

Seven Dice to Destiny

A Fantasy Tale Sourced from a
Popular Tabletop Role-Playing Game

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“Adventure” comes from the Latin for
"about to happen."

This is dedicated to the adventurers who,
through sheer gumption and ingenuity,
happen to other people.

Autographs

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Part I

Memories

What's past is prologue.

The golem looked to the left.

Buildings were getting taller in those days, but not in the town of Wurthensburg. It was still cheaper to build out than up and they had plenty of space after clearcutting Mirtvicke forest out to five miles from the current edge of town. Common practice was one mile, to prevent surprise attacks from the woods, but the Wurthers were careful folk and planned far ahead. Now they had lumber for expansion.

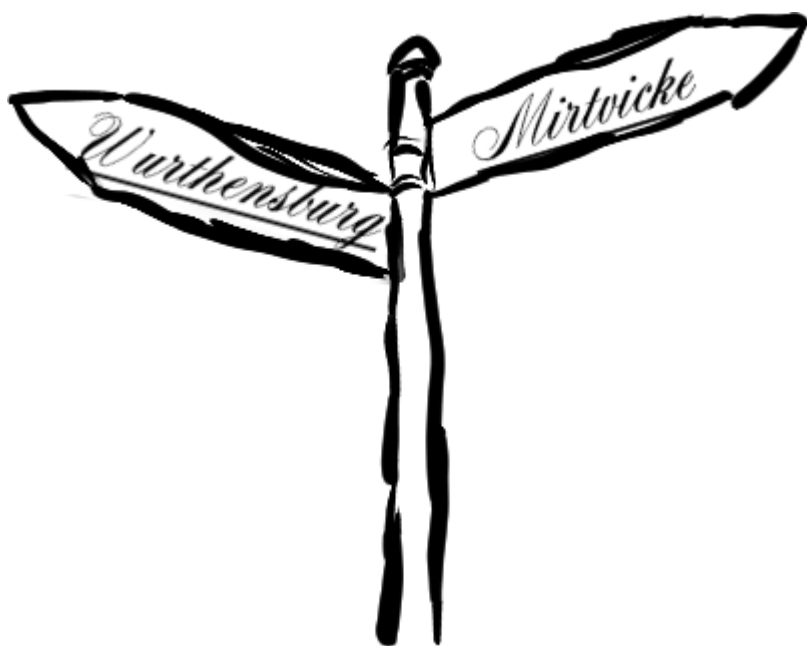
Some enterprising young woodcutter had installed a sign on the main road to the forest where they planned to set up the next logging camp once the snows cleared. An arrow to the left marked "Wurthensburg" in carefully hand-painted lettering. An arrow to the right marked the forest "Mirtvicke." The road was only five miles long and connected only those two places, but in the Wurthensburg to come, there would be plenty of need for signs.

The golem sat on a rock in front of the sign. To the left, it saw smoke rising from the town in the distance. Even at this distance, it could spy a wizard's tower just

on the other side of town and made a note of it for later. It looked to the right and saw the forbidding forest. It looked back at the sign and nodded. Confirmed.

The sleeping figures at its feet were wearing only their smallclothes and the burned and eaten rags of what they were wearing before. A wicked-looking sword lay broken. A staff was smoldering.

And the golem waited for everyone to wake.



Slowly, and with the care of one who has had a hangover before, Julianne rose. She saw the curvy elf lying next to her in the same state of undress. She adjusted her demicorset and thought, “Well, that probably wasn’t the worst thing I’ve done this week.” She turned around and saw the man-sized raven

sleeping in a tattered cloak and the dwarf with a beer stain on his boxers. “Maybe it was.”

At first, she attributed her unease to whatever the raven thing was, but now that she had thought about it, it was clear that it was due to an abundance of magical energy coursing through the forest. It felt like she was standing right over a leyline and the air would shake as the thrum of it went right through her.

There was a broken knife at her feet. When she picked it up, it felt right in her hand, so she kept it. There was a broken scythe as well, and a smoking quarterstaff, but were too big or unwieldy. It probably wouldn't do to be seen collecting weapons as the others were waking up, either.

The raven was first awake, but the dwarf had less distance to go to get on his feet. He approached her with a “Where are we?” Then he followed with a “Who are you?” Then he finished with a “Who am I?” Eventually she was able to respond with an “I don't know,” but that was after he figured it out as well.

The dwarf continued to blather, but Julienne tuned him out. “Who I am,” she said aloud in the hopes that if something is said in confidence it may as well be true, “is... starts with a J.”

“Julienne,” said a mossy voice behind her. It wouldn't do to say that she screamed, since by reputation she never screams. Her voice was, however, elevated and unintelligible. A Firbolg wearing glasses was standing behind them all, waiting patiently.

In her heart, she knew he¹ was right, but had to lash out anyway, as is her nature. “And how do you know, Mr. I’ve-got-all-the-answers?”

“My dear lady,” he explained, “it’s written on your knickers.”

Without missing a beat, she replied, “And now we know you’re a pervert, too.”

The Firbolg was aghast, but continued regardless. “I suppose I’ve been called Sevo, though I don’t recall when.”

The raven picked up the broken scythe and said “Shing.” Possibly. It was less an onomatopoeia and more like the actual sound. None of them had met any Kenku before, so they wouldn’t know that they are a race of dimensional travelers that can’t speak but can mimic perfectly. He had made the sound of a sword being drawn. One can only guess where he had heard it before.

The dwarf said, “Eitri, I guess. If you’re all so cool with waking up naked, maybe you have some shared history I’d rather like to know. I’d like some proper clothes if you don’t mind. Town’s over there. Go get some.”

Stone shifted against living stone as the golem rose to its full height. It picked up the dwarf gruffly by the

¹ On a Firbolg, you don’t need to guess at the gender. Near universally, the males have big, bushy beards like a dwarf and are about a foot taller on average than the women. This Firbolg was tall, but was also clean-shaven. On the plus side, Firbolgs tended to be polite enough that they never corrected you.

underwear and placed him on its shoulders. It began the trek to town and the others followed.

Sevo, Shing, Julienne and the golem marched peaceably, with only Eitri complaining and kicking the golem's shoulders to ruin the mood. Along the way, another group of fellow travelers were trying to go in the opposite direction.

“What ho, kind travelers,” Sevo began as they turned quickly and stuck a stiletto dagger deep into the golem's clay. Now, if it had been a sledgehammer or something, the golem might have been perturbed. As it was, the golem simply pinched the dagger at the handle and snapped it off.

The other travelers (there must have been eight of them!) quickly took out crossbows and daggers. One managed to get a shot off at Eitri, who became rather angrier than he was when he didn't have a crossbow bolt protruding from his buttocks. Curses flew, and not the magical kind. The lexicon grew three sizes that day.

Sevo attempted a small spell. He wanted it to be bigger, but it seemed he was a little rusty, like he was forgetting a syllable here and there. The words of power were muddled or muttered and lost quite a bit of their potency, coming out as sparks and static instead of a fully-fledged lightning bolt. It was enough to make a few of them drop their weapons.

Julienne, thankfully, must have felt wherever she kept her daggers, since they reappeared in her hands in a flash of silver. She took down two of the attackers without any wastage in her movements and with no remorse whatsoever.

One of them snuck up on her and was about to strike when he was hit in the head by a rock. “Don’t think you’re going to play without me,” said Sarissa, the elf they left behind. “It just wouldn’t be a party.”

“Aw,” said Julienne, “we just didn’t know who you were or what we were doing.”

Sarissa considered this. “Fair enough. Me neither.”

A broken scythe whirled about the footpads’ shoulders, dancing through the attackers as gracefully as a hippo isn’t. Shing appeared to enjoy himself in the melee for a while, but remembered he was supposed to be dark and put on a stern face instead.

The golem put down Eitri and took a defensive stance in front of him to protect him. The footpads promptly shot him from behind. Eitri was furious at this point and charged the enemy, who again promptly stabbed him in the gut. He reached into his underwear between the two crossbow bolts and pulled out an oddly shaped piece of metal. He screamed a final curse at any and every God in the pantheon and fired the device into the sky.

The footpad would later recall that the device made a sound like thunder, but there was no lightning. The gods must have been perplexed at this and decided to rectify the situation. An echo of the curse came back, booming and amplified, and a bolt of lightning came to strike the footpad. He survived to marry an intelligent wife who was patient enough to put up with his periodic spasms and raise two children, but for the rest of his life always stayed inside during thunderstorms.

Eitri had fainted from exertion at this point, but the attackers were scared off and ran away. Sarissa was confused. “What was all that about?”

“I don’t know,” said Julienne, “but I don’t like it. Let’s move on.”

They eventually reached the town of Wurthensburg. When it wasn’t under a strange magic, the town held about 6,000 people. It was unknown how many people were still living there, since the streets were all deserted and no lights were on in the houses. Wurthensburg wasn’t a metropolis, but it was big enough to find whatever you’re looking for, though you may not have options once you find it. A delicious smell was in the air from a buffet at a local chain restaurant and some smoke was coming off of a blacksmith’s shop. A small strip mall at the far end of town contained clothing stores and cobblers.

They found a blacksmith’s shop and laid the unconscious Eitri by the fire. The golem mumbled some words and glowed faintly. Eitri rose back into consciousness, but decided to stick around the forge. He was more of a loner anyways. Still, he welcomed the rest of them to take anything they wanted from his smithy. They were going to point out that it was just a smithy that they arrived in and that it definitely wasn’t his, but judging by the chaos on the road and the relatively deserted streets, the original smith was likely dead by that point and a vacancy is a vacancy.

Now with fresh weapons and armor, the rest of the adventurers headed to the buffet they were smelling earlier. Clearly, anything with that much delicious food would have to be a trap in a crazy town like this,

so Julienne went in first through a window on the side of the building. Sure enough, there were several armed men inside.

With a shout, Julienne began the attack while the golem charged in through the door. Splinters showered the ambushers and several were thrown back into the rear wall behind the bar. The battle could be described in full, but it would be easier for all involved to say that it went very embarrassingly for the ambushers. In all, it turned out to be a gang of eight or nine that tried to fight the adventurers, but most of them were incapacitated in the initial attack and the rest were being tripped or shoved when they weren't being slashed or stabbed.

There was blood everywhere, but luckily, very little of the food was contaminated. They dug in to the tuck, but stopped when they reached the ham above the warming candles. Now that they weren't as hungry, they could stop and analyze the smell a little better. The ham was... off somehow. The golem stood in front of it and refused to let any of them near it. Julienne eventually identified it as the *other* other white meat. All of a sudden, they weren't hungry anymore.

Feeling full, or as full as they could reasonably be expected after that, they headed out towards what seemed like the last bastion of civilization: a fortified two-story town hall. As they approached it, a guard from a second story window called out to them: "Halt! Come no farther!"

Sarissa took the lead here, since Julienne was still in a stabby mood. "We come in peace. What happened here?"

“Oh, wouldn’t you like to know?” The guard laughed with someone else deeper inside the building. “They want to know what happened here,” he chortled with his companion. He snapped quickly back to the window. “Well, so do we! And you’ve been killing people left and right. We’ve seen it.”

“You mean at the buffet,” asked Sarissa, “or on the road?”

“The road?! We didn’t even know about the road. How many are dead?”

“That’s not really important right now,” said Sarissa, “but they were trying to kill us.”

“Yet you knew it was an ambush beforehand. You wanted to kill them, or you would’ve just walked away before springing the trap.”

The elf was caught in a moral quandary, and it wasn’t the kind of quandary she liked. She preferred the quandaries that involved which kind of chocolate she should have after dinner. This kind of existential mumbo was for the clerics.

“Alright,” she said, “another time then.”

The guard rapped on his windowsill. “You all seemed so keen on helping us yesterday, before it went and broke! Charging off to the wizard’s tower like that...”

She turned to Sevo, Shing, Julienne and the golem. “The tower! We were all at the tower!” The memories returned to them, bit by bit and then in a rush. They all met at a tavern in town. For their own reasons, they were drawn there. The scent of mead permeated the tavern and the mood was heady and light. Someone

burst into the tavern and there was a feeling of urgency and then... still lost.

“To the tower, everybody,” said Sarissa, “and we’ll finally figure this out.”

They headed out immediately and did not catch the guard saying, “except for the Firbolg. He’s new.”

The folding tower.

Lefty cleared its nonexistent throat, sounding like a trumpet that was just opening its spit valve.

“Knock Knock,” said the left doorknocker.

“Who’s there?” replied the right.

“Amelia.”

“Amelia Who?”

“Does it matter? We only have one person on our whitelist.”

The doorknockers laughed together. Humor wasn’t very effective when you haven’t traveled more than five feet in an arc for your entire existence.

"Hold on, shush up! Somebody's coming..."

Sevo held the lead for the group coming up on the Wizard's Tower. They were not so naive as to think a wizard would go out of his way to build a foreboding tower with gigantic double doors and not install

sentient doorknockers, so as he approached, he said "Hello."

They pretended to rustle into awareness in a dramatic fashion to spook the newcomers. Sevo pretended to be surprised. It was amazing how ingrained tradition can become.

"Knock on a door and proceed through it. One side is safe, and the other is certain death. One of us speaks only truth," said the Right Knocker. "One of us tells only lies," said the Left Knocker. "With one question, determine which of us is the liar to proceed."

Sarissa piped up. "I've heard this one before," she exclaimed, "but I don't remember what the answer is."

"It's something to do with asking the other one which door to use," said Sevo, "because the liar will give the lie, and the soothsayer will tell you truthfully what the lie is. As long as they agree, you know what the lie is, so you can figure out the opposite is the truth."

It made sense to her, and the elf was excited. She blurted out, "What would the other knocker say if we asked it what door to take?"

"It would say knock on the right door," said Left Knocker. "The Left would also say to knock on the right door," said the Right Knocker. The golem approached the doors and knocked on the left.

A trapdoor promptly opened up below them and swallowed them whole.

"I don't suppose," said the Left Knocker, "they realized we were both liars and they weren't getting in anyways?"

"Probably not," said the Right Knocker, "if they were stupid enough to think that the left or right of a double door would lead to different places. I mean, what if you opened both at once?"

"I suppose this is a Wizard's Tower," said the Left Knocker.

"Heh," said the Right Knocker, who had never been inside the building it was guarding. "Wizards."

"Well that was uncalled for," said Sevo, dusting off his cloak. He couldn't remember how doorknockers were supposed to act, but that was clearly rude no matter how you sliced it.

They took a look around their new premises and found it largely uncomfortable. A skeleton in shackles took up one corner of the dungeon while another appeared to have not only been infested by rats, but built up by the rats into some sort of rat condominium.

Careful thought had been put into the layout of this dungeon, corresponding the Feng Shui concept of "if a dragon were to live here, would it be comfortable?" Alas, it had clearly failed to attract any dragons as tenants (likely due to proximity to a wizard - location, location, location!) and wallowed in disrepair.

By the time he had assessed the situation, Julienne was already at the top of a crumbling set of stairs, catching the lock on the door as it fell.

She obviously wasn't stopping for anyone, so Sevo, Sarissa and the golem ran up after her. The two guards

at the top of the stairs were already slumped over the table they were playing poker at.

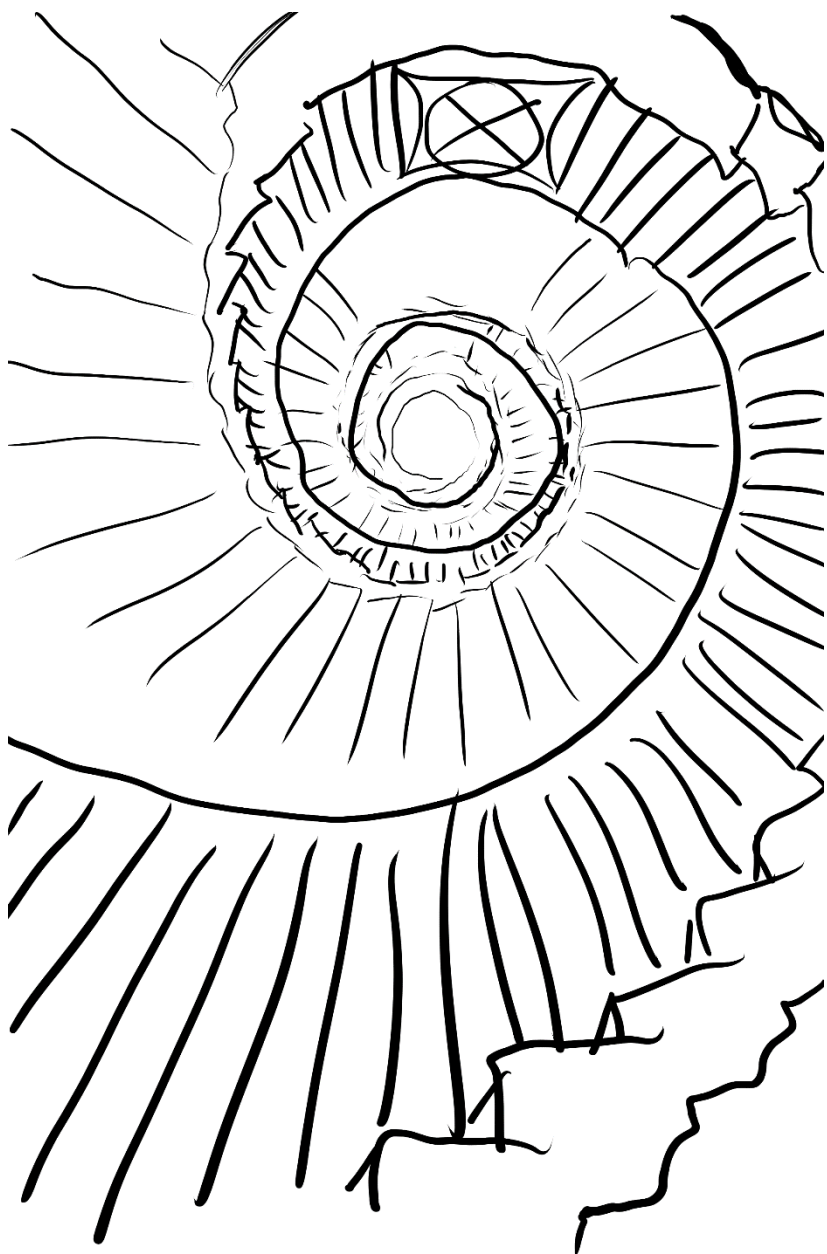
Julienne was holding a bloody dagger and tapping her foot impatiently. Clearly, there was murder to do and if you weren't up for it, she was.

The tower was about 15 feet in diameter with a staircase winding up the inside of the tower in a lazy circle, extending higher and higher into a pitch black center. No ceiling was in sight, even though the tower clearly had a roof from the outside. Reinforced doors dotted the circumference of the circle on mezzanine landings, spaced about 30 ft apart on opposite sides of the tower.

Julienne went up the steps, trying doors as she went. If regular loot was valuable, imagine what a wizard might have? The first door was locked and barred. The rest of the group started up after her, but as Julienne attempted to open the second door up, it suddenly swung open. She jumped back to the inner edge of the staircase and lost her footing, grabbing quickly with both hands at the edge as she fell.

Two guards rushed out from the doorway, each armed with a crossbow and a shortsword. One pointed his crossbow down the stairs, while the other approached Julienne and stomping down on her fingers.

Shing swung his scythe above his head and started charging up the stairs. Sarissa began her climb, swinging from level to level and jumping up the center of the tower. The golem took a more direct route. It grabbed one of the unconscious guards at the table and chucked it upwards at the soldier near Julienne, pushing him backwards against the doorway.



Sevo began casting a spell, but was interrupted by another door opening behind him and a third door opening above. Additional soldiers poured out from the barracks behind the doors, each similarly armed and armored.

Seeing the soldiers aim their crossbows on the third level, Sevo turned and cast his spell at them. Ordinarily, fire would flow from a wizard's fingers into a red hot cone of destruction. This time, it did just the opposite. The temperature in the air drained down into Sevo's fingertips, giving them an shimmering halo of pure heat. Frost formed on the soldiers' mustaches as their body heat was stolen away. The strings on the crossbows snapped under their load as they became brittle.

Shing took one soldier's attention while Julienne climbed back up. He swung his scythe upside down and used it to pull the feet out from under the soldier. Soon enough, that soldier was hanging in the same place that Julienne was in just a moment prior. She took great pleasure in stomping down on his hands.

The soldier screamed as he fell, but it was only one story. The landing came complete with a magnificent but survivable thud. What wasn't survivable was the golem down there who was looking for something else to throw.

On the return trip, the soldier considered his life. He thought back on the people he loved and left behind, the incident at the tavern that made him join the Wizard's army, and the friends he had made in basic training. In all, it wasn't a bad life. As the wind blew

past his face, caressing it with the gentle sensations of flight, he thought it wasn't a bad way to go, either.

Two soldiers went down with a bone-snapping crack and both Shing and Julienne were now free to give their attention to the other two sets of soldiers. Shing took those below, leaping into action with his scythe spinning in the air. Julienne took the opportunity to charge up to the third mezzanine.

The lower soldiers attacked Sevo, reasoning that a wizard was a glass cannon and his appearance as a Firbolg was a ruse or illusion of some kind. They were savagely mistaken. The first attempted to stab the wizard, but his blade was turned aside by the Firbolg's thick hide. Sevo grabbed his wrist and flipped him into the ground using reflexes honed by years spent living in the forest, unhindered by a foggy memory. The second saw what happened to his partner and started to turn around, but that moment of hesitation was all the golem needed to grab him by the shoulder and swing him up to the third floor.

Knocked off balance by the soldier-sized missile hurled at their heads, the frozen soldiers prepared to fight off Julienne. They never noticed Sarissa sneaking up behind them with two acorns, a spring and some straw from the dungeons.

Now that the soldiers were dispatched, it was clear that the doors in the tower led to barracks. The barracks themselves weren't in the same tower, though. One was in a jungle. Another was in a city somewhere. The tower itself was playing hob with any sense of space and direction. Under Julienne's direction, all three barracks were duly looted while

they discussed what to do next, but the tower answered for them.

The top of the tower folded in on itself and the doors all collapsed into each other. It had the effect of a paper tube being crushed. The ceiling, once black and inscrutably far away, had dropped down to the fourth floor. An imposing set of double doors was on the highest landing.

"Hey Sevo," said Sarissa, "Wizards like imposing double doors, right?"

"Oh yes," replied Sevo, "they're fantastic."

"Then I know where we're going next."

They burst into the room at the top and found it full of the usual accoutrements for a wizard: beakers bubbling on a workbench, jars of unknown body parts, stuffed alligator hanging from the ceiling. The main feature is a spellbook on a dais. What it was unusually not full of was wizard. There was no sign of the mysterious mage.

Cautiously, they approached the central dais. Once they got within a few feet of it, the spellbook opened on its own and flipped its pages in a wind that didn't exist. Pages flew from the book and plastered themselves onto Sevo's body, lifting him into the air and paralyzing him in an instant. The ink crawled around on the pages and under his skin like a scarab and a iridescent purple light emanated from his eyes.

As the power subsided from a violent torrent to a steady thrum felt behind the eyes, Sevo's body

lowered to the floor. It was unchanged, but completely different. It wasn't Sevo's anymore. It was the Wizard.

Oh, what a terrible wiz he was!

The Wizard's words streamed mellifluously through the air, ringing against the stone and flowing back upon itself. I was as if his words and the tower were the same, expanding and contracting as he willed.

"I thank you," he said, "for delivering my glasses back to me. My original defeat was most ignominious, resulting in my discorporation and a split between my mind and memories. This oafish Firbolg was kind enough to retrieve the glasses etched with my mind and so take my skills and self upon him, but it was not enough for me to truly take over his body until my memories, trapped within my spellbook, were returned to me. But I digress."

He flicked his hand and the memories came burning back, as if they were never forgotten. Joining up at the tavern, disrupting the ritual with the mirrored shield, missing something and accidentally blowing out the top of the tower...

"I thank you for this new body as well," he continued. "Some consider me evil, but at least I'm no speciesist. The muscles on this brute are incredible and I'm sure

I can teach it the proper reflexive magic stances in time." He smiled. "To business. Are you prepared to die?"

They all realized they were paralyzed the entire time, and it wasn't because of magic. Quickly, they sprang into action. Shing raised his scythe to attack, but hesitated at striking who he remembered as Sevo. The Wizard gave a casual wave knocked Shing across the room.

A wave of thunder pushed everyone but the Wizard off of the central dais and a violet wall erupted to block their movement back onto it. "I'm not stupid," said the Wizard. "You thugs will attempt to kill me or else knock me out before the changes become permanent and your friend 'Sevo' is lost forever, but I won't let you.

The human soul is made of dark and light, and so is my spell. It would insert me as ruler of the world as far back as people could remember. The light would burn away old memories and write new ones as truth, while the dark would add depth and emotion to them and make them feel real. They would be loyal because as far as they knew, they had always been loyal.

But you adventurers! You interfered before I could complete my incantations. That blasted mirror shield of yours reflected the light half of my spell back at me, destroying my body and splitting my mind and memory. The dark flowed through into Wurthensburg. With nothing to tame it, it enhanced their emotions beyond control and deepened their mental shadows. Their anxieties were made darker and their fears

deeper. And of course, without my will, the tower rejected us. You have no idea what you've caused.

But I am benevolent. It shall be undone. And I shall be your king, for eternity."

Two lizardmen walked out from behind scientific apparatus too thin to have truly hidden them. Shing, Sarissa and the golem prepared to fight. Julianne took the opportunity to slink away unnoticed.

The Wizard continued. "I began with a study on hammerspace. For the untutored, that is the space behind objects or cloaks that seems to hold items larger than could possibly fit into them. The basics have been known for quite a long time. If you have ever encountered a Bag of Holding, it runs on the same principles. Eventually, I mastered hammerspace, and those who master it can glimpse through it, beyond it. I saw the others in the beyond, the ultimate observers, and they frightened me at first, but in the end they inspired me. By making all eyes into my agents, I too could ascend to their level. I merely had to take over the world."

While they were distracted by the two lizardmen in front of them, a third lizardman suddenly existed behind them striking Sarissa in the back. Shing whirled about to deal with it, but was held by yet another lizardman. Without Sevo's wizardry to help them, it was difficult to deal with large numbers.

"It took a long time to refine my skills into something truly worthwhile. I had always been fascinated with memory. The self that you are might have been completely different if you had been raised differently, and where are the differences created and stored?"

Your biology defines your mind, but your memory defines your soul."

The golem's eyes burned with an ancient fire. These were his friends. His friends were in trouble. He must help all people as a part of his Shem, a contract with the powers which animated him, but... friends were important. The golem began to charge.

"Many wizards have attempted to do what I have done, but to no avail. They ran into problems. They could use a corruptive technique, but those are easily detectable. They are stopped before they are halfway begun."

One lizardman fell beneath the charge. Two lizardmen fell. Three were piled around the feet of the golem when it crashed into the tower wall, shattering beakers and knocking wall coverings off. Five more lizardmen appeared.

"Others attempt to change things in an instant and force themselves upon their victims. This too runs into issues, since the victim is conscious of the change and fights back with a purification of the self. It could not be done. Not until someone developed a method to do it both corruptively and instantaneously."

Sarissa threw everything she had at the lizardmen, which included a twig, three more acorns, and a lead pipe. The distracted lizardmen weren't properly oriented yet, having just emerged from hammerspace, and their ranks collapsed. One fell on another's sword in the tumble and another was knocked unconscious or worse when she hit her head on the stony floor. Seven more lizardmen started to emerge in the never-

ending fight, but the golem kept charging until the room had nothing more to hide behind.

"With my studies in hammerspace, I was able to develop a working theory of hammertime, the moments between moments when adventurers seem to move halfway across a continent all because nobody is actively viewing them. By invoking my memory spells in the instant between instants, when nobody is watching, I would have become ruler of the world. I would have their power! The power to change fate and control luck across the plane! With control over hammertime, I would have become untouchable."

The three of them made a triangular formation. Each one watched the others' backs and there was no space for the lizardmen to appear from. The remaining combatants were put down one by one, but the Wizard was nearly done with his incantations.

"Very well," he said, "I'll deal with you using the more mundane magic." He moved his arms in a circular gesture and turned his palms outwards. "For three annoying adventurers pecking at my heels, a chicken will do nicely."

He clapped his hands together and in a flash of light and smoke a monstrous chicken appeared in the middle of them. The face was slick with blood and entrails hung from its razor-sharp beak. It flapped wings the size of horses and took a flying leap at the golem. It clawed at the golem's face and ripped a chunk of stone off it.

The golem raised its arms in defense and fended off most of the other blows until one of the chicken's

talons got caught in a crack in the golem's elbow. The chicken was frustrated and pulled away, but not before Shing got around with his scythe and cut off its head with one solid blow.

The chicken, however, was unperturbed. It got the talon free from the golem's arm and attacked Shing instead. Nothing can last long without a head, but the chicken gave it the old college try. All three of the adventurers focused down the massive headless chicken until it could no longer stand from massive blood loss.

Steam erupted from the wizard's ears, since using cartoon logic to further his goals works both ways. "Enough!" he shouted. "I'll deal with you myself!" The violet shield lowered and the Wizard prepared to fight.

As one, the battered warriors took their stances and prepared for a withering assault, but Sarissa held up a hand. She spoke clearly and carefully. "We do not wish to kill our friend. If we separated your mind from the body again, would your power go back to the spellbook? Or are you tainting him forever?"

A scoff escaped the Wizard's lips. "Remove the glasses before they can meld to me? It is probable, but you are unlikely to do so. They are held by my force of will."

Sarissa sighed with relief. "Then we won't kill you." The Wizard smiled as a mentor might do to a child. Sarissa continued, "But you were right. That which is forgotten and unnoticed is most likely to do us in."

Julienne's knife thrust from behind, flipping at the last moment to hit with the butt instead of the blade. The skull crack was sickening, but the Wizard

crumpled like a used tissue and the glasses skittered off his face.

Blackness bled away from the Wizard as thunder made the air go vibrato. The wizard babbled incoherently in his unconscious state and the escaping words assembled themselves in the air as symbols of power, flowing back into the spellbook. The book started to burn as the power flowed into it faster and faster. The black words that made up all the malice in the Wizard's soul scattered and fled from the flames.

Eventually, the book burned down to its final six pages, so black with dense overlapping text that they absorbed all light and heat from the flames, extinguishing them.

Everyone in the group was breathing hard. Julianne was nervous. "Is he dead?" she asked.

"No," said Sarissa, "I don't think so. The evil is back in those pages. We can put his glasses back on and restore him to the Sevo we knew, but do we have the right?"

The golem shuffled off to the Firbolg's sleeping body and checked it for signs of life. It pulled back one of his eyelids to show a blank white sclera and shook its head. The body was alive, but the brain was dead. The golem took the glasses and gently placed them on the tip of Sevo's nose.

He murmured as he woke, rising in a groggy haze. "I feel," he said, "like I just got hit in the head. Is everybody alright?"



Sarissa wrapped him in her arms. He looked confused. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing to worry about, you big lug. Let's head back to town."

When most of the adventurers left, the golem took a step back and gingerly picked up the six black pages. Beneath its fingers, the words on the pages still writhed and shrieked and asked for escape. The embers of the dying flames were still dancing across the surface of the pages without touching it. If that was any indication, the pages were basically indestructible.

They would have to be hidden, but now that the danger was averted, there would be time to hide them. They would have to be lost to society, but given a century or two, there would be time to forget them. They would have to be guarded, but there would always be time to protect them. Golems live forever.

Loose threads in the forest.

The woods were lovely, dark and deep, and likely patrolled by maddened elves and fell creatures mutated by evil magic. They had already attacked by a group of elves who, driven mad by the greasy magic feel pervading the atmosphere, were convinced they were coming to kill them all. When the elves attacked first, that mostly became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Shing ventured forth to track down the elf that got away while the rest of them took a breather in the shade of a large fir tree. After all that had happened, it was nice to just relax for a moment. Sevo coaxed an apple from a tree and handed it to Sarissa. Without the effects of those cursed memories, he was a completely different person from the evil Wizard that caused all this mess. Still, it was difficult to forget that he had that potential. Only Sarissa seemed to completely overlook it.

The golem remained impassive, its thoughts impenetrable. Somehow, it even seemed imposingly moody. Julienne, master of the oblivious, decided to

Speak with it anyway. Even she couldn't miss the tension between Sarissa and Sevo.

"I don't know what she sees in him. We all know what he's capable of, and in a strong body like that, to top it off." The golem nodded. "Sure he's fine now, but what about tomorrow? Or the next day? Some people are just born evil." The golem nodded.

"I don't like how quickly he accepted it all once we explained it to him, either." The golem tilted its head. "You know," said Julienne, "being told you're pure evil can't go down easy, but he just decided that wasn't him anymore. Like that's just his decision!"

She paced around the golem. "What am I talking to you for? It's not like you ever respond." She looked in its eyes. "Do you even have a name?"

The golem lifted an arm and pointed at its left shoulder, where an etching just big enough to be legally legible said "Kulenov Trading Co. / Proudly Made in Nimoar's Hold / Model Friday / SN7432232"

Julienne frowned. "We can't go calling you 7432232. How about Friday?" The golem nodded. "Alright, Friday. It's about time we did something."

She stomped over to the happy couple with uncharacteristic loudness. "What's going on with you two?"

Sarissa was startled. "We're just eating some apples. What is it?"

"Don't get smart with me. We were talking about the whole situation."

Sarissa looked over Julianne's shoulder. "We? The golem?"

"It has a name, Sarissa. Friday and I discussed just what's happening between you and the Wizard."

It was Sarissa's turn to be indignant. "He's got a name, too, and it's Sevo."

"That's just the name of the poor brain-damaged Firbolg he's taken over and you know it."

"He's not hurting anyone and he's helped us a lot."

Sarissa was getting heated now and didn't notice Sevo edging back around towards Friday. He settled down next to the golem. "Looks like we don't have much agency in our own affairs, do we?" The golem nodded.

Violet shades gathered in the golem's chest and spilled stone dust from his cavity, but it wasn't visible outside the golem's body. That cavity was Warforged and designed to hold terrible forces. It laid a hand on Sevo's shoulder and tried its level best to look apologetic. It pushed away from Sevo and the rumbling died down.

Sevo was with friends, and he was alone.

At that point, Shing returned and defused the entire situation by being hilarious. Every single one of them had forgotten that their scout couldn't speak in the Common tongue. He could handle certain phrases that he had heard before, but any time he tried making a complex statement out of several different words, it came out like the aural equivalent of a kidnapper's note.

Fifteen minutes later, they had decided that they had better just follow the exasperated Shing back to wherever the escaped elf went than try to keep guessing.

By this point, the group was a well-oiled machine. So well-oiled, in fact, that they didn't make a sound when they slipped into the elf village of Lahad and snuck behind the chieftain in his hut off the main square. A few quick magical motions from Sevo made the campfire in the center of the square explode, catching several elves on fire and causing panic in the streets.

"Oh no, you don't," said Julianne as she slid her knife around the chieftain's neck. "And you might want to be a little forthcoming about why the elves have started attacking people."

The elf chieftain gulped, causing his Adam's apple to graze the knife. A trickle of crimson graced the hungry blade and dribbled down his throat. "I don't want them to," he responded very carefully, "but the madness forces them to do it."

"So why aren't you mad?"

He demurred, considering his position, but ultimately thought better of his tribe than his life. "It's my cloak," he said. "It is made from rare leaves and protects me from the foul magic. If I were to take it off, I would go just as mad as my people."

The knife was held in hands that never twitched, capable of pulling away slowly to a small degree. It was enough to breathe again, but with the knowledge

that it was just as deadly from that distance as no distance at all.

Sarissa explained, "We're here to get rid of that rotten source and bring an end to your troubles. Is there any way you can help us?"

"I can give you my cloak, but then I'd have no protection. You must promise me you will get rid of this disease."

Sevo gave a troubled cough. This was difficult to say. "Though it seems a lifetime ago, I cannot help but feel responsible for your ills." He stepped forward and gently pulled Julianne's knife hand away. "Give me the cloak and I will save you or die trying."

Elves are known for their keen perception. Elf chieftains are the keenest. He looked into Sevo's eyes, through the spectacles and through the Firbolg and into his very soul. He took off the cloak.

"There is a bright and shining shield in the middle of the old ruins to the south. It landed in a cloud of shadows three days ago. That is when our troubles began."

They looked around at each other's reactions. So that was what happened to their mirror shield.

"The cloak should protect you from the rank atmosphere, but it won't protect you from the wild magic bursts that explode from the shield. It's the only reason I haven't done it myself."

Sevo took the cloak and his hand. "It will be done."

Much was left unsaid when they left the elf village, but Sevo was on a mission.

It was clear that the explosions from the mirror shield were not completely random. They tended to focus down on living creatures and came more frequently the closer they got to the shield. Within a hundred yards, the air itself was hot, fetid and vile. Within thirty, it was searing.

The group contemplated possible methods to defeat said security, but decided against chucking live squirrels into the area and distracting the explosive forces. The vote was 2 for, 3 against.

In the end, they decided to distract the shield themselves. Shing and Julienne took the first leg and ran in zig-zags across the field while the explosions shook the ground around them. Both of them had years of practice in escaping from authorities, so running away from shadow magic attempting to kill them was basically a Tuesday.

Closer in to the shield, the more magic-attuned users took over. Sarissa bounced lengthwise across the killing field and scattered acorns like a shotgun. Technically alive, the acorns acted like chaff. Friday, the sturdier of the two, simply took the damage as it came and used its own magic to ward it and heal as much as possible.

The final leg was up to Sevo. He pushed through the miasma using the cloak like an oar. The thick shadows surrounding the shield parting about it like oil on water.

The elf chieftain was right: it worked wonders against the shadows, but the explosive magic was too strong. The cloak caught fire at the bottom corner and began eating up the length.

Quickly, knowing that his time was short, Sevo swept off his cloak and hurled it at the shield. A perfect hit! The cloak completely covered the shield, but the energies involved were too intense to simply dissipate.

The shield's power shattered the rock beneath it and flew above Sevo's head, flipping through the air and casting off the cloak. It buried itself into a mound of dirt and began to fire off again.

With a flying leap, Sevo caught the cloak and threw it again, but this time throwing himself along with it. Feeling the pulsing power of the shadows, he wrapped the cloak all around the shield using the weight of his own heavy Firbolg body to keep it in place and smother the flames.

With some time, the pulses died down, but Sevo was in bad shape. Sarissa ran over to him and applied cool water to the burns he had suffered to lessen his pain. Friday arrived next, with Shing and Julienne bringing up the rear. It focused on healing the wizard, but the burns would only lessen and the wounds refused to close. In the years to come, they never would all go away. Until the day he died, Sevo would tend and dress those wounds, though not alone.

“The magic is thorough,” Sevo said. “It has become a part of the shield. It cannot be cleansed. Don't ask me how I know; I just feel it. The shield must be destroyed to be purified.”

“I think I know the right place,” said Julienne.

Wurthensburg was finally getting back to normal. The spell was broken when the wizard died, but tensions still ran high so long as that foul force was still emanating from the forest. Once that evil was trapped, the town began to heal.

The buffet was one of the first places to revive. Its owner was hard-nosed and cleared out most of the hoodlums himself. Whatever contracts he had to bring food into the village were ironclad and personally enforced, so food service returned quite quickly.

Town hall was intact. The nobleman who ran the village went crazy during the curse and the townspeople who remained sane had to draw up an uneasy balance between them. Once the spell was lifted, they all decided they were better off that way. The nobleman gave up most of his property to the people, since it was better than the alternative he was presented. It worked for a few years.

Eitri ran the blacksmith's shop now, since the blacksmith who owned it never returned. The party found him hard at work in the forge.

“You've come with a job,” he said, “and you don't have any money.” He hung up his hammer and tongs. “OK. You kept me safe and I owe you something. What is it you need?”

“We need to have something destroyed,” said Sevo, peeling off a corner of the cloak from the mirror shield.

Eitri’s eyes darkened. “Something that evil can’t be destroyed in any forge,” he said, “but it could be repurposed. The difference between medicine and poison is in the dose. I can cleanse it in fire and give it new shape. A sword will do.”

“Dibs,” said Julienne.

“I thank you, Eitri,” said Sevo. “We all do. Once the amnesia was lifted, we all remembered the part you played the first time we went up the tower.”

“Aye,” he replied, “and I wish I could forget it. You all needed armor and I thought in my arrogance that I could join you. I brought my invention to help slay the evil you spoke of, but all the evil I found was just more men that happened to be in another uniform. It made the problematic people go away, so I called it a ‘gone.’ It was all so easy. Now I wish it were gone as well.

I don’t have the stomach for killing that you folk seem to have. Four shots and four kills were enough to haunt me. You can bloody well keep the thing if you’d like. It’s on a table in the shop. I haven’t touched it since.”

Sevo shuffled his feet. “Well, actually, there is something more we have to ask of you.” Eitri glared at him. “It’s concerning the Wizard.”

Eitri relaxed a bit. “Now that one, I’m alright with shooting. What happened to him?”

Sevo began the sequel, Shuffle 2: Shuffle Harder. “Well, it’s a complicated subject that we really shouldn’t delve deeper into at the moment. The fact of the matter is, the Wizard is dead (for the most part) and we have to deal with his legacy.”

Eitri nodded. “I didn’t quite catch that part you mumbled, but count me in, so long as I don’t have to kill anymore.”

Sevo looked at Friday. “Even within your casing, Friday, I could feel the dark pull of those pages.” The golem stepped forward and opened its chest. “These pages contain the magic of the Wizard, as well as his memories. They lack his guiding mind, but are more than enough to turn anything evil... if gathered together like they are now. Will you help us guard them and keep those who seek power from uniting the pages again?”

Julienne slammed her fist on a wall. “I never signed up for guarding anything and I won’t be roped into this! I’m a traveler and a world-class assassin, and if an assassin stays in one place for too long, they get assassinated. I only stopped in town for a drink and you all promised me I could kill things!”

“Then you don’t have to guard it,” said Sevo, “just hide it well. You can still help by killing those who seek the pages. An ear to the ground in taverns will be useful, and there are whole rooms in the tower filled with riches that can pay for your services.”

Julienne sat. “Better.”

Eitri folded his arms. Sevo cleared his throat. “I mean, he said, “enough to pay all of us.” That got a lot more nods from the group.

He looked around the room at all the faces of his friends that he didn’t have three days ago, and at all the power in the world that he held four days ago in those pages. Choosing between them was simple.

Each of the six took one of the pages and held them in their own way. Eitri eventually went back home to his ancestral mines and buried his page deep within. He would pass down his gone from generation to generation, along with the secret formula for the powders that made it all work.

Shing stayed with Julienne for a time, but eventually left for yet another dimension, taking his page with him. The last thing they heard was the sound of harpsichords as cosmic gates shut behind him. He was never seen again.

Julienne used some of her share of the money to travel around the world, hiding the page in the last place she’d expect anyone to look for it. She used the rest of it to create The Foundation, a friendly system among fellow assassins tasked with gathering information and eliminating those who are looking for the black pages or any other magical artifacts. They would be known by many names: the Librarians, the Molrai, the Secret, and more. To those who sought power by magical means, they were simply known as Death.

Sarissa’s page was hidden deep in the forest, guarded by the most monstrous hive she could find. Sevo refused to touch his, but asked Sarissa to place it on

the top floor of his tower. His magic took it from there, restoring the tower to the labyrinth that it once was.

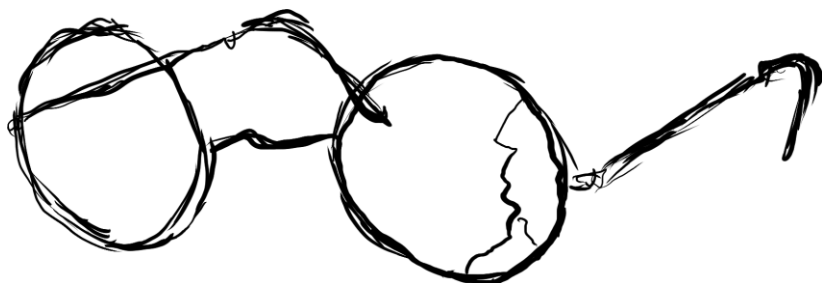
Sarissa and Sevo lived for a long time in Mirtvicke forest. Though it wasn't her tribe of birth, the elves in the forest readily accepted Sarissa as one of their own and in time she grew to great stature. Sevo stood by her side through good times and bad, and she in turn cared for his wounds and his soul.

The last time they saw Friday was the day Sevo died. The Firbolg body he had wasn't all that young when he got it and he refused to place the glasses on another. One life was enough for anyone. Sarissa took his glasses when he breathed his last, but couldn't bear to destroy them. She was chieftain of the tribe by that point and had to take care of her people. Instead, she sought out the golem, who kept the glasses in remembrance.

There is an end to Friday's story, but not yet. It had a job to do, and a golem will execute its duties for eternity if it has to. It kept the page in its chest where it could guard it forever. The golem was ever vigilant.

For now, though, there was no danger. Its tale was over. It sat on a rock by the side of the road.

The golem looked to the right.



Part II

The Spider Wakes

Taverns, terror and tombs.

The beginning is as good a place as any to start, but admittedly, there was not much happening. Balls of gas coalesced into stars and planets, with the stars being the unbearably bigger of the two. They worked out a lovely series of regulations to make sure everything went smoothly, which resulted in electromagnetism, strong and weak nuclear forces, and gravity.

There's a fifth that they don't like to talk about, mainly because they're not sure where it came from. The name of it simply came unbidden to them, as if by... well, by itself. The others may give a push or pull in time, but only Destiny has that sense of *irresistibility*.

As sure as stars tug the planets by gravity and lodestones tug metal by magnetism, so surely does a tavern use Destiny to tug at adventurers and assassins, the holy and profane. Scientists theorize they have an excess of Questium in their blood, but there has been no proof found. Mainly, this is due to science not being all that advanced and the researcher just making it up.

At this particular tavern in the town of Shaad, six people would meet. Five by Destiny and one by necessity. The first was Sariel Greenleaf, an elvish druid that came into town for the Festival of Moons, which was starting soon. She was well-known in the forests for her many feats of cunning and turns of phrase. She sat by a dwarf who loved drinking almost as much as she did.

The second was an assassin known to her friends as Arntya. Not many knew her name. She had successfully relieved a local inn of its valuables. If anything, they should thank her for reducing their need for security. Currently, she was looking for a place to launder her new currency into comestibles. The jingle of copper and silver pieces in her pocket was a soft music to her. It was earned, not given. For various values of earned. She had the money to eat without stealing, but where's the fun in that?

The third was a gnome called Scaith, who came looking for wizards. His people kept to themselves, though the ones in town were constantly underfoot if you saw them at all. In particular, his people were the Svirfneblin, which lived in the deepest parts of the world. A few of them survived only by hiding in the shadows between the crags and rocks which housed the worst of the worst: acidic slimes, wyrms with maws the size of canyons, and beasts which won the International Sharpest-Tooth Competition for the last 700-years running. The rest of them mostly survived temporarily. Scaith was the loudest and brashest of his 13 brothers and sisters, and also somehow the last one alive. He attributed this to quick thinking, sure footing, and possibly a worn spellbook he had found by the ashes of a wizard who used it incorrectly.

Across the town, a golem known as Medic was tending to some minor injuries on children who played too close to the river. The priest in charge of the Hospitaller services took it aside and told it kindly, "You've been working very hard and deserve a rest." It responded with extended hands and a low grumbling noise that sounded like two metal plates scraping against each other, because they probably were. The meaning came across clearly. Golems do not need rest. I was forged in war. I must heal others. These bloody hands must heal!

"You can help in a different way," said the priest, "because you're scaring the children. You can give me an aid to recover from a long day. The kind that comes in steins and is full of alcohol." The Warforged golem nodded in assent and immediately trundled off towards the tavern. The priest shouted "And remember to use the door this time!"

A man wearing a balaclava walked out of the blacksmith's with half a day's pay. He couldn't lift the hammers. One more shame was added to his already long list. He shifted the woolen mask about his head to wipe the sweat from his brow. The inside of it must be salty with the residue and would smell if he could not get back to the river to wash it tonight. But perhaps a drink would be in order.

All but the Warforged gathered about the last table in the tavern, sitting alone with each other at the last open spots in the back of the room. The seat for the mighty golem was currently occupied by a rather drunken dwarf. It was time for Destiny to give a little nudge.

"I'll beat you all," he said, "in a contest of iron livers! The drinks are on me if y'ell play me for 'em. T'ain't a soul in this place wot can tank wot I can!" The Warforged sensed opportunity and pumped itself full of beer to bring to the table. The battle went thus: the masked man bowed out early and the thief came in after. The dwarf was rivaled by the gnome Scaith, leading him to believe that drunkenness must have an inverse relationship to size. The winner, though, was Sariel Greenleaf.

On her 19th beer, well past the seven that the dwarf had drunk, Sariel breathed in deeply and belched with such magnificence that the table shook. With the flair of one who has done this kind of thing before, she dropped a match from up her sleeve and scratched it into flame with a fluid motion. She tossed the match in the air and stretched herself out to become one with the flame, engorging it with the gases of her belch and shaping it into a brilliant work of art.

This particular work of art read "Suck it."

Laughing at the dwarf's expense, the four were joined by their erstwhile keg, the golem, and adjourned to watch the fireworks show for the Festival before retiring to the local inn at the town square. What good fortune that they were all travelers and would be staying together! Everyone believed in fortune, though they may not believe in destiny. Destiny, however, believed in them. Feasting on a crumble pie that was masterfully filched by the gnome's growing skill with Mage Hand, they stood in the crowds and relaxed together, as much as they would for a long while. The sky erupted in a shower of sparks and life was good.

The masked man awoke to the sound of creaking timbers and the smell of burnt pork. He was glad he kept his clothes on and leapt from the bed into his boots. He grabbed his axes and approached the door to his room, but it was burning hot. He leapt instead to the other side of the room and evacuated via the window. Down he fell from the second story, landing gracefully in a superhero pose. 'Hm,' he thought, 'I should probably check my height before jumping next time.'

Each of the others landed likewise outside of their rooms, with Sariel exiting via the door thanks to her abilities to shape the flame. The masked man rushed to ask if there were still people inside, but she motioned with her hand to the stream of guests that were following her out of the building.

Medic and the priest were already on the scene, treating minor burns with salves and unguents. The assistant mayor, Gareth, was present as well, shouting at the top of his lungs for any who would help.

Ever the hero, Sariel Greenleaf was out in front of the crowd. "What do you need, Gareth?" Though the man she was addressing held office in this town and she was but a traveler, somehow she pulled off calling him by his first name as if they had been friends their whole lives.

"It's the Mayor's son," he replied in tears, "they took his son, oh gods, oh gods, they took him away and I don't where but he's gone and they took him."

"Who?"

"Some goblins, I think, maybe. I don't know. At least five of them took him away to the east, to the forest or past it, I don't know."

"Then that's where I'm headed," said Sariel. "Me, too," said the masked man coming to her side. "And me," said Scaith, who found a lovely perch and fast friendship atop Medic's shoulders. Arntya didn't respond, but it was clear that she was the shiftest one of the bunch and would probably be blamed for the fire, so she sidled next to the rest of them.

Gareth was gracious. "The city will reward you, if only you bring him back." The tears flowed freely down his rough face. "And hurry!"

The forest was a day's journey to the east by walking, but they traveled at a grueling pace, taking time only to scout the path and find more tracks. Scaith was of great help in this regard, using his keen gnomish eyes and natural stealth to pick his way through the dense forest. Thankfully, he was also resistant to poisons, or the gascap mushroom spores he ran over would have knocked him right out.

He led the way to an old, forgotten tomb guarded by two goblins. Gripping his greataxe, the masked man surprised the first goblin with a great cleaving blow, neatly bisecting the air behind the goblin. The poor green fellow didn't have a chance to react as Arntya stabbed him up from groin to gullet with a rapier. Nasty way to go, too, since he was shorter than the blade and the tip pierced through his skull like an old German helmet.

The second goblin fared little better. He had time to unsheathe his weapon, but was greeted with a lovely ray of frost by the grinning gnome, followed swiftly by the gnome himself, courtesy of by the strong-armed Medic.

Five adventurers entered the tomb, prepared for at least three more goblins. They found them in the next chamber, a vast affair with a wooden seal in the center. The three were guarding the entrance to another necrotorium. This time, the masked man's greataxe found its mark and cleft the first in two. Fire flew from the fingers of the gnome and elf, cascading about the other goblins. One was reduced to cinders and the other ran into the masked man, who was having trouble removing his axe from what was now a goblin's corpse. With great effort, he whipped it around and caught the goblin on the neck, ending the battle.

The wooden seal in the middle was smoldering and revealed a loose cobble beneath the ornamentation. Removing the cobblestone and reaching in, Arntya pulled out a bag with 20 gold pieces. "Easy money," she thought a little louder than she hoped. "That it is," said Scaith, who watched her divvy it up fairly.

Around the scorching, they could still read an inscription: "I vow to protect the weak."

Before the final room, the adventurers gathered together. They opened the door slowly and peered inside. The child was trapped in a cage, surrounded by animated skeletons and a small bugbear with a morningstar and a set of javelins. Small is something of an oxymoronic statement, since he was small for a

bugbear. He was still quite a lot larger than everything and everyone else in the room, towering heads higher than even the lanky elf.

The impulsive masked man placed the ax upon his back and charged the bugbear, attempting to grapple with him in a fair fight. The bugbear eventually noticed, tossing him aside with a casual flick of his morningstar. The rest of them poured into the room, casually muttering insults to the stupidity of the barbarian and beginning the fight. Medic threw his



arms up and emitted a great light, burning the eyes of the undead skeletons and Turning them aside. The bugbear grabbed a javelin and took careful aim at the golem, missing him by inches. Scaith leapt from Medic's shoulders and used the javelin as a springboard. He aimed to melt the face of the bugbear while launching towards him like he did with the goblin guard earlier, but he failed to take into account his overconfident somersaulting. The bolt of flame scorched a line across the floor two feet to the left of his target.

By this time, the masked man was up for another run and grappled with the bugbear's leg. The bugbear ignored him completely this time and simply walked across the room to engage with the rest of the adventurers. Clinging to his leg and tired of the creature ignoring an honorably issued challenge to a fair fight, the barbarian flew into a rage and drew his greataxe once more, cleaving a hole in the bugbear's side.

The adventurers beat at him with flame, fist and stave until he could no longer stand. His legs collapsed as he breathed his last.

Scaith collected some of his singed hair, reasoning that magic required some strange ingredients and you never knew what you might need tomorrow. Arntya picked the lock on the child's cage, but had trouble forcing him out. Seeing his fear, the masked man pulled out one of his handaxes and gave it to the child. "Now you are strong like us," he said. "Do not cry." Sariel and Scaith looked at each other quizzically. "He's stupid," the elf said, "but his heart is in the right

place." It seemed to do the trick, since the child left his cage tentatively.

Arntya's treasure senses were tingling. The sarcophagus in the room was labeled, "Give this to me for your reward." The simpleminded masked man approached the sarcophagus and kissed it. Turns out, that wasn't it. Sariel came up with the idea to give the oath found on the wooden seal outside. Some bricks shifted behind them and a doorway opened up which wasn't there before.

Inside was a motionless mimic that the keen-eyed Scaith saw and four other chests that contained a handful of goods and weapons. Another sarcophagus inside was gripping a jeweled sword, which Medic removed. As they exited the room, they felt some rumbling and decided to exit a little faster. On leaving, the tomb collapsed behind them.

They began the trek home, with the child in tow.

All the qualities of a dog.

Some time passed. The party found themselves surrounded by wood paneling, distinctive of the office of Mayor. Notably, there was a lack of Mayor. "Here we are," said a voice echoing darkly from a side room, "faced with a senseless loss of life." His words were soft and careful, but his tone was 'Try me.' He emerged from the shadows and the party let out a collective gasp.

During that time that passed, some interesting things happened.

While walking back from the Now-Recently-Recalled-with-Fond-Memories Tomb, they all camped for the night near an idling stream. It was a beautiful scene that made all who gazed upon it just happy to be alive and experiencing such gentle nature, contemplating how boring it would be for a story chapter to begin here.

The masked man had introduced himself as Praxis and wandered off to gather berries and small game for dinner. The child wasn't hungry and remained silent for most of the trip. He slept soundly beside the handaxe that Praxis had given him. The rest of the crew put together a makeshift fire pit and chatted while Scaith tried to remember the proper procedure for making simple sparks.

"I don't get it," he said, closely examining the dirty space between his thumbnail and his forefinger. "I remember reading all about fire bolts and fields of flame, but I can't get tiny ones to work right."

Sariel smiled and twirled her flint between her fingers. "You can borrow my lighter if you'd like." Scaith grunted and waved it away, murmuring something about a matter of honor. Arntya settled down next to her, figuring some conversation was in order.

"Have you ever met someone who annoyed you to no end, but you can't quite shake them?" Sariel laughed as elves do. "You're all still with me, aren't you?"

"Ha. Ha." Opening up to people and being insulted. Standard fare. "I mean to say, Sariel, that you can't shake them in your mind. That you leave them because they annoy you, but they stick in your head."

Sariel gave it a brief thought. "Can't say so. Why do you ask?"

"You seem so Zen, that you take it all in stride. I want to know how you do it."

For once, Sariel looked perplexed. “There’s never been a person that I couldn’t leave behind and never think about again. The past is prologue and all that, and there’s always another adventure with another chance to get a statue built of me in the town square.”

Now it was Arntya’s turn to laugh. “Statues are a way to remember the past!”

“Yes,” replied Sariel, “but that’s a past that I like.” She stopped flicking her flint for a moment and regarded Arntya with interest. “Who’s got you in a bunch?”

The reasons were complicated, as family always is. “I was just hoping that maybe I could ignore a problem, and maybe... just maybe... it wouldn’t affect me anymore.” In a better, more honest world, she would have added, “that I wouldn’t have to kill them.” But that world was being run at a different table in the games of the gods.

Back in a realm she was familiar, Sariel quipped, “If you’re looking to ignore a problem, I recommend Stuyvesant Stout with a rum chaser.”

Praxis returned from his foraging with an impeccable sense of timing and a string of fish with a pouch of edible greens and berries. “Where is the fire? The food is aching for it!”

“Sod it,” said Scaith. The fire was visible from space.

They all dreamed that night, of riches and glory. They dreamed of home and heartache. They dreamed the dreams of those who worked hard. Scaith dreamed of family and the seventeen brothers and sisters he loved but would never see again. Arntya dreamed of family she hated and knew she'd see again. Praxis dreamed of a championship and becoming the strongest. Medic didn't dream as organics did. The runes which powered him recompiled with the memories of the day in a standard process. Sariel was disturbed. It had been over 24 hours of exertion since the last time she had a drink and sobriety was starting to sneak back into her subconscious. She dreamed the dream she used to dream, of clicks and clacks and brilliant giants and a crippling knowledge her mind refused to comprehend.

Light streamed across the campsite and... hey, where'd they go?

My, they were up early. With only a mile to go until they reached the edge of the forest and the border of what humans called "civilization." The child was marching alongside Praxis when he noticed a sound coming from a clearing beyond a gap in the trees. His reactions were surprisingly quick, for he went bounding off into the brush before the rest of them had a chance to reckon what was going on.

Three orcs were perpetrating unspeakable acts upon a Mastiff of significant proportions. In Common, they were poking it with a stick. But in Orcish, it involves the rolling of a "gz" sound that civilized folk have

never quite mastered. Regardless, what kind of soulless being could see monsters do such a thing and not step in to help?

Arntya was eager to get up and go, but Scaith and Praxis were already heading for the orcs. Men.

Sariel, Medic and Arntya caught up to them mid-brawl. Praxis had already taken a swing at one of the orcs and missed completely. Scaith had accidentally cast Blur on a tree instead of himself and ran smack into the trunk of it. Men.

Rather than get in the thick of things like the rest of them, Arntya found it best to whittle them down around the outside. Arntya tapped one on the shoulder and bowed. As it turned, she unsheathed her sword and then sheathed it again. The orc blinked.

It lifted an arm to attack her, but it started to leak out of its chest. It gave a sound of surprise, which turned into a gurgle, which was even more of a surprise. He covered his mouth, which was dripping red, but every arm movement opened up the hole in his chest a little wider. It shifted its arms between the two injuries, worsening its condition until its hands couldn't contain the flow of blood.

It collapsed into a heap of used Orc. "That," said Arntya, "is how you kill."

Such grace! Such poise! Such inspiration! Praxis recovered beautifully from his failed attempt at a kill with an enraged backswing that cleft an orc in twain from armpit to opposite shoulder. The slick grass

provided tough footholds for the combatants to keep the attacks coming, but they continued to stab and smash at the remaining orc. It threw a javelin at Scaith in the tree, but missed him by inches. Scaith briefly considered another springboard attack from the javelin, but decided to do the smart thing instead, putting the orc out of its misery with a well-timed fire bolt.

The child was petting the dog through the encounter and keeping him calm amidst the carnage. The dog looked friendly and recognized the benefits of traveling in a pack. Aside from gaining a canine companion, looting was miserably poor since these orcs were already reduced to poking a dog for sport. It's not like they were carrying any good books. Praxis picked up the upper torso of one of the slain greenskins and placed it on his shoulders. "Look everybody! I'm a half-orc!" They were nonplussed.

The torso was lain to the side and they continued on their way, now with a grateful Mastiff and a happy Scaith riding him. Medic would never say it, but he missed the weight on his shoulders and hoped this wasn't a permanent institution.

Guards were at the city gates, doing what guards do best: discussing sporting events. The Shaad Shamblers were playing that night against the Lindentown Liches in a no-holds-barred Qaddat match.

Qaddat was an ancient game developed by a miserly soul who named it because she was frustrated at losing Scrabble. It was close to American Football (which was played here but named “Xerxilla” for similar reasons), but changed in some small parts. For one, each team had their own ball and there were no downs. They simply tried to get the ball to their end zone as many times as possible before their opponents did the same. This was all good fun until someone realized they could employ a local Hill Giant and hold both balls at once for the entire duration of the match. Another team hired a Frost Giant to counter the Hill Giant and, when that worked well, yet another team hired a Fire Giant. The Commissioner was a laissez-faire kind of guy until the equivalent of the Super Bowl involved lightning being thrown about the stadium and a reckless disregard for spectator safety. Dead spectators couldn’t pay for future tickets, so Reformed Qaddat was born.

This is neither the time nor place to describe the nuance and subtle play that is Reformed Qaddat, but suffice it to say that no animals are harmed and there are less than seven concussions permitted before the referee is obligated to call fouls.

Roused from their conversation by the clanking steps of the less-than-stealthy Medic, the guards crossed their pikes before the gate.

“Halt! Who goes there?” As if they didn’t know.

Sariel took the opportunity for a grand introduction. “It is we,” she said, sweeping her arms, “the victorious conquerors! The vanquishers of evil and the clubbers

of kidnappers! We come to the city gates with the Mayor's son returned and a new dog friend as well!"

"..."

"You may begin making the statues! The left is my good side."

"..."

"Why are you both shifting nervously?"

The guards looked at one another and back at the adventurers. "I don't suppose you want to discuss the Shamblers?"

Stony silence gave the answer. One of the guards piped up, "We have orders to bring you to the Mayor."

"That's handy," said Sariel, "since that's who we came to see in the first place."

"I mean," he expanded, "that we are to bring you to the Mayor under arrest."

Praxis pulled the boy a bit closer. Sariel was serious now. She said, "You can *arrest* us, but you're not touching us under any circumstance. Take us to the Mayor."

The party found themselves surrounded by wood paneling, distinctive of the office of Mayor. Notably, there was a lack of Mayor. "Here we are," said a voice

echoing darkly from a side room, "faced with a senseless loss of life." His words were soft and careful, but his tone was 'Try me.' He emerged from the shadows and the party let out a collective gasp.

The barkeep from the tavern emerged from the shadows and Sariel gasped the loudest. "I brought you some beer," he said, proffering the large stein he held. "I figured I owed you that at least for saving my tavern before the fire spread too bad to it." Sariel gulped it up greedily and handed the stein back to the barkeep.

"I'd better head back there," he said, "Gareth just became Mayor and he looks mad with power. Hopefully, I'll see you at the bar." Once he exited, Gareth coughed.

"As I was saying," Gareth continued, "this senseless loss of life breaks my heart." Again, with the tone. Now everyone knew he wasn't even trying to lie properly. "I can see that you've clearly taken the boy as a hostage and commend you on trying to keep him behind you all, but you must remember I'm not alone and you're surrounded." Arntya turned just in time to see the door close on the boy and his dog. Scaith was rubbing his behind after being shoved off of the Mastiff.

"For cunning schemers and arsonists," said Gareth, "you need work on your evil plans."

"Arson?" said Sariel.

"Setting things on fire," mansplained Gareth. "Everybody saw when you shaped the flames to

‘rescue’ the people in the Inn. It was reasonable for them when I ‘discovered’ the evidence that you set it in the first place and were in league with the goblins and bugbear. Once they swallowed that, it was a simple matter to make them believe you killed the Mayor and his son, too.”

Arntya scowled. He shouldn’t have known about the bugbear, and he certainly seemed to know about directing fear against foreigners. “We brought the boy back,” she said.

He didn’t bother noticing the way everybody in the party seemed ready to strike him. “Did you?” he said. “That boy is not the Mayor’s son. He just happened to be handy. Still, I must admit, I did not expect you to return so soon, and so unscathed.”

‘Now this is ridiculous,’ thought Scaith, ‘I’m a wizard. I’m right here with them... oh, is this a short joke?’

“It means ‘unhurt’,” said Gareth, who was already convinced of his superiority, “I can still see the gnome over... get away!”

Praxis took the initiative to leap over Gareth’s fancy new mayor’s desk and pull his arm behind his back. “You will explain this to the people or die,” he said. “I’m chaotic good, not chaotic stupid.”

“GUARDS!” screamed Gareth. The door flew open and two guards swiftly entered, followed hotly by three bandits and their captain. He elbowed Praxis in the side and wrenched his arm free. “Attack them!”

He ran through a side door and locked it behind him, no doubt to a spiderhole or secret passage. The party had other things to worry about.

Praxis hefted his greataxe and charged at the bandit captain, enraged. The captain, surprised at the ferocity of the attack, remembered to dodge at the last moment and still got a nasty chunk taken out of his leg.

“Let’s end this quickly,” said Scaith. “BURNING HANDS!”² Flames shot out from his fingertips to engulf the guards and bandits. They tried to jump out of the way, being singed regardless of their position. The unlucky ones, including Praxis, were burned alive. The captain jumped out of the way and fired a crossbow bolt in the air at Praxis in a failed attempt to finish him off, taking him in the shoulder instead.

Sariel, Scaith and Arntya finished off the bandit grunts in an act more of mercy than of combat. One guard ran in fear straight into a wall and knocked himself unconscious. The other had help with a Ray of Frost from Scaith. The air was a vortex of vapor as the frost boiled away in the heat of the flames. Scaith began thinking.

Medic lived up to its name, murmuring an incantation that made its runes glow with an unearthly haze. Its shield shimmered in the haze, seeming to flicker in reality, fading in one realm and appearing in another.

² There is a school of thought that announcing your attack before doing it made it somehow stronger or more likely to connect. This is shared between schoolchildren, Japanese cartoon writers, and apparently deep gnomes.



When the glow faded, the steel in the shield remembered it was either real or wasn't and reasserted itself. In exchange, the burns all over Praxis' body also faded to the other realm. When the glow disappeared, his healthy body was just as acceptable to reality as a burnt one.

Praxis stepped out of the fire, still burning around him. His mask was mostly burnt away, revealing his pointed ears and the wounds about his face. The blood streamed from a wound on his forehead, dripping

stark contrast around his unblinking eyes. He pulled the crossbow bolt from his shoulder and the hole closed up around it, thanks to Medic's magic. He hurled his greataxe into the air and hurled it at the bandit captain, who dodged handily into the waiting arms of Sariel.

“Looks like I cast ‘Charm Person’,” she said. The bandit captain jumped backwards in an apparent attempt to get away from his enemies, but was actually more from being shy around women due to a traumatic incident in his childhood with a girl he liked and an unfortunate horse.

Medic swung a hammer at him, but nailed a post instead as the artful dodger was kept on the defensive. Praxis had it just about to here³ with that behavior. He plucked the bandit captain out of his boots and slammed him into the ground.

Sariel took the opportunity to saunter up to him and whisper in his ear, “Let's finish what we started.” She kissed him deeply. Her abilities to shape the elements were not limited to flame. The water in the rarified air he breathed was frozen in his lungs. Frost dribbled out from his mouth and he pushed her away.

Arntya said, “Ew.” Medic turned to her. “Well,” she said, “she didn't have to use tongue.”

The combatants were getting tired. Each swing of a sword, knife, or axe was slow and clumsy. The captain

³ About nipple high.

was on the defensive and barely pulling out of the way of each attack. Scaith said, “Let’s finish this.”

Praxis glared at him. “I mean,” said Scaith, “in a careful and practical manner.” He snapped his fingers.

The bandit captain felt the heat rising in his chest. Each mote of frost that lined his lungs was melting and boiling all at once. His otherwise trim belly roiled like a celiac sufferer’s at a Taco Bell and the steam had to find an escape route. Most of the party turned away rather than see a man’s face erupt like that.

Arntya stepped over the sizzling corpse and tried the lock on the side door where Gareth ran. “There’s a lock on here, but if you’ll give me a moment, I think I can pick it.” Medic nodded and strode forward through the door as if it were paper. “Or that works.”

The boy and dog were there, along with a small writing desk inside, and the surmised trap door for escape. On the writing desk was a set of papers. Praxis picked them up and read them, recognizing a script similar to Elvish. “I don’t recognize the writing, but they appear to have been signed with a badly-drawn octopus.”

“Give me that,” said Sariel. “The bad news is, you don’t know what a spider looks like. Are there even octopi up in the mountains? Where are you from?” Praxis shrugged, knowing what he knows and nothing more. “The worse news is, I *do* recognize this script. This is from the Drow.”

Secretaries are secret-keepers.

Before the story continues, a few facts about the Drow should be established. Not many people in this realm are aware of their existence, much in the way that not many people in our world are aware of the existence of fairies. Everybody has heard of them. Most assume they are but legends. Rest assured, however, that they are very real.

Let the camera of your mind's eye peel back from the scene at Town Hall in the quiet village of Shaad and exit through the tiled roof. The rains that blessed the area shortly after the fire are still pouring out to the north. Let the clouds part for us as we travel back down through the treetops and into a small craggy hole. The light only penetrates a few feet down before the twists and turns of this corridor eliminate it completely.

Beyond this, no man dares enter, but the mind's eye has no such limitation. You enter a large cavern, illuminated only by the glowing fungi that always seem to permeate these earthen abscesses. Water flows in an underground stream through the cavern and down a long, thin waterfall. It collects in a broad,

shallow pool at the bottom before being sucked past the rocks through the greedy earth. What is below it is no man's guess. To the side is an ornately carved desk that one might find in a businessman's office, with one exception: every few planks in the desks are from a different type of wood.

There is no forest to be found underground, so these planks must have come from different places on campaigns aboveground. Regardless, each type of wood is hand-carved to match every other type. The artisan is careful and meticulous and knows his way with a knife. Each desk drawer has a set of chalk outlines in it detailing the location for every object within, from the stolen pens and office supplies to the stiletto dagger and vial of slow poison.

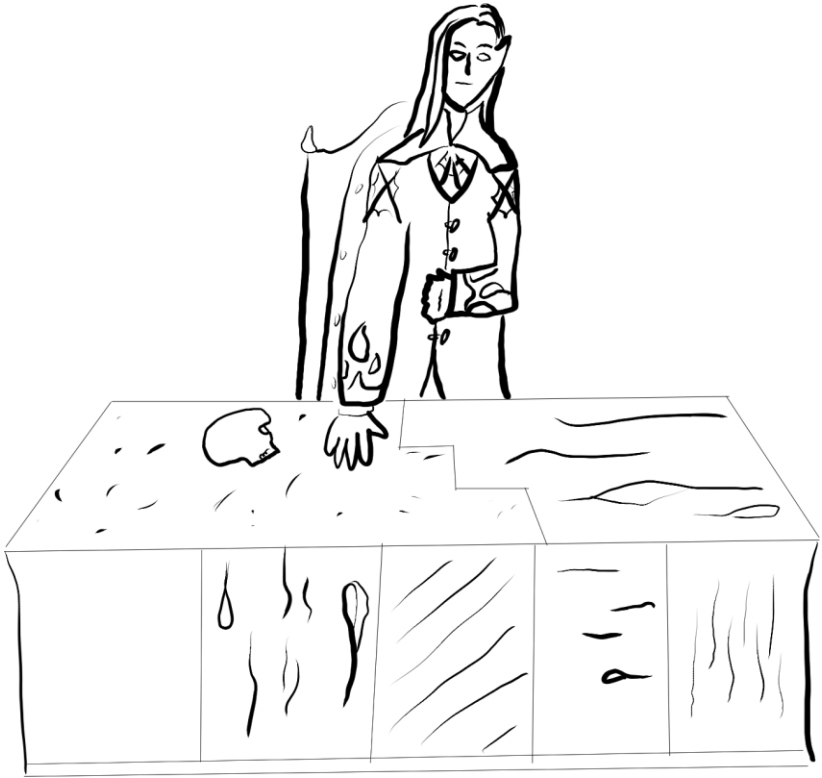
This is the desk of a secretary to a Drow chief. He keeps the ledgers of which slaves were removed on which day for proper sacrifice to Lolth, the spider goddess. He keeps records of the condition of their organs and how long they've been working in their pens. He maintains the ordering for the warmaster to bring back supplies from their next raid. He does not use blood as ink, since ink is far better for writing. He saves the blood to add to the slaves' water supplies, for efficiency and to let them know why they are there. He is in control.

His cruelty pales in comparison to his employers, and there is nothing funny about him.

He enters the scene from behind you using long strides and sits in his chair (which is as ornately carved as his desk). His bone white hair gracefully falls against his dark face as he leans into the desk and

rests his chin on an exquisitely thin hand. If leisure were a picture, he would be the Mona Lisa. When he smirks, it is the little half-smirk that tells you he knows everything and you're not going to like it. He glances up from the desk to look straight into your mind's eye and it bores into you. And that smirk...

He sees you! Quickly, imagine something else!



The mines of dysphoria.

The tavern was surprisingly normal. After all that had happened to the people of Shaad it made sense that there would be business at a bar, but it should have been a somber affair. These people lost their homes, their businesses, and in some cases their families, but they remained in the tavern and joked and sang drinking songs like nothing had ever happened.

A large part of that was due to Sariel. She was back in her element, schmoozing with the patrons and ordering a round for everyone, which went over quite well for the townsfolk that lost most of their savings when the Bank burned down. While she meandered about the room, giving everyone a much-needed lifting of spirits, the rest of the party filed in to the barstools.

"I can't believe he went after a kid," said Arntya. "I'd murder him for it, but I'm too tired for murder."

Scaith agreed silently, which was rare. To meet an agreeable deep gnome was uncommon, and for Scaith

to shut up was a wonder. The gnome's energy was usually boundless.

The boy attempted to order a double shot of gin, but the barkeep recognized him as his own son and decided to ground him instead.

Praxis leaned against the bar, head in hand. He felt the tips of his pointed ears and his shame rose. He would need a new mask and soon.

Medic shuffled up alongside them. Despite being completely made of metal and magic, the exhaustion of the party was getting to it as well. It would never stop, but it was more sluggish than usual. It sat upon a stool and raised four fingers for glasses. The bartender set them down, but Medic waved him away before he could fill them. It reached into its chest / multifunction kegerator and pulled out a hose.

Despite being a little flat from sitting in a golem for a few days, it was still surprisingly refreshing. A golem cannot smile, but they all knew it was smiling when they complimented it. Scaith gave a knowing wink to Arntya. "Must be magic."

In the midst of their joy, a voice grumbled beside them, "Don't mind if I do." It belonged to a grizzled old dwarf who helped himself to some of the beer. "That fire took a lot out of me. Lost my business and my savings." He eyed his frosty mug (that he clearly must have brought from home, being that it was half again as tall and as wide as the bar's mugs). "But it couldn't take my love of beer."

Sariel sidled up to him, saying, "Then you had your priorities straight, rescuing your mug from the blazes."

"Oh no," he replied, turning a bit red, "I wasn't near my home at the time... I just happened to have my mug on me."

Sariel gave him one of her most charming smiles and flipped a gold coin into the hoppy container. "For your business."

He gave her a nod and turned to his beverage. He upended it into his mouth, downing the rest of it in one go. He spat the coin into his hand and placed it into his pocket. "Thank you. You're all kind folk and we're grateful for your presence. I assume ye'll be shoving off for the next adventure by the mines any day, but I'm glad you're here right now."

Scath's ears perked. "Mines, you say?"

"You hadn't heard? There's been some doin's in Farquae Mines every night for the last week or so, after bein' abandoned for nigh on twelve years now."

Praxis was piqued. "What doin's are being done'n?"

"Could be anything," the grizzled dwarf replied. "Skulking. Shadowy shapes. There's been word it's anything from ghost pirates coming back from the dead to illegal elf hunting... the most dangerous game." Sariel nodded, acknowledging that yes, he's right about that. "But as for me, I'd put my last gold coin (that you just gave me) that it sounds like a dimensional rip."

Secure in the knowledge that unkempt dwarves are commonly experts in higher dimensional physics, the party set out immediately (after finishing their beers and having a nap by the inn's fireplace and perhaps a game of darts).

First, a quick trip to the shop was in order. Praxis immediately went for the lutes, having seen one before and been curious. One bedeviled shopkeeper later, the party set off with several lines of rope, a new mask with a butterfly on it for Praxis, a sharpening stone, and the lute that Praxis promised to stop playing if they just left the store.

The mastiff followed them to the mines. He had begun responding to the name "Deogi," in common use ever since the boy started spelling it. He was a loyal companion for the most part. No hunter or brigand could sway him from his duties, though a rabbit or squirrel did what a murderer could not.

Scaith examined the mine's entryway. It was boarded up with two by fours. Being a craftsman, he took pleasure in noting that they were true two by fours, not some slipshod 1.5 by 3.5 business. This was done by craftsmen, albeit quickly. He mentally wrote down the name on the stamp on the lumber so that he could visit them later and maybe get an addition built on his parents' mine.

The party pried open the mine and lit a few torches for the less darkvision-able members of the party. Arntya and Praxis stood back while Scaith lit them. It took them all of five minutes to find their first clue.

The mine was being salted. Gems were affixed to the walls in a random manner. Scaith was furious at the terrible quality of the scam. Normally, a mine would be found devoid of any precious gems, so some were brought in for other mines so that investors would think they came from there. The investors would give the mine owners enough money so that they could leave town on a fast horse.

This job was horribly done. There were emeralds next to rubies next to diamonds arranged in ways that no natural force could have created. They pocket what they can and move on.

Sariel was getting a bit heady from her past successes and decided she could help navigate through the mines through echolocation and "the power of the Bat!" When they came to a fork in the road, it was she who decided what direction to take. Since one path was as good as another by this point, they all just went with it.

They came upon a room with recently lit oil lamps. There was a human skeleton lying by the wall.

"This is clearly a human female," said Sariel, "of average height with a break above her left femur. She was carrying a bag with some stylish etchings on it, but they're meaningless. She must have been an actor." She takes off a pair of dark-tinted glasses that nobody saw her put on or even own. "She did break a leg."

Praxis played a loud note on his lute and shouted "YEEEEAH!" He was immediately quieted by the rest of the party, who would preferably like to remain

silent. "Sorry," he said, "I'm still drunk from that beer." They gave him a look. "It hits me slowly."

They all proceed through the next few rooms, which were mostly empty. A few more skeletons were laid about, as well as a poor canary. But wait! A skittering noise... from overhead!

Seven giant wolf spiders fell from the ceiling and the echoes of another world flowed through the passages like a tide of sweet molasses. Listen, and you can hear them...

"There's nothing better on a bright, sunny Sunday than fighting giant wolf spiders who want to liquefy your innards and eat them, right Steve?"

"You bet, Tom. Today's matchup looks to be an interesting one as the six members of this adventuring party are ambushed by seven giant wolf spiders."

"Is that number advantage enough for the giant wolf spiders? They have some pretty mean fighters in that group."

"Yes, Tom, but those fighters have been caught flat-footed. The spiders have literally gotten the drop on them through some careful prep work among the rock-strewn ceiling of the mine. If they can get out some early hits, they have a solid chance of pulling this off and having a meal fit for a Spider Queen."

"Let's turn back to the action, Steve, and see just what they're able to do with it. Firstly, they chose some excellent timing for the attack. They've successfully split the party in two, with the elf and gnome up front

and human and masked man in back with the golem and dog."

"That plan has been known to backfire, though. By splitting their party in two, they've also split themselves, eliminating their own numerical advantage. They've already begun the counterattack by... is that legal? The elf has begun shouting in the spiders' language that danger is coming and they all must flee. One spider has taken her up on it! Can we get a ruling on that?"

"There's no referee more accurate than the body count, Steve. So far, things are looking up for the adventuring party. The tunnel is already beginning to fill with flame from the gnome and what's that? The tiny human girl just whipped out two scimitars and is going to town on one of her defenders. That's one leg..."



"Ooh, that's got to hurt. Every leg and complete disembowelment."

"He's going to be sore in the morning!" Chuckles all around. "Even the dog is getting in on the action, delivering a vicious bite and knocking one of the spiders over."

"The spiders are reorganizing, though. That's what I love about these spiders, Tom: if you give them an inch, they'll spin a new web. I'll bet these adventurers are glad that wolf spiders aren't poisonous after those bites."

"Are we sure about that, Steve? The masked man appears to have gone crazy. He pulled out a lute and began playing a lullaby."

"A lullaby offense? I haven't seen one of those in years."

"What's that, Steve?"

"The masked man has successfully lulled a spider to sleep in the middle of the fight. That spider is effectively out of this encounter."

"Unorthodox, but so is this party. It seems the elf woman has taken on a wild shape and transformed herself into a giant toad of some kind."

"A natural predator to giant spiders."

"And an effective one. That's another spider swallowed by the former elf. The remaining spiders are shivering in fear as the tiny human girl approaches them and ooh! A smack by the dog on their blindside

and the girl wraps up those spiders in butcher's paper, because those spiders filleted."

"An interesting approach, Tom. But what will they do with the sleeping spider? We'll be right back after these..." The voices faded away into the dark.

The sleeping spider was woken roughly from his slumber by an irritated Praxis and a smiling Sariel with all eight legs tied up in a rope. "Have a nice rest?" said Sariel in fluent spider. "I brought you some flies from outside."

"The thing needs to flies," said Praxis. "The thing needs to talk." Sariel translated in a series of clicks.

"I don't think we should push him," she replied calmly. "I think he wants to help us find out who's been messing in his cave." The spider knew what was good for him and quivered his pedipalps, which was basically Spider for "Yes, of course!"

"Some humanoid figure has been entering deep into the mine and causing such sounds and lights," he communicated, shaking his spinneret in a manner suggestive of a sauntering human. As an afterthought, he added, "It sounds to me like a dimensional rift."

Sariel was pleased and Praxis was mollified. He grunted. "Then your name is Octo, for you are my octopus, and you shall fight by our side."

Praxis untied the spider, who saw the light gleaming off his greataxe and decided that yes, he could be an octopus. Octo led the group excitedly towards the source of the sounds and lights, down a twisty passageway and across a musty wooden bridge. This

section of the mines had been forgotten before it even shut down, but it appeared that someone remembered quite recently.

The room was extremely well lit, partly from the flaming sconces on the wall and mostly due to the glowing green portal to another dimension that had opened up in the middle of the room. Phase spiders warped in and out of the local reference frame with frightening regularity. Even more frightening, the rift continuously played a stream of 90's pop music. This place was more chaotic than a Taco Bell restroom at lunch hour.

There, right next to the warp on a makeshift throne, sat Gareth. Something about him seemed creepier than usual. He notices the party and uncrosses his legs. He says, "Who are you?"

Scaith was furious. "We're the ones you left for dead!" he screamed. The party tensed for a fight.

"But I've been here the whole time," said Gareth. He arose in a fluid motion and stood stock still for a moment and a half. "We're the ones you left for dead!" he screamed. "We're the ones you left for dead!" His footsteps became a blur.

He charged at Praxis and ineffectually slapped into the barbarian's admittedly willowy hide. Praxis grabbed and threw him to the ground. The dimensional rift raised the stakes by shifting from S Club 7's "S Club Party" to Aaron Carter's "That's How I Beat Shaq."

Each member of the party gathers around him and kicks him until he bleeds, but Gareth does not notice.

He grows another arm out of his head and slams Praxis' head into the ground, escaping from his grasp. Deogi leapt to the front and mauled his face before he could get up from the ground and the beating continued. Scaith fired magic missiles into Gareth's face, belly and groin. Arntya finished him off with a slice up the belly.

Gareth's body continues its transformations, shifting from each party member to the next. The most unsettling was Praxis' simulation, since the wounded doppelganger couldn't tell the difference between a mask and a face. The stitched-together skin it made was reminiscent of a Frankensteinian monster.

The phase spiders swarmed heavily and began to attack the timbers of the mine. Now was not the time for dawdling! The party members grabbed what clues or riches they could and ran from the mine as it collapsed behind them to the tune of Vanessa Carlton's "A Thousand Miles." After the oppressive darkness of the mine, it was refreshing to see sunlight once more.

A bigger problem.

Light flickered from the fire pit, reflecting on the many faces that surrounded it. Each face seemed more defined in the firelight, each shadow bolding the details that they would ordinarily never notice.

Medic's face was impassive, but worn. It was a face that had been punched before, probably with a steel bar. It was a tired face, but not an exhausted one. It was cursed to always have a little more to give.

Scaith sat with Deogi, nearly hidden among the mastiff's fur. It is often thought that the cavern homes of the Svirfneblin are cold, dark places, and they certainly are dark, but the caverns hold a little bit of heat like an oven. Furs were rare and expensive down there, and the mastiff felt luxurious. Scaith usually smiled, but this one was real.

Sariel and Arntya were having some conspiratorial fun at the boys' expense. Sariel's sharp elven ears couldn't have missed it when Scaith though he was alone and started whispering kind puppy things to Deogi. This she told with the fervor of small village gossip. She also didn't miss the small scars under

Arntya's ear, only visible in the small shadow it cast in the harsh firelight. This she never mentioned, as whoever made them clearly meant them to be hidden.

The masked man's face was obscured, as usual, but the smile was apparent. Praxis was pleased. A good fight was like a good nap to a barbarian; it refreshed the spirit. It wouldn't last. The conversation turned to a stranger topic.

"I say he makes us dresses," said Sariel.

"I say he makes us kilts," said Scaith.

"I say the only difference is who's got them on," said Arntya.

Praxis burst into laughter, which was more than a touch similar to the sound of a hungry bear. Most of them expected something like it, but the dog was unsettled. "If he is so skilled, perhaps he can make me a fine mask," he said, "with a beret and pom on top."

Their discussions went unheard by their new master tailor, Octo, who was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to care. Also, as a spider, he lacked ears. His entire family was killed in that mine during the attack, but his memory was so shredded and muzzy that all he recalled was these kind adventurers finding him and allowing him to travel with them. His pedipalps rubbed together in anticipation and he sharpened the fangs of his chelicera. When he found who committed this heinous act of carnage, there would be a reckoning in blood.

The stars revolved around the world that night. Some educated pedants will tell you that the Earth revolves around the sun Sol, which in turn revolved around bits of black hole in the Milky Way galaxy. If one of them attempts to inform you of this absolutely correct fact, remind them that this story right here is a fantasy, and it isn't even on Earth anyways, and they surely must have something better to do than mock a tale. The stars here only work at night and when they get tired, they go to bed on the far side of the planet where nothing interesting really happens.

In the morning, halfway back to Shaad, they came upon a traveling salesman. They knew he was a traveling salesman because he carried a piece of luggage that weighed more than he did, wore a big glossy button that read "Aske me about the nu diktionarys," and smiled the kind of smile that means he's dead inside and the job is the only thing keeping him together and maybe just maybe if he gets this commission he can get his daughter a new doll and she might love him again.

Scaith was excited. "Would you happen to have some kelp?" The salesman affirmed. "That's incredible," Scaith said, "because we were just looking for something green to feed our giant spider and get him to spin green silk." The salesman's brain shifted hard without a clutch, but he was just happy to make a sale.

"These are adventurers," he realized. "They must be favored by destiny to complete unimaginable tasks that leave them with strange needs and oodles of gold!"

"I can see you are a gnome of discerning taste," he said, his training from that one day workshop kicking in. "Perhaps I can interest you in this one-of-a-kind totem from the barbarian tribes of the North?"

He brandished a medium-sized wooden statue of a bear in his hand. It was only a bear in the metaphysical sense. No bear tooth was that long, no bear eye that beady in real life. The claws were disproportioned and the belly was rounded and thick. This was not created from a picture of a well-fed bear in a zoo. It was everything a man remembered after he met a bear in the wild.

Praxis blundered forward and grabbed him by the collar. "Where did you get that?" he demanded. The salesman knew the next words out of Praxis' mouth would instead be actions from his greataxe. The salesman stammered out a reply, hoping it was clear enough that the crazy man would know he said that he got it from a thieves' den about two days' travel to the north. Thankfully, Praxis was in a blind rage, not a deaf one, and had a lot of practice listening while his vision was red.

"The the the password is," gulped the salesman while preparing for the hardest word he could possibly pronounce while scared out of his gourd, "Scheherazade."

Praxis let him go. "We pay for nothing. We take the totem. It belongs to my family."

A slim hand came between the barbarian and the salesman. "They could have sold it," said Sariel.

"No," replied Praxis. "A totem is part of the family, like a brother to all members of the family. To me, to my mother."

"That totem is your uncle as well, then," said Scaith.

"Yes," said Praxis, whose grasp of sarcasm was kin to his grasp of theoretical physics. "We go." The words were Final, so they went.

The salesman knew in the pit of his soul that he would never sell one of these terrible dictionaries. He was beating his head against a metaphorical wall for nothing. He'd never get the money for that doll. It was better to just end it all. Then, and only then, once he ended his career, would he have time to spend with his daughter and help her grow up right instead of being an absentee father. Who knows? Maybe his wife's "microbrewery" idea would take off.

Walking north was simple, but the day had taken too long already and the stars were eager to begin their shift. Even adventurers have to camp for the night.

Praxis was silent, joining Octo in absorbed contemplation of what he was going to do. He strummed his lute absent-mindedly in what would become the first grunge song on Faerûn. Arntya sat at the edge of the firelight, deciding whether or not the party was still safe to travel with. The atmosphere was so tense, it was about to get a charley horse.

Luckily, Scaith noticed another fire not too far away, manned by people who didn't have the sense to mask the light from their camp when traveling in unfamiliar

woods. He rode Octo over there, keeping to the treetops, and reported back.

"There's a group of hobgoblins out there. About five that I could see. They were examining some more of those totems." The sides of Praxis' mask perked up. He grabbed his axe. Sariel nodded at the group. "Let's go kill somebody." Arntya smiled for the first time that day.

The fight was short. Sariel extended their fire to singe and scare them while Scaith snuck up to the treetops on Octo and dropped down in their midst. He thrust his arms out to his sides and muttered an arcane phrase in a long-dead language. He was, one might say, too eager to try his new spell. One Thunderwave later, the hobgoblins were scattered, disoriented and extremely dead.

Arntya sighed. 'Next time,' she thought as she put away her scimitars.

The party recovered all of the totems and a bear broach, useless until reunited with their families, but precious nonetheless. Trinkets and sundries totaled to about 20 gold pieces if they could find a buyer. There was no sense in wasting a good campsite, so they doused the fire, ate the hobgoblins food and rested.

They approached the thieves' dens the next morning. The gates were massive solid wood affairs with substantial walls three times as high as a man surrounding the compound. It was clearly a den rather than a hideout. A hideout is someplace you go to not be seen. A den is someplace that's safe. It was

patrolled by 20 individuals with large crossbows, and that was only the visible ones.

Expecting trouble, Arntya came alone to the gates, speaking the password in the soft lilt of Thieves' Cant. The massive doors swung open without issue. The rest of the party sneaked towards giving such general comments as "Oh, yeah, we're with her. Don't worry about it."

The inside of the thieves' den looked familiar. It was basically a tavern, but with more indecent clientele than usual. There must have been hundreds of thieves inside. Resting on a shelf towards the back of the room, several more totems caught their eyes. Arntya began to ask around about them.

"They were from a man who said he bought them off some giants," said a helpful thief. "He should still be over in the tent area out back. His name is Throuma."

Sariel grabbed a few flagons of ale for the party and for Throuma and headed out back to ask him his story. Praxis stayed behind, since he might kill him on sight and knew it would be a bad idea in the middle of this many people.

He wasn't difficult to find. The scene was of hundreds of tents, one each for the many thieves in the tavern. Thieves naturally distrust one another. The knowledge of this is the only reason why a cooperative like the Thieves' Den could work. Since they knew there was no pretense of trust, they could work out exactly what they were willing to group together for without exposing themselves to the kinds of people they knew they were.

A garrulous man in an eyepatch dominated the central tent yard. By the laws of narrative causality, Sariel reasoned that he must be Throuma. She was right.

A man like that was always willing to talk; the question was merely whether you could guide the ship of conversation to the harbors you wanted. Thankfully, Sariel was practically a rear admiral.

They were able to learn that he found the items in a Hill Giant's stash about ten miles to the north below the twin-peaked mountain. The Giant wasn't around and hey, finder's keepers, so he took as much as he could carry and brought them straight back to the Den. They looked particularly vicious so there weren't any takers yet, but he had high hopes.

Sariel gave him an extra flagon of ale and left him to talk to the other thieves. That type of man would never miss one audience member if there were more to come. It was time to bargain for the rest of the totems.

In the meantime, Arntya and Scaith were enjoying themselves. Arntya was finally among people she understood. Scaith had fallen into a group of crafty Halflings and was enjoying not being the shortest one in the group for a change.

"Psst." Arntya looked around. "Yes, you."

The stage whisper came from a shadowed corner of the bar. A hooded figure was waiting there, beckoning Arntya to come forward. Never being one to refuse a good beckon, Arntya did. She was very good at listening, but so was Scaith, and none can match a Deep Gnome in the shadows when it comes to stealth.

She sat at the figure's table. The figure lifted her hood. Her complexion was as dusky as the shade her hood had cast, but the bone white of her hair became clearly visible.

The Drow introduced herself as Ardunalla Dlarzza. She mentioned knowing Gareth and wanting him dead. This was easily believable, since a man of Gareth's reputation was easy to dislike and clear in his repugnance. It was almost admirable just how he generated such refined loathing.

She offered his location in exchange for his head. Arntya preferred the visceral memory of the kill and didn't have any particular need for heads, so she agreed.

The dark elf sat lazily in her chair. "To find Gareth, follow the greater moon for a few days, heading northeast towards the dark forest. Gareth is there, along with another... of a higher power." She smirked. "Oh, and Mara?" Arntya hadn't heard that name in a long time. Nobody knew that name who liked her. "Bor Galandodel would greet you if he could." She glanced in Scaith's direction. Arntya glanced over, but Scaith had hidden in the crowd. By the time she glanced back, Ardunalla was gone.

It was odd that a Drow would be so willing to betray someone who clearly had dealings with the Drow. They very rarely had infighting that wasn't resolved extremely quickly and certainly had enough warriors to handle most anyone who betrayed them, especially a small-town Assistant Mayor. In retrospect, they should have thought about this a touch more.

Sariel and the rest of the party rejoined her at the table carrying armfuls of totems and looking very proud of herself. "I explained a few things to the barkeep," she said, "about the nature of these cursed totems and the terrible fate that befalls anyone who takes them for more than a few days. Luckily, we were here to help him out of this jam. Medic 'cleansed' the area for him and we got a few drinks out of the deal." She produced several flagons of ale as if by magic.

Praxis had obtained a large sack from some overambitious young thief who wouldn't be needing it any further and began loading all of the totems into it. He was glad of the easy acquisition of the totems, but disconcerted by the news of the Hill Giant.

"Hill giants rarely leave their burrows," he said, "and are too stupid to plan an attack on my village. My people have had an accord with the Frost Giants of the mountain and have been known to compete with them in games. There is something deeper here than a giant, but that is our lead. We can find your villain and Gareth and deal with the giant later, since Gareth moves but the giant remains, but I WILL deal with the giant."

An hour passed. Medic and Deogi worked hard to drag Sariel and Scaith bodily from the bar. Thankfully, Medic had been working on a new technique for Alcomancy and sobered them up in an instant. Though she wouldn't say it, Sariel wished the buzz lasted longer. The dreams would be back tonight and the forest to the north would be a terrible place to sleep.

Together, they ventured towards Gareth and destiny. Halfway into their journey, they felt footsteps. A low rumble echoed through the woods. It was impossible to determine where it was coming from, but comparatively simple to see which way the birds were flying. As if moved by classical hero training, the group diverted to meet danger head-on.

Not being classically stupid, however, they waited ahead of the danger to make an ambush. Trees bent around the hill giant as he stomped towards them unawares. When the hulking goon was close enough to set their jaws shaking with each step, the party sprang their trap.

Scaith cast blindness on the brute, but the giant's thick skin apparently extended to magical injuries as well. He just rubbed his eyes as if removing sand. Arntya took the opportunity to slash him across the Achilles tendons, but he barely noticed. Sariel sprang out with her quarterstaff, but it snapped against the giant's thick hide. Physical attacks weren't working and they had lost all advantage the ambush had given them. The giant was starting to get annoyed.

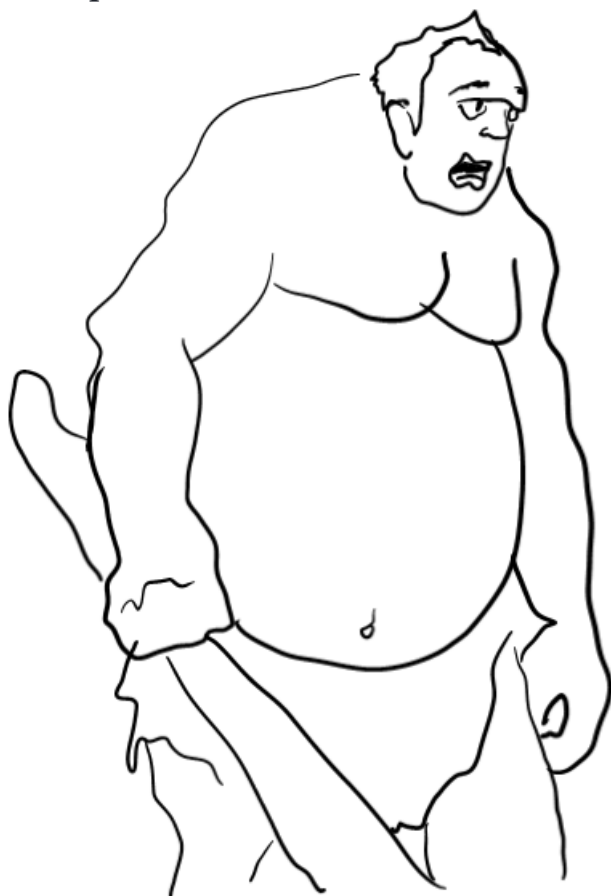
Praxis strode confidently to the fore of the fray and whispered an ancient curse from his homeland. This fight was what he had prepared for all his life. Dissonant whispers entered the giant's feeble mind. The giant faced right, then left and behind him. They were coming from all directions!

The giant fled from the battle, knocking over trees as he went. The party easily caught up with him except for Sariel, who was still attempting to use her druid

magic to grow her quarterstaff back out to normal length. She ran to catch up, but tripped and fell into tall grass wet with what she could only hope was dew.

The attacks came faster now, with Medic hammering on the giant's feet and Sariel freezing the "dew" into darts to throw at the giant's eyes.

Praxis gave a blood-curdling war cry and charged at the giant. He slammed into the giant's shin with such ferocity that the giant was knocked over. The trees took the brunt of the fall and collapsed in a shower of toothpicks and firewood. Praxis clambered up the



giant as he fell to arrive at the brute's head.

The giant picked up a nearby stone and attempted to clobber the barbarian from his face, but Praxis was too fast and he broke his own nose instead. Now

holding the giant in a full-body fingerlock, Praxis began his questioning.

"Why did you kill my people? Why did you kill them?"
The rage never left his eyes.

"We were sent!"

"Who sent you?!"

"Moltrag!"

Hill giants were never known for their loyalty or sense of direction. Praxis knew he'd have to find Moltrag on his own and the giant's usefulness was over. He popped the giant's finger joint and released his greataxe from its holster while the giant screamed in pain. With a mighty cry, he severed the giant's spine at the neck in one fell swing. A hill giant was a waste of sharp metal, but it had to be done. Not even an exile from the Hou allowed a living thing to suffer needlessly. Not even if they really wanted them to.

In the giant's satchel, there were many more artifacts and totems from his village. Praxis sat among them in silence for some time until Arntya approached him. "They'll be needing their totems back," she said. "We can go to your village. We can find Gareth again."

Praxis shook his head. "My people pride themselves on strength. They will survive on their own, or not at all." After a small and quiet ceremony, he bundled the totems into the sack he carried and placed it hidden in the branches of a tree. He blazed the tree with his family's totem symbol to find it on the way back.

The group went on to confront Gareth, but now Praxis had a name. Arntya walked behind them all. She was

the only one who saw him take a framed picture of a mother and child with small pointed ears from the giant's bag. She was the only one who saw him cry.

Could be anyone's citadel.

“We walk together through forest greens
singing a song, singing a song!
With love and laughter our modes and means
getting along, getting along.
We pass the time with rhyme and beer
friendly and free, friendly and free.
We were far and now we're near
from tree- to ver-dant tree-!”

Thankfully, Praxis stuck with the lute instead of the bagpipes this time. Sariel only got through the last hour by drinking heavily and there was only half a flagon of ale left. The forest was becoming unnaturally dark, beyond even Scaith's ability to see. Arntya was basically flailing about at this point and stuck close to Praxis, who was a hard target to miss. The darkness was so richly black that colors formed in the mind as mortal thinking attempted to process it, creating hallucinations. It pulled them in almost magnetically.

As they ventured farther into the forest, the darkness only got deeper. Already over the edge of blackness,

the dark seeped into the minds of the adventurers. Medic seemed unaffected by the unreality, but the rest of them were on edge. Sariel sobered at a rate much faster than she would like and imagining the suburban life of Roger, a vacuum salesman. Arntya wondered what materials she might need to begin a small quilting project. They had collected a good number of scraps from all the people she'd killed. Yes, a scrapbook would be lovely. It would be pink.

Praxis pondered. He wasn't used to imagination, but it was forcibly growing on him. He thought of some kind of a tabletop game where he could pretend to fight instead of getting all bloody. Children back home played with wooden swords and shields all the time and they always claimed to hit or not get hit by the others, whatever worked to their advantage. There would need to be a fair way of resolving disputes that took both skill and a bit of luck into account.

Something in a clearing up ahead was brightening up the gloom. The light was faint, but irresistible. On approach, they found an effervescent glowing orb slightly bigger than a fist. Something about it was calling to them, as if it were alive.

Scath arrived first on Deogi and began questioning it. "Are you aware? Blink once for yes, twice for no." *Blink.* "What's your name?" *Confused blinking.* *Attempt to create Morse code. Realization that this is futile.* "What's your favorite color?" *He's not getting this blink thing, is he?*

Medic and the others arrived soon after, but it saw the magic sword that Medic retrieved from the fondly-remembered tomb and started going crazy. Sariel

grabbed it to calm it down, but the orb flew erratically and bashed into Sariel's face, breaking her grip and flying away.

Medic and Scaith chased it through the forest. When it reached another clearing, the light winked out and they could no longer see what they had stumbled into. It was a black, oozing mud with a pudding-like consistency. They assumed the worst and just knew they would have to run laundry at some point soon or it would be unbearable.

The mud started to burn. It also started to grow. Black pudding tentacles reached up from the muck and burned Scaith with their acidic touch.

Medic gripped Scaith mightily and ripped him from the ooze. It sensed that it was losing a meal and grew more tentacles reaching for the gnome, but the gnome was far from defenseless. Fire shot from his fingertips to sear the top of the pudding, now more of a crême brûlée.

Medic summoned its energy, which crackled with a purple spark and danced on the surface of its hands. It laid them upon itself, surrounding its body with a cool blue flame and holy light. If the pudding had eyes, it would know a fight when it saw it. It receded and slunk away.

Now that they knew what dangers were present in the dark forest, it was a simple matter of evading them. The will-o'-the-wisps were merely a pleasant distraction. The puddings were dangerous, but easily avoided if you were aware of the smell. There were

rumors of a Drow citadel in the middle of the place, but rumors being what they are, it was probably a myth. Sariel was basically certain.

The party ventured forth until they arrived at a citadel, which could really be anyone's citadel if you think about it, and realized why they couldn't find it easily before: the central turret towered above the trees and saw over the whole forest, but it looked just like a giant tree. Down in the black of the undergrowth, it was indistinguishable from the rest of the greenery.

They were plenty of civilizations with an ancient racial memory for trees. Really, it could be anyone's citadel. They found the entrance behind a portcullis and drawbridge with moat, but the drawbridge was up.

Drones littered the ground just outside the gates. They looked like someone stuck stick arms and legs onto platonic solids. On quite a few of them, it looked like someone ripped them back off. Several were rusted through. A dead Warforged lies in the center with a Captain's markings on its forehead. It was made of stone instead of the usual metal and pockmarked with both battle damage and erosion, marking it as a very old design. Naturally, the party rifled through its compartments, but the only thing they found was a small box containing the Warforged's personal items and mementos.

Arntya gave it a thorough search, but concluded that was all. "It didn't have much," she said, "but we might be able to get a few silver pieces for some of the working armatures in there." Medic stared at her. She gulped. "Or not."

Scaith gave it a shot with an attempt at humor. "Why stop at an armature? Do you want an extra arm, Medic?" While just as disrespectful of the corpse, Medic figured this kind of comment would come from the gnome and he didn't really mean it. Medic discovered, however, that it could force the glow in its eyes to simulate a rather nice eye roll. The matter was settled. Medic placed the personal box in its own compartment. It had its own reasons, but was silent as always.

Sariel proceeded to the moat, which on closer inspection was bone dry. She peered over the edge and noticed another pudding creature spread thin around the citadel, just under the rim of the moat. Anyone sliding down to climb the other side would get caught in its grasp. It was a smart pudding, but not as smart as a heroic elf who probably had statues put up in her honor in several counties, according to what she often said at the bar.

She simply manipulated the water in the air to freeze the surface of the pudding for about 10 feet across, making it easily passable. Praxis admired her work and they began to chat about it. "Looks like I've made a pudding pop," she quipped. Praxis guffawed from deep in his belly as only the greatly uneducated would. They were the last to notice that the drawbridge had lowered.

The interior of the citadel walls was deserted. If it weren't for the lack of corpses, it would have looked like the citadel was overrun. Spears and shields were scattered about the grounds, but no hands that held them. It could have been a rout and they could have surrendered, but the weapons should have been

picked up. The ground should at least have shown blood, but at a second look the terrain was cracked and dry. Any blood would have been drunk deep by the earth.

Arntya had headed towards the central tower and pointed out a spiral staircase on the inside. They decided to give it a try. At the least, they would be able to see all over the forest from up there and possibly see where the attackers went.

Tapestries adorned the walls of the tower, which spiraled up straight to the top aside from a handful of mezzanines. Each tapestry denoted a grand victory of the spider queen, Lolth. At this point, it may be irrefutable that this citadel was currently run by the Drow, but there's no way the rumors would have been able to know that so quickly. It could be anyone's citadel, really. Either way, Octo started to quiver, with eagerness or fear it was impossible to tell, but certainly with anticipation.

The first mezzanine was littered with bones. Medic identified a few as belonging to elves, more to hobgoblins, and yet more to orcs and Halflings and humans. All of them were mingled together in mounds. Oddly, the larger the mounds, the hazier they became, and the mounds only got larger higher up in the tower.

Reality was thinning here. Dimensional rifts shimmered in and out of existence at random, smaller than the one in the mines but far more numerous. At least one was connected to the same 90's prom as the mine was, although thankfully the DJ switched to a Pat Benatar themed soundtrack to get the energy up.

Maybe the wallflower boys would actually get the courage to ask someone to dance.

Scaith threw an orc knuckle through one of the portals and it shot out of another portal behind his head. Another portal just led to nothingness. They proceeded onward to discover two wererats guarding the door to the top.

Scaith and Praxis cast sleep on the guards. They begin to snore and the party is prepared to sneak past them, but Arntya snaps. She unsheathed her scimitars quick as a wink and stabbed them several times in a flurry of blows as vicious as they are surgical. She gave great blows in a turning motion to gain momentum and kicked off the wall to fly at them at a drastic speed. Both heads are completely severed in clean cuts. Arntya rolled with the landing, stuck it like a gymnast and bowed with aplomb.

"That'll teach them to call me 'wererat' in high school," she murmured under her breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

The bodies morphed back to their original shapes, growing pointed elfin ears. Their skin was too light to be Drow. Other than that point, they were



carrying nothing of interest.

Another small set of stairs lie beyond the guarded doors. The room at the top was lit poorly, but obviously on purpose, like a Goth kid who is destined to poor eyesight when they're older. It took up the entire floor like a penthouse suite, but all the windows that would have looked over the forest had been blacked out, which must have caused the property values to plummet.

Gareth sat in a throne of bones at the far end of the circular room. It's quite good craftsmanship, especially considering bones are difficult to stick together. There's only one way that bones are designed to fit together, and it's certainly not throne-shaped. This thing took time.

"Welcome," said Gareth. "It is impressive that you made it this far. Do you like my throne?"

Scaith cast Shatter on him, rattling his throne to pieces and revealing a small stack of puzzle cubes. Gareth was obviously bored waiting for the adventurers. He was not bored now. Gareth was visibly shaken. His hair was out of place and his perfectly styled image was ruined. His eyes glowed red with subtle power, seething to break free. He bellowed, "Impertinent fools!" and picked up a bony mace from beside his throne.

Arntya slashed at him with her scimitars, but he dodged with ease, taking only a glancing blow to his arm. He took a wild swing at Arntya, but she dodged as well and he knocked another block from the remains of his throne. Sariel grabbed a torch and her

half-drunk bottle of alcohol and spat burning flame at him, but he dodged again.

Scaith cast Cloud of Daggers, filling a small area with spectral points and edges around Gareth and carving scarlet arcs about his body. Praxis grappled him and held him into the cloud of daggers.

Gareth screamed from the thousand cuts, but seemed to take pleasure in the pain. Medic pulled out the sword that it found in the tomb (See Chapter 2, Dungeon Delvers! - Joltin' Jimmy) and pierced him through the heart. The blade glowed bright as it cut through the dark presence that surrounded Gareth and, coincidentally, Gareth himself. He slumped to the floor, smiling as the light about his body and in his eyes slowly sloughed away.

A Drow warrior festooned with trophies from a hundred raids stepped out of the shadows and began laughing. It was basically infectious. Praxis starts laughing as well, wanting to be part of the crowd. It got a little awkward and the laughter petered out.

The ebony warrior spoke. "It shouldn't surprise that you don't recognize me. I haven't introduced myself, but I've been watching you for quite a while." He smirked. "Allow me to use one of your tricks."

He took a swig from a stainless steel flask at his hip and sprayed it into the air. With a snap, he ignited the vapors and shaped the flames into letters three feet high. MOLTRAG.

Arntya whispered, "We should go."

Moltrag continued, "You have no idea what is about to happen. Pain and suffering will ascend to this world, enveloping it as a shadow in an eclipse."

Scaith hated pompous overconfident diatribing. "Like those 90s proms you keep portaling to?"

"Worse than a 90s prom." The party let out a collective gasp. "Loth shall arrive in all her glory."

Sariel sauntered forward and said "Hey guys, can't we just talk this out? A little bit of diplomacy goes a long way. Maybe if we" SLAP HIM IN THE FACE. He wiped his face and smirked for the second time in minutes.

Medic cast a ray of light from its fingers, causing Moltrag to wince in pain and glow. His already punchable face became extremely punchable when brightly lit. Sariel morphed into a gorilla and bashed Moltrag on the crown of his head with both fists.

Scaith yelled, "Magic Missile! Magic Missile!" and fired three projectiles from his outstretched palms into Moltrag's face. Praxis, being Praxis, grappled him and knocked him flat.

Moltrag attempted to break the grapple and knee him in the crotch, but failed in his struggles.

The blows continued as Arntya slashed him across the back and Medic cracked Moltrag across the legs with his hammer.

Sariel roared into his face, showing off her incisors and putting the primordial fear of the jungle in him. She boxes his ears, nearly crushing his skull in the process. He is bleeding out of his eyes at this point,

but an evil glow surrounds him. He rises from the ground, dangling Praxis from his arms. He pulses with evil energy. Praxis' hands grow sweaty against the malicious heat coming off of Moltrag's body. Moltrag grabs him by the head, but he slips off onto the ground. His mask is torn from his face.

"I ascend," he cried in ecstasy.

"Before you ascend," said Sariel, ever fearless, "could you tell us if this was in fact a Drow citadel?"

"Not before we took it over a few days ago. They called it 'Anyone's Citadel,' where peaceful monks of all races could coexist. We mingled their bones in heaps and consecrated the ground with their blood."

Legs grew out of Moltrag's body in a sickening display of hyperplasia. His face tore open to reveal fangs and pedipalps and eight eyes that saw everything.

Sariel had already turned to the rest of the group. "I told you the rumor was fake."

Moltrag was no longer Moltrag. She was of Lolth. The entrance and only exit to the room was instantly bound with mystic webs and reality thinned to a crepe.

Lolth asked of Praxis in a voice like poison, "Are you a God?"

Praxis responded, "Sure, why not."

Lolth screamed "LIAR!" and smacked him across the face with one of her arms. She spat webbing at the party and bound them all at a whim.

Octo recognized his goddess and skittered to her side. "Octo, no!" shouted Praxis, "And after we killed your family for you!"

Octo did not appreciate it. He took Arntya's completed armor, just finished on the way to the citadel, and tossed it into a rift. It was the first and would be the last time that Arntya had ever desired a dress.

One unfortunate girl at a 90's prom was as disappointed as a middle-class teenager could get. Somebody else wore the same dress as her, but they were more popular and it would look like she was copying her. Life just wasn't fair!

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a fine new silk dress floated down and landed in her lap. It was the most beautiful garment she had ever seen.

Back in the real world, Lolth's slow poisons were taking their desired effect. Each member of the party absorbed their dose from the webbing through their skin. In their toxic state, they were easily tossed into a portal of Lolth's choosing.

For now, their tale was over. If they ever emerged again, the world wouldn't be the same.

Part III

A New World

He writes sins, not tragedies.

Let us take the safe route this time and venture where no Drow bothers to look: inside. We can sneak up behind him and enter the mind to see what malice has been cooking up since last we saw our heroes.

A secretary is perfect for this kind of thing. They have seen absolutely nothing, but know absolutely everything. Every hour of torture is carefully logged and every log is carefully prepared and filed. The secretary knows where all the bodies are buried because he did the burying.

He was stuck in the middle of a particularly difficult missive to a superior. There was a standing order to update the generals on the state of the five Heroes of the Drow, the midwives that had brought Lolth into the world of the surface, every quarter year. This was the worst since the third update.

“Alas,” he began, “we have lost another of the five to the Molrai.” Wait, “to the rebels who shall not be named.” Better.

“Their recruitment channels are an ever-present thorn in our sides. We remain ignorant of their communications or however else the Hero Sariel⁴ coordinates her strikes. It is considered that the Hero Arntya née Mara was the other end of that connection, and now that she has released herself from her work station at the forge, the strike teams will need time to create new channels.

It is the considered opinion of several lower officers that it was a mistake to introduce Bor Galanodel to forge duty, much less kill him in front of her. She possesses a unique talent among her kind to channel rage into positive productivity. A normal human would be broken by seeing an old mentor and father figure enslaved, tortured and blinded by hot pokers, and subsequently murdered before her eyes, but with Arntya, it served only to steel her resolve. It is feared that she will no longer be capturable. Kill on sight orders recommended.

To continue with the poor news, Sariel has yet to resurface. Her name is used among the rebels with regularity, but we have yet to get a confirmed visual on the elf herself. She must have been present at several of the skirmishes of the last year, but not in elf form. It is theorized that she has not been properly herself since her self-release.

It is still unknown how she was able to neutralize the magic inhibitors that were placed on her. Forensic

⁴ “We should consider eliminating her title. I am fully aware of the difficulties in navigating our bureaucracy and have already sacrificed three assistants in pursuit of this. With luck, the application will be on your desk by noon, one year from now.”

reports indicate no tampering with the magical mechanisms; only dead guards and an open lock.”

The Drow rested his hand a moment. That should do it. He made an effort to break the news gently. They were running out of trusted messengers.

He stretched. Better to kill a messenger than the author of the report, he surmised. ‘I have skills,’ he reasoned. ‘I can get things done. All the messenger has is youth and strong legs, which can be replaced by any number of illiterate slaves.’

He absentmindedly played with the human skull on his desk. It was part of the remains of the first person he had personally assigned to a magical experimentation pit. The wizard had managed to extract his skull while he was still alive and decided to engrave it as a present. ‘To the Underworld’s Best Secretary.’

He didn’t earn that skull by procrastinating. He picked up his pen and began again.

“The remaining three Heroes are still in captivity. To begin, the one known as Medic continues to function as a guard. It has successfully stopped seventeen escape attempts since the last report. Although our reform program remains woefully inadequate for use on constructed beings, we have discovered a method for compliance. It has an unnaturally severe horror against harm coming to the innocent and appears to care for all living things. This weakness is easily exploited. Medic has been cooperative ever since we started holding hostages against his work.

After repeated cavity searches, we continue to find new compartments. It is unknown whether or not it is hiding anything from us.

The half-elf abomination known as Praxis continues work in the kitchens. As you know, we originally wanted to keep his mask off as an insult to him, but his appearance halfway between a glorious but traitorous elf and a mongrel human has been demoralizing for the guards. His new mask is the same orange color of his jumpsuit. He insists on wearing a chef's hat over the top of it and singing while he cooks, but the guards enjoy his cooking enough to allow it. Even the song about bottles of beer.

He has been remarkably quiet during his captivity. Due to this, he has been allowed to prepare food for the guards as well as the prisoners for the last year. The guards report the food is passable, but not great "except for Friday Meatloaf." The prisoners surprisingly enjoy the food greatly, despite them getting the burnt or disgusting-looking portions that the guards pass over.

Scaith is compliant, but hardly quiet. He works in the mines with the other Svirfneblin. I continue to recommend against this. Svirfneblin communities are notoriously tight-knit and he may have found a relative or friend. Protocol dictates that prisoners must not be allowed to taste home, lest it lead to hope.

Previous accommodations for Scaith included the Wizards' Brigade, our sardonically named mining company. The wizards in the brigade have experienced a 40% average increase in bicep size since

we used anti-magic shackles on them and set them to work.

Building materials from the mining efforts have been sent almost entirely to the Shaad construction initiative.

Ongoing experiments with the reform program have provided encouraging results among the human population. Elven and Dwarven populations are more resilient, but a handful of recent successes have spurred our wizards on to more inventive methods. We anticipate a breakthrough within the next year.

End of report twenty-four.”

The Drow blew on the paper to dry the ink and carefully folded his report into an envelope. He placed the envelope on the corner of his desk for the latest messenger to pick up.

He grimaced. Something is wrong. He opened a drawer and removed another piece of paper. “Memo,” he began. “Look into a method for removing intrusive narrators. Their persistence has been – “

Oh look, time to go back to the story at hand.



The revolution is live.

Sariel stood upon a ridge a quarter mile from the edge of the prison camp and rubbed her wrists where the chains had bound her. They still ached, not from the metal, but from the sheer humiliation of being kept prisoner and less than a person. She had been so angry at the Drow that contemplated suicide to escape, but another option appeared when one of the guards seemed infatuated with her.

Love hurts.

The time was at hand for a reckoning. She had spent countless hours in animal form, wreaking havoc against the Drow forces. It was starting to pay off. Every animal the Drow came across was assumed to be another assassin. They were jumping at shadows and rats.

Six hundred and seventy-four messages had been sent by animal from inside the prison over the past two weeks, updating Sariel on the conditions inside the prison. She learned many things, including the location of all her friends, a brigade of wizards and the means with which they were bound, the defenses

surrounding the camp, and internal resistance movements. She also learned, to her chagrin, several recipes for Bundt cake and that she should never have taught Praxis how to talk to animals.

Alas, he was the only magic-user not bound in anti-magic chains. 'We must make do with what we have,' she thought, sighing.

"Thinking about Praxis again?"

Arntya startled her. She had personally been at least twelve prey animals who survived by stealth and still had no idea how the girl was so quiet. On the bright side, their aims were aligned. Her skills would come in useful.

She grimaced. "I was thinking how I haven't had a proper drink in five years. The still I made is good for getting drunk and not much else."

The irony did not elude Arntya. For someone with so many skills, Sariel made a lousy bartender. She could distill the liquor from just about anything and kept a small greenhouse of plants to cull the alcohol from, but couldn't pour a margarita worth its salt.

Instead of bringing up the sore subject, Arntya smiled. "Are you ready to begin the assault?"

Sariel nodded. "I am," she said, "but the Drow aren't."

Sariel cast a stealth spell and they began their descent into hell.

The first guard tower they came across was an old stone affair occupied by two elite Drow warriors and a lonely golem held against its will. A mouse went skittering between their feet and was immediately stabbed through by one the guards.

"Got her," he said to his companion. Medic looked even more uncomfortable than usual. The Drow warrior approached it with the mouse on the tip of his sword, waving the poor corpse about so Medic could see it from every angle. "She didn't change back, so I suppose this one was just a mouse. Won't matter. We'll get her eventually and we'll get the waif, too, as soon as we see her."

"But you won't see me." His partner stood stiffly for a moment with eyes wide open before falling to his face. Arntya gave a smirk and pulled her dagger from the prone warrior's kidney.

A hawk barreled in from the open window of the guard tower and metamorphosed into Sariel with a longsword. Her momentum was enough to impale the other warrior clean through and ram them both into the far wall.

Arntya grabbed the hair of her fallen warrior and pulled his head up so his throat was open. She pulled her dagger swiftly across his neck and dropped him again. By going quickly, the guard received less pain than he might have otherwise suffered, but Arntya felt that it was better that her blade didn't get rusty and dull from a slow cut in running blood.

Sariel was still fiddling awkwardly her longsword, having decided that her usual quarterstaff wasn't a strong enough symbol for a jailbreak. The guard

pushed her off and readied himself for a proper defense, but Medic realized now was the time and stabbed him in the back with his Drow-issued greatsword.

The little assassin gave Sariel a look. "It's two against one over there. What's taking so long?" Sariel reconsidered her longsword idea and jammed it into the tower stones. She cupped her hands around her mouth and gave a screech that would put a two-month-old baby to shame, but was apparently attractive to hippogriffs, since one came swooping in through the window to join the fight.

Going virtually unnoticed in all this was a gecko who had crawled in between the stones. It spoke suddenly with a voice very similar to a certain bard's.

"Rah rah sis boom bah,
kick 'em in the knee!
Sock 'em in the jaw!
Rah rah sis boom bee,
smack 'em in the long johns,
hit 'em for me!"

The guard was enraged by both his injuries and the terrible poetry. He charged, but was sliced across the calf by Arntya. She shouted, "Why don't you die?" He shouted back, "For the Spider Goddess!" Medic slapped him upside the head, but he recovered nicely and tried to charge again.

With his calf cut, all the Drow could manage was a stumble, but it was at lightning speed. His awkward movement made it difficult to predict his positioning and he ran Sariel through with his sword. Unused to

losing a fight, not to mention a pint or two of blood instantaneously, Sariel quickly fainted.

Her hippogriff took up the slack, rending the Drow warrior's flesh from his arms as he flailed about defensively. He pushed the thing away in time to find Medic already tending to Sariel's wounds and Arntya drawing her scimitars.

"You don't deserve both swords," she said as she rammed one between the stones. "And you don't deserve mercy." She threw her other scimitar into the air and while the Drow tracked it with his eyes, she pulled the first scimitar from the stones and lopped off his head. She stretched out her arm and caught the falling scimitar in an underhand grip. "Don't lose your head over it."

Thankfully, Medic's stabilization was working. Sariel already had enough strength to raise a middle finger at that terrible pun.

All the while, the gecko was taking in the marvelous display of brutality. When the dust settled and Sariel's wound magically knit back together, he inquired "Any message you want to send back?"

Sariel groggily slurred, "No time! Go!" The gecko crawled back into the stones.

She looked around at her compatriots and the carnage in the guard tower. "Twenty minute rest?" The golem nodded.

Medic was still a guard in the eyes of the Drow, saving of course for the two dead ones. It led the two of them

in unlocked shackles down to the mines where Scaith was working. It was the perfect disguise, except for an orc.

"I know you," said the orc walking alongside them. "You served with me in the forges, stoking their dread fires!" Arntya shooed him away, but he refused to take the hint and leaned in closer to her. He delivered his best stage whisper. "We were bellows buddies! I shoveled the coke while you worked the pump! It's me, Kanon! Kanon Fawter."

She grabbed him roughly by the scruff of the neck and held him close to her face. For an orc, stooping that low had to cause back issues. She held him there for what seemed like an eternity, but was probably no more than a second or two. "This is a jailbreak, Kanon," she whispered. "You are either with us, or you are dead. Do you understand?"

Kanon nodded his assurance and continued to walk alongside them, albeit silently for once. He led them straight to the wizard mines.

The wizards were chained together with anti-magic shackles and forced to mine with their bare hands. There wasn't even any tea available. It was barbaric. Each brigade was filled with a different kind of wizard so that they could reminisce about what they once had and never could have again. Scaith's Svirfneblin brigade was up for hard labor at this time, with the Pyromancers on cart duty.

The escape group was about thirty feet into the mine when they heard a guard shout "Sing a slave song!" The mining Svirfneblin began their ancestral chorus

of "Hi Hoooo," but one lone voice sang a counter melody.

"I don't get a kick," sang Scaith, pausing for dramatic effect, "from champagne!"

Whips flew like hornets in the air. The guards were obsessed with beating every last Svirfneblin for the excesses of the one. In time, perhaps they'd forgive Scaith for instigating it, but every good rescue requires a distraction.

Medic approached the guards whipping Scaith and gave him a deliberate wink, or at least a reduction in glow in one eye. Scaith shut his eyes tightly while Medic cast a quick spell.

Instantly, every scratch and crack in Medic's armor began to glow with an intense light. He strode amongst the guards like a golden metal god. The Drow, normally adverse to light and currently working in a mine, were blinded by the shining soldier. The assault began.

At this time, a canary flew back into the mines and climbed into its cage. He spoke with a familiar voice, but distracted as if he were keeping an eye on something else. "Don't mind me, I'm ready to work," it said, then added in a whisper, "There's a cake in the oven right now with your names on it. Give them heck, guys!"

Meanwhile in the kitchens, Praxis pulled a cake from the oven. Over his time, he had perfected a great many culinary inventions, such as a method to make celery

taste like chicken, muffins made entirely from dirt, and a ganache that melts in the oven and self-coats cakes. It was the latter that was employed for this masterpiece.

The cake was three layers. It used only the finest ingredients that the Drow kept for themselves. The bottom-most was a rich chocolate. The middle layer was a thin, rich, cake-shaped caramel concoction. The top layer was plain, with a faint taste of potato chips. It took skill to keep the subtle salty taste in a baked good. It took greater skill to emboss a message in the top: "Viktory!"

For the fifth anniversary of the coming of Lolth, of course.



This layer was delicate. The salts made the cake crumbly and the whole thing could fall apart with the slightest tremor. All that was needed was to place the cake atop the first two layers and let the ganache cool to hold it together.

He slid a peel under the cake and slowly removed it from the oven. With tender care, he lifted the layer to the very top of his creation. When he set it in place, it was with equal measures of excitement and relief.

Both of the Drow sent to the kitchens as punishment stood next to him in awe of the towering confection. One whispered to the other, "That is wonderful."

Praxis responded with a hearty "Thank you!" and the cake collapsed layer into layer like a demolished building.

The ruined tower reflected the ruin in his soul. He threw his chef's hat to the ground and muttered curses and other things under his breath. The Drow did not see him point to a cockroach and send a message.

Arntya, Medic and Sariel used the keys lifted from the guards to unlock as many shackles as they could as quickly as they could. The wizards cackled in delight as their magic returned to them. The sorcerers received it in dribbles when their internal sources started to work again, while the wizards had immediate access to huge torrents of magic from the leylines beneath the mines. All except for one.

Scàith attempted a bit of magic, but he was weaker than usual. He had to be sure that they would whip

him immediately in order to pull off the distraction, so he had been disobeying every day that past week. He sparked and stumbled.

Over the years spent away from his calling, he was forced to mine harder than any in his family during their peaceful time together. What he had lost in rusted skill, he had gained in muscle. Blood coated his body from the harsh sting of the whips. It only served to make his musculature gleam. He had somehow gained a fourteen-pack during his service, which was strange since Svirfneblin only have four abdominal muscles.

Yet he wouldn't have the opportunity to use them all that day. He was exhausted. When Medic stomped to his location, he clambered aboard, weary and grateful to see his friend again.

The wizards were having a grand old time. Fire was being thrown about like a party ball at a rave. The very earth was a plaything to them, molding and morphing to their whim and trapping the frightened and powerless Drow inside. The raw enormity of the magic being tossed around, coupled with the thinness of reality in the Drow camp, sheared the fabric of space and time and caused Kool and the Gang's "Celebration" to echo through the cavern.

While Sariel and Arntya freed more and more wizards, Medic provided defense. It hefted its greatsword and cleft a guard in twain. Kanon tackled another as a handy reminder that he was still there. During the beatdown provided by these two hulking colossi, though admittedly mostly by the golem and not the

orc who continued to shout "I'm helping," a cockroach skittered into the mines and delivered a message.

It said, "I'm sorry guys, but the cake is ruined."

Frost crept up Scaith's left arm and flame crept down the right. His fingers flexed with determination and a strength he didn't know he had. His blistered skin peeled away when the air pressure increased at his every breath and vacuumed away when he inhaled. Medic had heard of this kind of power only once before, from a fellow corps mate who had lived a thousand years. It told that it hoped to return to dust before it saw such a raw force of nature again. Medic shifted its stance to provide a better ground for the energies being manipulated.

"Five years of slavery..." Scaith began, "and there's NOT EVEN ANY CAKE?!?"

He brought his hands together and everything stopped. As the earth moved in its inexorable orbit, everything in the cavern held in place for a microsecond. The clap of his hands were the clap of thunder and lightning erupted as the cavern raced forward to catch up to nature. The bolt was as bright as the Sun, yet arced gracefully around the prisoners. The guards were subsumed in the light. They did not leave ash, only memories.

Scaith slumped in his seat on Medic's shoulders. "Woah. Those Kegels are paying off."

One last Drow lying prone behind them shook off his stupor and drew his dagger. He shouted a battle cry and attacked, but Medic spun around and slammed

his greatsword through the Drow and into the ground by two feet. This fight was over.

Meanwhile back in the kitchens, a re-hatted Praxis successfully converted the collapsed cake into a sweet bread pudding. It glowed with an inner sweetness despite the harsh kitchen lighting. The Drow who were supposed to be guarding Praxis stepped back when he brandished the large serving bowl and scooped in all but a few morsels of the bread pudding. Those morsels, he scooped into two fresh bowls for the two Drow. "The secret ingredient is love," he said. "Some just came in today." He set them to eating and simply walked out of the room.

Someone else might have surreptitiously poisoned their meals as he left. Someone else might have indulged in revenge to these two hapless Drow for the indignities of the past five years. Someone else did not have a passion for their food like Praxis, who would not adulterate it with such a thing.

On his way out, Praxis stopped for a bit and tore two eye holes in his chef's hat. He pulled off the orange mask of his captivity and placed the chef's hat triumphantly back on his head. He pulled it deep down to the tip of his nose to serve as his new mask of freedom. He made sure to cover the tips of his ears, but if anything, it was only out of habit.

He gave some of the pudding for one of the local rats who had gathered near the delicious smell. They were always kind to him, so long as he had more treats for them. He gave them something else, too: a directive.

"Gather the dog and meet us at the mines."

"Clive was OK," said Scaith. "I mean, he was still morally bankrupt, but he didn't whip so hard. Effin' Steve, though."

The camp was in absolute chaos when Praxis arrived with Deogi at the mines, carrying a large bowl of glowing bread pudding. "Liberated him," Sariel piped up, having felt less statue-worthy than usual in this particular escapade. "You all saw it."

None of them cared for the credit. They were together again. Just as the music emanating from the mines behind them kept repeating, it felt right to celebrate.

Don't call it a comeback.

Hairs on Scaith's arms rose when the Drow Mage cast her trap. Blue electricity arced through the air around the edges of the camp, slowly rising to complete a dome of energy. To the Drow, they had just created a foolproof method of recapturing Sariel and Arntya. To the heroes, they had merely created a bottleneck. They would have to go through the Drow Mage first.

Scaith called out the direction of the Mage, which happened to be near the docks. They hurried over, taking the Wizards' Brigade with them. Two elite Drow warriors were guarding the Mage, but wouldn't be there for long. It was time to get to work.

Praxis set down the bread pudding and went to grapple with one of the warriors, but the warrior was trained in the art of grappling and knew what to do. He moved his arms in a circle to gain inside control on Praxis and shoved him off to the side.

"No!" shouted Praxis. "Arm windmills! One of my many weaknesses!"

It was a guard's turn to cry out next when Scaith sent a bolt of flame across his face, burning off a chunk of hair. "My luscious locks!" he screamed. The other guard managed to roll out of the way, but in doing so noticed just who was attacking.

"Sariel," he asked, "is that you? I thought we had a thing!"

Sariel rolled her eyes. "He's that guy," she explained to Arntya, "that I seduced to escape." Arntya gave a twin eyeroll. Sariel confirmed and countered with what can only be described as an eye roll 720 with half flip. She turned her baleful gaze toward her "lover."

"That's enough, Rahayrjahyr! We're done."

The Drow raised his sword and wiped away his tears with his arm. "My name is Roger! You never paid attention to me." He lashed out at Sariel, but his heart wasn't in it. Medic stepped in and backhanded him in response.

Sariel used her connection to nature to shift the earth under the other Drow warrior, but he was faster than she realized and simply jumped out of the way. He brushed the dust off his shoulders. Sariel turned to Roger and said, "You weren't even worth that, Rahayrjahyr."

The rest of the crowd began to fight as well. The members of the Wizard's Brigade chanted together. Earth specialists cracked the crust while Fire specialists called forth geothermal heat. Magma burst forth from the ground and magically transformed into lava through the power of the English language. The dusty warrior and the mage were caught in the blast

and burnt near to cinders were it not for the protective spells of the mage.

Even Kanon Fawter joined the fray, closing his eyes, screaming and swinging his arms wildly in an attempt to hit something. By luck, he managed to bop the mage on the head and knock her unconscious. He felt the resistance against his whirling fist and peeked an eye open.

"I did it guys," he said as he walked past the dusty warrior, who promptly stabbed him.

Praxis flew into a rage and attacked the dusty warrior. He pulled his chef's knife and charged him in a reckless attack, only to beat him to death with his unarmed fist, screaming all the while. He was still wearing an apron that says "Kiss the Cook" in Undercommon.

During the protracted and unnecessary beating, Arntya stopped what she was doing and tapped him on the shoulder. "Why aren't you using the knife?," she asked. He responded, "Are you insane? I use this to prepare food!"

Roger continued to strike at Sariel, now bawling in a rage. The rage gave him the energy to continue striking. The bawling made his strikes weak and ineffectual. Sariel sighed yet again. "You're not going to win this with brute force and crying."

She motioned to the Svirfneblin Wizard's Brigade to dogpile on Roger. Sariel was incredibly charming and they practically (and literally) tripped over themselves to do it while Medic fixed up Sariel's bruises.

Roger struggled against the weight of a dozen Svirfneblin bodies pinning his arms and legs to the ground. Sariel drove a sword into the ground barely a centimeter to the right of Roger's head. From the look on her face, she clearly "meant" to do that. She kicked him in the head to get out of the awkwardness.

She quickly erected a 4 foot tall statue out of the earth dedicated to her performance in the fight, inscribed with the quote about brute force and crying. She was very proud of that quip.

In the distance, a slavers' ship arrived at the dock. The first one off the boat was a frost giant guard to watch over the slaves as they disembarked. Sariel considered burning down the ship to get rid of the Frost Giant, but remembered that they still needed to escape from the prison camp and a boat might be the way to go.

Praxis got a crazy look in his eye and started murmuring, "Giants... giants... giants..." He charged toward them with the chef's knife out. Sariel shifted the earth slightly to trip him, but he made sure the chef's knife and bread pudding stayed clean and upright during the tumble.

Sariel sauntered up to him. "Wow that was weird how you tripped, huh?" Praxis nodded. "Maybe we can talk about how we're not going to attack the giant unless we have to?" Praxis nodded. "OK."

Medic, who was still considered to be a guard by most of the slavers, engaged the frost giant in conversation. Neither of them could really speak common, but the looks flashed between them spoke mute volumes. Just in case, Sariel casted Charm Person. Medic relieved the frost giant of duty. The giant high-fived Medic,

driving him into a friendly hole about three feet into the ground. Medic pulled himself out and assumed control of the S.S. Honey Badger, flagship of the Kulenov (Slave) Trading Company.



The slaves were immediately released as is ethical and just, then asked politely if they could crew the boat for escape or else they'd be left stranded here in the slave camp and also nobody in the party carried any money, so there would be no remuneration. An old slave said he can pilot a boat and they all load in. The slavers are

cowed into submission as they load back into the boat and crew it to leave.

The seas were choppy enough that the owners of the ship had to exit their well-fortified quarters. Lo and behold, they were Arntya's parents. "Hello, Mara," said Mother, "It's been a while."

Sariel leaned to Scaith and said, "Her name is Mara?!?"

Father, who could hear stage whispers, spoke. "Mara Kulenov, our daughter and heir. We have tried for years to bring forth the ancient evil of Lolth. The Kulenov Trading Company has been a friend of the spiders for quite some time. How fortuitous that our own daughter played a part in her coming!"

The party and crew circled Arntya / Mara and her parents. Medic lit up a cigarette from its rations to look cool. Sariel attempted to call forth flame from the cigarette onto the parents, but they quickly threw up a magical shield in response.

Father drew his rapier and attacked Arntya, but she reflexively punched him in the mouth. He wiped the trickle of blood from his mouth and attempted to stab again, but Arntya dodged. Arntya hamstrung him with one scimitar, but nicked the bread pudding bowl that Praxis held with her backswing. The scimitar was knocked out of her hands and went overboard.

Mother picked up the rapier and slashed, missing Arntya but cutting her hair. Arntya attacked again with her remaining scimitar and a dagger, but

overthrew the dagger and hit a gawking slave. Medic tended to his wounds while Father grabbed a dagger from his boot and went for her legs, stabbing her in the thigh. She held the dagger in her thigh to immobilize his arm and slashed him across the chest, bleeding him out almost instantly.

Mother stares at her with hatred in her eyes and grabbed the dagger, stabbing herself in the heart.

Arntya dropped her weapons. "I knew I'd have to do it someday. Just not today."

"The world is a better place now that we've murdered them," Sariel says comfortingly. Arntya starts dragging the bodies overboard, and the rest help.

Mara says "The ship is now mine. Do you have any problems with that?" She retreated to the captain's cabin, her cabin now, where she could cry without anybody seeing.

Now that there was some down time, the rest of them looked around the ship. Sariel almost immediately found the kegs below decks. "Do you know how long it's been since I've had something good to drink? I tried fermenting snow. It doesn't work."

Praxis organized the Svirfneblin and slaves into a production of the story so far. He was extremely excited, since "It's gonna be a musical, and gnomes can sing really high!"

Arntya left the cabin a few days later, holding letters found in the captain's cabin between the Drow and her parents, confirming their willing assistance. She also found a picture of herself as a child.

Sariel mentioned to her once, "Back in the elf village, everybody raised the kids together. If somebody's parents were evil, the kid just had to kill them." But she wasn't an elf, and Sariel wasn't very good at comforting.

As they approached the mainland and true freedom once more, they saw another ship a few leagues off. Arntya recognized it as one of the smaller, faster ships in her family's fleet: the SS Plot Device. The water beneath the ship grew darker. Suddenly, tentacles rose from the depths and gripped it tightly. Within moments, it was crushed and dragged to the depths!

The shadow approached the ship under the sea and swiped across the deck with two tentacles. Medic dropped unceremoniously to the floor, cracking its chestplate and throwing Scaith into the ship's rail and knocking him out. The box taken from the old golem at the citadel spilled out, revealing old mementoes: an etching of an old party that golem had been with, a broken piece of a scythe blade, a pair of glasses and two black pages. Medic moved with speed and grabbed all the items back.

Sariel used her skill in talking with animals in an attempt to communicate with the Kraken. "There's other ships back a ways that are far more delicious. We only have snacks aboard." Praxis held up the bowl of bread pudding. A tentacle grabbed the whole bowl and brought it underwater. After what seemed an eternity, the Kraken moved away.

They were still about one week from the mainland. Over that time, Scaith had healed but remained quiet.

He was crippled from the attack. His 14 abs had exerted too much strength on his spine. His fevered dreams were nightmares. In his weakness, he found himself driven to crawl to Medic's quarters while it was out on duty and to listen to the dulcet sounds that only he could hear. The glasses were enticing, and he wore them.

The spirit of Sevo filled him. His mighty spirit ignored the body's limits and stood. The healing had already begun, but it could take a while. He strode forth onto the ship's deck and was met with the gaping mouths of all the crewmen. Obviously, finding someone they saw crippled now walking would be strange, even if that mobility was apparently at the cost of poor eyesight.

Only Medic realized what had happened. It reached for the glasses, but its hands passed through them like a phantom.

"Firstly," said Sevo, "I've waited centuries for a body and I have more practice in magic than all of you combined. If I don't want to leave, you can't make me." His intangible trick was proof of that. "Secondly," he continued, "he needs me. The body needs to focus on healing while I ride it, or he won't even survive the night."

The rest of the party listened to him tell his story and accepted it begrudgingly, if only for Scaith's sake. That didn't stop them from referring to him derogatorily as "Spectacle Jim," "Sunglass Steve," or "Bifocal Freddy."

At the shipyard, there were not many people about. The land itself looked devastated. Mirtvicke forest was mostly clear-cut. Sariel ran toward one of the remaining trees and hugged it. "I missed you so much! That wasn't nature! It was frozen hellscape!"

The citadel stood tall in the distance, clearly visible now that most of the trees were felled. Shaad was almost completely destroyed. They checked to see if Sariel's statute remained, and it did, but with the inscription changed to read "Dedicated to those who freed Lolth." They didn't want to consider this and instead ventured forth toward the citadel.

The citadel, which should have been the site of a major celebration, remains largely the same as when you left it, with one difference: there are many more bones about. "Aren't these the bones of people doing what we're attempting to do right now?" said Mara. "That many people can't be wrong," said Praxis. Still, the place looked abandoned.

The keening squeal of portals was the only sound. They ascended to the top of the citadel tower. The destroyed bone throne and all their weapons were present, including extra scimitars, Medic's magic greatsword and Praxis' belt (slightly gnawed upon by rats). The 90's prom portals now led to the 2000's. An old dress in Arntya's size fell out of the portal as a girl finished reminiscing about high school, tossed it into her closet and consequentially into the tower.

They looked around for notes and found a map leading to a swamp and caves. The swamp appeared to have some sort of weapon in them. They chose to go there.

Arntya, get your gun.

Devastation reigned. It was a whole new world under Drow, and they remade it in their image. Unfortunately for everyone else, their image was terrible. Plants refused to grow in the tainted, salted soil. Even the ground cover was mostly pebbles, jagged on their edges in complete refusal of the normal process of making pebbles. Evil had sharpened them.

Leaving the citadel, Medic trampled a flower. The land was already in pain and Sariel couldn't abide even one more instance of deforestation, so she used her druidic skills to replant them as they went, undeforesting the area.

They came across an old tree whose roots had come up out of the ground. Medic noticed a rotted rope sticking out of the ground. It, Praxis and Deogi started digging as the rest watched. After an hour passed, Sariel used her abilities to move the earth and created statues of herself laughing at the rest of us digging.

At the end of rope, a large bundle laid open. Its contents spilled out when Praxis pulled on an edge.

Praxis' tribe's totems and some food! Everyone grabbed the food and hastily stuffed it into their packs for later. "Hey Praxis," said Arntya, "anything you can whip up out of this?"

Praxis wasn't listening. He was on his knees, crying. Sariel, ever comforting, approached him. She patted him on the back and told him, "They're just dirty. A little brushing and they're good as new."

He took off his mask and threw it to the ground. "The totem is a part of the family," he said. "All our warriors are connected to their totems, spiritually. They would know where they were." A hush fell over them and all that could be heard was sobbing.

"They would have come. They would have taken them back."

Sariel wasn't used to people crying around her and backed off somewhat. Medic took her aside and Arntya took her place. She didn't say a word, but hugged him tightly. He returned the embrace. They sat there for a few minutes and took comfort in simply being. Their old families were gone, but they still had their new one.

After some time, they all pitched in to drag the bindle out from under the tree so that Praxis could count the totems and ensure they were all accounted for. "Oh," said Praxis, "there's no blaze. I didn't notice before, but it's not the same tree I put them under."

Sariel murmured under her breath, "Racist."

"Judging by the amount of food and the size of that bindle, somebody big must have moved them," said

Sevo, "and I doubt we want to remain in the area long enough to meet them. Let's go."

They started to wrap up the bindle, but heard a snicker coming from under some of the totems. They open the bindle and find a pseudodragon in there, like a regular dragon but kitten-size. Sariel talked to it, whispering kind words, and it nipped at her hand playfully. It climbed aboard into a small sack she was carrying and came out with a gold coin. She plucked a juniper berry from a nearby bush and fed the pseudodragon. It crawled back into the sack.

"He likes gold and juniper berries," she said. Arntya instinctively pulled her coinpurse in close. As they walked, they held a vote on what to name him and decided on "Firewisp" or "Wispy" for short. It just looked too cute when it tried to breathe tiny little flames.

They walked into the swamps a little past noon the next day. The fetid air was different from the usual swampy smell of rot and decay. There was a sharpness to it, like metal and ozone. The lowlands were submerged in most places and unbearably muddy in the rest. They would have been incredibly exposed in such a flat setting had it been as desolate as the former Mirtvicke forest, but the harsh terrain had kept the Drow's mechanized loggers from the area and it had remained mostly overgrown.

About a mile into the swamps, they spotted a Drow army wending their way through the muck. There were far too many to fight, so they remained hidden until the last Drow had passed. They were about to

leave again when they noticed a small band of Drow straggling behind.

The band of five was obviously inept and plodded through the mud like they had never been outside a city before. They belted out strains of foreign music, singing "NOOOO OOOOOONE SINGS like Gaston, no one STINGS like Gaston..."

It had been a while since the last time they murdered things, so the party decided to get their practice in on these Drow. After all, they could use some more equipment. They still didn't trust Sevo and called him names like "Four-eyed Fritz," "Bifocal Barry," and "Pince-Nez Pete," so they had him go first with a fireball.

For such a strong wizard, he was clearly out of practice. The little flame was basically a toe-tickler, with a bit of heat and the stench of sulphur. One of the Drow looked at his neighbor and said, "Did somebody fart?" His partners nudged him playfully, one shouting "He who smelt it dealt it!"

Sevo rose to anger. "That was a warning shot," he proclaimed, "to warn you about the next fireball!" He flourished his hand far above his head and drew a much larger flame from the air. He smiled. An illusory mage's hand appeared three feet above his head, five times larger than his own hand, and the flames leapt from his own to the giant hand.

The terrible ball of flame burned bright as the Sun and as tall as a pine when Sevo threw it at the Drow. Their pained cries fell on deaf ears, save for Wispy, who flew off to bite at one of their eyes. It's a bit vicious, but the

party has been morally dubious for quite some time, so they're cool with it.

By this point, it has become clear that they weren't fighting back because they were physically incapable of it. They might have been mentally deficient. At that point, they were too far gone to stop, so the party finished them off even though their hearts weren't in it anymore. They weren't even carrying anything.

Sariel mixed up a cocktail for herself and mentally debated. From their singing and odd movements, they were probably Improv actors, and Improv actors are barely people, so they really made the world a better place. Now justified, she made a statue of somebody's eye being pulled out by a tiny dragon with her laughing in the background to commemorate the event.

It dawned on them that they were still hopelessly lost, so they pulled out their map piece and try to orient themselves. The weapon is somewhere in a small temple deep in the swamp. Sariel attempted to meditate on the location, but was unable to sense it. Instead, she spoke to nearby plants to see if they had an idea where it was and they turn towards it, but shudder. There was clearly an evil lying dormant there.

Sariel stroked a nearby leaf to calm them and for once it actually worked. Arntya said, "It's just a plant," and a vine reached out to slap her. Not wanting to press her luck against hostile greenery, she led the party onwards toward the temple.

Halfway to the temple, Praxis remarked "Do swamps have tides?" They looked about and realized that the mud was definitely lower than it used to be. The mud

flowed faster now, sloughing away from their feet with a loud sucking and popping. Their battle-honed reflexes were primed to attack anything that moved, so their weapons were ready to start cleaving and stabbing the mud itself.

Strangely, the mud formed into a mob of mephits already in attack mode (so they were unfortunately rewarded for the assumption that murder is always the best option). The mephits' bodies were about half the size of an adult human and looked like balloons coated with sopping wet earth. Tentacles and heads emerged from their round bodies and fingers slowly budded from the tentacles.

Arntya immediately pierced one with her rapier to hold it still while she lopped off its head with her scimitar. The separated body parts kept expanding and expanding until they were grotesquely large. She pulled her rapier from the mud and dove out of the way just before the decapitated mephit exploded! The earthen body flew apart into jagged pottery pieces, but the party was far enough away that they remained safe.

Not so with the other mephits. The jagged pieces pierced a few other mephits and they began to grow as well. The party began to push back the encroaching horde in a literal sense. Nobody wanted to cut open another potential explosive, so they tried to grip the slippery beings and toss them back.

Wispy really got into it, but his eyesight was so bad that he just started attacking regular mud. The mephits were offended, since most regular mud is at least distantly related to mephits. A crowd soon formed around the pseudodragon to register a

complaint through exploding. Medic fired off its crossbow to pin the closest mephit to a tree while Arntya and Praxis continued to toss them back or kill them before they got near. Arntya's eyes were glazed brown with mudlust.

Suddenly, just as soon as they appeared, the mephits dissolved back into the ground. Arntya and Wispy continued to stab at the ground for a bit before realizing they were just getting their weapons or claws dirty. Sariel sauntered back to the group after finishing a drink of gin with some particularly hard-partying cattails she met before the attack. "Oh," she said, "were you guys fighting something?"

The rest of the group looked at her with incredulity, but it soon turned to horror as a giant, fat crocodile rose from the nearby pool of water behind her. It opened its mouth, revealing nearly a hundred bloodred teeth and grinning like a glutton about to be satisfied. Praxis swung out on a vine and landed on the crocodile's back when the vine snapped. He quickly wrapped the broken vine around the crocodile's snout, but the crocodile was ready to go into a death roll to shake him off. Sariel froze the water around the beast's stump-like legs to prevent it from moving while Praxis finished up his hogtying.

"His name will be Steve," said Praxis, "and he will be my steed." Sariel talked the crocodile down and Praxis fed him some cupcakes. Eventually, the croc agreed to ferry him around for a while in exchange for more food.

They eventually arrived at the temple, though it took longer than normal due to Steve and Praxis stopping

every few hundred yards for snacks. From the safety of the reeds, they scoped out three armored Yuan-Ti abominations guarding the structure. The metallic smell was stronger here, and they knew that meant the artifact was inside. They had to make it in. There was no choice to make, so they made it without hesitation. Sevo began combat by throwing a fireball at the Yuan-Ti, albeit a fireball of moderate size. No sense overdoing it when pride wasn't on the line.



The first Yuan-Ti, who shall be called Aaron, pulled out his longbow and fired at Medic, but it bounced off its chest. Arntyta darted forth and stabbed it in return. Barry, the second Yuan-Ti, transformed into a giant snake and encircled Praxis in deadly coils. Sevo projected a mental image into the third Yuan-Ti's mind, whom shall be called Charlie, because why not? Charlie imagined a stalking killer hiding behind any and everything he could see, as well as just behind him, always out of reach no matter how fast he turned.

Praxis struggled mightily against the snake's coils, but could not bring about the strength he needed. The indignity of being grappled by someone else was humiliating! His muscles wouldn't respond to his needs for they pitied him so. Until, that is, he spied Steve the Crocodile slinking away from battle. That a new friend would leave in the middle of a fight galled him mightily and drove him to such a rage that the snake was cast off like a worn scarf. He stomped through the mud to Steve and dragged him back to the fight.

Medic glowed with its ancient magics and the whole party felt invigorated. Even Wispy blew smoke in such a cute way as to build morale.

Charlie bit and slashed at Arntyta, nearly killing her, but doubled over in pain as a headache gripped it. The phantasmal killer stuck in its head scratched behind its eyes and gnawed on its memories. Aaron attacked Sariel with its poisoned longbow, piercing her. Arntyta threw a dagger at him, but her wounds got the better of her and it missed. Barry transformed back into a half-man half-snake abomination and charged Medic with his scimitar, but again the blade bounced off.

Sevo pronounced words of power and created a field of flashing energies sharp enough to cut a man, or in some cases, a half-man half-snake.

Sariel summoned two brown bears which claw and bite at the Yuan-Ti. Praxis grabbed one of them and dragged it into the cloud of daggers. Medic continued to chant its magics and reinvigorate the group, while Steve finally got into the fight. He bit at one of the Yuan-Ti and thrashed him about like a marionette. Praxis glanced over at Steve and was proud. The little tyke was a grappler, just like his dad.

Arntya continued to stab, frustrated that their physiology was so weird and that she couldn't hit a vital organ. Undeterred by a lack of progress, she continued to slash, reasoning that a thousand brutish cuts could do what a single graceful one might have achieved. Even Sariel got wrathful and turned into yet another bear. All three bears attacked the bitten Yuan-Ti, which went down in bloody murder. Steve began eating the corpse, but at least he had done his part in the killing first.

Charlie attempted the snake transformation trick and bit Sariel's bear form. She howled in pain and ripped away from the snake's fangs, transforming back from into an elf. Stitching wounds together was trivial when she shed her fur and grew a new skin, but she was left tired from the effort. Arntya dashed behind the Yuan-Ti and attempted to stab him when the Yuan-Ti doubled over in pain again. The psychic shadow haunting him flared up again. He clutched at his well-defended head and another area just under his helmet. Arntya stabbed at the area he was trying to defend

from the phantom and severed the blood flow from a vital saliva gland. The abomination fell in an instant.

The remaining Yuan-Ti looked at the corpses of his dead teammates, one of which was almost fully eaten by a giant crocodile, and decided that protecting an ancient weapon of untold destruction wasn't really worth it. He attempted to run, but was interdicted by a loud barbarian shouting encouragements and self-affirmations. The brawler grabbed a greataxe from his back and gave it a mighty throw, hurling it end over end into the Yuan-Ti's chest. The snake creature looked down at the axe, back up at the barbarian, and decided that life was too complicated and quit. Medic took a moment to heal the group before they entered the temple.

The temple was simple: a high vaulted ceiling to an open room containing nothing but a small, straight path across water and a pedestal. The pedestal was illuminated by a single beam of light through the only window in the temple. A small metal object was upon it consisting of a small metal barrel the length of a hand and set of cylinders above a wooden grip. It looked fairly simple for such a destructive machine. The weapon laid upon a small pillow along with a leather bag of black powder and some pages written in an older form of Common. Three of those pages were full of notes about ammunition construction and formulae for powders. The last page was solid black.

Arntya approached the pedestal. "Hey guys," she said, "do you still feel like killing things?"

"Why do you ask?" replied Sariel.

"Because I've stolen a lot of things," said Arntya to nobody's surprise, "and this pedestal is clearly rigged to drop the door behind us and spring some kind of trap. I'm guessing something rising out of the water. It's been a theme in this swamp."

They conferred and decided that a good scrap was in order. One easy lifting later and the pedestal began to sink into the ground. Seven heads emerged from the waters. It was impossible to tell the waters from the drool of the Hydra's heads when it licked its lips. It was massive and brutish and completely unprepared for what was about to happen.

Sariel summoned four cockatrices and attacked. The bite of the cockatrice affects the hydra and it started to turn to stone. Steve breaks one of its necks with a massive tail swipe and bites off another head with his crushing jaws. Arntya, Praxis and Medic raged and slashed at a third head and lopped it off, snicker-snack. Sevo threw a fireball to burn off a fourth head and cauterize all the necks.

The hydra was still fighting off the petrification and couldn't move fast enough to attack effectively. The cockatrices attacked again and Sariel hit the beast with her longsword. Wispy blew smoke in its face just for fun while Praxis insulted its mother and called it ugly. Steve continued to gnaw on one of the heads he had severed. Medic lopped off the last head to put the thing out of its misery.

It swayed and fell, breaking the stone that blocked the entrance. Escape from the temple at that point was a trivial matter, so they took the time to do something useful, like making saddlebags out of the hydra skin

for Steve. Even Sevo, for some reason he could not fathom, had an unbearable drive to make hydra jerky. He was a little grossed out, but fascinated at the same time.

Lolth was still out there, but they now had a god-killer.

One more time.

Terrence was excited for perhaps the first time since the Drow took over. They were experiencing some trouble with rebels over the western mountains near Shaad and had to move a large portion of their forces to quell riots and unrest. He was a meek man and very peaceable. So long as the Drow didn't demand too much, he wasn't about to start trouble. Still, he had one dream: to open a tavern where people could sit and eat a sandwich or two while drinking their favorite beers, wines and spirits. Now that the occupiers were pulling their forces and giving the region more "light touch" autonomy, he'd managed to put together a permit. The taxes were extortionate and it couldn't be open after curfew, but it was something and Terrence was pleased.

It was after midnight, so today was the day of the ribbon cutting and he couldn't sleep a wink. He had been allowed to take a pair of scissors from the Drow weapons locker and everything. All his surviving friends were going to be in the audience at the ceremony and they'd share the first drinks together, discounting the tribute first drinks that the Drow

officers would be having. By six o'clock, there would be a new tavern in town.

The swamp was a harsh land and unforgiving to those unaccustomed to travel in it. To a group of people who had spent the last five years of their lives in the northern frozen wastes, the marshes were too alien. They had hoofed it out of there and back into the low-lying foothills toward Shaad, but grew tired and had to rest. Night followed day, and day followed night. Before long, Sariel woke from her meditation. Vines and other plants receded into the fertile ground as her bed of leaves was unsummoned.

Praxis and Arntya were already up and looking at something with interest. Sariel approached them.

She inquired "What are you looking at?"

Arntya responded, "I see shit."

"Not much to look at, then," responded Sariel quizzically.

"That's not what I mean," said Arntya. "Look. Shit." There were indeed piles of fecal matter scattered throughout the hilltops next to their campsite.

Praxis posited, "Elf footprints are rare, for they leave no trace when they march. Drow footprints are similarly rare, but more sinister. But their animals are a different story. They must have been carrying a heavy load to need this many."

"If they're heading west," said Sariel, "then that's where we're headed too. It's either slaves or gold, and both are in need of liberation."

They packed up camp and marched onward, doing what they did best: wandering and bickering. They discussed all manner of hopes and dreams, like the town they'd build after the revolution is done and Lolth is banished. Perhaps instead of street signs, they would have Sariel statues in mid-pose for directions, like "Head towards 'Winning a bar bet' and make a left. If you see 'Sariel Juggling,' you've gone too far." Wispy would be a constable.

Because wandering completely lost is a part of their method, Sariel questioned the plants to get back on track. The Drow army was sizable and had elves and humans and one orc held captive. The villains were two days ahead of the heroes at an easy march. There was no way for the plants to know that they were also right behind them.

They walked for a day more at a fast pace with no interruptions until a crack resounded in the world behind them. Reality peeled away from the thin fracture in what was to reveal what was yet to be. A drider, half-Drow half-spider, reached a spindly leg through hammerspace and grabbed Sevo. Medic rushed for the portal, but the drider already had Sevo through and was pulling the thin veneer of the world back into place. The last thing Medic saw the the bioluminescent glow of the Underdark.

"Alright," said Sariel, "so that happened. Anybody know how to open portals?"

"Scaith, probably," said Arntya, "or that new guy in his body."

"So there's no help," replied Sariel.

Praxis looked up to the sky and spied a hawk circling overhead. "That drider was probably with the Drow army. They must have sensed him somehow. We can't reach them fast enough, but I'll bet that hawk can." He scratched his chin and thought. "I'll send a message through the hawk to the Drow army. Something menacing and insulting that will make them stop."

He raised a finger to the hawk and whispered his message, only he couldn't think fast enough and all he came up with was the self-admonishment "I can't think of any insults." The hawk flew ahead to deliver the message, only to return a few hours later to deliver the reply: "Obviously."

Sariel questioned it to determine that the army was at that point only 10-12 hours away and there were more soldiers in it than the bird could count. The prisoners were deposited in some nearby caverns that the bird, now named Kevin, can lead them to. It landed on Medic, which gave it a look that said "Don't you dare poop on me." Kevin didn't understand looks very well and started pecking it.

When they arrived at the cavern, Praxis set up a tiny magical hut for them to rest while Medic crafted Godkiller bullets. The powder recipe, aerodynamics of the bullets and packing of the cartridges required an exacting hand and constant vigilance. Its extensive

concentration to the task at hand was heating it up dramatically, which hindered its progress since it was handling explosive materials. Every few minutes it would take a break while Sariel used her natural abilities to push wind against him for cooling.

Praxis was depressed. He got this way any time a friend of his was kidnapped, which was admittedly not often, but a problem nonetheless. He curled up next to Medic, which was the warmest thing in the group, but Sariel pushed him away with a large directed gust. The way he was pushed reminded him of Movement 18 from the dramatization of their escape in G Minor as Sung by Svirfneblin, which reminded him of Scaith and Sevo once more. All the memories flooded him and he started to sing from his unfinished composition. Sariel grew weary of it within the first half hour and summoned 32 cats to attack him, but Praxis countered by using his skills in directing animal messengers to give each cat a note to sing and arranging them into a backing score.

They rested one more day to recover all the spells they used on cats.

Once all the cats had settled, the tiny magical hut was dispersed and they continued on into the caves. The walls were contaminated with some kind of bioluminescent fungus that emitted the only light they could see. They had to watch their footing on the stones to keep from slipping. The smell was of rot and muck.

Fluids dripped down from the stalactites. Medic scraped the sticky goo from its shoulder and looked

up at the rocks to try dodging future unguent accidents. Glowing eyes searched the ceiling, but saw only shadows and iridescent spots. One of the spots blinked.

A shadowy form wavered and slid across the rocks. Sariel watched it pass over the group, but it bent in half and sprang onto her. Teeth sharpened by years of shearing flesh bit into Sariel's neck. She screamed and slammed her body against the cavern wall. With supreme effort of will, she summoned growth in the fungus to entrap the cloaked monster and ripped herself away from it, tearing her shoulder in the process.

The monster tore at the fungus and tried to rip itself free. Praxis yelled "Fly free, Stevey! Onwards to victory!" He enraged and picked up the fat giant crocodile and chucked him at the entangled beast, crushing it against the wall.

Arntya and Medic stabbed at weak spots and impaled it against the wall like a giant, angry butterfly. It screeched in agony as the blood oozed from its body and mixed with the saliva that it couldn't stop secreting.

Steve was on his back. He looked so cute flailing his tiny arms in the air around his fat body. Praxis used his animal skills to make him mimic him saying "Hewp me, pwease!" in a baby voice. The crocodile is now unbearably adorable.

Sariel rolled her eyes and used her good arm to stab the monster to death, then congratulated herself on finally stabbing something successfully.

Medic wiped its sword. It wanted people to die from the injuries it inflicted, not sepsis. As a medical professional, it could not abide sepsis. The group healed up and flipped Steve back upright.

After spelunking further into the cavernous depths, they decided enough time had passed that there was no way there would be another monster ambushing them at any moment.

Praxis sniffed the air. "Anybody hear some slithering?"

"No," said Sariel.

Arntya says nothing, but instead turned and stabbed a giant worm up through the skull, piercing the mouth. How a giant worm managed to sneak up on them remains a mystery to this day. Coincidentally, Medic unmuted its internal hearing equipment. It had been off since two nights ago when Praxis started singing.

Praxis enraged and grappled the giant purple worm to hold its mouth shut. Wispy attempted to attack, but landed on the point of the rapier sticking up through the worm's skull, yelped and ran away.

Sariel crushed earth against the side of the worm. Medic and Arntya stabbed it. Steve explored the bioluminescent fungus and nuzzled up against it with the wonderment of a child. The worm attempts to break Praxis' grapple, but the barbarian held tight.

The sounds of many legs echoed through the cavern. Praxis yelled out, "Worms don't have legs, guys..."

A colossal spider lurched above the worm and bit clean through it. Praxis pulled the worm remnants out

of the spider's mandibles and snapped it like a whip. The spider reared back and stalked slowly towards the group.

Recognition slowly dawned upon Praxis. He would know that rearing and stalking anywhere. He yelled "Octo!" and ran toward the spider with arms wide open to engage in a barbarian hug. It ignored him. He gave Octo the old "Bring it on in!" gesture, but still the spider did nothing. He said "We're going to go kill your God. Want to come?" Octo slammed him against the wall.

Octo stomped on Sariel and pat a web around Steve. Sariel transformed into a giant wasp to free herself and moved straight for Octo's abdomen to sting him. Octo's legs buckled and it fell, but it looked Praxis straight in the eyes and summons the strength to get back up.

Wispy decided to become useful. He fluttered above Octo and nipped him on the crown. The bite of a pseudodragon is a potent sleeping magic and made him drowsy. Praxis sent another message through Octo to make him say "I'm sowwy evwybody" just before he finally fell asleep. Praxis stroked one of its arms and said "I love you Octo, but we can't have you following us." Praxis hogtied Octo with the rest of the dead giant worm while Sariel grew vines around him to hold tight.

Lights danced on the cavern walls further down the path. Everybody hid behind Octo or under hastily grown vines. Praxis jumped into Steve's gullet, leaving the crocodile to explain for himself just why he was

deep in a cave. Medic just stood where he was and waved hello as the lights approached.

A group of Myconids stared at the stalwart Warforged as it put its sword away in a show of peace. They were agog at the marvelous mechanical man. Sariel emerged and spoke with the Myconids to find out their story. They were also enslaved by Lolth and the Drow. It was a short story.

Sariel pointed at the worm and the spider, saying that they subdued both of those. She went on to explain that she is peaceful, but there are people in her party that would as soon kill them as look at them. It would be wise to join them instead of being against them, or the man inside the crocodile might attack. A voice from the crocodile snickered like a giddy schoolgirl.

The wise Myconids agreed to join them. One of them was a Myconid sovereign. Arntya emerged, startling Medic. Medic picked up Steve and shook Praxis out of him. The Myconids led the party down through the caverns by secret means, past umber hulks and troglodytes and even a beholder.

Arntya recognized the beholder as the one who had captured her mentor in the first place. The rage boiled inside her, but she knew that the mission could not be interrupted. Like a ninja, she merely farted silently around the beholder to ruin the moment for it and continued on.

Praxis began singing again, inspired by the darkness and danger. "With the lights out, it's more dangerous. Here we are now, entertain us. This is stupid and conta..." and Medic slapped him to be quiet.

They stepped into a vast chamber, larger than anything nature could have made. Ahead in the distance, the scene was dominated by a throne. Throngs of Drow were bowed or kneeling in worship to the spider goddess Lolth upon her throne in glory. To the right of the throne, a familiar Svirfneblin was held in chains.

The beholder floated between the party members. Eystalks gazed in every cranny of the passage, but his eyes were watering slightly and he missed them. It scraped by in the cramped confines of the passage.

"Ahem," said a voice behind them. They turned as one to the sound. "Do you have an appointment?"

Medic stood up to its full, towering height and approached, but the Drow standing there did not change his expression. "All appointments must go through Lolth's secretary."

Sariel pitched in, "I suppose you're the secretary."

"I am," said the Drow, "and I don't have a record of your appointment."

Sariel looked at Medic and shuffled awkwardly. "Oh, we made it last month. It was by courier. You must have missed it."

The Drow cracked half a smile. "I don't miss anything. You're the liberators of Lolth, correct? The ones who freed her in the first place."

They passed glances around the passage, unsure if they could kill this elf silently enough not to alert the worshippers.

"You're here to send Lolth back to the far realms from which she came, correct?" They nodded dumbly. "I think I can pencil you in immediately for the 5:45 to 6 o'clock slot. Lolth will be basking in adoration for those fifteen minutes and it would be a fortuitous time to strike." He turned and walked away. "Please," he spoke, "try not to damage the caverns and remember to wash your hands before you leave."

Silence passed until Praxis broke it, saying "That went well."

Sariel continued. "You heard the creepy dude. We've got fifteen minutes. Let's make it count."

Arntya pulled out the Godkiller weapon and Medic passed her the ammunition. She loaded it deliberately, making sure that each cartridge was secure in its chamber. She pointed it at Lolth, cocked it, and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell.

The projectile issued forth with a sulphurous boom, echoing through the cavern. Thunder rolled, like giants rolling dice. When their eyes recovered from the flash and the smoke cleared, Lolth had a substantial hole through her abdomen that wasn't there before.

Her followers surrounded her and pulsed with a dark energy. Sariel called down lightning among the followers to disrupt their ritual while Praxis ran to the throne and broke apart the chains that held Sevo. His glasses flickered on his face and he flexed his muscles.

Lolth spilled from her throne to reveal four black pages that the Drow had captured over the years. Sevo raised a hand and called them. They fluttered and

ripped away from the throne to swirl about him and slither under his skin. The two pages that the party gathered were also ripped from their control.

To further complicate things, Octo appeared from behind them and Praxis rushed to embrace him again. Surprisingly, Octo was cool with it this time. It was hard to stay mad at Praxis for long. Well, it was hard if you don't have ears and don't have to constantly listen to him.

Lolth's stomach knit itself back together, but her breathing was labored. Sevo began a banishment spell. Arntya fired the Godkiller once more and blasted off two of Lolth's legs.

Unimaginably, Lolth used her godly power to pull herself up and fired webs at Arntya. Medic's sword burned bright with energy. It swung the sword and scattered the bright energy at Lolth, like a magic shotgun. Praxis cut open Arntya's webbing with his greataxe and picked up one of Lolth's shot-off legs.

Driders in the crowd surrounding Lolth rose in defiance of their assault and attacked, nipping at the pets and stabbing at the party members, though they deftly dodged or withstood the damage. Sariel summoned a black dragon wyrmling that breathed poison at the driders and Lolth. Steve whipped about and thrashed a drider with his tail. He bit the drider to pin him down. Octo also bit and poisoned a drider. Wispy fluttered annoyingly.

Lolth called down thunder and knocked down all of her driders in an attempt to push the party away, and some did stumble, but most stood firm. Wispy, unfortunately, died in the blast...

Medic healed everyone it could and Praxis used the Godleg to club two of the driders at the same time. One drider attempted to disarm Praxis in the literal sense, but merely cut him. The wyrmling blew more acid breath, killing more driders.

Sevo's banishment spell was in full swing. A whirling portal appeared above Lolth's head. Through it, Sariel could see the figures from her nightmares that kept her from being sober: giants playing dice with their fate. It was the perfect place to torment their oppressor.

Arntya lifted the Godkiller and blew out the last drider and the other side of Lolth's arms in a single shot. Medic slashes her abdomen off and Praxis lifted and tossed her like a caber into the portal. She stuck fast in the portal and tried to claw her way back out, but Sariel charged and pushed her in as the pets bit at the remaining leg holding her in reality. Lolth cursed the group as she and the evil Drow got sucked into the portal. The last thing she heard was a giant saying, "Ew, a spider! Somebody smooch it!"

Sevo said, "The pages need to go everybody. Goodbye." He took off his glasses. "Goodbye, Monocle Mike," said Scaith. He threw the glasses through the portal and the pages flew off after them. The portal was shrinking, but the vacuum grew stronger. Even the good party members were being drawn toward it, probably since they were only "good" in the approximate sense.

It was six o'clock and Terrence held the scissors in his hands. He stood in front of the crowd at the entrance

to his new tavern for a ribbon-cutting ceremony, guarded by two Drow. The Drow looked uncomfortable. They were starting to sweat and were shifting in place, shouldering their weapons nervously. For once, they were completely overwhelmed by the humans and elves in the crowd. Even with their weapons, they knew they were just for show. There was no way they could keep the peace if the citizens wanted to try something. Their normal confidence and arrogant demeanor was completely missing, as if their strength were sapped.

"Thank you for attending," said Terrence. "I've been waiting years for this and I can officially say our time is now. I repeat, now." He spun on his heel and jammed the scissors in the neck of one of his Drow guards. The crowd surged forward and grabbed the other, pulling him to his doom. Terrence pulled his Drow's spine apart.

"I christen this tavern 'The Drow's Head'!"

He cut the ribbon.

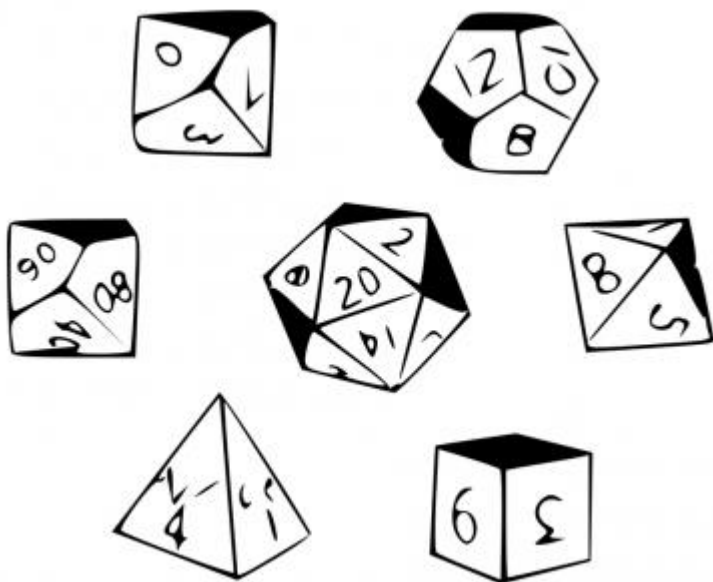
With a new tavern in the world, Destiny pulled anew at the heroes. It pulled them to the east, away from the portal just long enough for it to close. They were tired and weak, but triumphant.

The Myconid sovereign was dying, but Medic had enough strength to heal him. The portal was thorough. The only evidence that anything had ever happened in the chamber was the Godleg club that Praxis held.

Generously, the Myconids gave treasures beyond their wildest dreams. They led us out of the caverns to the light. Somehow, when Lolth was pulled out of the world, it also undid her magics. The world has returned to the way it was: forested, with Shaad a city once more. Octo had transformed back to normal size and joined Scaith aboard Medic. Even Wispy returned to life, fluttering just outside the cave mouth. An owlbear nuzzled up to Arntyta, who was the only one who didn't have a pet.

The pages were no more and Lolth was banished. The future was looking bright. The party went home to Shaad to rest and celebrate.

THE END



Praxis' Sweet Bread Pudding

You'll need:

- 3 eggs
- 2 cans (12 ounces each) sweetened condensed milk
- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (optional)
- 3 slices (1 pound) birthday cake, cubed
- Sprinkles, for topping (optional)

Then:

Preheat your oven to 325°F. Grease a 9x13-inch baking dish. Set to the side.

In a large bowl, beat eggs. Add the sweetened condensed milk, sugar, butter, vanilla, cinnamon and salt; mix well. Gently stir in the cubed cake, frosting and all. It may begin to break up in the wet mixture; don't panic. It will bake up just fine. If you'd like, garnish with sprinkles.

Pour into your prepared pan and bake for 50-60 minutes or until a knife inserted near the center comes out clean. Serve warm or cold.