

# SESSION 18 – KEY TO THE PAST

March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008

The 7<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

When they arrived back in the tiny shack at the center of the junk-filled vacant lot, Tee took several moments to subtly rearrange the room – prepping the entrance so that she would, hopefully, be able to detect whether or not someone used it.

“We seem to have gotten covered in blood again,” Tor said. “This is becoming a habit.”

“Well, except for Ranthir,” Tee pointed out. “He stayed clear of it.”

After a quick discussion, it was agreed that the gore-spattered wouldn’t have much luck getting into the Nobles’ Quarter (standards tending to be a little higher there). Plus, if Ranthir went he would be too far away from Shilukar’s lair – the spell of *alarm* he had placed upon the lower entrance would be unable to alert him.

Ranthir was, however, able to use a little magical prestidigitation to clean Dominic’s clothes and Tee always carried a spare set in her bag. So it was decided that Agnarr, Elestra, Tor, and Ranthir would return to the Ghostly Minstrel while Tee and Dominic would return to Castle Shard and break the bad news.

## AN UNEXPECTED LETTER

It didn’t take Agnarr, Elestra, Tor, and Ranthir long to reach the Ghostly Minstrel, despite the fact that no carriage would take them in their present state. While Agnarr, Elestra, and Tor headed around to the stables to be drenched by buckets of water, Ranthir excused himself and headed through the front doors.

“Master Ranthir!” Tellith gave him a cheerful smile. “A letter has arrived for you and your friends.”

“Oh,” Ranthir said, slightly startled. “Thank you.”

Ranthir broke the plain wax seal and read the short missive written on the parchment:

I’ve found a lead on the key. Meet me in the alley off Yarrow Street.



He was still puzzling over these seemingly simple words when the other three came thudding in from the kitchens – damp, but no longer bloody. Ranthir moved to show

them the letter, but then thought better of it. “We need to talk. Let’s retire to Mistress Elestra’s room.”

They took a few minutes to change into drier clothes, but once they were safely secluded, Ranthir showed the letter around.

“Do you think it might be something that we... you know... did *before*?” Elestra asked.

“Before we lost our memories?” Ranthir asked. Elestra nodded. “It’s possible.”

Agnarr waved his hand. “Here, let me see.” He stared at the parchment long and hard. “Ah, yes. Of course.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t read!” Agnarr shoved the letter back at Ranthir.

## DELIVERING BAD NEWS

Tee and Dominic didn’t have any problems convincing a carriage to take them up to the Nobles’ District, so by the time the others were arriving back at Delver’s Square they were already pulling up in front of Castle Shard.

Unsurprisingly, Kadmus was waiting for them. Silently he gestured them across the drawbridge and led them through the castle’s halls.

Lord Zavere was waiting for them in his map room. As Tee and Dominic entered he seemed lost in thought, but he quickly turned to them and smiled with only a touch of bittersweetness... it was clear from the crestfallen expression on Tee’s face that they were not carrying fair news for him.

As quickly as she could, Tee told him that they had failed and that Shilukar had escaped. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright, Tee,” Zavere smiled his bittersweet smile again. “Perhaps it was meant to be.”

“But there might be another possibility,” Tee said. “We found something down there. Some kind of idol. Shilukar called it the idol of Ravvan. We think it’s very important to him. And maybe, if you retrieved it, you would be able to trade the antidote for it... without giving him sanctuary.”

Zavere’s entire complexion changed as the idol was mentioned. “Shilukar had the idol of Ravvan? Do you have it with you?”

Tee shook his head. “No. We were afraid that it might be tainted. I’ve had enough of the taint.”

“If it is the idol, you were right to fear.” Zavere frowned. “But, quickly, describe it to me.”

And for several minutes, Tee answered an exhausting battery of questions. At last it seemed as if Zavere were

satisfied. He leaned back and then turned his head to the empty air, "Rill. I have need of you."

As if slipping between the waves of a waterfall, Lady Rill slipped through thin air and appeared before them.

"Shilukar holds the idol of Ravvan. I think this takes precedence, even over our debt to our friend. Would you concur?"

Rill seemed to ponder the question for a moment and then nods. "Yes."

"Very well." Zavere turned back to Tee and Dominic. "Would you be willing to retrieve this idol? It is of the utmost importance."

Tee's stomach twisted. "And the taint?"

Zavere nodded. "With the idol even a short exposure could be dangerous. But I shall see to it that you and your companions are cleansed as soon as the idol has been secured."

"Then we'll do it," Tee said.

"Thank you." Zavere stood. "This must be done quickly."

## ALARUMS

Tee had asked their carriage master to wait for them. Now, as she and Dominic rushed out of Castle Shard, she was glad of it. As they leapt into the carriage, she cried out a promise of extra coin for his fastest speed.

When they arrived back at the Ghostly Minstrel, they found the others still gathered in Elestra's room. Before they could explain what had happened at Castle Shard, however, they were swept up into the ongoing conversation of the letter.

Like the others, neither Tee nor Dominic had any idea what the letter might be about. But Tee, in particular, was fascinated by the possibility that it might have something to do with the time they had lost.

"Yarrow Street sounded familiar to me," Elestra said. "But I couldn't place it. Do you have any idea, Tee?"

"I think it's in Oldtown," she said. "Near the bureaucratic complexes."

"What key could they be talking about?" Ranthir mused.

"I don't know." Tee shook her head. "But there's something else we need to talk about." And she quickly explained what Lord Zavere had asked of them.

"I think we need to go to this Yarrow Street place first," Agnarr said. "Whoever this person is could be waiting for us right now. There's no time to lose."

Elestra agreed. "We could miss him! Or make him angry!"

Dominic furrowed his brow. "But the letter doesn't specify a time. And you said it was just left with Tellith?"

"That's right," Ranthir said.

"Then it probably isn't urgent," Tor said.

"Right," Tee said. "And Zavere said we need to hurry and get the idol before Shilukar returns. We should head

back there right away. The alarm hasn't gone off, yet, so—"

The magical alarm in Ranthir's head went off. "Um... Mistress Tee...?"

"...you're kidding."

## MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Their carriage came to a clattering, jolting halt on Brandywine Street before the abandoned lot.

Tee led the way into the ruined shed, taking a few moments to verify the hidden signs she had left. "They haven't been disturbed," she said. "No one's come this way."

At the bottom of the ladder she found the doors of the antechamber still locked. She slid the key into the lock, turned it, and then stepped back – clearing the way for Agnarr and Tor.

The doors swung wide to reveal utter putrescence: The pinkish flesh of the lair seemed to be dying, literally rotting away from the walls. Pus and blood dripped from gaping, ulcerous wounds.

"Oh no..." Tee murmured, already suspecting that they were too late.

They headed down the main hall. Agnarr took the time to sprint down the side passage leading to the sewer entrance. It had been smashed open from the outside. He knelt down: The pulpy, dying flesh had clearly been trampled by many feet, but he wasn't sure how many had passed this way... or whether they were still in the complex.

The rest of the group proceeded down the main hall. When they reached the room where the idol had rested, Tee's worst fears were confirmed: The door had been smashed open with a battering ram which lay nearby. The idol had been ripped out of the floor. It was gone.

"Dammit," Tee cursed, tears welling in her eyes. "I should have just taken it. Why didn't I just take it?"

The idol wasn't the only thing disturbed in the room, however: Off to one side a section of the fleshy wall had been hacked away... revealing a hidden passage.

Heading down this passage they found that it led to a small prison of sorts. Two cells were formed from bars of now-rotting flesh. In one of them, crouched against the far wall, was a hauntingly beautiful man – beautiful, but gaunt. Gaunt almost to the point of starvation.

"Are you with the elf? Or the others?" There was a note of desperate panic in the man's voice.

"The elf?" Agnarr said. "Do you mean Shilukar?"

"Aye, the black-skinned elf!"

"Black-skinned?" Tor frowned. "He had black skin?"

The man confirmed it: When Shilukar had come to him, he had ebon skin. But this only served to confuse them. Was it actually Shilukar they had fought before? Had he come to the man in disguise? For what purpose?

Even Tee had never heard of an elf with ebon-colored skin before.

As they worked to free him, the man – whose name was Carlin – told them his story. It was rather confused and fragmented, but in the end they pieced it together: Carlin had worked as a groundskeeper at Dallaster Mansion. A few weeks ago the Dallaster’s daughter, Tillian, had seduced him in a fiery passion, but they had been discovered by her parents and he had been summarily dismissed. A few days later he was captured by Shilukar and brought to this place. Shilukar had told him that he was suffering from some kind of wasting disease, but instead of curing him the elf had performed various experiments on him. Then, just a few minutes earlier, a group of six people had appeared outside his cell. He had begged them to free him, but they had just laughed and left.

To Carlin’s broken narrative they were able to add details of their own: Carlin’s disease was almost certainly the Lover’s Grip, which they knew had broken out in the Nobles’ Quarter. They knew it was a magical wasting disease that was transmitted sexually and made its victims irresistibly attractive. (Agnarr edged away from Carlin.) After kidnapping Carlin, Shilukar had broken into Dallaster Mansion and assaulted Tillian. (“Or did she assault him?” Elestra wondered.)

“I don’t think we can help you,” Tee told Carlin. “But we know someone who might be able to.”

“I’d be glad of it,” Carlin said. “I’ve been getting weaker every day.”

While they were finishing this discussion, they had successfully freed Carlin and returned to the sewer entrance. They were going to try tracking whoever had taken the idol.

They told Carlin that he didn’t have to follow them into the sewers – he could wait here and they’d come back for him. But Carlin had had enough of Shilukar’s lair and came with them.

Agnarr actually found the trail easy to follow through the sewers: The boots of the trail-makers had been coated with the decaying putrescence of the lair-flesh, leaving clear marks.

The trail led them for several blocks, and ended at a ladder leading up to street level. Unfortunately, the trail emerged onto the bustling Old Sea Road... and was lost completely.

The idol was gone.

## YARROW STREET

They flagged down a carriage and began the long ride back to the Nobles’ Quarter and Castle Shard.

Agnarr raised the idea of stopping by Yarrow Street on the way. There didn’t seem to be any harm in waiting to deliver the second round of bad news to Lord Zavere,

so they quickly gave new instructions to the carriage master.

Yarrow Street was a short, cobbled way that curved gently through the cold, grey-faced buildings of the city’s lower bureaucracy. They found what was most likely the alley mentioned in the mysterious letter about midway down its length.

Tee and Ranthir clambered out of the carriage, leaving the others to watch over Carlin.

Even with the afternoon sun still high in the sky, the alley – crammed between two looming buildings with faintly gothic architecture in the Vennocan style – was massed with shadows. After about forty feet the alley took a sharp turn to the left and abruptly ended at a bricked-up doorway. Across the bricks, scrawled in charcoal, was a duplicate of the symbol that had been used to sign the letter.

“Now what?” Tee wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” Ranthir said. Then he walked up to the door and laid his hand on the symbol.

“Good to see you again.”

The voice had come from behind them. Turning they saw a strange figure squeezing his way through a nearly imperceptible crack in the stonework. Their first impression was that the figure was shadowy – but they quickly realized that this wasn’t the case: It wasn’t so much that the figure was hidden from them as it was that their eyes just naturally seemed unable to focus on him, leaving them with no impression of its true features.



Tee decided to bluff it. “Your note said you’d found the key.”

“I haven’t found the key, but I have found a lead for where you might find it.”

“Well? What is it?”

“Money first.”

“How much?”

“250 marks, as we agreed.”

Tee paid him.

“The key was last held by the Crimson Coil.”

Tee arched an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. After the Coil got it, the key disappears from sight. Whatever they did with it, it hasn’t turned up since then.”

“Fine. Thank you.”

### THE CRIMSON COIL

As they continued their carriage trip up to the Nobles’ Quarter, Ranthir and Tee quickly filled in the others on what had happened in the alley.

“The Crimson Coil?” Elestra said. “I think I’ve heard something about them. Random acts of violence. Vandalism. That kind of thing. I got the impression they hadn’t been around for years, though.”

“That’s right,” Tee said. “I was still living here. The cult members wore blood-red robes and hoods. They’d spontaneously appear in huge gatherings to wreak random chaos. Then, about two or three years ago, the Knights of the Pale tracked them to their stronghold – I think it was called Pythoness House. Reportedly the whole cult was wiped out.”

“Perhaps their local operations were stopped,” Ranthir said. “But the cult was not wiped out. The Coil is still active beyond Ptolus. In fact they have quite a long history, always following the same pattern: They show up to burn a building or set fire to a field or slaughter a family or deface a monument. They come very suddenly and in such numbers that they simply cannot be stopped – a dozen to murder a merchant walking down the street; a hundred to burn down a building.”

“It never got that bad here,” Tee said. “Random beatings and vandalism for the most part. There were a few murders in the end, just before the Knights took action.”

“Then you were lucky,” Ranthir said. “The cult is said to maintain countless secret temples throughout the Borderlands, but when they appear in the Five Empires they often appear in great strength. All of these temples, however, are referred to as the ‘lesser temples’. The few cultists who have been successfully interrogated say that their greater temples are to be found in the Western Wastes or somewhere beyond the Southern Desert. Although whether that’s truth or grandiose myth-making I don’t think anyone really knows.”

“But what about this key?” Elestra wondered. “What key could we have been looking for?”

“What about the box that Ranthir found in his room?” Dominic said. “It could be a key for that.”

“Maybe it’s a key for those secret doors in Ghul’s Labyrinth,” Tee muttered. The others laughed. The idea of a door that she couldn’t open seemed to be Tee’s personal bane.

### A CLEVER IDEA

As they pulled up in front of Castle Shard, Carlin was taken aback. “This is Castle Shard!”

“Yes,” Tee said. “This is where we can get you help.”

“Help? From Castle Shard? Who *are* you?”

Tee smiled. “Friends. Come on.”

As far as the matter of Shilukar was concerned, this meeting went no better than the last. Lord Zaveré was deeply worried by the fate of the idol, but seemed to place no blame on them. After hearing Carlin’s story, however, he said he would be glad to see that he got the help he needed.

As they left, Tee turned back for a moment: “Is there anything else we can do to try to help you with Shilukar?”

Zaveré smiled sadly. “Only if you can find him before tomorrow.”

They left the castle with their heads bowed. Their failure was hard to accept.

But as they reached the halfway point across the drawbridge, Ranthir suddenly stopped in his tracks. The others turned to look back at him.

“What about the alley on Yarrow Street?”

### ON SHILUKAR’S TRAIL

They headed back to the alley. This time all of them headed down the alley. A few moments later, the mysterious informant had again slid his way into the alley. (Elestra leaned over to Ranthir, “That’s a neat trick. I wonder if I could learn it?”)

“I wasn’t expecting to see you again this soon,” he said. And then, catching sight of Tor: “And who is this?”

“Master Torland of Barund.”

“A pleasure to meet you. My name’s Shim. Now, what can I do for you all?”

“We need to find a thief named Shilukar.”

“And there’s a catch,” Tee said. “We need to find him by morning.”

Shim seemed to ponder it for a moment. “That’s a tall order. If it can be done, I’ll need a payment of 7,000 marks. And even if I fail, I’ll need 500 for my efforts.”

It was expensive, but they were out of options. They agreed and paid him the 500.

The carriage ride back to the Ghostly Minstrel – including a stop at the Hammersong Vaults to withdraw the cash they would need if Shim was successful – was subdued. They were excited by the prospect that they might soon have another opportunity to capture Shilukar and recover the idol from him, and they all took the time to congratulate Ranthir again on his quick-thinking, but they knew that they had a long wait ahead of them.

When they reached the Minstrel they quickly retired: Their long and busy day had exhausted them, and



Ranthir in particular would need time to rest and prepare his arcane rites for the challenges of the day to come.

Unfortunately, they were not destined for a full night of rest and recuperation: Shortly after midnight, Elestra woke to find Shim sliding between the panes of her window.

“I don’t know what you’re doing in Agnarr’s room, but Shilukar is planning to attack the Foundry in the Guildsman’s District in less than 30 minutes. If you want him before dawn, this will be your only chance.”

Elestra quickly roused the rest of them. Tee saw to paying Shim and then they were off as quick as a carriage could carry them – their muscles still stiff and their bodies exhausted from their exertions.

### THE FOUNDRY (09/08/790)

The Foundry was one of the largest buildings in all of Ptolus. Located in the heart of the Guildsman District, on Smith Street, it was said to be one of the finest facilities for the molding of metal in the world. In recent years it had come under the control of the Shuul.

“The Shuul?” Ranthir asked.

“A highly specialized guild,” Tee said. “Their skill with mechanical guildcraft is said to be unrivalled, and they are dedicated to using it to better their entire lives. There are rumors that they have a close alliance with House Shever.”

“Why would Shilukar be attacking them?” Elestra wondered.

“Perhaps they have the cure,” Ranthir said. “Or something he needs to complete the cure. He’s meeting with Lord Zavere tomorrow morning. It would explain why he’s going after them tonight.”



They had their carriage drive past the Foundry on Smith Street and then turn right on Vadarast Street. The structure itself was dark and only the thinnest wisps of smoke trickled out of its mammoth chimneys. It seemed that the Foundry was silent for the night.

Moving through the tight and twisted alleys between Vadarast Street and Hammer Street, they found a vantage point from which they could observe the Foundry.

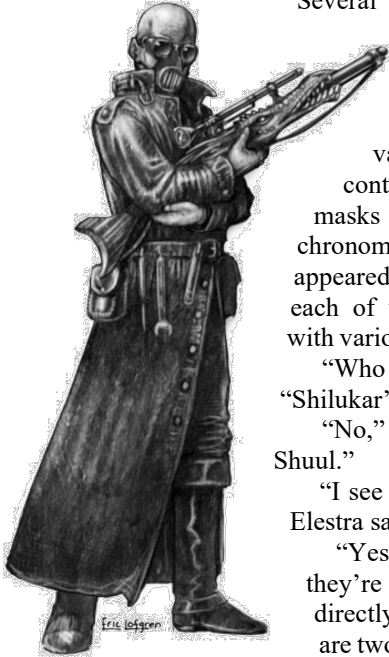


“How much time do we have before Shilukar gets here?” Elestra asked.

“Less than ten minutes if Shim was right,” Tor said.

“It was probably more of an estimate,” Ranthir pointed out. “He could already be in there.”

“I don’t think so,” Tee whispered. “Look!”



Several figures were walking a patrol around the Foundry. Each wore a long black trenchcoat and all of them had various mechanical contraptions: Goggles or masks or wristbands or large chronometers. They carried what appeared to be dragon rifles – but each of them had been modified with various mechanical extrusions.

“Who are they?” Agnarr said. “Shilukar’s men?”

“No,” Tee said. “They’re Shuul.”

“I see two patrols of two each,” Elestra said.

“Yes,” Tee said. “It looks like they’re keeping the building directly between them. And there are two more who are keeping an eye on a rear entrance on the east side of the building.”

They looked at each other. “So what are we going to do?”

“I’m heading in there,” Tee said. “Shilukar could already be in there. And even if he’s not, maybe I can figure out what the cure is and get it before he shows up.”

“How are you going to get past the patrols?” Tor asked.

“There’s a blind spot on the west side of the building between the two patrols,” Tee said.

“Picking the lock will take time.”

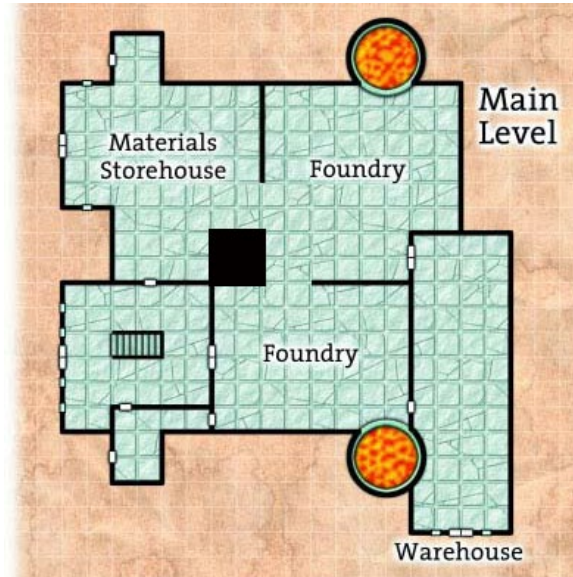
“I don’t need to pick the lock. I’ll climb the wall and head in through the windows.”

With a plan in hand, they split into two groups: Tor and Dominic headed to a position on the corner of Hammer Street from which they could look down the length of the western edge of the building while Ranthir, Agnarr, and Elestra stayed in the alley which overlooked the eastern side of the building.

As planned, Tee took advantage of the blind spot, scurried up Smith Street, and quickly scaled the western wall – easily reaching the roof before the second patrol rounded the corner below.

## INTO THE FOUNDRY

Tee spent the next couple of minutes quietly clambering across the roof of the building, peering into various windows until she had a fairly good understanding of the building’s floorplan.



The lower level of the building was dominated by the two massive foundries: Huge forges and anvils worn through decades of use stood immutable, while various molds for molten metal stood here and there – some of them massive almost beyond comprehension; others tiny, intricate, and delicate.

Tee’s attention was particularly drawn to the second level of the building: The stairs in the entry hall led up to a structure that extended through the wall and followed the ceiling of the second foundry. This structure had numerous leaded and thickly begrimed windows that looked out over the foundry floor: If Shilukar was seeking something valuable, Tee was convinced it was probably there.

The foundries themselves had open windows running down their entire lengths – clearly designed to vent the hot air and fumes of the working day. Conveniently these were at a level where Tee, on the roof, could literally walk right through them.

She did so, climbing down the rough hewn walls to the floor of the second foundry. From there she made her way to the entry wall, gently easing open the wide double doors and then shutting them again behind her.

Easing her way up the stairs, Tee heard voices coming from above her.

“Did you hear about Korben?”

“Meddling fool. The sooner we’re done with this shipment, the happier I’ll be.”

“Their coin is good enough. And useful. I understand that we’ll be using it—“

“Wait. Did you hear that?”

“Stay here while I check it out.”

Tee silently cursed. A loose loop of her chain had caught against the metal of the stairs. Hearing the footsteps approaching from above, she quickly slid back down the stairs.

Tee looped around the stairs, disappearing into the shadows beneath them. One of the guards from above – dressed like his comrades outside – descended and peered into the corners of the entryway. Then he began to circle around the stairs. Tee, ever alert, countered his movement – circling the stairs and keeping them between them.

They finished a full loop of the stairs and the Shuul guard shrugged. “I don’t see anything. Must’ve just been night noises.” He began to climb the stairs and Tee, sighing silently, slipped back towards the foundry.

### SHILUKAR’S DISTRACTION

As Tee was avoiding the Shuul guard in the entryway, Tor spotted two heavily muscled thugs running up to the chimney on the west side of the building – taking advantage of the same blind spot in the patrol that Tee had. She pointed them out to Dominic, but neither of them could think of anything they could do about it.

A few moments later, the thugs turned and ran away from the chimney again – disappearing down the same alley from which they had appeared. Uncertain of what was happening, Tor and Dominic held their position.

A minute later, just as Tee was re-entering the foundry, the chimney exploded in a huge gout of flame.

All the Shuul guards – both patrols and the guards watching the rear entrance – whirled and began running towards the explosion.

Agnarr’s reaction was immediate: Drawing his greatsword he ran straight across the street and began hacking away at the front door.

“What is he *doing*?” Tor muttered, peering around the corner from Hammer Street.

Tee, taken completely by surprise, shrank back into the corner of the other foundry, trying to find some place to hide. She could hear the guards from upstairs shouting to each other and then clattering down the stairs and she was certain she was about to be discovered... but then Agnarr started hammering away at the front door, and those guards came to a sudden stop, convinced that the true assault was coming from the front of the building.

Elestra, who had hung back with Ranthir and kept a watch down the eastern side of the building, spotted the rear door being swung open... by absolutely nobody at all. “Shilukar! Come on!” She tugged on Ranthir’s sleeve and ran across the street. She shouted Agnarr’s

name to get his attention. The barbarian turned, shrugged, and followed her.

### CHAOS IN THE FOUNDRY

The explosion had actually torn a huge hole into the side of the chimney, opening it to the night air. The six Shuul guards outside had now converged on it and one of them quickly took charge: “You two circle around to the front door, make sure it’s secure. You two stay here. You come with me.”

Two of the Shuul guards now leapt through the chimney and across the hot bed of coals – apparently convinced that the breach had been used to infiltrate the building. This forced Tee to constantly shift her position to remain out of sight of both the guards in the front hall and these newcomers.

Tor and Dominic, meanwhile, ran across the street and began making their way down the front of the Foundry. The two guards running from the point of the explosion rounded the corner and lowered their rifles at them: “Stop! Who are you?!”

Tor whirled and, without hesitation, shouted, “We have reason to believe that the mage-thief Shilukar is attacking the Foundry. You have to let us in!”

The two Shuul glanced at each other with a look of slight panic. Looking over their shoulder they shouted back to the guards who had stayed by the hole in the chimney, “It’s Shilukar!” Then they turned back and leveled their rifles, “But you aren’t going anywhere.”

Tor and Dominic raised their hands above their heads, just as the Shuul agents in the entryway unbarred the front door and rushed out into the street.

The guards at the chimney shouted through to their comrades inside: “It’s Shilukar!” Tee heard this, realized that none of the guards who remained were watching the rear entrance, and cursed under her breath. Shilukar’s plan was obvious.

Elestra and Ranthir, meanwhile, reached the rear entrance. It led to a long warehouse stacked haphazardly with various crates. Just as Agnarr caught up with them, they saw a door at the far end of the warehouse swing open – seemingly of its own accord. Agnarr ran right past them and into the warehouse.

The two Shuul agents in the foundry also saw the door open. “I think I saw somebody moving in there!” They advanced.

Ranthir, meanwhile, shoved Elestra into the warehouse and slammed the doors shut behind them. Elestra, seeing the Shuul agents advancing into the room, ducked behind some of the crates... noticing, as she did, that they were labeled “Edarth’s Loans”.

Agnarr, seeing the Shuul agents himself, charged towards them. But the agents lowered their strange dragon rifles and bathed the western end of the warehouse in gouts of flame. Agnarr screamed in pain,

but screwed his eyes shut and carried through. The Shuul, seeing him unswerved, stumbled back – desperately working the mechanisms on their rifles. But before they could get ready for a second shot, Agnarr’s greatsword found them both – chopping one of them in half and laming the other.

Tee, deciding that things had gotten far too chaotic for her tastes, climbed back up the wall of the foundry – pausing just inside the ventilation windows and waiting to see what happened.

Elestra drew her crossbow, stood up, and planted a bolt through the surviving Shuul’s forehead. Agnarr stepped back.

Ranthir waved his hand and the door at the far end of the warehouse swung shut. Then he began using various magicks in an effort to detect Shilukar’s presence, but to little avail. Had whatever the mage-thief wanted been in this warehouse? Had he retrieved it and then escaped through the warehouse doors before Ranthir had shut them? Or flown through the ventilation windows above them? Ranthir didn’t know, but he feared they might have already lost Shilukar again.

Ranthir did discover, however, that the crates here in the warehouse were radiating a magical aura – but a magical aura strangely tinged with some other influence unlike anything he had seen before.

Meanwhile, in front of the building, the sounds of battle and chaos coming from within were clear. Tor continued trying to sweet talk the Shuul into letting them go into the building and help, but the Shuul weren’t having any of it.

Elestra turned to the nearest crate and quickly pried off the lid... to find it packed full of the modified dragon rifles. But unlike the antique that Tee wielded, the rifles looked fresh and new, as if they had just been constructed.

One of the Shuul who had been in the front hall, satisfied that Tor and Dominic were pacified, turned and headed back through the hall and into the materials storehouse. Two more turned and headed into the second foundry, directly below Tee’s feet. In the sudden silence pervading the Foundry, Tee could hear their footsteps echoing ominously below her...



# SESSION 19 – THE END OF SHILUKAR

April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 8<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Elestra grabbed a couple of the rifles out of the crate she had pried open and handed one to Ranthir. Ranthir smiled. His magical skills were not yet very advanced, and so he had often felt like something of a sixth wheel whenever they had found themselves in a tight spot. The firepower he held in his hands now might help him to be something more than an observer.

Agnarr, thinking this was all a good idea, wedged his toe under one of the rifles that had fallen from the hands of the Shuul agents lying before him. With a quick jerk he flipped it up into his left hand, keeping his greatsword clenched in his right.

The Foundry was rocked by an explosion, accompanied by a massive gout of flame in the materials storehouse.

The two Shuul agents passing below Tee in the second foundry stopped in their tracks for a moment, frozen in shock. Then they began to turn back towards the front of the building...

Unfortunately, Ranthir's reactions were faster. His ears recognized the aural hints that told him the explosion was a magical extrusion of primal fire, and he leapt towards the nearest door. Ripping it open he was confronted by the two Shuul agents. The agents arrested their turn and lowered their rifles at Ranthir. "Who are you?! Don't move!"

Agnarr reacted quickly, shoving Ranthir out of the way and taking his place. "We're friends! We're trying to stop Shilukar!"

"Get out here!"

## SHILUKAR APPEARS... AND DISAPPEARS

Tee missed all of this. Hearing the explosion she vaulted through the ventilation window and back onto the roof. Scampering twenty feet or so across the clay tiles and then looked through the ventilation windows about the first foundry. From this vantage point she could look down into the materials storehouse.

Shilukar! He was standing just inside the wide, open doorway leading from the first foundry into the storehouse – he was just lowering his hands to his side, looking off towards the main entrance. And, as Carlin had described, the elf's skin was the color of ebony and his hair the gray of ash.

Tee whipped her bow off her back, strung an arrow, and let it fly. Her shot was true, and would have taken Shilukar full in the side of the neck, but as it approached within an inch of the elf's black skin the arrow suddenly

stopped in mid-air – a vibrant golden flash betraying the magical shield.

Shilukar whipped his head around, looking up to where the shot had come from. But Tee had already slipped back into the shadow. Shilukar's eyes darted here and there for a moment, and then he ran off towards the main entrance.

Tee ran back across the roof and tried to look down into the main entrance – but the extrusion of the second floor blocked her line of sight. She cursed under her breath and began running towards the front of the building.

Meanwhile, at the front of the building, the sound of the magical explosion had caused the Shuul agent watching over them to glance nervously towards the Foundry, but it didn't look like he was going to do anything else.

Tor stared at him, "Didn't you hear that? We need to do something!"

The Shuul agent seemed to think about it for a moment and then seemed to make up his mind. He called out to another agent who was still watching the front door. "Get over here and watch these two."

The agent at the front door shrugged and headed their way. They were standing near a door leading into the materials warehouse, and the agent closest to them lowered his gun, fumbled for a ring of keys, and unlocked the door.

Tee arrived at the front of the building. Looking down she was aghast to see that the front door had been left wide open and completely unguarded. Shilukar was going to escape! What were the Shuul thinking?

Tor had caught sight of Tee out of the corner of her eye. Tee, looking down the street, saw Tor give an almost imperceptible nod of acknowledgement. Tee gestured frantically down towards the front door, trying to make Tor understand that Shilukar was heading their way.

The Shuul agent fumbling at the door finally got it open. Looking into the storehouse they could see one of the Shuul agents had been horribly burned by the explosion. He was lying very still.

Dominic, seizing the moment, held up his holy symbol. "I can help! Let me help!"

The Shuul agents glanced at each other, then reached a decision. "All right. Help him. But I'll be right behind you."

Dominic nodded and, with worried glances into the shadowy corners, led the way into the materials storehouse.

As soon as Dominic was clear, Tor made his move, breaking into a sudden run towards the front door of the Foundry. The Shuul who had been left to watch him pulled the trigger on his modified dragon rifle, but Tor – anticipating it – rolled under the wave of flame and came back to his feet.

## ROUTING THE SHUUL

Back inside the second Foundry, Agnarr’s attempts to bluff his way past the two Shuul agents were falling on deaf ears.

“Drop your weapons.”

Agnarr dropped the modified dragon rifle... but kept his greatsword.

“Drop the sword! Drop it now!”

Agnarr grunted... and suddenly leaped toward the Shuul. The Shuul, surprised, stumbled backwards. The barbarian managed to take one of them down... but not both of them. He was caught by another wave of flames.

Elestra, who had followed Agnarr with some thought of helping him, was caught by the flames as well. But she was able to call upon her connection to the Spirit of the City and soothe their wounds even before the burns could blister.

Tee, seeing Tor run beneath her and into the Foundry, tried to swing down from the roof and through an upper window that locked into the entrance hall. But her grip slipped, and she fell forty feet to the ground below. Fortunately, she had the light and nimble grace of an elf, and although she landed awkwardly and twisted her ankle she was not seriously hurt.

Tor, who had been turning around, grabbed Tee almost as soon as she hit the street and pulled her into the entrance hall before slamming the doors shut. The Shuul agent who had been chasing Tor arrived just a moment too late. The agent threw himself against the door, but Tor easily held it shut. A few moments later, he had lowered the beam to lock the door.

Meanwhile, Dominic – hearing the shout of the Shuul agent outside and then the burst of fire from his rifle – broke instantly into a run. The Shuul watching him was close on his heels, but Dominic reached the small door leading from the materials storehouse to the entrance hall and managed to slam it shut behind him.

Looking for some way of locking the door, Dominic saw that there was a keyhole... but no key. In frustration, he drew his mace and slammed it down on the door handle. The handle snapped off. A moment later, he heard the handle on the opposite side fall to the floor.

Tee, meanwhile, hobbled up to the second level. Reaching the top of the stairs she saw a hallway filled with doors. Lots and lots of doors. She cursed again. Shilukar could be anywhere. She was going to need help. “Shilukar is up here! HE’S UP HERE!”

Elestra, having just finished a second spell to sooth the pain in Agnarr’s badly burned lungs, heard Tee’s cry. She ran through the entrance hall and up the stairs.

Agnarr was following her, but Dominic – seeing Elestra run past him – whirled around and cut him off. “There’s one circling around this way!” He pointed back towards the second foundry.

Agnarr shrugged, turned around, and headed back into the foundry.

In fact, there were two Shuul agents coming that way: The one Dominic had re-directed by destroying the door handle and another who had leapt through the chimney from outside. Agnarr squared himself off and grinned... just as a third agent – the one Tor had locked out – emerged from another door off to one side (which apparently led outside).

The smile started to fade from Agnarr’s face. But at just that moment, the last Shuul – who had been left standing outside just beyond the gaping hole in the ruined chimney – gave a cry. He was being attacked by the two thugs Tor had seen set the explosion!

The Shuul agents, convinced that they were surrounded – and noticing the gutted bodies of their comrades lying on the floor of the second foundry – turned and ran. Crying, in retreat, “Shilukar may have won for now! But it won’t last for long!”

The agent outside, staggering from blackjack blows, managed to bring his dragon rifle to bear and immolated the thugs. Then, he too, ran off into the shadows.

## SEARCHING FOR SHILUKAR

Agnarr strolled into the entrance hall.

“What’s going on?” Tor demanded.

“They think we’re Shilukar.” Agnarr grinned. “Which is probably for the best.”

Agnarr jogged up the stairs to Tee’s side. Seeing the doors he blanched in much the same fashion she had.

With Agnarr guarding the stairs, Tee and Elestra quickly searched the rooms. For the most part they were small quarters with minimal furnishings – utilitarian barracks. There was one room that was slightly larger than the rest, but although the furniture was slightly more luxurious it was still almost devoid of personality. Elestra did find a copy of the *Book of Vehthyl* laying next to the bed in this room, and this she gave to Dominic.

Since Shilukar had not been found, the depressing possibility that he had escaped began to set in. Agnarr and Elestra began arguing again about why he had attacked the Shuul here in the Foundry. What had he been looking for? The cure? Had he found it? Or was it still here?

Dominic and Tor, meanwhile, decided that their best hope of finding Shilukar again before the morning deadline would be to question one of the thugs that were apparently working for him. They weren’t sure how

badly they had been hurt, but hopefully Dominic would be able to use his divine powers to wake them up.

Ranthir and Tee decided to search the Foundry again – Ranthir using his abilities to detect magical auras and Tee with more practical means. They didn't know how much time they would have before the Shuul returned, so Tee's efforts would have to be fairly cursory.

But no sooner had the search started, then Tee's sharp elven eyes spotted scrape marks on the floor of the materials storehouse leading straight into a wall. The magical explosion Shilukar had set off had obscured the marks somewhat, but their meaning was still clear: There was a secret passage right where Shilukar had disappeared from her view.

Tee smiled. "It looks like we won't need those thugs, after all."

Elestra ran out of the building and caught up with Dominic and Tor, who had just reached the thugs and were about to begin healing them. With a shrug they abandoned the badly burned corpses and headed back into the Foundry.

## THE WORKSHOPS OF THE SHUUL

While the rest of them were gathering in the materials warehouse, Tee had searched the wall and discovered a stone that could be depressed to open the door. Now she pressed it and the wall swung aside to reveal a spiral staircase leading down.

Tee arched an eyebrow. "I like games of cat and mouse... I just wish I knew if we were the cat or the mouse."

After about 20 feet the stairs bottomed out into a workroom of some sort: Several low stone tables ran in parallel down the width of the room, covered in a variety of mechanical devices and tools which seemed dedicated towards constructing and modifying dragon rifles (of which about a dozen lay around in various stages of completion).

Several hallways twisted away from this room, and Tee arbitrarily headed down the nearest one on the left. This ended at a steel door which had been broken open. Tee showed the damage to the others, "Shilukar."

Beyond the door lay a storeroom with several short shelves running around its walls. These shelves were filled with *chaos storage cubes*, which Tee identified from having flipped through the *Lesser Book of Chaos* they had found in Shilukar's lair. She quickly warned the others of how dangerous they could be. Elestra shuddered, remembering the horrible, gasping death she had suffered in the pool of raw chaos beneath Greyson House.

They headed back to the workroom and then down the next hallway. Halfway down its length, Tee heard the unmistakable sounds of someone rummaging around. She quickly raised her left hand for silence while

slipping her right into her *bag of holding* and pulling out a thunderstone.

Rounding the corner, Tee saw a door standing ajar. Someone was definitely on the other side – there was the sound of something metallic clattering against stone.

As Tee prepared to creep carefully up to the door, however, Ranthir suddenly stumbled – scuffing noisily across the stone floor. The noises from beyond the door suddenly came to a stop.

Tee reacted instantly, throwing the thunderstone through the door and into the room while simultaneously signaling for Agnarr to take the lead. The cacophonous boom of the thunderstone seemed to rock the Foundry's foundations, but they were fortunately shielded from the worst of it by the half-shut door.

Agnarr kicked open the door and quickly took in the scene beyond: There were more workbenches here, covered with more strange devices and bubbling tubes of chemicals. Various clusters of these devices seemed focused around a half dozen large metallic spheres. Two of the spheres seemed intact – with shiny, polished surfaces of greenish metal – while another seemed damaged and three others were in various states of disassembly.

Shilukar was leaning over one of the spheres, but as the door slammed open he looked up and his eyes widened: "You! Not just Zaveré, but—you're all working for the Shuul?! What have you done with it?! Where have you hidden it?! WHERE IS MY IDOL?!"

Agnarr couldn't hide the wide grin which split his face. Shilukar was completely baffled by them! Realizing that he needed to keep up the pretense, Agnarr tried lying... and failed rather miserably at it. Fortunately, it quickly became apparent that Shilukar couldn't hear him at all... he had been deafened by the thunderstone.

This didn't stop the ebon-skinned elf from taking definitive action, though. Even before Agnarr had opened his mouth, Shilukar had flipped a switch on the side of the sphere – causing it to emit a loud-pitched humming noise and float up into the air.

Agnarr ignored it and charged Shilukar. Rage and frustration fueled his thews as his greatsword slammed into the elf's side. Shilukar gasped, blood bubbling to his lips, and stumbled away.

Agnarr made to pursue, but the sphere that Shilukar had activated suddenly dove towards him, sprouting large, protruding blades. It plunged into Agnarr's chest, tearing his pectorals into bloody tatters.

The barbarian stumbled back, dripping blood. The sphere pursued, and Agnarr struck at it – but his blade clanged ineffectually against its metal shell.

On the far side of the room, Shilukar was activating a second sphere. But now Tor stepped into the room, whirling a knotted rope above his head. His skills as a

horseman suddenly proved themselves as he dropped a lasso around Shilukar's neck and pulled it tight.

The elf had just been drawing a potion from his belt, but now he was yanked hard across the room. Pulling him close, Tor tried to grapple him to the floor and bind his limbs, but Shilukar – in desperation – lunged out and flipped the switch on the nearest sphere...

The sphere exploded! Shilukar was hurled backwards into the wall and knocked unconscious. His arm was horribly lacerated and two huge shards of metal had embedded themselves in his chest.

Agnarr had been concussed by the blast, but Dominic was able to get him back on his feet quick enough. Meanwhile, with a certain amount of distaste, Elestra was casting a simple charm to seal Shilukar's wounds and make sure he didn't bleed to death... at least, not until they'd gotten the cure out of him.

### SEARCHING THE WORKSHOPS

Tee, meanwhile, had missed the entire affair. Hearing Shilukar demand his idol, she realized that he must suspect that the Idol of Ravvan lay somewhere within the Shuul's hidden workshops. She immediately turned on her heels and headed out into the rest of the complex to search for it.

Heading down the next hall she picked the lock on the door to an office. It was austere and utilitarian, but clearly well used. The desk was covered in a variety of papers. Most of these were incomprehensible blueprints and schematics, but on the top of the stack was a letter of some sort that caught her eye.

Brother Savane—

Brother Tannock has brought me strange news. A man bearing the Mark of Vehthyl has come to our temple. He is to return to us on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Kadal, at which time I shall see for myself. But if the Chosen of Vehthyl has come to us, then the hour has arrived. Can the Iron Angel be made ready?

Maeda

She quickly scanned the letter, pocketed it, and moved on. The door directly across from this one led to another office, but this one appeared to have been abandoned. She moved on.

The door at the end of the hall was made of iron, and from behind it – as she drew near – she could hear a buzzing, crackling sound. She decided that whatever was behind that door had the strong possibility of being too dangerous to deal with on her own, so she decided to head back to the others.

By the time she got back, Shilukar had been securely tied up Tor. Looking down at the body Tee smiled. "Looks like we were the cats."

Tee gave Dominic the note she'd found. As Dominic read it, his face creased with worry.

"What's wrong?" Elestra asked.

Dominic showed the rest of them the note. "I think... I think I might be the 'Chosen of Vehthyl'."

"Do you know these people? Brother Tannock? Maeda?"

Dominic nodded. "No. But I was supposed to meet with some people on the 9th..."

While the others were distracted, Agnarr slipped one of the attack spheres into his *bag of holding*. But the conversation soon turned back to their immediate situation. Some of them wanted to leave immediately, but Tee felt it was important to finish searching these workshops for the idol. Lord Zavere clearly thought it was very important.

They returned to the buzzing, crackling door. Tee picked the lock and Agnarr opened it. Beyond was a large room studded with multiple iron rods protruding from the floor and the ceiling. Electrical arcs in scintillating colors leapt between these rods and focused down onto a *chaos storage cube* which lay on a low platform of obsidian in the center of the room.

They all stared for a moment... and then Tee eased forward and closed the door. "Right. Let's move on."

A small chamber held a battered table, some chairs, and an effluvium of food and the like – clearly some kind of informal kitchen or dining room. A quick tossing of this room revealed nothing of interest, and the passing minutes were wearing heavily on their minds.

Going down the last hallway brought them to another iron door. Swinging it open they found an enormous chamber. The floor here was actually sunk by 8 or 9 feet, with a flight of stone stairs leading down to it. The ceiling was vaulted. And in the center of the room there was a massive, humanoid shaped structure. Huge banks of machinery with rubbery tubes and chemical beakers were attached to it in various ways. A second look revealed that, although it was humanoid shaped, it was also hollow – as if it were some sort of impossibly huge exoskeleton.

But there was no idol.

### TORTUROUS PLANNING

They left the Foundry. After a brief discussion they decided to take Shilukar to Greyson House: They didn't want to take him to the Ghostly Minstrel. They didn't think they should take him to Castle Shard until they'd gotten the secret of the cure out of him. And, given the fact that it was one o'clock in the morning, there didn't seem to be anywhere else they could take him.

But it was also decided that someone should take word to Castle Shard. For this task, Ranthir volunteered. They performed a cursory search of Shilukar's body, removing anything that seemed valuable or mysterious – a magical potion, two vials of alchemical fluid, a ruby ring concealing a magical pearl, a minor spellbook – and then packed Ranthir into the first carriage they could find. A few minutes later they found a second carriage to carry them up to the North Market and Greyson House.

When they arrived, Tor and Agnarr bundled Shilukar up to the house while Tee paid the carriage master a rich sum to make sure he'd "forget he'd ever seen them". ("Of course, mistress.") Then she moved to join the others.

But as she crossed the porch into the house, Tee noticed that there were large scrape marks – as if something heavy had been dragged here. She followed them into the house and saw that they led towards the trapdoor in the kitchen (which led down to the cellar and, from there, to Ghul's Labyrinth).

There was a moment of panic, but then they remembered that they'd deliberately sold the knowledge of this place to the Erthuos. (At least, they hoped that's who it was.)

In any case, they did a quick survey of the house to make sure they were alone, and then sat down to a serious discussion about what methods of torture they would use to loosen Shilukar's tongue. The general consensus was ear-eating and hand-chopping. The shock they had once felt in seeing Agnarr bite a man's ear off had disappeared. Life was hardening them...

## ALTERNATIVES TO TORTURE

Ranthir, meanwhile, was arriving at Castle Shard. He had been somewhat delayed at the Dalenguard – no doubt due to the late hour – but some of the papers he kept in one of his many pouches soon resolved those difficulties. With a wry grin he noted that Kadmus was waiting for him with the drawbridge down. Nothing seemed to faze the doughty servant.

Lord Zavere awaited him in a small, indescrpt room furnished with a simple, yet elegant, table and chairs. Despite the late hour he looked refreshed and well rested.

"Master Ranthir. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We have captured Shilukar."

"Excellent." Zavere smiled. "I see that he's not with you."

"No. The others have him under guard. We thought it best not to bring him here." Ranthir quickly explained everything that had happened that night.

"And who did you buy this information from?" Zavere asked.

Ranthir hesitated. "I'm not sure that I'm at liberty to say."

"That's fair enough." Zavere said. "How much did you pay?"

"Seven thousand marks."

Zavere nodded and let him proceed with the tale. Ranthir quickly finished, saying, "And so I brought everything he was carrying. If he wasn't at the Foundry, perhaps he had it with him. If not, we'll have to... question him."

"Come with me."

Zavere led him through the chamber of the Shard, taking him to an alchemical and magical laboratory at the far end of the castle. Lady Rill was waiting for them. Lord Abbercombe stood in his petrified doom in one corner of the lab.

One by one they tested the items Ranthir had brought, returning each of them to Ranthir as they turned out not be the cure. More than an hour passed in taut concentration and effort.

But, finally, Rill smiled and her face suddenly radiated with beauty (and Ranthir realized that he had never seen her smile before that moment). "We have it," she said simply, holding aloft one of the vials of alchemical fluid.

She carried it delicately to Lord Abbercombe's side and, with a silk cloth, rubbed it gently on his limbs, as though she were polishing his golden features. And then slowly – almost inexorably – Lord Abbercombe began to move!

His motions were almost imperceptible, but after a few moments of careful observation Rill confirmed that the cure was taking effect: "Within six or perhaps seven hours he will be fully recovered."

Lord Zavere took Ranthir aside. "Castle Shard is in your debt. And we do not forget such debts. In addition, I am not unmindful of the sacrifices that you and your friends have made for us in this endeavor. Hopefully this will serve to mitigate your losses to at least some degree."

Kadmus appeared, carrying a bounty of 140 platinum pieces. "I will take you out, sir."

As Ranthir was just about to leave the laboratory, he turned back to see Rill and Zavere bent in thought upon Abbercombe's slowly moving form. He had one last question to ask: "Lord Zavere... what should we do with Shilukar?"

"Arrest him."

## THE OTHER BOUNTY

Ranthir returned to Greyson House. The others had grown increasingly worried – his journey to Castle Shard had taken much longer than they had anticipated – but were glad to hear the news he bore.

During his absence they had performed a more thorough search of Shilukar, turning up one last item of interest: An odd strap-like device that had been bound



around his upper arm. A thin cord leading from the device had been plugged into a strange hole in the back of Shilukar's upper spine. This they yanked out before pulling the device off of his arm.

They decided to not even bother waking Shilukar. They simply hauled him out to the carriage Ranthir had brought back from Castle Shard and carried him up to the major watchhouse along the Dalenguard Road in Oldtown.



There they answered many questions and became the center of attention for a dozen or more of the city watch while they completed the bureaucratic niceties of collecting the 5,000 gold piece bounty on Shilukar's head.

When they had at last extricated themselves from the affair, they took their carriage back to the Ghostly Minstrel and collapsed into bed. It seemed as if the days were getting ever longer and harder, and the nights ever shorter...



# SESSION 20 – PYTHONESS HOUSE

April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 8<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

It was only a few all-too-short hours later before they were rousing themselves out of bed once again.

Ranthir was one of the first to wake up. For several days he had been eagerly looking forward to reading the sealed letter that the Iron Mage had given to them at Castle Shard during the Harvesttime party. He had placed the letter on his bedside table the night before, and the first thing he saw upon opening his eyes was the letter lying open.

## IRON MAGE'S LETTER

My dear friends—

I am sorry that I could not deliver these instructions to you in person so that I might answer all of your questions. But, sadly, necessities of another nature will make that impossible by the time all of the particulars are known.

By the time this letter opens – which shall be no later than the ninth day of Kadal, if all goes well – the particulars will be known, and thus I have ensorcelled this parchment to reveal them to you.

On the twenty-first day of Kadal, the *Freeport's Sword* – a privateer vessel from the Teeth of Light – shall arrive in the Docks of Ptolus. It carries a crate bearing my seal – a plated visor beneath crossed wands.

I ask that you report to Captain Bartholomew upon the arrival of the vessel, collect the crate, and keep it safe. I shall return for it no later than Nocturdei.

I stress that all of this is of the utmost importance. Many lives could be placed in great danger if the crate is not kept safe from the others who seek it.

THE IRON MAGE

## IT WAS TIME FOR A REST

After reading the letter over, Ranthir took it downstairs and showed it to Tee (who was already up). As the others made their dreary-eyed way down to breakfast, each of them read it in turn.

The previous night, the group had postponed the question of what their next immediate goal should be until they could see what the letter might say. Now that it was clear that, even if they decided to do the Iron

Mage's bidding in this matter, it would still be nearly two weeks before it required their attention, their decision had been simplified: They could either pursue the information that Shim had given them regarding Pythoness House; or they could finish exploring the last few nooks and crannies of the complex they had found in Ghul's Labyrinth.

Tee, for her part, was angry that – caught up in the elation of catching Shilukar, saving Lord Abbercombe, and helping Lord Zavere – they had failed to question the dark elf before turning him over to the authorities. The others, realizing the mistake they had potentially made, quickly fell to discussing ways they might be able to get Shilukar back under their control... but none of them seemed particularly practical.

And they had another affair to attend to, as well: The funeral for Elestra's python viper – a companion that had been by her side since she was a young girl – was scheduled for later that same morning. So the decision was made that, after paying their respects, they would use the day for rest and recuperation. The next day they would go to Pythoness House and search for the mysterious key that Shim had mentioned, in the hopes that it would answer the most important question of all: What had happened to their memories?

They spent the next hour or so finding buyers for the treasures they had recovered from Shilukar and the Shuul; shopping for various supplies; and then stopping by the Hammersong Vaults to bank the rest of their money. ("I just don't want to be carrying around 5,000 gold sovereigns," Elestra said.)

(Tee, however, actually made a withdrawal – slipping the coins into her *bag of holding*.)

## FUNERAL FOR A PYTHON VIPER

From the vaults in Oldtown they headed back down city, taking the North Gate Road to Golden Elm Way and then following that east along the northern edge of the Temple District until they could see the Siege Tower rising above the cold stone wall of the Necropolis.

As they were walking, Tee spoke to the others of the Necropolis: "It's safe enough during the day, but at night no one in their right mind would go there. The undead have never been fully brought under control – there are catacombs and crypts that delve so deep that it's said no one but the dead has ever seen them."

The Siege Tower itself spoke of the dangers of the Necropolis louder than words could: The passage of stone which passed beneath it into the Necropolis could

be sealed shut with iron doors and double portcullises on both ends. And, when they passed through it, they could see more than two dozen murder holes running the length and breadth of the road. The entire place could be turned into a lethal death trap within moments.

The Siege Tower itself, as Tee explained, was watched over by the Keepers of the Veil – an order of knights dedicated to fighting the undead. Or, at the very least, keeping their threat contained.

Mand Scheben was waiting for them just outside of the Siege Tower. Two priests with him were carrying a small, circular coffin of stained mahogany. The lid of the coffin had been carved in the likeness of a snake.

After greeting them, Mand Scheben led them through the Siege Tower. Entering the Necropolis was like emerging into a city: An avenue of stone ran between massive houses of the dead – enormous crypts of gothic architecture that seemed as old as the hills.

The Necropolis had been built upon a low bulging hill that lay just along the Cliffs of Lost Wishes at the eastern edge of the city. As they moved a little further into the Necropolis, therefore, they were able to look over the top of the mausoleums and see seemingly endless rows of gravestones dotted with crypts of various sizes running up the hill. In the farthest distance, on the edge of the cliffs themselves, they could see an enormous, castle-like building.

“What’s that?”

Tee looked... and barely suppressed a shudder. “The Dark Reliquary. Some say it’s older than the city itself. Some even say it’s older than the Dalenguard. No one goes near it now. People who do don’t come back.”

After more than a quarter of a mile, they came to one of the houses of the dead. From the outside it seemed very large indeed – dwarfing even some of the larger buildings of Oldtown. But once they entered they realized that it was larger still – for much of the structure’s bulk lay beneath the surface.

Mand Scheben led them through countless passages that twisted back upon themselves, before finally coming to a place where a small tomb niche had been left open – the solid stone block levered out and put to one side.

The priests placed the mahogany coffin before the open tomb and withdrew, from various pouches in their robes, ceremonial candles and the like. Once these were lit, Mand Scheben said several prayers and then asked if any of those gathered had any words to say.

Elestra was choking on her sobs, so Agnarr – patting her comfortingly on the back – stepped forward and cleared his throat. “This snake saved my life.” He paused to think about this for a moment, before adding: “Many times.” Then he nodded and stepped back.

The coffin was placed into the tomb niche and the stone slab levered back into place. Additional prayers were said, and then the final words of grace. When it was done, Mand Scheben led them back towards the surface.

(The other priests stayed behind to continue saying the holy words and blessings which would pay honor to the dead and, hopefully, keep the body from being raised by necromancy.)

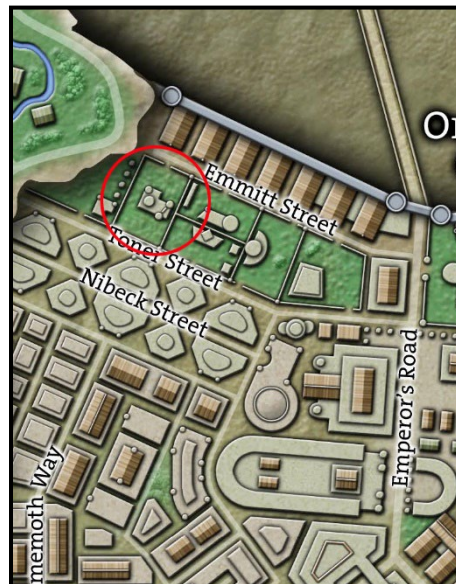
## LEARNING MORE ABOUT PYTHONESS HOUSE

Mand Scheben walked with them back to the Siege Tower. The Keepers of the Veil seemed more suspicious of those leaving the Necropolis than those entering it – they spotted at least one of the knights casting a spell which Ranthir recognized as a means of detecting the undead. (Fortunately, all of them apparently passed the test and the Keepers allowed them to pass unmolested.)

Mand Scheben then said his farewells and headed south into the Temple District. After some brief discussion, the rest of them split up as well – some of them heading back to the Ghostly Minstrel while others scattered through the city.

Elestra, for her part, opened her heart to the spirit of the city and listened to what it might whisper to her about Pythoness House. Tee had remembered that it had once been the stronghold of the cult of the Crimson Coil. Tee and Ranthir had also known a good deal about the cult, but almost nothing about Pythoness House itself.

Her questions were soon being answered, starting with the location of the house itself. It stood near the base of the Jeweled Cliffs along the western edge of Oldtown, looking out over the King’s River Gorge.



Pythoness House was, in fact, an ancient manor house. Five years ago it had been established as a popular but illegal brothel with an odd twist: The prostitutes working there claimed to see the future during sexual intercourse and would give their clients a “reading” of their future

based on this sexual ecstasy. This brothel, however, was also apparently a front for the operations of the Crimson Coil cult and, two and a half years ago, the Knights of the Pale had raided it and rooted the cult out. The brothel was shut down and the house had been empty ever since. Before the brothel had moved in, the house had been abandoned for many years. It had previously been owned by an elven historian named Navaen Blueflight, who had lived there for many years before disappearing mysteriously.

The house had originally been built nearly five hundred years ago by a wealthy woman named Darma Kolltis. She had been the head of a minor merchant house which was now defunct.

After learning that the house was reputedly abandoned, Elestra decided to walk past the house itself... just to make sure that it wasn't being watched.

She was astonished to see that it looked more like a small keep than a house. The entire structure sat atop a hill overgrown with weeds, shrubs, and tall, unkempt grass. The property was surrounded by a low stone wall, but the iron gate facing Emmitt Street was in such poor repair that one could easily slip through the rusted, broken bars and walk up to the open stone arch on the wall of the building itself. As far as Elestra could tell, the structure was completely abandoned.

Satisfied, Elestra turned and headed back towards the Ghostly Minstrel – taking her time and listening to the Voice of the City as she went. The news she heard was grim: Another body had been found in the Warrens with

its skin completely flayed from its body. Rumors were beginning to spread that a serial killer might be responsible.

But the news of Shilukar's capture was also spreading like wildfire... and all of their names were being mentioned.

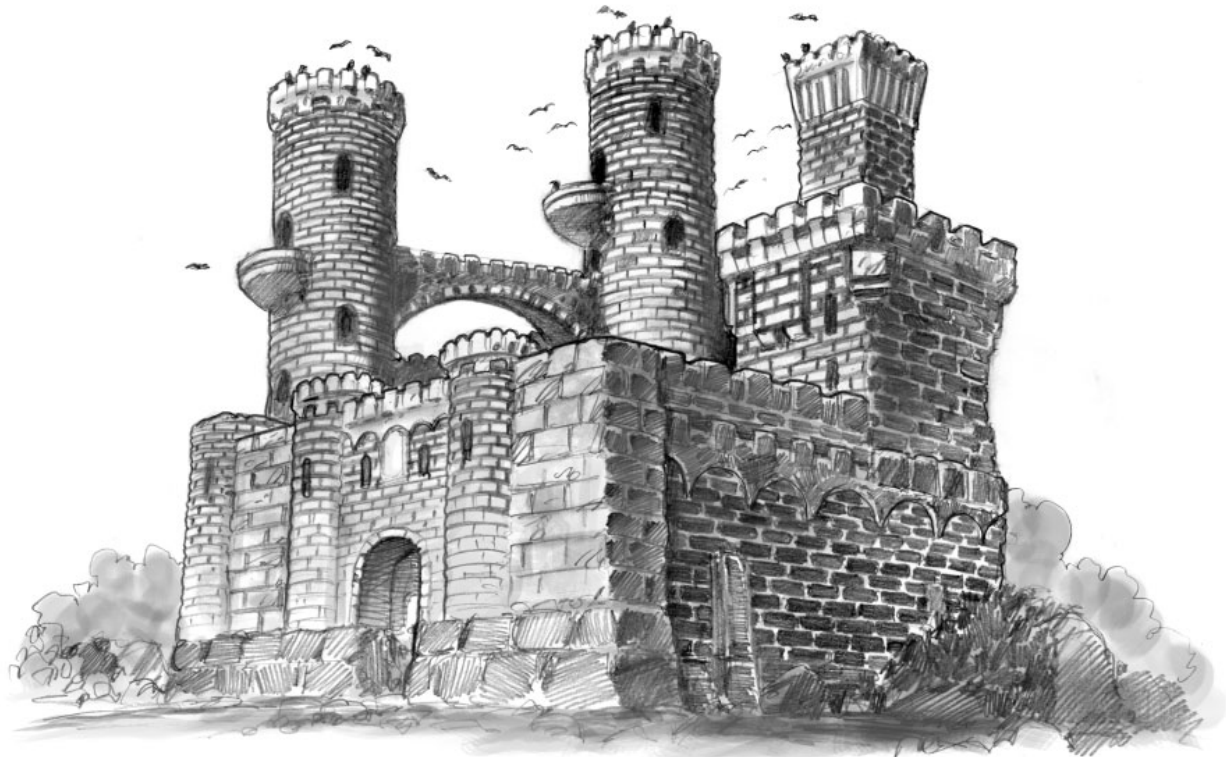
### WITH BLUE IN THE GRASSLANDS

Tor headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel and spent a few minutes in the kitchen, packing a light lunch of sweet creams and fruit. Then he headed out to the stables. Blue ninnied at his approach – it had been too many days since they had ridden together. Tor rubbed his nose, whispered in his ear, and with soft, expert motions worked the saddle onto his back.

They headed towards the tourney fields north of town. Tor had been hoping to get back to them since viewing the tourney on Harvesttime and now he finally had the opportunity.

As expected, the tourney fields were abandoned. Tor took the time to ride several passes with Blue, feeling the familiar rhythms of the saddle. After more than an hour, both Tor and Blue had worked up a lather of sweat. Tor dismounted, took the saddle off of Blue, and rubbed him down.

After letting Blue rest for awhile, Tor saddled him again and galloped east across the open grasslands. When they reached the sea cliffs north of Ptolus, Tor stopped again and – letting Blue graze freely on the





prairie grasses – settled down to his own lunch while gazing out over the Southern Sea.

They stayed there a long while, and then Tor mounted once more and rode slowly back towards the city.

### **AGNARR LOOKS FOR A DOG (AGAIN)**

“It’s like there are no damn dogs in this entire city!”

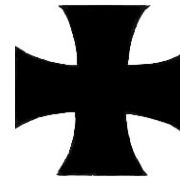
### **TEE AND THE SILVER FATAR**

When they had a moment alone, Dominic asked Tee if she would go on his behalf to see Rehobath, the Silver Fatar of Athor. The note they had found at the Foundry regarding the “Chosen of Vehthyl” had left him deeply concerned about the meeting he had scheduled the next day at the Temple of the Clockwork God. Were they setting him up for something? Were they planning to *do* something to him?

Dominic felt that he was in desperate need of guidance. But he also didn’t want to walk into the lion’s mouth if it turned out that the Imperial Church was as *interested* in him as the Reformists.

Tee was more than willing to help. After leaving Dominic at the Ghostly Minstrel, she headed to the Outer Cathedral of Athor.

The cathedral was ancient, its presence in Ptolus a testament to one of the three Merchant Princes who had gone to the Novarch in Seyrun and begun the Great Conversion. It was designed around Athor’s traditional cross and layered with intricate iconography and complex ornamentation. Graven images of saints and figures of pantheistic significance covered almost every surface, including the ornately carved pews in the sanctuary. Holy knights of the Order of the Dawn could be seen guarding every entrance.



*Athor's Cross*







*Order of the Dawn*

Tee had suspected it would be more than a little difficult to get an audience with Rehobath, but she had – if anything – underestimated how impossible it truly was. She was shuffled constantly from one priest to another without ever seeming to get any closer to the fatar, but just as she was about to give up a prelate who happened to be passing by stopped in his tracks.

“Excuse me, would you be Tithenmamiwen?” he asked.

Tee nodded.

“I couldn’t help overhearing that you wished to see the Silver Fatar. He had mentioned meeting you at Castle Shard. If you wouldn’t mind waiting, I’m sure we can find you a few minutes to speak with him.”

The prelate shoed the other priest away and led Tee to a luxuriously furnished waiting room – a place of crimson satins and velvet cushions. Tee was still left waiting for more than an hour, but eventually a priest came in and escorted her to Rehobath’s personal office.

The office was at the apex of the cathedral’s tower. A huge, vaulted ceiling left Tee feeling particularly small as she was led down the long length of the hall. A fire burned in a mantle of marble to her left; to her right statues of Athor in each of his aspects flanked the wall to the right. At the far end of the chamber curtains of crimson silk hung before tall windows looking south across the Temple District and across the lower length of the city.

In front of the windows, Rehobath sat behind an enormous desk of godwood – the pale, almost pearlescent wood glowing faintly with a white light in the presence of divine magic.

Rehobath rose at Tee’s approach and smiled broadly. Tee bowed slightly and then sat down.

“Mistress Tithenmamiwen,” Rehobath said. “It’s a pleasure to see you again. Prelate Adlam tells me that you had some matter to discuss with me.”

“Yes,” Tee said. “I have a friend who I think might be in trouble. I recently... umm... *found* a note that I think is talking about him. I think its very disturbing.”

Tee produced the note and gave it to Rehobath. As he read the note, the look of concern – which seemed like more of a polite façade than anything else – was replaced by one of genuine shock.

“Maeda thinks she’s found the Chosen of Vehthyl?”

“I guess so,” Tee said. “I’m sorry... but what does that mean, exactly?”

“Yes, of course. Let me explain.” Rehobath settled back into his chair. “The Chosen are living saints. The gods themselves have chosen them as direct conduits of their will within the mortal world.”

“You mean the Chosen can talk to the gods?”

“In a way. It would be more accurate to say that they are the living will of the gods made manifest.” Rehobath’s eyes danced over the note again. “Is it true that your friend has the Mark of Vehthyl?”

“I don’t even know what the mark would look like.”

“There are many possible marks, but the Mark of Vehthyl is most often described as eyes which glow with a silver light.”

Tee shifted nervously. “Yes. I’ve seen that.”

Rehobath could barely contain his excitement. “Then your friend has been honored. Would it be possible for me to speak with him?”

“Possibly,” Tee said. “The letter has frightened him. But I’ll talk to him about coming to you.”

“Thank you.” Rehobath paused for a moment and then looked at her significantly. “Your friend Dominic is an itinerant priest, isn’t he?”

Tee quickly denied that Dominic was the friend she had been talking about... and then realized that she’d probably just confirmed Rehobath’s suspicions. Flustered and angry with herself, she made her excuses and farewells.

Rehobath rose and walked her to the door himself, asking her once again – on the way – to have her friend come and talk to him as soon as possible.

## DOMINIC AND THE SILVER FATAR

Tee returned to the Ghostly Minstrel and described the entire encounter to Dominic.

Dominic was still uncertain, but Rehobath had seemed receptive and concerned... without the disturbing overtones of the letter they had found in the Foundry. Of course, the Reformists at the Temple of the Clockwork God had seemed nice enough, too. But Rehobath was giving answers... and Dominic was a priest of the Church.

“Will you come with me, Tee?”

“Of course!”

So the two of them quickly returned to the cathedral. Unlike Tee’s previous reception, they found themselves swept straight up to Rehobath’s office. He rose to greet them, but as Dominic meekly approached his desk the godwood suddenly flared to a bright light.

Rehobath stepped back, clearly shocked by the display. Fumbling his words for a moment, he suggested that they retire instead to the small seating area near the fireplace.

The three of them sat down. Rehobath, with an eager air, began by asking Dominic to show him the mark of

Vehthyl. Dominic with a nervous, sidelong glance towards Tee murmured a prayer to Vehthyl:

*Mighty, majestic, and radiant,  
You shine brilliantly in the evening,  
You brighten the day at dawn,  
You stand in the heavens like the sun and the  
moons,  
Your wonders are known both above and below,  
To the greatness of the Magus,  
To you, Vehthyl, I pray!*

As he finished, his eyes blazed with silver light. Rehobath was entranced. “It is the mark... It’s hard to believe that one of the Chosen should have come to me.”

Dominic had many questions, but there was much Rehobath didn’t know: Although he could confirm that Maeda was the “head priestess” of the Temple of the Clockwork God (confirming Dominic’s suspicions regarding the letter), he had no idea what the “Iron Angel” she mentioned in her letter might be.

However, Rehobath was able to confirm that Maeda had formed an alliance with the Shuul, who were led by a mysterious man known as Savane. The Shuul had apparently constructed most or all of the Temple of the Clockwork God.

Dominic was most interested, however, in knowing about what had happened to him. How or why had he been chosen by Vehthyl?

But, as Rehobath said, “The ways of the gods are filled with mystery... Vehthyl perhaps moreso than all the rest. To be chosen by them is to have your life placed in the focal point of creation. There is no way of knowing why you were chosen – only that, because you were chosen, you are an important person in an important place at an important time.”

This didn’t do much to give Dominic the guidance he was looking for, but then Rehobath said, “We may not know why Vehthyl has chosen you, but I suspect I know why you should have come to me now.”

“I was once the Gold Fatar of Athor. I served on the Council of Councils and was esteemed. When the last novarch died, it was clear to many that I was destined to follow him – to speak as the Living Voice of the Nine Gods. But when that time came, the Emperor played *politics*.” The last word was filled with venom. “Another was named in my place while I was stripped of my offices and sent here to serve as the Silver Fatar of an outer cathedral. It was the most blatant interference by the Emperor in the matters of the church since the Years of Heresy.”

***Historical Note:** The Years of Heresy began in 615 YD when the Emperor of Seyrun became the leader of the Imperial Church and called for a Time of Reflection. It later became known as*

*the Purging. For five years a bloody, internal war was waged against heresy cults. When the Emperor was assassinated in 620 YD, church and state became separate once again and the Time of Reflection came to an end shortly thereafter.*

“I believe that you can help me, Dominic. I believe that you were *meant* to help me.”

“What do you want me to do?” Dominic asked.

“Simply to let yourself be known. Your presence here in Ptolus is a sign. I would like to call a convocation in, let’s say, two days. Could you return here on the 10<sup>th</sup>?”

Dominic was hesitant, but he agreed. Rehobath then summoned in several members of the Order of the Silver God. The Order were the primary scholars of the Church here in Ptolus, and Rehobath wanted them to examine Dominic carefully and confirm the veracity of the mark. This they did – not only observing the glow of the eyes, but also testing its various properties (most particularly its ability to detect magical auras). When they were satisfied, priests escorted Tee and Dominic in honor to the front doors of the cathedral.

## GATHERING AT THE GHOSTLY MINSTREL

When they had gotten some distance away from the cathedral, Tee asked Dominic whether he thought they ought to tell Mand Scheben about what was happening. “Even if he can’t advise us, I think he should at least hear it from us.”

Dominic agreed and they headed over to the Temple of Ashe. Unfortunately, Mand Scheben wasn’t there. They made plans to come back the next day. They also tried to meet with Lord Zavere, but he was also out (Kadmus told them that he had gone out with Lord Abbercombe and was not expected back until the next morning).

Stymied (at least for the moment), they returned to the Ghostly Minstrel in time to meet the rest of the group for dinner.

Tee and Dominic gave a brief, but complete, overview of what had happened with the Silver Fatar. Dominic also told them that he had decided to simply not show up at the Temple of the Clockwork God the next day. He still wasn’t sure what Maeda wanted, but he didn’t feel safe about it.

With that decision made, Elestra began telling them everything she had learned that day about Pythoness House; the second Flayed Man killing; and – most exciting of all – the fact that their names were being mentioned all over town as a result of Shilukar’s capture!

“It’s being talked about all over town?” Tee said.

“Yes!” Elestra said.

Tee's face went white. She pushed her chair back and stood up quickly. "Excuse me. I have to go."

She ran out of the Ghostly Minstrel, leaving the others to look after her and exchange puzzled frowns.

### ANOTHER INTERLUDE WITH TEE

Tee ran up the hill to Emerald Hill, through the gates of Iridithil's Home, and straight to Doraedian's office.

Doraedian's desk was covered in various bits of parchment and he was sorting through them. He smiled wryly as she came in. "Tee... It seems you've been quite busy."

"Leytha?"

"It's true, isn't it? You captured Shilukar?"

"With the help of my friends."

"Of course. But your name keeps finding its way to the most interesting places." Doraedian smiled. "You have grown beyond your years, Tee. I'm very proud of you."

Tee started to smile, but it faltered. "But I feel lost. I wish I knew if I was following the right path... Do you think I'm doing the right thing?"

"I can no longer judge your choices, Tee."

Tee didn't know how to respond to that. After a moment, Doraedian continued. "Why are you here?"

"I don't know... I..." Tee trailed off.

"The path you're on is taking you to places where I cannot guide. I don't know if you can take any comfort from that, but I do."

Tee frowned. Then she seemed to reach a decision. "There's something else."

"Oh?"

"You remember my friend Dominic? The priest?" Tee quickly described the mark of Vehthyl and the arrangement which had been made with Rehobath.

Doraedian's face was grave by the time she was done. "He's calling a convocation?"

Tee nodded.

"I shall have to bring news of this to the Commissar," Doraedian said. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention."

"Do you think we did the right thing? Do you think Dominic should go?"

"I don't know. If he has been chosen by one of the nine gods, then perhaps he's doing exactly what he should be doing and can do nothing else. I know little of such matters. But if the Silver Fatar is planning a religious gathering like this, then the Commissar should be warned so that proper preparations can be made."

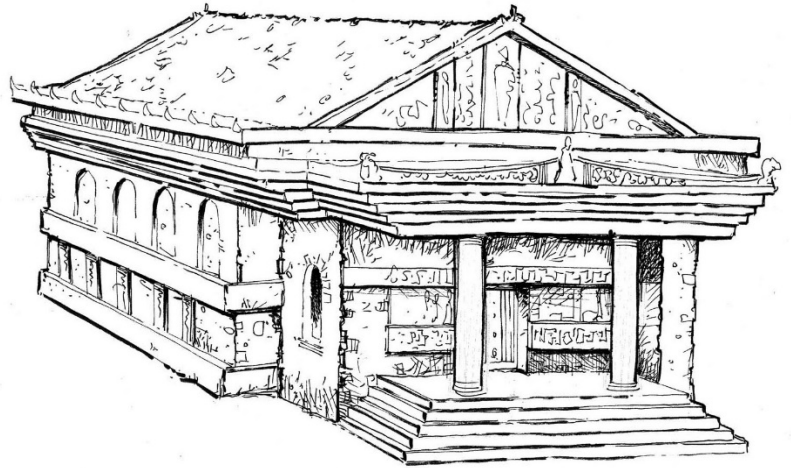
### AN EVENING WITH TEE

Tee left Doraedian feeling more conflicted and confused than ever. She felt the need to clear her head – to relax and put the constant cares that plagued her conscience behind her, even if it could only be for a single evening.

Her thoughts drifted to the thousands of gold pieces she was carrying in her *bag of holding*. She realized that she was richer than she had ever dreamed of being. Somehow the reality of that seemed distant to her more often than not.

More than that, she was dressed in some of her finest clothes – she had changed into them to meet with Rehobath and never had a chance to change out of them. She was struck by the desire to go some place expensive. Some place carefree.

She headed to the White House. It was the most prestigious gambling establishment and brothel in Oldtown. Tee was surprised when the guards standing in front of the white marble façade scarcely gave her a second glance as she passed through the doors.



The interior of the White House was luxurious – but a very different sort of luxury than the one she had seen in the Outer Cathedral earlier that day. The cathedral had possessed the regality of age – it was a mature and elegant sort of luxury. But the White House was gaudy – a youthful and exuberant luxury that sought to lavish its patrons with pleasures.

There were only a dozen or so tables – but all of them sported the highest of stakes. Tee dabbled at a gambling wheel, but then settled down to games of green dragonscales.

Tee had been worried that the news of the day might have followed her to the White House, but instead almost everyone she talked to seemed to be most fascinated by the news that mrathrach – a game that she knew had begun down city in the Cock Pit – was moving uptown to the White House. A mrathrach wheel was being

installed and the news was that it would be operational within mere days.

She lost a small fortune (although it was only a minor dent in her current finances), and then slowly spent the rest of the evening earning it back bit by bit.

### TEE AND THE DREAMING APOTHECARY

It was very late when Tee returned to the Ghostly Minstrel, but Elestra was still in the common room nursing a drink. She grinned and waved as Tee came in.

“We were worried about you. I thought I’d stay up and make sure you came back all right.”

Tee smiled. “Quite all right... now anyway. Actually, I’m glad you waited up. I was wondering if I could borrow that token of the Dreaming Apothecary that Jevicca gave you?”

“Of course!”

They headed upstairs, stopping by Elestra’s room long enough for Tee to grab the token, and then said their goodnights.

Tee headed straight to her room and placed the token under her pillow. Then she eased herself into a dreaming trance.

After a time, Tee seemed to wake in her own room... but with her skills she quickly identified the telltale signs of the Dreaming.

An elven woman dressed all in white and glowing with a soft, white light floated in the center of her room. The woman’s eyes were milky white and her long, blond hair flowed about her as if she were floating in water.

“What do you wish from us?”

Tee quickly described several pieces of mage-touched equipment. The floating woman named a price that would exhaust almost all of Tee’s funds, and this gave Tee a moment of pause... but only a moment.

“Place the coins in a bag upon the table at the side of your bed. We shall collect it and deliver the items as soon as the enchantments have been worked upon them.”

The woman smiled and began to fade to ethereal nothingness. As she disappeared, Tee felt the blackness of sleep washing over her... but she recognized this as a false impression and fought against it.

She forced her eyes open to find herself still in the Dreaming... but now she stood atop the Spire, able to see for miles in every direction. She looked down and saw, where the city should be, nothing but an empty grassland stretching from the base of the Jeweled Cliffs to the Southern Sea. A black speck was moving through the grasses.

Then, unexpectedly, her vision sharpened like an eagle’s. At first she could see that the black speck was a man and then, suddenly, she could make out every detail of him.



The strange knight seemed to be searching for something. His gaze crossed back and forth across the grasslands. And then, abruptly, the knight looked up at the Spire. His gaze seemed to pierce her. Tee stumbled back in surprise...

... and woke in her own bed with the morning light streaming through her window.

### RANTHIR’S LABORS

After returning from the Necropolis, Ranthir had retired to his rooms at the Ghostly Minstrel. He had been hoping for several weeks – almost since waking up in the Ghostly Minstrel for the first time – to have the time to perform a lengthy and complicated ritual. Now that he had a day free, he leapt at the opportunity.

He began by drawing up detailed astrological charts showing the positions of the stars and the planets as they had been reflected at the time of his birth. (He had prepared such charts before, but they had been left behind in Isiltur. The gods alone knew what might have become of them by now.)

He then compared these charts to various magical texts he had collected. These texts were copies of incredibly old works – works almost as old as the practice of magic itself. They outlined a formula and, by comparing this formula to the details of his astrological charts and working in the factors of Ptolus’ geographic location and certain other details, Ranthir was able to work out the particular details of the ritual he would need to perform.

With the ritual designed, Ranthir took the time to bathe – anointing himself with alchemical oils – and

donned fresh garments of clean linen. Then, with his window open, he took a freshly crafted, unused brass brazier and filled it with fragrant wood. Setting it ablaze he cast into it a variety of herbs, spices, fluids, and minerals – each carefully measured and the interval between them precisely timed.

Then, for many long hours – as the brazier burned – Ranthir recited aloud the magical verses of binding. The words fused the rites of the ritual and Ranthir could feel his soul reaching out... calling out...

In the wee hours of the morning, the call of Ranthir's soul was answered. There came a snuffling sound at his window. Rising from his lotus position, Ranthir crossed the room and held out his hand. Into it crept a tiny, white hedgehog.

And Ranthir named his familiar Erinaceidae.

### MAND SCHEBEN

(09/09/790)

By the time the others had finished breakfast, Ranthir still hadn't emerged from his room. So Tee and Dominic decided that they would head back to the Temple of Asche and see if they could gain an audience with Mand Scheben. They felt strongly that he shouldn't hear about Dominic's alliance with Rehobath second hand.

Mand Scheben was at the temple this morning and was more than happy to see them.

Tee and Dominic had been worried that Mand Scheben would be upset, but he soon set these fears to rest. "The Imperial Church may hold us in low regard, but although I fear that the Church itself has lost its way I have no doubt that many of those who serve it hear the true voice of the gods."

*Religious Note: Mand Scheben serves as one of the head priests for the Reformist church known as the Temple of Asche. This temple was dedicated to Asche, one of the saints of Itehl – the patron saint of cities.*

He did caution them not to trust Rehobath too much. "Remember that you are the one to bear the mark. Not him."

### INTO PYTHONESS HOUSE

Tee and Dominic returned to the Ghostly Minstrel only a few minutes before Ranthir emerged from his room. Ranthir introduced Erin to his friends and grabbed a bite to eat for himself.

Then they headed towards Oldtown and, within a quarter of an hour, they were standing on the street before Pythoness House.

The keep-like house seemed dreary beneath the noon sun – grimed and crumbling from years of neglect. Tee

and Elestra were able to slip through the iron gate facing Emmitt Street, but Agnarr was forced to shove the rusty metal to one side causing it to emit a horrible shriek.

Looking through the stone arch on the front of the house they could see through a short passage into an interior courtyard. As the others came up the hill, Tee took the lead and headed through.

She was halfway through the stone passage when some instinct caused her to look up: A small, black metallic sphere was being dropped through a small murder hole!

Tee leaped forward as the powder bomb landed behind her and exploded. She managed to avoid the worst of the blast, rolling into the inner courtyard as several small mice scattered ahead of her. Agnarr and Tor, seeing the explosion, came running up – only to dash headlong into a second powder bomb.

Tee rolled to her feet and tried to find a target with her dragon pistol – but the opening was too small and the angle poor. She couldn't see anything.

"COME TO ME..." The disembodied voice seemed to spring up from all around Tee – echoing through the courtyard and dancing through the empty windows and doors of the house. Tee whirled around, trying to find the source of it... but there was nothing there.

Elestra, Ranthir, and Dominic dashed through the passage into the courtyard. Agnarr and Tor pulled a rear guard, and barely managed to dive out of the way as a third bomb filled with dung was dropped.

Agnarr hauled himself to his feet, wiping a few flecks of disgusting excrement off of his armor. "That was disgusting. Wait—listen!" His sharp ears had caught the sounds of skittering claws racing across stone – whoever or whatever had been using the murder hole was running off to the west through the upper passages. Then something large was thrown to the floor, and there was a booming noise – a large door being slammed.

Then there was silence.

They took stock of the situation: The walls of the courtyard were so high that it almost seemed like an interior chamber – except that it lacked a roof. The noon sun was beaming down almost directly onto them, but despite that the place seemed to have a palpable chill and an uncomfortable dampness. Mosses and fungi covered the stones moreso than weeds or grass.

Looking up they could see several windows, terraces, and towers arranged in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Off to one side there was a short flight of stone stairs leading to an elevated platform with a well in the center of it. In the opposite direction there was a large, open archway leading into the interior of the house.

Elestra took a moment to run up the stairs to the well, but nearly lost her balance as the moss-slick stones cracked and tilted wildly under her weight. She barely managed to stop herself from sliding back down to the



cobbled courtyard, instead righting herself and then carefully backing down the stairs.

Tee headed cautiously through the archway into a damp room filled with leaves and refuse that had apparently blown in through the open doorway. A red carpet, dark with moisture and grime, covered most of the floor. A staircase along the far side of the room led up to a stone walkway which joined two platforms twelve feet above the floor. The room also curved to the right, although a green, mildew-stained curtain in that direction blocked the passage.

Between the stairs and the curtain there were two doors of battered, weather-beaten wood. There was also a third door just to the left of the arch from the courtyard.

Tee headed towards this third door first. Agnarr had followed her into the room to keep an eye on her, but the rest of the party stayed in the courtyard waiting for the all-clear.

This door was somewhat better shielded from the outside elements, but was still in rather poor condition. Tee eased it open, revealing a small room of barren stone and drift debris. Another door – this one of iron – lay in a curved wall on the far side of the room. Tee crossed to it.

It opened onto the lowest level of the eastern tower. A rickety wooden ladder bolted to the wall led up through a hole in the ceiling. Tee crossed to this and looked up – the ladder went up three flights.

Tee backed out and used her thieves' tools to lock the iron door behind her.

## HAUNTINGS

Crossing back through the room with the moldering red carpet, Tee checked the first door on that side. The weather-beaten wood wouldn't even fasten properly, so she easily pushed it open to reveal what had once been a boudoir: Four beds covered with silk sheets and pillows – now layered in grime, dust, cobwebs – were surrounded with ruined draperies of silk and moldy paintings in wooden frames. Two brass braziers lay dust-covered and overturned in the corners of the room. The floors were carpeted with thick, worm-ridden rugs. A thick smell of mold and mildew hung in the air.

A glint of silver caught Tee's eye. A small locket was lying half-buried in the dried muck between two of the beds. Tee bent over to pick it up—

As her fingers brushed against it, however, one of the braziers suddenly jerked into the air as if held by invisible strings. It abruptly righted itself, slammed itself to the floor, and burst into flame.

Tee jerked back, leaving the locket laying on the floor. Agnarr standing in the outer room, yanked out his sword.

From the courtyard, Dominic – seeing Agnarr suddenly draw his sword – called out: “Is everything all right?”

Tee eased out of the room, pulling the door shut behind her. “Yes. Everything's fine.” She glanced meaningfully at Agnarr and moved onto the next door.

This also opened onto a ruined boudoir. After making sure that none of the braziers were going to start flying around, Tee started poking around. The paintings in this room were in slightly better condition. All of them depicted disturbingly lewd scenes, and although Tee estimated they might have some minor value she didn't really want anything to do with them.

Tucked under one of the pillows on a ruined bed, however, she found a small book with a tattered, dark brown cover. Flipping it open she found that its contents were written in a nearly illegible scrawl that could only have been born of hopeless madness. The first several pages were covered in repetitions and variations of a single phrase: FACELESS HATE. (*They wait in faceless hate. We shall burn in their faceless hate. The faceless hate has consumed me.*)

Tee glanced at several more pages and blanched. The entire book left her feeling vaguely disturbed and with a sense of deep disquiet. She decided not to mention it to the others just yet and tucked it away for later. But as she emerged from the room, it was obvious that something had worried her.

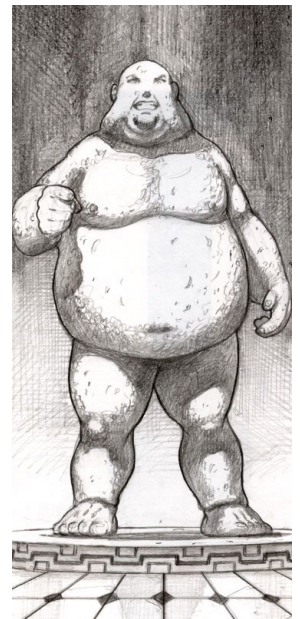
“What is it?” Elestra asked.

Tee shook her head. “We'll talk about it later.”

Tee crossed over to the moldering green drapery and pulled it off to one side. The hall continued beyond it, with another door, a wrought iron spiral staircase leading up, and – at the very end of the hall – a life-size stone statue of an obese, naked human man.

The statue's pose and expression seemed to show a diabolical confidence. It stood on a round platform three inches high and four feet across. Just walking up to it, Tee could easily see that there were deep scratch marks in the floor leading away from the platform – leading her to conclude that the platform could be moved out of the way, revealing a hidden way into Pythoness House's basement.

After a brief discussion with the others, it was decided that they would leave the statue alone for now. It seemed too risky to head down and leave potential danger lurking above them.



So Tee headed to the last door on this level. By this point, most of the others had gathered in the center of the hall (near the green draperies) – the only exception was Tor, who was still keeping a wary watch in the courtyard.

This door had been more sheltered from the elements than the others, but when Tee swung it open it revealed the same ruined, tawdry boudoir as the other rooms on this first level...

But only for a moment. An instant later the dusty vestiges of age seemed to be swept away, leaving everything as it must have appeared years ago – luxurious and clean. Three beautiful, scantily clad women stood in the middle of the room looking aggressively seductive. They opened their arms towards Tee and, with seductive whispers drifted across the room towards her.

Tee's senses seemed befogged, but she shook her head and the illusion began to drop away – now everything seemed to become transparent to her, and through the beauty she could see the ruin... and the three dry, desiccated corpses lying on the beds.

Tee pulled her dragon pistol and fired at one of the apparitions. The shot passed right through it.

One of the beautiful, illusionary spirits had reached her now and it reached out its arms and tried to wrap them around Tee's throat. "Love me... Love me forever..."

Agnarr – his firm ground in reality allowing him to quickly shake off the illusion – stepped forward and pulled Tee away from the apparition. The ghostly whores turned to their attention to him, but their seductive whispers didn't dissuade him for a moment: His sword slashed through them.

Tee, seeing that Agnarr's sword had seemingly had as little effect on the spirits as her pistol, shifted her aim: She fired at one of the corpses laying on the beds inside the room. As the shot struck true – sending a cloud of corpse dust into the air – the expressions of the apparitions transformed into gaping maws of rage and pain.

Elestra, seeing the effect of Tee's shot, pulled out one of the modified dragon rifles they had taken from the Shuul. She ducked around the apparitions – which were now drifting out into the hallway – and into the room. Lowering the rifle she bathed one of the bed-ridden corpses in flame.

With a terrifying, spectral scream one of the ghostly whores vanished. The other two, with an air of desperation in their movements, reached out to those around them. "Love me... Hold me... Stay... Stay..."

One of them headed towards Ranthir, who stumbled back against the wall. As her hands wrapped themselves around his neck, he could feel the breath turning cold and dead in his lungs as her pale lips reached for his—

Elestra swung the flaming dragon rifle around, bathing the other two beds in its flame. The remaining

apparitions vanished. Ranthir stumbled forward a step, gasping for breath.

## A SECOND AMBUSH

Hearing the commotion from the courtyard, Tor had come running into the house – but he arrived just in time to see the last of the ghosts disappearing.

Elestra stumbled out of the room. The flames were beginning to spread and the entire room was filling with acrid black smoke. Tee took the time to quickly glance around the room and – seeing nothing of value or interest – quickly slammed the door shut.

"Do you think it's all right?" Agnarr asked. "Will the fire spread?"

"I don't know," Elestra said. "Do you think I shouldn't have used the rifle?"

"I think it will be all right," Ranthir said. "The walls here are stone. The door is thick. I think it will burn itself out."

Tee turned to Dominic. "Do you have any spells that might put it out? I'd rather not—"

A powder bomb landed directly behind Tor. His armor took the worst of it, but the blast knocked the breath out of him. He stumbled forward half a step, and by the time he got turned around Agnarr had already raced past him and back to the eastern end of the hall.

A ratman was standing on the walkway above. As Agnarr reached the base of the stairs, two more of the ratmen raced out of the shadows to the south, dropping additional powder bombs as they crossed to the far side of the walkway and pulled out crossbows. Agnarr threw himself to one side as the powder bombs went off.

Tor broke into a run for the stairs as well, but was nearly crushed when a massive ratbrute hurtled off the upper level and nearly landed on top of him. The creature stood at least 8 feet tall and was nothing but rolling mounds of muscle and fur. Six inch, yellow fangs protruded from its stinking mouth and its grime-encrusted claws lashed out at Tor.

Agnarr regained his balanced and launched himself up the stairs. As he mounted the upper level he swung his sword at the nearest ratling – the one still standing on the walkway – but the creature ducked under the blow, hissed, and launched himself at the barbarian's face.

The ratbrute's claws weren't finding their way through Tor's armor, but its powerful blows left him staggering. Then one arm caught Tor and hurled him into the stone wall. Tor felt the sharp pain of a rib breaking, but then he snapped up his sword and began circling warily around the creature.

Up above, Agnarr stepped deftly to one side and let the ratling careen past him. The ratling's claws skidded on bare stone, turned and leapt again... directly onto Agnarr's sword.

Tor fainted, and then – catching the ratbrute off-balance – slashed his sword across its chest. The wound was shallow, but electricity crackled along the blade and the faint smell of burning fur filled Tor’s nostrils.

And then Elestra – who had snuck up behind the ratbrute – pulled the trigger on her modified dragon rifle. From Tor’s perspective, the creature was suddenly limned with flame – and the stench of burning fur was overpowering.

The ratbrute, enraged, whirled towards Elestra. Tor, despite his battered ribs, dived to one side. Elestra stumbled back a step, worked the dragon rifle’s mechanism, and then pulled the trigger again.

The ratbrute – writhing in the pain of the flames – collapsed. A few moments later it stopped moving entirely.

The others had been kept pinned down by the crossbow fire from above, but with the ratbrute down Dominic was able to rush up to take cover under the stone arch.

The ratlings, however, were routing: Both of them tried to rush back across the stone walkway, but Agnarr was ready. The barbarian yanked his sword out of the first ratling’s chest, pivoted, and with a single swing of his sword decapitated them both as they tried to scurry past him. Their heads rolled off the walkway in opposite directions, landing to either side of Dominic.

### UNWELCOME TAIN

Elestra reminded them of the bounty on rat’s tails, but Agnarr had already set to work chopping them off.

Tee, meanwhile, remained curious about the brazier which had burst into flame. Had its motion been connected to the locket she had touched?

She asked Dominic to use his holy sight to detect the presence of supernatural evil. The priest murmured a prayer and looked into the room: The room appeared completely normal.

But when he turned back to tell Tee this, Dominic was shocked to discover powerful auras of evil clinging to many of them: The modified dragon rifles they had taken from the Shuul were tainted... and so was Tee’s soul.

The news nearly reduced Tee to tears. She hated the very idea of this filth crawling across her soul. But as the others had not yet been corrupted by it, she dutifully collected the modified dragon rifles from them.

Dominic also carefully checked the unmodified dragon rifle that Elestra had taken, but this appeared to be free of the taint. Ranthir concluded that the modifications the Shuul had made must have used chaositech.

### RAT WARRENS AND DINING ROOM

There were two doors on the second level – one at either end of the stone walkway. One of these was an iron door leading to the second level of the eastern tower, but the other – slightly ajar – led to a room that stank of stale urine. It appeared that the ratlings had been nesting here, with trash and scraps seemingly pulled from all over the house. Plates, pots, cutlery, towels, and shredded paper and cloth of all kinds.

Trying to breathe as little as possible, Tee stepped into the room and began poking around through the trash. (She thought there was at least a small chance that, if the key had been in Pythoness House, the ratlings might have found it and added it to their stash here.)

Disturbing the garbage, however, caused at least a dozen rats to come pouring out into the open. They swarmed around Tee, biting at her feet and legs and trying to crawl their way up her body in a frenzied mass.

Tee drew her longsword and swept them off her. Agnarr stepped in and helped to finish them off.

“Careful with that sword,” Tee said, glancing around at the drifts of refuse. “We don’t want to light the whole place on fire.”

The flames of the blade died down and Agnarr set to work hacking off rat tails while Tee resumed her aborted search of the room.

There was nothing of value, and certainly nothing that looked like a key. But she did find a small crawl hole that had been smashed or gnawed through the west wall at floor level.

Looking through it, Tee could see into what had once been a well-appointed dining room – a long, dusty table with a dozen chairs covered in moldy cloth took up much the room, and she could see that there were two doors leading out of the room on its far side.

Agnarr offered to go first, but Tee pointed out that his broad shoulders weren’t going to fit through the narrow hole. Even with her slim, elvish frame it was going to be a tight fit.

In fact, it took a good deal of wiggling for her to work her way through the hole. Standing up with a clearer view on the far side, her eye was immediately caught by the cobweb-ridden chandelier that hung above the table. It had once been set with many gemstones, and she could see that at least six of them still remained.

Unwinding her rope and grappling hook, Tee cast it up and easily caught the chandelier. Her first thought was to climb up and pry the gems out, but after a quick test of the rope she was fairly certain it wouldn’t support her weight. So, instead, she gave it a short, sharp yank.

The chandelier easily pulled free from the damp, moldering plaster of the ceiling, crashing spectacularly into the rotten wood of the table and breaking it like a twig.

“Tee! Are you all right?” Agnarr was trying to peer through the hole in the wall.

“Everything’s fine!” Tee called back, choking on the cloud of dust that had filled the room. She pulled out one of her daggers and quickly pried loose the semi-precious gems. Then, comparing her mental image of the second floor to what they knew of the first, she crossed over to the northwestern door and swung it open.

Her suspicions were confirmed: She was standing in an empty hall of plain stone. The spiral staircase from the first floor passed through this hall and up to the second floor. A window looked out over the courtyard and there was also another door at the far end of the hall.

Crossing back to the hole, she called for Agnarr to tell the others to come up the spiral staircase and then went back to meet up with them.

## SECOND HAUNTINGS

Agnarr headed back down and let the others know. They headed towards the spiral staircase.

Tor, who had gone back to watching the courtyard, took up the rear. But as he came back into the house, one of the decapitated ratling heads floated into the air, turned itself towards him, and seemed to stare with its cold, dead eyes – dripping blood down onto the moldering red carpet.

With an instinctive gasp he swung his sword down in a crackling arc, slamming the ratling head to the floor. As his sword connected with a sickening crunch, a horrible spectral howling ripped through the upper levels of the house.

The others whirled at the sound, and Elestra – seeing Tor with his sword drawn – called out, “Tor?! What happened?”

Tor was looking around warily, circling in place. “I think we’re being watched by something in the upper levels of the castle. I think it was using the ratling’s head to spy on us.”

Agnarr prodded the other head with his sword. It didn’t respond. Nor did anything else seem untoward now that the howling had passed. They turned back to the spiral staircase and headed upstairs to meet with Tee, quickly filling her in on what had happened.

Tee summed it up in one word: “Creepy.”

They headed back into the dining room. Tee quickly inspected the other door in the room and then Agnarr opened it, revealing another ruined boudoir. A small alcove projected out from the south wall, holding a window seat that looked out across Oldtown.

The lewd paintings that had decorated the lower boudoirs were missing here. Instead, recessed shelves were built into the walls. It looked as if these shelves had once been covered with a variety of tiny, doll-like figurines, but now only a few of them remained: A pair

of matched acrobats. A porcelain angel. A young girl. A small terrier dog.

Tee idly crossed to the shelves and leaned in to take a look at one of the figurines. Her face was less than a foot away from one of them when it suddenly leapt from the shelf and clawed at her eyes!

Tee jerked back. “Agnarr!” The angel figurine had leapt from the shelf and was now flying towards her. She reached up and snatched it from the air, crushing it easily in her bare hand.

The small figurine of the dog began running around in circles, yipping. Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

The acrobats launched themselves off the shelves – Tee ducked to one side and the two figurines landed near Agnarr as he came charging into the room... and then skidded to a halt in confusion.

Tee grabbed the figurine of the young girl, which was still trying to claw at her eyes, threw it to the floor, and crushed it beneath her foot.

Agnarr, realizing that the dolls were a threat, tried to smash one of the acrobats with his sword... but it twirled up onto the top of the blade and ran toward his face. It wasn’t quick enough, though: Agnarr quickly whipped his sword around and smashed it against the wall, sending flaming bits of debris flying through the room. Then he pivoted and brought the sword crashing down onto the second acrobat (sending even more flaming debris into the air).

The dog suddenly ceased its circling and leapt for Agnarr’s throat.

Agnarr beamed: “A dog!” He caught it deftly in his hand.

The dog continued struggling, trying ineffectually to claw and bite at Agnarr. It also continued its shrill barking: Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

Tee grimaced. “Agnarr...”

Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

“It’s a dog! Not a real dog... but a dog!”

Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

Tee grabbed the dog from Agnarr’s hand and smashed it to smithereens on the floor. Agnarr’s face fell... but at least the incessant yipping stopped.

## THE GHOST APPEARS

Heading back out into the hallway they went to the last door on the second level. This was another iron door and it led into one of the small towers that flanked the front gate. A ladder bolted to the wall led up to the next level of the tower.

Tee and Tor climbed up the ladder. Tor headed through another iron door, this one leading to the gatehouse immediately above the entrance to the house: They could see where a large stone block had been levered out of the floor and pushed to one side, revealing the murder hole the ratlings had attacked them through.

A narrow wooden table off to one side held the decrepit remains of four crossbows and three quivers of rotten quarrels, all covered with cobwebs and dust. An iron pot filled to the brim with rusty caltrops was shoved into a far corner. There was a matching door directly opposite.

Tor proceeded cautiously into the gatehouse. He hadn't gone more than a few steps, however, before the door suddenly slammed shut behind him. Tee jumped for it and easily got it open again. She turned and called over her shoulder, "Get up here! Something's happening!"

The trapdoor slammed shut.

"Tee?" Elestra called. "What's happening?"

Tee whirled back towards Tor... just in time to see the ghost materialize between them.

The spirit wore the robes of an Imperial priest, but its face was contorted with fury. "Leave this place! The curse will claim your souls!"

Tee hesitated for a moment and then leapt for the trap door, yanking it open. "Agnarr! The ghost is right here!"

Tor, meanwhile, had drawn his sword and – with a single quick swing – sliced it through the ghost's ethereal form. Although the blade crackled and its electrical arcs flashed as it passed through the ghost, the apparition appeared unphased.

Agnarr began clambering up the tower ladder. Dominic, thinking quickly, ran back around the hall to a window looking out over the courtyard. Through this he was able to look up through one of the inner arrow slits of the gatehouse and see the ghost moving menacingly towards Tor.

Dominic raised his holy symbol and called out a prayer to Athor. But whether it was the distance, the thick stone walls, or the sheer tenacity of the spirit the prayer had no effect. Frowning, Dominic ran back around towards the ladder.

Tor swung his sword again... again to little effect. But at the blow the ghost's face was transformed into a black maw of rage "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!"

Every object in the gatehouse began to shake violently, and then handfuls of the sharp, rusty caltrops came flying out of their cauldron – pelting Tor viciously.

Agnarr leapt out of the trapdoor and drew his sword, bounding towards the door leading to the gatehouse. "FOR THE GLORY!"

The spirit whirled: "LEAVE THIS PLACE."

Agnarr grunted and swung his flaming sword. It ripped through the ghost, and Agnarr could feel it catching and tearing.

The ghost moaned in pain and rushed away from Agnarr... passing straight into Tor's body.

Tor jerked spasmodically, and then a clearly alien intellect took possession of his limbs and spoke through his lips: "Leave this place or your friend will die."

Agnarr paused. "I'll only give you once chance: Get out of his body."

"LEAVE THIS PLACE!"

Agnarr attacked. The spirit clumsily raised Tor's sword and parried the attack. Agnarr moved to attack again, but the ruined crossbows were swept off their table and hurled at Agnarr by invisible hands.

Agnarr stumbled under the assault, and barely got his sword back into a defensive position as "Tor" attacked him. Agnarr parried several more attacks, trying to figure out some way of getting rid of the ghost without harming Tor. But there didn't seem to be any way around it.

"I'm sorry, Tor! Dominic will heal you later!" Agnarr got ready to swing away with all his strength, which would surely sweep aside the ghost's clumsy defense—

When Dominic, having ascended the ladder behind him, raised his holy symbol and with a shouted prayer focused his faith upon Tor's body. The ghost was blasted back, forcibly ripped from Tor's soul, and then faded into wispy nothingness...

"Is it gone?" Tee asked.

Dominic gasped. "I think so."

## LOOKING AROUND

Tee cautiously crossed the gatehouse and opened the iron door on the far side. It led to a tower nearly identical to the one they had climbed up. Tee flipped up the trapdoor in the floor, revealing a lower level filled with some badly rotten straw and little else. She shrugged and slammed it shut again.

On this side, however, there was also a trapdoor in the ceiling. Tee swung it open and climbed out onto the tower's parapet.

From here Tee could look down onto an outdoor terrace surrounding three-quarters of the courtyard. Half of this terrace had, at some point in the past, been turned into a rooftop garden. Various boxes and pots – most in disrepair and many spilling their dirt out onto the stone roof – lay here and there. Many of the plants were still alive, although most of the garden had been overrun with weeds.

Almost directly across from Tee – on the wall near the door leading to this terrace – she could see a strange face that had been carved into the wall. Something glinted in the eyesocket of the carving, glittering like a gemstone.

Tee toyed with the idea of trying to jump down to the terrace, but decided against it. She climbed back down to where the others were waiting in the gatehouse and they decided to return to the spiral staircase and climb up to the third level of the house that way.

## COOKING RATS

Tee went first, emerging into a room overrun with garbage and debris – tables, chairs, divans, and



overturned furniture of all kinds; broken bits of crockery and various utensils.

But what immediately caught her eye were several huge rats – each the size of a large dog and some with blood-red, pupil-less eyes. They seemed to be chewing on a pile of fresh-looking garbage that had been dumped on the far side of the room, near a heavy purple curtain blanketed with mold and mildew covering the far exit.



Tee thought briefly about calling for Agnarr, but then she shook her head: She wasn't going to be scared off by a couple rodents, even if they were of unusual size. She vaulted over the railing of the stair and pulled out one of the tainted dragon rifles.

The rats raised their head from their sickly meal and began scurrying across the room towards her – their long, grime-encrusted claws scrabbling through the debris.

Tee pulled the trigger. Flame gushed out of the rifle's end, catching the rats as they charged.

Then, off to her left, the debris exploded as another of the huge rats – along with dozens of other rats – burst forth and rushed towards her. She swung the rifle towards them, pulling the trigger again and bathing them in flame.

Agnarr came charging up behind her and vaulted over the railing... but by the time he got there the battle was already over. He desultorily plunged his sword into one of the rats which still squirmed with lingering life.

### A DEAD PROPHET

After quickly poking around the worthless garbage (and making sure that they hadn't just started another fire in the house), Tee crossed over to the purple curtain and shoved it aside. The next room was largely empty. A large, circular depression in the center of the room held several silken pillows. It was surrounded by four-foot-tall iron candlesticks screwed into the floor and holding the stubs of white candles.

All of these were horribly weather-worn because, off to Tee's right, an archway opened onto the outside of the castle, in midair, about twenty-five feet above the ground.

On the opposite side of the room, however, was a curiously well-preserved human skeleton clad in black robes. The skeletal remains were stretched out across the floor, with one hand flung out towards the wall. Large letters upon the wall, written in charcoal, read:

*The Saint of Chaos shall return and the Banewarrens shall ope their maw. And the name of doom shall be Tavan Zith.*

Tee kept her distance from the body and went to check out the archway. Directly below the opening was a tangled mass of broken wood. It looked as if there had once been a wooden balcony here that had completely collapsed at some point.

Ranthir, meanwhile, had crossed towards the body and the prophetic scrawl. It looked like gold thread had once been used to embroider strange runes along the robe's hem, but age and weather-wear had destroyed these.

### COOKING RATS, PART 2

Tee rifled the ruined pillows in the room's central depression, but didn't find anything of interest. Then she headed over to the far door in the room and made sure it wasn't trapped. She stepped aside and let Agnarr step up to it.

Agnarr opened the door. The next room was almost entirely empty... except for two of the ogre-sized ratmen mounted on rats nearly the size of small ponies. They had clearly been waiting for them (probably having overheard their loud conversation), and as soon as the door swung open they spurred their rat-mounts and charged with lances lowered.

Agnarr was struck by both lances, spun around, and knocked to the ground. Tor stepped forward, but the ratmen leaped from their mounts. The rat-mounts continued on, their slavering jaw biting and tearing at any exposed skin they could find. Tor was overwhelmed by them and, for a moment, it appeared that their position was going to be completely routed.

But Ranthir, seeing the eminent catastrophe, lowered his hand and muttered arcane syllables. A thick, fibrous mass of web instantly filled the room – leaping from the walls and completely enshrouding the ratlings. Tor, recovering his feet, quickly dispatched the half-trapped rat-mounts.

Ranthir stepped forward and, with a strike of flint and steel, set the web alight. The ratlings, trapped in the cocoon-like webs, screamed in agonizing pain as they were roasted alive.

## THE DAY'S CODA

After a few minutes more, the webbing had burned away completely with an acrid stench of the arcane (mixed with more than a hint of burnt rat fur).

Able to take a closer look at the room now they could see that holes in the walls and discolored places in the floor gave a vague suggestion that the room had once been more fully accoutered, but whatever furnishings had once been there were long gone now.

Ranthir's eye, however, was immediately captured by what appeared to be runes written in various places on the floor and walls. It looked as if they had been written in blood, but age – coupled with the burning web – had eradicated most of the details.

In the corner of the room there was another spiral staircase leading up to the fourth floor. Climbing this they reached a once-opulent bedroom: Red carpets covered the floor and a large bed made up with red and gold silks jutted out from one wall. There was even a

porcelain bathtub.

A heavy green curtain, moth-eaten and grimy, hung across the center of the room, dividing it roughly in half. On that end of the room there was a wooden bureau, a writing desk of dark wood, and a wooden chair. Ranthir's attention was immediately attracted to the books lined up across the top of the writing desk.

Flipping through these, Ranthir discovered that one of these was a ledger which appeared to show all of the brothel's business from five years ago until two years ago. He tucked that away and turned his attention to the other volume of interest: A journal written by someone named Maquent.

The room was also filled with a variety of chests and drawers. In fact, the more Tee looked the more it seemed that every nook, cranny, and corner was stuffed full of knick-knacks or clothing or something of the like.

As Tee ransacked the room, Ranthir began reading the journal:

## MAQUENT'S JOURNAL

In a beautiful, flowing script, this journal relates details regarding the operation of Pythoness House from 786 YD to as recently as 788 YD. Maquent Dellisaria was a seer and prophetess expelled from a group she refers to as the "Fate Weavers". She and her partner, Radanna Scalth, operated the house as a brothel. An ardent follower of chaos, Radanna insisted that the two allow the house to be used as a front for a chaos cult known as the Crimson Coil. Some of the more interesting entries include:

### **Ulanseyl 18, 786**

Urieth says that all of the girls believe the gatehouse towers to be haunted by a lost spirit.

### **Ulanseyl 22, 786**

Urieth has been attempting to communicate with the gatehouse ghost. She says that, in life, it was a priest named Taunell. She has been telling the others girls that he has the ability to see anywhere in the house, but that one can only speak with him in the gatehouse towers.

### **Ulanseyl 29, 786**

No one shall go into the gatehouse towers. I shall lock the door myself. The unwelcome spirit is quite tenacious, and not a little dangerous. We attempted to put it to rest, but it made the process far too difficult, so we shall simply leave it there forevermore. (Which is fine with me—I have no liking for holy men and did not relish the thought of bringing one here for an exorcism when Urieth's attempts failed.)

### **Duelsayl 10, 786**

There is another spirit within this house. At first I thought it was our old friend Taunell, but this is different. It has something to do with the statue of that horrid man. This is Radanna's doing. She smiles slyly whenever I mention it. She keeps so many secrets from me now...

### **Siythtural 10, 786**

Radanna and her friends have become obsessed with the "Night of Dissolution". They will speak of almost nothing else. They are convinced that the "coming changes have arrived"

**Thoral 1, 787**

The spirit in this house now has the ability to keep out those it does not want, and keep in those whom it does not wish to leave. Only while it sleeps are we truly free to come and go. At other times, I have become a prisoner in my own home. Though, in truth, I rarely wish to leave any more. Where would I go? The filthy city has little for me. I see mostly darkness in its future, with just one possible ray of light. And even then, the light will never reach me. I shall end in darkness, and soon.

**Siltarsal 15, 787**

Radanna's cultists have hidden some great weapons of power and items of chaotic magic in the cellars beneath the house and used the enchanted statue to seal the entrance. Only the spiral contrivance can move the statue, and it is broken in two halves – one for me, and one for Radanna. She says we are to keep them hidden and safe until the time when they are needed.

The cultists say the hidden weapons will strike down their enemies on the Night of Dissolution. I no longer care. Their true future is too entwined with chaos to foretell with any accuracy. Perhaps what they say is true. I do sense great changes coming in the next few years.

**Noctural 14, 787**

I have somewhat befriended the Cobbledman. He grows more mad with each day, however. I hid my half of the spiral contrivance in his tower with him. I shall not even tell Radanna. Of course, she will not tell me where she keeps her half, either, but there's only one place it could be. Certainly no one could sneak a ladder up to that secret door without her knowing about it.

**Essaseyl, 788**

Not a favored day for those in my profession. Radanna and her friends have brought forth a goat-headed demon to live in the high tower. Its presence disrupts my ability to foretell the future. Radanna refers to it as a "servitor of the Gods of Change" and an "earthbound demon". To me, a demon is a demon. I do not care for the way it looks at us—as if we were domesticated animals. I can also feel its oppressive age. Every fiber of my being screams with it. It is so very old.

**Taranal 10, 788**

The goat-headed thing has called demons from the Dark Reliquary to it here. They join the horrible menagerie of rat-things the cultists already hide in our house. And, of course, the Cobbledman. Soon, it seems, demons will walk the streets of this city, and no one will give it a second thought. I have had a dream of death.

**Taranal 18, 788**

The name of this month means nothing to Ptolus now. No sun shall shine here again, although strange new stars haunt my vatic dreams.

**Ildeial 2, 788**

Thabitha lost the key to the square tower. Radanna is furious. I shall have to protect the girl, or Radanna will certainly hand her over as a sacrifice to her terrible friends. Thabitha says that she was on the rooftop garden when she last had the key.

**Ildeial 15, 788**

It is over now. Urieth says the Knights of the Pale are on their way. The cultists flee. Radanna is slaying the girls one by one. I cannot stop her. The spirit keeps anyone else from leaving. My end comes in darkness.

## LEAVING PYTHONESS HOUSE

“I MUST FEED...”

The booming voice echoed through the empty halls of Pythoness House, seeming to come from all around them. Ranthir’s reading of the journal trailed off and Tee, her ransacking of the room almost complete (having turned up little of interest or value), stopped and looked up.

“I don’t really like this place very much,” Agnarr said.

The day was drawing to a close. They didn’t want to particularly stay here through the night and, in any case, Dominic had commitments to keep in the morning. They

were also growing worried by the statements in Maquent’s journal suggesting that they might not be able to leave the house.

They retreated back to the first floor. The courtyard had become very dark. Looking up they could see that dark clouds had swept across the sky from the north – a storm coming in from the plains. The low, rumbling growl of thunder could be heard from somewhere in the unseen distance.

Tee led them across the courtyard... and ran straight into a wall of invisible force stretched across the front gate.

They were trapped.

# SESSION 21 – THE SAINT’S SCHISM

May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 9<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Tee turned around. “Ranthir?”

Ranthir muttered a few words of magic and then carefully examined the invisible barrier. “It’s completely impenetrable. And beyond my ability to dispel.”

“I thought we got rid of the ghost.”

“Apparently not,” Agnarr said.

“Or there’s more than one ghost haunting this place,” Tor said.

Tee grimaced. “Let’s hope that’s not the case.” She paused for a moment and thought things over. “All right. We can’t get out this way, but we can always climb down the walls. Let’s head back up to that collapsed balcony. I think that’ll be easiest.”

Tee headed back into the courtyard. A flash of lightning drew her eye upwards... and she suddenly caught sight of a large, hunched figure leaning over the edge of a walkway that stretched between two of the keep’s towers. Instinctively she whipped out her dragon pistol and fired.

The blast of energy struck the edge of the bridge. The figure jerked back and then shambled off towards one of the towers – disappearing from sight.

“What was it?” Elestra asked.

“I don’t know,” Tee said, slowly holstering the pistol. “I couldn’t see it clearly.”

## A TORMENTED LEAVETAKING

They headed back into the keep. Their footsteps and quiet whispers seemed muffled. The entire place seemed enshrouded by a preternatural silence.

But they reached the room that had once led to the now-ruined balcony without any difficulty. The gaping hole in the wall looked out across a sweeping view of Oldtown, but their eyes were drawn down along the crumbling stonework of the keep’s wall to the sharp, jagged wreckage of the wooden balcony below.

Given their ill-luck with climbing in the past, they decided that they would need a rope if they were all going to make it safely to the ground below. Looking around, Tee decided the best place to tie the rope off was the wrought iron railing of the spiral staircase in the next room.

Tee took a few moments to make sure the knot was nice and tight. But she was also coming to distrust this entire house and whatever spirits were roaming it, so she decided to keep an eye on it.

It was well that she did, because as soon as Tor put his weight on the rope and began to lower himself, the rope began to untie itself. Tee cried out a warning and

Tor, feeling the rope go slack between his fingers, jumped for the wall and caught the edge.

After a quick discussion, they decided not to try tying it again. Instead, they all grabbed hold of the rope and tried to lower Tor to the ground. But this, too, met with near-disaster: The rope began to fray, unraveling itself before their eyes. Tor scrambled back up into the room and Tee, frowning, put her damaged rope away. (Elestra promised to fix it for her later – her affinity with the creations of man giving her a magical knack for such things.)

They decided to try another approach. Agnarr took the *boots of levitation* from Tee and put them on, then he grabbed Dominic and tried to carry him down to the ground.

Looking up as they slowly descended, Agnarr caught sight of another opening father up the wall – a second, smaller balcony that had also collapsed. It was a fortunate that this caught his eye, however, because otherwise he might not have noticed – when they were halfway down – that one of the keep’s crenellations was being “pushed” over the edge towards them. As the massive stone block tipped over, Agnarr turned off the *boots* and fell.

Agnarr did his best to cushion Dominic, but Dominic still landed heavily and awkwardly. Agnarr only had a moment to give a last, desperate effort to shove Dominic out of the way—And then the stone block landed right on top of him.

Dominic, unaware of what was happening, stumbled away painfully. “What are you--?”

He turned around to see Agnarr crushed beneath the heavy stone block. His legs and lower body had been caught directly beneath the block, and pieces of the broken balcony thrust up through his shoulder – leaving him twisted awkwardly in the air. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

“I need help!” Dominic called out.

The stone block began to rise back into the air.

“Thanks!” Dominic pulled Agnarr out of the way and opened the flow of holy energy that would slowly knit his bones and heal his tortured body.

But none of the others had been responsible for the block’s levitation: It was the spirit. Resetting the trap to crush anyone foolish enough to try to follow Agnarr and Dominic.

Tor, however, was thinking quickly. When the block was halfway up the building, he jumped for it: Landing on the block and trying to quickly jump again. But he wasn’t quick enough: As soon as he landed on it, the

block began spinning wildly – throwing him into the wall of the keep. Tor tried to grab onto the wall, but the crumbling stonework gave way beneath his scrabbling fingers and he crashed heavily to the ground below. He felt at least two of his ribs break.

Elestra, driven to desperation by the chaos of the situation, suddenly called out to the Spirit of the City – begging it for aid. And the prayer was answered: She felt her body transforming. For a moment she was frightened, but then – as she found herself flying with the wings of a raven – it seemed the most perfectly natural thing in the world. She gently lifted Ranthir’s familiar, Erin, from his shoulder and flew her to safety on the ground below.

By now, however, the stone was hovering twenty feet above the opening they were trying to escape from... waiting for them.

Ranthir, gulping deeply, decided that there was nothing they could do except risk it. He began climbing down the side of the building. At first it seemed as if he might make it... but then it became clear that the spirit had simply been toying with him: The stone fell again. Ranthir let go of the wall, but then felt as if he were being grabbed by unseen hands. These unseen hands hurled him towards the ground, sending him crashing heavily into the sharp, wooden debris. The breath was smashed from his body... and then blackness claimed him as the stone smashed down on top of him.

Agnarr darted forward and snapped the iron collar from Ghul’s Labyrinth onto Ranthir’s body, hoping to trap his soul on the border between life and death until they could figure out some way to get him out from under the stone block... but then, once again, the block began to rise into the air.

Tee, meanwhile, was climbing horizontally along the wall – trying to avoid the stone block. She managed to get almost twenty feet down the wall before another crenellation was “shoved” from the roof. Tee leapt to one side to avoid it, then lost her grip on the crumbling masonry of the wall and fell. She tried to roll with it, but like Ranthir she could feel spectral hands propelling her relentlessly towards the ground.

Agnarr, standing next to Ranthir, looked up just in time to see the second stone block coming towards him – he caught it and, grunting with effort, heaved it to one side.

Tor and Agnarr managed to pull Ranthir free from the wreckage, and then – with Tee and Dominic – hobbled towards the outer wall of the estate. Dominic managed to restore the breath to Ranthir’s body as they went, and they clambered over the outer wall.

The farther they got from the house, the weaker the malevolent spirit hanging over them seemed.

## THE TEMPLE OF ITOR

They slowly made their way back towards the Ghostly Minstrel. As they were leaving Oldtown, they were suddenly struck by a downpour – an autumn squall out of the north, blowing out of the lee of the Spire.

As the others turned into Delves’ Square, Tee and Dominic excused themselves and continued north into the Temple District. They were seeking the Temple of Itor: Tee thought it might be good for Dominic to speak with Urlenius, the Star of Itor. Perhaps another living saint might have some advice for him.

Unfortunately, although the priests there welcomed them inside out of the cold rain, Urlenius wasn’t there. Frustrated, Tee and Dominic headed back towards the Ghostly Minstrel to join the others.

## SERVANT OF THE SURGEON

The others, entering the Minstrel, glanced into the common room and noticed Urlenius sitting at a table – his familiar halo of *ioun stones* floating around his head.

Tellith greeted them with a smile and a wave. “Is Mistress Tee with you? There’s a letter for her. No? All right.” Then she came a little closer and spoke quietly. “There’s someone waiting for you. On the second floor in the room at the head of the stairs. I put him in there because he was disturbing the other customer. Well, unsettling them anyway.”

“Who is it?” Agnarr asked, but Tellith just shook her head.

They looked at each other, and then Agnarr just shrugged and began heading up the stairs.

Their intention was to go to their rooms first and change out of their rain-drenched and bloodied clothes, but as they reached the second floor the door of the room directly across the hall

swung open and a strange man stepped out. He was short and squat, but their gaze was immediately drawn to his face where his eyes were covered (or replaced?) with large metal spheres set into the sockets. His ears, too, were covered with boxy metallic contraptions. Small antennas protruded from these devices in various directions.





“You are the companions of Mistress Tithenmamiwen?” The man’s voice was strangely metallic and unnatural. “My name is Ribok. I have... business... with you.”

The man backed into the room and they warily followed him.

“I represent the... Surgeon in the Shadows... It has come to his attention that you have... recently acquired certain items. Certain technology of the... taint. Is this true?”

“Yes,” Elestra said.

“Why?” Tor asked.

“The Surgeon would be interested in... acquiring such items. He would pay you well. He would pay... better than others would.”

“We don’t have them,” Tor said.

“Would Mistress Tithenmamiwen have them?”

“Perhaps,” Tor said. “In any case, we would need to talk to her before making any kind of decision.”

“I see.”

“How can we contact you?”

“I will... wait.”

They backed carefully out of the room and headed upstairs.

## THE STAR OF ITOR

Tee and Dominic returned to the Ghostly Minstrel. Tee received her letter from Tellith, but immediately pocketed it because she had spotted Urlenius in the common room. He had a massive feast laid out on the table before him.

Tee herded Dominic over to him. “Urlenius? I don’t know if you’ll remember us—“

“Of course I remember you,” Urlenius said. “Mistress Tee and Brother Dominic! ...chicken leg?” He proffered a roasted drumstick.

“No, thank you.” Tee smiled. “I was hoping you might be willing to talk to Dominic. You see, a few days ago...” She quickly spilled out the entire story of how they had gone to Rehobath; how he had identified Dominic as the Chosen of Vehthyl. “And he’s called a convocation tomorrow.”

“I’m not sure what to do,” Dominic said.

Urlenius had become serious, his food forgotten. “Rehobath believes you to be the Chosen of Vehthyl?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true?”

Dominic hesitated. Then he murmured a prayer to the God of Mysteries, and opened his eyes to reveal the silver glow. He only allowed them to shine for a moment before willing it away again.

Urlenius’ lips had parted. “It is true.”

Tee hesitantly interrupted. “Can Rehobath be trusted?”

“I don’t know,” Urlenius said. “I do not trust the Imperial Church, but that doesn’t mean I don’t trust those who are part of it.”

“Why don’t you trust the Church?”

“When I was younger, I was a monster. Bestial like much of my kind. The Brotherhood of Redemption found me and took me in. They taught me the ways of civilization. They gave to me the teachings of the Nine Gods. But the Church condemns the Brotherhood and its works. They have even condemned me upon occasion. It is hard to trust that which does not trust you.”

At the moment, Tellith came over and whispered in Tee’s ear. She wanted to know if Tee could take the time to deal with Ribok. Tee, not entirely sure of what was going on – but gathering that the others were already involved – agreed. She excused herself.

Dominic stayed. “How were you Chosen?”

“I received a vision in which I spoke to the god Itor himself. He told me that there was a path before me and that, if I chose to follow it, great good would come of it.”

“He actually speaks to you?”

“No. I have never been visited in that way again. Except once, and I will not speak of that. Being one of the Chosen means that your entire life is an expression of the will of the gods.”

“That didn’t happen for me. At least... I don’t think so...” Dominic paused for a moment, and then candidly told Urlenius of his memory loss. And of the few memories he did have – including one of waking with the holy symbol of Vehthyl clutched in his hand.

“Most strange,” Urlenius said. “Perhaps you should speak with the Malkuth.”

“Who?”

“The Malkuth. They claim to have stood before the Nine Gods themselves and returned. You met one of them – Aoska – at Castle Shard.”

“And what do you think I should do about Rehobath?”

“If you have been Chosen, then you should follow your own instincts. They will guide you true. And he is, after all, a member of your own Church.” Urlenius smiled, gesturing at Dominic’s shoulder. Then he held out his other hand. “Chicken leg?”

“Yes, please!” Dominic grinned.

## TURNING THE SURGEON AWAY

Tee headed upstairs and spoke with the others. They explained the situation. Then she headed back down to the second floor. As she reached up to knock on the door, it opened.

“Welcome... Mistress Tithenmamiwen.”

“You know who I am?”

Ribok looked up into the air for a moment. “Yes... of course. It has come to our attention that you have...”

certain items in your possession. Chaositech. The Surgeon would like... to purchase them.”

“I don’t have them any more.”

“But you could obtain them?”

“I doubt it.”

Ribok looked into the distance again, then back to Tee. “The Surgeon would... pay well... for nothing more than the location in which such items were... found.”

“We’ll think about it.”

“I cannot... persuade you?”

“Not for now. Where can I contact you?”

“We will... contact you.”

Ribok walked past her, down the stairs, and out of the Ghostly Minstrel.

“Creepy...” Tee muttered under her breath.

### AT THE COMMISSAR’S REQUEST

Tee suddenly remembered that the items she had requested from the Dreaming Apothecary might have arrived. With a wide grin, she took the stairs two at a time and threw open the door to her room.

... but, sadly, the items had not been delivered.

Standing in her room, however, she remembered the letter that Tellith had given her. She pulled it out and broke the seal.

Mistress Tithenmamiwen—

I would like to speak with you. Please come to the Dalenguard at once.

Commissar Urnst

“Oh shit...” Tee quickly jammed the letter back into her pocket and ran out of the Ghostly Minstrel, hailing the first cab she saw and commanding it to use all haste in taking her to the Dalenguard.

At the Dalenguard’s gate, she showed the Commissar’s letter to the guards on duty. From there she was led up onto the battlements of the Main Keep.

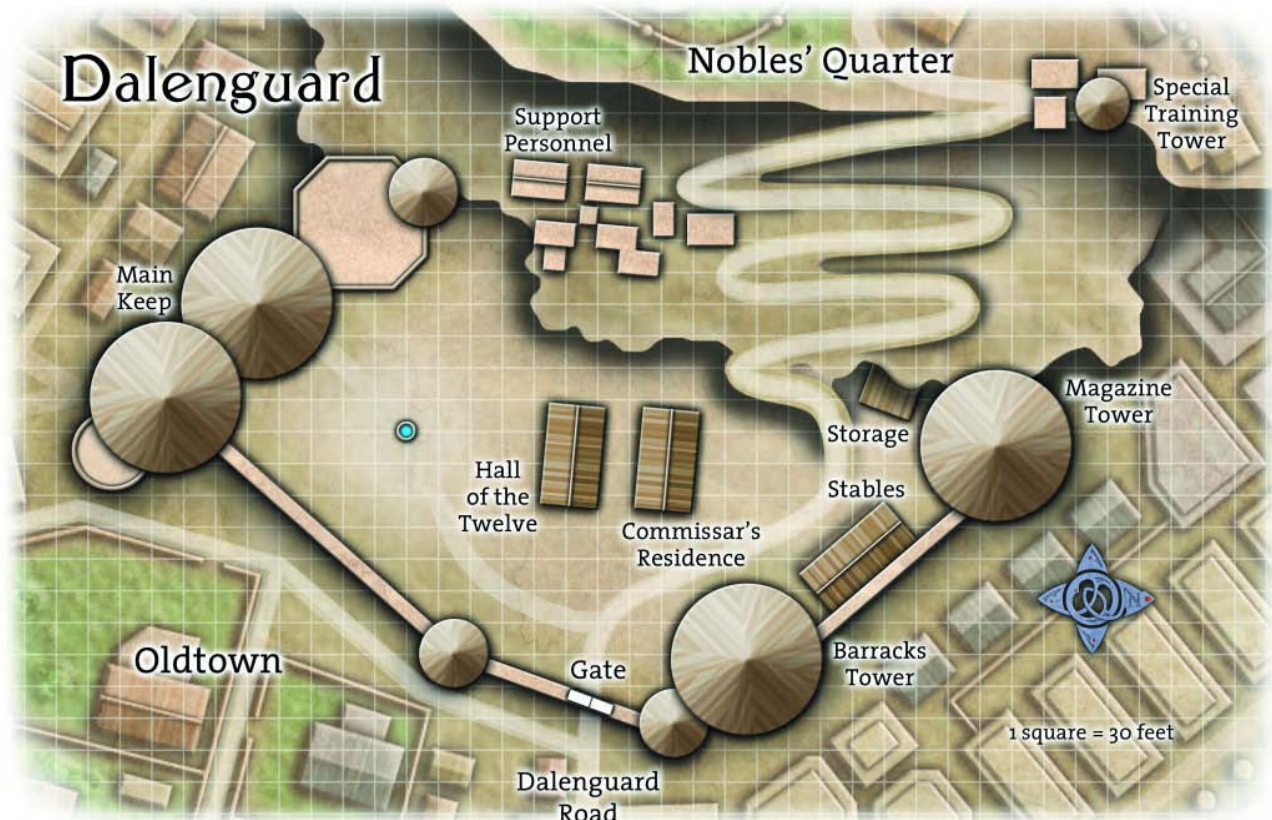
The rain had eased itself into a gentle drizzle, but the sky was still filled with a cold, grey light. The Commissar stood by himself, inspecting more than a dozen cannons.

The guard leading Tee stopped a fair distance away. The Commissar looked up and waved her towards him. She stepped gingerly forward, leaving the guard behind.

“Mistress Tee?”

“Yes, Commissar.”

“I have heard your name many times over the past few weeks.” The Commissar paused and studied her face. Tee couldn’t think of anything to say, so she didn’t. “Leytha Doraedian has told me that the Silver Fatar



believes your friend Dominic to be a living saint. Is it true?"

"I think so," Tee said. "He has the signs."

"I see." The Commissar frowned slightly. "And is it also true that Rehobath has summoned a convocation on the morrow? And that he intends to present Dominic there?"

"Yes." Tee said. "Do you think we can trust him?"

"I don't know," the Commissar said. "But the last time there was an unexpected gathering in this city, I was nearly assassinated." He paused for a moment, then turned and laid one hand on the cannon he was standing next to. "Do you see these cannons, Tee?" She nodded. "They are known as the Commissar's Guns. They are powerful weapons. They were made to protect this city.

Just as I have been chosen to protect this city. From the walls of the Dalanguard they can be fired to the south. And to the north. And to the west. But they cannot be fired to the east. Do you know why?"

Tee looked to the east and, through the silvery gloom of the rain, the answer was clear. "Because of the Spire."

"Yes. Because of the Spire. The greatest enigma. The utter unknown." The Commissar turned back and looked at her. "These cannons cannot protect the city from any danger which comes

from the unknown. Neither can I. I don't know what Rehobath intends. And I can't protect the city against what I don't know."

Tee again found herself at a loss for words.

The Commissar turned back to his cannons. "Thank you, Mistress Tee. I have no doubt that I shall be seeing you again soon enough."

### OF PRELATES...

(09/10/790)

The next morning, with doubt still hanging over them, they left the Ghostly Minstrel and headed towards the Outer Cathedral of Athor.

As they approached the cathedral, it was impossible to miss the distinctive navy blue uniforms of the Commissar's Guard surrounding the cathedral at a respectful – but not discreet – distance. They stood all along Sunrise Street and Godsdays Circle.

A crowd had already begun to gather on the grassy avenue between the two artificial ponds leading up to the cathedral. A temporary stage had been erected in front of the cathedral, extending out from its ancient stone steps. Several rows of seating were arranged directly in front

of the stage, with the rest of the crowd arrayed behind them.

The party was met by several priests. Dominic was taken inside the cathedral while the others were shown to seats in the second row. Tee, looking around, could see that here on the cathedral's grounds the Commissar's men were absent – but there were several dozen members of the Order of the Dawn standing guard here and there. Elestra spotted Sir Kabel Dathim, the head of the order, sitting in the front row.

Dominic, meanwhile, was being taken up to Rehobath's office. Rehobath greeted him as he arrived with a friendly smile, although Dominic couldn't help but notice that he met him on the far side of the room away from the desk of godwood. "Dominic! Thank you again. You have given me a clarity of vision and set a path before us which shall see the Church restored to its proper glory."

"Oh... You're... welcome?"

Rehobath gestured to one of the many priests circling around him. The priest brought forth a finely carved box of darkly-stained wood. "This for you."

Dominic opened the box... revealing the purple robes of a prelate.

"Umm... These are above my rank."

"Not any more." Rehobath smiled. "One who has been chosen by the gods can't be merely a priest."

Two of the priests helped Dominic put on the purple robes. Rehobath stepped forward and fixed the symbols of his rank – those of the prelate and the itinerant – on his shoulder.

### ... AND NOVARCHS

Rehobath led them down to the sacred hall of the cathedral. A procession had gathered there, and Rehobath took his place at the head of it, with Dominic immediately behind him and at his right hand.

Rehobath mounted the stage, along with Dominic and several other prelates. Rehobath raised his arms and the crowd fell silent.

*We live in a time of darkness and pain. We live in a time of trouble and despair. We look towards the gods and we wonder when they shall give us the hope of salvation to guide us and light our way.*

*But the gods have been silent. They have been silent because we have lost our way. And turned our backs upon them. And cast our eyes into shadow.*

*I come to speak to you today because the Church has lost its way. In its failures we see*



*manifest the fracturing of our faith. We see the loss of our pride and our hope.*

Tee began shifting uneasily, her thoughts casting back to the words of the Commissar the night before. Where was Rehobath going with all of this?

*And how has the Church come to lose its way? Not through its own actions – blessed by the gods as they are – but by the meddling of others. A meddling that we have seen before. A meddling that was denounced by the Holy Blood of Barund. Denounced by the councils! Denounced by the Nine Gods themselves!*

*It is the meddling of the false Emperor. And now it is the meddling of the False Novarch that the False Emperor has raised up in idolatry. I was there in the Council of Councils and I saw these heresies performed. I saw the Nine Gods forgotten in the holiest of all places!*

“What?” Elestra murmured, her face turning white. Tor glanced over and saw Sir Kabel glowering, clearly unhappy with what he was hearing.

*I have prayed long to the Nine Gods. I have pleaded with them to reveal the path by which I could restore the true light of the Church.*

*And, at long last, they have answered my prayers. They have sent to me a sign. The chosen of Vehthyl – a living saint – walks among us. He has come to me and he has told me that the time has come to act.*

Rehobath turned to Dominic and held out his arm. Dominic, with nervous steps, edged forwards. At Rehobath’s inviting nod, he murmured his prayer to Vehthyl... and his eyes shined forth.

The crowd gasped. Rehobath whirled.

*The Nine Gods have answered my prayers. They have named me their Living Voice. They have chosen me as the True Novarch and told me to stand against the False Novarch of the Emperor.*

*Today is the day we take back our Church and our Faith! If you hold the Nine Gods true in*

*your heart, then raise your voice with me in their praise!*

“Oh gods...” Tee began edging her way towards the edge of the crowd, worrying that things might turn to riot. But the crowd was cheering. The priests nearest them had also risen to their feet, although they maintained a slightly greater decorum.

The doors of the cathedral opened again. The holy symbols of the nine gods – each crafted from glowing godwood – were brought forth. As they passed Dominic, each symbol pulsed with scintillating brilliance, prompting a fresh cheer from the crowd.

The symbols were placed in a circle around Rehobath, who kneeled in the center of them and lowered his head in prayer. After a few moments he raised his face to heaven.

Liquid light in a diamond flask was brought forth. The glowing liquid was poured across Rehobath’s brow, bathing him in its light as it coursed down over his shoulders.

A circlet of elfin gold was produced and placed upon Rehobath’s brow. As it settled into place, the liquid light flowed back up across his body, becoming concentrated in a great glowing bauble that shone forth from his forehead.

Priests bearing the red robes of the novarch emerged from the cathedral. Rehobath rose and the robes were wrapped around him, covering the silver robes of the fatar.

Rehobath turned and led the procession as it returned to the cathedral.

Dominic, following in his wake, was filled with sadness. This had all been a mistake. He had sought aid from the Church when his village had been lost. He had sought help from Reformist and Church alike here in Ptolus. He had gotten none. All of them it seemed wanted nothing more than to use him for their own gain or send him away as a madman. Rehobath couldn’t help him. Or, at the very least, Dominic couldn’t trust him. He was confused by the betrayal of his Church. He was worried that he had failed his friends and placed them in danger.

But perhaps he didn’t need a Church. He communed with the Divine in his own way every day. He would find the answers on his own. He would find the strength of his own resolve in this. And when he needed help, he would rely on the strength and trust of his friends.

The great doors of the cathedral swung shut behind him. The sacred hall seemed to fall into darkness.

# SESSION 22 – RETURN TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 10<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Dominic was led inside the cathedral. Tee, seeing him go, quickly followed. Agnarr, Ranthir, and Tor came too. The Order of the Dawn moved to block them at the cathedral's door. Tee called out to Dominic, but Dominic – nursing his distracted thoughts and worries – didn't hear her. Fortunately, Tee's efforts were enough to convince the guard that they could enter.

They caught up to Dominic just as Rehobath's procession came to a stop in the sacred hall. The newly-anointed Novarch turned to Dominic and smiled, "Thank you, Dominic. Without your guidance this day would not have been possible. Now I feel as if our paths must part, at least for awhile. We must each work for the gods in our own ways, after all."

This suited Dominic just fine, who had just been trying to figure out how he could get away from Rehobath and his politics without letting him know how he truly felt.

"Now," Rehobath said. "Is there anything else I can do for you... for any of you?" His gaze took in Tee and the others.

Dominic seemed ready to get out of there, but Tee wasn't satisfied yet. "Do you think Dominic will be safe?"

"Two members of the Order of the Dawn are already waiting at the Ghostly Minstrel, as you had requested." Rehobath smiled. "Do you think more guards might be needed?"

"No," Tee said, glancing towards Dominic. "That should be fine."

They headed back outside. Dominic leaned towards Tee. "I need to get out of these robes," he said. "I don't feel right in them."

"You can borrow one of my kilts," Agnarr offered.

Dominic caught a whiff of Agnarr's unique odor as he leaned in close. "Um..." He shook his head. "No thanks."

They met up with Elestra, who had spent her time outside circulating through the crowd. "Everyone here seems pretty excited by this. They're all talking about the dawn of a new age. But I've also heard quite a few of them talking about how they knew to be here. I think the crowd was hand-picked."

"Doesn't surprise me," Tee said. "Come on, lets get out of here."

When they had gotten some distance away from the cathedral, Dominic stopped and pulled off the purple

prelate robes that Rehobath had given to him. He turned to the others. "Does anybody else want to go delving for a couple of weeks?"

## DORAEDIAN'S COUNSEL

While everyone else headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel, Tee peeled off and headed up to Emerald Hill – she needed to see Doraedian.

"Tee!" Doraedian smiled, looking up from the sea of parchment spread across his desk. "Your lessons in the Dreaming Arts aren't until tomorrow."

"Rehobath has just declared himself the True Novarch of the Imperial Church and denounced the Emperor of Seyrun."

All traces of mirth fell from Doraedian's face. "We weren't expecting that."

"Neither were we."

"And where's Dominic?"

"Back at the Ghostly Minstrel. Rehobath has cut him loose now that he doesn't need him."

"I see."

"The Commissar warned me that something like this might happen. I should have listened."

"Did he?" Doraedian raised an eyebrow.

"He talked about what Helmut and the Republicans did. Do we think Rehobath will turn against the city? I don't want Dominic getting caught in the middle of something like that."

"No. Rehobath's quarry lies beyond the walls of Ptolus. He won't start a quarrel. But I don't think the Commissar will simply stand aside and let him do what he wants, either. And if that happens, Rehobath will resist."

"Rehobath has put two guards at the Ghostly Minstrel. That's partly my fault – I wanted Dominic protected. But now I'm worried that Rehobath will use them to spy on Dominic. On all of us."

"He almost certainly will. But he'll be keeping an eye on Dominic in any case. At least this way you know who his spies are." Doraedian pushed back from his desk and stood. "I need to be going. The Commissar will be summoning the Twelve Commanders, and I must give Lothao instructions. I may even accompany him. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course." Tee smiled.



## LET'S GO DELVING

On her way back to the Ghostly Minstrel – her adrenaline rush wearing off – Tee began to feel very ill. Pulling back the leg of her breeches, she found that the rat bites she had suffered in Pythoness House the day before had become red and swollen. Pus was dripping down her leg.

She turned aside and headed to the Temple of Ashe. After a few minutes of prayer, the gods alleviated her suffering. By the time she got back to the Ghostly Minstrel, she was still feeling a little dizzy and disoriented, but had largely recovered.

She found the others gathered in Elestra's room, discussing their plans.

Returning to Ghul's Labyrinth was seriously considered: It would allow them to deal with the tainted dragon rifles they had taken from the Shuul, and they could also finish their explorations there. Tee also argued that Ghul's Labyrinth had proven to be rich with treasure, and if they were going to cleanse her of the taint that had touched her soul they were going to need the gold.

But, in the end, they decided to return to Pythoness House. If Shim was right, then the key would be there. And although they had no idea what the key might be or what purpose it might serve, it was the only tangible path that might lead them back to their lost memories.

## RETURN TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

“COME TO ME...”

As Tor, coming up in the rear of the party, entered the courtyard at Pythoness House, the deep, booming voice echoed around them – seeming to emerge from the countless, empty windows that looked down upon them.

They made their way up into the gatehouse towers. From there they jumped down onto the upper terrace and made their way down into the ruined garden that Tee had spotted earlier. According to Maquent's journal, one of the brothel girls – Thabitha – had lost the key to the square tower while she was in the garden. They suspected that Radanna had hidden her half of the “spiral contrivance” in the square tower, and they hoped they would be able to find the key Thabitha had lost.

On the way, they passed by the strange face Tee had seen carved into the outer wall of the terrace. She had thought its eye to be a gemstone, but now that she was closer to it she could clearly see that it was simply a bit of red paint that had not yet been flecked away by rain or wind. Nonetheless, the laughing face seemed queerly malevolent.

The garden was a display of life and death: In places, the plants had overgrown their boxes and pots – splitting them and spilling dirt and greenery everywhere. Elsewhere brown swaths spoke of those which had failed to endure the passing winters without care.

Tee began poking around, but if the brothel sisters hadn't found a key lost here years ago, she didn't think she would have much luck with it. But then she happened to glance over the parapet on the northern side of the garden – a forty foot shaft of sorts had been formed between the wall of the house itself and the wall of the gatehouse.

“If she dropped it down there...”

Tee quickly called the others over and pulled out her rope.

“What if the rope breaks again?” Elestra asked.

“We'll just have to risk it,” Tee said, handing one end of the rope off to Tor.

Tee had climbed down about ten feet when the booming voice returned: “I MUST FEED...”

Tor, distracted by the voice, jerked his head up. As a result, he missed seeing the rope fraying in front of his hands. With a sudden snap, the rope broke. Tee, feeling the rope go slack, attempted to push off the wall and control her fall... but she slipped on the slick, moss-covered stones. She tried to roll in mid-air, but only succeeded in cracking her skull against the far wall.

She landed heavily on her shoulder. Fortunately, her fall had been cushioned by a thick layer of dead leaves and detritus. She felt blood trickling down her forehead.

“CHAOS IS THE KEY...”

“Are you all right, Tee?!” Everyone up above was peering over the edge.

“I'm fine,” Tee struggled to her feet. Probing gently at her aching shoulder she mournfully remembered the *boots of levitation* she was still carrying in her *bag of holding*. “Give me a couple minutes.”

Tee started poking around in the dead leaves. Less than a minute later, she was triumphantly grasping a rusty iron key in her hand: “I've got it!”

## RADANNA

Tee had no problem using the *boots of levitation* to lift herself back up to the others in the ruined garden. Key in hand, they began studying the journal again and discussing different possibilities.

They figured they had to find some way into the square tower. From what Maquent had said in her journal, it seemed as if the secret, locked entrance to that room would be located somewhere up high – maybe a ceiling or on the outer surface of the tower itself.

“And that'll get us half of the spiral key or whatever it is,” Elestra said. “But what about the other half?”

“The journal says that Maquent gave it to the ‘Cobbledman’,” Ranthir said.

“But who is that?”

“I think it might have been the guy I tried to shoot yesterday,” Tee said. “I probably shouldn't have done that.”

“FIRE!”



Arrows suddenly fell among them. One of them clipped Elestra's shoulder. All of them were suddenly in motion – diving for cover in different directions.

Somehow six skeletal women – most clad in the tattered remnants of their brothel fineries – had crept onto the upper terrace and were now firing arrows down into the ruined garden at them.

Tee, sliding in behind the limited cover of the parapet, pulled out her dragon pistol and began to return fire. Her first blast caught one of the skeletons in the chest, turning its emaciated ribcage to dust.

Agnarr and Tor, meanwhile, had drawn their swords and were charging up the stairs. Ranthir, quickly assessing the situation, began weaving his magicks and managed to seize partial control over the mind of one of the skeletal warriors – tricking it into believing that its weapons were cursed and “suggesting” that it would be best to hurl them into the courtyard below.

Elestra, following Tee's lead, sought cover behind the parapet and pulled out her dragon rifle. The two of them laid down a barrage of energy blasts, but the skeletal women were implacable. Ranthir ducked out of sight as another arrow came too close for comfort.

As Tor and Agnarr reached the upper terrace, the two nearest skeletal women dropped their bows and drew short swords. Stripped of their skin, the skeletons moved with preternatural speed – forcing Tor and Agnarr into defensive stances.

One of the skeletal women was wearing chainmail. She had been the one to shout the command to fire, and now she drew out a battleaxe and darted towards Agnarr and Tor. She moved even faster than the others, slipping between their ranks and taking a swing at Agnarr that cut deep into his upper leg.

Agnarr, roaring as he let the pain feed his burning rage, swung mightily. His flaming greatsword cleaved its way through one of the skeletons and nearly caught the chainmail-clad leader before she ducked out of the way.

One of the skeletal women broke and ran, opening a secret door in the side of the keep and racing through. Elestra and Tee shot another as it attempted to turn its bow on Agnarr, while Tor cut down another in midstride.

This left only the chainmail-clad skeleton. She fell back towards the secret door, fighting tooth-and-nail with Agnarr and Tor at every step. She was wily and crafty, ducking this way and that – her ancient bones moving with a lithe and vicious life. “You fools! None can cross the power of chaos and live!”

With the upper terrace cleared of archers, Dominic was free to come out from cover. Following close behind Agnarr and Tor, he reached a begrimed window on the wall near the secret door.

He found himself looking into a large and once-sumptuous bedchamber. Unlike those on the ground floor, however, this room featured only a single large bed. It was surrounded by a wealth of furniture – a

dresser, padded chairs, divans, braziers, and tables. He didn't see any sign of the skeletal woman that had run into the room, but he did see another door to the left and a staircase leading up. He gestured towards the other door.

Tee leapt up from behind the parapet and ran down the short hallway leading to the second door. It was locked. She whipped out her lockpicks and set to work on it. Ranthir came up behind her. “What are you doing Tee? Are you going to pick the lock? Oh, I see!”

Tee groaned silently to herself.

“The power of the Crimson Coil shall never die!” the skeletal leader backed into the room. She raised her battleaxe and brought it crashing down on Tor's chest, but Tor's breastplate turned the blow.

“You're already dead!” Tor roared and pressed his attack.

Meanwhile, Tee – unseen – had gotten the other door open. Seeing the skeletal woman with her back turned to her, she pulled out her dragon pistol and fired. Unfortunately, the skeletal woman chose that moment to dart forward, and the blast splashed uselessly across the back of her chainmail.

The skeletal woman whirled. “No! None shall enter my chambers!” In an utter, unthinking rage she charged across the room at Tee. Tee fell back, firing wildly.

Tor took advantage of the situation and followed at Radanna's heels, plunging his sword down into her skull. It cleaved through the top of her head and lodged there, sending purple arcs of electricity bursting from her eyes.

Dominic followed Tor into the room. His eyes darting around – taking in the holes in the dusty floor where skeletal bodies had lain for years; the blood-stained knife laying upon the floor in the center of a pentagram traced with blood. He drifted towards the large bed tucked into one corner of the room... and spotted the other skeletal woman cowering behind it.

He gestured frantically towards Agnarr. Agnarr, taking his cue, charged across the room and leapt full-bodied over the bed. “FOR THE GLORY!”

The skeletal woman shrank back against the wall. “No! PLEASE!”

Agnarr's sword sliced down through her skull and shattered the bones of what had once been her body. As she crumbled slowly into dust, her final whisper drifted into his ears: “Thank you... I am free...”

Agnarr grunted and sheathed his sword. “You're welcome.”

Meanwhile, the skeletal leader – in a frenzied flurry of blades – had been cut down by Tor and Tee. Tee, inspecting the body, discovered the chain armor was of superb quality. The woman had also worn a ruby ring and matching gold bracelet worth a small fortune. On the interior of the bracelet was inscribed a name:

RADANNA

Laying near the gruesome remains of whatever deadly ritual had been held here there was a slim, red book. On the cover, traced in blood, was the symbol of a spiral. Ranthir began examining it as Tee continued searching the room.

### THE SCARLET OATH



On the cover of this book, written in blood, is the symbol of a coil. On the first page is an oath:

“I pledge my body, soul, and purpose to the furtherance of chaos. We shall act as one. We shall breathe as one. We shall think as one. And in our crimson coils we shall choke out the life of those who would bring us death. We shall choke out the order which stifles life. We shall choke out the civilization which crushes liberty.”

The rest of the book teaches the ways of the Brotherhood of the Crimson Coil. The cult acts like a virus – their faces hidden; their identities submerged into the Coil itself. The members of the cult do not mix in normal society, preferring to remain cloistered in remote temples or hidden demesnes. The only time the cultists make an appearance is to carry out a Purging. During a Purging the cultists appear *en masse* to carry out some act of terrible destruction.

The cult chooses a target, seemingly at random, and then show up to burn down a building; set fire to a field; slaughter a family; or deface a monument. They are neither subtle nor gentle. They show neither mercy nor fear. Usually, their raids come so suddenly and unexpectedly that they meet little resistance. They usually appear in numbers so great, they simply cannot be stopped—a hundred cultists to burn down a single house, a dozen to murder a merchant walking down the street. They disappear quickly, often using spells to cover their escape.

## THE FIFTH FLOOR

While Tee and Ranthir studied the book, Tor shuffled through the cluttered effluvium lying out on one of the tables in the room. There were several bottles of perfume here, still stored in crystal vials. They brought a smile to Tor’s face, reminding him of the faces of his family. He pocketed two of the vials, thinking that he might send them back home as presents for his daughters.

There was nothing else of true value left in the room: Moldering silks and other expensive clothes lay in ruins. However, in one of the wardrobes Tee did find a single red robe decorated with the same spiral symbol as the book’s cover. This robe, unlike the other clothing, seemed to have been perfectly preserved.

Lying on the floor behind one of the divans, Tee found a portrait in a broken frame. Although badly dilapidated, they could still make out a young man with lanky brown hair. His features seemed queerly unsymmetric. A small brass plaque on the frame read:

### WUNTAD

They went up the stairs, emerging into a large empty room on the fifth floor. Another staircase on the far side of the room headed up towards the sixth floor, but they turned towards the room’s single door instead. This opened into a small hallway that ended, off to their right, in the ruined remains of a small balcony (which they had previously seen from below while trying to climb out of the castle).

They crossed the hall, opened another door, and looked into a small, oddly shaped room. Four piles of bones had been neatly arranged in random locations on the floor. There were also some old wooden bookcases along one wall.

Ranthir, hearing the word “bookcases”, started forward – but Tee waved him back: There were no books left on these shelves. Instead, three human skulls marked with the spiral symbol of the Crimson Coil sat next to a small iron coffer.

Tee pondered the situation for a moment and then decided not to take any chances. Drawing her dragon pistol, she fired directly into the nearest pile of bones. The pile exploded to no effect.

Shrugging, Tee holstered her dragon pistol and headed over to the bookcases. Grabbing the iron coffer she quickly picked its lock and flipped it open, revealing five vials set into padded lining. Four of the vials contained a black liquid, while the liquid in the fourth was a silvery-gold in color.

While the others remained behind, Tee and Agnarr headed through into the next room – an empty, circular chamber with an open archway leading out onto a balcony filled with dirt and dead leaves.

Tee took the time to move out onto the balcony and look down into the ruined garden below. Turning back, her eye happened to catch a runestone that hung from the wall. Her familiarity with the archaic elven tongues allowed her to recognize it as the rune for “blessed protection”, although it had been badly damaged. Smiling, she reached up to take the rune down off the wall.

As her fingertips brushed against the runestone, however, she felt her mind being invaded by strange, alien thoughts. A horrible compulsion seized her to race for the edge of the roof and hurl herself down to oblivion.

Her right foot twitched, as if to turn her towards the edge... but then her own thoughts imposed themselves again. She gritted her teeth and forced her foot back to the ground. Pulling her hand back from the runestone, she felt the compulsion fading from her completely. She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

But even as Tee was fighting to control her own body, Agnarr caught a sudden movement in the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw one of the skulls from the bookcase floating across the doorway towards one of the bone piles. With lightning reflexes, he hurled himself back into the room, drew his sword, and neatly cleaved the skull in two.

Elestra, her attention drawn by Agnar’s sudden movement, stepped into the room from the opposite direction with her dragon rifle drawn. Seeing the two remaining skulls on the shelves begin to move, she quickly took aim on the one to the right and blew a hole straight through its eye socket.

With one great stride, Agnarr reached the bookcase and brought his sword down on the other, shattering it into countless shards of bone.

Tee came back into the room. “What’s going on?”  
Agnarr turned to her. “Nothing now.”

## THE SIXTH FLOOR

They rejoined the others. Concluding that there was nothing else of interest on the fifth floor, Tee and Agnarr took the stairs up to the sixth floor. These stairs reached what appeared to be the base chamber of the keep’s central tower. However, the way up to the next level of this tower had apparently been bricked over years ago. However, there was a door off to one side and an open archway led to the bridge between this central tower and the eastern tower.

The door was locked, so Tee knelt next to it and got to work. Agnarr, standing nearby, decided to start oiling the hinges. Tee, remembering the last time Agnarr had decided some hinges needed oiling, began grinding her teeth, but managed to ignore him... mostly.

Tee finished up, hearing the satisfying sound of a tumbler clicking open. Standing up she reached for the

handle. But Agnarr, wanting to test his handiwork, pushed past her and twisted the handle himself.

There was a click and a hiss—And Tee hurled herself out of the room as the entire chamber was engulfed in a massive explosion that blew out onto the balcony and followed her into the lower chamber where the others were still waiting.

Agnarr – on fire and screaming in pain – rushed down the stairs a moment later. They managed to quickly smother out the flames and Dominic channeled a burst of divine energy into his body to undo the horrible burns. Agnarr gasped with the sudden relief of it.

“Well, at least it was me instead of Tee who took the worst of it,” Agnarr said. “It’s a good thing that I was the one to open that door.” Then a thoughtful look entered his eyes. “Wait... is *that* why you always have me open the doors first?”

Everybody looked at each other. “We thought you knew!” Elestra said.

Agnarr, in a surly temper, headed back up the stairs. “Well, at least the door’s safe now.”

It took Tee a moment to realize what he was doing. “Agnarr! No!”

Twist. Click. Hiss.

Agnarr came hurtling out of the doorway and tumbled down the staircase an instant before a nearly identical explosion was unleashed. “I knew that click. I knew that hiss!”

Tee, shaking her head, headed back up and took another look at the door. After several minutes of work she was feeling fairly confident that she had disabled the trigger for the magical explosion.

... but she was wrong. And this time she took the brunt of the blast, collapsing with her lungs blackened and burnt by the scorched air. Dominic was forced to expend even more of the gods’ power to get her back on her feet. Then, out of pure stubbornness, she went back to work.

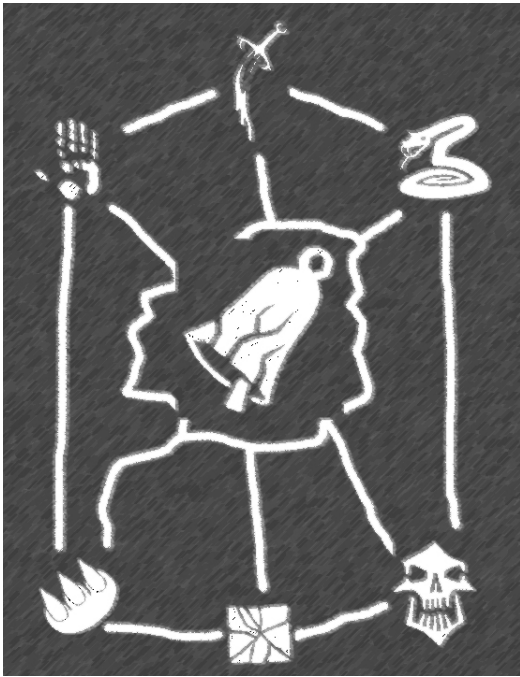
This time she was successful. With a grim satisfaction, she swung the door open.

## WORKINGS OF THE CHAOS CULTS

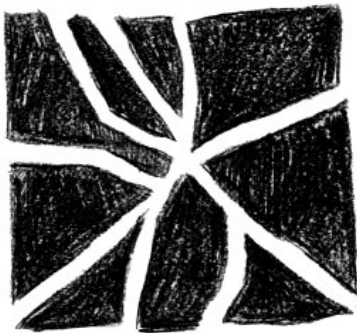
The walls, floor, and ceiling of the room were covered in a haphazard array of magical circles, symbols, and strange characters. The sight was almost dizzying. After little more than a glance, Tee called out for Ranthir to join her.

Ranthir quickly identified the symbols as belonging to a variety of rites, although none were immediately known to him. He did note that many of them bore a more than superficial resemblance to the rites performed by the Seyrunian demon-binding cults of the previous century. And others seemed to have something to do with the creation and binding of energy. Some simply seemed to be mad scribbles to which Ranthir could not ascribe

any immediate sense. One particular section of the wall had been completely covered in charcoal, and then written upon in chalk:



Tee, meanwhile, had discovered that one of the wood panels on the floor was loose. Prying it up revealed a small cache containing two books and a gold ring bearing the device of a broken square:



Ranthir was immediately distracted by the books. Eagerly taking them from Tee's hands he began flipping through them.

## TRUTH OF THE HIDDEN GOD



What appears, at first, to be a copy of the *Book of Athor* is nothing of the sort: The pages inside are covered with scrawled diagrams and heretical desecrations of the Nine Gods.

A closer reading reveals this to be a cult manual for the "Brotherhood of the Blooded Knife". The cult venerates chaos in all its forms, focusing their blasphemous rituals around the practice of human sacrifice. These sacrifices are given to a Galchutt named Abthoth, who they venerate as the "Source of All Filth" and the "Lord of the Zaug".

Disturbingly, much of the book is given over to material designed to mock the holy rituals of the Church. It appears that the cult establishes itself secretly in society by posing as other religious orders. Actual followers of the deity may choose to join them, usually to their dismay – either they come to join the cult itself or they die beneath the cult's "blooded knife".

In other cases, a few cultists will infiltrate another religion and use force, blackmail, magic, or simple persuasion to sway its members into secretly worshipping chaos. This process can take years, but eventually the cult eats the other religion from the inside out, consuming it until the temple is entirely a front for the altars of the Brotherhood hidden in their subterranean complexes.

The last few pages of the book appear to be a prophetic rambling of sorts, beginning with the words: "In the days before the Night of Dissolution shall come, our pretenses shall drop like rotted flies. In those days the Church shall be broken, and we shall call our true god by an open name." The remainder of this section is a description of the faux religious practices for a fanciful "Rat God", with the apparent intention being that a church could be openly established for this "god". Eventually, the prophecies, say even this "last pretense" will be abolished and "Abthoth shall be worshipped by all who are not blooded by the knife".

## TOUCH OF THE EBON HAND



The pages of this volume are filled with disturbing and highly detailed diagrams of the most horrible physical deformities and mutations. A closer reading quickly reveals that these deformities – referred to as “the touch of the ebon hand” – are venerated by the writers as the living personification of chaos incarnate. Particularly prized are those functional mutations – an extra eye or oversized arms, for example.

The rest of the book describes horrid rites which make it clear that the Brotherhood of the Ebon Hand not only idolizes deformity and mutation, but seek to inflict it and spread it as well: Ritual scarring. Magical alteration. Alchemical experimentation. Chaositech-induced mutation.

Members of the cult have no distinctive garb, but they usually bear the symbol of a black hand in some form: A tattoo. A charm. A small embroidery on their clothes. Or so forth. Of course, most of them are also marked by their mutations.

## **THE COBBLED MAN**

As Tee continued searching, Elestra also came into the room. Looking over Ranthir’s shoulder she pointed at the charcoal wall: “We’ve seen three of these symbols now. The hand, the knife, and the broken square.”

“I wonder what the others could mean.”

“Something to do with the cults, I guess.”

They continued chatting quietly as Tee probed at the walls and the floor.

Dominic, in the tower outside, stood looking in at them. And then pain rushed through his body as a heavy blow landed across the back of his skull.

Stumbling forward he felt a horrible wave of nausea rip through his body. Turning he saw a horrific,

monstrous man: A second head had been awkwardly attached to its shoulder, and the muscles of its arms and legs were grotesquely over-developed. The hair on both of its heads was greasy, lanky, and sparse. The eyes on one of the heads was shut, but the eyes of the other were filled with rage. In its right hand it clenched a silvery rod.

“WHY ARE YOU IN WUNTAD’S ROOM?”

Its voice was a dull boom. Its words sullen.

Tor, reacting almost instantly, rushed up the stairs from below. Emerging into the cramped base of the tower, he was clipped nastily along the side of his head. Like Dominic, he felt a nauseous wave pass over him. Shaking it off, he swung his sword – opening a vicious gash in the creature’s arm.

Ranthir rushed out, as well. “Can’t we just work this out?” But his voice was drowned out in the sudden chaos of the melee.

But then Tee shoved her way past him and her voice carried a greater authority: “Stop it! Wuntad sent us! Stop it now!”

The creature froze, its massive hand hovering to deliver a devastating blow on Tor. “Wuntad sent you?”

“Yes,” Tee lied, putting as much earnestness into her voice as she could. “He sent us.”

“He’s been gone so long. I’ve been alone for so long...” The dimwitted voice was filled with painful sorrow.

Tee softened. “Are you the Cobbledman?”

“... someone called me that. Once. They left too. A long time ago.” The Cobbledman clutched absently at the rags on his chest. “They left me all alone... Do you have any food?”

Ranthir fumbled at one of his pouches and then held out an iron ration. “Why didn’t you leave?”

“Can’t leave.”

“Why can’t you leave?”

“Wuntad put something in my brain. Make me loyal. Make it hurt to leave. Can’t leave until Wuntad say I can leave.”

Ranthir had a sickly certainty that this was a betrayal of the flesh. He could see telltale lumps beneath the Cobbledman’s skin – tubes and... other things.

“What happened to Wuntad?” Tee asked.

“Don’t know. The angry men in the metal suits came. There was lots of angry noise. I hid in my tower. And then everyone left... You’ll leave me, too, won’t you?”

No one had an answer for that.

“Cobbledman,” Tee said carefully. “Do you have a piece of metal that looks like a spiral?”

A look of something very like panic entered the Cobbledman’s eyes. “Yes.”

“Could we have it?”

“No! No! My friend gave it to me! I have to keep it safe! She said so!” His hand groped against the rags on his chest, clutching something beneath them.

“I understand,” Tee said gently. “But if we promised to bring it back, do you think we could borrow it? You could even come with us.”

“Maybe...” The Cobbledman seemed to be losing focus. “Do you have any more food?”

Ranthir gave him some more and the Cobbledman chewed it absentmindedly. “I’m going to go to sleep now. So very hungry...”

He began shambling back across the bridge and disappeared into this tower. They watched him go, sadness and pity filling their hearts.

“Well,” Tee said. “At least we know where one part of the spiral key is. Now we just need to find out where Radanna hid hers.”



# SESSION 23 – THE COMING OF THE CHAOS CULTISTS

June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 10<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

“WHO DARES TO VIOLATE THIS SANCTUARY OF CHAOS?”

They whirled around and looked up. Above, on a balcony in the tower directly above them, a demon with a goat-like head was floating several feet off the ground. It carried a vicious looking axe with a blade that gleamed in the sun.

Its powerful legs pushed off the wall behind it, propelling it above their heads. It then dropped to the balcony, floating a few inches above the floor as it swung the axe towards Tee’s head.

Tee tumbled backwards, rolling to her feet in a low crouch. Tor and Agnarr pushed past Ranthir, raised their swords – which they had held uneasily by their sides during the conversation with the Cobbledman – and attacked.

The demon caught Tor’s blade with the broad side of his axe, but Agnarr’s sword cut deeply into its arm. It felt as if he was chopping into a block of solid wood, but the magic blade cleanly cut through the thick skin and found the blood and bone below.

The demon threw back its head and howled in pain. It swept the axe violently back and forth – first smashing the broad side of it against Tor’s head (sending him staggering) and then reversing the blow to smash into the Agnarr’s ribs.

Agnarr gasped as the axe cut through his armor and deep into his side, sending a gush of blood pouring from the wound. The demon’s horns jutted forward, smashing into Agnarr’s forehead.

Elestra reached out, feeling the Spirit of the City and using her own force of will to energize the strength of it around her.

Ranthir, meanwhile, was thinking quickly: He hit the demon with a powerful disenchantment, causing its levitation charm to vanish. The demon fell, landing awkwardly and stumbling forward.

Agnarr, grimacing through the pain, took advantage of the momentary distraction and swung his sword again.

The demon whirled away from the blade, but it still cut deeply into his side. Then it ducked under Tor’s blade and leapt over the parapet, murmuring demonic

syllables. Arcane powers caught it up in the air and it levitated out over the central courtyard.

As it turned back to them, Elestra finished gathering her strength and focused a sizzling arc of lightning which tore through the demon where it flew. But the demon seemed entirely unfazed as the electricity leapt from its horns and arced through its body, instead crying aloud: “You will rue the day that you crossed the path of True Chaos!”

Tee, who had retreated back into the keep itself, suddenly heard heavy footsteps thudding across the stone ceiling above her – which would mean that something was on the roof! “Look out!”

But she was too late to warn any of them. Two hounds of hell leapt from the upper level, landing on the balcony near Tor and Agnarr. Their skin had the appearance of cooled lava; their eyes were smoldering pits; and their nostrils breathed goutts of flame. As they skidded across the balcony, they turned and gaped their mouths: Twin cones of flame washed across Agnarr and Tor.

But Tor had raised his shield at the last possible moment, and Agnarr had eased in behind it: Although they still felt a little broiled in their armor, they were mostly angered by the fell beasts.

Although that might have been more true for Tor than it was for Agnarr, because a huge grin was growing across the barbarian’s face: “Dogs! They’re dogs!”

Tee called out from behind him: “You are not allowed to keep one!”

The smile fell from Agnarr’s face, and he dutifully moved forward with Tor. Their blades worked in quick unison and – although the hounds were covered in skin like liquid stone – their magical blades made quick work of them.

Meanwhile, the demon had fled – abandoning his hounds, reaching the far wall of the keep, and dropping down out of sight.



## THE SQUARE TOWER

With the demon gone and the demonic hounds reduced to a pile of burning slag, Elestra released the powers of lightning she had called and the smell of ozone faded from the air. Turning to the others she said, "So where to now?"

"I still want to try to get to the square tower," Tee said. "If Maquent's journal is still accurate, then the other half of the spiral contrivance or key or whatever it is must be hidden in there."

There had been a trapdoor in the ceiling of the room filled with arcane symbols and the remnants of old rites, so they climbed up through that to reach the roof. From there they were able to cross over to the square tower.

But they found that the square tower had no doors or windows. Tee donned her *boots of levitation* to reach the top of tower, but there was no entrance there, either. She then spent the better part of half an hour scouring every inch of the tower's 24-foot high walls, convinced that there must be some hidden entrance.

Ranthir, meanwhile, was looking through Maquent's journal. Just as Tee, in frustration, was giving up on her search, Ranthir reread the entry from Noctural 14<sup>th</sup>, 787 YD. Then he read it out loud to the others: "I have somewhat befriended the Cobbledman. He grows more mad with each day, however. I hid my half of the spiral contrivance in his tower with him. I shall not even tell Radanna. Of course, she will not tell me where she keeps her half, either, but there's only one place it could be. *Certainly no one could sneak a ladder up to that secret door without her knowing about it.*"

"If the key is in the square tower and it requires a ladder to reach the secret entrance, maybe that entrance isn't on the wall of the tower – maybe it's *under* the tower."

They returned down to the large, empty room on the fifth floor of the tower. "We should be directly beneath the tower here," Ranthir said.

Tee floated up to the ceiling and quickly found a bit of false plaster. Scraping that aside with one of her dragon-hilted daggers, she revealed a small keyhole. She took out the key she had found in the nook below the ruined garden and found that it was a perfect fit.

When she turned it, however, the entire stone block – 6-feet to the side – came loose and fell. It slammed into her and spun her down and to one side. Agnarr, standing below, was caught squarely by the block and driven to the ground.

Dominic rushed forward to help. Agnarr pushed the rock off of his crushed legs and waited patiently for the priest's holy energy to repair his broken bones. "I'm getting tired of falling rocks in this place."

"I think they went with cheap mortar," Dominic said, reaching out to lay a hand on Tee's bleeding scalp as she settled woozily to the floor next to them.

"When we move in here it'll have to be the first thing we fix," Ranthir said.

"We aren't moving into the demon-infested house," Tee said.

Tor smiled. "It won't be demon-infested when we're done with it."

"That's right," Elestra said. "We've already scared off one demon today."

"He'll be back," Tee said grimly.

The stone block had revealed a hole leading through the floor into the bottom level of the square tower. Niches carved in the sides of the hole would make it easy for someone to climb up if they were at the top of a ladder, but they were superfluous for them: Tee's head was clearing now and so she floated up through the hole.

She emerged into a small, square room. A ladder of iron rungs driven into one wall led up to a trapdoor. The other walls of the room were covered with carved niches. Most of these niches were empty, but in four of them Tee could see flasks of liquid. In another there were a half dozen sticks of black-and-gold incense. In a sixth lay a small gray idol.

Tee grimaced. "I hate idols. Idols haven't been nice to me." She unlaced her boots and dropped them down so that Agnarr could follow her up.

Tee climbed up the ladder to the next level of the tower. Here she found a plain room of stone with an iron chest lying off to one side. The ladder continued up to a trap door of stone secured with a thick iron bar.

The lock on the chest proved tricky, but Tee eventually managed to get it open. Inside she found bags of silver and gold coins, a thick candlestick of pure gold, and a finely-crafted headband of woven silver. Laying at the bottom chest was half of a circular disk of black obsidian with a bright red stone spiraled through it.



Tee climbed back down the ladder and found Agnarr peering quizzically at one of the niches. "Don't touch anything. I've found Radanna's half of the contrivance... key... whatever it is."

“Now we just need to kill the Cobbledman for the other half.” Agnarr grinned.

“I don’t think we’ll need to kill him. He seemed all right with the idea of letting us borrow it.”

“I thought it was inside of him. He grabbed his chest when he was talking about it.”

“I think he was just grabbing at something under his shirt.”

“Oh.” Agnarr thought about this for a second and then jerked his head towards the niches in the wall. “Should we take this stuff?”

Tee glowered at the idol. “I guess we’d better figure out what it is. Why don’t you go back down and send Dominic up to look at it.”

Agnarr shrugged and jumped down through the hole. He handed the boots over to Dominic, who murmured a prayer to Vehthyl and floated up just high enough for his eyes to clear the edge.

He was able to quickly identify the flasks as containing unholy water. The incense had a strong aura of magic about them.

“And the idol?” Tee asked.

“It has no enchantment upon it. I think it’s safe.”

Tee picked it up and found that it was formed of compressed ash. It was really nothing more than a trinket. She stuck it in her bag, decided against taking the unholy water, and then gingerly picked up the incense.

Dominic, meanwhile, had floated back down to join the others. Agnarr threw the boots back up, Tee laced them up, and floated down. She held out the sticks of incense. “Ranthir can you identify what these are?”

Ranthir took them and raised his eyebrows. “I can, actually. These golden runes on the side are unmistakable. This is vision incense. The six sticks must be burned simultaneously, and their conjoined enchantments create a powerful connection between this world and the dreams of those nearby. Great truth can be found in the visions revealed by incense like this. There are many in Isiltur who use it.”

### CLEARING THE KEEP

They headed across the bridge and into the Cobbledman’s tower. Climbing down, Tee found herself in a chamber littered from broken bones and filth. On a dirty pallet of grey straw, the Cobbledman lay sleeping.

Tee approached him and gently shook him by the shoulder. He stirred, and then the eyes on his second head – the one that hadn’t spoken before – shot open. His hand shot out and grasped Tee by the throat, choking the life out of her. The second head let out a low growl of rage.

Tee panicked for a moment, but then thought quickly. She slapped the other head soundly across the cheek. It woke up, bleary-eyed. It took in Tee. It took in the other head. “No! Don’t!”

The Cobbledman’s other arm darted out and punched the Cobbledman’s second head.

The hand on Tee’s throat dropped away and she fell to the floor (realizing only then that she had been lifted up into the air).

“Are you all right?” the Cobbledman asked. The second head was glaring and sulking.

“I think so,” Tee said, rubbing her throbbing throat. “I’m sorry I woke you up. But you said we might be able to borrow the spiral key that Maquent gave you. Do you think we could do that?”

The Cobbledman grasped at his shirt front. “...I don’t know.”

“We have the other piece,” Tee said, holding it up. “We’d only need it for a little while. And once we were done, you could have both parts.”

“Really?” the Cobbledman’s right face split into a wide grin. “All right.” From under his shirt he pulled out the other half of the spiraled disc:



With a sharp tug, he broke the leather strap it was hanging from and handed it over to Tee. She smiled, thanked him, and gave him some more food. Then she climbed back up to where the others were waiting.

“Got it.”

“What do we do with it?” Elestra asked.

“I don’t know,” Tee said.

“Could this be the key you were looking for?” Tor asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Tee said. “I think the key we’re looking for is below the statue. I think this is something the cultists made.”

“How will we get the two pieces back together again?”

Tee shrugged and pressed the two pieces together. There was a bright flash of light, and the pieces were seamlessly joined.



“I thought that might work.”

Even with the key in hand, they still wanted to make sure that the rest of the keep had been cleared out before doing anything else. Leaving enemies at their back while they journeyed down into whatever waited beneath the house didn't seem like a good idea.

Fortunately, they had already explored most of the keep. They started by climbing the stairs that led from the roof of the house up to the central tower. There they found a chamber filled with a weblike nest of bits of old cloth and other rubbish, held together with a hardened, glistening excretion of some kind.

“Disgusting,” Tee said, and then stepped aside to let Agnarr chop his way through it. She could see that there was a ladder on the far side leading up to the tower's parapet. But a few moments later she was holding up her hand: “Stop!”

Agnarr stepped back and Tee stepped forward: She had been right. There were two more of the red robes which had apparently belonged to the Crimson Coil cult stuck in the nest. “These might come in useful,” she said, carefully prying them out. One of them was in fairly shabby condition (“I can fix that!” Elestra said.), but the other was in good condition (albeit filthy).

Agnarr went back to work, and within a few minutes Tee was pushing open the trapdoor leading to the parapet. Poking her head through, her gaze was immediately arrested by a crown sitting in the center of the parapet.

With a closer look, she quickly realized that the crown itself was nothing but cheap wood painted gold. But her interest was piqued by the eight large blue garnets: To her trained eyes, these appeared real... and, if they were, they would easily be worth 200 gold crowns each.

### BINDING FOUL AND FAIR

That left only one nook left to explore: The lower levels of the Cobbledman's tower. These couldn't be accessed

from above, however, so they circled back down through the keep and then climbed back up.

This brought them to a small, poorly furnished room. In the center of the room there was a rickety wooden table. On the top of the table a pentagram had been inscribed in charcoal. Three objects stood within the pentagram, positioned at points of power within the diagram: A jar of yellowish liquid; a short, fat candle half-expended; and, on a copper plate, a book.

Tor, looking at the jar, grimaced. “We've found somebody's chamberpot.”

Tee turned back to the ladder. “Ranthir! Get up here!”

Ranthir was quickly able to identify the ritual as an exploitation of sympathetic magic. “It's a binding ritual,” he explained. “The jar is either formed of diamond crystal or a polymorphed diamond – I can't tell which. But you can see that the purity of the crystal has been corrupted. The pattern of the pentagram also suggests that it was, in fact, a dual-binding ritual: One spirit was bound here, to this jar. But this minor ritual was used, through the laws of sympathetic magic, to trigger a much larger binding somewhere else. And the spirits would have been opposed – one evil or chaotic; the other lawful or good. The burning of the candle would have triggered the sympathetic connections of the ritual and... Yes, here on the candle we can see inscribed the name *Segginal* in arcane runes.”

“Who's Segginal?” Tor asked.

“I don't know,” Ranthir said.

“The Cobbledman,” Tee suggested. “One bad head; one good head. A spirit bound to each.”

“Perhaps,” Ranthir said. “But the nature of the ritual suggests that one of the spirits is still bound here, in the jar. Or rather to the jar.”

“Then which one was bound in the jar? The good one or the bad one?”

“It could be the spirit that haunts the castle,” Tor said. “The ritual could have been what bound it here.”

“Well, the book should tell us more,” Ranthir said, and picked it up. He flipped it open... and the pages seemed to blur before his eyes, forming a black maw that seemed to open inside his very mind... threatening to overwhelm him... to swallow his very mind...

Ranthir jerked the book away, slamming it shut and throwing it onto the table.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

Ranthir rubbed his forehead. His thoughts seemed blurred. The edge of his intellect dulled. “The book... the book betrayed me!”

Ranthir remained in a rather foul mood as they discussed their options. He'd heard of the foul corruptions which could turn a book into an inversion of itself – a consumer of knowledge instead of a giver of knowledge – but he still felt personally violated by the

experience. It was a betrayal that struck at the heart of everything he held dear.

After weighing their options, Tee decided that they should break the jar. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"Death," Tor said.

Agnarr, hearing this as they came back down the ladder, grinned. "Sounds like my kind of plan."

They went down to the courtyard.

"Are we sure we want to do this?" Dominic asked.

Tee shrugged and threw the jar against the stone wall. It shattered into shards and, where the shards fell, a whirlwind sprang up. It grew suddenly in strength, whipping their hair and causing some to fall back a step. Elestra cursed. Tor tightened his grip on his sword.

And then the whirlwind gave way and disappeared. In its place, a tall figure with pale blue skin and white-feathered wings hovered in the air. He looked down at them with eyes of pure light.

"My name is Edlari. I thank you for freeing me from my foul imprisonment. I owe you a debt that cannot easily be repaid." He turned his gaze to the sky and frowned. "What year is it?"

"790."

"Has it been so long?" He shook his head sadly. "I can sense a great evil in this place, but it lies beneath us where I cannot reach it. Will you accept my aid, meager though it may be?"

"Of course," Tee said.

He flew to each of them in turn, his heavy wings beating softly at the air, and laid his hand upon their brows. They felt their wounds and aches fade from their bones and blood. Ranthir could feel the fog left by the evil tome fade from his thoughts. Tee, with great joy, could feel the rigors of the taint fading from her soul... although, in the same moment, she felt the weight of the dark items which lay in the bag at her side.

"And now," Edlari said, "I must return to the Pale Tower. Seek for me there if you would speak with me again."

With that, he was gone – his wings carrying him up and over the walls of the keep.

## BENEATH PYTHONESS HOUSE

As far as they could tell, the keep was now empty except for themselves and the Cobbledman. They turned their attention to the statue in the first hall of the keep, and were surprised – as they rounded the corner towards it – to discover that a gap had opened in the statue's stomach, revealing a circular depression into which the spiraled disc would fit perfectly.

They concluded that the depression must have opened when they had joined the two halves of the disc together.

Tee stepped forward, but Agnarr took the disc from her and fitted it carefully into the statue. With a twist of the wrist he was able to turn it counter-clockwise. With a rumbling groan and a burst of stale air, the statue rolled down the hall towards him. Agnarr stepped deftly to one side and saw, where the statue had been, a hole in the floor.

A twenty-foot shaft dropped straight down into a room with a ten-foot-high ceiling. Iron rungs set in the side of the shaft made it an easy climb. The chamber itself was of plain stone, but the floor to one side was interrupted by a fleshy membrane that quivered in the draft of air that flowed up towards the keep above. On the other side of the room, slumped against the wall, was a giant's skeleton.

The skeleton was of titanic proportions and clad in age-tattered robes. The hem of these robes were embroidered with strange, round-shaped runes. Ranthir, glancing over from the iron rungs as he climbed down, instantly recognized them as Lithuin runes. These strange runes – now unreadable – were believed to have been used by the Titan Spawn of the legendary city of Lithuin. Only a few samples of such runes were known to survive. He was excited to study them in more detail.

But as Tee's foot touched the floor, the skeleton began to stir – clouds of dust rising from its form as it slowly lurched to its feet. "Agnarr!" Tee cried. "Tor!"

Agnarr let go of the ladder and dropped to the floor (he was only a few feet above it in any case). Tor, taking up the rear guard as usual, had to jump clear of the wall to avoid hitting Ranthir and Dominic on the way down, but he landed easily, his sword already drawn.

Things went poorly at first: The titan spawn skeleton's massive hand easily swept past their defenses, delivering bone-crushing blows. But then Dominic reached the floor and was able to lay his hands on Agnarr – at his touch, the familiar divine strength poured into Agnarr's body and he grew to match the skeleton's height and girth.

And despite his size, Agnarr was still possessed of greater speed and agility than the lumbering skeletal giant. Even as he finished his divinely-inspired growth, he whirled low and whipped his sword around – cutting at the giant's shins and shearing straight through one of its legs.

"Don't hurt the runes!" Ranthir cried, darting forward a few steps from where he stood in the corner (keeping a safe distance from the titanic struggle).

Dominic, summoning his inner strength, called upon the same divine energies a second time and let them flow into Tor.

Tor, growing as Agnarr had done, followed Agnarr's example. Ducking low, his blow swept in from the opposite direction and cleaved the giant's other leg. It crashed precipitously to the floor.



With perfect timing, Ranthir released an arcane attack – piercing the creature’s barrel-like eye socket with a blast of frigid energy that froze the bone. The jarring impact of its collapse caused the brittle bone to break and shatter, sending great gaping cracks racing across the dome of its skull.

Whatever enchantment had knit those bones together in undeath was broken, and the giant collapsed.

## THE FRIGID CAVERN

Ranthir drew a knife and carefully cut away the Lithuin runes from the hem of the titan spawn’s robe. Meanwhile, the others were moving towards the fleshy membrane. It was slightly translucent and appeared to be stretched across another shaft leading down.

“What do we do?” Elestra asked.

“Well, the key we were looking for – are looking for – must be down here somewhere,” Tee said. “And there’s no where else to go.” She shrugged, drew her dragon pistol, and blasted the membrane.

The membrane ripped apart, and as it did so a howling blast of frigid air rushed up from the shaft below. Looking down through the hole, Tee could see that the frost-rimed shaft ended in another chamber twenty feet below, although all she could see of this chamber was a narrow patch of floor that appeared to be covered completely with ice.

“I’m going to go down and check it out.” Tee pulled out a sunrod, stepped off the edge of the shaft, and levitated down.

The chamber below appeared to be some sort of natural cave, but it was unnaturally – even impossibly – cold. The floor, walls, and ceiling of the cave were entirely coated in a thick layer of ice. The air was cold enough here that Tee thought there might be a real risk of frostbite.

Tee noticed that along one edge of this cavern, the ice appeared a little thinner. Looking at this broad patch more closely, she could see what appeared to be liquid water under the surface.

With a thoughtful look, she floated back up to the others. “Ranthir, I need you down there for a second.”

It took more than a second, but Ranthir was able to perform several divinations which confirmed that the unnatural cold was the result of a magical aura permeating these chambers. He could also tell that this magical aura extended through the liquid water in a tunnel that curved down and away before it passed behind too much solid rock for his arcane sight to penetrate. He attempted to unwork the magic of the aura, but failed.

Tee and Ranthir returned to the others and reported what they had found. “I think we have to go through that tunnel,” Tee said.

Tor shook his head. “If it’s as cold down there as it feels up here, we’ll all get hypothermia trying to swim through that water.”

“I know certain magicks that could protect us against the cold,” Elestra said.

“So do I,” Dominic said.

“Between the two of us, we should be able to protect everybody.”

“But we’ll need to prepare the proper spells,” Dominic said.

“I hate to wait,” Tee said. “I’ve got an appointment tomorrow. But if we need to rest, then we need to rest.”

“We could stay here,” Agnarr suggested.

Elestra gave the barbarian an incredulous look. “I think we should head back to the Ghostly Minstrel.”

“Assuming we can leave,” Tee said ominously.

“That’s true,” Tor said with a slightly worried tone.

Ranthir, meanwhile, had been getting a thoughtful look on his face. Now he suddenly turned to the others. “Come with me! Quickly!”

The others followed him as he climbed back up into the keep. Once everyone had joined him, he reached out and easily pulled the spiral contrivance out of the statue. As soon as he had done so, the statue rumbled back to its original position.

“It suddenly occurred to me that there was still a demon wandering around up here,” Ranthir said. “We could have been trapped.” He pushed the disc back into place. As the statue rumbled open again, he turned to Tee. “Once I’m down below, remove the disc and wait a couple of minutes. Then open it again.”

Tee followed his instructions. Ranthir, from below, watched the statue close above him... there was no keyhole for the spiraled disc down here. When Tee opened the statue again, Ranthir climbed up and informed the others. “As long as we’re down there, we can be trapped by anybody who comes along and removes the disc.”

## HUNTING A DEMON

“We have to find that demon,” Tee said.

“And kill it,” Agnarr added.

“Well, we saw it descend beyond the outer walls, correct?” Ranthir said. “Perhaps we should start by searching the grounds outside.”

The others agreed, but after circling the keep they could see nowhere that the demon could have been hiding.

“Maybe he’s returned to his nest,” Ranthir suggested.

They walked back through the gate. “At least we know we can get out of here now,” Tee said.

“COME TO ME...” The familiar voice echoed through the keep.

“Didn’t he already say that?” Elestra asked.

“A couple of times, I think,” Tor said.



The demon had not, in fact, returned to its nest. Tee sighed heavily with frustration. "All right, let's go back to the Minstrel. Maybe when we come back tomorrow, the demon will have returned and we'll be able to kill it."

But when they reached the gate, they found the invisible wall of force had once again been raised to block their passage.

"You've got to be joking," Tee said, her hand pressed up against the energy field.

### TRAPPED AGAIN

After a brief discussion, they decided that – if they were stuck here anyway – they might as well try a more mundane way of overcoming the frigid chamber below: Fire. They would gather up the older furniture from around the keep, drag it to the icy chamber, and then burn it.

But when they returned to the statue, they found that the hole in its stomach had closed up.

"It's like its reset or something," Elestra muttered.

"I MUST FEED..."

Now, standing in this hall, they were sure that the voice was emanating directly from the statue itself.

"It must be Segginal," Ranthir concluded. "They bound Edlari so they could bind Segginal to this statue."

"What does it mean by 'feed', do you think?" Elestra asked.

"I don't know," Tee said. "Maybe if we feed it, it'll open the keyhole again."

Tee walked up to the statue and touched it... she instantly felt a sharp pain and was overwhelmed by dizziness. Pulling her hand back, she saw that her fingertips were covered in a sheen of blood. She cursed.

Next, with a certain sense of desperation, Tee tried breaking the spiral key in half again (it broke naturally along the same line as before). Then she rejoined the two halves. There was another flash of light and the disc was made whole again... but the statue stubbornly remained shut.

"There might be another way," Agnarr said. He led them back to the courtyard and pointed to the well. "It's almost directly above the icy caverns below. There might be another way of reaching those caverns at the bottom of the well." A way not blocked by the statue or its spirit.

Agnarr took the *boots of levitation* from Tee. He drew his sword – both for protection and for the light its flame would provide – and descended more than fifty feet into the dark, cramped well before he spotted the well water below him.

Something seemed to be stirring in that water... some great, white shape rising towards him. Instinctively Agnarr retreated back up the shaft, but before the slow power of the boots could take him far enough a flaccid arm of doughy white flesh burst out of the water and grasped his ankle.

Whatever the foul creature was, it began dragging its way up the length of Agnarr's leg. A face of melted, white flesh emerged – gaping a maw of vicious, needle-like fangs.

But Agnarr had already reversed his grip on his sword and, as the creature lurched up towards him, the blade plunged down through its gullet and Agnarr, with a savage whipping of his thews, tore the creature in half.

Taking a deep breath of the now acrid air, Agnarr descended into the greasy, gore-spattered water... and met with a dead end. The water had a depth of perhaps fifteen feet, but did not open out into any larger cavern. He returned to the surface to report his disappointment to the others.

"What do we do?" Elestra asked again.

"Let's try talking to the Cobbledman," Tee suggested. "He lives here. He might know something about the statue."

They found the Cobbledman in his tower.

"Cobbledman?" Tee asked tentatively, unsure of which head was in command.

"Tee!" The right head grinned broadly and the Cobbledman lurched to his feet. "You came back! ... do you have food?"

Tee smiled. "Yes, I have food."

She handed it over and the Cobbledman began munching contentedly.

"Do you know who Segginal is?" Tee asked.

The Cobbledman's face became crestfallen. "Bad fat man!"

"He was a bad man?"

"Bad fat man!"

"Who is he?"

"Wuntad brought him. Now he watches. Watches all the time."

"Does he do anything else?"

"Sometimes. Hurts when you touch him."

"The statue?"

The Cobbledman nodded.

"Is there any way to stop him from watching?"

The Cobbledman shook his head. "But sometimes he goes away."

"When does he go away?"

"Chaos is the key..."

Tee thanked him and gave him some more food. Then she climbed up to where the others were waiting. "The statue is Segginal. And he's on a cycle."

"Is there any way to speed it up?" Elestra asked.

Tee shook her head. "Not that he knew, anyway."

Since it seemed as if they had nothing better to do for the moment, they began a complete search of Pythoness House again – from top to bottom. Perhaps the demon had snuck back into the keep and was hiding somewhere. Or perhaps there was some undiscovered nook or hidden door.

But that didn't seem to be the case. Fortunately, as they finished their search and gathered back in the courtyard, the voice of the chaos spirit boomed forth once again: "CHAOS IS THE KEY..."

They returned to the statue and confirmed that, once again, the keyhole had opened on its stomach.

"The gate should be open now, too," Tee said.

Since they understood the patterns and limitations of the ritual now, they felt comfortable in recuperating before journeying any deeper beneath the keep. They returned to the courtyard and headed towards the gate...

### THE CHAOS CULTISTS

... and found their way blocked by more than a dozen sinister men and women.

At their head was a massive, humanoid creature with wings of darkness and shadow that crackled with blue arcs of lightning. His flesh was a sallow yellow-green, and his long, grey-white hair seemed to be coming out in clumps. His drooping eyes glowed with a white malevolence, and his muscles seemed to bulge unnaturally beneath his skin. Strapped about his broad chest was a silvery breastplate.

Behind him, flanking him to either side, were a litorian and an adrak: The litorian had familiar symbols of chaos shaved into her fur and burned into her skin.

The adrak, likewise, had symbols burned or branded onto its scales.

And behind them was a rabble of another half dozen thugs.

The sallow-skinned leader chuckled darkly as they halted in their tracks. "Give me the weapons of chaos and you can leave here with your lives."

"We don't have them," Tee said.

"Don't lie to me child," the creature said. "Or you will die."

"We don't have them!" Elestra cried. "We didn't get them yet!"

The litorian waved her hand and a beam of light swept over them. She scowled. "They're telling the truth, Wuntad."

Wuntad turned to her. "You're sure?"

The litorian nodded.

Wuntad turned back to Tee. "Very well. Then you'll go and get them and then bring them back to me."

"We can't do that right now," Tee said.

"You *will* do it or you'll die."

"It's not that we won't, we can't. We need to rest first, and then—"

With a bellowing roar, Agnarr charged. He caught Wuntad by surprise, but his sword caught on the cultist's breastplate. With an answering roar of rage, Wuntad swung a muscular claw at Agnarr's head. The barbarian laughed. "You don't look much like your picture!"



The other cultists, after stepping back in shock at the suddenness of the assault, were recovering and drawing their weapons.

But they were too slow for Ranthir, who was already completing the casting of a spell: A thick, bulbous sphere of viscous web exploded in the midst of the cultists. It entangled them thoroughly and suspended itself between the wall of the keep and the ground.

Unfortunately, the web blocked their own path of escape. Fortunately, the torch Tor had carried during their explorations through and beneath the keep was still burning. He darted off to one side and began burning a path through the web.

Agnarr had also been caught in the web and he began tearing himself free. But Wuntad was the faster, his wings of lightning-lit darkness tearing through the webs like razor blades and – with a single, powerful beat – propelling him into the air above.

Nevertheless, it seemed as if things were going well: Ranthir's spell had neutralized most of the cultists, and if they could capitalize on that moment of opportunity, then—

The litorian managed to free her hand and held aloft a bell of tarnished silver. She rang it and, at the beating of its clap, a wave of dizzy darkness swept over them. Tor fell unconscious, the burning brand which had been leading his path falling uselessly at his side. Dominic fell behind him. Agnarr sagged where he stood, only the thick webs holding him aloft.

Elestra, Tee, and Ranthir struggled on... but the bell rang again, and this time both Tee and Elestra toppled.

Ranthir, too, fell... but he was bluffing, hoping that the ringing of the bell would stop if the cultists thought they had all been affected. He was right. The litorian lowered the bell, and the cultists set to work trying to burn or chop their way out of the web.

Once the cultists were thoroughly distracted, Ranthir eased himself over to Tee, who was laying only a few feet away from him. He gently shook her awake.

Unfortunately, as Tee stirred to wakefulness her movement attracted the attention of the cultists.

“Kill them!” Wuntad cried.

“Wait!” Tee shouted. “Just wait! We’ll get the weapons for you!”

Wuntad smiled grimly. “A wise choice.”

### AN UNRESOLVED DEBATE

Tee woke the others. They were upset at the thought of surrendering, but she made it clear that they had no choice. In sullen silence they retreated back to the hall where the statue of Segginal stood.

“What are we doing?” Elestra asked. “We can’t help them!”

“Do you have a better idea?” Tee asked. “They took us out pretty easily last time. I’m pretty sure they’ll be able to do it again.”

After several minutes of discussion, it became clear that the group was divided: Some felt they should at least find out what these “weapons of chaos” were. Others felt strongly that they should try to fight. Others suggested that they might escape.

The tide of their argument seemed to be turning strongly towards this latter course of action – escape – when the statue spoke to them: “Wuntad’s patience wanes. I see everything that happens in this house. Bring him the weapons of chaos *now*.”

Tee grimaced and slapped the spiraled disc into the statue’s keyhole and twisted. The shaft opened. “Let’s go.”

### THROUGH THE CAVERNS OF ICE

(09/11/790)

They went down, but they didn’t go far. They stopped in the first chamber and began unpacking their camping gear.

“All right, we’re down here,” Tee said. “Now Wuntad can just wait until we’re ready.”

They kept watch in short shifts throughout the night. In the morning, Elestra and Dominic prepared and cast the spells which would allow them to endure the freezing temperatures below.

Agnarr’s flaming sword easily chopped through the ice above the underwater tunnel and, with the spells of Elestra and Dominic, they were able to pass imperviously through the frigid waters.

At the other end of the watery tunnel, Agnarr needed to hack his way through a second sheet of ice, allowing them to emerge into another icy cavern. On the floor here, rimed with frost, were six chests. An iron door, entirely free of ice, stood on the opposite wall. Off to the left and the right, frozen into the thick ice covering the walls, were two minotaurs.

Tee eyed the minotaurs carefully, but they appeared to be dead. Satisfied that they were no immediate threat, Tee crossed over to the chests and began inspecting them while the others hung back near the pool from which they had emerged (with Agnarr, in particular, making sure the hole in the ice – and their potential retreat – remained open).

The heavy iron chests had been bolted to the stone floor beneath the ice. The top of each chest was marked with an inscription:

“Mysteries of the Purple City”  
“Blades of the Galchutt”  
“The Kingslayer Spear”  
“The Despairing Word of Chaos”  
“The Tools of Chaos”  
“Freedom’s Key”



Tee pulled out her lockpicks and set to work. The locks on the chests, however, proved difficult, and she reflected glumly that if she had received the magical tools she had requested from the Dreaming Apothecary this would be a much easier task. Magical protections or not, she could still feel the cold of this place seeping into her bones.

As Tee was struggling with the first lock, however, her work was abruptly interrupted: The sudden, sharp sound of cracking ice made her look up to see one of the minotaurs punching his way out from his icy tomb. The ice in front of the other one was clearly melting, and she could already see thick cracks spreading through the ice as it, too, struggled to be free.

Thinking quickly, Tee reached quickly into her *bag of holding* and pulled out the least damaged set of Crimson Coil robes. She quickly slipped the robes on and stood up.

“Ah, the Night of Dissolution is come at last!” The first minotaur was stepping free from the wall of ice, shaking the ice from his eyes. The second was also emerging.

The first minotaur turned bleary eyes towards Tee. “Who are you?”

“A servant of Wuntad.”

“And has the Night of Dissolution come?”

“Yes.” Tee moved up towards the door on the far wall, trying to position the minotaurs with their backs to the others. “What’s behind this door?”

The second minotaur approached her. “Did Wuntad not give you the password?”

“He didn’t,” Tee said truthfully.

A worried look entered the minotaur’s eye. “Then I wouldn’t go in there.”

“Wait,” Tee said, looking meaningfully at the others. “*You* wouldn’t go in there?”

But none of the others were taking her cue, so she decided to take a different tact. “Do you have the key for these chests?”

“Wuntad didn’t give it to you?”

“No, he did not.”

“And why isn’t Wuntad here to greet us?”

“He has been barred from the keep by magic,” Tee said, expressing a truthful suspicion that she had. “Go to him and fetch the key.”

The minotaurs seemed guileless – or perhaps deferred completely to those wearing the crimson robes. Without another word they both headed to tunnel of icy water and dived out of sight.

Tor, having watched them go, turned to Tee. “Did we just send him reinforcements?”

“Does it matter?” Tee said. “I didn’t see any of you leaping to stop them.”

“They won’t get far in any case,” Ranthir pointed out. “The statue is shut.”

“Well, let’s get these chests open before they come back.”

## THE SIX CHESTS AND THE KEY OF FREEDOM

Tee turned to the smallest of the chests, the one labeled “Freedom’s Key”. She was certain that this was what they had come to Pythoness House for in the first place. Once she defeated the lock, she opened the chest to reveal a golden key laying on velvet lining.

The end of the key seemed to be twisting and, looking more closely at it, Tee could see that it was actually made of innumerable pieces almost too small for the eye to see – they were constantly in flux, seeming to warp and twist and move in an almost impossible manner, as if their movement were not truly determined by the limitations of the natural world.

Tee was fascinated – almost enthralled – by the artifact. With delicate fingers she reached down and picked it up...

And felt a coldness rush up from her fingers and seem to bury itself in her soul. Despite the throbbing pain and waves of weakness emanating from the key, her curiosity could not be contained. She turned to the next chest, the one labeled “Mysteries of the Purple City”. Inserting the golden key carefully into the lock she turned it.

The lock opened with a satisfying click. But the pain and the cold intensified. Tee almost felt as if her soul were being ripped out through her. Her hand flew to her head and she sagged, nearly fainting where she stood.

“Tee!” Elestra cried. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m fine,” Tee said. “But I don’t think I should be using this key any more.” She slipped it into her *bag of holding*... but even there she could still feel its presence like a cold weight on her soul.

Inside this second chest there was an ancient-looking box of ironwood inscribed with several strange, round-shaped runes. Ranthir confirmed that these, like those on the robes of the giant skeleton above, were Lithuin runes.

Opening the ironwood box revealed four crystals as large as a fist and a journal with a worn leather cover and yellow, blood-stained pages. Without even bothering to glance at it, Tee passed it over to Ranthir and moved onto the next chest.

Tee returned to her lockpicks and began opening the other chests as Ranthir began to quickly skim through the journal. The “Blades of the Galchutt” were two matched longswords of blackened steel with hilts carved in the shape of demons’ heads. “The Kingslayer Spear” had a shaft of adamantium carved with strange runes similar to those they had seen on the idols within Ghul’s Labyrinth. “The Despairing Word of Chaos” was a rod of strange metal.

The last chest, the “Tools of Chaos”, contained several strange items: A cloak of rich red fabric, two small vials filled with ash-like dust, and a skull marked with several symbols of chaos.

Ranthir, meanwhile, was comparing what he was reading in the journal to everything he knew of the lost city of Lithuin. He knew of the ancient tales which claimed that a fleet bearing mystic giants known as the Titan Spawn founded the legendary city of Lithuin on what was now the coast of Arathia. It was said that the earliest caravans and merchant houses were specifically founded to ferry goods to and from the great city. After generations of such trade, the Titan Spawn succumbed to some form of madness and their ships sailed back across the ocean to their mysterious continent of mists. Lithuin itself “fell into the sea” and its treasures and lore were lost to the ages. But the journal claimed that the city – or some fragment of the city – had been found...

### LITHUIN JOURNAL

This hand-written journal appears to be the record of an archaeological exploration. No specific year is given, but the entries seem to be spread across at least three months.

Several names are mentioned, most notably Wuntad – who appeared to be in charge of the expedition, although (in the opinion of the writer) not particularly proficient with the methods of excavation. The other names explicitly mentioned are Ibard, Kambranex, Coluvien, Falant, and Navanna – although it’s clear that there were at least several others, left unnamed, accompanying them.

The location of the expedition is eventually identified as the ancient city of Lithuin – or at least, what they writers believe to be the city of Lithuin. Progress appeared to be slow, and hindered by a variety of small catastrophes. Over the course of the journal, these catastrophes grow in severity. In one particularly tragic collapse, Coluvien was apparently killed.

Wuntad’s frustration with their lack of progress – marked by frequent rages – also become a common theme of the journal. Then, after nearly two months, they find a “box of remarkable crystals”. Wuntad becomes fascinated by these and, reportedly, retires to his tent to study them incessantly.

The last entries of the journal become short and erratic. There are references to “moving shadows”, “ancient shadows”, and “the shadows are coming”. Then the entries come to an abrupt end.

## BATTLE OF THE MINOTAURS

Tee gathered up the items, put them into her *bag of holding*, and then headed back towards the underwater tunnel.

“Wait,” Elestra said. “What about the key we came for?”

Tee looked at her quizzically. “I think it was the key from the chest.”

“The one that hurt you? But that doesn’t make any sense. And we’ve found lots of keys here. Maybe there’s another one. Why would we want a key that hurts you to use it?”

“We don’t know why we wanted the key,” Tee said. “We don’t know what it’s for.”

“We should open the door,” Elestra said. “See if there’s another key back there.”

“The door the minotaurs were afraid of?” Tee said. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Maybe they were just pretending to be afraid.”

The argument continued for several minutes, but eventually it was decided that they would at least look through the door. Tee picked the lock and edged the door open, peeking through it.

There was another icy cavern, this one larger than the rest. A multi-headed construct of frost-rimed brass and leviathan proportions lay in a heap in the center of the floor. But even as Tee’s eye fell upon it, the construct stirred – one of its heads slowly rearing up with the rasping sound of metal upon metal.

Tee slammed the door shut.

“We need to go. Now.”

WHAM!

The cavern rocked with the bone-shaking impact of the construct on the far side of the door.

“What is it?”

WHAM!

“Go! Now!”

They fled back through the underwater tunnel and up through the fleshy membrane... and found the minotaurs waiting for them.

“Segginal tells us that Wuntad sent you on a mission. Give us the weapons of chaos.”

Tee was bleary-eyed and exhausted, still suffering from the ill effects of using the key. She didn’t want to do it, but they didn’t seem to have any other choice. With

a heavy sigh she reached into her bag, pulled out the spear, and handed it to the nearest minotaur.

Agnarr attacked.

“Agnarr! No!” Tee was perhaps even more surprised than the minotaurs. Her hand was still half in her *bag of holding*, reaching for the next item. She quickly changed her aim and withdrew the modified dragon rifle. But she was too weak to fight, and simply stumbled back towards the nearest corner.

The minotaurs roared. The claws of one smashed into Agnarr’s side, sending him spinning towards the other who caught him with a similarly devastating blow. Agnarr dropped to one knee. He swung his sword feebly towards them, but then a third blow crashed down on his head and he slumped into unconsciousness.

Tor hesitated, his sword half-drawn from its sheath, waiting to see what would happen. With Agnarr down, would Tee begin negotiating again?

Perhaps she might have, but even as Agnarr thudded heavily to the ground, Dominic extended his hand and murmured a prayer. A bolt of silvery energy emerged from his fingertips and struck one of the minotaurs. The energy flowed about the creature as if it were liquid mercury, and the motions of the minotaur slowed... and stopped. It had become frozen in time.

Tor finished drawing his sword and charged the other minotaur. He nimbly weaved his way through the flurrying claws of the creature, turning the closer blows with his shield. His sword, crackling with electricity, struck here and there – opening painful wounds in the creature’s thick hide.

As Tor kept the creature occupied, Elestra and Dominic darted forward and laid their hands on Agnarr. Their joint strength flowed into the barbarian, healing his wounds.

As Agnarr groggily regained his consciousness he quickly focused on the battle being waged almost directly above him between Tor and minotaur.

He grabbed up his sword and stabbed up... straight through the minotaur’s groin. The creature gave a bellowing roar of unimaginable pain and collapsed in a pool of its own blood and viscera.

As Agnarr stood up, shaking off some of that same blood and viscera, Tee weakly stepped forward, lowered the modified dragon rifle, and immolated the surviving minotaur (who was still trapped by Dominic’s spell).



## LEAVING WITH THEIR LIVES

“Wuntad is very angry with you.”

It was the voice of Segginal – the statue-bound chaos spirit.

“I don’t care, Segginal.” Tee shouted. “Open up!”

After a moment, the statue above them slid aside. They climbed up and then moved away from the statue before discussing their options.

“We could still try to escape,” Agnarr said.

Tee shook her head. “We couldn’t beat them before and now I’m less than useless in a fight.”

“They might have left.”

“I doubt it,” Tee said. “But we can check.”

They climbed up to the second floor, hoping to look down through one of the tower windows. As they reached the tower, Elestra asked the question that was weighing on everyone’s mind: “Do you think the Segginal guy is telling Wuntad where we are?”

Tee looked out through the window. “Yeah... I think he is.”

Wuntad was standing on the path before the gate, staring straight up at her. He was now accompanied by more than a dozen of the cultists. Now he shouted, his voice loud enough to be heard through the lead-framed window.

“The minotaurs don’t matter to me! They were foul, primitive creatures. Unworthy servants. All I want are the weapons! Give them to me and you can still leave here with your lives!”

“Damn it.” Tee sighed heavily and turned away from the window.

“We’re not going to give them to him, are we?” Elestra asked.

Tee looked at her. “I’ll say it again: Do we have any other choice?”

“But we can’t! We don’t know what he’ll do with them if he gets them!”

“But we do know what he’ll do if he doesn’t get them.”

“We could always try going out the back way,” Dominic suggested.

“With Segginal telling him everything we’re doing?” Tee said.

“If we do give them to him,” Tor said. “I don’t want to go out there. I’m sure he’ll betray us.”

“Maybe we could get the Cobbledman to give him the items? I don’t think he can actually come into the keep. Otherwise he would have just killed us and gotten the weapons himself. Or done it years ago.”

A shadow fell across them. Wuntad had flown up to the window and was looking in at them. “This is your last chance.”

“Will you agree to free the Cobbledman?” Tee asked.

Wuntad’s eyes narrowed. “He lives?”

“He does. And he misses you.”

Wuntad seemed to mull it over for a moment. “Very well. If you give me the weapons, I will free the Cobbledman.”

“Fine,” Tee said. “We’ll have him bring the items to you.”

They found the Cobbledman, once again, sleeping in his tower. Tee carefully woke him.

“Cobbledman? Wuntad is here.”

“Wuntad’s here?”

“He is. He’d like to see you. He wants to free you. But I need to ask you a favor.” Tee quickly explained what they needed the Cobbledman to do.

They went down to the courtyard. Wuntad and the cultists were waiting just outside the gate. Tee loaded the Cobbledman’s arms full with the various weapons... but she deliberately held back three items: The journal, the ironwood box inscribed with Lithuin runes (and the crystals it held), and the golden key. She hoped that Wuntad might not notice the missing items, and if he did then—

“Where is the box of ironwood?” There was great anger in Wuntad’s voice.

“It’s right here,” Tee said, pulling it from her bag. “But his arms were full. Send him back and he can bring it out to you.”

And, as she had hoped, Wuntad had noticed the missing item most precious to him... but not the key. Nor did he open the ironwood box and notice that the journal was missing.

“Cobbledman,” Wuntad said. “You are free to leave Pythoness House.”

Wuntad then turned to them. “I am glad that you saw... reason. But pray that our paths do not cross again.”

The cultists turned and left. The Cobbledman came back towards them, a wide grin on his kind face. “Did you hear?”

“We did,” Tee smiled. “I’m very happy for you.”

“Do you have any more food?”

Ranthir laughed and handed him another bar of rations. The Cobbledman, munching contentedly, headed back towards his tower.

“We should do something for him,” Tor said. “He shouldn’t have to stay here.”

“What about those people that Urlenius was talking about?” Tee suggested.

“The Brotherhood of Redemption?” Dominic said.

“Right. They might be willing to help him.” She looked around. The cultists were gone. “Well, shall we go?”

“Not yet,” Agnarr said. “There’s one more thing I want to do.”

Agnarr returned to the statue of Segginal... and smashed it to pieces. As the last of his destructive work was done, a mournful wind howled through the keep and,



with a malevolent laugh, Segginal's voice echoed through the halls: "You will bear my curse *forever*."  
Agnarr grunted. "Nice guy."

### A PEACEFUL AFTERNOON

As they emerged from Pythoness House, the aershship of House Shever passed above them – heading out towards the Southern Sea. They followed in its wake, heading down into Midtown and returning to the Ghostly Minstrel.

Tee had an appointment to keep, so she only stopped in long enough to drop off her *bag of holding* (with its tainted items and, most importantly, the soul draining key) and then left again.

Tor, too, only went to his room long enough to pick up a fresh set of clothes before heading over to the bathhouse on Tavern Row. (Where he sat quietly in a corner, speaking to no one.)

Agnarr headed to the common room and ordered a meal of feast-like proportions.

Elestra and Dominic, meanwhile, talked things over and decided to spend the afternoon trying to find help for the Cobbledman. Elestra knew that the Brotherhood of Redemption maintained a small chapterhouse in the Guildsman District (although there were rumors that they also maintained a large underground fortress somewhere beneath the city).

As Elestra and Dominic headed back out through the front hall, however, a cry came from the common room. "Mistress Elestra! Mistress Elestra!"

Before she even turned to look, Elestra knew that it was Iltumar. She suppressed a groan.

Iltumar was sitting at a table with an elven woman with dark brown hair. The glint of mithril chain could be seen under the woman's clothes.

"Elestra, this is Lavis," Iltumar said. "I've solved Tee's riddle! The answer is 't! T for Tee!'"

"Very good, Iltumar!" Elestra smiled, exchanging a look with Dominic.

"I've got a new one for you, too: 'My house is not quiet, but I am not loud. I am the swifter, at times the stronger. My house more enduring, longer to last. At times I will rest, but my house rushes on. Within it I lodge as long as I live. Should we two be severed, my death becomes sure.'"

Elestra leaned over towards Dominic. "Do you think it's a snail? I think it might be a snail."

Dominic shrugged.

"Do you want to join us for a drink?" Iltumar asked eagerly.

Elestra turned back to him. "I'm sorry, Iltumar. But Dominic and I have something we need to do. In fact, we were just heading out."

Iltumar's smile fell away.

"But I'll let Tee know about your new riddle. I know she'll be excited to hear it."

"It's okay," Iltumar said. "I know you probably have much more important people to see."

Elestra awkwardly tried to figure out how to make her farewells. Lavis exchanged a sympathetic look with her. But, at that moment, Ranthir was passing by on his way to fetch his customary bowl of soup for the evening. Overhearing her distress, he tapped Iltumar on the shoulder.

"Iltumar, I have some studies to attend to this evening. Would you, perchance, be interested in assisting me?"

Iltumar's smile returned, even larger than before. "Really?"

"Yes," Ranthir smiled. "I have to fetch some food, but then we could begin immediately... if you like."

### FOURTH LESSON OF THE DREAMING

Tee – weakened by the draining effects of the golden key and distracted by the myriad thoughts racing through her mind – had difficulty focusing upon her training. She had difficulty even achieving the dreaming trance, and could do little of consequence.

When the frustrating trance work was completed, Tee began gathering up her things to leave. But Doraedian stopped her.

"The dreaming trance requires a difficult art of balance. It shall never be without effort, although you will find that it becomes easier in time. However, there is another matter that we must discuss today. There are many paths through the arts of the Dreaming, and from this day forward your training will be of your choosing."

"Choosing?" Tee said.

"Yes, while your lessons with me will continue, you will also be trained in one of three specialties.

"First, there is the Dreamsight. The Dreaming is the wellspring from which all reality is born and the grave to which all living memory returns. As such, those who can see the Dreaming with unclouded eyes can perceive deep truths of the world around them.

"Second, there are the Dream Pacts. The Lords of the Dreaming are powerful and fey. Those skilled enough in the dreaming arts can turn their souls into conduits through which the Spirit Lords can be made manifest in the world around us. But following such a path requires supreme self-control, for the Lords of the Dreaming are capable of reshaping your very soul.

"Finally, there is the art of Dreamspeaking. Those practiced in the dreaming arts can reshape the Dreaming around them. Those who are masters of the Dreaming, however, can reshape the world around them by reshaping the dreams from which the world is born. These arts have been perfected into the dreaming tongue – a primal language which not only describes the most

fundamental aspects of reality, but can be used to transform it.”

“I’m not sure what I want to do.”

“It is not a decision to be rushed. Take your time. Explore your thoughts. Write me by letter before your next lesson on the 18<sup>th</sup> and let me know your choice.”

## BROTHERHOOD OF REDEMPTION

Elestra led Dominic down to the Guildsman District. They found the public house of the Brotherhood of Redemption to be a rather small and unimpressive affair. When they knocked on the door, it was answered by a meek-looking man.

“Welcome. Can the Brotherhood be of some assistance to you?”

“I think so,” Elestra said.

“You have captured some bestial creature in need of the gods’ redemption?”

“Not exactly,” Dominic said.

“We met someone in need of help. He’s gentle. And kind. But a little lost and confused.”

“We are no common charity,” the man said. “If this creature is civilized, then he is beyond our purview.”

“Well, half of him is,” Dominic said.

“What do you mean?”

“He has two heads,” Elestra explained. “One of them is civilized, I guess. But the other definitely isn’t.”

“An ettin-like divided consciousness?” The man was not only intrigued, but excited. “With one turned against the other? Well, if you can bring him here we would certainly give him any help that we can.”

Taking their leave, Elestra and Dominic – primarily at Elestra’s prompting – decided to return to Pythoness House, by themselves, and try to find the Cobbledman.

They got no further than the courtyard, however, before they realized – given the possibility that a demon was still wandering about the place – that this might have been a good idea. Elestra called for the Cobbledman a couple of times and, when he did not come down into the courtyard, they left.

## SHOPPING

They reconvened at the Ghostly Minstrel. Agnarr took the many rat tails they had collected and turned them into the proper officials for the bounty, feeling a great sense of fulfillment at finally managing to accomplish one of the first things he had vowed to do upon awaking in Ptolus.

Tee gathered up the items they were going to sell and led the rest of the group on a shopping trip. Ranthir chose not to go with them, instead remaining behind to continue his studies (while trying to find some useful way for Ilumar to contribute beyond petting little Erin),

but did ask Tee if she could try to find for him an item with a particular enchantment laid upon it.

Ranthir described the enchantment in detail. Tee glossed over most of the technical details, but captured the gist of it: The item would attune itself to the rhythms of Ranthir’s own body. Once it had done so, it would be capable of nourishing him, intensifying the refreshment of mind and body during periods of sleep.

“Instead of needing to sleep for eight hours every night,” Ranthir explained, “I would only need two hours of sleep. And in the extra hours of the night I could be copying my scrolls or studying the many books we have discovered or anything of the like.”

Tee knew that Ranthir was frustrated by how little time he was able to devote to his studies and preparations, and she herself had worried that they weren’t spending enough time studying the various books of lore they were discovering. So she was quite happy to discover that Myraeth had recently received a ring with just such an enchantment laid upon it. Ranthir did not have quite enough money to afford it, but Tee talked it over with the others and they decided it would be in their best interests to pool their resources and help him buy it.

“After all,” Tee said. “The best wizard is a well rested wizard.”

## THE PALE TOWER

They went back to the inn. Ranthir excused himself from Ilumar and joined them in Elestra’s room for a conference. They decided to follow-up on the offer that Edlari had made and go to the Pale Tower to speak with him.

Ranthir poked his head back into his room and spoke with Ilumar, who was more than willing to wait for him to return. Ranthir smiled, nodded, and then ran to catch up with the others.

Standing in the northern reaches of Oldtown, not that far from Pythoness House, the Pale Tower stood in stark contrast to the structures around it, rising up from the midst of a perfumed garden more like a marble monument than a building. The windowless round tower was faultlessly white and seemed to shine as if newly built, and yet there was an air of great age that hung unmistakably about it.

There were two great knockers of gold upon the double doors of godwood at the front of the tower. Tee reached up and clapped one of them loudly.

The doors parted without visible hand, revealing an antechamber of marble. The rune-carved Graven One stepped forward to greet them.

“What business brings you to the Pale Tower?”

“Edlari asked us to seek him here.”

“I see.” The Graven One’s solemn face seemed to smile. “I shall seek him and return.”

At his gesture, they stepped into the antechamber and the outer doors of the tower swung shut behind them. The Graven One turned and went through an inner door. They caught a glimpse of a long hallway beyond it, making it clear that the Pale Tower's interior was vastly larger than its exterior.

A few minutes passed, and then the Graven One returned, leading Aoska through the inner doors.

Aoska smiled. "The Graven One has told me that you seek Edlari." Her voice was like honeyed silk.

"He asked us to seek him here," Tee said.

"He did return here," Aoska stood. "And told us of what you did for him. We thank you for freeing him from so foul an imprisonment. But he has left us again, and stepped through the Jewels so that he might stand once more before the Nine Gods and cleanse his soul of the taint that has been left upon it. He may not return, and Sephranos himself counseled that he should feel no need... but Edlari could not bear the touch of it."

"We know something of the Taint," Tee said. "We have suffered its touch in attempting to cleanse the evil from that place where Edlari was imprisoned."

"I can sense it in you," Aoska said. She seemed to think carefully for a moment. "Come. It is the least that we might do to see that such accounts are set to rights."

She turned and led them through the inner doors, which parted at her approach. They passed in silence through many pillared halls and open gardens, each seemingly more beautiful than the last.

At last, Aoska brought them before great valves of silvered adamantine. She turned to them then and said, "You shall have audience with Sephranos, the First Among the Chosen."

At her touch the doors parted and opened, revealing a hall of ivory and gold. Atop a dais at the far end, upon a throne of mithril, sat a gold-skinned man with white-feathered wings. His eyes were pits of pale blue fire shining out from a face both regal and welcoming.

Aoska approached him and whispered into his ears, and then his eyes were turned upon them. And, most particularly upon Dominic.

"We are honored to give audience to the Chosen of Vehthyl." Sephranos smiled and turned his gaze to all of them. "We thank you all on the behalf of Edlari. We were saddened to see him leave us once again, but glad that he is now free to find his own path again. What boon would you ask of us?"

"When we freed him, Edlari healed us of the dark wounds we had sustained in the place where he had been imprisoned," Tee said humbly. "After he had left to return here, we faced greater dangers and suffered similar wounds. We had hoped that we might find healing here."

"This shall I do for you."

Sephranos raised his hand and a golden light shone forth from it. For a moment it seemed as if they had had lost consciousness – but rather than darkness, it felt as if a bright white light had embraced them.

Then their eyes opened once more and all was as it had been – Sephranos upon his throne and Aoska at his right hand upon the dais. But their wounds had been healed without any lingering trace or ache – and even the soul-hung weariness which had afflicted Tee since using the golden key had passed from her.

Aoska stepped forward and led them out of the hall. As the valves of silvered adamantine swung shut behind

them and Aoska led them back towards the entrance, Tee turned to her. "Aoska, we have in our possession many artifacts that bear the taint. We know that there are many people seeking them for dark purposes, and we can't carry them safely. We know that a hallowed place would serve to hold them and even to cleanse them, but the churches we have approached have turned us away. Is there such a place here in the Pale Tower where they might be kept?"

"We could not bear to have these objects mar the purity of such a place as the Tower," Aoska said.

Tee nodded sadly. "Yes, we've been hearing that a lot."

Aoska smiled. "But there is a place in the Temple District. A hallowed vault and sanctuary where such items may be kept."

They couldn't help but notice, as Aoska gave Tee the directions to this vault, that their path back through the



Pale Tower was not the same path by which they had come.

"There's something else," Tee said, hesitantly.

"What is it?" Aoska smiled encouragingly.

"We... lost some of the tainted artifacts," Tee struggled to find the words and then, like a pent-up river bursting its dam, babbled the rest of it. "We were ambushed by chaos cultists. They were led by someone named Wuntad."

"I know the name," Aoska said. "A minor cultist of some recent years. We had thought he had long since fled the city."

"He's back," Agnarr said gruffly.

"Is there anything you can do?" Tee asked.

"Perhaps," Aoska said. "But there are many things of greater import to concern the powers of the Pale Tower. There are many such cultists, and their danger is not to be dismissed. But there are also larger dangers in this world."

The thought of that didn't sit comfortably with Tee, and she found herself changing the topic. "I was also wondering if you knew Eida Laevantha. I have met her and she once mentioned that she had affairs with the Pale Tower."

"Yes, I know her," Aoska said. "Our paths have crossed often in the Dreaming."

And then they were back at the entrance of the Tower and saying their farewells to both Aoska and the Graven One (who waited there still).

### REDEMPTION FOR THE COBBLEDMAN

It seemed quite strange to emerge out of the marbled wonders of the Pale Tower onto the common streets of Ptolus, but after taking a moment to orient themselves they decided that – since they were in Oldtown in any case – they should return to Pythoness House together

and try to bring the Cobbledman to the Brotherhood of Redemption.

They found the Cobbledman sleeping in his tower again. Tee gently waked him (from a safe distance) and explained that they had found people who could help him. "You don't have to live like this any more."

The Cobbledman seemed trepidatious, but also hopeful. He followed them down to the Guildsman District, and there they placed him in the Brotherhood's care. Ranthir gave him one last iron ration and, as they left, he was munching it contentedly.

### THE FATE OF PHON

They headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel and then split up again: Ranthir returned to his room (where Iltumar was still reading). Agnarr decided that he was going to return to the caverns of the Clan of the Torn Ear. Dominic retired to his room to study the *Book of Vehthyl*.

Elestra went out into the streets. Most of the city was still captivated by the story of what Rehobath had done the day before. The newssheets had dubbed him the Novarch-in-Exile and public opinion seemed evenly split on whether Rehobath's actions were weal or woe.

But Elestra also discovered that the day before Rehobath's pronouncement, there had been another Flayed Man killing in the Warrens... and there were many whispers of worry coursing through the city.

There had been another atrocity that day, too: A house in the Temple District had burned down. Three dead bodies had been found inside and the rumor of the street was that the Balacazars were responsible.

A sickening suspicion entered into Elestra's head, and asking further she confirmed it: The house had been Helmut's. It appeared that Phon was dead.

# SESSION 24 – LET SLIP THE HOUNDS OF GHUL

June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008

The 11<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Tor left the Ghostly Minstrel and turned north towards the Temple District, heading towards the Outer Cathedral. In the three weeks since he had come to Ptolus, he had felt a deep frustration growing in his heart. He had left his home and his family to become a knight and follow the path of honor. But he had found little of the certainty he had hoped for traveling with these strange companions that the mage Ritharius had sent him to. They were good people – of that he was certain, although there had been times when he had doubted – but they seemed lost in a time when he desperately needed direction.

And so he was intent in seeking out Sir Kabel Dathim, the leader of the Order of the Dawn. He had seen Sir Kabel's cold reaction to the proclamations of Rehobath and this had, for whatever reason, created some sense of trust in him.

When he arrived at the Cathedral, Tor spoke with one of the lesser priests and was led to Sir Kabel's quarters. The priest knocked on the door, entered, and returned only moments later to usher Tor forward and shut the door behind him.

Sir Kabel's quarters were small, but well-furnished. An inner door led to what was most likely a bedroom, and the main chamber into which Tor stepped served as both an office and a lounge of sorts. Sir Kabel was sitting at his desk, but as Tor entered he closed a thin ledger, rose, and crossed towards the couch.

"Sir Kabel." Tor bowed deeply. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me."

Sir Kabel returned the bow with a nod and then sat down on the couch, motioning Tor to a nearby chair. "Sir Torland of Barund, if I remember correctly? We spoke of horses at Harvestime, did we not?"

"Yes, but I am no knight, sir."

"Truly?" Sir Kabel raised his eyebrows. "Yet you bear a sword at your side and you carry yourself like a warrior."

"I am trained in the blade," Tor said. "But I belong to no order."

"Would you like to?"

Tor couldn't contain the grin which erupted across his face. "That's why I've come to you!"

But now Kabel's face, which had been drawn in thought and consideration, became clouded with suspicion. "You're in league with the Chosen of Vehthyl, aren't you?"

Tor's grin dropped away and he chose his next words carefully. "He has recently been my companion."

"How recently?"

"A few weeks."

"And what do you think of the Novarch-in-Exile?"

Kabel couldn't keep the contempt out of his voice.

"I think he's dangerous," Tor said plainly. "And I don't trust him. I don't think Dominic trusts him, either."

"And yet he stood at Rehobath's side."

"He didn't know what Rehobath was planning. None of us did."

Kabel nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think Dominic is truly the Chosen of Vehthyl?"

"I don't know. I don't think he knows." Tor shrugged. "But he bears the signs. That's no trick."

Kabel grunted and then stood up. He circled behind the couch and began pacing, his words coming thoughtfully. "I don't trust Rehobath. He claims to speak with the voices of the Gods, but the Gods speak through the Church and he would raise himself against it. I serve the Church. Not him." He turned to Tor. "I'm not sure what to make of your friend, either. I would squire you into the Order of the Dawn, but as part of that I must ask you to keep a wary eye on Dominic."

Tor frowned. "I won't betray my friends."

"I'm not asking you to," Kabel said. "Are not two of my men – men who are more loyal to Rehobath than me – already standing guard at

the Ghostly Minstrel? And you can be sure that those are not the only eyes that Rehobath has on him. I am only interested in making sure that Dominic himself does not turn against the Church."



Tor had to think deeply, but in the end he believed that what Sir Kabel said was true. Or, at least, true enough. "I can agree to that."

"Then come with me."

Sir Kabel led Tor out of the Cathedral and into the large complex of Church-owned buildings just to the north.

This complex was capped by the Godskeep, which housed the Order of the Dawn. At first, Tor thought he was being taken there, but instead Sir Kabel stopped in the small practice field just outside the keep's southern gate.

A handful of knights were scattered here and there, practicing or skirmishing. Sir Kabel went over to the racks of practice weapons and pulled down two wooden swords. He tossed one of them to Tor. Tor caught it out of the air.

"I'll rest on little ceremony here," Kabel said. "This is your First Trial of Arms. We'll begin with the Test of the Blade. Strike me. If you can."

Tor attacked... and Kabel easily parried the thrust. "Good form. Controlled, yet fierce."

Tor feinted to the left and then slashed to the right. Kabel almost completely ignored the feint and easily parried the slash, but Tor deflected his blow and plunged the point of his blade toward's Kabel's chest. Kabel was forced to twist his own sword in order to parry the follow-thru. "Excellent!"

Tor backed off half a pace and then quickly brought a strong blow down directly towards Kabel's head, but Kabel was quick enough to shift his footwork, right his form, and block the blow.

"Enough!" Kabel cried, disengaging. "Now for the Test of the Shield. Defend yourself!"

Tor loosed the shield from his back and lowered himself into a defensive posture. Sir Kabel unleashed a withering flurry of attacks, and although Tor blocked many of them, Kabel's sword seemed to constantly find the weak points in his defense.

After several exchanges, Kabel stepped back again. "I'm impressed. It's clear you have had little formal training, but your instincts are strong and you have clearly been tested by the true heat of battle. The Order would be honored to have you serve as its squire."

Kabel drew out a ring marked with the sigil of the Order of the Dawn and gave it to Tor.

Tor's heart leapt. It was the dream he had sought, but scarcely hoped for. He quickly made arrangements with Sir Kabel to return once every other day for his training, and then made his way back towards the Ghostly Minstrel.

### AGNARR'S ABORTED MISSION

Agnarr headed across Delver's Square to Ebbert's and purchased a variety of supplies, particularly a large bulk

of raw meat and other food supplies. Loading all of it into his *bag of holding*, he set out for Greyson House: His intention was to travel down to the caverns of the Clan of the Torn Ear, gift them with the food supplies, and then practice sparring with them. The fact that he spoke none of their tongue dissuaded him not at all.

Once he made his way into the tunnels beneath Greyson House, however, he found them unexpectedly disturbed: The pit of chaos had been covered over with a thick layer of stone... albeit a layer of stone which now seemed to be slowly bubbling and boiling away as a result of the powerful forces of primal chaos trapped beneath it.

Agnarr doused his flaming sword and proceeded carefully down the hallway. As he approached the complex where the bloodwights had nested, he heard many voices and the muffled sounds of some activity.

Toying with the idea of brazenly entering the complex and confronting the intruders, Agnarr instead decided for prudence. He retreated silently back to Greyson House and returned to the Ghostly Minstrel.

### THE MEETING OF ALL THINGS

Having returned from the Pale Tower and the Brotherhood of Redemption, Tee pulled Ranthir aside and spoke with him regarding the golden key they had recovered from Pythoness House. It was the only direct connection they had to their missing memories, and Tee felt strongly that they should pursue it as rigorously as possible. She wanted Ranthir to research it at the Delver's Guild Library as soon as possible.

But as they discussed it, they realized that they had a wider need to take stock of what they had accomplished, analyze what remained to be done, and make some hard decisions – as a group – regarding what their immediate and long-term goals should be.

As the others returned to the inn, therefore, they gathered them together in Elestra's room.

Tee asked the most important question: What are our immediate goals?

**Iron Mage and the Hammersong Vaults.** Ranthir pointed out that they had only two firm commitments: The Iron Mage had asked them to collect a crate from the *Freeport's Sword* on the 21<sup>st</sup>. And, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, they would gain access to their Hammersong Vaults.

Elestra, looking at the calendar, realized it was her own birthday. She had completely lost track of time.

Tee grinned, "My birthday is on the 14<sup>th</sup>."

**The Golden Key.** Tee again raised the issue of the golden key, and the others agreed that Ranthir should research it as soon as possible.

"Should we use the key to open the Vaults?" Elestra asked.

Tee shook her head emphatically. “It’s too dangerous. It felt like it was draining the very life out of me. It could almost certainly kill any of us. Since we’re going to be able to access the vaults without using it, I think it’s better if we just wait.”

**Ghul’s Labyrinth.** Dominic mentioned Ghul’s Labyrinth. “Should we finish exploring down there?”

“And there was still a lot of treasure we needed to recover,” Tee pointed out.

Ranthir pulled out the carefully executed map he had been drawing during their explorations. He pointed out the areas they hadn’t fully explored yet, including the sealed vault door they hadn’t been able to get past. “We could also get rid of the tainted items Mistress Tee is carrying.”

Tee emphatically agreed with that idea. And she was also in favor of taking the time to loot the more cumbersome treasures: Her own funds, in particular, were once again beginning to dwindle.

At this point Agnarr mentioned that he had just gotten back from the tunnels beneath Greyson House.

Tee was shocked. “What were you doing down there? Why did you go down there alone?!”

Agnarr quickly explained what his plan had been.

“You don’t speak goblin!”

Agnarr shrugged. “But I wasn’t the only one down there.” And he quickly explained what he had seen.

Ranthir pointed out that they had sold the location of the orrery, and that it was probably just workers from House Erthuo retrieving it. Tee agreed that it was likely, but they all agreed that they should confirm that sooner rather than later.

**The Night of Dissolution.** Then began the bulk of the evening’s work: The reading, sorting, and analyzing of the mass of paperwork – letters, notes, maps, books, and the like – that they had accumulated over the past several weeks.

Tee called their particular attention to the Night of Dissolution.

The first reference had been found among Helmut’s astronomical predictions: “The key is found. The lost shall be found. The night of dissolution comes when the barbarians arrive.”

Then a reference in Maquent’s journal from Pythoness House: “Radanna and her friends have become obsessed with the ‘Night of Dissolution’. They will speak of almost nothing else. They are convinced that the ‘coming changes have arrived’.” And later in the same journal: “The cultists say the hidden weapons will strike down their enemies on the Night of Dissolution. I no longer care. Their true future is too entwined with chaos to foretell with any accuracy. Perhaps what they say is true. I do sense great changes in the next few years.”

One of the minotaurs beneath Pythoness House had also said: “Ah, the Night of Dissolution is come at last!” As if they had expected to be awakened only when that night had come.

And in *The Truth of the Hidden God*, one of the chaos lorebooks they had discovered, the last few pages were a prophetic rambling of sorts, beginning with the words: “In the days before the Night of Dissolution shall come, our pretenses shall drop like rotted flies. In those days the Church shall be broken, and we shall call our true god by an open name.” The book went on to describe the faux religious practices for a fanciful “Rat God”, with the apparent intent that a church could be openly established for this “god”. Eventually, the prophecies say, even this “last pretense” would be abolished and “Abthoth shall be worshipped by all who are not blooded by the knife.”

“I’m worried that we’re somehow responsible for bringing about this ‘Night of Dissolution’... whatever it is,” Tee said. “We found the key. And the ‘Church shall be broken’, isn’t that Rehobath has done?”

“It sounds like an apocalypse,” Elestra said. “How can we be responsible for the apocalypse?”

“Well... Are we causing it? Or are we supposed to stop it?” Dominic asked. “Is that what we were trying to do?”

“Maybe the golden key is an essential part of whatever brings the Night of Dissolution about,” Tor suggested. “Maybe we were looking for the key in order to stop the cultists from doing whatever it is they’re doing.”

“If that’s the case,” Tee said, “Then Wuntad is going to come looking for it. And for us.”

“All the more reason we should get out of the Ghostly Minstrel,” Tor said. “Everyone knows we’re here. We should get a house. Try to find some place private.”

“We could move into Pythoness House,” Agnarr suggested.

“It would certainly give me room to study,” Ranthir agreed.

**The Galchutt.** Studying the *Truth of the Hidden God* drew Ranthir’s attention to the Galchutt. The Brotherhood of the Blooded Knife, to which the cult manual was dedicated, practiced blasphemous rituals of human sacrifice. These sacrifices were dedicated to a Galchutt named Abthoth, who the cult venerated as the “Source of All Filth” and the “Lord of the Zaug”.

But the first time they had encountered the name Galchutt was in the final, fragmented pages of Morbion’s journal: “JUIBLEX. HE IS OF THE GALCHUTT. THEY ARE—“

And “Blades of the Galchutt” had also been inscribed on one of the chests beneath Pythoness House. Specifically, the chest containing two matched longswords of blackened steel with hilts carved in the shape of demons’ heads.



This discussion of the Galchutt made Tee remember something: The *Book of Faceless Hate*, the queer volume she'd discovered in Pythoness House and then forgotten about in the chaos which had followed. Ranthir set to work deciphering the hard-to-read text...

### **THE BOOK OF FACELESS HATE**

No title marks the tattered, dark brown cover of this book. Its contents are written in a nearly illegible scrawl that could only have been born of hopeless madness. The first several pages of the book are covered in repetitions and variations of a single phrase: FACELESS HATE. (*They wait in faceless hate. We shall burn in their faceless hate. The faceless hate has consumed me. And so forth...*)

**CHAOS:** True chaos, or “deep chaos”, is a religion based on the fundamental aspects of hate, destruction, death, and dissolution. The philosophy of chaos is one of constant and endless change. It teaches that the current world is a creation of order and structure, but that it was flawed from the dawn of time due to the lack of foresight into what living sentience truly wants and need. The gods of creation – the gods of order – are untouchable and unknowable. They are aloof and uncaring, says the teaching of true chaos.

**THE LORDS OF CHAOS:** According to the book, the Lords of Chaos – or “Galchutt” – are gods of unimaginable power. But they are “mere servants of the true gods of change, the Demon Princes”. It is written that the Galchutt came to serve the Princes during the “War of Demons”, but while the Princes have “left this world behind”, the Galchutt still “whisper the words of chaos”.

**VESTED OF THE GALCHUTT:** Although they sleep, the Galchutt still exert some influence upon the world. This influence can be felt by the faithful through the “touch of chaos” and the “mark of madness”, but it can also be made manifest in one of the “Vested of the Galchutt” – powerful avatars of their dark demi-gods’ strength.

**CHAOS CULTS:** The book goes on to describe (but only in the vaguest of terms) many historical and/or fanciful “cults of chaos” which have risen up in veneration of either the Galchutt, the Vested of the Galchutt, or both. These cults seem to share nothing in common except, perhaps, the search for the “true path for the awakening of chaos”. The book would leave one with the impression that the history of the world has been spotted with the continual and never-ending presence of these cults – always operating in the shadows, save when bloody massacres and destruction bring them into the open.

All of this material suggested a connection between Morbion, the gods worshipped in Ghul’s Labyrinth, and the modern chaos cults.

**Dreaming and Chaos.** Speaking of the worship of chaos, was there a connection between the Dreaming and Chaos?

When they had first awoken in their rooms, both Ranthir and Tee had in their possession copies of a work known as *The Dreaming Arts*. There were also their common experiences with the Dreaming Apothecary.

None of them were entirely sure what the Dreaming was, but they had also seen references to it in the *Notes on the Corruption of Wa’tuel* from the research material they had recovered from Shilukar’s laboratories. The exact nature of the “corruption” remained unclear, but there were references to a “theft of Dreams” and a “severing of the Dreaming” which would “result in an utterly alien character”.

Similarly, Shilukar’s *Notes on the Blood of Ravvan* had contained references to the Dreaming: Those suffering the “dreamless corruption” and “trapped in the Dreaming stasis” appeared to be “more receptive to the whispers of the Beast”.

This discussion reminded Tee and Agnarr of a notebook they had recovered from a reptilian sorcerer named Serrek Tarn in the adventures they remembered immediately prior to their amnesia. Amidst a mad scramble of mathematical notations and geometric enigmas, there had been several legible fragments, including:

“Lessons from the tainted dreaming” (*written in a large bold hand near the top of the notes*)

“Sessural is the depth and the circumference”

“The bastion of purity is not untouched. If it could be destroyed—then victory.”

“The shard has not been found.”

“The inner eye sees all, but all there is it does not see.”

“To see the blackness, one must look into their own soul. The blackness is of the body and the bone and the blood.”

“The dreaming must be made one with reality. The key is the sanctuary; the sanctuary is the key; and the apprentice of the One Who Speaks in Dreams shall be the master’s voice within the world. When he is made whole, the endtimes of the beginning shall renew.”

There seemed to be a connection between the chaos and taint of chaostech and the chaos and taint of the

Galchutt. Was there also a connection between chaositech, the Galchutt, and the “tainted Dreaming”? None of them could guess.

**Silion.** Another name that they had multiple references to was “Silion”. They had first found this name in a letter recovered from Linech Cran’s office: Silion had written to Cran demanding delivery of a shipment (presumably of shivvel). The name Urnest, an associate of Silion’s, had also been mentioned in this letter.

The name had been mentioned again in papers recovered from Shilukar’s lair. A report from Shilukar’s minions had read: “We have been contacted through intermediaries by Silion. They have apparently obtained a bone of iron that requires repair. They inquire as to whether your services might be available?”

Who were Silion and Urnest? And had there been, as Elestra now suggested, some sort of connection between Shilukar and Cran?

This discussion also stirred Dominic’s memory: While discussing the results of their mission to Cran’s with Mand Scheben, Dominic had mentioned the name Silion. Scheben had noted that the name belonged to a lascivious and rather unkempt priestess who ran a small and disreputable temple somewhere down on the Street of the Gods. He had meant to follow up on it, but then Phon had disappeared and it had simply slipped his mind.

**Ravvan.** Sifting through the papers from Shilukar’s lair brought Tee’s thoughts back to the Idol of Ravvan. She considered it to be a major threat, in no small part because the mention of it had clearly given Lord Zavere himself considerable worry.

“We should make it a priority to find the Eyes of Ravvan and the Idol of Ravvan.”

Everyone agreed... but they had no leads.

“Wait a minute,” Tor said. “Could it have been Wuntad who took the idol? The gardener we rescued said that a litorian was among those who had taken it.” And there was litorian among those following Wuntad when he had ambushed them at Pythoness House.

“It’s possible,” Tee nodded. But since they didn’t know where Wuntad was, either, it didn’t help much. Besides, she wasn’t sure that she *wanted* to find Wuntad. Their first meeting had ended poorly.

**Helmut’s Prophecies.** They had found Shilukar by using the prophecies they had discovered at Helmut’s house. That alone made it clear that the prophecies had at least some validity to them. In the hope of finding similar insight, they turned their attention to the rest of these prophecies and collated the following commentaries on them:

*Sitting alone at night. H upon the scope of the sky. A slight flame comes out of the void and makes true that which should not be believed in vain.*

H could be Helmut, the astronomer who “sits upon the scope of the sky”.

*When the crowd gathers upon the hill in the oldest town, the new republic shall be troubled by its people. At this time the lord shall be weak.*

This seemed like a clear description of the Riot in Oldtown. It had led them to the conclusion that Helmut was not just interpreting the prophecies, but working to bring them about or use them to his advantage.

*In the world there will be made a king who will have little peace and a short life. At this time the ship of the Novarch will be lost, governed to its greatest detriment.*

They theorized that “the ship of the Novarch will be lost” could refer to Rehobath declaring himself Novarch-in-Exile – although whether that referred to Rehobath or the Novarch in Seyrun was unclear. If “the ship” referred to the Church, then it could be assumed that Rehobath’s actions would not be to its favor.

Could “the king who will have little peace and a short life” refer to Dominic’s role in Rehobath’s ascension?

*S shall find the golden statue while it still breathes. But the Idol of Ravvan brings doom. His lair lies beneath a vacant lot of brandywine.*

This was the prophecy which had led them to Shilukar’s lair. The “golden statue” most likely referred to Lord Abbercombe.

*They will be driven away for a long, drawn out fight. The countryside will be most grievously troubled. Town and country will have greater struggle. Salesia and Corinthia will have their hearts tried.*

Salesia was the capital of Arathia and Corinthia lay on the eastern edge of the Southern Pass (a city-state jointly held by Arathia, Barund, and Seyrun).

*The wands must be selected before the swords.*

Ranther had found a set of notes jammed into a book at Helmut’s house. These notes included the phrases “What are the staves of Ghul?” and “Asche shall deliver the Swords of the City”. Ranther wondered whether this meant that the staves of Ghul needed to be selected before the Swords of Ptolus... whatever that meant.

*The eye of Ravvan will be forsaken, when his wings will fail at his feet. The two of Ptolus will have made a constitution for Amsyr and Duvei, which the goblins will trample underfoot.*

Duvei was an Arathian city-state. Amsyr was a Vennocan city-state. The identity of the “two of Ptolus” was unclear.

The Eye of Ravvan had been mentioned among Shilukar’s papers and associated with the Idol of Ravvan.

Ranthir raised the possibility that the goblins might “trample underfoot” simply by walking under their feet... in other words, to live underground. So this might be a reference to the Clan of the Torn Ear.

*Arrived too late, the act has been done. The wind was against them, letters intercepted on their way. The conspirators were fourteen of a party. By the street of kings shall these enterprises be undertaken.*

A reference to “brandywine” had led them to Brandywine Street. It was possible that the “street of kings” could refer to the King’s Road in the Nobles’ Quarter.

*How often will you be captured, O city of the sun?  
Changing laws that are barbaric and vain. Bad times approach you. No longer will you be enslaved. Great H will revive your veins.*

*The mimics have seen the lance. Doom.*

When Tee had been struck by madness in Ghul’s Labyrinth, she had been left with two sentences burning in her mind: “The lance is being built. The runebearers will not come in time.”

*The knights out of time shall move again. Their oath shall not be broken, though their dreams lie shattered like their city.*

Tee wondered whether this might refer to the strangely armored figure they had seen on the street outside of Greyson House.

*A coffin is put into the vault of iron, where seven children of the king are held. The ancestors and forebears will come forth from the depths of hell, lamenting to see thus dead the fruit of their line.*

*After combat and naval battle, the great ??? in his highest belfry: Red adversary will become pale with fear, Putting the great Ocean in dread.*

*The elves shall quarrel. Dark out of the depths. Blood shed under silver moonlight*

*Vehthyl and Itor, and the silver joined together. Beyond the depths of the Deeps, one will say the ether trembles.*

Could the first sentence somehow be a reference to Dominic and Urlenius?

Ranthir knew that the Deeps were the mid-point of the Southern Pass. The city of Deeptown lay near their center.

*The rune born of crime (DB???) will walk the clouds.*

This prophecy had led them, inadvertently, to Dullin Balacazar and the unknown catastrophe which had beset the Cloud Theater. (“And let’s not do that again,” Tee said.)

*When they will be close the lunar ones will fail, from one another not greatly distant. Cold, dryness, danger towards the frontiers, Even where the oracle has had its beginning.*

*The key is found. The lost shall be found. The night of dissolution comes when the barbarians arrive.*

Could the key refer to the key they had found in Pythoness House? Could “the lost shall be found” refer to their memories?

“And is Agnarr the barbarian?” Dominic said.

“Well, he’s large,” Tee said. “But I don’t think he’s large enough to count as multiple barbarians.”

“Then perhaps the night hasn’t quite started yet if we aren’t the barbarians this refers to,” Ranthir said.

*The warrens are opened. Great evil pours forth. No seal may be found while the heart remains untouched.*

Could this be a reference to the Banewarrens? There had been two references to them before: The schematics for a “Drill of the Banewarrens” that they had discovered in Ghul’s Labyrinth. And the Prophecy they had found scrawled on the wall of Pythoness House: “The Saint of Chaos shall return and the Banewarrens shall open their maw. And the name of doom shall be Tavan Zith.”

*Within the closed temple the lightning will enter, the citizens within their fort injured. Horses, cattle, men, the wave will touch the wall, through famine, drought, under the weakest armed.*

**The Sealed Box.** Although they had identified the golden key from Pythoness House as their only connection to their lost memories, they realized that

there was another: The sealed box that Ranthir had found in his room after waking up with amnesia.

It was an enigma. And like any lock she couldn't open, it seemed to be taunting Tee.

But Ranthir hadn't entirely forgotten it, either. He had been preparing more powerful spells that could be used to unlock the chest... but they didn't work, either.

They decided on two courses of action for the next day. First, Ranthir would go to the Delver's Guild Library and research the golden key.

The rest of them would go down into Ghul's Labyrinth and check on whoever was down there. After Tee's equipment from the Dreaming Apothecary arrived, they would return to Ghul's Labyrinth and open the doors that had previously eluded her skill.

"And if nothing else, we'll have *finished* something," Agnarr said.

## THE NEXT MORNING

(9/12/790)

But when Tee woke up the next morning, she discovered that the Dreaming Apothecary had finally delivered the items she had purchased. They were laying, neatly displayed, on her bedside table.

There were two small, golden discs designed to be affixed to the temples. Tapping either of the discs caused a scintillating field of golden energy to cover Tee's eye sockets. Although this effect prevented others from seeing her eyes, it enhanced her own vision.

There was an armband of black silk with Tee's dragon sigil embroidered upon it in silver thread – thread that was not merely silver-dyed cloth, but actual woven silver.

And, at first, Tee felt there had been some mistake because there was no sign of the glamoured lockpicks she had requested. Instead, there was a large ring set with a faceted ruby. Closer inspection, however, revealed a tiny trigger near the base of the stone. Pressing the trigger revealed a set of tiny prongs, wires, and other small devices crafted from mithril. Slipping the ring on, Tee found that she could control the minute motions of these precision tools with a mere thought.



Since Tee had received her tools, it was decided that the entire group would first return to Ghul's Labyrinth and finish their explorations there. (As a result, Ranthir's researches into the golden key were delayed.)

Returning to the tunnels beneath Greyson House, they proceeded carefully past the point where the pit of chaos now lay entombed. The stone above it was now visibly warping and buckling, making it clear that the effort to seal away the pool would not last for more than a few more days at most.

But, soon after, their fears regarding the unknown intruders were laid to rest: Drawing near to the former bloodwight nests, Tee could easily distinguish the distinctive sound of elvish voices. Stepping into the open, she confirmed that this was a party of workers and scholars from House Erthuo.

The leader of the Erthuo expedition stepped forward and introduced himself as Faeliel. He grew quite excited when Ranthir introduced himself, shaking his hand vigorously. "Cordelia told me that you might pass this way. I'm most pleased to meet you. Would you like to see what we've accomplished with the orrery?"

Ranthir smiled with delighted surprise and eagerly followed Faeliel. With only a glance he could see that the orrery had already been partially restored.

"That's right," Faeliel said. "We're trying to restore the orrery before moving it so that we can preserve as much of it as possible. The mechanisms are badly damaged, but we're learning a lot by observing it in a relatively unchanged state. This damage over here seems quite extensive and recent, unfortunately."

Ranthir explained about the bloodwight which had burst its way out of the orrery shortly after they discovered it.

"Oh!" Faeliel gasped. "Well... I'm glad we weren't the first ones here, then!"

They both laughed, and then fell into a spirited conversation. Ranthir was able to offer several insights into the workings of the orrery before the others pulled him towards the bluesteel door.

## THE FIRST HOUND OF GHUL

They were careful not to let any of the workers from House Erthuo overhear the password as they passed through the bluesteel door.

Tee had been intermittently obsessing for weeks now over the cryptic mysteries hidden behind the locked secret doors near the alchemical laboratory. Now, with her new tools, she was eagerly looking forward to trying her luck with those locks once again.

But before she did that, as they passed through the first antechamber (where the four colossal statues of Ghul looked down upon them), Tee swung open the double doors leading into the strange and tainted temple of obsidian. Through those doors she hurled every

artifact of tainted chaositech she carried, feeling her very soul lightened by the loss of their burden. With a deep satisfaction, she swung the doors shut behind her and then turned aside towards the laboratories.

One of the secret doors lay in the chamber with four alchemical pits, where the fetid fungus had threatened to overwhelm them in a living, undulating wave. While Agnarr and Tor moved cautiously towards the pits to ensure that no new dangers were breeding in their depths, Tee moved toward the section of the wall where she had discovered the concealed keyhole. Removing the ruby on her new ring, she slid the delicate mechanisms into the keyhole.

With a satisfying click, a section of the wall popped open with a burst of stale air. Sliding the wall panel to one side, Tee revealed the hidden chamber. To one side, a small wooden desk was half-rotten through. To the other, what appeared to have once been large crates had been stacked in the corner, but many of these had collapsed under the weight of many years.

And the sound of deep, laborious breathing echoed through the chamber...

Tee motioned for the others to keep silent and then moved quietly into the room.

She discovered the source of the breathing behind the desk: A large, gracile creature with chocolate-brown fur lay sleeping. Its neck and hind legs were curiously elongated, but it was clearly a hound.

Tee backed her way out of the room and told the others what she had seen. Then she moved back into the room, searching it while being careful not to disturb the dog. Agnarr followed her in to keep an eye on the creature and watch her back.

But as soon as Agnarr laid his eyes on the creature, a huge smile spread across his face. It was his dog! He had spent so much time looking for a faithful hound to rear and train, and now he had found it in the most unexpected of places!

Most of the room's contents had decayed to dust and ruin, but among the shattered boxes Tee found three spears of solid steel and high craftsmanship that she felt might fetch a fair price in the city above. But her persistence paid off particularly when she found a secret compartment hidden inside the ruined remnants of the desk... and, inside the compartment, a half-rotted purse containing several dozen blood-red rubies.

As Tee stood up, slipping the gem purse into her *bag of holding*, Agnarr gestured towards the dog. "Try to wake it up."

Tee gave the barbarian a skeptical look, her thoughts returning to the vicious, yapping, porcelain puppy that Agnarr had last fixated on in his quixotic search for a faithful companion. But she could tell that he wasn't going to be easily dissuaded, so she gave the slumbering dog a half-hearted prod. It didn't stir.

Tee shrugged. "No such luck! Let's go."

She headed towards the door, but Agnarr didn't follow. Instead he sheathed his sword and gave the dog a more powerful prodding with his foot. There was still no response.

With a thoughtful look on his face, Agnarr reached into his own *bag of holding* and pulled out a raw steak. (Tee: "Why do you have raw steak in your bag?" Agnarr: "For the goblins." Tee: "Well... that explains absolutely nothing.") Agnarr waved the steak under the dog's nose.

The dog didn't stir.

But Agnarr was not to be easily dissuaded: Laying the steak down, he grabbed the dog with both his hands and gave it a mighty shake.

The dog's eyes popped open! It lunged at Agnarr's face! Tee, cursing, whipped out her rapier—

... and the dog began ecstatically licking Agnarr's cheek.

## THE SECOND HOUND OF GHUL

A few minutes later, the dog was following Agnarr and the others down the hall towards the far side of the first level. (After a brief discussion they had decided to break through the crudely blockaded hallway they had discovered near the fountain decorated with the statues of three strange-looking hounds, and thus finish their explorations of this upper level.) Agnarr was busily trying out different names for his new dog.

With a wry grin and a wink at Ranthir, Tee said, "What about an elvish name?"

"I'd like that!" Agnarr said.

"Well, C-A-T is the elvish word for 'faithful companion'."

And Agnarr promptly named his dog Seeaeti.

The blockade was formed from large chunks of rock, furniture, shelving, and the like. It had all been stacked in a great, jumbled heap – completely blocking the corridor and clearly designed to either keep something out... or keep it in.

Looking at it again, a fresh debate arose about whether this was a good idea. But, ultimately, their desire to completely explore every nook and cranny of the complex decided the issue for them.

It took Agnarr and Tor, working together, the better part of an hour to clear a crawlspace. After considering its narrow expanse – and thinking back to the disastrous rope-induced bottleneck in Morbion's oozy lair – they spent another hour widening it so that two of them could go through it together (which would hopefully speed any necessary retreat).

Tee was the first one to crawl through. As she emerged into the hall beyond, she suddenly became very aware of the dim light pouring through the narrow opening behind her... and the dark, impenetrable shadows that lay beyond its reach.

Agnarr squeezed through behind her, and his flaming sword extended the light's reach, but Tee was already moving down a side corridor that lay almost immediately to her left. (She wanted to make sure that any side chambers had been cleared before they pushed down the length of the main hall.)

The corridor emptied into a small, empty room. Another narrow hallway left this room and paralleled the main hall that she had left behind. There were tiny pieces of debris scattered thickly across the floor.

Tee stooped low. Tor was coming up the hall behind her now, and by the light of the torch that he carried she realized that she was looking at fragments of furniture and other fixtures... all smashed almost to the point where they had become indistinguishable.

She straightened suddenly and whirled, looking down the length of the second hall: Something had moved down there, just at the limit of her elven sight and heading towards the main corridor. Something large.

Back at the crawlspace, Seeaeti began to growl – his hackles rising even higher and his long neck bunching tautly. Elestra, just pulling herself through the barricade, hissed at Agnarr to keep the dog quiet. But all of Agnarr's focus had followed the hound's. His grip tightened on the hilt of his longsword as his gaze attempted to pierce the shadowy depths of the corridor.

Tee, meanwhile, had motioned Tor to silence and headed back down the side passage towards the others. But she had barely opened her mouth to whisper what she had seen than her head whipped around: A heavy, tapping, clacking noise had echoed ever-so-softly and ever-so-distinctly down the hall.

Everyone fell silent. Impossibly, the shadows seemed to deepen. And then, out of the darkness, the second hound of Ghul appeared: It was a bony, undead thing. At its shoulder, it stood nearly twice as tall as Agnarr. Four interlocking, razor-sharp sabered fangs punctuated a jaw of jagged teeth. Its claws were nearly as large. Its bones were thick and at the end of a long, sinuous tail was a bulbous ball of bone twice the size of a grown man's skull.

"By the gods..." Elestra murmured, utterly taken aback.

With a roar, Agnarr charged. But the hound's tail lashed out and the bulb of bone smashed into his side, hurling him into the wall. With a groan, Agnarr slid to a crouch on the floor, trying to find his bearings.

Tee and Tor came running around the corner, skidding to a halt at the sight of the skeletal hound. Elestra fumbled for her crossbow. But the creature was drawing closer to Agnarr now; its maw gaping wide; its fangs reaching out for the throat of the staggering barbarian—

"STOP!"

They all turned to look at Ranthir – perched halfway through the crawlspace with one hand stretched out

towards the skeletal hound... which had now frozen in mid-stride. There was a moment of perfect silence, and then Ranthir lowered his hand and scrambled the rest of the way out of the crawlspace.

While the others watched with some mixture of amazement, confusion, and bemusement, Ranthir walked down the length of the hall and stopped near the creature, examining it closely. "Hmm... Interesting!"

"What did you do?" Elestra asked.

"Hmm?" Ranthir turned to look at them. "Oh! Well, it's a rather simple necromantic creation. It's mindless... or nearly so, at any rate. So I simply took control of its ley lacings and—"

"What is it?"

"It's the skeleton of a ghulworg. Or, at least, I think it is. They have long been thought to be either extinct or legendary. They were either related to the worgs, created from worgs, or the ancestors of modern worgs... the lineage is rather confused. If this creature were still living, the blood in its veins would be boiling hot – protecting it from fire and making it immune to cold. It is even said that the blood could scald attackers who were foolish enough to attack it. But if you look here--" Ranthir gestured lightly and the ghulworg skeleton snapped its jaws shut and lowered its head to him. "You can see that it's bones have been laced with adamantine. That could only have been done after death."

## RAMPAGING THROUGH THE LABYRINTH

"We should kill it now!" Elestra said.

"Wait a minute," Tee said with a thoughtful look. "Let's not be hasty. How long can you keep this thing under control, Ranthir?"

"At least a day," Ranthir said. "And I could always prepare the same spell again tomorrow."

"So you could keep it under your control indefinitely?"

Ranthir nodded.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Dominic said, eyeing the ghulworg warily.

They thought it was a great idea.

Just down the hall there was a door that even Agnarr's stout shoulder couldn't open. They had the ghulworg smash it open. Inside they discovered nearly a half dozen orc corpses and the half-rotted remains of a barricade.

"They must have locked themselves in here to escape the ghulworg," Agnarr said, moving between the skeletal remains with his sword drawn.

When the undead orcs began to rise up from the floor a few moments later, they beat a hasty retreat and sent the ghulworg in to smash them to sepulchral dust.

Around the corner they found a large room filled with a shallow pool of blackish, brackish liquid. After a brief examination, Ranthir determined the liquid was the



diluted remains of necromantic fluid. Although the pool still radiated with the faint traces of necromantic energy – and would have once been a powerful tool for creating undead – it was now no more than a curiosity.

There was a side-chamber overlooking the pool which proved of little interest, but everyone's attention was immediately arrested when Tee discovered a secret passage leading away from the pool room.

The ghulworg was barely able to squeeze into the passage, but with Tee and Ranthir leading the way it followed loyally behind.

Halfway down the passage, they found the broken remains of a black centurion hanging from its rack of machinery. The centurion didn't stir at Tee's approach, but they all had dark memories of their last encounter with these constructs. Just to be safe, they used the ghulworg to batter it to pieces.

The far end of the passage ended in what appeared to be the back side of another secret door... but Tee wasn't able to figure out any way of opening it. With a shrug, she had Ranthir bring the ghulworg forward and smash through it.

The door opened into the chamber where, a couple weeks earlier, they had discovered a chamber rigged with dozens of arrows that fired automatically. They had been somewhat puzzled to discover that the arrows would strike everything in the chamber *except* the person who had triggered the trap, but now Tee was able to unravel the mystery: One of the arrows was designed to hang loosely out of the wall and pulling that arrow would have opened the secret door. She theorized that the trap must have been built as an escape route: Someone fleeing down the hallway could trigger the trap, kill their most immediate pursuers, and then escape through the secret door.

"Does anyone else find it disturbing that someone felt there was a serious chance they might need to run away?" Tor asked.

"Given what I've seen, *I* want to run away," Elestra said.

Ranthir had the ghulworg squeeze his way out into the hallway and the rest of them circled up to discuss their next option. They briefly considered the idea of taking the ghulworg down to the lower level and using it to smash open the sealed vault. ("And then we could take it and smash open the Hammersong Vaults!" Elestra joked.) But they eventually decided it was too risky... the ghulworg might be destroyed by the lightning rods!

Instead they returned to the construct laboratories on the second level and used the ghulworg to haul up the heavy loot they had been forced to leave behind – the adamantine-edged Drill of the Banewarrens; the workshop tools; and the construct elements.

They stacked all of this material just inside the bluesteel door leading back to the bloodwight complex. (If nothing else, Tee was more comfortable with the idea of having hired laborers potentially lugging it up to the surface from there, rather than trying to lead them deeper into the dangerous and unpredictable complex.)

Although the ghulworg had made moving the material possible, all of them had taken part in the labor one way or another and now they were beginning to feel their exhaustion. They discussed returning to the surface, but Elestra thought she might have a better option: Turning to the nearest wall she sung softly under her voice, calling on the Spirit of the City to open one of the hidden ways to her.

The bricks of the wall turned upon themselves and twisted back to form an open arch. Beyond the arch there lay a circular chamber of worn stone, furnished with a variety of couches and chairs in the center of the room and curtain-veiled beds around its circumference.

# SESSION 25 – THE SECOND END OF GHUL’S LABYRINTH

June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

They stepped forward into Elestra’s sanctuary. The wall closed behind them, transforming itself into a fireplace with a crackling fire already lit. Directly above the fire, a mirror was hung.

“What is this place?” Tee asked.

“A secret,” Elestra said, looking around with a sense of vague familiarity overwhelming her. “I think I’ll be able to open a doorway to this place no matter where we might be. We should be safe here. No one can see the entrance from the outside.”

Ranthir, too, was struck by the familiarity of the place. Following some instinct he turned suddenly towards the mirror above the fire. Touching it, he was surprised to see the mirror’s surface suddenly frost over. When it cleared a moment later, it was a transparent window looking out into the hallway they had just left. They could see the ghulworg skeleton crouched there, waiting patiently for their return.

“What did you do?” Dominic asked, looking slightly alarmed.

“I don’t know...” Ranthir said contemplatively. “It just seemed like the right thing to do...”

“Well, at least this way we don’t have to worry about getting ambushed when we decide to leave,” Agnarr said.

Dominic started poking at random things around the room. “If it worked for Ranthir it might work for me...”

Tee smiled and took over where Dominic left off, giving the room a quick and cursory search without turning up anything of particular interest.

Tor, meanwhile, had counted the beds. There were just enough. “Well, at least I won’t have to bunk with Agnarr again.”

## EXPLORING EVERY CORNER

(09/13/790)

The next morning they returned to the stairs and headed down to the second level. There was still one small section of the complex that they had not yet explored: The hallway beyond the torture chamber from which the undead horror with long, blood-sucking claws had come.

There they found a long hall containing a table of black stone and massive, yet elegant, high-backed chairs. There was also a large aubrey of preserved oak containing a large number of silver goblets and three bottles of ancient orcish bloodwine – all perfectly

preserved by one of the many preservation spells which had been laid on these halls.

Unfortunately, these preservation spells had turned the next chamber – an office of some sort – into a rather gruesome scene: The large desk on the far side of the room had been smashed into two pieces, which lay upon a once-luxurious carpet which had been horribly stained and soiled... and so laden with blood that it squished beneath their feet.

Fresh blood made them nervous, so Agnarr was nominated to check it out. He found the desk to be nothing but splintered wood, but as he backed away cautiously he suddenly gasped in pain as a sharp blade lacerated his ribs from behind.

A black centurion had silently entered through the far door and taken them all by surprise as it lunged out of the flickering shadows cast by the flames of Agnarr’s sword. There was a moment of fear at the sight of such a deadly opponent... but then they realized that they were still being followed diligently by the ghulworg.

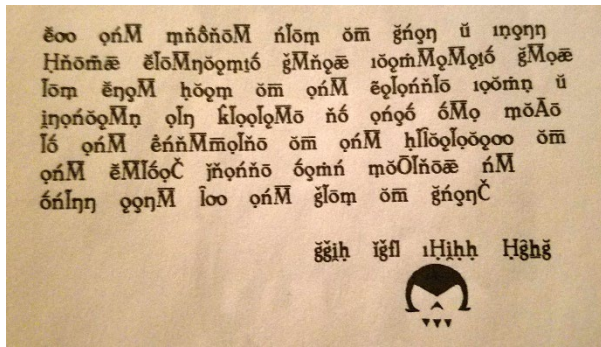
Agnarr backed away from the centurion, carefully parrying its blows. And then the ghulworg leapt in, smashing it to bits in mere moments.

Pushing through the door the centurion had come from, they discovered a small complex essentially identical to the one in which they had fought the other centurions. In fact, several more centurions were already in the process of activating. But their numbers made little difference: The ghulworg made short work of them.

In fact, the group showed such little concern over the matter that Tee was already searching the blood-soaked office before the last centurion fell. In the floor, under the oozing carpet, she found a hidden safe.

A safe meant there might be something particularly valuable. So, with a fair degree of excitement, Tee quickly broke the combination and spun the door of the safe open.

She was somewhat disappointed to discover that the safe was almost entirely empty. The only thing it contained, in fact, was a heavy roll of parchment. Unrolling it she discovered a text of thick, reddish-black Orcish characters. Despite being written in Orcish, the entire document appeared to be elegantly scribed. Near the bottom of the page an immense black seal had been set and impressed in the wax was a familiar skull-shaped sigil. A piece of black-and-gold ribbon had also been attached to the wax.



Tee handed the scroll to Ranthir, who quickly deciphered it using a quick bit of legerdemain:

By the divine hand of Ghul – Skull King, Banelord’s Heir, Sorcerer’s Get, and Blue Lord of the Arathian Stock – Ulthorek tal Yattaren is thus set down as the Chieftain of the Laboratory of the Beast. Within such domain, he shall rule by the Hand of Ghul.

GHUL THE SKULL KING



“Interesting,” Elestra said. “Is it worth anything?”

“If that’s actually Ghul’s signature and seal, it might be worth quite a lot, actually,” Tee said... although she was doubtful that Ranthir would be willing to part with it. (In fact, he had already slipped it into one of his many pouches.)

They were now confident that they had mapped out every corner of the complex (with the exception of whatever might be inaccessible behind the various bluesteel doors they had discovered), which meant that there were only a few loose ends left for them to investigate.

They started with the vault they had unsuccessfully attempted to break into before. The four iron rods, each topped by a ball of brass, still stood in the corners of the room – menacing only because of their vivid memory of the electrical bolts which Agnarr had triggered twice before.

While the others kept to a safe distance, Tee tried to access the vault door using the magical properties of her new ring... but this failed spectacularly, and she only narrowly managed to dodge the worst of the electrical bolts she triggered in the attempt.

With a shrug, Tee got to her feet and left the room. A few moments later, the ghulworg had smashed down the vault doors (although many of its bones were visibly

blackened from the electrical storm it suffered in the process).

They were very disappointed, however, to discover that their painful efforts had been in vain. The walls of the iron-shod vault were lined with numerous shelves both large and small, covered with small, carefully-crafted niches which were each clearly designed to hold some unique item. But all of the niches were now empty.

## BACK TO THE CLAN CAVES

Which left only the seemingly bottomless pit at the center of the massive, silvery-grey pool.

Using her *boots of levitation*, Tee “walked” her way across the ceiling above the pool and then dropped down to the walkway circling the pit. Behind her she could hear Elestra trying to convince the others that they should start prying out the glowgems on the ceiling. She shook her head in exasperation and made her way around the edge of the pit, carefully keeping her distance from the familiar brass-tipped rods of iron positioned around the walkway.

Halfway around the perimeter she noticed that a line of pitons had been driven ladder-like into the wall of the pit. Even with her keen elven vision, Tee couldn’t see how far down they might go.

She called out to the others, telling them what she had seen. They decided to see where the pitons might lead. Elestra transformed into a hawk and flew the *boots of levitation* back and forth, allowing the others to safely cross the pool one at a time.

They climbed down the pitons. After more than a hundred feet, they ended at a narrow fissure that cracked the otherwise smooth sides of the pit.

There was still no bottom in sight below them. Tee, who had taken back her *boots of levitation*, used them to descend another 500 feet and still couldn’t see any end to the sheer shaft.

She returned to the others and they decided to pursue the path of the pitons. Squeezing through the fissure they worked their way through a series of tight caves that gradually widened as they delved deeper. For awhile they were able to walk in a rather cramped fashion, but then the caves narrowed again and they found themselves crawling for a long while.

At last, they crawled their way out into a larger passage that – as they stood up, brushed themselves off, and stretched – looked rather familiar. Turning to the right, they quickly confirmed their suspicions as they entered a cave with a familiar message written in Goblin upon the wall: “These caves belong to the Clan of the Torn Ear.”

They were surprised, however, to find that the holy symbols of Veththyl and Itor had been written on the wall directly beneath the familiar greeting.

They were still discussing what this might mean when a goblin entered the cave. They didn't recognize her, but she certainly recognized them. She told them that she had just come from the fungal farms, but she would be more than happy to take them to Crashekka and Itarek.

Passing through the siege gate, they entered the Great Hall of the clan. Crashekka sat in her place of honor at the far end of the hall, and Itarek stood beside her. They greeted the heroes with wide, toothy grins.

"Welcome, heroes of the world above!" Crashekka said. And then Itarek strode forward and shook their hands, a custom that they had inadvertently taught to him.

Tee carefully asked them about the holy symbols they had seen, not certain of what their reaction might be. But Itarek seemed more than happy to explain. "Our tribe has been touched by the gods of the holy man," he said, gesturing towards to Dominic (who fidgeted nervously). "I was the first to receive their visions, but many have dreamed their words. And there are greater wonders, too."

He took them to the maiden's chambers where Dominic had saved the lives of the tribe's woman. There he showed them newborn goblins, each bearing a sigil of one of the Nine Gods.

Dominic's brow furrowed. "Does this mean I need to stay and teach them?"

"I don't think so," Tee said, but she couldn't really keep the concern out of her voice. She wasn't sure what any of this might mean.

When the question was put to Itarek, he shook his head. "No. I know you have your own path to follow in the world above. And we shall have to find our own path to the Gods' Truth."

## THE SURGEON STRIKES BACK

They left the clan caves and returned to the Laboratory of the Beast. As they passed the large sigil of Ghul on the first level of the complex, however, they heard voices coming from the antechamber. Motioning for the others to stay back, Tee stealthed her way forward.

The door to the temple of obsidian was open.

Tee waved for Ranthir and the ghulworg to come forward. They tried to keep their approach quiet, but between the awkward wizard and the massive creature of bone-and-adamantine it wasn't clear which was less discreet. After a particularly loud noise, the voices coming from the temple suddenly stopped.

Tee signaled them to stop and then moved quickly to her left and hid behind one of the large statues of Ghul.

She was just in time. A moment later, a strangely horrific creature emerged from the short hall leading to the temple. The lower portion of its body had been replaced with an artificial creation of steel and flesh

resembling a giant spider. An ogre's upper torso jutted up from this spider-like body in front of a large, bulbous abdomen. The ogre's arms had been replaced with two large, blood-encrusted blades. Its entire torso was covered in a thick shell of adamantine.

The spider-ogre glanced around the antechamber and then began slowly circling the perimeter. Tee quickly began climbing up the statue she was hiding behind, hoping to avoid the perimeter search.

This worked, and the spider-ogre passed her by. But there was little chance that it would miss Ranthir and the ghulworg standing in plain sight down the next hallway. Tee wracked her mind, but she couldn't think of anything to do.

It didn't matter. As the spider-ogre reached the hall, Ranthir sent the ghulworg on a charge. With a single, bone-crushing snap of its jaws, the ghulworg bit the spider-ogre's head off.

It had happened so quickly that the spider-ogre had not even a moment to respond. Not so much as a gurgle had escaped its throat. They all froze in a moment of silence, waiting to see what would happen.

And then a voice came from the temple: "Is everything... all... right?"

It was the distinctive, buzzing drone of Ribok – the servant of the Surgeon in the Shadows.

Tee tried to bluff her way through it, assuming a deep voice and calling back: "Everything's fine."

There was a moment's pause. And then Ribok spoke again: "Mistress Tithenmamiwen?"

Tee cursed under her breath. Ranthir waved his hand and webbed the hallway leading to the temple.

"Yes, Ribok. It's me," Tee said.

"And my... ogre?"

"Dead."

"I see..." There was another pause. "Perhaps an... accord... could be reached?"

In other circumstances, Tee might have considered that. But there was a terrible suspicion growing in her mind. "What happened to the workers from House Erthuo?"

A long pause came here.

"They will no longer trouble... anyone... in this world."

"Neither will you."

They used the ghulworg to form the center of a "wall of death", with Tor and Agnarr slowly burning their way forward through the web.

As they approached the temple doors, however, sudden waves of fire from the modified Shuul dragon rifles they had left in the temple suddenly washed over them. This burned away the last of the web, but also scorched them badly... and filled them with the dread certainty that the powerful chaostech they had left in the temple would soon be turned against them.

A brief melee broke out around the doorway. There were two rifle-wielding thugs there – their muscles bulging out to an unnatural size and in unnatural locations. Jagged shards of bone jutted out of at their elbows and knees and shoulders. The bones of their hands, too, stuck out in scythe-like protrusions which they used to slice viciously at any bit of exposed flesh. A half dozen more of these thugs stood further back in the chamber, and Ribok himself stood atop the highest terrace in the room.

Tor finally cut down one of the thugs. The other two fell back, joining the rest of the thugs as they suddenly broke for the sides of the chamber.

Agnarr grinned. If they were going to hold back like that, then they could just send the ghulworg in and—

Suddenly chaostech arrows shot out from the sides of the chamber, turned sharply in mid-air, and rushed towards Tor and Agnarr.

“That’s what those do?!” Tee cried in outrage. “I should have kept them!”

“They were tainted,” Dominic pointed out.

“I don’t care!” Tee said.

As Tee’s joking suggested, they were still feeling pretty confident. But things took a rapid turn for the worse: Ribok thrust the glass sphere filled with black liquid above his head and shattered it. The thick, viscous liquid poured down over his body, forming itself into the thick, black hide of a hideous demon. The metal of his implanted eyes melted away, revealing empty sockets filled with flame.

“The Galchutt have seen all that you intend!” he cried, his voice transformed into a bass thunder. And lowering his out-stretched hand, he began launching soul-rending arcane energies lancing down the hall.

In the confusion of the moment, the party’s battle formation foundered into something of a muddle. No one seemed certain whether they should be pushing their attack as planned or retreating to regroup under the unexpected conditions, and so they waffled in the middle as arrows continued arcing unnaturally around the corner and the demonic blasts of the Ribok demon burst in their midst.

Agnarr was the first to fall, dodging a volley of arrows but getting caught by a blast of dragon rifle fire in the narrow hall.

Even as Agnarr fell, however, Tor was able to cut down the second rifle-wielder and advanced into the temple itself.

But just as it seemed like he might be able to rally them, Ranthir was caught by one of Ribok’s blasts. And as Ranthir slid to the floor...

The ghulworg skeleton went feral.

Tee cursed loudly. Tor, realizing the danger and hoping to control the battlefield, turned and slammed the doors of the temple shut behind himself.

Seeing the massive doors cut off their sight of Tor was disconcerting for the others, but they had little time to worry about it. The ghulworg was creating complete chaos. The bony bulb of its tail had smashed Dominic to the floor, crushing his ribs and knocking him unconscious, before the priest even realized what was happening.

Tee, with little choice, drew her longsword and attacked... but the adamantine-laced bones of the creature turned the blade easily. Before she could try again, the creature’s claws lashed out and raked from sternum to hip. Tee collapsed in a froth of blood.

But Tee’s attack had been worth it, buying Elestra enough time to dive for Ranthir. Laying her hand on his unconscious form, she let the strength of the city flow into him.

Ranthir opened his eyes, muttered an arcane syllable... and the ghulworg was once again under his control.

The wizard stood up. “I’ve had enough,” he said with a grim determination. With a wave of his hand, he sent the ghulworg charging down the hall. It smashed into the doors.

On the other side of the doors, Tor – who had been fighting an entirely defensive battle with his back pressed up against the door and blocking as many blows as he could with his shield – was uncertain what to think. But then Elestra cried out, “Tor! Open the doors!”

Tor swung the doors wide and the ghulworg bounded into the temple.

The Ribok demon fell back, but the ghulworg’s tail lashed out and smashed into him. The demonflesh encasing Ribok seemed to deform, and the horrendous sounds from cracking of bone and ripping of sinew echoed against the obsidian walls. With a horrible, unintelligible curse, Ribok vanished in a flash of light.

The remaining thugs fell upon the ghulworg and finally succeeded in hacking his splintering and broken bones apart.

But the ghulworg had bought the rest of them enough time to get Agnarr back on his feet. He rushed down the hall to Tor’s aid, and – without Ribok’s demonic assistance – the bone-sharded thugs proved no match for them.

They were shown no mercy.

## BLOOD ON THE ORRERY

As Dominic and Elestra began healing their remaining wounds (and Ranthir mourned the loss of the powerful ghulworg), Tee grabbed Agnarr and ran back down the hall to check on the workers from House Erthuo.

The scene they found was gruesome: Bodies were scattered throughout the first two chambers of the bloodwight complex, many in various states of dismemberment. Faeliel’s body was spread-eagled

across the orrery itself, dripping blood down upon the silver spheres.

Ranthir, coming upon the scene, eased Faeliel's body to the ground. With tears welling in his eyes, he turned back to the others with a crack in his voice. "He wouldn't have wanted the mechanisms damaged... is there anything we can do?"

He wasn't asking about the orrery. But the stench of decay was thick in the air and he knew the answer before Dominic said: No. They had been dead for too long.

The death of these innocents struck the companions hard. They had been the ones to give House Erthuo the location of the orrery. They had been the ones followed by the Surgeon's men. And they had only been a few hundred feet away as they were helplessly butchered. They knew they didn't truly bear responsibility for this atrocity, but it nonetheless sat heavy on their souls.



# SESSION 26 – THE RIDDLE OF ILTUMAR

August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 13<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

After several mournful minutes in which little was said, they quickly decided that someone needed to return to the surface and notify House Erthuo of the death of Faeliel and the others.

Dominic and Ranthir took that heavy task on themselves. Tor left with them, needing to keep an appointment later in the morning.

The walk back to the surface took a little more than twenty minutes. Then they took carriages in opposite directions: Tor back towards Midtown; Ranthir and Dominic towards the Nobles' Quarter.

When Ranthir and Dominic arrived at the estate of House Erthuo, they still weren't sure what they were going to stay. Clambering out of the carriage they approached the two guards on duty at the gate.

"What's your business here?" The guard had an edgy suspicion in his voice. It wasn't until that moment that they realized what a dismal sight they must present – dusty and bloody from their delving.

"We bring news for Cordelia Erthuo."

"News of what?"

"Of Erthuo workers who were retrieving an orrery. She'll know what we mean."

The guard nodded to his comrade, who left through the gate. They stood in uneasy silence for several minutes before Cordelia came rushing up.

## MEANWHILE...

Tee, Agnarr, and Elestra had remained behind in the bloodwight complex to watch over the bodies.

Agnarr and Tee took the time to go back to the hall where the ghulworg had stacked the more cumbersome treasures from the Laboratory of the Beast, confirming that nothing had been taken by Ribok or the other servants of the Surgeon in the Shadows. Nothing was missing, although it was clear that the items had been rifled through.

The bluesteel door had been smashed open, proving that they were not completely impassable. But in the process, the door had also been rendered useless. There was nothing preventing the Surgeon's men – or other intruders – from returning to these tunnels. So Tee made the decision to gather up the few remaining items of taint and chaostech from the obsidian temple, intending to take them to the safety of the facility Aoska had mentioned to them on the 12<sup>th</sup>. They also took the time to strip the adamantine from the ghulworg's skeleton, stacking it with the other items in the hall.

A little over forty minutes had passed by the time they returned to where Elestra had been waiting. As they were walking up, Elestra suddenly heard footsteps approaching from the direction of Greyson House.

It was still much too soon for Ranthir or Dominic to be returning, so they quickly moved into defensive positions: Tee kept a watchful eye focused in the opposite direction, while Elestra, Agnarr, and Seeacti flanked the passage from which the footsteps were approaching.

"Do you want to send your dog down to the stuff we gathered?" Elestra asked. "You know, to guard it?"

Agnarr looked flatly at her. "No. I don't."

And then they fell silent, awaiting the approach of whoever – or whatever – was coming...

... they were House Erthuo's men. Six of them, dressed in the livery of the house mercenaries.

## MEANWHILE AT HOUSE ERTHUO...

Cordelia came rushing up. "Master Ranthir! Master Dominic! You've come from Greyson House?"

They nodded. "Yes," Ranthir said.

Cordelia couldn't help noticing their melancholy. "What's wrong?"

"I'm afraid... Your men are dead."

Cordelia gasped. "All of them? What happened? Even the guards I just sent?"

"Yes— Wait... the guards you just sent?"

After several moments of confusion, they quickly realized that they must have crossed paths with the House Erthuo guards. Cordelia had sent them after Faeliel failed to report in.

"Oh dear," Ranthir said. "I hope nothing unfortunate happens."

Cordelia asked them to return to the orrery site and help with the recovery of the dead bodies so that they could be given proper rites.

"Of course."

## MEANWHILE AT THE ORRERY SITE...

"What happened here?" The House Erthuo mercenaries, taking in the sight of their dead housemates, were clearly suspicious – if not outright hostile.

Agnarr – his sword still raised above his head – opened his mouth to respond, but Tee quickly stepped forward. "They were killed by a man named Ribok who worked for the Surgeon in the Shadows."

“Who?”

“He works for the Balacazars.”

They clearly recognized that name. “Why would they want to kill scholars?”

“They were just innocent bystanders,” Tee said.

“We think they were looking for chaositech!” Elestra blurted.

“Back that way,” Tee said. “Beyond a bluesteel door. That’s where we met them.”

“And who are you? What are you doing down here?”

“My name’s Tee,” she said. “This is Agnarr and Elestra. We were the ones who sold the location of the orrery to Cordelia.”

At that, the Erthuo mercenaries finally relaxed and lowered their weapons. Agnarr followed suit.

“What happened to the murderers?”

“We killed most of them,” Agnarr said.

“Except Ribok,” Tee said. “He escaped.”

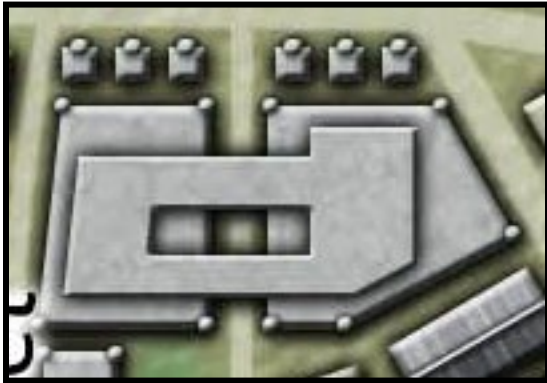
The Erthuo mercenary grimaced. “Not for long, if I have anything to say about it.”

The three companions helped the Erthuo men gather up the bodies. Ranthir and Dominic arrived during this morbid work. It wasn’t long before the dead were being carried up the passage towards Greyson House.

### TOR’S TRAINING

Instead of taking his carriage into Midtown, Tor had it turn aside on Golden Elm Way and pass into the Temple District. When he arrived at the Cathedral, he quickly headed to Sir Kabel’s office.

After a warm and cheerful greeting, Sir Kabel took him back across the Cathedral’s courtyard and up the Godswalk towards the Godskeep.



*The Godskeep*

“The Godskeep serves as the headquarters and training facilities for the Order of the Dawn,” Kabel explained. “In truth, it is a set of twin keeps which have been joined by the upper towers.” He pointed up to the colossal statue of Crissa atop the western keep and the

matching statue of Athor atop the eastern keep, both looking north.

Crossing through the Godskeep gateway, Kabel led Tor out the far side of the keep. There stood the Statues of the Six Gods – Itor, Itehl, Sarathyn, Sayl, Bahl, and Tohlen. Smaller than the colossi atop the keeps, these statues were nonetheless impressive, standing three times as high as Tor.

“These are the heart of our order, Tor. Only Vehthyl has no statue here at Godskeep, but that should not be considered any slight. We are all sworn to serve the Nine Gods.”

Sir Kabel then led Tor into the Godskeep itself, and began recounting the oral history of the Order.

### TOR’S PRIMER – RELIGION IN BARUND

Tor was born in 757 YD at the height of the Twenty Year War between Seyrun and Barund. Among other things, the Twenty Year War triggered a religious schism within the Imperial Church. After Seyrun invaded Barund, the king of Barund refused to acknowledge the Edicts of the Novarch (as those edicts were closely associated with imperial power in Seyrun). An outright refutation of the Novarch, however, would have put the king on somewhat shaky ground: For six centuries, the Line of Kings had been recognized and legitimized as a divine bloodright dating back to the Holy Coronation performed by the Novarch in 127 YD.

So the king declared that the Novarch, while still the Living Voice of the Nine Gods, had no secular or religious authority over the lands controlled by the divine bloodright of the Barundian royal family.

The supreme leader of the Church in Barund had always been the Prelate of Barund. The Prelate of Barund had been appointed by the Novarch and had authority over the regional prelates of the church throughout Barund. Following the religious schism, however, the king of Barund – on the authority of his divine bloodright – promptly appointed his own Prelate of Barund.

Following the end of the Twenty Year War, the schism was at least partly repaired. However, even today, there are still two Prelates of Barund: One appointed by the King and the other appointed by the Novarch.

This is all to say that Tor was born into and grew up during the height of this religious tension.

## TOR'S PRIMER – ORDERS OF KNIGHTHOOD

Any order of knighthood has three things in common:

1. They follow the Code of Law as laid down in the *Book of Athor*.
2. They adhere to the Martial Code as laid down in the *Book of Itor*.
3. They honor the Seven Compassions as laid down in the *Book of Crissa*.

The Code of Law is your bedrock “thou shalt not” stuff: Don’t murder, steal, enslave your brother, and so forth.

The Martial Code is essentially your standard chivalric ideal: Face your opponent fairly and honorably.

The Seven Compassions are a bit more philosophically complex, and are also referred to in some commentaries as the Seven Cares. The compassions are of the self, the companion, the stranger, the task, the thought, the memory, and the true. In other words, care for yourself, for your companions, and for strangers. Take care with what you do, what you think, and it shall be remembered. And if you can do all that, then you will know true compassion. (For most people, the Seven Compassions boil down to “be nice to people” and “think before you act”.)

Collectively these are also known as the Way of Knighthood.

### THE DEEDS OF HONOR

Although not an official part of the Way of Knighthood, the Deeds of Honor are intimately tied to the popular conception of “what it means to be a knight”.

The Deeds of Honor, as written in the *Book of Itor*, are a collection of legendary tales of valor, honor, bravery, and faith. In some ways they serve as a kind of “scorecard” or exemplar of heroic actions. “He lives his life by the deeds of honor” is a common saying.

## TOR'S PRIMER – THE ORDER OF THE DAWN



The modern city of Ptolus was founded by a man named Shay Orridar, the head of the Orridar merchant family (now defunct). It is said that the inspiration of the city was based on the research of the loremaster Gerris Hin, who was studying the ruins of an ancient city built on the same location.

As a result of Hin’s researches, Ptolus also became one of the early centers for the rejuvenation of Pantheon worship. The Knights of the Golden Cross, founded by Hin on the basis of his research into the old traditions which predated modern history, championed the cause of the Nine Gods.

The Knights of the Dawn were founded perhaps a quarter of a century after the Knights of the Golden Cross. The Knights of the Dawn, like the Knights of the Golden Cross, were dedicated to the Pantheon. The two groups became rivals of a sort, but the Knights of the Dawn became ascendant when they became the official protectors and guardians of the Imperial Church in Ptolus – an official Order of the Church.

The Order of the Dawn is now primarily a defensive knighthood, there to protect the temples, holdings, and interests of the Church. Only occasionally are they sent on quests, and then only with the direct blessing of the Silver Fatar.

The current leader of the order is Sir Kabel Dathim, who answers directly to the Silver Fatar of Athor.

## GETTING (RID) OF THE LOOT

The bodies of Faeliel and the other Erthuo scholars were gone, and the Erthuo mercenaries had gone with them. Reconvening in the dilapidated living room of Greyson House, there was an involved discussion revolving around how they could go about getting the rest of the bulky valuables out of the complex below.

There were three main problems to overcome: The sheer weight of the arcane equipment and precious metals. The pit of chaos warping the hallway. And the difficulty of lifting the material out of the basement here at Greyson House.

Out of everything, the “Drill of the Banewarrens” was going to prove the most difficult: Everything else could be mostly parceled up into smaller bundles, but the drill was both bulky and weighed several thousand pounds all by itself.

“Could we just sell the location of the drill to somebody?” Elestra asked.

“Like House Erthuo?” Tee said. “I doubt they’d be all that interested considering what just happened.”

In the end, they decided on a complex scheme involving fifteen hired laborers to move the drill; an architect to design the supports and ramps necessary to get it up into Greyson House; and then spells from Dominic and Elestra to quickly create the structure itself.

It was going to take some time to pull all of that together. Plus, they still had to get rid of the chaositech items. (“And the sooner the better,” Tee said.)

So Agnarr headed back down into Ghul’s Labyrinth to keep an eye on things. Dominic and Elestra headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel to rest up and prepare the proper spells.

## THE HALLOWED VAULT

Tee and Ranthir headed towards the location in the Temple District they had been given by Aoska when they had asked for a secure place to store the tainted items.

They found the address wedged into a narrow gap on the Street of a Million Gods. The door opened to reveal a small, largely unadorned room with little more than a door draped with a beaded curtain. An elderly man sat in a worn-looking chair.

They were momentarily confused, but once they had identified themselves to the elderly man they were led through the beaded curtain and down a narrow flight of stone stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs they emerged into a long chamber lit with a pale blue light. A shallow pool of holy water ran the length of the room. The walls were covered in niches of various shapes and sizes, all of them obscured by sheens of silvery energy... except for one, towards which the elderly man pointed.

Taking her cue, Tee approached the niche and placed within it the tainted items she carried. As she drew back her hands, the niche quickly sealed itself with the same silvery energy as the others.

Tee turned to the man. “Thank you.”

He smiled, nodded, and led them back out onto the street.

## THE TROUBLE WITH ILTUMAR

Tor returned to the Ghostly Minstrel. As he came through the door, Tellith called him over to the front desk. Apparently Hirus Feek, one of the owners of the Bull and Bear Armory next door, had stopped by and asked if Tee or Elestra or any of their companions could spare a few minutes to meet with him.

Tor turned around and headed back out into Delver’s Square. As he entered the Bull and Bear, Hirus – a skinny, balding man with a thin gray hair – smiled at him.

Tor quickly explained that Tee and Elestra weren’t with him, but he had been the first to return to the Ghostly Minstrel and he wasn’t sure when the others might return.

“That’s all right,” Hirus said. “I just needed to speak with one of you about Iltumar.”

“About Iltumar?” Tor said. “Is everything all right?”

“I’m not sure,” Hirus said, frowning. “He’s been hanging out with some shady people. Ruffians. I don’t like it. I was hoping one of you might be able to speak with him. Straighten him out. He looks up to you.”

“Any idea who they are, exactly?” Tor asked.

Hirus shook his head. “Not really. But I heard Iltumar say something about ‘the Brotherhood’ the other day. For some reason, I didn’t like the sound of that.”

“Is Iltumar here now?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“When will he be back?”

“He’s supposed to be back here by 10 o’clock.”

Tor agreed to come back then and try to talk with Iltumar. Then he headed back towards the Ghostly Minstrel.

Coming out of the Bull and Bear, however, he spotted Elestra and Dominic coming across the square. He called out to them and, as they headed into the Ghostly Minstrel together, quickly filled them in on the Iltumar situation.

Tee arrived as they were grabbing some food and drink from the bar. She told them that she had sent messengers to Castle Shard, Jevicca (as a representative of the Dreaming Apothecary), House Erthuo, and even a place called Avery’s Armory with details on the drill, construct parts, and adamantine – basically every place she thought might be interested in them.

As Tee was finishing up her explanation, Iltumar entered the inn. Elestra, seizing the opportunity called him over.

“What are you doing?” Tee hissed to her while giving Iltumar a friendly smile and wave.

Elestra waved her off. “Trust me, I’ll explain later.”

“Tee! Elestra!” Iltumar grinned. “Master Tor!”

“How are you doing, Iltumar?” Elestra asked.

“Very well!” he said. “Very well indeed.”

“That’s good.”

Tee decided to make the best of it. “I’ve got an answer for your riddle.”

“Really?” Iltumar said. “Already?”

“I couldn’t help thinking about it,” Tee said. “Is the answer a fish and the ocean?”

Iltumar pursed his lips. “That’s... close.”

“Huh,” Tee said. “Then it must be a fish and the river.”

“That’s right!” Iltumar clapped his hands. “Do you have a riddle for me?”

Tee shook her head. And then her eyes widened. As Iltumar had raised his hands to clap, she’d spotted a new ring on his finger: A ring marked with the symbol of a broken square.

She had a ring just like that in her *bag of holding*. They had found it in Pythoness House as part of a cache of artifacts belonging to the chaos cultists. Tee glanced over towards Elestra, and she could tell that she’d seen it, too.

Thinking quickly, Tee smiled broadly. “Oh! That’s a nice ring! Where did you get it?”

Iltumar suddenly seemed very nervous. “What? Oh, this ring? Just... around.”

“Really? I’d love to have a ring like that!” Tee was putting everything she had into a flirtatious voice. “Do you think I could have it?”

“No,” Iltumar said sharply. “I can’t.”

“Oh...” Tee suddenly got very sad.

“It’s just... Somebody gave it to me.”

“Oh,” Tee said, brightening slightly. “Another girl?”

But it wasn’t working. Iltumar babbled slightly and then clammed up. Tee was left promising to come up with a new riddle for him soon, and then he went off to get a drink.

Seizing the opportunity, the others quickly filled Tee in on what Hirus had told him.

“Do we think there’s a connection between the ‘Brotherhood’ and the chaos cultists?” Elestra asked.

“There must be,” Tee said.

“What should be do?”

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do,” Tee said. “At least not right now. We’ll let Tor talk to him later.”

## MAKING THE SALE

Tor and Dominic headed back to Greyson House to rejoin Agnarr. Tor was uncomfortable with letting entirely unknown workers handle the material directly (they might steal stuff). So, taking crates from the basement of Greyson House, he started packing up as much of the loose material as he could.

Tee, meanwhile, received a letter from Avery’s Armory, informing her that he was always interested in sources of adamantine and would be willing to pay market value for anything she might have (which she estimated to be worth a few thousand gold).

Later that evening, Tee was able to track Jevicca down in the common room of the Ghostly Minstrel. When she showed her the schematics of the Drill of the Banewarrens, Jevicca became very interested and immediately offered 10,000 gold pieces on behalf of the Inverted Pyramid.

Tee thought that was a decent offer, but told Jevicca she would need to check with the others first (since they all had equal stakes in the matter).

It was perhaps well that she did, because a few minutes later a letter from Castle Shard arrived. In response, Tee caught a carriage.

It turned out that Lord Zaverre was also primarily interested in the drill. He offered to not only purchase both the drill and the construct parts for a total of 13,000 gold pieces, but to take care of transporting all of it, as well. Plus, he would deliver the adamantine directly to Avery’s Armory for them.

It was an offer that significantly simplified things for them. (And saved them a large chunk of money.) Tee accepted it on the spot.

After leaving Castle Shard, Tee sent a messenger to Jevicca to inform her that she had accepted a different offer. Then she stopped by Avery’s Armory personally to confirm the deal with him. Once that was done, she headed back to Greyson House and told Tor to stop prepping crates: It had all been taken care of.

## KADMUS AND THE GATE

(09/14/790)

The night passed quietly.

The next morning, a gate appeared in the middle of the corridor. Kadmus stepped through the portal, greeted them cordially, and, with one hand, lifted the impossibly heavy adamantine drill.

They were universally taken aback by this prodigious display of strength.



“Remind me never to pick a fight with him,” Tor said.

It took Kadmus about fifteen minutes to move everything through the gate. When he was finished, Zavere stepped through himself. Handing Tee a pouch filled with platinum, he promised to have the adamantine delivered to Avery by noon at the latest.

Zavere stepped back through the gate. A moment later, it disappeared.

## KING’S ROAD

They headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel. In the lobby, they met Elestra on her way out, quickly filled her in on the details of the deal they had made, and gave her the platinum she was due.

“Where are you going now?” Tee asked.

“I’m just going out to the listen to the Spirit of the City,” Elestra said. “See what I can find out. Maybe ask around about the Brotherhood.”

“I don’t think you should,” Tee said. “I don’t want us drawing the kind of attention that asking those type of questions might bring. I don’t want to wake up with Wuntad in my room. I already did that with the Balacazars and I didn’t like it.”

“Okay,” Elestra said. “That’s probably true.”

While they were discussing their options, they were joined by the others. Ranthir returned to an idea that had occurred to them during the “meeting of all things” on the 11<sup>th</sup> – that the prophecy referring to the “street of kings” could be a reference to King’s Road in the Nobles’ Quarter.

Feeling that they otherwise had a dearth of solid leads – and reflecting on the fact that Elestra had probably had a very close encounter with certain death when she had attempted to follow a similar lead on Brandywine Street by herself – they decided to head up to King’s Road together.

When they arrived, however, they realized they really had no idea what they were looking for. The prophecy said: *Arrived too late, the act has been done. The wind was against them, letters intercepted on their way. The conspirators were fourteen of a party. By the street of kings shall these enterprises be undertaken.*

“Arrived too late?” Elestra said. “Does that mean we already missed it?”

Tee frowned. “Maybe. But even if we haven’t, it sounds like this is something that’s going to happen here. So unless we just happen to be here at the right time, I’m not sure what we’re going to see.”

In the Nobles’ Quarter, there were two major thoroughfares running away from the Dalenguard – Crown Street to the south and King’s Road to the north. Near the Dalenguard, King’s Road was filled with a variety of expensive shops, restaurants, and other storefronts dedicated to serving the rich and decadent

tastes of the major merchant houses: Moleshan’s, The Jewel, Buckingham’s, The Dry Easel, and the like.

Further to the north, however, King’s Road ran past a number of merchant estates maintained by the major merchant house – Dallimothan, Nagel, and Rau – along with a number of other mansions, including Castle Shard.

Their particular attention was drawn to the Crown Theater – far enough to the north not to be lost in the sea of businesses near the Dalenguard, yet something more than enigmatic, luxurious, and inaccessible estate.

Making inquiries at the theater’s box office, they learned that the current production was *The Merchant Warlord* – a lavish opera telling the historical tale of Nulara Aretari, the warlord who married into the Aretari merchant family and served as the original First Commander of the nascent Mercenary Army during the Battle of Salesia, helping to create the modern nation of Arathia. Tickets were 25 gold crowns, a staggering sum that left Tee gaping.

A few minutes after they left the Crown Theater, the group was approached by a pair of city guardsmen. Upon reflection, they realized that they looked rather out of place among the pervading opulence of the Nobles’ Quarter, and that wandering openly up and down the length of King’s Road had probably attracted the wrong sorts of attention.

Tee flirtatiously talked the guards off them – weaving some tale about wanting to see a show at the Crown Theater – but the group decided that, since they didn’t seem to be accomplishing anything any way, it was probably time for them to leave. They returned to Midtown and then split up to go their separate ways.

## TOR’S MORNING

Tor returned to the Bull and Bear Armory, where he found Iltumar manning the shop. After exchanging a few pleasantries, he asked Iltumar if Hirus was about.

“He’s upstairs tending to Sholum,” Iltumar said. “I’ll go get him. Can you keep an eye on things?”

Before Tor really had a chance to respond, Iltumar had bounded through the door in the back of the shop. Tor could hear him running up the stairs.

The shop was empty when Iltumar left, but a few moments later a young, blond-haired woman came in through the door. Tor suddenly felt himself to be bearing a responsibility he wasn’t sure how to discharge. He awkwardly explained to the woman that the shopkeep had just stepped out, but would be back in just a moment.

The woman nodded and began casually perusing the various weapons hanging along one wall. Tor kept a wary eye on her, but she didn’t seem to be doing anything suspicious. A few minutes later, Hirus and Iltumar came downstairs.



Iltumar moved to assist the woman who had been waiting, while Tor and Hirus stepped outside to have a private word. Tor ascertained that Iltumar had duties around the shop until midday, but after that would be free. Tor offered to take Iltumar riding with him after he'd finished his duties, if that would be all right with Hirus.

Hirus smiled. He thought that Iltumar would like that a great deal. Tor told him to let Iltumar know, and that he would be back at noon to pick him up.

Hirus went back into the Bull and Bear. Tor grabbed a carriage at the mouth of Delver's Square and rode it to the alley off Yarrow Street where they had met with the enigmatic information broker known as Shim. Within mere moments of walking down the alley, he was rewarded with the sight of Shim slipping between the cracks of the wall.

"Master Tor," Shim said with the sound of an unseen smile in his voice. "A pleasure to see you again. What can I help you with?"

For a minimal fee, Tor arranged for one of Shim's men – whoever they might be – to keep an eye on him for the next few hours.

"You want me to keep an eye on... you?" Shim said, slightly bemused.

"That's right," Tor said. Although he didn't tell Shim his exact suspicions, he suspected that the Brotherhood might be keeping Iltumar under observation. If they were, he wanted to know about it.

Leaving Shim's alley, Tor returned to the Bull and Bear. Iltumar was waiting for him with an excited grin on his face.

"Have you ever jousting before?" Tor asked him as they stepped back out into the square.

Iltumar shook his head.

"Do you have a horse?"

Iltumar shook his head.

"Have you ever ridden before?"

Iltumar shook his head.

"Okay," Tor said. "Let's start by getting you a horse."

They went to the stables behind the Ghostly Minstrel. Tor said hello to Blue and patted him on the nose, and then made some quick arrangements to rent a horse for Iltumar.

As they rode north along Lower God Row – Tor easing into the comfortable familiarity of the saddle and Iltumar awkwardly trying to stay on his mount – Tor gently tried to broach Iltumar's thoughts.

"How have you been?"

Iltumar shrugged.

"Hirus has been worried about you."

Iltumar's whole body tightened. "Is *that* why you asked me to ride with you?"

Tor backed off. Iltumar obviously wasn't going to respond to direct inquiries about whatever was going on,

so he would just have to reach out and leave his hand there in the hope that Iltumar would take it.

They rode out of the city through the North Gate and spent a little over three hours just riding through the open prairies around the city. Tor slowly coached the lad into a greater sense of confidence in the saddle, all the while trying to convince him – without saying as much – that, if Iltumar wanted adventure, all he had to do was ask.

When they were done, Tor returned to the Bull and Bear with a very sore – but very happy – Iltumar. He made arrangements, if Iltumar would like, to meet him again in a couple of days.

Once Iltumar had said his farewells, Tor rode Blue back to Shim's alley.

"You were right," Shim said. "You were followed."

"By who?"

"A blond woman dressed in the robes of an Imperial priestess."

"An Imperial priestess?" Tor frowned. "Where did she go?"

"She followed you to North Gate and then waited in the area until you returned. Then she trailed you back to Delver's Square. After you left the kid, she hung around outside the Bull and Bear."

Tor paid Shim and left.

## ELESTRA'S MORNING

Elestra decided that she wanted to ask around town about the Brotherhood after all. "I'll just be careful," she said to herself.

And she was. Poking her nose into all the right places and asking discreet questions, she learned that an organization calling itself the Brotherhood of Ptolus was quietly recruiting young men and women with idealistic-sounding jingo. She ran into a couple of walls, but eventually made contact with Jamill – a member of the Brotherhood with strange tattoos, numerous scars, long black hair, and the sunken eyes of a shivvel addict.

Elestra voiced interest in joining the Brotherhood, but Jamill wasn't willing to talk about it until they were in "a more private place". They agreed to meet at a tavern called the Onyx Spider on Tavern Row at two o'clock.

To kill the time, Elestra grabbed some newsheets and started asking around about recent events in the city. After spending several days in Ghul's Labyrinth, she was still feeling a little disconnected.

On the 12<sup>th</sup>, a man named Doonhin – a salt merchant in the South Market – was accused of killing his wife by throwing her off the Stormwrought Campanile (a freestanding belltower in the Temple District that's said to be a sanctuary from bad omens, ill luck, storms, and evil magic). Doonhin has been pleading his innocence, claiming to have been magically charmed by a sorcerer.

On the 13<sup>th</sup>, there had been another Flayed Man killing. This one had taken place in the Guildsman's

District, suggesting that the killer might be moving out of the Warrens.

And only a few hours earlier, around noon, the Rat's Nest – a pub on Tavern Row – had been vandalized.

### DOMINIC'S MORNING

Dominic spent the morning shopping. He bought Tee a bouquet of flowers and a charming necklace for her birthday, delivering them to her room at the Ghostly Minstrel. The gifts brought a huge smile to Tee's face, and she thanked him profusely.

Dominic also stopped by Myraeth's Oddities and bought a scroll describing a magical ritual which could be used to deliver short messages over long distances. He hoped that Ranthir might be able to learn the ritual and improve the group's ability to communicate during times of separation. After delivering Tee's birthday presents, he crossed the hall and knocked on Ranthir's door.

"I have a present for you, Ranthir!"

Ranthir quirked an eyebrow. "You know it's not *my* birthday, right?"

### ELESTRA DIGS DEEP

As two o'clock neared, Elestra headed to Tavern Row.

The Onyx Spider was a large, squat, two-story building wedged into the south end of Tavern Row. Elestra knew it to have a seedy and dangerous reputation. And as she passed through the front doors into the common room, it wasn't hard to figure out where the tavern had gotten its name from: In the center of the room, levitating ten feet off the floor and embedded in a huge crystal sphere, was a giant spider carved from black onyx. It looked expensive.

Elestra spotted Jamill at the bar and pushed her way through the crowd to where he was standing.

"So you're interested in the Brotherhood?" Jamill asked her, stonefaced.

Elestra nodded. "I might be interested in joining."

"Might be?"

"I guess I just want to know about it."

Jamill's brow furrowed. "Right. Okay, who told you about the Brotherhood?"

Elestra hesitated. "A friend."

"Who?"

"Well, it was more a friend of a friend... you know?"

"Who was it?"

"I don't really... He kind of spoke to me in confidence and..."

Jamill slammed back the last of his amber-colored drink. "Okay, this is your last chance. Who sent you?"

Elestra suddenly became aware that two rather large men with short clubs strapped to their thighs had suddenly materialized out of the crowd behind her. She stammered, unable to find any kind of answer that would satisfy Jamill.

Jamill jerked his head and headed towards the back of the bar. The two thugs laid their hands on Elestra's arms. She got the message and let them hustle her out through the back door of the tavern.

As they stepped through the door into the narrow alley behind the Onyx Spider, however, the two thugs briefly took their hands off Elestra. She immediately called upon the Spirit of the City and began her transformation into a bird, hoping to fly away.

But the thugs were too quick for her. A large hand snapped out and grabbed the fragile sparrow-Elestra in mid-flight. She could feel it crushing the delicate bones of her new form and she was forced to abandon the attempt.

The two thugs reached for their clubs, but even as she landed lightly on the floor of the alley, Elestra was quick to draw her rapier. Her blade lashed out at the face of one of the thugs, cutting a deep gash through one cheek.

The thug screamed in pain, but even as Elestra grinned with satisfaction she felt the other thug's club smash into her already aching ribs. Ignoring the blinding flash of pain, she spun around and cut a matching gash across the second thug's cheek.

Jamill stepped out of the alley. He had drawn a longsword, but his swing seemed slow and clumsy to Elestra. She easily parried it and drove her own blade viciously past his defenses, skewering him through the stomach.

With a deep groan, Jamill let his longsword slip from his fingers and sank to the dirty cobbles of the alley. The two thugs stared at Elestra, glanced at each other, and then ran off in opposite directions.

Thinking quickly, Elestra grabbed Jamill (who had now slipped from shock into unconsciousness), threw him over her shoulder, and headed north towards the Ghostly Minstrel. Circumspectly circling around the inn, Elestra snuck in through the kitchen and headed upstairs.

She grabbed Agnarr from his room and left him to bind and blindfold Jamill in her room while she went back downstairs to leave a message with Tellith to let the others know that she would like them to come up to her room as soon as they returned.



## TEE IS THE CLEVER ONE

Tee and Dominic arrived back at the Ghostly Minstrel together. Receiving Elestra's message (by way of Tellith) they headed up to her room.

When they knocked, Elestra cracked the door slightly and peeked out at them. "Oh! Hello!" She visibly scanned the hall behind them to make sure that it was empty, then ushered them inside.

Agnarr was sitting on the bed with a vaguely bored expression on his face. Jamill was trussed up in the middle of the room, still unconscious. Elestra shuffled her feet nervously.

Tee looked back and forth between the three of them. "What am I looking at, exactly?"

Elestra, in a slightly disjointed fashion, explained everything that had happened. Tee was unbelieving. Wasn't this exactly what she had told Elestra *not* to do?

"And then you brought him *here*?" Tee said, incredulously. "Why would you—"

Another knock came at the door. Tee quickly waved Elestra out of the way and cracked the door.

It was Tor.

"I had a message from Elestra to come up?"

Tee nodded. "Elestra has created a... situation." She opened the door wide enough for Tor to see Jamill. "And it would probably be better if you weren't part of this developing disaster."

"Haven't you just told him pretty much everything there is to tell?" Dominic said. "Just let him in."

But Tor nodded to Tee and left. Tee shut the door.

"What—" Elestra started.

"Shhh." Tee cut her off. "Let me think."

She had asked Elestra not to go asking questions, but she had. And now she was faced with almost exactly the type of situation she had feared: A cultist in their rooms, compromising whatever safety or security might be left at the Ghostly Minstrel. Anywhere else would have been—

"Elestra, I need you to go out and find a vacant warehouse. Somewhere far away from here. Try the South Market."

"What are you—?"

"Just go. We've got to get this done before he wakes up." Elestra left. Tee turned to Dominic and Agnarr. "You two stay here and keep an eye on him. If it looks like he's going to wake up, knock him out again."

Tee dashed out of the room and headed across Delver's Square to Ebbert's. She bought a strange, eclectic collection of material and then returned to the Ghostly Minstrel as quickly as she could.

By the time Elestra returned with the location of a suitable warehouse in the South Market, Tee had stripped down the common items she had purchased and assembled the makeshift components of a primitive disguise. Her biggest goal had been to make herself look

human instead of elfish, hoping that would be enough to throw people off the trail if it came to that. (Of course, Elestra hadn't been disguised at all... but there wasn't much she could do about that.)

Tee had Agnarr and the others carry Jamill downstairs and load him into a carriage, making protestations as he went about how his friend had had "too much to drink". Tee surreptitiously joined them a few moments later. She bribed the carriage driver well and had him drop them off at the empty warehouse.

## TEE HUSTLES

There was a dilapidated chair in the corner of the warehouse. She had Agnarr tie Jamill to it and then told everyone to wait outside.

"Will you be okay?" Agnarr asked.

"If not, you'll hear me shouting. I have big lungs." Tee gave a slightly nervous grin.

Once the others had left, though, she slipped the broken square ring that they had found in Pythoness House onto her finger and pushed those nervous feelings deep inside and set her face in a look of cold determination. Then she slapped Jamill awake.

"I'm ashamed of you."

Jamill shook his head. "What's going on? Who are you?"

Tee removed his blindfold, carefully making sure that he would see the ring on her finger without letting him know that she was *trying* to make sure he saw it.

Jamill shook his head again, trying to get his bleary eyes to focus. "What happened?"

"You couldn't handle a little girl?" Scorn dripped from Tee's voice. "A little girl who turns into a *bird*?"

Jamill suddenly turned surly. "She was tougher than she looked..."

"She's been dealt with," Tee said with a finality that made it clear that Jamill was lucky that *he* hadn't been "dealt with", too. "You're an embarrassment. You're *embarrassing* us. Get out of town. Don't come back."

And then she left him... still tied up.

## BACK TO ELESTRA'S ROOM

Tee rejoined the others. She stripped off her disguise and they returned to the Ghostly Minstrel, gathering Ranthir and Tor on their way back to Elestra's room.

They quickly compared their notes from the day. Tor filled them in on his fear that Iltumar might be followed by cultists, his meeting with Shim, and the news that they *had* been followed.

"But Shim said that it was an Imperial priestess."

"What does that mean?" Elestra said.

"Do you think that the Church might be in league with the cultists somehow?" Tee said.

Dominic suddenly looked queasy and uncertain.

“Or perhaps there are just some members of the Church who are cultists,” Ranthir said. “*The Truth of the Hidden God* said that the Brotherhood of the Blooded Knife infiltrates religions.”

“Is it possible that Rehobath is working with Wuntad?” Elestra asked.

A flurry of panicky hypotheses followed, but then Tor held up his hands. “There’s something else you should all know.” He paused for a moment, trying to find the right words to express something that felt like a confession. “I’ve started taking steps towards becoming a knight with the Order of the Dawn…”

“Congratulations!” Tee said, a huge smile spreading across her face. “That’s wonderful!”

“But that means,” Tor said, “That the priestess might have been following me. The Order might be keeping an eye on me to make sure that I don’t do anything unworthy.”

To a large degree, all of this left them back at square one: Tee hadn’t dared to ask Jamill any questions because it might have made him suspicious enough for her gambit to fail. They didn’t know how to interpret the information that Shim had given to Tor. All they’d really done was to confirm that Itumar was tied up with some very dangerous people.

“As much as I hate to say it,” Tee said, “Elestra may have had the right idea. If we move quickly, I might be able to find someone else in the Brotherhood that I can talk to by using Jamill’s name as a contact… before he has a chance to warn them or they discover that he’s missing.”

This didn’t thrill any of them, but it seemed like their best chance at this point.

“Of course,” Tee said with a withering look in Elestra’s direction. “I’ll be taking proper precautions.”

And she walked out.

# SESSION 27 – THE SAINT OF CHAOS

September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 14<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Tee put her disguise back on and hit the streets, trying to find another contact for the Brotherhood. She wasn't having much luck, however, until she stopped looking for the Brotherhood and started looking for people who knew Jamill. After that, it wasn't long before she was pointed in the direction of a small pub at the north end of Tavern Row where a blond woman with sparkling green eyes and a small scar above her lip was nursing a beer.

Tee gave her name as "Laurea". The woman introduced herself as Arveth and, like Jamill, she was clearly wary of Tee's questions regarding the Brotherhood. But once Tee actually dropped Jamill's name, her suspicions seemed to melt away.

It turned out that Arveth had actually been waiting for Jamill to show up so that they could "talk about tonight" (a revelation which made Tee more than a little nervous). Arveth slipped Tee another of the rings with a broken square and said, "Wear this ring and come back to Tavern Row tonight at midnight."

Tee thanked her and headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel (taking a deliberately circuitous route to throw off anyone following her and stripping off her disguise before entering the inn itself). She rejoined the others and quickly briefed them in on what she had accomplished.

There was still the problem of Iltumar. They assumed that he was probably planning to go to the meeting that night, too, and they had no idea what might be waiting for him (or Tee) there.

"Is there any way we can stop him?" Tee asked.

"Can't we just tell him not to go?" Dominic said.

Tor rubbed his chin. "Considering the way he reacted when I tried to talk to him about it in even general terms... I don't think it would work."

They talked round (and round) the subject for several minutes, but eventually concluded that they couldn't approach Iltumar directly about what was happening. Instead, they decided to distract him – keeping him busy with something else so that he wouldn't have time to attend the meeting.

Tee crossed the hall and touched base with Ranthir (who had returned to his studies). Ranthir affably agreed with their conclusion, and was very open to the idea of letting Iltumar study with him as a way of pulling him out of the meeting.

Unfortunately, the plan didn't work: Tor waited several hours before heading over to the Bull and Bear around ten o'clock, only to discover that Iltumar had left at nine o'clock. Iltumar had told Hirus that he was going over to the Ghostly Minstrel... but he wasn't there.

Tor went back and told the others. "He's gone."

## THE MIDNIGHT MEETING

(09/15/790)

Tee had already resolved to go to the meeting: If Arveth was going to be there, she would be expecting Tee (as "Laurea") to be attending. There was no sense throwing away all the work they'd done to make contact with the Brotherhood, and Tee might be able to learn something valuable from the meeting itself.

The possibility of someone going with Tee (using the ring they had found in Pythoness House) was briefly raised, but they eventually decided not to push their luck. Elestra was concerned for Tee's safety and made it clear that, if Tee hadn't returned within a couple of hours, the rest of them would come looking for her. It wasn't entirely clear to Tee what they could do (since none of them even knew where the meeting was going to be held, exactly), but there wasn't much time to argue about it: With midnight rapidly approaching, Tee slipped back into her disguise, went out the rear door of the Minstrel, and circled around to the south to make it appear that she was approaching Tavern Row from the opposite direction.

As she arrived, Tee spotted Arveth at the far end of the Row. But she was approached by a different woman with mousy-brown hair. The woman gave Tee an innocuous greeting, but with a subtle tilt of her head she indicated a nearby rooftop. Tee surreptitiously glanced in that direction and spotted a shabbily dressed girl. With Tee following on the street below, the little girl ran down the roofs and came to a stop next to an alley near the middle of the block.

One of the buildings flanking this alley was a small, seedy-looking pub named the Rat's Nest. Tee could see that the backdoor of the pub opened into the alley. The door was open and a woman dressed like a serving wench was standing in it. When she saw Tee round the corner, she waved her over. As Tee drew near, she opened another door that led into a small, open area. Several large, wooden crates had been stacked up in this space, allowing Tee to climb up onto the rooftop garden of the building directly behind the Rat's Nest (which fronted onto Runshallot Street).

The only other exit from the rooftop garden was a door. With a shrug of her shoulders, Tee swung it open. The room beyond appeared to be nothing more than a sparsely-decorated living quarters. Three thugs were crowded around a small table, playing cards. As Tee entered, they looked up. One of them pointed towards a

bench that had been shoved up against the wall near a flight of stairs leading down to the first floor. Spread out across the top of the bench were a dozen white masks with crude eyeholes cut in them.

“Put on a mask, then go downstairs.”

Tee nodded. She was actually quite grateful for the mask, since it would save her the difficulty of figuring out what to do if Iltumar recognized her. She grabbed a mask, tugged it down over her head, and then headed down the stairs.

The stairs bottomed out into what appeared to be a cobbler’s shop. There was a large table near the fireplace, with a half-dozen cultists in identical masks sitting around it. As Tee came down the stairs, they turned and stared at her. The effect was deeply disconcerting.

At the bottom of the stairs, another cultist waited – this one unmasked. “Take a seat. Keep your mask on. And remember, no names.”

Tee nodded her understanding and headed over to the table. Her eyes instinctively found the exits: The stairs she had come down and two doors – one that might lead outside and another directly opposite it.

A few minutes later, there was the sound of movement coming from above and then another masked cultist came down the stairs. Tee recognized his stride and his body language. It was Iltumar.

*Oh, Iltumar... Tee thought. What are you doing?*

With Iltumar’s arrival, the greeter at the bottom of the stairs was apparently satisfied. He crossed to the inner door and knocked.

A moment later, the door swung open and a large centaur entered the room, stooping under the human-sized lintel.

*Oh shit,* Tee thought. She didn’t recognize him, but it was possible that he knew her. There weren’t that many centaurs in the city, and most of them had some sort of connection to the Narred enclave.

“My name is Dilar,” the centaur said. “And I am honored to see so many who are ready to take the first, glorious steps in championing the cause of freedom. You have come to this meeting from many different places and for many different reasons. But you share a common dream – a dream which the Republicans have begun, but which they were not daring enough to realize!”

Tee cringed at the thought of the Republicans – who had tried to kill the Commissar – not being daring *enough*, but there was a palpable sense of excitement from the others around the table and she was careful to match it.

“We have a real chance to make a difference!” Dilar said. “To change the course of history! By choosing to be here, you have chosen to be heroes. You have chosen greatness.”





Tee saw Iltumar straighten up at the mention of the word “hero”.

“By coming here, you have already joined this Brotherhood,” Dilar continued. “Over the next few weeks you will be contacted. For many of you there will be training. You will be asked to do things. Many of these things will seem simple or even unimportant, but you should never doubt that in even the smallest service you are aiding the Brotherhood and all that we are attempting to accomplish. Over time, your responsibilities will increase.

“The truth is that, even now, we are in desperate need of your help. And so I am asking for all those who can immediately commit themselves fully to our cause to volunteer for our newest project.”

Iltumar’s hand shot up. Several others, including Tee’s (against her better judgment), followed.

“Excellent.” Dilar smiled. “Now, for one final point of business. We have many allies in our struggle. Among them are the brothers of the Ebon Hand. They have a public temple, but as long as we must operate in secret it is important that none of you should go there. However, if any of the Ebon Hand should contact you, you should treat their words as if they came from the mouths of the Brotherhood itself.”

With the meeting concluded, the greeter instructed those who had not volunteered to return upstairs and then leave the way they had come. The others, one at a time, were let out through the front door.

### THE PROJECT SITE

Once outside, Tee was met by Arveth. With few words exchanged between them, Arveth led Tee to an apartment complex on Crossing Street in Oldtown.

Arveth identified one of the buildings as the “project site” and explained that security had become very important. She led Tee to a position in an alley across the street from the building from which she could covertly observe the building’s entrance, then she taught her several hand-signs.

“Members of the Brotherhood will identify themselves using these signs,” Arveth said. “You’ll stand watch between the hours of midnight and six o’clock every day. If anyone attempts to enter or leave the complex without properly identifying themselves, you should raise the alarm. Do you understand?”

Tee nodded. She was certain that the “Brotherhood” was planning to kill the Commissar (what other work of the Republicans could the cultists want to carry out?), and she desperately wanted to know what could be hidden inside



the apartment complex which could further those designs... but Arveth either didn’t know or didn’t think that Tee should know. Pushing the issue might make her suspicious, and Tee had the feeling that she was in deep enough at this point that she wouldn’t be allowed to simply back out of the deal.

Arveth arranged to pass messages to Tee through the Delver’s Guild, and told her that she could contact Arveth in the tavern where they had first met during the evening hours.

With these arrangements made, Arveth left Tee to her first shift.

However, this left Tee with something of a dilemma: She knew that her friends were waiting for her at the Ghostly Minstrel, and the hour was fast approaching when they would abandon restraint and come looking for her on Tavern Row. Their efforts might come to no effect at all, but they could just as easily bumble their way into ruining all of her work at infiltrating the Brotherhood.

While keeping a faithful watch on the apartment complex, Tee planned carefully. After about half an hour, she started looking around nervously. This escalated until she was actively miming the need to relieve herself.

Hoping that her act had convinced anyone watching her, she retreated down the alley. Emerging onto Tower Road, she was able to flag down a carriage and ride it to the White House – a nearby gambling establishment that she had visited a few weeks earlier. As she had hoped, there were several messengers waiting to service the large, late-night crowds there. She quickly wrote out a terse message assuring the others that she was safe and that she should not go to Tavern Row, dispatched the messenger, and then slinked back to her post on Crossing Street.

Tee had no way of knowing what she might have missed during her absence, but the rest of the night passed quietly. Just as her shift was ending, however, she saw two men in black robes leave the apartment building. They gave the proper signs and headed south down the street.

Tee briefly considered following them, but then discarded the idea. A few minutes later she concluded that no one was coming to specifically relieve her (she guessed that the other shifts must be watching the building from different locations), and she slipped away quietly.

### LIGHT OF A FALSE DAWN

Tee followed a long and winding path back to the Ghostly Minstrel, eager to shed any possibility of being followed.



By the time she arrived, the sun was just beginning to rise past the edge of the Spire.

In the common room, Tee saw her companions sleeping around a table. Tee's short missive had not specified when she would be returning, and so the others had waited up for her... Or, at least, waited up for as long as their stamina could endure.

After a moment's thought, Tee decided not to disturb them yet. Instead she made her way upstairs, changed into a fresh set of clothes, and then came back down. Stretching heartily on the stairs he yawned, "Oh! That was a wonderful night's sleep!"

She woke the others. "What are you all doing down here?"

Agnarr instantly realized what she was doing. "Huh... I must have had too much to drink."

The others played along as well, fostering the illusion – in case there were any eavesdroppers in the inn itself – that they had all spent the evening here.

Tee, meanwhile, was trying to figure out her next step. Reaching a resolution, she made some polite farewells and then headed for the front door.

But Dominic stopped her. "Oh! Tee! What about that book you were going to loan me? You know the one... I think it was called *What Happened Last Night*? It sounds really interesting, but I don't know anything about it..."

Tee smirked and all of them made their way upstairs to Elestra's room, where they hoped they might have a bit more privacy. Once there, Tee quickly briefed them on what had happened the night before.

Once they had been satisfied, Tee made her farewells again and left the inn.

### A FRUITLESS INTERLUDE WITH TEE

Tee turned out of Delver's Square and headed up Tavern Row towards Emerald Hill. Once there, she went straight to Iridithil's Home and Doraedian's office.

As she entered, Doraedian looked up with surprise in his eyes. "Tee! What are you doing here? Your lesson isn't until tomorrow."

"I know," Tee said. "But there's something I need to talk to you about."

But now that she was here, she wasn't sure exactly what she wanted to say. She still wasn't sure what Doraedian would think if he knew the full scope of what she had been doing, and she couldn't bear the thought of his harsh judgment.

So she chose her words carefully, laying out – with the slightest possible amount of detail – the discovery of the apartment building in Oldtown, the involvement of the cultists, and her suspicion that they were trying to finish what Helmut had started by assassinating the Commissar. She was particularly hoping that Doraedian would know something useful about the centaur named Dilar, but he did not.

In fact, on some level, Tee had hoped that Doraedian could tell her what to do. She was overwhelmed by the enormity of what she had gotten herself involved in. But while Doraedian promised to take her concerns to the Commissar, he wasn't sure that anything would be done about it. "You're not giving me much to work with, Tee."

Feeling somewhat dejected, Tee returned to the Ghostly Minstrel. She found the others gathered in Elestra's room.

### SCOUTING ON CROSSING STREET

Tee looked at them. "I think we're on our own with this one."

Since it looked as if the authorities weren't going to get involved, the conversation turned to what they were going to do about it.

"Let's kick down the front door," Agnarr said.

Elestra, however, pointed out that Tee knew the pass-signs for the site – they could just walk right through the front door (assuming all of the watchers were as ignorant as Tee was). And the others weren't even sure they *should* get involved. Or that they would be able to accomplish anything if they did.

And so, in the end, they decided to take a gentler approach. Ranthir revealed that his arcane researches had recently yielded the perfection of a spell allowing for the remote viewing of nearby locations. If they could get close enough to the apartment complex, he would be able to – at least briefly – peek inside.

Since they didn't know who – or what – might be keeping an eye on the apartment building, they decided that it was important to keep as low a profile as possible. And since a large group would attract more attention than a smaller one, Tee and Ranthir found themselves heading up into Oldtown while the others remained behind at the Ghostly Minstrel.

The apartment building being used by the cultists was one of several similar buildings lining Crossing Street. Since Ranthir would only be able to target two specific locations with his spells, they decided to scout out the other buildings to get a better sense of what the layout might be like inside the cult's building.

What they discovered was that all of the buildings were owned by the Vladaam merchant house. The residents were all part of the Vladaam estate and each building was run by a separate collective. Most of the people they talked to, however, proved surly and unhelpful, and it quickly became apparent that the residents of the other buildings knew little or nothing about the building being used by the cultists.

Each building was two stories tall, with a single entrance on the front opening onto a central hall with various doors leading to a dozen or so apartments. Encouraged by these similar layouts, they decided to

break into an apartment in the building directly adjacent to the “project site”.

With Tee’s skills this proved to be quite simple. Going to the window they were able to look across the narrow alley between the buildings. There was a thick curtain hanging in the window on the opposite side, but Ranthir was able to use a minor cantrip to jerk it aside – causing it to flutter as if caught in a breeze.

This revealed nothing except an empty room... except that Ranthir was left with the impression that something large had moved rapidly out of his line of sight just as the curtain started to move.

Thus convinced that there might be something more interesting to see, Ranthir used his more powerful spell of clairvoyance to peer into the room... and there, standing in the midst of wrecked furniture and miscellaneous debris, he saw two massive, insectoid creatures.

At the sight, he blanched.

As he watched, one of the creatures reached out with its sharp talon and literally drilled the still-drafting curtain into the wall, pinning it in place.

Ranthir kept his arcane gaze focused there for awhile, but the strange and disturbing creatures did nothing more than scuttle back towards the center of the room and settle themselves down on the floor.

When it seemed clear the creatures weren’t going anywhere, Ranthir pulled his perception out of the spell and pondered the problem of where to place his second (and last) clairvoyance.

Using a different divination, Ranthir was able to pinpoint several magical auras within the building – all of them concentrated in a room on the second floor. That seemed potentially interesting, so Ranthir placed his second point of clairvoyance and peered through...

There were three men standing in another ruined room. He quickly noted that all of them wore the broken square rings of the cultists. Two of them wore coiled viper amulets, and they appeared to be arguing – vociferously – with the third man, who had a black palm print tattooed onto his forearm.

Unfortunately, Ranthir could only look into the room. He couldn’t hear anything.

“Can you read their lips?” Tee asked.

“Perhaps...” Ranthir looked doubtful.

“Is there any way you can let me see it, too?” Tee asked. She’d often practiced reading lips as a little elfling.

“I’m afraid not.”

Ranthir could make out little of what they said, but he was able to pick out a few key phrases here and there: “The Ebon Hand won’t stand for this—“ “—the Brothers of Venom knew—“ “Wuntad will hear of this!”

Ranthir was repeating all of this to Tee. At the mention of Wuntad, she blanched. They’d known that they were almost certainly dealing with chaos cultists,



but the confirmation that Wuntad was directly involved was disconcerting nonetheless. In many ways, she was terrified of him.

The argument was clearly growing hotter. The cultists were pacing around each other, shouting with red-faced rage. It became more difficult for Ranthir to make out what they were saying. And then, just before his spell came to an end, he saw one of the serpent cultists – a Brother of Venom? – begin casting a spell. He barely had time to recognize it as an enchantment of paralysis before the final strands of the clairvoyance unraveled.

He turned to Tee. “Let’s get out of here.”

### **BACK AT THE GHOSTLY MINSTREL**

Tee didn’t argue with him. They returned to the Ghostly Minstrel and reconvened with the others, quickly describing what they had seen.

Elestra was more than happy to let the cultists fight amongst themselves. Agnarr, on the other hand, was still more than happy to charge in the front door. “We’ll catch them by surprise!”

Tee was convinced that the insectoid creatures were going to be used in some sort of an attack on the Commissar, and their discussion turned to what their primary goal had become: Was it to shut down the project? To protect Iltumar? Or somehow do both?

Tor talked about his plans to take Iltumar out the next day. “If he’s looking for something more exciting, maybe we can offer that to him.”

“But isn’t it possible he’ll just think we’re trying to control his life?” Ranthir asked.

“That’s right,” Elestra agreed. “Tell a boy not to do something and he’ll do it just to spite you.”

Tee, reflecting on the fact that Elestra was scarcely older than Iltumar, shook her head. “I got the impression that, if I left, I’d be hunted down and killed. Even if we could somehow convince Iltumar to quit, just pulling him out could still be dangerous.”

In the end, they decided to wait until the next day. Tee would take her shift in disguise at midnight. And if Tor could pull Iltumar away so that they could be sure he wouldn’t be on duty, they would try an assault on the complex.

“Without Tor?” Dominic asked.

“I’d prefer to have his sword,” Tee said. “But we need to make sure that Iltumar isn’t the line of fire.”

“Aren’t we worried about the giant insect things?” Dominic asked, clearly worried about the giant insect things.

“They were afraid of a moving curtain,” Tee said. “I’m not too worried about them.”

“If they’re easily startled, I’ve got a cantrip that can make dancing lights,” Ranthir said.

Dominic laughed. “Ah! Lights! Lights! Look out for the lights!”

Tee grinned. “Agnarr! Get away from those lights and hit those things!”

They all laughed. Even Agnarr.

### MISSIVE FROM THE MIGHTY

There was a knock at the door.

Elestra answered it and found Tellith standing in the hall.

“Oh, good. Master Agnarr *is* with you,” Tellith smiled. “I have a message for him.” She held out a piece of folded parchment.

Agnarr came to the door, grabbed the letter, and grunted a thank you. Elestra thanked her as well and then shut the door.

As soon as the door was shut, Agnarr passed the parchment to Tee. She read it aloud to him.

Master Agnarr—

As we have not received word from you in several weeks, we are urgently seeking confirmation that you are not, in fact, dead. If this letter should reach your hand, please send us a couriered response indicating your continued good health.



*The Order of Iron Might*

Agnarr had no idea what this Order might be, but Tee was familiar with them. They were a guild of warriors based out of the Citadel of Might near the Arena in Oldtown. Tee had never been there, but she understood it to be a hiring hall of sorts for mercenaries, guards, and sellswords. She had some impression that Dorant Khatru, the Merchant Prince of House Khatru, served as the Order’s guildmaster.

“Do you think you joined them... before?” Elestra asked. “You know, when we lost our memories?”

Agnarr shrugged. “It’s possible.”

Links to their missing past had proven few and hard to come by. Tee was particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of following up on this one. She and Dominic both agreed to accompany Agnarr while he paid a visit to the Citadel of Might.

### A KNIGHT’S TRAINING

Tor, meanwhile, had training to attend to. He headed into the Temple District. Sir Kabel met him at the entrance of the Godskeep and escorted him to the training field just outside the southern gate. There he was introduced to Sera Nara – a lithe and attractive woman with dark, copper brown skin. She wore her dark hair in a long braid down to her waist. The entire braid was tightly bound with bands of gold, and the tip was capped with a sharply-edged blade of mithril.

“Nara will be your instructor,” Kabel said. “I’ll have to leave Tor in your capable hands, Sera. I have to meet with Gemmell regarding the tourney rosters.”

Kabel went off about his business and Nara got down to hers. She adopted a practical, no-nonsense approach, but was clearly impressed with Tor’s ability with the blade.

“I practiced for many years,” Tor explained. “But these past few weeks it seems as if all that training suddenly makes *sense*.”

“Of course,” Nara nodded. “Your life has been at a risk. When the blood boils, the blade and body become as one. The heat of battle has made you a warrior. Now we will hone that ability into the skills of a knight.”

They worked hard. The session lasted for nearly two hours. Tor proved to be a fast learner, quickly mastering the rudimentary elements of the Order’s martial training.

“We perceive the world through sight and sound and touch,” Sera Nara said. “But all of us share a deeper connection with reality, as well. If you listen with your soul you can hear the Song of the World – the divine melody which links us all, man and god alike. Through the motions of his blade, a warrior’s body can harmonize with the Song. You will see your opponents without sight; hear them without sound; strike them without thought.”

When the training was nearly complete, Tor became aware that Kabel had returned. The knight stood a goodly distance from the practice field, but his attention was clearly focused on them.

Nara eventually finished. She complimented him again and told him to return to the field in two days. As Tor was gathering up his armor, Kabel made his way over to him.

“Master Tor. How was your training?”

“Exhausting.”

Kabel laughed. “Sera Nara is a demanding teacher. But these are demanding times. I think it’s more important than ever that you become a knight as quickly as possible.”

Tor smiled. “I would like that very much.”

“As would I.” Kabel returned his smile. “Now, a question. Do you know if Dominic has met with Rehobath again?”

Tor shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

“That’s to the good,” Kabel said. “Hopefully this dark chapter can be put behind us soon. If all goes well, I will have much to tell you when you return.”

Kabel made his farewells. Tor was curious about his enigmatic parting, but all he could really do was wait.

## THE COMING OF TAVAN ZITH

Agnarr, Tee and Dominic, meanwhile, had entered Oldtown on their way to the Citadel of Might.

They had just turned off Dalenguard Road onto Four Fountains Street when their ears were assaulted by sudden screams. They were crossing the mouth of Whipstone Street, and turning that way they could see the tightly packed crowd of the merchant road suddenly surging towards them. There were shouts of “Fire!” and “Run!”

Moments later, a half-orc tore into view. He was completely engulfed in flame, but – despite his own screams and the look of terror in his eyes – the flames didn’t seem to be hurting him. However, when the half-

orc grabbed onto a woman near him – in what looked like desperation – the flames did burn her. Badly.

Their crisis instincts kicked in. Dominic threaded his way through the crowd, trying to reach the woman who had been burned. Agnarr, meanwhile, hurled a waterskin at the half-orc. This, however, simply burned away in a cloud of steam without having any effect on the fire.

Tee kept her distance, but shouted at the half-orc to stop. “How can we help? What’s happening?”

But the half-orc didn’t seem to hear her. “What’s happening to me? I’m burning! Help me! For the love of the gods, someone help me!” His voice was tortured with panic.

And then, suddenly, the half-orc’s flames pulsed brightly. Dominic, having drawn near in his efforts to help the woman, was scorched.

Agnarr, seeing Dominic hurt, lost his patience with the situation. He tried to knock the half-orc out. Unfortunately, his efforts only succeeded in making the half-orc even more panicky.

Tee could see that the situation was getting out of control. She ran down the street – getting close to the half-orc and practically shouting into his face. “Stop it! We’re trying to help you, but you have to stop it! You’re hurting people!”

Something in her sharply spoken words – or perhaps the sudden appearance of a lithe elfling directly in his path – shocked the half-orc out of his panic. He looked around the street, seeming to see the scene around himself for the first time. Then he sagged to his knees, his face taut with pain. “It hurts...”

But the flames still weren’t hurting him. Dominic, laid a soothing blessing on the woman who had suffered burns, and then – at Tee’s signal – moved in to examine the half-orc (albeit it from a safe distance).

Now that the half-orc was more of a curiosity than a threat, the crowd that had been scattering in a rapid retreat instead began to draw closer. But just as it seemed as if they had successfully calmed the situation, another man suddenly grabbed at his eyes. Bolts of blue lightning shot out of them, striking several people in the crowd. The thick stench of ozone filled the air. At least a half dozen people collapsed.

Panic erupted once again. In the midst of it, Tee was suddenly struck by the sight of a dark-cloaked man striding boldly down the street and seemingly oblivious to the chaos around him.

He seemed so incongruous that Tee’s suspicions were immediately tweaked. She headed in his direction and hadn’t gotten far before she saw him brush past an older woman in her fifties. The woman almost immediately started floating up into the air. “Help! Help me! The demons have me! They have me by the arms! Help!”

“Agnarr!” Tee called back over her shoulder. “The man in black! I think he’s doing something!”

Agnarr tried to push his way through the crowd, but didn't seem to be catching up. Finally he lost his patience and bellowed. "OUT OF THE WAY!"

The crowd parted before him, allowing Agnarr to abruptly catch up to the mysterious figure and swing away with his greatsword.

"Oh!" Tee gasped. "But I'm not even sure if he's actually causing... Never mind."

With some preternatural sense, the man barely managed to duck out of the way of Agnarr's blow. Then he whirled, revealing a muffled face, and cried out in an imperious voice, "You dare to molest me, miscreant?"

... but then he caught sight of Agnarr's imposing figure and apparently decided that flight was the better part of valor. He whirled away and took off running down the street, displaying an amazing agility at slipping through the now near-riotous crowd trying to escape from the chaos in the street. An elf he passed suddenly screamed and collapsed to the ground.

Agnarr was momentarily startled at the abrupt flight. He was even more startled in the next instant to find himself beginning to secrete acid through his skin. It burned sharply, but he gritted his teeth through the pain and ran after the man, ducking narrowly to avoid one of the blasts of lightning scorching through the air with the scent of ozone.

Dominic, meanwhile, was studying the half-orc. The flames weren't burning him, but there was no denying the pain that the half-orc was feeling. In fact, the flames seemed to be feeding on him in some way – consuming his fundamental vitality in much the same way that a soul-thirsting undead might.

Tee was having some success in following in Agnarr's wake, but she was losing ground. In frustration she pulled up short, notched an arrow in her bow, and took a shot.

It clipped the dark-clad figure's shoulder as he ducked around the corner at the far end of the street, still desperately trying to escape from Agnarr's blows.

Tee renewed her pursuit. As she neared the corner herself, she came upon a dwarf staring at the wall. Globules of black energy poured from his eyes... and a giant octopus appeared half-embedded in the wall, its long tentacles thrashing limply. Tee cursed silently, but decided it was a problem she'd have to deal with later.

Dominic, meanwhile, had figured out how to sustain the rapidly deteriorating half-orc... but his efforts weren't actually curing his condition, only alleviating it. While he was trying to figure out a more permanent solution, several members of the city watch came running up from Four Fountains Street. Spotting Dominic's robes, one of the watchmen approached him. "Have you got that under control?"

Dominic looked up. "Umm... More or less."

Agnarr finally caught up with his quarry. At the last possible instant, the dark-clad figure whirled in an effort

to defend himself, but Agnarr's blade cut too fast and too strong, viciously slashing through the figure's chest.

Grasping at his bleeding torso, the man doubled over. "You would dare the wrath of Tavan Zith?!"

And then Tee's arrow took him in the throat. Zith collapsed to the street, his breath gurgling and blood bubbling from his wounds.

## THE AFTERMATH OF TAVAN ZITH

But the chaos he had wreaked did not abate: The half-orc still burned. The lightning-eyed man was still firing randomly in all directions.

And the dwarf Tee had passed before was still summoning fell creatures into their midst: A massive hound – standing taller than a man's shoulder (although perhaps not as tall as Agnarr's shoulder) and wreathed in living shadow – appeared suddenly at the corner of Whipstone Street. Directly behind Tee. The crowds started running in a new direction.

Tee cursed and ran down the street towards Agnarr.

Before she could get there, however, Agnarr had reached down and grabbed the dying Zith by his hair. Hauling him up he was shocked to discover the features of a dark-skinned elf – just like Shilukar. But the shock didn't stop him from cutting off his head.

Tee came skidding to a halt next to him. "Agnarr! What are you doing?"

"It didn't work!" Agnarr, gasping in pain, held up one of his acid-coated hands.

"We needed to question him!"

"And we will." Agnarr took off the iron collar from Ghul's Labyrinth and snapped it around the dark elf's neck. "Dominic should be able to heal this." He grimaced again at the pain from the acid. "I think you might need to kill me... Maybe that would stop it."

"It's not that I wouldn't love to do that," Tee said. "But—"

"But I have work to do." Agnarr nodded. Then he grinned. He turned down the street and ran back towards where the hound of shadows was spreading panic.

Tee, meanwhile, grabbed Zith's body and stuffed it into her *bag of holding*.

Meanwhile, back by Dominic, the city watchmen were spreading out. They formed a perimeter around the lightning-eyed man and – before Dominic realized what they were doing – shot him dead.

"For the glory!" Agnarr charged through the panicking throngs. The suddenly flaming sword had a less than calming effect on the crowd, but it caught and tore at the insubstantial flesh-stuff of the shadow hound.

The beast – in terrible pain – threw back its head and *howled*. It was a sound born from the stygian pits of utter darkness, carrying in its very note a primal terror. It echoed off the buildings of the city. At its passing, a wave of supernatural fear swept over the entire block.

People began scattering in complete panic. Even Tee couldn't resist its effects, joining the screaming throngs in mindless flight.

The dwarf responsible for summoning the strange creatures suddenly leapt onto Agnarr's back. "No! Leave it alone you! You mustn't hurt it!"

Agnarr managed to shrug off the frenzied dwarf. Then with a final swing of his greatsword he finished off the shadowy hound. He twirled back towards the dwarf— And found an axe swinging at his head.

He narrowly turned the blow so that it only cut lightly into his armored side and then slammed the flat of his own blade into the dwarf's face. The dwarf slumped into unconsciousness, his face badly scorched from the flames of the blade.

Back at the other end of the street, the city watchmen had thrown a rope around the floating woman and were pulling her back down to earth. Once her feet touched the ground, her condition seemed to pass. But the half-orc was still burning and his condition was deteriorating rapidly.

Dominic, however, had seen that death seemed to have stopped the lightning-bolts being hurled from the eyes of the other man. He was able to heal the man's wounds and return breath to his body. And when he did, the condition didn't reappear.

As he was finishing, the commander of the watchmen approached him. "I know you... You're the Chosen of Vehthyl."

"Umm... Yes." Dominic was already uncomfortable with this conversation and it hadn't even properly begun.

"What caused this?"

"I'm not... really sure."

Agnarr came trotting up. "I am." He quickly explained about the "sorcerer" who had been responsible for releasing these dangerous abilities.

"And what happened to him?" the commander asked.

"He escaped," Agnarr said without missing a beat. "He ran that way." He pointed in a plausible direction.

Dominic thought that the only way to cure the half-orc might be to kill him and then bring him back from the dead. The half-orc was terrified by the idea, but agreed. Before Dominic could say anything else, Agnarr thrust his flaming sword straight into the half-orc's chest—

And a massive explosion ripped its way out of the half-orc's chest and gouted its way down the length of the entire block!

An unnatural pressure wave preceding the blast threw Agnarr clear of it. He sat up and shook his head. "What happened?"

Fortunately the street had already been virtually abandoned and the members of the city watch had been far enough away that they weren't injured.

The only thing left of the half-orc, however, was a desiccated corpse... Which, thankfully, no longer

burned. Dominic had to work for several minutes – stitching sinew and regrowing skin through the sheer life force of his faith – but he was finally able to restore some semblance of life to the half-orc's pain-wracked body.

Agnarr, meanwhile, was stripping out of his armor in an effort to prevent it from any further damage. The acid-scarring hadn't caused any structural damage yet, but his clothes were already badly scarred in many places.

"We'll have to get you some new clothes," Dominic said.

"Why?" Agnarr said. "There's just a few holes!"

"It's... umm... more about where the holes are located."

Like the half-orc, Dominic only saw one solution. In a controlled fashion he stopped Agnarr's heart, killing him. Then he immediately used his skills and divine gifts to revive him.

It worked. The acid stopped oozing from Agnarr's pores.

## TEE RETURNS TO THE SCENE

By the time her head cleared, Tee found herself on High Road, looking down off the Oldtown cliffs towards the sea. She cursed under her breath.

After a moment's thought, she set off at a running pace towards the Ghostly Minstrel. Once there she barged into Ranthir's room.

"Mistress Tee?"

Without saying a word she pulled Zith's corpse half out of her *bag of holding* and then stuffed it back in. He was on her heels as she turned and headed back out into the street.

They were able to grab a carriage in Delver's Square. As they rode back towards Oldtown, Tee filled him in on what she'd seen. "We're not sure what we're dealing with. I'm hoping you'll be able to figure it out."

"I'll do my best."

By the time they reached the ramp leading up into Oldtown, however, the watch had sealed the upper city.

It turned out that the bay of the shadow hound had affected a wide swath of the city. And in the tightly-packed confines of Oldtown the effects had been devastating: Riotous crowds and madhouse conditions. There had even been some reports of people throwing themselves out of windows in blind panic.

Tee, however, managed to identify herself as an associate of the Chosen of Vehthyl. Fortunately the guards stationed on the roadblock had apparently heard reports that Dominic had been helping them at the source of the disturbance. They let Tee and Ranthir through the blockade.

When they arrived back at the scene, they discovered that Dominic and Agnarr had already left. Everyone who had been directly affected by Zith's attack had been

quarantined on Whipstone Street. Things were firmly under control, but the watch commander was more than glad to accept Ranthir's mystical expertise.

After examining those affected, Ranthir identified the effect as an uncontrolled explosion of sorcerous potential. "We all have a connection to the same arcane forces that I use in the casting of my spells," he explained. "In some that connection is stronger than in others. It appears that in these victims that connection has been exploited. In layman's terms, it's been ripped open – power flows through it in a completely uncontrolled fashion."

This meant little to any of them, but Ranthir was able to confirm that all of them had been fully cured.

But the dwarf kept screaming about the voices whispering in his ears. And the elf who had collapsed was now babbling in what appeared to be glossolalic tongues.

"So what's wrong with them?" Tee asked.

"There's no lingering effect of a mystical nature," Ranthir said. "But whatever happened to them must have broken their minds. Killing them won't help."

The commander of the watch nodded sharply and then turned to one of his men. "We'll send them to Mahdoth's Asylum, then."

Suddenly, out of the elf's mad gibberings, Tee's sharp ears caught a meaningful phrase: "The lance... The lance is coming..."

She had said something like that herself once, as her mind emerged from madness. The similarity struck her to the soul.

There was nothing else to be done there. Ranthir and Tee returned to the Ghostly Minstrel, hoping to find the others there ahead of them.

## AT THE CITADEL OF MIGHT

Dominic and Agnarr, however, had continued on to the Citadel of Might. At first glance the Citadel appeared to be a rather intimidating fortress, but a closer inspection as they drew near revealed most of the apparent fortifications to be nothing more than a façade.

Entering the building they found a rather confusing scene: Various pieces of furniture had been broken and a half dozen or so unconscious bodies had been leaned up against the nearest wall.

Agnarr grabbed the nearest upright person. "What happened?"

The man shrugged. "They just went crazy. We had to knock 'em out." He finished propping up the last of them. "Now, what brings you to the Order?"

"I received a letter. I'm here to confirm that I'm still alive."

"That's definitely better than being dead," the man grinned. "What's your name?"

"Agnarr."

"Ah. Right. I remember sending that letter this morning."

"What was the last job I got here?"

"You having problems getting paid?"

Agnarr shook his head. "I'm just curious."

"You don't remember? Did you take one too many blows to the head?" the man laughed. Agnarr laughed with him.

The man checked the guild's records. "Actually, it looks like you never took a job here. But you're all paid up. And your locker's squared away. And you're alive. So you're good to go."

"Locker?"

The man showed Agnarr to a locker in a small side room. Agnarr waited until he left and then smashed the cheap lock.

The first thing that caught Agnarr's attention was his original greatsword – the blade that had been given to him by the people of his clan. He lifted it with a grin, feeling the familiar weight settle comfortably into his hand.

Putting the sword aside for a moment he looked through the rest of the locker's contents. There was a suit of padded armor (suitable for practice sessions), a sheaf of blank parchment, and several charcoal sticks suitable for writing. These latter items seemed to confirm that Agnarr had been literate during their period of lost memories.

"You know," Dominic said. "If you learned it once, you could probably learn it again."

Agnarr grunted noncommittally. He put the padded armor on and found it to be a perfect fit. And since he'd already put on the armor, he decided to go sparring for a bit. But this left him vaguely unsatisfied as he easily gained the upper hand against the cheap hired muscle making up most of the crowd there.

After an hour he put the armor away, secured the greatsword in his *bag of holding*, and then returned to the front desk.

"The lock on my locker's broken. Can you get that fixed?"

"Huh. It must have gotten busted up during the brawl. We'll get that fixed right up for you."

## THE SHORTEST INTERROGATION

Once Dominic and Agnarr returned to the Ghostly Minstrel, Tee gathered all of them – except for Elestra who was still out prowling the streets somewhere – in her room. Once there, she and Agnarr revealed the identity of the dark elf and reminded the others of the prophecy they had seen in Pythoness House:



*The Saint of Chaos shall return and the Banewarrens shall ope their maw. And the name of doom shall be Tavan Zith.*

“What does that mean?” Elestra asked.

“I don’t know,” Tee said. “Let’s ask him.”

She pulled Zith out of her *bag of holding*. Tor bound him securely. Tee blindfolded him. And Dominic healed him.

As soon as Tavan Zith awoke, however, they all felt a sickening, bursting feeling erupting in their chests. Agnarr instinctively smashed the pommel of his sword into the dark elf’s nose, breaking it and sending him plunging back into unconsciousness.

But it was already too late. Dominic’s skin was toughening into a thick, fibrous, sickly grey substance. Tee, meanwhile, suffered a quivering pulsation starting somewhere in her ribs – she felt uncontrollable power surging through her limbs, trying to tear its way out of her.

Then, suddenly, she felt Tor’s hands on her shoulders. “Fight it, Tee! You can fight it!” His voice was strong and reassuring. They were an anchor. She found herself focusing on those words and pulling away from whatever was fighting to tear itself loose from inside of her.

The moment passed.

Agnarr looked at Dominic. “Is that another sign of Vehthyl?”

Ranthir examined Dominic and determined that the effect wouldn’t persist for more than an hour or so.

But now they weren’t sure what to do. Zith was clearly dangerous. And he seemed to bring with him grim tidings. (“Although our saint did kick their saint’s ass,” Agnarr said, patting Dominic on the shoulder.) But they didn’t have any way to control him. Or even to question him, apparently.

The best idea they could come up with was to perhaps toss the entire thing into Lord Zavere’s lap, although Tor pointed out that they had often done that before. Perhaps too often.

While they were mulling the issue over, however, a knock came at the door. Tee quickly gestured for Tor and Agnarr to get Zith’s body hidden out of sight behind her bed.

They opened the door cautiously... and found Tellith standing on the other side.

“Jevicca Nor is waiting downstairs. She’s asked to speak with you. She says its urgent.”

“We’ll be right down,” Tee promised.

Agnarr looked down at his acid-stained clothes and panicked. He couldn’t let Jevicca see him like this. He headed to his room to change. Tor and Dominic stayed

in Tee’s room to watch over Zith. Which left Tee and Ranthir to head downstairs and meet with Jevicca.

As they came down the stairs into the lobby, however, they were taken by surprise at the sight of her. Jevicca looked imperious and stood taller than they had ever seen her before. There was a palpable difference between this Jevicca and the Jevicca who came to enjoy the camaraderie of the common room.

“What is it?” Tee asked.

“I’m here on behalf of the Inverted Pyramid. We should speak in private,” Jevicca said.

They took her back up to Ranthir’s room. Agnarr joined them on the way. Once the door was safely shut behind them, Jevicca began to speak...

### ... AND THE BANEWARRENS SHALL OPE THEIR MAW

“Those who know the true history of the world speak of five ages: The Age of Stars, the Age of Gods, the Age of Sorcerers, the Age of Dragons, and the Age of Man.

“In the dawning years of the Age of Sorcerers – countless millennia ago and long before any written history you have ever read – the Great Sorcerer Ptolus founded the first city of Ptolus. Little is now known of the sorcerer Ptolus, but Ptolus had an apprentice named Danar.

“In time, Danar eventually became a Great Sorcerer in his own right and near the city of his master he built a fortress named Mosul Pearl. The world was troubled then, and Danar became distressed at the great evil that seemed to be growing in its strength. And so Danar sought to rid the world of its corruption. He studied the secrets of evil artifacts, objects of dark power, trapped essences of vanquished fiends, demonic relics, and even the last vestiges of particularly horrible diseases. He named these “banes”, and he began to gather them from all corners of the world.

“Danar did not seek to destroy them, however. He believed that, if destroyed, the evil of the banes would be released back into the world and manifest again in some other form. Destroying banes would only begat new banes.

“Instead, Danar constructed a vast catacomb beneath the fortress of Mosul Pearl. He named this place Tremoc Korin – the Banewarrens. Within its well-warded vaults he sealed the banes, locking them away from the world for all time.

“But Danar’s goal was folly. Concentrating so much raw hatred and despite – so much darkness and evil power – in a single place was a terrible mistake. The earth itself, no longer able to tolerate the concentrated evil that the banes represented, thrust Tremoc Korin away from itself – creating a tall, impossibly high and narrow spire atop which Mosul Pearl still stood.

“Damar, however, was undeterred. And, in time, the evil he had gathered seeped into his soul. Damar was corrupted himself and his soul turned to darkness. He became the Banelord, transforming his castle to the dark keep of Jabel Shammar, and using the banes he once strove to keep out of evil hands to spread his own evil across the land.

“Ptolus and his city were destroyed by the Banelord. And then, having succored his strength, the Banelord attacked the civilized lands for thousands of leagues in every direction, raining destruction down upon the world and all its inhabitants. In the end he was defeated by an alliance of Great Sorcerers and god-touched heroes who were marked by the Sigils of the Pantheon. From this alliance the First Conclave of the Sorcerer-Kings was born.

“But the Spire remains. Jabel Shammar remains. And it has been long believed that the Banewarrens remained... sealed and impregnable beneath the surface of the earth, but still filled with ancient evils. Many – including Ghul himself – have come to Ptolus seeking a way into the Banewarrens so that they might claim that power for themselves. But they have always failed. The terrors of the Banewarren have remained lost.

“Now, however, we believe that has changed. We detected the surge of wild magic you encountered in Oldtown earlier today and our subsequent divinations reveal that a path has been opened into the Banewarrens. We don’t know how and we don’t why, but we desperately need to find out what’s happening. And we’d like you to do it for us.”

# SESSION 28 – INTO THE BANEWARRENS

September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 15<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty



Jevicca offered them 1,000 gold pieces each for a preliminary investigation of the Banewarrens and identified a mansion on Nibeck Street in Oldtown where the Inverted Pyramid had first detected the surges of wild magic.

They looked at each other, clearly uncertain. Tee asked Jevicca if they might have a few moments alone to discuss the matter. Jevicca agreed and headed downstairs.

They quickly discussed what they had just learned. It wasn't the first time they'd heard of the Banewarrens. They had discovered the "Drill of the Banewarrens" in the laboratories of Ghul's Labyrinth, and now they could guess at the impregnable walls that the Skull-King had been seeking to penetrate. And, of course, there was also the prophecy of the coming of Tavan Zith that they had discovered in Pythoness House – a prophecy which now seemed to be coming true.

"There's something else," Tee said. She pulled out a thick bundle of papers representing the various fruits of their investigations. Among them was the sheet of astronomical-based prophecies they had discovered in the house of Helmut Itlestein. "Listen to this."

*The warrens are opened. Great evil pours forth.  
No seal may be found while the heart remains  
untouched.*

"I thought it was talking about the Warrens, but it didn't make any sense. Maybe it's actually talking about the Banewarrens."

There was more than a little trepidation in the room. It was easy to feel overwhelmed in the face of such portentous history and riddling prophecy. The Banewarrens seemed like an insurmountable problem.

"But it's not a problem we have to solve," Ranthir pointed out. "She just wants us to investigate."

"It's easy money," Agnarr said. "We don't even have to go in. She said preliminary."

(Dominic looked at him. "Where did you learn that word?" Agnarr grunted.)

Tee frowned. "I don't think it'll be that easy."

"It's never that easy," Tor said.

But they decided to take the job. Tee headed downstairs to tell Jevicca. As she arrived in the entryway, however, Elestra walked in off the street. Tee sent her up to talk to the others.

Jevicca was glad that they were willing to conduct the investigation. While discussing the exact parameters of what the Inverted Pyramid was looking for (which turned out to be fairly vague), Tee dropped the name of Tavan Zith to see if Jevicca would know it. She didn't.

Tee explained Zith's identity and gave Jevicca copies of the two prophecies they had discovered. Jevicca promised to look into them.

### A PARANOIA OF CASTLE SHARD

Tee headed back upstairs. By the time she got there, Elestra had already been filled in by the others. She agreed with Agnarr. It sounded like easy money.

After discussing it, they decided not to go up to the Nibeck Street mansion until the next morning. Many of them were exhausted from the ordeals they had suffered earlier in the streets of Oldtown and there were only a few hours left before Tee needed to go back undercover to the Brotherhood of Venom's project site.

Dominic, however, raised the possibility of trying to question Tavan Zith again. "I know it's dangerous, but we could try talking to him somewhere without any people around. Like a ceme— Like a field. A big, empty field."

"We need some way of talking to him without triggering his power," Tee said.

Ranthir pondered this for a moment. "The effect triggers a latent connection to sorcerous powers. It's possible that an antimagic field should suppress it. If nothing else, it would suppress the powers released in others."

"Can you make one of those?" Dominic asked.

Ranthir shook his head. "It's beyond my skill."

"We could talk to Lord Zavere," Tee suggested.

"I don't know if I trust Zavere any more," Ranthir said. "We sold him the Drill of the Banewarrens yesterday and today someone breaks into the Banewarrens."

Agnarr promptly proposed ambushing.

Elestra laughed nervously. "Okay, who here doesn't want to ambush the most powerful wizard in the city?"

Hands were raised.

"Jevicca was interested in it, too," Tee pointed out.

"So what you're saying is that we can't trust anybody?" Tor asked.

"Right," Tee said. "Business as usual."

There was a knock on the door.

### THE SECOND INQUIRY

It was Brother Fabitor, the priest from the Chapel of St. Gustav. They let him. He seemed very nervous.

"Is this about Phon?" Tee asked. "We heard what happened to her."

"What? Oh, no," Fabitor said. "That was a terrible tragedy. But no, I have a message for Dominic."

Now it was Dominic who seemed very nervous. "What is it?"

"A friend of mine has gone missing," Fabitor explained. "A member of the Church. Earlier this

evening I went to the Cathedral to report his absence. I was spoken to by the Novarch himself. I was honored. He asked me to come here. He requests an audience with Dominic."

"When?"

"He said as soon as possible. It seemed quite urgent."

"Then I guess we should hurry," Tee said.

They ushered him out of the room and rapidly made preparations. Tor removed the signet ring of the Order of the Dawn. Dominic put back on the purple prelate robes that Rehobath had given him.

They took a carriage to the Temple District. When they arrived at the Cathedral they were quickly escorted to Rehobath's private office. He was waiting for them there, seeming to bathe in the light cast from his godwood desk.

Rehobath was being attended by three others: A middle-aged, brown-haired woman wearing Crissa's ank. A muscular, fit, middle-aged man with a shaved head wearing Athor's cross. And a young, dark-haired man with angular features and a tall frame wearing the winged serpent of Vehthyl.

The woman introduced herself as Sister Mara von Witten, a member of the Sisterhood of Crissa. The younger man – Brother Thad – eagerly shook their hands. He gushed enthusiastically over Dominic, repeating over and over again what a great honor it was to meet him. Dominic squirmed.

Finally the other man was forced to interrupt him. "I think that's enough. We should get down to business."

"Yes, I agree," Rehobath said. "This is Brother Heth Neferul, my friend and advisor."

"How can we be of service to you, Novarch?" Dominic asked with a meekness born from feigned humility and nervous fear.

"We live in a time of prophecy," Rehobath said. "And you seem to have a habit of finding yourselves in the middle of it."

"What do you mean?"

"The extraordinary events in Oldtown today – in which I have been told you were involved – are the beginning of what will be a new chapter in history. Tavan Zith has returned to this world, and if the prophecies are true that means that the Banewarrens have been opened. Tobias, if you would..."

Thad nodded and took up the thread. "I tend to the Archive of the Church as a member of the Order of the Silver God. There are many secrets recorded there that have been forgotten by other men. Among the legends recorded there is the tale of the Sword of Justice – a blade once wielded by the goddess Crissa herself.

"The sword was lost. But it was said to have been used by a man of great evil to create a place known as the Banewarrens. It is written that the Banewarrens were sealed by the gods themselves as an affront to the natural

order of the world... but the Sword of Crissa remained inside.”

“If the Banewarrens have been opened,” Sister Mara said. “Then we have a unique opportunity to regain one of the lost artifacts of the Church.”

“If the sword is within our grasp,” Rehobath said, “It would be a powerful talisman in our cause to purify the Church. I have been told of your role in the return of Tavan Zith. And when the Chosen of Vehthyl is found in such a place... well, it seems to me that the gods have spoken.”

“Of course,” Brother Heth Neferul said, “We understand that such investigations will have certain *expenses* associated with them. And to that end we would be more than happy to supply you with a fund of 2,000 gold pieces for your trouble.”

They would practically be getting paid twice for the same job. There was no reason to pass that up. They agreed to the commission.

“Excuse me,” Tee said. “You said that Tavan Zith was mentioned in your books. Who is he?”

“We don’t properly know,” Brother Thad said. “But in some texts he’s referred to as a ‘saint’, so I’d assume he was working on behalf of the gods – although I have no idea which of them he may have served.”

“I see,” Tee said. “Thank you.”

## TAVAN ZITH AT CASTLE SHARD

They left. Once they were safely in the carriage and driving away from the Cathedral they talked things over.

“I don’t trust him,” Tor said.

Dominic nodded. “You can put crimson robes on a pig, it’s still not a novarch.”

They needed to know more. They needed to question Tavan Zith, and the only way they could think to do that was by going to Castle Shard. They also needed to know if Lord Zavere was the one responsible for opening the Banewarrens. And, if so, why.

As they rode, Dominic looked at the others. “So... do we have any idea how we’re going to do this without getting killed?”

Agnarr shrugged. “Sure. We ask him. If he didn’t do it, we don’t get killed.”

Tor came up with a better strategy. “We tell him that we respect him. Tell him we’ve been approached about this. But if he’s involved, we’re more than happy to stay out of it. We just want to know that before getting in his way.”

Kadmus was waiting for them at the gate of the castle. He ushered them in to see Lord Zavere. He welcomed them warmly and seemed genuinely pleased to see them.

Unfortunately, their plan fell apart fairly quickly. Tee carefully began working her way around the subject of the Banewarrens – sounding him out on the matter. But

then Elestra blurted out Rehobath’s involvement. Before Tee could regain her grip on the situation, Zavere had quickly figured out that they had been approached by both the Novarch and the Inverted Pyramid.

Tee sighed and decided to make the best of it.

“What do you know about the Inverted Pyramid? Should we trust them?”

“It depends,” Zavere said. “Although I have reasons to distrust them, the Pyramid is not entirely monolithic. Whether you can trust them will most likely have more to do with whether or not you can trust the person you’re working for.”

“And what do you know about the Banewarrens themselves?”

Zavere gave them a brief history similar to the one Jevicca had described to them. “No one has ever been able to penetrate them, although many have tried. It’s known that Ghul himself was fascinated by them. He named himself the Sorcerer’s Get and claimed to be a direct descendant of the Banelord himself. The drill I purchased from you would have been only one of many attempts he made to access them.

“Much of our modern knowledge of them derives from records recovered by Gerris Hin, the same loremaster responsible for founding the modern city of Ptolus. Over the centuries, many have attempted to succeed where Ghul failed. Some of them, like Sokalahn, being quite famous. Others less so. But whether powerful or clever, none have ever succeeded.”

“And have you ever tried?”

Zavere laughed. “No. I purchased the drill as a mere curiosity. I doubt it would work in any case. No, the Banewarrens are not a specialty of mine.”

“Do you know who might specialize in it?” Tor asked.

“The Banewarrens have long been a fool’s errand. If you had asked me yesterday, I might have told you that no one was studying it. But clearly the last few hours have changed that.”

“If the Banewarrens have been opened,” Tor said, “I don’t know if we’re strong enough to face them.”

“Neither do I,” said Zavere. “But I will look in the archives of the Castle. If they contain any information about the Banewarrens that might help you, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you,” Tor said.

“There is something else...” Tee said hesitantly, glancing at the others. “Does the name Tavan Zith mean anything to you?”

It didn’t. Tee quickly filled him on what had happened and showed him the prophecy they had discovered in Pythoness House. Then she revealed that they had Tavan Zith in custody, but had been unable to question him. She let Ranthir explain why and share his theory about how an antimagic field might be used to suppress Zith’s ability.

“Where is he now?” Zavere asked.

Tee glanced nervously at her *bag of holding*. Zavere followed her gaze.

“Are you serious?”

Tee nodded.

“Very well. Come with me.”

Zavere led them through the Castle, taking them to a small, but well-acquainted laboratory where Lady Rill was working. He quickly explained the situation to her.

Lady Rill lowered a metal cylinder out of the ceiling. Manipulating several devices she created a blue, glowing field of energy within the cylinder. “If you place him in there, he will be restrained and any sorcerous manifestations will be suppressed.”

Tee removed Zith from her *bag of holding* and placed him in the cylinder. They woke him up.

As Zith opened his eyes, his features contorted into a contemptuous sneer. “The powers of chaos shall make you rue this day.”

“Who are you?”

“I am the sower of chaos! The servant of the true gods!”

“What do you mean?”

“Destruction. Destruction is the ultimate end of all things and the fulfillment of all dreams.”

“Do you know where the Banewarrens are located? Did you come from the Banewarrens?”

But his answers were useless, varying between the megalomaniacal and the insane. After several minutes they gave up. Zavere promised to continue questioning him, although he had little hope of getting anything out of him. They thanked him and Lady Rill both and went on their way.

## ON THE EVE OF THE BANEWARRENS

As they passed down through Oldtown they turned aside long enough to stop at the Pale Tower. There Tee left word with the Graven One – asking if any of the Malkuth would be interested in knowing that the Banewarrens had been opened.

Ranthir headed to the Delver’s Guild library and started researching the Banewarrens directly, although he turned up little of substance beyond what they had learned from Jevicca, Rehobath, and Lord Zavere.

Elestra, meanwhile, made a point of buying a newsheet. They were filled with news of the riots in Oldtown, and she found that Agnarr, Dominic, Tee, and Ranthir had been prominently credited with the quick and successful response to what was being described as a sorcerous attack on the city. She also discovered that a 2,000 gold piece reward had been offered for the spellcaster responsible.

Elestra also made a point of digging up older copies of the day’s newsheets, printed before the riots. From these she learned that Gidden Primus, a mage of mild

repute, had been found dead the night before in his apartment in Oldtown. His chambers had been rimed with frost and Gidden himself had frozen to death.

Tee had gone straight up to her rooms to snatch some sleep before heading back up to Oldtown to perform her watch duties for the Brotherhood (it had been more than a day and a half since she’d woken up), but Elestra caught up with her in the common room when she came back down around 11 o’clock.

They agreed that there didn’t seem to be any connection between the death of Gidden Primus and the opening of the Banewarrens.

When Tee left, Elestra shapeshifted into a dog and accompanied her. Tee appreciated the company, and they thought it might be useful to have another pair of eyes and legs available if they were needed.

In fact, it turned out that they were needed sooner rather than later. As they passed through the streets of Oldtown, Tee spotted Iltumar sneaking his way back towards Midtown – his watch duties on the apartment complex must have just ended.

Tee warned Elestra and they easily avoided him. Once he had passed, Tee indicated that Elestra should follow him while she continued on to the apartment complex.

Elestra did. Or at least tried to. After a few blocks, Iltumar seemed to become suspicious of the “stray” that was dogging him. Elestra tried to throw his suspicion by acting innocently (sniffing at garbage piles and the like), but in the process she ended up losing him. Frustrated, she turned back and rejoined Tee at the apartment complex.

The rest of the evening passed quietly. When Tee’s shift ended at 6 o’clock they both headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel and managed to grab a few more hours of sleep before the new day began.

## RETURNING TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

(09/16/790)

The mansion on Nibeck Street that Jevicca had identified as the origin point for the appearance of the surge of Tavan Zith’s wild magic was very close to Pythoness House. So close, in fact, that they feared there might be a connection. Could the cultists be responsible for the breaching of the Banewarrens?

“If we check it out and there’s nothing there,” Ranthir pointed out, “then we’ve lost nothing. But if there is, then we may have saved ourselves considerable time.”

So before heading to Nibeck Street, they return to Pythoness House.

They found it undisturbed... until they reached the gatehouse. As Tee passed through the door of the narrow space, the ghostly specter who had assaulted them before suddenly rematerialized. At the same instant, the



trapdoor slammed shut behind Tee, separating her from the others.

“Leave this place of evil before it consumes you!”

“Okay.”

“... what?”

“If you’ll just open the trapdoor, I’ll leave.”

“Very well.” The ghost waved and the trapdoor swung open.

Tee grabbed it and held it open. “There’s a ghost! Help!”

Ranthir called up from below, “Did we want to talk to it this time?”

Agnarr, who had leapt up the ladder and had his sword halfway out of his sheathe, stopped. “I suppose...” He sighed heavily.

The ghost, for his part, now seemed to be more flustered than sinister. They asked him his name and he introduced himself as Taunell.

“What are you doing here?” Elestra asked.

“I lived in this house two hundred years ago. I served as priest for the Kollotis merchant family. It was a minor house and its fortunes were waning. It must have appeared weak. One night a band of brigands assaulted the house. They killed most of the household and stole the family jewels. The Kollotis family never recovered. I, myself, found myself unable to leave this mortal plane. I had no greater desire than to see the family protected, and now I seek to protect this house against those who would stain their memory.”

“And the chaos cultists?” Tee asked.

“They came here five years ago. I am shamed to say that I could not make them leave this place.”

“Do you know anything about Wuntad?”

“He was their leader. Among the women who lived here I had a friend named Maquent. She told me that his ultimate goal was to join all the followers of chaos in a common cause. He brought great evil into this house.

Tee grimaced. “He left with it, too.”

“If we brought him back here, is there anything you could do to stop him?” Elestra asked.

Taunell lowered his head. “I couldn’t even stopped him when he lived here.”

“I understand,” said Tee. “It’s all right.”

## THE MANSION ON NIBECK STREET

Besides Taunell, Pythoness House was deserted. Neither the cultists, the chaos spirit, nor the demon had returned. Satisfied that there was nothing else to be gained there, they headed towards the mansion on Nibeck Street.

The mansion was a single-story sprawl of decayed opulence standing in the shadow of the Jeweled Cliffs. It had clearly been abandoned for some time. A dreary layer of neglect was draped over the entire structure – grime and dust and weeds.

They carefully made their way up to the grand entrance. By studying the dim tracks left in the dust outside the door, Agnarr was able to tell that a large group had recently entered the mansion. “I’m not sure how many were in the group, but some of these tracks are too large to be human. They appear to have been followed by two other people who were careful in their movements – stealthy.”

There were also several large, circular, clawed prints that none of them recognized. Agnarr couldn’t tell if these tracks had accompanied the first group or the second.

Tee carefully opened the front doors. A broad foyer with a moldering carpet was revealed. About thirty feet further on, this foyer ended in the main entrance hall which ran through the center of the building. On the opposite side of the hall they could look out through what had once been a grand living room through a wall of glass doors into the mansion’s private garden.

Agnarr was still following the tracks. “They went to the right.”

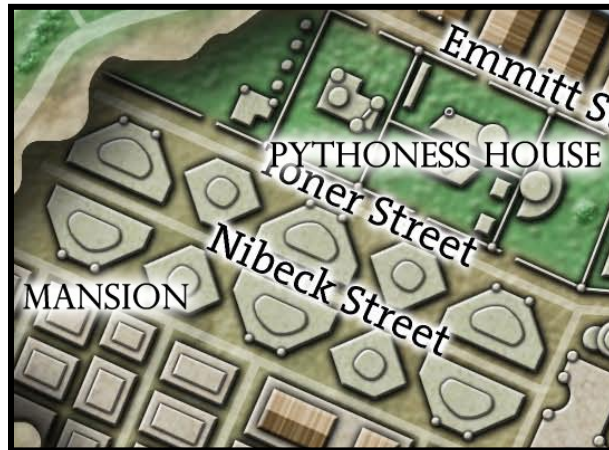
The others followed him. They passed a dining room on their left. The tracks continued further down the hall towards another door, which turned out to be the kitchen. Beyond the kitchen the hall took a sharp turn to the right.

“All right,” Tee said. “Do we keep following the tracks or should we make sure that—”

Her question was rendered moot as an orc woman came darting around the corner and, with a guttural warcry, swung her sword at Agnarr’s head.

The barbarian was surprised, but only for a moment. He easily ducked under the orc woman’s clumsy blow, whipped out his own sword, and used it to pin her to the wall.

The orc woman howled in pain. She slammed her own sword into Agnarr’s side. Agnarr barely grunted. The orc woman’s eyes widened and she tried to squirm





free, but Agnarr – holding her in place with one hand – simply drew back and then severed her spine.

Tor trussed her up and Dominic healed her spine. Tee quickly rifled through her possessions, but she was carrying nothing that would identify her. Her equipment was of high quality, but generic. She had no identification papers on her. What she did have, however, was a curious ring made out of bone. Tee tried to remove it, but found that it stuck fast. Dominic inspected it and discovered that it was actually bonded to the orc woman's finger bone.

"That's... disturbing," Tee said.

They woke her up and began questioning her. Unfortunately, she proved completely intransigent – hurling curses at them and then falling silent. Tee pretended to plead with her, playing the sympathetic role to the hilt. But, when she still refused to respond, Tee simply turned to Agnarr: "Do it."

Agnarr stepped forward and ripped off her ear.

But she still wouldn't talk.

"How is that even possible?" Elestra said. "I'm intimidated and it wasn't even my ear."

Dominic re-attached her ear (as much to stop her from bleeding to death as anything else) and they dumped her in a nearby closet. No one had come to help her, but they did a quick sweep of the mansion's upper level just to be sure there wouldn't be any more surprises. They found nothing.

### THE MEANDERING PASSAGE

In the kitchen's pantry they found a narrow flight of stone stairs leading down into a wine cellar. There were various wooden racks for bottles and a few larger ones for casks, but they were all empty. A number of the racks, however, had been toppled over and shoved off to one side of the cellar, exposing a large section of the western wall. A huge hole had been dug into this wall, leading to a long tunnel which ran out of sight.

They headed into the tunnel. The floor was bare stone and tightly compacted dirt, making it impossible for Agnarr to make out any clear trail. However, Tee was able to tell that the tunnel had been dug with large claws.

The tunnel ran in a perfectly straight line due west. After a few minutes they began to wonder exactly how far it went. It was more than 1,600 feet before they reached the first turn-off — a second tunnel broke off abruptly to the north. The walls of this second tunnel were rougher and less even — it had the appearance of a natural cave, perhaps one that had been inadvertently intersected by the tunnel they were following. They decided to bypass it and continue west.

After another thousand feet or so, the tunnel widened into a larger cavern. Loose stones and dirt covered the floor. Burrowed passages continued to the west and to the south. There were a few digging tools scattered on

the floor (none of which, curiously, appeared to have been used) and a leather pack leaning up against the wall.

Digging through the leather pack they found a few miscellaneous supplies and a note:

#### YUINTHU'S LETTER TO KIKANUILE

Kikanuile—

I am glad to hear that your excavations are nearly complete. Fortunately, our own researches have already yielded fruit. Within the unsealed portions of the Banewarrens, you should discover a massive iron door marked with the Seal of Malkith. You will need to breach this warded door in order to penetrate deeper into the complex.

To that end, I am sending you a ring enchanted with two magical wishes. You will need to use one of the wishes to open the door – and even that will only keep it open for a moment. The second wish will be your key to get out. Use the ring with care. We do not know when we might be able to procure another.

Our attempts to divine what lies beyond the door have failed. Both our spells and our research are silent as to the location of the Grail. Discover as much as you can and then report back.

—Yuinthu

"What does it mean?" Elestra asked.

"I have no idea," Tee said, tucking the letter away.

"Which way should we go?" Ranthir asked.

"Let's keep heading west."

But after a couple hundred feet, the western tunnel came to a sudden end – as if digging had simply stopped for some reason. So they doubled back and took the southern passage instead.

After about eighty feet, this second tunnel broke through into a very different-looking chamber. Rocks and dirt covered the smooth stone floor near the mouth of the tunnel, and around the edges of the gaping hole they could see pieces of jagged metal jutting out of the wall. The finished area beyond was about 30 feet wide and equally long. To the right there was an open arch. To the left, the chamber widened into an octagon-shaped area, with a narrow passage on its far side and a large steel door covered with runes and symbols standing slightly ajar opposite it on the north wall.

## ENTERING THE BANEWARRENS

As they passed carefully through the jagged hole into the chamber beyond, Ranthir noticed minute runes written on the metal jutting out of the wall. He was able to identify them as arcane resonant points designed to interact with potent magic emanating from some other location.

“But what are they supposed to do?” Elestra asked.

“There’s no way to know,” Ranthir said. “I’d have to know what emanations they were meant to receive. If they were active, I might be able to deduce it. But they aren’t.”

Tee, meanwhile, had moved ahead to investigate the rune-covered door. Looking through it she saw a stark and empty chamber. She called Ranthir over to take a look at it.

He identified the runes of the door as being of a warding nature. He found traces around the edges of the door of a magical metallic substance that would have enhanced the seal on the door. “Difficult to open, but not impossible. And now that it’s been opened, the ward has been completely broken.”

“So even closing the door again wouldn’t seal it?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, close it anyway. We’ll check the southern passage first to make sure that nothing can sneak up behind us.”

## VERMIN WIGHTS

The southern passage led to a large room with vaulted ceilings. A huge iron vat – at least ten feet tall and pocked with rust – stood in the center of the room. Dozens of iron buckets were stacked around it. On the far side of the room there was a wide flight of stairs leading up.

Before they could actually enter the room, however, the far corner of the room – which was shrouded in shadows – began to emit a terrible droning noise. Two humanoid figures composed of tiny insects and worms came gurgling forward like thick, black swarms given the shape and form of men.

Tee whipped out her dragon pistol and fired. The force blast ripped a hole in the first vermin-thing and left a faint, ozone-tinged stench hanging in the air. But the creature seemed barely affected – the insects of its body simply swarmed up to fill the hole.

Agnarr charged. His flaming sword ripped all the way through the nearest creature, but in the sword’s wake the creature simply reformed itself around the cut. The stench of burning insects grew thicker as Agnarr struck again and again, each time to little effect. The creature tried to strike back several times, but Agnarr was fighting in concert with Seeaeti – their mutual training clearly paying off.

The second vermin wight reached Tee. Its arm shot forward, completely enveloping her head in its squirming mass. A chill, supernatural cold began to sink down her throat, but she managed to tear herself free before suffering anything worse than minor scratches and a sense of sick nausea.

As Tee stumbled back, Tor came running up – cleaving from one end of the vermin-thing attacking her to the other. The creatures two halves fell apart... and then rejoined, crawling back together with a sickly, slurping sound.

Elestra, thinking quickly, fished a flask of oil out of her pack and threw it at the vermin-thing Tor was fighting. Agnarr stepped back, pivoted, and landed a blow with his flaming sword. The oil ignited and the vermin-thing was immolated by the wave of flames.

Tee stepped back and, drawing her own flask of oil, hurled it at the one Agnarr had just turned his back on. Agnarr whirled and a moment later there was nothing left of the creatures but two inky patches of burning grease.

# SESSION 29 – INTRUDERS IN THE BANEWARRENS

September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 16<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

“Should we go upstairs or finish clearing this level?”

“Finish clearing the level,” Ranthir said. “You should always finish clearing the level.”

They returned to the rune-encrusted door in the entry chamber. As they passed through the door, however, Seeaeti balked, whining slightly. Agnarr decided to stay back with his hound. From there he could also serve as the rear guard.

Ranthir heard a small, sweetly feminine voice. “I don’t like this place.”

“... I think I’m hearing voices.”

Ranthir looked around with a rather worried expression on his face. But after a moment he realized it was Erinaceidae – his familiar. The bond between them had apparently grown strong enough for her to speak with him.

And the chamber beyond the door was making her very nervous. She scampered off Ranthir’s shoulder and clung close to Elestra’s light.

The only other exit from the chamber was an arch on the far side of the room. Tee approached it carefully, checking the floor for any traps or other protective devices that might be triggered by their presence.

She didn’t detect anything. But it didn’t matter: As she reached the arch, a purplish-red wraith swept out of the next room. Tee barely managed to roll out of the way. Elestra shouted for help. Agnarr came running.

The silence with which the wraith attacked was eerie. But it proved to be easily dispatched. Once Tor and Agnarr had engaged it, it only took a few sweeps of their magical blades to destroy its ethereal substance.

They passed through the arch. The next chamber was nearly identical and equally empty, with another arch on the far side. They passed through this second arch and entered a third chamber.

This chamber was nearly as stark as the first two, but there was a pedestal standing on the far side of it. The pedestal was made of stone and carved with a variety of tiny symbols. Atop the crystal, clutched in a claw-like sculpture of brass, was a purple-red crystal, glistening ever so slightly with its own inner light.

Tee crossed the chamber. She quickly estimated the value of the jewel-like crystal to be several thousand gold pieces at the very least. She set to work meticulously inspecting the claw-like sculpture and quickly discovered a pressure-operated trigger, designed

to activate some device within the pedestal if the weight of the crystal was removed.

She had only barely started to disable the pressure trigger when a second wraith came screaming out of the crystal. As it passed over the top of Tee’s head it struck her twice – once on each shoulder – chilling her entire body and leaving flaming lacerations in its wake.

After that first soul-searing scream, the wraith became as eerily silent as its predecessor. But it was just as easily dispatched, this time with a single swing of Tor’s sword. A moment later, Agnarr came running in.

“It’s okay,” Tor said. “It’s already dead.”

“If everything in the Banewarrens is this easy, we won’t have any problems down here,” Elestra said.

“Not if they keep coming,” Tee said.

“You think the crystal is creating them?” Tor asked.

“Or regenerating it.”

As they talked, Tee finished disabling the pressure device. But what should they do with it? Try to sell it?

“We can’t sell it if it keeps creating wraiths,” Tor said.

“True,” Tee said. “Ranthir, can you analyze its magical aura? Figure out if there’s some way—“

Another wraith tore its way out of the gem. It thrust its hand through Tee’s face – leaving five claw marks and a deep chill that left her soul-shaken in its wake (and suffering from a rather vicious migraine).

Agnarr, who had returned to the rear guard at the rune-etched door, came running. While the others dealt with the third wraith, he ran past them and swung at the crystal. The fragile gem shattered in a cascading wave of glass that swept down the entire length of the chamber. At the gem’s destruction, the wraith screamed in rage and whirled towards Agnar... who ripped it apart.

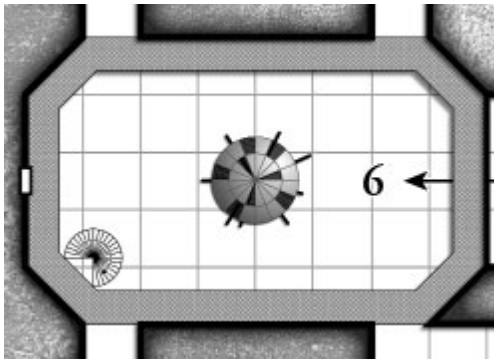
For her part, Tee was incensed at the loss of the valuable gem. (“And then... he broke it... He broke it! I couldn’t believe it... I just... Ah!”)

## THE WARDING GENERATOR

They headed west through the entry chamber, passing through the door and entering a large chamber. In the center of the chamber a huge metal device like an iron tower topped with a brass sphere rose at least 30 feet into the air. A spiral staircase of wrought iron on the far side of the room led up to a catwalk of crosshatched grating encircling the device.

The central tower was a cylinder with a 10-foot diameter. A number of jointed metallic extensions, like the legs of an insect, extended out from the tower and connected to the ground or simply jutted out into the air at all angles. The sphere on top of the tower was approximately fifteen feet across. A series of curved, brass plates formed the skin of the sphere, with each plate bearing a single arcane rune etched into its surface. Here and there a few of these brass plates were missing, exposing an inner grid-like support network of metal bars. The missing plates gave the entire structure the appearance of something unfinished or perhaps damaged.

There were no other exits on the lower level. However, four halls – two to the north and two to the south – led away from the chamber on the catwalk level. Directly opposite the passage through which they had entered was another door, also on the catwalk level, which was similar to the rune-etched door leading to the wraith chambers – but larger and more finely detailed. Laying on the catwalk before the door were the dead bodies of several goblins.



While the other hung back, Tee did a sweep through the chamber to make sure it was safe. The goblins appeared to have been killed in combat, their wounds having been inflicted by the blows of a sword. But there were no visible threats in the room now.

Once Tee was satisfied that the room was safe, Ranthir moved in and began investigating the machinery. While she worked, the others moved into defensive positions around the room – watching the various entrances and exits with wary eyes.

Ranthir spent the better part of half an hour examining the device. Then he moved to the rune-etched door and spent nearly as much time there, before spending another few minutes cycling back and forth between the two. Once he was satisfied he called the others over to the door.

He started by pointing at several large runes arranged in geometric patterns across the surface of the door. “These runes, like the runes we saw before, are warding runes. But these runes—” Ranthir pointed to smaller,

more detailed runes that were worked into the larger pattern. “—are arcane resonance points. Like the ones we saw on the exposed walls, except these are actively resonating. But they’re more advanced than anything I’ve ever seen, and they’re interwoven with the warding runes in ways I don’t fully understand.”

He moved to the railing of the catwalk and indicated the device in the center of the room. “The entire tower is a technomantic device. More complicated than anything I’ve ever seen. I’m not entirely sure how it works or what it’s supposed to do, but it’s not working. As far as I can tell, it was never completed. If it was working, however, I believe it would function as a kind of warding generator – activating the arcane resonance points.”

“But I thought you said the resonance points in the door were already active?”

“In the door, yes. I suspect that there’s another warding generator on the other side of the door. The warding runes on the door are attuned to that device. And the effect is to make the walls and the door of the next section of the complex virtually impervious. I think this warding generator is attuned to the walls in this section of the complex.”

“What would happen if we activated this warding generator?”

“The arcane resonance points built into the walls would activate.”

“We’d be trapped?”

“Not as long as the hole we came through is still open.”

“What would happen if we activated the generator and then repaired the wall?” Tor asked.

“Then the complex would be sealed.”

“Couldn’t they just break in again?” Elestra asked.

“I don’t think so. I think the only reason they could break through the walls in this section of the complex is because the warding generator isn’t working.”

“So we need to fix the generator and repair the wall.”

Ranthir shook his head. “It’s not that easy. You have to understand, I can barely comprehend even the most basic functionality of this device. And it’s not just broken. There are pieces missing.”

“Wait a minute,” Elestra said. “Come look at this.”

Elestra had been watching the northeastern hallway leading out of the chamber. Down this short hall she had seen a room. A number of curved brass plates, similar to those forming the brass sphere at the top of the warding generator, lay on the floor. There were other oddly-shaped devices formed from strange metals laying on various work tables or hanging on the walls.

Ranthir spent several minutes studying the contents of this room. “I think it’s likely that these are the missing parts. And possibly various tool that would be required for installation. But there’s no way to know if all the parts are here. And it would probably take me weeks of study before it could be repaired.”

## A KNIGHT IN MOURNING

They opened the door leading to the next room. It was filled with broken and rotting crates. Between the stacks of crates a heavily armored man with long silver hair knelt beside the dead body of another man. As the door swung open the armored man looked up at them with eyes filled with rage.

“Who are you and why have you come to this evil place?”

Tee met his gaze. “You’re the one standing over a dead body. You first. What are *you* doing here?”

“Do not mock me, woman. Those I have cared for have died. Name yourselves and your purpose.”

The tension was palpable. Everyone’s nerves were raw. It wouldn’t have taken much for blood to be shed. The man raised his hand to the hilt of his sword.

Fortunately, this movement allowed Tee and Tor to spot the ring he was wearing on his finger – the signet of the Order of the Dawn. Tor moved into the room, carefully slipping on his own signet ring and positioning his hands so that the man could see it. “We’ve been sent to investigate what’s happening here.”

“What *is* happening here?” Tee asked.

The armored man dropped his hand from the hilt of his blade. As he relaxed, his entire body sagged with exhaustion and sorrow. “My name is Kalerecent. This was my friend and comrade, Rasnir. Two days ago we came to investigate reports I had heard of strange activity and the sound of digging coming from a mansion in Oldtown.”

They had followed the tunnel and entered the complex. When they arrived, there had been a half dozen strange and monstrous creatures gathered in the room with the “tower of brass and iron”. Kalerecent and Rasnir were badly outnumbered, and so they chose to wait and watch.

One of the creatures – a warped and twisted crone with skin the sickly green of swamp moss and hair like twisted vines – had taken a ring out of a velvet pouch and held it against the door. There had been a bright flash of light and the door had opened.

Kalerecent had not been able to hear what they were saying before, but now one of them spoke loudly: “Hurry, it won’t stay open long!”

And then he knew what he had to do. This entire place reeked of evil and these creatures clearly had foul intentions. He and Rasnir had charged into battle. During the melee, the crone who had opened the door managed to duck through it. But moments later Kalerecent had fought his way to it and wrenched it shut.

“There was another flash of light and the door sealed shut behind me. But even in that moment, one of the creatures – a half-leonid fiend – slew Rasnir. I killed several of the goblins, but the other creatures escaped.”

Dominic offered to heal Rasnir’s wounds, but Kalerecent shook his head. “It has been more than a day. His soul has left this world forever. I tried healing them myself before it was too late, but his wounds were too severe. And when I tried to carry him out of here, I was attacked by the half-leonid.”

Tor knelt beside him. “It may be too late to heal him, but he should still be borne back into the city with honor. May I help you carry him?”

Kalerecent gave a grateful yet mournful smile. “I thank you. But the half-leonid creature is still loose in the complex and the others might return, if they are not here already. The door must not be left unguarded.”

It became clear that Kalerecent felt that Rasnir had died to ensure that the door would not be breached. He wouldn’t allow that sacrifice to have been made in vain.

“And it makes sense,” Tor said. “Whatever they came to the Banewarrens to find, it can’t be good.”

“Aren’t we here to find something, too?” Dominic pointed out.

After discussing their options, they decided to track down the half-leonid creature while Kalerecent continued to keep watch over his friend and the door. Once that was done, Tor and Kalerecent could carry Rasnir’s body back to the surface while the others remained behind to keep a watch on the door.

## THE LAMIA ROUTED

Kalerecent accompanied them back into the room with the warding generator. He was able to indicate which of the southern corridors the creature had fled through after their last confrontation. Then he returned to his vigil over Rasnir.

From Kalerecent’s description, Ranthir was able to identify the creature as a type of lamia – a rare and unnatural hybrid of human and lion. “It will be very fast and more than capable of using the claws on its lower limbs.”

The southern corridor led to a wide hall which widened before being abruptly interrupted by a 20-foot square pit. Four thick, rust-covered iron chains were hanging down into the pit, fastened to the wall with heavy bolts.

“It must have gotten to the other side somehow,” Tee said. “I’ll try climbing—“

A giant hand – at least five feet across at the palm -- reached up out of the pit and grabbed the side.

“By the gods!” Tee drew her dragon pistol and fired, striking the hand. It reared back and then crashed down again. A moment later the giant levered its way out of the pit with a roar.

Ranthir released a bolt of arcane energy which caught the giant squarely in the chest. The blast seemed to leave a scorch mark, but from the interaction between bolt and body Ranthir’s trained eyes were able to catch the tell-

tale marks of an illusion. He shouted out a warning to the others.

Once they had been warned, most of the others could see the illusion for what it was. But not Tee – her mind was still being fooled by it. “Are you sure?” she shouted, diving out of the way of a back-handed blow from the giant.

“I’m sure!” Ranthir shouted.

Agnarr moved up to the edge of the pit and looked down, but the dim light cast by his sword left the lower portions of the pit in deep shadow. A moment later, however, a bottle of fine crystal flew out of the pit and shattered on Agnarr’s chest.

As the bottle shattered, a magical whirlwind burst out of it – snatching Agnarr into the air and hurling him into the nearest wall.

Tee, seeing Agnarr walk through the illusionary giant, finally shook her belief in it. She moved up to the edge of the pit with her sunrod and looked down. At the bottom of the pit she spotted five different lamias. “Oh shit!”

She fired at one of them. The force blast struck... and the lamia disappeared. It was another illusion! With a snarling growl, the remaining lamias started climbing one of the chains out of the pit.

Ranthir tried to throw a flask of oil onto the chain, but his throw went wild and smashed uselessly into the wall. Tee tried to line up another shot, but the whirlwind came sweeping back the other direction and hurled Agnarr into her and her into the wall.

Seeing Tee caught up in the whirlwind, Tor quickly pulled out a length of rope, formed a lasso, and threw it around her. With a sharp tug, Tee came free.

The lamia, meanwhile, had nearly reached the other side of the pit. Tee, while struggling to untangle herself with one hand, snapped a shot off with the other – trying to break the chain the lamia was climbing. The shot hit the heavy iron chain, but didn’t break it.

The lamia reached the other side of the pit and ran for the door. Elestra and Tee fired with their dragon guns, but only succeeded in striking (and banishing) more of the illusionary lamias.

Agnarr turned and raced back out the door they’d come through. Dominic, who hadn’t even managed to get into the room yet, yelled to him as he passed by: “Have we killed it yet?”

Agnarr circled around and managed to intercept the lamia in the outer hall. The lamia spotted him and the two of them cautiously approached each other. Agnarr took a couple of jabs at the snarling creature, while narrowly avoiding its heavy paws.

Ranthir – who had followed Agnarr at a slightly slower pace – came around the corner and sent out a barrage of arcane blasts – leaving multiple scorch marks on the chest of the true lamia and eradicating the last of the illusory doubles. With the illusions gone, Agnarr was

able to get his first clear look at the creature, noting the serious wounds already marking its flanks.

At that moment, Tee and Tor caught up. Seeing itself badly outnumbered and already seriously injured, the lamia turned and ran towards a staircase at the far end of the hall. It howled plaintively...

... and was answered by a second howl!

## SKIRMISH IN THE CAULDRON

The lamia ran down the staircase. Agnarr pursued it, finding himself back in the room with the iron cauldron. Agnarr managed to back it up against the cauldron. It howled again. The answering howl was closer.

While Agnarr kept the lamia pinned, the others descended the stairs, their shots ricocheting off the cauldron as the lamia desperately dodged back and forth. Then Tor used his lasso – catching the lamia by the legs and yanking them out from under her.

They moved in to finish her off, but at that very moment a second lamia – this one male – came racing into the room through the northern door. Seeing the female lamia injured and entangled he gave a howl of rage and bounded forward, throwing a healing potion to her as he came.

Tor moved to engage the second lamia while Agnarr stayed on the female. But as Agnarr closed in, her eyes locked onto his. Her pupils expanded until her eyes were a solid, tawny gold and Agnarr could feel them reaching out towards him. He could feel her mind reaching into his mind.

*You should run away.*

He couldn’t deny the command. Agnarr fled. The female lamia took advantage of the distraction to slink away around the cauldron, drinking the healing potion as she went.

Tee used her boots to levitate up to the ceiling. Pulling herself along she was able to emerge into the room out of the range of the lamia’s vicious claws, and from that elevated position she tried to get a clear shot.

But the male lamia wasn’t the last of the reinforcements. A large, muscular minotaur emerged from the northern passage “Verochin! What’s happening?”

“It’s Derimach!” the male lamia shouted back. “She’s hurt! There are at least six of them!”

“Friends of that meddling paladin!” The minotaur turned back towards the northern passage. “Stop hiding like cowards! Attack!”

The minotaur dashed forward, quaffing a potion that caused him to suddenly blur with speed. Bunching his powerful leg muscles he leapt up onto the thick rim of the immense iron cauldron.

“They’re drinking our wealth away!” Tee cried, firing at the minotaur.

Tor and Agnarr could do little about it because Verochin's claws were keeping them thoroughly harried. Where the lamia's blows landed, not only were huge gouges of flesh torn away, but a supernatural chill seemed to spread from the wounds – racing up into their minds and clouding their perception.

And now, scurrying down the hallway, came four vicious-looking goblins wielding serrated blades.

But then Ranthir dashed down the stairs, lowered his hands, and webbed the whole northern half of the room – trapping Verochin, the goblins, and the minotaur.

Tor seized the opportunity, turning and heading around the cauldron in pursuit of Derimach. As he came around the corner, however, the lamia's eyes caught his and he could feel it trying to weave its way into his mind...

But he shook it off. With a bitter growl she threw herself at him.

Verochin, finding himself trapped in front of Agnarr, tried to wrench himself backwards out of Ranthir's web. But he was too late. Agnarr took advantage of the moment and plunged his sword through the lamia's back, ripping down through its front hips. In a gush of blood, Verochin fell.

The minotaur, meanwhile, was ripping his own way out of the webs. Moving along the rim of the cauldron he drew his massive greatsword. The blade – nearly as wide across as Agnarr's thigh – flashed out and ripped open Tee. She fell from the sky, landing on her neck with a sickening snap.

Ranthir dashed to Tee's side and raised his hands. A gout of fire rushed out of them, singeing the horns of the minotaur as he swung down into the cauldron for cover.

The minotaur levered himself back out of the cauldron and swung his sword low. Agnarr, who had been trying to move around to where Tor was engaging Derimach, only narrowly managed to dodge the blow. Fortunately, his help wasn't needed: By the time he had gotten back to his feet, Tor had already killed the second lamia.

Ranthir recognized that the minotaur's supernatural speed was ruinous. He quickly worked an enchantment that stripped the effects of the potion from the minotaur's limbs.

The minotaur growled and then shouted back over his shoulder. "Verochin and Derimach are dead! I cannot escape! Flee! Get word to the others!"

"The others...?" Elestra, who was trying desperately to heal Tee's grievous wounds, blanched.

Ranthir cast his own enchantment of speed, cracked a sunrod from one of his many pouches, and raced back up the stairs – hoping to circle around and catch the goblins before they could escape... although, truth be told, he wasn't quite sure what he was going to do with them if he *did* catch them.

The minotaur lumbered down the length of the cauldron and then hurtled off the end. Flipping in mid-air his greatsword swept down along the floor, ripping open Agnarr's back. Landing nimbly he spun to face Tor.

But Agnarr refused to fall. Stumbling forward his own greatsword ripped into the minotaur's hide.

The minotaur's counterstrike smashed Agnarr to the floor, but now he was bleeding profusely. He backed away from Tor and tried to cut his way out through the others... Tee, who had only just gotten back to her feet, was cut down again. ("I just healed her!" Elestra cried with dismay.)

But Tor's furious flurry of blows would not be denied. The minotaur's heavy blade couldn't keep pace. He fell.

## IN PURSUIT OF GOBLINS

Ranthir, arriving back in the octagonal entrance chamber, found that most of the goblins were still stuck fast in his web. But one of them had ripped its way free and disappeared. Scarcely pausing for thought, he raced down the excavated tunnel – hoping to use his supernatural speed to catch it before it could reach the Nibeck Street mansion and disappear into the streets of Ptolus.

Tee, meanwhile, wasn't far behind. As soon as her wounds had once again been healed by Dominic and Elestra, she had raced up the stairs and started circling around. Agnarr, meanwhile, began burning his way through the webs.

When Tee reached the entrance chamber, she drew the same conclusion Ranthir had. But without his enhanced speed, she didn't think she would be able to catch up in time to make a difference. Instead she crossed over to the bewebbed goblins and started shooting them.

The last goblin, seeing his comrades picked off, suddenly found the desperate strength to rip his way free... but he had only stumbled a few steps when Tee placed a shot straight through his eye.

A few moments later, Agnarr finished burning his path through the webs... only to find Tee standing happily with her hands on her hips.

Tor, meanwhile, had hacked off the minotaur's head – holding it up triumphantly by the horns.

But while the others celebrated, Ranthir was still working. He had raced several hundred feet down the length of the excavated tunnel and begun to think that the goblin had escaped after all. Just as he was about to give up hope, however, the sound of scampering feet came clearly to his ears. He redoubled his efforts.

As they drew near the side passage they had left unexplored, the goblin finally appeared in the light of his sunrod. Ranthir fired his crossbow, catching the goblin in the back.



With a screech of pained terror, the goblin veered off into the side passage.

Fearing an ambush, Ranthir cautiously cast his spells of clairvoyance and used them to peer down the passage from a safe vantage point. He watched as the goblin ran around a second corner and into a larger cave—

Which suddenly collapsed with a thunderous crash!

The goblin gave a final, squalling cry and then fell silent. A cloud of dust and debris billowed out of the catastrophe.

Unsure what to think – had the goblin triggered some sort of trap? or was it an elaborate ruse? – but confident now that the explored side passage represented a danger, Ranthir cast a different spell which would allow him to send a short message of exactly twenty-five words to his comrades:

*I chased him to the cross corridor. He hit a trap. Come here now. I need help... Because I'm Ranthir. Hope they hurry, Erin.*

### DEJA SLIME

The others were stripping anything that looked valuable off the creatures they had slain. Tee shook her head sadly at the empty vials. Tor was disturbed to discover that Verochin, Derimach, and the minotaur had all worn bone-grafting rings like the one worn by the orcish woman in the Nibeck Street mansion. (These rings, however, could be removed. Possibly because it was post mortem.)

But when the wind whispered Ranthir's message to them, they all ran up through the path that Agnarr had burned and down the excavated tunnel. When they had caught up to him, Ranthir quickly explained the situation.

Tee moved cautiously into the side passage. With Ranthir keeping an eye on her through his clairvoyance, she crept past a large boulder and up to the edge of the pit and looked down.

The goblin's body was gone. But there were sharp stone spikes and she could see where it had landed. A trail of thick blood led towards a tunnel on the other side of the pit.

Everyone moved forward. Agnarr took the *boots of levitation* from Tee and used them to ferry the others across to the far side of the pit one at a time.

The tunnel on the far side of the pit ran up into a four-way intersection. Back to the south they could see where it curved back to dead-end in a boulder – the same boulder they had passed before in the original tunnel. Something had levered the boulder into position, concealing this passage in order to guide others into the collapsing pit trap.

They crossed the intersection into the far tunnel, which began to slope back down again. After thirty feet

or so, this tunnel opened up into a larger cave with a slightly domed ceiling about ten feet high. Every surface in the cave was wet with the greasy-residue of mineral-choked water. Cracks in the walls revealed the moisture slowly seeping in and pooling, mostly along the north wall.

At the last possible moment, Tee – as she crossed the threshold of the room – was suddenly reminded of the caverns in which they had fought the olive slimes... and the tactics the slimes had employed. She dove forward and rolled onto her back—

Narrowly avoiding the gelatinous, iridescent, and (most importantly) motile blob of ogre-sized protoplasm that dropped from the ceiling! It wasn't an olive slime, but it was just as disgusting.

Tee managed to squeeze off a shot, but then the creature sent out a thick pseudopod that caught her and began squeezing the breath from her body. The creature's touch burned painfully and thick, acidic fumes tore at her throat.

Ranthir, recognizing the creature, shouted out a warning: "If you cut it, pierce it, or deliver an electric shock, it will split into multiple, smaller, and deadlier creatures!"

"You're kidding!" Tor cried, pushing his half-drawn cutting, piercing, electrical sword back into its sheath.

Agnarr moved up and start beating on the creature with the flat of his blade, hoping that the bludgeoning and fire would force the creature to drop Tee... but it just kept tightening its grip.

Tor grabbed Tee's dragon pistol from where it had fallen and began firing. Elestra drew her dragon rifle and did the same.

Tee's vision was turning black by the time that Agnarr's beating finally convinced the jelly to release her and attempt to grab him instead. The barbarian nimbly avoided the first pseudopod, but then the jelly *lurched* forward, slamming into Agnarr and smashing him into the wall.

As Tee climbed to her feet, Tor tossed the dragon pistol back to her and grabbed a club proffered by Dominic. He stepped up and swung away... the entire side of the jelly suddenly welled into a horrible, purple-black bruise that spread like dye through syrup.

### CAVERNS OF CONFUSION

Ranthir gave a sudden cry. A large, insectile creature with a dull-golden carapace was lumbering down the hall towards him. Beady eyes stared out from a face dominated by half-domed membranes and curved, viciously-serrated mandibles. He recognized in it the tell-tale marks of a mage-warped creature... and the far more obvious signs of its danger.

Agnarr glanced at Tor. Tor waved for him to go. Agnarr ran back up the corridor towards where Ranthir was rapidly backpedaling.

Tee, meanwhile, took careful aim and shot the dragon pistol directly into the middle of the bruise Tor had raised. The blow punctured the thick, rind-like membrane of the jelly – viscous fluid seeped from its side.

The jelly twisted in place, turning its injured side away from them. But Tor swung again, raising a smaller bruise on its opposite side.

Ranthir was falling back towards the rest of the group. Agnarr reached the intersection where he'd been standing, but as he rounded the corner the umber-colored hulk was already there – its claws whipped out and ripped at his skin, and then, as Agnarr was spun about by the force of the blow, the creature's long, vicious mandibles closed about Agnarr's neck. The only thing that saved Agnarr's life was the heavy iron collar that he wore.

Back by the jelly, Tee fired again. And again her shot struck the middle of the bruise that Tor had raised. This proved too much for it. With a horrific shudder, the creature's insides burst through the twin holes, leaving nothing behind but a spreading pool of thick slime. Its gelatinous skin lay like a disgusting, discarded garment.

Trapped between the mandibles of the umber hulk, Agnarr's torso was ripped again and again by the creature's claws. And then, whipping its head about, it threw him against the wall. Agnarr's head struck hard and he slipped into unconsciousness.

The creature took a menacing step towards Ranthir. But then Tor was there, racing up the passage and drawing his sword.

But as the rest of the group rallied toward it, the bulging membranes on the creature's face began to vibrate. The sound seemed to reach into their minds and scramble their thoughts. Some of them turned on their comrades. Others began to babble incoherently (although it was hard to tell the difference with Agnarr).

Complete confusion reigned. Erin screamed in Ranthir's mind: "I don't like the buzzing!" But the hulk did it again and again and again, even as its claws were battering away at Tor.

Elestra, resisting the mental barrage, slid in next to Agnarr and healed his wounds. But as Agnarr tried to struggle back to his feet, the creature slammed one of its massive claws into his back. Agnarr, nearly slain by the blow, feigned his own death... allowing the creature to turn its full attention back to Tor.

Tor's blows, meanwhile, were proving ineffective. Besieged both mentally and physically, he was barely able to catch his balance under the frenzied battering he was receiving from the creature's claws.

But he was keeping the creature engaged. And while he did, Tee was blasting away with her dragon pistol. Each shot was blowing away large chunks of the creature's carapace.

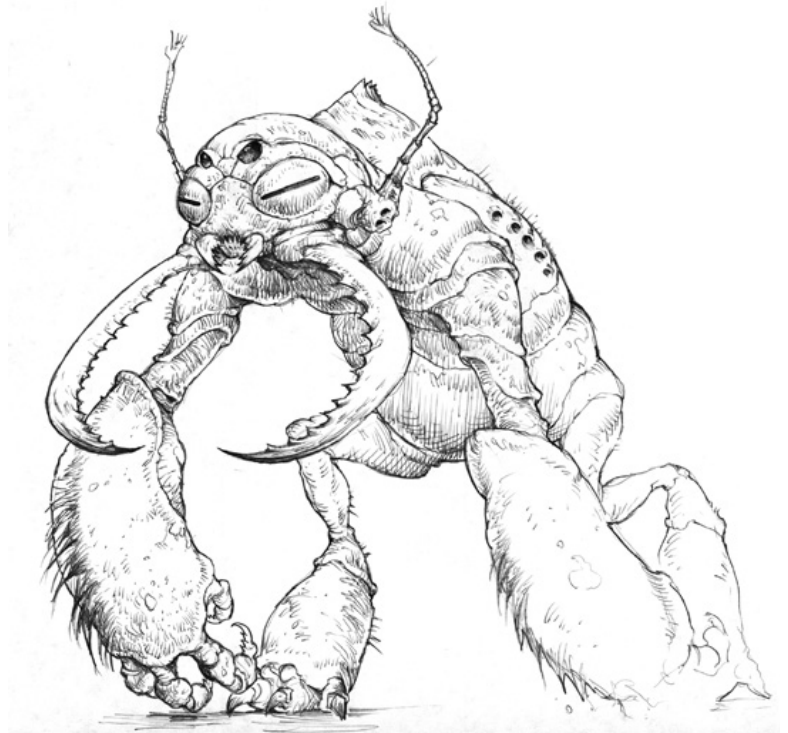
And then Agnarr, choosing his moment carefully, rolled to his knees almost directly beneath the creature and thrust up through its lower thorax.

This horrific distraction allowed Tor a moment to catch his footing. He took advantage of the moment and brought his blade down heavily onto the creature's head. From the point of impact, a horrendous pattern of cracks spread down its face.

It stumbled back and Tee, taking careful aim, placed a shot precisely where Tor had struck it. The entire top of the creature's head was blasted away, revealing a pulsing, purplish-green brain.

The creature roared three times, its membranes vibrating their staccato patterns of psychic turmoil. Tor and Agnarr were driven to senseless babbling. Dominic fled in terror down the hall. Seaeti, driven mad by the noise, leapt at his own master's throat – his vicious attack sending the badly-wounded Agnarr back into unconscious oblivion.

But the creature, perhaps mortally wounded, suddenly lurched to one side. The vibrating of its membranes stopped and its claws began vibrating instead – vibrating faster than their mortal eyes could see. It pulverized the stone of the tunnel wall and passed from sight. Heavy stone fell into its wake, preventing any thought of pursuit as the befuddled troupe gathered its wits.



# SESSION 30 – THE BREAKING OF THE DAWN

October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 16<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Agnarr beat on the wall where the umber hulk had disappeared.

“Maybe it’s gone away to die,” Elestra suggested.

Agnarr took small comfort from that small hope, but pursuit was impossible and they didn’t dare to go any deeper into these unknown caverns in their current state. Nursing their wounds, they retreated back towards the Banewarrens.

When they returned to where Kalerecent was waiting for them, they found him with his sword drawn. Seeing that it was them, he sheathed his sword and hailed them. He had heard the sounds of combat and been worried for their fortunes.

They described their encounter with the lamia, the arrival of the reinforcements wearing bone rings, and their eventual triumph. Kalerecent nodded. “I’m not sure how many goblins there were, but I think you’ve disposed of those I fought before.”

“Except for the green-skinned crone who went through the door,” Ranthir said.

“Yes. Except for her.” Kalerecent’s face was grim.

But with the other creatures slain, Kalerecent felt the complex was secure enough that he was willing to return to the surface with Rasnir’s body... as long as some sort of watch was kept on the door. Tor had sworn himself to help Kalerecent in bearing Rasnir back to the Godskeep, but the others agreed to stay behind and keep a watch over the Banewarrens.

Kalerecent carried the body himself. Tor walked at his side. The others came as far as the mansion before bidding them goodbye.

Once Kalerecent was out of earshot, they returned to the closet where they had left the orc woman tied up. Yanking it open, they found her still bound and gagged inside.

They removed her gag and showed her the weapons and rings of her comrades. “We killed them,” Tee said. “We can kill you. Now tell us what you know.”

But the orc woman was reticent. She sneered. “You have only made it more certain that I will never speak to you.”

“Aren’t you speaking to us now?” Agnarr frowned.

Dominic leaned in close. “Can’t we speak to the dead?”

But the orc woman said nothing.

“I don’t think it’s working,” Elestra said.

“No, seriously, I’m asking: Can’t we speak to the dead?”

Tee gagged her again and shut the door.

## THE GATES ARE SHUT

Kalerecent only had to carry Rasnir’s body as far as the Emperor’s Road. Once there, Tor was able to hail a carriage. (They had to pay the carriage driver a little extra to bear Rasnir’s body.)

They rode in silence down into the Temple District. As they were approaching the Street of a Million Gods, however, the carriage began to slow. They were still a few blocks away from the Cathedral.

Tor leaned out the window and looked up at the carriage driver. “What’s going on? Why are you stopping?”

“Some sort of disturbance, sir,” the carriage driver said. “We should be able to ride through, though.”

Tor could see it now: Clotted groups of people were streaming down the street in the opposite direction.

Kalerecent frowned. “I don’t like this.” He opened the door and stepped out of the carriage. To the driver he said, “Wait for us here. And guard the body of my friend with your life.” To Tor he said, “Are you coming?”

Tor nodded and climbed out of the carriage, as well. He tossed a few coins to the driver to “compensate for his pains” and followed Kalerecent down the street.

As they approached Discourse Street, the furrow of Kalerecent’s brow deepened. “The gates of the Godskeep have been shut.”

“Is that unusual?” Tor asked.

“I’ve been a knight of the Order for seven years. I’ve never seen them shut before.”

Something was wrong. Kalerecent led the way as they circled around towards the south gate of the keep. As they passed between two of the Cathedral’s outbuildings and emerged into the courtyard between the Cathedral and the Godskeep, they were met with a grisly sight: The south gate, too, had been shut and dozens of bloodied bodies were strewn across the grassy sward. Members of the Order wearing red sashes were moving between the bodies. Some were being healed... most of them were not.

Kalerecent stepped out into the open and Tor followed his lead. One of the red-sashed knights inspecting the corpses spotted them and stood up. “Halt!”

He approached with his sword drawn. Tor and Kalerecent stood calmly, careful to give no cause for alarm. As the knight drew nearer they raised their hands

and displayed their rings. The knight relaxed slightly, but kept his blade on guard.

“What happened here?” Tor asked.

“Sir Kabel attempted to assassinate the Novarch.”

### THE ANCIENT GOLEM

The rest of the group returned to the Banewarrens. They had not yet finished exploring the farthest reaches of the complex and, since they had nothing better to do while guarding the door, they decided to finish their sweep.

Opening the last of the unopened doors leading out of the generator room, they looked into a wide hall leading to another of the rune-encrusted and warded doors. In the center of the hall, a 12-foot-tall statue of a helmed warrior, made out of interlocking metal plates, stood like a vigilant guard. Patches of rust could be seen on it here and there.

Fearing that it might be a golem or, failing that, some other sort of trap, Tee entered the hall cautiously. Unfortunately, her caution was in vain. Scarcely had she crossed the threshold before the statue suddenly leapt into motion, charging down the length of the hall and slamming its heavy iron fists into her chest.

Tee was thrown back by the ferocious blow. Her head smashed against the wall and she slid to the ground, slumping into unconsciousness.

In some ways, however, this proved fortunate for her. No sooner had the iron golem delivered its tremendous blow than it was seized with a violent vibration which shuddered through its iron plates. A moment later a pulse of magical force burst from it – catching Agnarr in mid-stride as he rushed towards it with his sword drawn and throwing him backwards with a muscle-rending jolt.

And then it simply fell apart. From the seams of its broken form a strange substance poured like thick syrup, glowing with a strange blue light that seemed to sear the retina.

Dominic, with a rush of concern, dashed to Tee’s side. But she hadn’t been badly hurt. In fact, he was able to rouse her easily.

Agnarr had scrambled back to his feet and backed cautiously away from the oozing heap of misjointed metal. Tee, in frustration, gave the heap a spiteful kick and—

It exploded in a hail of semi-molten metal. Shards of the former golem embedded themselves deeply into the walls of the chamber.

Tee spent the next several minutes with Dominic prying shards of metal from her arms and legs.

### THE TALE OF A TRAITOR KNIGHT

“What?” Tor gaped.

“It’s true. Kabel and several other traitorous knights attacked the Cathedral. They were driven back and the Godskeep was shut against them.”

“What happened to Kabel? Was he killed?”

“No. He and several of the other traitors managed to escape. Sir Gemmell is pursuing them now.”

The knights loyal to Rehobath and Sir Gemmell were wearing red sashes to identify themselves. (“Red for the novarch’s robes,” the knight explained.) Kalerecent took one and Tor, keeping his private reservations to himself, did as well.

Kalerecent was uncertain what they should do: The Godskeep had been ordered shut until Sir Gemmell’s return, which meant that Rasnir’s body couldn’t be brought into the chapel. “Nor do I want him to lay here on this common field where his blood might mix with the blood of traitors.”

Tor explained that Rehobath himself was interested in the Banewarrens. He felt that they should report directly to him.

But when they tried to reach him, they found themselves stymied by the bureaucracy of the Cathedral. They were eventually escorted to a small antechamber within the Cathedral by one of the priests and told to wait.

They did so patiently and, in due time, Brother Heth Neferul arrived. Tor and Kalerecent quickly told their tales of the Banewarrens. When Heth was satisfied, he asked them to wait again and turned to leave.

“A moment, please,” Tor said.

Heth turned back to him. “Yes?”

Tor chose his words carefully. “We were told of Sir Kabel’s betrayal. I have reason to believe that he may have been... *compelled* in this treachery by the recent chaotic events that have been happening throughout Ptolus.”

“You believe he may not have been in his right mind?”

“It’s a possibility,” Tor said. “I have found Kabel to be a loyal and honorable man. There would need to be some reason for him to do what he has done.”

“I see.” Heth nodded. “I will mention this to Sir Gemmell.”

He turned and left them alone.

### THE FLESH-FEASTING GHOULS

Tee broke the seal on the door that the malfunctioning golem had been guarding. Then she stepped back and waved Agnarr into position.

Agnarr opened the door. Beyond it he saw a long chamber of dust-ridden stone. Near the center of the chamber, also covered in thick, choking dust, crouched four corpse-like ghouls, their skin blackened with bruises of dead, coagulated blood. At the sudden motion of the door in their ancient prison, the ghouls turned with

creaking suddenness – staring hungrily with their black, pulsing eyes; their dry, parched mouths hanging open to reveal countless, needle-like teeth.

The moment hung for an instant, and then the ghouls burst into motion with horrible speed – their ancient limbs casting up clouds of dust as they bounded towards the open door.

Agnarr slammed it in their faces.

They took a moment to gather themselves. Agnarr could hear the ghouls snuffling around on the opposite side of the door, but he waited until he had met the eyes of his companions and made sure that they were ready.

Then he smashed the door open again. The heavy iron caved in the skull of one of the ghouls. As Agnarr leapt into their midst, he could see one of them peeling flesh from its own arm and chewing on it.

“They’re eating themselves?!” Agnarr could hear Elestra’s horrified gasp from behind him, but he paid it little heed as he hacked his way through the ghouls.

For a moment it seemed as if Agnarr would dispatch them all – his flaming blade tore easily through their frail frames. But then the last of them leapt suddenly upon him and got its teeth into him.

The thing’s poison rushed into the barbarian’s veins. Agnarr felt his joints lock almost instantly and he fell with a heavy thud to the floor. The ghoul was upon him in an instant, tearing gouges of flesh out of his back and feasting upon them.

The ghoul was so lost in its blood-lust that it scarcely seemed to notice when Dominic caved in its skull with his mace.

Dominic managed to get Agnarr back on his feet and used his holy powers to purge any remnants of disease from the wounds on his back.

They decided that it would be better to wait for Tor to return before continuing their explorations. There had been a moment of true fear when they had seen Agnarr felled. Having Tor’s blade would make them all feel safer.

They retreated back to the room that Kalerecent had been holed up in, thinking it to be fairly defensible, and settled down to wait.

## THE AFFAIRS OF THE CHURCH

Brother Heth Neferul returned with Rehobath, Sister Mara, and Brother Thad.

Thad quickly crossed to Tor and shook his hand enthusiastically. “Master Tor! Such an honor to see you again! Whenever I think of the important work you’re doing... And to travel with the Chosen of Vehthy! It must be such an hon—“

“Brother Thad.” Rehobath’s cold voice sliced through the young priest’s ebullience. “Sir Kalerecent and Master Tor. I am glad to see you both. Brother Neferul has told me all that you have told him. I am sorry

to be so brief with you, but – as you know – there are other affairs demanding my time.”

“Yes, of course,” Tor said.

“Brother Thad believes he may be of some help,” Heth said.

Thad nodded eagerly. “Yes. Of course. While the known lore of the Banewarrens is quite limited – even within the Archives of the Church – and divinations have proven quite limited, now that you have access to the actual contents of at least part of the Banewarrens it’s possible that certain rituals might prove useful.”

He pulled a scroll from his robes. “This scroll describes an arcane ritual. If Master Ranthir were to perform it in front of the sealed door, it should reveal its secrets. It might even reveal how such a door could be opened.”

“Do we want to open the door?” Tor asked.

“It’s more important than ever that we recover the Sword of Crissa,” Rehobath said. “The troubles of today reveal the deep schism within our faith. With the Sword in our hand we would have a powerful symbol to unify those who have lost faith in the Gods.”

“I’m still worried by these reports of the others seeking to gain access to the Banewarrens,” Sister Mara said. “I think we need to use the Order of the Dawn to secure the entrance.”

“That’s a mistake,” Heth said. “We don’t want to draw undue attention to the site. Besides, Master Tor and his friends have already taken care of those responsible.”

“There may be others.”

“There may be,” Rehobath said. “But in light of our... recent troubles, I think it would be unwise to divide the strength of our Order until certain dangers have been properly dealt with.”

“I will return to that place and stand guard,” Kalerecent said. “I swore an oath by the side of my squire that I would not rest until that evil had been laid to rest. I ask only that I be given an hour to stand vigil by the side of Rasnir’s body. It waits not far from here.”

Rehobath nodded. “So it shall be. And I shall see to it that leave is given for Rasnir’s body to rest in the chapel of the Godskeep.”

Kalerecent knelt and kissed the ring of the novarch.

When the church leaders had left, Tor returned with Kalerecent to the carriage where they had left Rasnir’s body. They carried it to the chapel in the Godskeep and Tor left Kalerecent there, praying over Rasnir’s body.

## THE AFFAIRS OF THE PALE TOWER

Tor left with the intention of returning directly to the Banewarrens, stopping only long enough to collect Blue from the Ghostly Minstrel so that he might ride more quickly.

But as he passed through the doors of the Ghostly Minstrel, Tellith called him over to the front desk. A

letter had arrived for "Mistress Tee and her companions". Tor opened it and read—

Please come to me at the Pale Tower. You have filled my heart with great concern.

Aoska

So instead of riding directly to the mansion on Nibeck Street, Tor stopped first at the Pale Tower.

He was greeted at the doors of the tower by the Graven One, who led him to a small, domed room. There Tor was forced to stoop to step through the doors. The walls and floor were built of blue jade, the surface of which seemed to subtly swirl with whirlwinding eddies

of multi-hued colors. In the center of the room nine small idols of the same blue jade – each depicting one of the holy animals of the Nine Gods – formed a circle on the floor. In the circle, Aoska sat in meditation.

"Please sit, Master Tor."

Tor knelt on the floor, keeping a fair distance from the circle of idols.

Aoska opened her eyes. "We have received the message that Mistress Tee left for us regarding the Great Warrens of Danar. I have summoned you here to tell you that we cannot help you. And to offer our

apologies."

"That's all right," Tor said.

"Nonetheless, I think some explanation is deserved. We among the Malkuth have been honored to stand before the Nine Gods themselves. But for that honor we pay a price. Each of us has been sworn not to interfere in the matters of the mortal church. And since the Imperial Church has involved itself with this affair, we can have no part of it."

"I understand."

"I offer, too, a warning," Aoska said. "Be wary of removing anything from that place. The wards which Danar raised suppress the effects of the taint and prevent the Warrens themselves from becoming tainted. But the items are no less dangerous in their use. And if they were to be removed from the Warrens, the full effect of their corruption would be felt."

"We would like nothing more than to seal that place and never set foot in it again."

"That would be wise." Aoska smiled. "I thank you, Sir Tor."

"Thank you, milady."

## THE TALE OF A CONFESSING KNIGHT

From the Pale Tower it was a short ride to the Nibeck Street mansion. Tor used a door to create a ramp of sorts down the stairs and led Blue all the way to the cusp of the Banewarrens.

When he rejoined the others there were greetings all around.

"What happened?" Elestra asked.

Tor quickly explained what had happened at the Godskeep, at the Cathedral, and at the Pale Tower. He gave the Ranthir the scroll that Thad had given to him... And then he took a deep breath. "There's something else... I think you should sit down for this."

Then Tor told them, for the first time, that he had secretly joined the Order of the Dawn.

"Congratulations!" Tee said, a huge beaming smile spreading across her face.

"Don't congratulate me yet," Tor said. "I also promised Sir Kabel that I would spy on Dominic."

Dominic was confused. "What?"

"Oh! I didn't tell him anything! And it wouldn't matter if I did. He's looking for allies." Tor quickly explained Sir Kabel's opposition to Rehobath's claim to be the Novarch. "I hope you still feel like you can trust me."

"It's all right," Tee said. "Of course we do."

"Thank you," Tor said. "But what should we do? I don't know what to do next. I wish I knew why Sir Kabel had tried to assassinate Rehobath."

They continued discussing the situation. None of them were quite sure what to do, but it became even clearer that none of them trusted Rehobath.

"Then what are we doing down here?" Elestra asked, looking around at the walls of the Banewarrens.

"Working for Jevicca," Tee said.

"And what happens if we do find the Sword of Crissa?"

"I don't think we should give it to him," Tee said. "Not if he's going to use it the same way he used Dominic."

Tor grew thoughtful. "So... what would the reaction be if Dominic killed Rehobath?"

None of them had an answer for that. Least of all Dominic.

## THE CASTING OF THE LORE SPELL

While they talked, Ranthir had been examining the scroll that Tor had brought. He confirmed that it would do what Brother Thad had told them it would do.

“At least they were telling the truth about that,” Tor said.

“The casting of the spell could take awhile,” Ranthir said. “Maybe as long as an hour.”

They set up a defensive perimeter in the generator room. Each of them guarded one of the upper passages into the chamber while Ranthir began casting from the scroll.

For more than half an hour they kept watch, letting the soft drone of Ranthir’s words wash over them. They had actually begun to suspect that they would be able to finish the casting of the spell without interruption when, out of thin air, a hulking monstrosity of dark, blue-black flesh seemed to step out of thin air next to Elestra.

Before she could even shout a warning, Elestra was slammed up against the wall, torn up badly by the creature’s long, yellow claws. Its yellow eyes glowed with malicious and sinister glee, framed by its lanky black hair.

Dominic, whirling with the others at Elestra’s scream of pain, recognized it as some sort of troll-spawn – common enough in the mountains near his village – but of a variety he’d never seen before.

Agnarr moved quickly to protect Ranthir. Tor, meanwhile, closed with the troll-spawn while Tee circled around it. The creature lashed out at Tee, but the elven maid narrowly avoided the blow by virtue of the enchanted armband she wore (which skittered her slightly through time and space).

Agnarr hurled an axe from where he stood. The blade buried itself in the troll-spawn’s back, but with a shrug of its shoulders the creature shook it free. They could all see that the wound was already closing.

Tor, meanwhile, was struggling. Whenever the creature landed a blow, his thoughts filled with black and terrible things – a void of horror that drew itself across his mind. He could feel it deadening his limbs – threatening to overwhelm him.

While Tee and Tor kept the troll-spawn at bay, Elestra – badly hurt – fell back to where Agnarr was waiting by Ranthir’s side. “I’ll keep an eye on him,” she said. “You go.”

Agnarr raced around the iron catwalk, arriving barely in time. Tor had, at last, been overcome by the rapacious blackness working its way through his mind – his joints seized as his thoughts retreated to the safety of his inner soul. The troll-spawn surged forward, looking to finish Tor off... but then Agnarr’s burning blade struck true, eliciting the first cry of real pain from the creature as it ripped through its chest.

The force of Agnarr’s blow drove the troll-spawn stumbling back, adding to the force of Tee’s blade as she drove a precisely placed blow between its shoulder

blades. The tip of Tee’s longsword actually thrust out the front of the creature’s chest. It stumbled forward again, ripping itself off her blade in a gush of blue-black blood.

Elestra, still standing guard by Ranthir on the far side of the catwalk, placed a precise shot from her dragon rifle, nearly ripping the creature’s arm off at the shoulder. It collapsed into a bloody heap...

... but it’s wounds were still healing at a preternatural pace, and before anyone could react it had simply vanished back into thin air. With a howl of frustration, Agnarr smote the floor where it had lain.

... and in that moment, Ranthir turned – his eyes glowing bright – and chanted aloud:

Only the hand of creation can undo the seal which it has wrought.

Those who wish but for a moment can undo the creator’s work,

But those who would be his heirs must first wield his hand.

Into the heart of darkness they must follow him.

Seek the hand in the heart of the shard.

There all paths begin.

Thus all things shall be done or undone.

## RETRENCHING THE DEFENSES

Ranthir sagged forward as the magic of the spell left him. A moment later, however, he was scrabbling through his many pouches and bags to find paper and pen. He hastily jotted down the words that he had said.

“Did that make sense to anyone else?” Elestra asked.

“A little,” Tee said, frowning thoughtfully. “But not really.”

There were no clear answers written in the words that Ranthir had spoken. And with Tor still paralyzed, they had no choice but to seek more powerful magical aid. They let the Banewarrens, meeting Kalerecent where he stood guard in the cellar of the mansion.

They quickly explained to the knight what had happened. With Tor strapped to his saddle, Tee led Blue up the stairs (“Ah,” Kalerecent said. “So that’s why the door was there.”) and then mounted himself. Agnarr walked alongside as the three of them headed to the Temple of Asche to receive healing from Mand Scheben.

Ranthir, Elestra, and Dominic, meanwhile, returned with Kalerecent to the excavated cave nearest to the Banewarrens. Kalerecent had hoped to keep his guard in the cellar itself, but the others were concerned that the caverns where they had fought the umber hulk might lead to another exterior access point.

Once they were healed, Tee, Tor, and Agnarr returned to the Banewarrens, as well. After a brief discussion, they agreed that all of them – except for Tor,



who had business early the next day – would camp there for the night on a rotating guard shift.

### SEEKING SIR KABEL

Tor left the Banewarrens. But instead of heading directly back to the Ghostly Minstrel, he turned south towards the alley where they had met with the mysterious, shadow-like Shim.



Tor touched the symbol at the alley's dead end. A few moments later Shim exuded himself from a crack in the wall.

"How can I help you, Master Torland?"

"Can you find Sir Kabel of the Order of the Dawn and deliver to him a letter?"

"I can," Shim said. "The real question is, 'Can you pay for it?'"

"How much?"

"Two hundred gold pieces."

Tor agreed and quickly wrote out a note for Sir Kabel.

Sir—  
Please know that you have friends in Ptolus. Vehthyl is not fooled, but it is crucial we know what has occurred.  
  
Send word back if you are able. The safety of the city is in the balance.

Tor very specifically neglected to sign it, hoping that his elided reference to Dominic as the Chosen of Vehthyl would be enough to identify who the letter had come from without betraying him if it should fall into the wrong hands.

Shim took the letter and disappeared back into the wall. Tor left and returned to the Ghostly Minstrel for the night, satisfied that he had done all that he could. If all the might of the Imperial Church and the Order of the Dawn couldn't find Sir Kabel, it wasn't likely that wandering randomly around the city would do much good.

### A NIGHT IN THE BANEWARRENS

Back in the Banewarrens – or, rather, the small excavated cavern just outside of them – Kalerecent and

the rest of the party settled on the order of the watch and bedded down.

A few hours passed and the watch shifted twice without any cause for alarm. But then, about an hour before midnight, Tee's sharp eyes spotted movement coming along the passage leading to the Banewarrens. She quickly roused the others, whirling back towards the tunnel entrance in time to see the purplish-red wraith they had encountered before floating with sinister serenity into the cavern.

Kalerecent, who had been sharing the watch with her, moved to engage it. The engagement didn't last long: Kalerecent's magical blade ripped through its ethereal substance and then, a moment later, a single blast from Tee's dragon pistol tore it apart.

The others had barely even woken up.

After some mild complaints, Tee and Kalerecent resumed their watch while the others rolled over and went back to sleep.

A few minutes later, however, the wraith returned again. Dominic, rising impatiently from his bedroll, banished it with a burst of divine power, sending it fleeing back down the tunnel.

The group mustered their defenses and waited anxiously for its return... but after a quarter of an hour there was still no sign of it.

Agnarr eventually got tired of waiting and rallied an expedition back into the Banewarrens. They headed straight to the area where they had first encountered the wraith and the gem that spawned it. They found no trace of the wraith itself, but were entirely unsurprised to discover that the gem had somehow reformed itself. Without a second thought, Agnarr smashed it again.

Dominic raised the possibility of taking some of the shards of the gem with them – and thus, perhaps, preventing it from reforming again – but Tee and Elestra were both wary of the idea of carrying around shards from an artifact of clear and potent evil. (Hadn't they just been warned by Aoska not to risk removing *anything* from the Banewarrens?)

Ranthir couldn't even hazard a guess on what might happen (or not happen) if they took pieces of the gem with them. He did briefly ponder the possibility of storing the gem in the *stasis box* they had recovered from Ghul's Labyrinth, but he couldn't guarantee that it would actually stop the gem from reforming.

And so, in the end, they settled for simply shutting the once-warded door leading into the area – hoping, even though the ward had been broken, that this would stop the wraith from escaping.

"Aren't we just locking the wraith out?" Dominic asked.

"Well, next time we see it we'll kill it and *then* it will be trapped," Agnarr said.

While the others settled back down, Tee left for her guard duty at the "new project" of the chaos cultists. The

rest of the night – both at the project site and in the Banewarrens – passed quietly.

**THE TWO LETTERS**  
(09/17/790)

The next morning Tellith gave Tor two letters that had arrived for him during the night.

**SIR GEMMEL'S MESSAGE**

Master Torland of Barund—

I know that that the recent chaos surrounding the Order must have proven quite distressing to one so recently squired among our ranks. I pray to the Gods that this letter shall find you in good health and that no untoward danger has fallen upon you as a result of the treacherous actions of a handful of discontents.

I wish to assure you, however, that the Godskeep remains secure. I know that you were to receive training this afternoon, and I would like to avail myself of this opportunity to meet with you personally and make the proper arrangements.

My humblest thanks,

Sir Gemmell of the  
Order of the Dawn

**SIR KABEL'S MESSAGE**

Tor—

The days are darker than I had imagined. Come tomorrow at dawn to Nadar's Pub in Rivergate. Ask for Patrim. Bring Dominic if you trust him still.

-Sir K.

"I think I just wasted two hundred gold pieces," Tor muttered to himself.

As for Sir Gemmell's letter, it only affirmed what Tor had already been planning: In order to keep with his image of loyalty to the Order and to Rehobath he needed to attend his training that day as planned. On the morrow he would meet with Sir Kabel and find out the rest of the story.

But by the time he had saddled Blue and begun riding north into the Temple District, Tor began to be plagued with doubt. What if the letter purporting to be from Sir Kabel was a trap of some sort? Surely he wouldn't have been so foolish as to sign his own name? Why had the two letters arrived at nearly the same time?

Without having reached any sort of firm conclusion, Tor arrived at the Godskeep. He was escorted to the office which had once belonged to Sir Kabel... and were now occupied by Sir Gemmell.

"Master Tor, I'm honored to meet you."

Tor thanked him and exchanged pleasantries, but Sir Gemmell was quick to his business. "I know that you were squired by Sir Kabel. I don't know what his intentions were. But you're a companion of the Chosen of Vehthyl and so I know that you must be faithful to the Church and to the Nine Gods. Know, then, that Kabel has betrayed both the Novarch and the Gods. His treacherous plots have resulted in the death of many of our brothers."

"All I have ever wanted is to be a knight," Tor said truthfully.

"Yes. And with Kabel's treachery it is more important than ever that your training be completed as quickly as possible," Sir Gemmell said. "It's very likely that you will be contacted by Kabel. If that happens, you should alert us as quickly as possible. As long as he remains at large, we're all in danger."

"You think I might be harmed?" Tor asked blithely.

"Not as long as he thinks that he has some use to you. But after that? Who can say."

Tor was given over to Sir Lagenn – a knight of the Order that he had not previously met – for his training. Sir Lagenn was burly and heavy-set, with a shaved head and a vicious, purple scar running from his left temple down to his jaw. Despite his brutish temperament, Sir Lagenn proved to be a competent and able teacher.

But as he trained, Tor's thoughts were distracted by the two letters he had received. By the time Sir Lagenn called a halt to their exertions he had reached his conclusion: The letter from "Sir K" must be a fake. His loyalty was being test by Sir Gemmell.

Tor returned to Sir Gemmell's office and gave the letter to him.

After reading it through, Sir Gemmell looked up at him. "Why didn't you give this to me before?"

"To speak truthfully," Tor said. "I felt torn in my loyalty between the Order and someone who had quickly become a mentor to me."

"Well, your loyalty in this matter will no longer be tested. We shall attend to things from here. And do not seek any contact with Sir Kabel."

"Of course," Tor said.

Sir Gemmell looked back at the letter. "Why would he ask for the Chosen of Vehthyl?"

"I don't know," Tor said.

“Should Dominic’s trust in the Novarch be doubted?”

“I would never question it,” Tor said truthfully. (There was no question about it: Dominic didn’t trust him.)

## A PLAGUE OF WRAITHS

Tee, meanwhile, had returned to the Banewarrens.

While fighting the wraiths the night before, Kalerecent had suffered a wound. At first he had thought it a small and inconsequential thing, but it wasn’t healing properly. In fact, it proved to be beyond the healing skills of both Kalerecent and Dominic combined. As a result, Kalerecent was forced to leave the Banewarrens to seek more powerful healing from the Church.

This proved fortunate, however, when Tor arrived before Kalerecent returned – giving them a chance to converse privately.

“I need to tell you what’s happened,” Tor said.

“Should we sit down again?” Elestra asked.

Tor nodded emphatically and then began his tale.

“And you’re sure the letter from Kabel was a fake?” Tee asked.

“It had to be,” Tor said.

Before they could discuss it further, Dominic heard Kalerecent returning down the tunnel and silently signaled the others.

With Kalerecent back on guard duty and Tor returned they were free to go back to the Banewarrens and continue their explorations.

But Tee had only barely emerged into the first chamber of the Banewarrens when she spotted two purplish wraiths trying to get past the warded door they had shut the night before. One of the wraiths might have been the one they had encountered before, but the other was larger... and shaped like the half-leonid lamia they had slain the day before.

Tee crept back to where Dominic was waiting and told him what she’d seen.

“That’s bullshit!”

“I know,” Tee agreed.

Tee led them back into the chamber. Dominic was considerably less stealthy than Tee had been and the wraiths heard his approach. But it didn’t matter: Raising the cross of Athor, he banished them into nothingness.

Tee went over to the warded door and locked it securely (which proved difficult to do without a key).

“Tee!”

Turning around at the sound of Dominic’s cry, Tee spotted a lamia-shaped wraith and a minotaur-shaped wraith hovering nearby – held at bay only by the divine energy that Dominic was still channeling through his holy symbol. Tee started to move into a firing position, but as she did the wraiths slipped around the far corner and disappeared into the room with the iron cauldron.

Gathering the others they followed the wraiths into the cauldron room. The two larger wraiths were lurking in the shadows here, along with two smaller ones.

Elestra cursed. “It got all of them? We have to kill them all over again?”

Agnarr took the lead and Ranthir took the opportunity to demonstrate how he had used his arcane arts to duplicate Dominic’s feat of divine infusion: He enlarged Agnarr to twice his normal height and girth.

Elestra and Tor worked the corners, keeping the wraiths from circling around Agnarr’s massive shoulders. But most of the damage was actually coming from Tee’s dragon pistol: Agnarr’s blade passed through the wraiths again and again, but frustratingly couldn’t seem to find any purchase in their semi-ethereal forms.

With the battle largely stalemated into one of stark attrition, Tor eventually got daring. Pushing his way past Tee he plunged through one of the wraiths, ripping it apart on the tip of his electrified blade. From there he raced behind the minotaur-shaped wraith, providing enough of a distraction – and a few wounding blows – for Agnarr to finally finish it off.

With the larger wraiths dispatched, the two smaller ones were quickly driven back up the stairs on the far side of the room and overwhelmed. But even as they were finishing off these smaller wraiths, four more of the goblin-spawned wraiths drifted up from behind them. In fact, they were nearly taken by surprise – only Dominic’s wary eyes saved them.

Ranthir hurried up the stairs and away from the wraiths, while everyone else headed down the stairs to face them. But the wraiths – perhaps sensing weakness – passed directly through the walls and emerged to assault Ranthir. Their spectral limbs plunged through him, and Ranthir felt the living breath and warmth of vitality fleeing from his limbs.

Tor dashed back up the stairs and, half shoving Ranthir out of the way, interposed himself between the staggered mage and the wraiths. But in the process, he, too was struck by their soul-icing touch.

Their tactical control of the situation was rapidly deteriorating. They had been flanked, separated, and badly wounded. But Dominic, having barely ducked away from the wraiths’ assault himself, raised his holy symbol again and called upon the power of his faith.

The wraiths fled. As they turned away, Tor destroyed one of them and Agnarr cut down another.

Two of the wraiths escaped and they cursed their luck, knowing that they would almost certainly be troubled by them again.

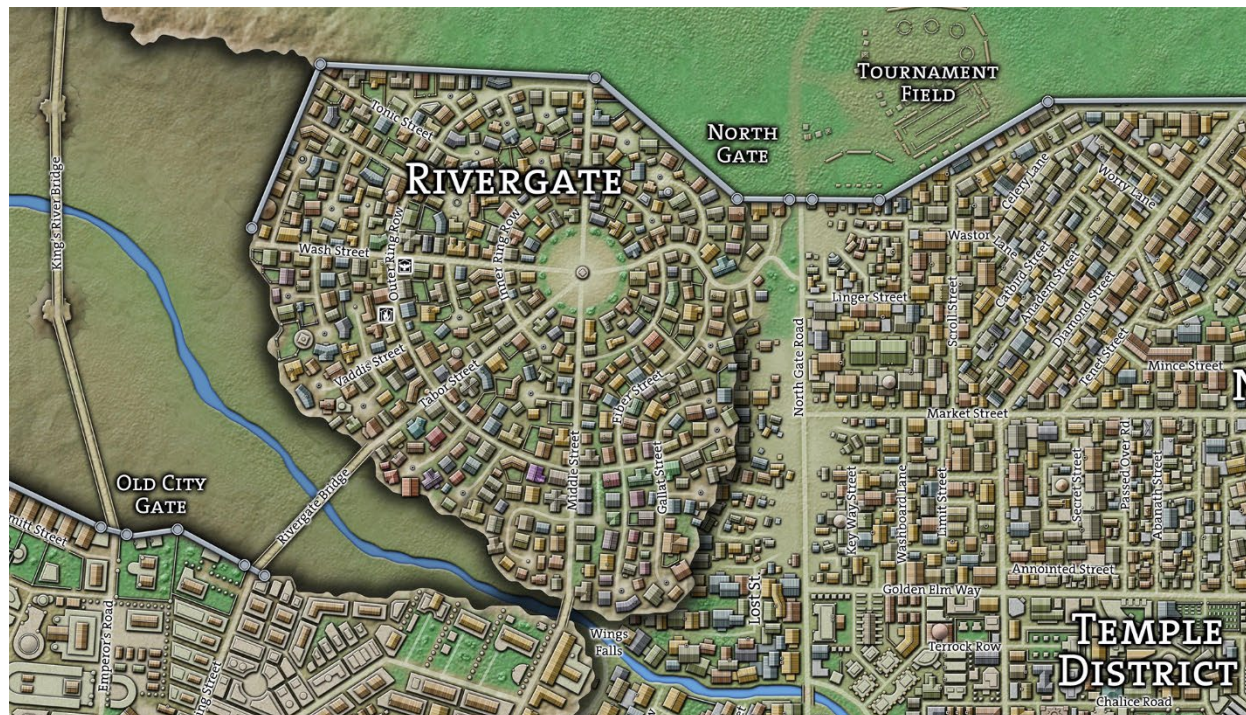
But perhaps it was for the best. Several of them could still feel the cold, cloying miasma of the wraiths sapping their strength and vitality. Knowing that, as with Kalerecent, only a more powerful channeling of divine energy could alleviate the pall, they resolved to abandon their current explorations and return to the surface.



# SESSION 31 – KABEL IN HIDING

November 9th, 2008

The 17th of Kadal in the 790th Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty



After leaving the Banewarrens they went first to the Temple of Ashe. There they had the wraiths' malaise cleansed from their bodies. Then they crossed the Temple District to the Imperial Cathedral, hoping to claim Brother Heth Neferul's promise of covering their expenses.

They were looking for healing resources – divine energy reservoirs into wands or healing totems. Unfortunately, as Heth explain to them, such resources were not available in a limitless supply – not even from the Church. However, they were able to obtain three such wands for a minimal tithing.

From there they returned to the Ghostly Minstrel. Tee took a brief detour to the Delvers' Guild offices in the Undermarket to see if "Laurea" had received any messages from the cultists, but she had not.

When Tee joined them in Elestra's room, Tor once again raised the idea of having Dominic assassinate Rehobath.

"We shouldn't be saying that in front of everyone," Tee said.

"We shouldn't be saying that in front of *each other*," Dominic said with a worried look.

Tor nodded. "You never know who might be listening."

"That's true," Shim said, slipping through the wall. He looked at Tor. "Are you okay with me talking in front of them?"

Tor nodded. "Go ahead. Anything you can say to me you can say to them."

"All right," Shim said. "My man found Kabel. He's at a place called Nadar's Pub in Rivergate. It was tough. He was well hidden. In fact, the only reason we knew he was there was because Sir Gemmell knows where he is. The Order of the Dawn is assembling a posse out of the Godskeep to arrest him."

Tor's heart sunk. The letter from Sir Kabel had been *real*. He'd unwittingly betrayed him.

"Kabel sent you answer: 'I am glad that the eyes of Vehthyl see clearly. Such sight will be needed in the morning light.'"

No one said anything for a long moment.

"Do you want me to do something more?" Shim asked.

Tor shook his head slightly, deep in thought. "I shouldn't go there."

"No," Tee agreed.

"I could go," Elestra said. "I could transform into a bird and fly there with a message."

Shim took his cue and bowed out. "I shouldn't be hearing this." He slipped back into the wall and disappeared.

("How do we know he's not still listening to us?" Dominic asked. "We don't," said Tee.)

They eventually agreed that Tor should write a letter and have Elestra deliver it.

This is a trap. Head to Pythoness House, a manor house overlooking the King's River Gorge in Oldtown. I will contact you there. Go now. They are coming.

"Should we tell him about the evil ghost?" Elestra asked.

"He'll figure it out," Agnarr said.

Elestra called upon the Spirit of the City, allowing it to flow into her body and transform it into the shape of a crow. When the transformation was complete, they tied Tor's message securely to her leg and opened the window.

### ESCAPE FROM NADAR'S PUB

Elestra flew straight to Nadar's Pub, covering the distance to the Rivergate District quickly through the air. She took a moment to circle above it and then landed on the ledge outside the front window.

Peering inside she saw the barkeep tending to two customers. Clearly the mid-afternoon trade was slow.

There was no sign of Sir Kabel, but that made sense. It was unlikely that a hunted man would be supping openly in a public tavern.

Elestra flew around to the back. She found the kitchen window open and peeked in: There were several shelves packed with various foodstuffs, a modest cast iron stove, a pump for water, and a large fireplace for roasting. There was also a pair of large cellar doors set at an angle into the floor.

Elestra cautiously flew into the kitchen, tapped lightly on the cellar doors, and then flew back up to her kitchen window perch. She waited several minutes. There was no answer.

Elestra was still thinking over her next course of action (should she turn back into human form? but if she did that how would she get out again?) when the barkeep came into the kitchen to fill a pitcher of water.

She waited until he left and then flew back down to the cellar doors again. She tapped louder this time and then hopped up onto a nearby shelf to wait.

A few moments later, Elestra heard the cellar doors being unbarred from the far side. One of the doors was eased open and an armed woman looked out. (Elestra

didn't recognize her, but Tor later identified her as Sera Nara.)

Not immediately seeing anyone, Nara emerged cautiously into the kitchen. Elestra seized her opportunity: swooping past Nara she flew down into the cellar. There she found Sir Kabel and two other knights sitting around a small, well-worn table.

Elestra landed in the center of the table and cocked her head towards Sir Kabel, trying to look as innocent and harmless as possible. Sera Nara came rushing back down the stairs. One of the other knights turned to Kabel with a quizzical look on his face. "Why would Killraven be contacting you?"

"I don't think it's one of hers," Kabel said. "It's too small to be a raven."

Kabel reached out and untied the note from Elestra's claw. He unrolled it and read it, his face drawing immediately into lines of concern. He looked up sharply. "Gather your things now. We have to go."

As the others grabbed their weapons and several large packs, Kabel looked at Elestra. "Thank you, whoever you may be."

Kabel and his knights headed up the stairs and out the kitchen door. Elestra flew up and watched them head south towards Oldtown, following them long enough to be certain of where they were heading. Then she turned back and circled high above the pub for about fifteen minutes, waiting to see if there would be any sign of covert pursuit or the like.

She saw nothing. Turning east she flew towards the Temple District. As she was passing over the bluffs she spotted them: Sir Gemmell leading a war party of twelve mounted knights up the Wash Street ramp.

Veering aside, she followed them from above. She watched as they surrounded Nadar's Pub. Sir Gemmell rode forward and called out in a loud voice, demanding that Kabel surrender.

A few moments later the door of the pub swung open. The barkeep yelled out that no one by that name was in the pub. Sir Gemmell gave a sharp gesture and two of his knights dismounted and entered the pub. Several minutes later they emerged with no result.

Gemmell and several more knights dismounted. Angry words began to be exchanged... and that's when the watchmen arrived. From her height, Elestra couldn't hear what was being said, but a few moments later Gemmell – clearly furious – mounted his horse and rode off, heading back towards the Temple District.

Elestra followed the knights long enough to be fairly certain that they were heading back to the Cathedral and then winged it back to the Ghostly Minstrel.

Returning to her room, where the others had been anxiously awaiting her, Elestra let the Spirit of the City depart her. Her body resumed its natural form.

She quickly explained what she had done and what she had seen. Tor embraced her at the news that they had



(just in the nick of time) averted disaster. A weight of guilt had been lifted from his conscience.

### WORD ON THE STREET

They decided to head back to the Banewarrens and rejoin Kalerecent's watch. On their way, however, they passed down Tavern Row. Here they found a dozen ravens perched here and there on various buildings.

"What's going on?" Tee asked.

"Could it be the Killravens?" Ranthir said.

"I'll find out," Elestra said.

While the others continued on, Elestra put her ear to the street. She heard a few people talking about an incident on Tavern Row: The day before, a centaur named Unos, the owner of the Old Goose tavern, had been found murdered in the common room of his tavern at dawn.

Drowning out the affair on Tavern Row, however, were the varied reports surrounding the events at the Cathedral. There seemed to be a good deal of confusion surrounding the exact details. Public opinion was still split fairly evenly on the issue of Rehobath claiming the mantle of the Novarch, but that opinion was beginning to slowly shift in his favor.

### THE EMPTY VAULTS

Elestra rejoined the others in the excavated cave outside of the Banewarrens. Kalerecent reported that everything there had been quiet during their absence, and so they headed down to continue their exploration of the farthest vaults.

Passing down a wide hall they came to a T-intersection. The narrower corridor they entered was lined with more than a half dozen of the now familiar warded doors.

One of the doors stood ajar. Inside the chamber beyond this door was a long, metal box, not unlike a lidless coffin. On each of the four corners of the coffin-like receptacle a large amethyst has been inlaid. The inside of the box was lined with six heavy leather straps, arranged in such a way as to bind someone within.

Tee was tempted by the obvious worth of the amethysts, but cautious as well. (They'd already encountered one cursed jewel in this place.) Ranthir examined them closely and determined that the gems had been used to focus several enchantments onto the inhabitant of the box. Some of these appeared similar to those found in a *stasis box* while others appeared to have some form magical negatement as their purpose.

"Would these enchantments have held Tavan Zith's abilities in check?" Tee asked.

"Yes, I think so," Ranthir said. "But they're harmless now. The spells were broken and the magical energy has dissipated."

That's all Tee needed to hear. She pried out the valuable gemstones and dropped them into her *bag of holding*.

They went back out into the hall. A careful examination of the remaining doors revealed that the wards on one of them had been broken. They opened this door to reveal an empty vault with a large, circular depression in the center of the floor. This depression was filled with water and large patches of the rest of the floor were damp as well.

Tee discovered runes worked into the inner edge of the circular depression and Ranthir was able to identify them as part of enchantments designed to bind something to both the material and ethereal planes. He hypothesized that this chamber might have been used to contain the ethereal-shifting, blue-skinned troll-spawn they had fought before.

### THE VAULTS OF FORGOTTEN EVIL

After a brief debate they decided to break open the remaining vaults. Opening the first of these released a blast of chilled air. A large block of ice filled the center of the room, extending from the floor to the ceiling. A careful inspection of this ice revealed that it was laced with thin filigrees of golden thread and Ranthir was able to discern that these threads were minutely etched with tiny runes. Unfortunately, he had no idea what purpose the threads or runes might serve. Large bulbous shadows could be seen within the ice, although making out any sort of detail was quite impossible. When Ranthir was satisfied that he had learned all that he could learn (which was little), he stepped back. Tee started blasting away at the ice using her dragon pistol.

After only a couple of shots, the ice had already cracked badly. Tee lined up her third shot—

—and the ice shattered! A slimy, writhing tentacle burst free. It was followed moments later by more. Tee fired blindly into the ice and then the creatures within were free.

There were three of them – blobs of soft tissue and pulsating gray matter; long tentacles writhing in levitative air; numerous, bulbous, yellow, feral eyes and befanged mouths scattered haphazardly within the folds of flabby flesh.

Tor, who had been standing on guard, dashed forward and slashed his sword across the eye of one. Tee, switching her dragon pistol to her side, drew her sword and lunged forward – stabbing through the eye of another and feeling the familiar thrill of it (although this eye was larger than most).

And then Agnarr stepped forward and with a single mighty swing his flaming greatsword cleaved its way through all three of the creatures in a single blow.

As each died in a deflating, wet heap of protoplasmic flesh, a wave of horrific terror swept across them – but





each, in their own fashion, found a way to steel their soul against it.

Elestra, thinking of the wraiths they had fought before, took the time to burn the corpses thoroughly.

### THE VAULT OF THE PAIN DEMON

They broke the wards on the next door, finding a vault not dissimilar in character but smaller than the last, with a pillar of ice suspended between floor and ceiling.

From a slightly safer distance, Tee again used her dragon pistol to blast away at the ice. Obviously her shots were disrupting whatever magicks had been laid upon the ice because it was not long before the shadowy form within began to shift and move.

As the ice began to crack, waves of hate-filled pain radiated from it. Grimacing against the pain, Tee continued firing. The demon trapped within finally burst free. Its skin was a glistening ebony. Its eyes were a blood-red crimson. Its mouth was a toothless maw with razored lips. Chains were fused about its wrists, each animate with hatred.

As it came free, Tee fired a shot, but it ricocheted harmlessly off the demon's chitinous shell. The creature howled and the waves of psychic pain battering them seemed to intensify.

Ranthir recognized the thing: It was a naturally demonic creature. Its chains had been soul-bound to its demonic essence – binding its own pain sympathetically and allowing it to reflect that essence back in the psychic waves which were assaulting all of them (although Ranthir tasted only the edge of it from his relatively safe haven in the hall).

Agnarr and Tor had fallen back before its first assault – the waves of pain overwhelming their minds and the animate chains harrying their defenses – but now they rallied, pushing it farther and farther down the length of the narrow chamber. Step by step the pain demon was forced back.

Agnarr suffered grievous wounds from the chains – the cold pain of them numbing his limbs. And the assault of primal pain was strengthening. Those nearest the creature could feel it now as both a psychic and physical thing. The manifestation of pain itself was intense enough to open cuts upon their bodies.

In the end, they were able to beat the creature down.

Tor was left with a single, dramatic cut upon his cheek... But Agnarr welcomed the warming touch of Dominic's healing.

### THE CHITTERING SWARM

The next few vaults proved to be empty. There were no signs that they had even been used.

But then they unleashed the demon swarm.

As the ice of this third vault shattered, the chittering creatures boiled out. Agnarr and Tor had held the chokepoint of the door, but it mattered little as the creatures swarmed around them in every direction.

They found it difficult to fight the swarm. There was a pervasive aura around the dozens of demonlings that seemed to muddle their minds and the tiny creatures would hop from place to place, crawling over them and slipping into their clothes and armor. Some even tried to pry their way into mouths.

Tee fired several blasts ineffectively into the carpet-like mass of demonlings and then fell back before their indomitable advance. The party, in general, split awkwardly in two – with some retreating one way down the hall and others retreating in the other.

The creatures, despite their small size, had vicious claws that ripped and tore as they leaped and scuttled here and there in a chaotic, eddying swirl of motion. And the party discovered, to their horror and disgust, that the creatures were exuding some sort of unnatural black thread – iron-like in strength and binding to the wounds they dealt. The demonlings were literally stitching their limbs together.

Seeaeti howled in pain. Dominic quickly found himself mobbed by the creatures and rendered almost immobile within a cocoon of their black thread.

Ranthir poured flame from his hands and this had some limited success, but still the creatures came. Elestra called down bolts of lightning from thin air, but the demonlings seemed to dance around the scorching blasts.

They were going to be overwhelmed.

“Run!” Ranthir cried.

Elestra did. The others dived for cover.

A bead of fire flew from the tip of Ranthir’s finger into the midst of the chattering swarm. It blossomed into a ball of flame...

And in its wake were left the charred and stinking corpses of the demonlings.

Agnarr stepped forward and put the last of the little fiends out of their well-deserved misery.

This, however, still left them with the difficult task of undoing the demonic, black thread that had been sewn randomly across their bodies. Tee tried to simply rip her way free, but this opened some grievous wounds that sent black spots dancing across her vision.

They started carefully cutting each other free of the stuff. Only Elestra seriously botched this procedure, ripping a gaping wound in Dominic’s side. (The others dissuaded her from helping them with their own extrications.)

## THE ABANDONED CAVES

They had now explored this entire section of the Banewarrens and made it as secure as they could (largely by killing everything in sight). Without passing through the sealed door, there was nothing else for them to do here. And so they were left with waiting for the emergence of whatever creature had slipped through the door before Kalerecent had shut it.

They decided to complete their explorations of the caves in which they had fought the umber hulk. Some of them were anticipating the possibility that the creature had returned (affording them with an opportunity to finish it off), and although others were skeptical that it would, if nothing else, eliminate the possibility of a second, unknown entrance to the Banewarrens.

It was an easy matter to return to the caves. Pushing farther into their depths, the group spotted a second passage that had been concealed by a boulder. A little distance further on, Tee saw that the passage they were in opened up into a larger chamber and that, out of that chamber, a second passage appeared to turn in the same direction as the concealed passage behind the boulder.

“Why would it put these boulders everywhere?” Elestra asked.

“I don’t know,” Tee said. But she decided to head down into the larger chamber to see if it did, in fact, meet up with the concealed passage in the way that it appeared to...

And narrowly avoided falling into a pit of loose gravel as it suddenly gave way beneath her feet.

From that they concluded that these boulder-hidden passages had been used by the umber hulk to bypass the traps and snares that it had laid out for the unwary.

With grunts of exertion, Tor and Agnarr managed to leverage the boulder out of the way and they headed down the passage it had concealed.

In the twisting passages beyond they found what appeared to be the creature’s lair: A large bed of stone had been crudely constructed in one corner of a cave in which other stones had been arranged and shaped towards some strange purpose.

“Could it be some form of art?” Ranthir said.

Tee briefly considered the possibility of taking this “umber hulk statuary” and selling it, but she eventually decided that there was unlikely to be any sort of meaningful market for it. Certainly no market worth hauling around several tons of stone for. “I might be able to hustle it... But it’s just not worth the effort.”

Hidden behind some cleverly arranged stones in another corner of the cave they found a surprisingly rich stash of gemstones and gold.

In the next cave they discovered the creature’s “larder”. A horrible stench permeated the air and the walls were slick with moisture. In a low spot near the center of the cave was assembled a grisly, bloody mess: The partially dismembered corpse of a goblin and a half-devoured corpse, greenish white with bloating and decay, that looked as if it might have once belonged to a man.

Tee was disgusted by the sight and wanted no part of it. But as she turned to leave, Agnarr stopped her. “Aren’t you going to search the cave?”

Tee bluffed him into thinking that she had already searched the bodies, but the others eventually convinced her that she should.

“There might be some sort of identification,” Elestra pointed out. “We could let people know what happened to him.”

Tee sighed and started searching.

“Wait,” Agnarr said. “I thought she already searched them?”

“I’m just making sure I didn’t miss anything.”

“Oh. Okay.”

There were no identification papers, but the man was carrying a small coin purse drenched in sickly decay. Tee left it where it lay.

## THE OBSTINATE PRISONER

“Couldn’t we take one of these corpses and use it to intimidate that orc we’ve got locked in a closet?” Elestra asked.

“Haven’t we basically already done that?” Tee pointed out, leaving unvoiced her concern about the bloodthirstiness beginning to appear in the young girl.

“I’ve even torn off *her* ear,” Agnarr said.

They left the bodies, but they did return to the mansion.

They found the orc woman sleeping in the closet. Tee poured water over her head and they tried to question her again... but it went no better than the last two times they had tried.

The orc woman laughed at Elestra’s efforts. “You’re wearing pink leather boots. I can barely take you seriously.”

Tor stepped forward and ineffectually tried again. “I’m imagining *you* wearing pink leather boots.”

They were stymied.

“It’s been two days since I had a drink,” the orc said. “Are you planning to kill me?”

“What are you talking about?” Tee said. “I just poured water over you head.”

“Maybe if we tried a nicer approach?” Ranthir said. “Tell us what we want to know and we’ll give you some food.”

“You tore off my ear and killed my friends and you think I’m going to talk for a little bit of food?”

They shut the closet door and withdrew a little.

“She’s right about one thing,” Tee said. “If we just keep her locked up in there, she’ll die.”

“So?” Elestra asked.

They eventually decided to haul her down to the Imperial Cathedral. There they turned her over to Heth Neferul, explaining that she might be a source of information regarding the group attempting to breach the Banewarrens.

“And what of the lore spell?” Heth asked. “Was it successful, Master Ranthir?”

“Yes,” Ranthir said.

“It told us that the only way through the door was through the use of a magical wish,” Tee lied blithely.

Heth pondered this for awhile. “I will see if such powerful magicks can be acquired for you. In the meantime, continue your efforts to reach the sword. If our questioning of this orc yields any fruit, I will send word to you.”

## PLANNING FOR THE MORROW

Returning to the Ghostly Minstrel they spent the better part of an hour cleaning up the coagulate gore and blood that had been spattered across them in the Banewarrens (and only now pausing to reflect on Brother Heth’s blithe reaction to the same).

While the others were finishing up, Tor left the Minstrel and went next door to the Bull and Bear. There he found Iltumar tending the shop. After some small talk (in which Iltumar proved to be his usual, overeager self),

Tor asked him if he might be interested in practicing some swordplay the next morning.

“I would love to! Will Mistress Tee be there?”

“No, it would just be me and you,” Tor said. “Is that okay?”

“Of course!”

“Do you own a sword?”

“No, but I can ask Hirus if I might borrow one.”

“Do so,” Tor said. “I’ll meet you here tomorrow.”

Tor returned to the Ghostly Minstrel and gathered the others. Tor explained his plans with Iltumar – if the lad wanted to be a part of something larger, he was hoping to give him a better option than the Brotherhood of Ptolus.

Tor also wanted to try to reach Sir Kabel in Pythoness House as soon as possible, but he was worried that he was still being followed – possibly by agents of the Church.

After discussing their options, Ranthir proposed using a spell of invisibility that he had studied in Shilukar’s spellbook. Thus cloaked in magick, Tor would be able to easily slip away from the mansion on Nibeck Street and make his way to Pythoness House undetected.

Ranthir wouldn’t be able to cast the spell until morning, but since Tor wasn’t supposed to meet with Sir Kabel until then they decided that the plan was as good as any.

They also wanted to make sure that the sealed door in the Banewarrens couldn’t be opened without them knowing about it. Ranthir would be able to lay a spell which would alert him if the door was opened and Elestra’s connection with the Spirit of the City would allow her to work a similar charm. Between the two of them they should be able to keep the sealed door under constant alarm.

However, these minor magicks were strictly limited in their range: If they were placed upon the sealed door, Ranthir and Elestra would be unable to move much farther east than the edge of Oldtown.

And with that plan in hand, not wanting to leave the door unwatched any longer than necessary, they returned to the Banewarrens. Ranthir laid his spell upon the sealed door and the rest of them set their watches for the night.

## THE MIDNIGHT WATCH

(09/18/790)

As midnight drew near, Tee left the Banewarrens and headed across Oldtown for her guard duties as a “cultist”. On her previous watches there had been little or no activity around the apartment complex. In fact, from all outward appearances, it seemed to be abandoned.

About an hour into her shift, however, Tee suddenly saw a light come on in one of the upper windows of the building. Her interest was particularly piqued when she

realized that it was the window of the room in which Ranthir had clairvoyantly spied on a quarrel between cultists of the Ebon Hand and the Brotherhood of Venom.

Tee slipped across the street and, using her magical boots, levitated up to the window. The curtains had been drawn, but they were cracked and she was able to peer between them: A grim-visaged man wearing grey robes and an iron breastplate bearing the symbol of a coiled serpent was kneeling next to the corpse Ranthir had seen left behind. After a few moments, he stood up and left the room.

Tee floated up to the roof and kept an eye on the street to make sure that he wasn't actually leaving the building. A few minutes later, however, she saw a light through the rear windows of the building moving back towards the room with the corpse. She returned to the window in time to see a group of several people return: The same grey-robed man was accompanied by two others wearing serpent symbols and a fourth man with a large tattoo in the shape of a black hand on his throat.

After no more than a cursory inspection of the corpse, the group fell into arguing with each other. Tee was having problems hearing, so she cautiously cracked the window open.

"—we're not going to stand for this!" This was the Ebon Hand cultist.

"Vocaetun, if you're making some sort of accusation—" this was the grey-robed man.

"I am! You may think that you can steal this research from us! But we have worked just as hard to perfect the venom-shaped thralls, and we won't let you steal them from us."

"It could have easily been one of the thralls who did this."

"Don't be absurd!"

At this point one of the Venom cultists slipped out of the room. The argument continued vociferously. It became clear that the two cults had been working together to create "venom-shaped thralls" – which Tee guessed must be the insectoid horrors that Ranthir had seen on the lower level – but now significant distrust was boiling up between the two groups.

The cultist who had left returned, following a woman with golden-brown skin. Tee spotted a bell-shaped charm around the woman's wrist.

As soon as they saw her, the other cultists fell silent. She eyed fixed them with a steady gaze until they settled down. "What's going on here?"

"Reggaloch's dead, Gavele. Theral found the body here."

"Theral killed him you mean!" Vocaetun shouted.

While the other cultists went back to arguing, Gavele knelt down next to Reggaloch's body and did a more thorough inspection of the corpse. Unnoticed by the

others (but not unnoticed by Tee), she found a note and slipped it into her pocket. Then she stood up.

"That's enough," she said. "Reggaloch has been dead for days. Give the body to the thralls. They'll eat it up. Then come with me and we'll settle this. You really don't want me to have to bring this idiocy to Illadras' attention."

At the woman's direction, a couple of the cultists grabbed the corpse and hauled it out of the room. The rest of the cultists followed, taking the light with them.

Tee waited for a long while. When it was clear that none of them were coming back, she decided to go through the window. She eased it open silently and slipped inside.

She could hear sounds of movement from below, but nothing untoward here on the upper level. It looked as if the room had been torn apart: Various pieces of furniture had been smashed into kindling and scattered around haphazardly. There were doors to her left and right, but there was also a gaping hole punched through the far wall.

She headed through the hole in the wall into another large room. The floor creaked ominously under her weight. There was another hole in the far wall here, too, but she couldn't see anything beyond it due to the lack of light. There were a couple of doors and one of these had been smashed open. Through it she could see a hallway leading to the stairs.

She decided to backtrack through the room where Reggaloch had died and tried one of the doors. Through it she found the remnants of a small apartment. In one corner of the ruined room she saw a cocoon of crystalline black secretions. In the other corner there was a second cocoon... but this one had been ripped open from the inside, and something seemed to be *writhing* in there.

*I'm going to die in here...* Tee realized with a sudden dread. She backed out of the room, shut the door, and escaped out the window.

She returned to her post across the street and waited for dawn to come. Just a few moments before the end of her shift, however, the door of the apartment building opened. The Ebon Hand cultist she had seen in the room above emerged and began walking down the street to the west.

She was just considering whether she should follow him or not when she spotted him surreptitiously passing a note to a man walking in the opposite direction. That settled the matter for her: She wanted to see that note.

She followed the messenger for several blocks and then, seizing an opportune moment, knocked him unconscious. She grabbed the note, quickly rifled through his purse (to make it look like an ordinary robbery), and then slipped away. When she was safely out of sight, she opened the note and read.

Malleck—

Reggaloch is dead. I am certain the Brothers of Venom are to blame. Gavele is deaf to our cause. I would urge you to send more of our brethren as soon as you can.

Vocaetun

Thinking quickly, she returned to where she had left the messenger. He was still unconscious. She quickly replaced the note and then woke him up.

“Hey! Are you all right? I saw that guy hit you and then—“

The messenger, with a look of panic in his eye, quickly patted himself down. As soon as he had confirmed that the note was there, he pushed his way past Tee and hurried down the street.

*Alarmed, but not suspicious... Good.* Tee nodded to herself and then headed back to the Banewarrens to meet up with the others.

### A MORNING WITH ILTUMAR

When Tee returned to the excavated cave, she found Agnarr and Kalerecent on watch. Ranthir was awake, as well, having suffered from bad nightmares during the night. Waking the others, she proposed that they should renew the alarming charm that had been placed on the sealed door.

This needed to be done in any case, but it also gave them an excuse to leave Kalerecent so that they could speak in private. As they walked, Tee quickly briefed the others on what she had seen the night before.

“You went *inside*?” Dominic said, incredulous.)

Elestra renewed the alarming charm and they made their way back to the excavated cave. All was quiet in the Banewarrens.

While the others rejoined Kalerecent’s watch, Elestra and Tor left the Banewarrens.

While careful to remain within the limits of her alarming charm, Elestra walked the streets of Oldtown. What she heard disturbed her: Late last evening, a small group of arcanists had magically animated the painted mural of the griffon in the common hall of the Griffon Tavern on Tavern Row. Three innocent bystanders had been killed by the creature before Sheva Callister had been able to stop it.

The word on the street was clear: The Killravens were making a concerted push to muscle in on the Balacazars’ protection racket along Tavern Row. There had been a few skirmishes between low level enforcers, but it was only a matter of time before the Balacazars

started pushing back... and when they did, things were going to get ugly.

Nearly drowned out by the affairs on Tavern Row, there was another piece of news: A warrant of arrest had been sworn out for Sir Kabel. The charges were “disturbances of the peace” and “conspiracy to murder”.

Tor, meanwhile, headed down into Midtown. He met Iltumar at the Bull and Bear.

“Did you get a sword?”

“I did!” Iltumar said, patting the blade strapped awkwardly to his hip.

“Good. Do you have a horse?”

“... no.” Iltumar frowned.

“It’s all right. I’m sure arrangements can be made.”

And, in fact, they could. At the stable behind the Ghostly Minstrel, Tor saddled Blue and made arrangements to hire a horse for Iltumar for the day.

They rode up to the tournament grounds north of town. They were empty, but served as an excellent arena in which Tor could practice Iltumar on the arts of the sword.

As they worked, Iltumar slowly loosened up – both physically and with his tongue. “I think it’s important to fight for what’s right,” he said. “I wish I could do what you and Mistress Tee do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Making a difference in the world,” he said. “That’s all I dream about, really.”

Tor grunted. “That’s a noble sentiment. And now... defend yourself!” And he pressed the attack again.

### A NOONTIME WITH KABEL

After dropping Iltumar back at the Bull and Bear (the lad was rather saddle sore), Tor returned to the Nibeck Street mansion. As arranged, Ranthir and Tee met him just inside the door. Tee broke the news of Kabel’s warrant (which she had learned from Elestra when she had returned earlier). Ranthir rendered him invisible and then headed out the door first, allowing Tor to slip out without any visible sign.

From the outside, Pythoness House still looked completely deserted. Tor passed through the gatehouse, easily slipping past two knights of the Order of the Dawn who were stationed as covert guards in the courtyard. He quickly found Sir Kabel and Sera Nara in one of the former bedchambers on the first floor, quietly discussing matters over a game of dragonscales.

Tor knocked on the door.

Sera Nara was jumpy. “Who’s there? Show yourself!”

“That will be... difficult,” Tor said. “It’s Tor. I thought it best if I came as secretly as possible.”

Sir Kabel waved Sera Nara down.

“Where should I sit?” Tor asked.

“Wherever you like,” Kabel said. “We are, after all, here at your sufferance.”

It took a few moments for the invisibility spell Ranthir had worked to wear off. As Tor became visible, Sir Kabel smiled, “It’s good to see you, Master Tor.”

“Before we begin,” Tor said, “I have a confession to make.” He quickly explained that he was responsible for Kabel nearly being captured. “I thought it was a snare. I am sorry.”

“No, the debt is entirely mine,” Kabel said. “Without the efforts of you and your friends, we would have all been captured.”

“I’m sorry to say that I have more bad news,” Tor said. “A warrant has been sworn out for your arrest.”

Kabel grimaced.

“I’d like to help you. We’d all like to help you. But first I’d like to know what happened that morning.”

A flash of anger crossed Sera Nara’s face. Sir Kabel held up a placating hand to her, “No. It’s all right. I’m sure that Rehobath has spread his story far and wide. It’s good to hear the truth.”

### KABEL’S TALE

“I had taken several knights from the Order to train at the tournament field. Many of these were loyalists to the Church, but there were a few that were brought so that we might try to recruit them. We needed all the support we could if we were going to remove the False Novarch.

“Unfortunately, not all of those I trusted were truly loyal. Two of my knights – Aric and Thomas – attacked me. Crying their loyalty to Rehobath and with a vow to kill me for a traitor, they attempted to assassinate me.

“They failed, largely through the quick blade of Sera Nara. While we were still gathering our wits, another of my loyal knights rode up and warned us of further treachery: Sir Gemmell had attempted to gather those knights loyal to me and ambush them in the Great Hall of the Godskeep.

“We rode hard and discovered that Gemmell’s plan had failed. The loyalist knights had fought their way out of the Godskeep. But now there was heavy fighting on the green south of the keep and my men were pinned down between the Godskeep and the Cathedral.

“We were able to cut through the defensive line that Gemmell had formed. We fled west down Sunrise Street. When we came to the Street of a Million Gods, I ordered my men to scatter. The group I led eventually made our way to the pub in Rivergate and, from there – through your grace – to here.”

### PRELUDE OF THE FATAR

“That explains many things,” Tor said.

“Now, there’s something else I’d like to propose.” Sir Kabel leaned back and gestured expansively, taking in

the whole of the room and beyond. “The knights loyal to our cause are scattered, hiding in bolt-holes around the city. They’re just waiting to bound by Gemmell and the other traitors and captured. But Pythoness House is practically a fortress. It could be secured against any assault by Rehobath or his cronies. You brought us here. Is it all right if use this as a safe haven for the others?”

Tor was hesitant. “I’m not sure I have the right to make the decision without first consulting my comrades. We’ve spoken, actually, of our need to find a place more secure – and secret – than the Ghostly Minstrel as a base of operations. We had been thinking of using Pythoness House ourselves.”

“I understand,” Kabel said.

“What are your plans, exactly?” Tor asked.

“I’ve received word from the Church in Seyrun. Kirian Ylestos has been raised as the Silver Fatar of Athor and dispatched to Ptolus to take control of the Cathedral. He’s bringing with him a small platoon of the Crimson Guard. With the guard reinforcing my loyalists, I believe that we’ll be able to overwhelm Sir Gemmell, capture Rehobath, and put an end to this farce.”

“How many men do you have?”

“Twenty or so loyalists, unless more have been captured,” Kabel said. “And the platoon will bring another twenty armed men to our side.”

“And how many men does Gemmell have?”

“At least forty knights still serve him in the Godskeep,” Kabel admitted. “But when the true Fatar arrives and the word of the Church is heard again, I think many of them will realize their folly. Of course it would be easier if... Since he isn’t here, am I to understand that Dominic is not to be trusted?”

“No,” Tor said. “I only came alone in an effort to be as secure as possible.”

“If Dominic were to publicly denounce Rehobath, that would go far towards discrediting Rehobath’s heresies. More of the Order might turn against him and Gemmell.”

“He’s not a friend to Rehobath, I can tell you that,” Tor said. “But beyond that I can’t say. I would need to ask him. Perhaps it would be best if I brought all of my friends here to meet with you.”

Tee stepped out of the shadows by the door. “Some of us are here already.”

### TEE’S PATH

After Tor left the Nibeck Street mansion, Tee had waited ten minutes and then climbed over the rear wall of the mansion. When she had reached Pythoness House she hadn’t bothered trying to go through the gates, instead climbing the wall and quickly reaching the roof above the gatehouse. From there she was able to look down into the courtyard and easily spotted the two knights guarding the entrance. She had slipped down through the

gatehouse (saying a quiet “hello” to Taunell) and started looking for Tor. It took her several minutes, but she had arrived outside the door just in time to hear the last few sentences of the conversation.

Nara leapt to her feet and her sword leapt into her hand. “Who are you?”

Tor quickly made the requisite introductions. Tee gently pushed Nara’s sword away from her throat as Kabel waved her down again.

“Apparently we’re going to need new guards.” Kabel smiled.

They agreed to meet for dinner that evening and Tor asked him if they would need any supplies or the like.

“No. Nara is quite... skilled in keeping a low profile,” Kabel said. “She should be able to supply all of our needs. I look forward to our... palaver.” He smiled again. “Master Tor, I am forever in your debt.”

“It was the least I could do,” Tor said.

Kabel led them out into the courtyard – quite confusing the two guards who were still standing duty there (Kabel promised to explain things to them later). Then they made their farewells and left.

### **BACK AT THE MANSION AGAIN**

Returning to the Nibeck Street mansion, Tee and Tor met up with the others and filled them in on the situation. They all readily agreed to return to Pythoness House for dinner the next day and listen to Kabel’s proposals.

Tee, having business in the city, left the rest of them to return to their vigil in the Banewarrens. On the walk back towards the excavated cave, the discussion turned towards what Dominic should do: Denounce Rehobath or continue keeping as low a profile as possible?

“So what is Vehthyl telling you to do?” Elestra asked.

“Vehthyl has nothing to say about it,” Dominic quipped.

“What about that other saint?” Elestra said.

Dominic was getting uncomfortable with her cavalier attitude towards the whole matter. He still wasn’t sure what he thought about being a saint or the “Chosen of Vehthyl” or whatever, so he wasn’t prepared for her to be so familiar with the idea of it. “Do you mean the Star of Itor?”

“Yeah. What was it he said to you? That you should follow your heart? What is your heart saying?”

“I... I don’t think I know,” Dominic said.

“I guess it’s a question of where your loyalties lie,” Ranthir said.

“I don’t know that, either,” Dominic said.

“We may not know which side is right,” Tor said. “But I think we know which side is *wrong*.”



# SESSION 32 – ENTHRALLED IN OLDTOWN

December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 18<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

When Tee returned shortly after noon, the group retrenched its plans. They had already decided to meet with Sir Kabel for dinner that evening and they now resolved to use that meeting to lay out a complete strategy for dealing with Rehobath, the arrival of Kirian Ylestos, the affairs of the Order of the Dawn, and the decisions facing Dominic.

This, however, left them with several hours of empty time to fill. Ranthir and Elestra had a variety of minor chores that they thought they might be able to pursue (the writing of magical scrolls, the gathering of information, and so forth), but then Tee proposed going to the project site of the cultists in Oldtown and laying siege to it.

This plan met with immediate and enthusiastic support. And, in short order, they found themselves approaching the building.

## SCOUT BY SNAKE

Elestra called upon the Spirit of the City to cloak her companions from sight, allowing them to easily slip into the alley next to the building. Calling upon the Spirit once more, she shifted into the shape of a snake. Tee, using her *boots of levitation*, carried her up to the window on the second floor that she'd used before and slipped Elestra inside.

Slithering under doorways, Elestra noted several cocoons scattered around the upper level – some of them still whole, others hatched.

In a room on the far side of the building there were two of the hatched cocoons. There were also two doors, one of which had been barricaded shut with an assortment of half-broken furniture.

Elestra decided to avoid the barricade for now, and instead slithered under the other door. In the center of the next room were two of the “venom-shaped thralls”.

Fortunately, the creatures appeared to be sleeping – they were hunched down on the floor and their long, beclawed arms were drawn in close. Elestra beat a hasty retreat back into the outer room.

She considered heading directly back to the window where Tee was waiting. It would certainly be the safest thing to do. But, on the other hand, it would be helpful if

she could finish scouting out the entirety of the second floor. Then they could form an accurate plan of action.

And so she slipped her way through the barricade and poked her head under the second door.

On the far side of the room there was a half-hatched cocoon. But extending from its broken shell there were writhing, gelatinous tentacles that groped grotesquely at the empty air. For a long moment, Elestra was captivated by the horrific sight of it. But then her reverie was broken by painful, stinging bites.

Wrenching her head out of the room, Elestra saw a swarming carpet of strangely deformed, red-and-black beetles pouring out of one of the hatched cocoons in the outer room. She had been literally overwhelmed by the outer edge of the swarm.

She fled back towards Tee with the chaos beetles biting and stinging her as she went. Tee, seeing her plight, flung open the window and fired once into the mass of creatures. The blast had little effect, but it did cause the creatures to fall back long enough for Elestra – momentarily freed from their mass – to escape out of the window as Tee scooped her up.

Ranthir, seeing the panicked scene above, reacted quickly. With a wave of his hand the window slammed shut.

Mere moments after the window shut, Tee saw one of the venom-shaped thralls scurry into view – evidently awoken by the sounds of the swarming chaos beetles. Before it had a chance to notice them hovering outside of the window, however, Tee dropped out of sight and returned to the alley below.

## MELEE ON THE SECOND FLOOR

When they reached the ground, Elestra returned to human form. She quickly described what she had seen to the others. Since the second floor was so sparsely populated, they decided to quickly mop up the minimal opposition before the riled up chaos beetles alerted everything in the building to their presence.

Levitating back up, however, Tee found the window Ranthir had shut swarming with the chaos beetles – the entire surface a churning, chitinous mass. She blanched. *Disgusting...*

“Did we ever figure out why the bug-things were called venom-shaped thralls?” Elestra asked.

“Because they’re poisonous?” Tor ventured.

“But *venom-shaped*...” Dominic said.

“They’re made out of venom?” Elestra suggested.



Tee, meanwhile, was circling around to the western side of the building. There she found another window, this one looking out over the rear alley. Peeking through it she saw one of the thralls patrolling the hallway leading to the stairs. And there was another of the black cocoons attached to the far wall. But it would have to do. She eased her way up to the roof, tied off her rope, and lowered it to the others below.

Returning to the window, Tee eased it open and slipped inside. She slid in behind the banister of the stairs. From her hiding place there, she waited for Agnarr to reach the window. Then, once the patrolling thrall's back was turned, she gave the signal: Agnarr leapt through the window, silently rolled to his feet directly behind the thrall, and then gave his familiar battlecry: **FOR THE GLORY!**

As the flaming greatsword bit deep into the creature's chitinous hide, acidic ichor sprayed from the wound and oozed down its side. Agnarr's arms burned at its touch.

The thrall whirled with a hideous, chattering hiss that echoed through the upper level of the ruined apartment complex. Tee, timing her move perfectly, circled it in the opposite direction and buried her sword in its back. It howled its hiss again, its serrated beak and claws going into a furious flurry at Agnarr's expense.

Agnarr was forced back a step by the thing's furious onslaught. "They're bigger than we thought!" he shouted over his shoulder.

But then Tor, who had scrambled through the window behind them, stepped up and beheaded the creature with a single smooth stroke. Its head went bouncing down the length of the hall... but as it passed over the cocoon at the far end of the hall, a thrall-claw suddenly burst forth from the purplish-black mass and impaled it in mid-air.

"Oh shit..." Tee turned towards it and drew her dragon pistol. But as she prepared to fire, she saw – through one of the gaping holes in the wall – the chattering mass of the chaos swarm sweeping towards her like an ambulatory carpet. "Oh shit!" She swung her pistol in that direction and fired.

Her blasts had little effect, but then Ranthir stepped forward, lowered his hands, and bathed the creatures in flame. Unfortunately, they kept coming. Elestra, calling on her own magical might, dropped a ball of roiling fire into their midst, but the creatures swarmed around it and clambered up Ranthir's legs – leaving hideous red welts in their wake.

Ranthir screamed. But then Elestra swung the ball of fire back into the midst of the swarm and, this time, the flames shattered the swarm's hivemind, sending the desultory remnants scattering into the corners of the room.

Tor went racing past them and plunged his sword into the hatching cocoon – but to no avail. The half-dozen

claws of the creature continued ripping their way to freedom.

Tee dropped her dragon pistol and drew her bow, wanting its greater accuracy. As the newborn thrall ripped its way free from the cocoon, Tee loosed her shot – placing the arrow straight through the emerging creature's eye.

With a flip of her hand, Elestra engulfed the thrall's head in a ball of the flame. And then Tee shot again, her arrow ripping through its second eye and bursting through the back of its skull – leaving a slightly flaming arrow flicker in the wall at the center of a splash of green ichor and black brain. The creature slumped forward over the edge of the cocoon.

Meanwhile, another of the thralls – the second of those Elestra had seen before – had burst through the door on the far side of the room. Agnarr moved to engage it and Ranthir quickly scurried in that direction. Laying his hand on the barbarian's back, he released a sharp burst of arcane energy. Agnarr grew and grew and grew... finally reaching thirteen feet in height.

In a panic, the venom-shaped thrall scuttled backwards – its flashing claws and beak lashing Agnarr, but doing little real harm. Agnarr drove it back and then cut it in ichorous twain.

### **TIP-TOEING THROUGH THE TULIPS**

Ranthir and Tee could both feel the venom of the chaos beetle swarm burning in their blood. As its effects grew worse, their limbs began to shake uncontrollably. Dominic was able to help Tee, but they lacked the proper resources to fully cure Ranthir (who was left shaking with a severe palsy).

Tor wanted to finish their sweep of the upper level as quickly as possible, convinced that anything on the lower level of the apartment building must already be aware of them. He moved into the next room, verified it was empty, and started heading towards the barricaded door.

But then, on the ceiling, he spotted an effervescent patch of violet-colored slime. It looked... unpleasant.

Since Agnarr was thirteen feet tall (and stooping even in the high, vaulted ceilings of these ruined apartments), Tor called him over to take a close look at the patch of slime – and deal with it if necessary.

But as Agnarr cut through the room at the center of the complex, the floor suddenly buckled beneath him – plunging him down to the first floor in a loud, splintering crash of broken wood.

Looking around, Agnarr saw the problem: Several support walls had been completely destroyed and there were several broken floor beams. He tried climbing back up to the second floor, but the acid-eaten floorboards broke beneath his weight a second time and dropped him back down again.

“I’m just going to stay down here,” Agnarr said, heading towards the far door of the room he’d fallen into. “Tip-toe... through the tulips...”

### ENTER THE CULTIST

Tee, who had taken up a position at the top of the staircase to serve as a look-out, heard a door open below. She snuck down the stairs and looked down the central hall on the first level... just in time to see someone disappear around the far corner of the hall into the front entryway.

Signaling silently to the others above to follow her, Tee made her own way down the hall. Agnarr, oblivious to all of this, continued poking around through the largely deserted complex of rooms he’d dropped into.

Tee peeked around the corner into the entryway: One of the doors on the northern side of the room was slightly ajar. She took a few moments to consider her options while the others crept down the hall behind.

But before she could reach a decision, Agnarr finished exploring the rooms he was in and emerged – loudly – into the entryway through a different door.

As he did so, the slightly ajar door burst open and two venom-shaped thralls charged through. Agnarr took half a step back and drew his sword to defend himself—

But at that moment, a beam of scintillating energy shot out from a second door – only slightly cracked – and struck the barbarian in the chest, paralyzing him completely. Agnarr was completely defenseless as one of the thralls thrust its lance-like claw through his chin and up into his skull, killing him instantly.

Ranthir – seeing Agnarr fall – threw a fireball into the entryway. It exploded spectacularly. Tee seized the opportunity to tumble past the two large thralls. Bursting through the door from which the beam of energy had come, she saw the spellcasting cultist backing away. With a single bounding leap she was on him, viciously cutting him across the chest.

The cultist fumbled a potion of healing to his lips and raised his other hand to cast a spell – but then his eyes grew suddenly large as a cocoon behind Tee suddenly belched forth a swarm of chaos beetles.

Tee ducked back out of the room and slammed the door shut. The last thing she saw were the beetles sweeping over the cultist, biting and stinging at him repeatedly.

Tor, meanwhile, had led the charge against the two venom-shaped thralls. They had been badly injured by Ranthir’s fire ball, and Tor was making short work of them.

With the entryway cleared, Dominic came around the corner, looked at Agnarr’s grievous wound, and sighed heavily.

### EXIT THE CULTIST

As the last thrall dropped and Dominic knelt by Agnarr’s side, however, the sound of breaking glass came from the room Tee had left the spellcaster in.

“He’s jumped out the window!”

Tor and Ranthir rushed outside into the street. A moment later, the cultist came stumbling out of the alley, a vicious cut on his arm sending blood streaming down his arm. Seeing them he spat. “Chaos shall eat your hearts!”

The cultist raised his hands to cast a spell... and Ranthir undid the casting before it had even begun.

Tee came through the door, dropped her sword, and drew her bow.

The cultist yelped and turned to run, but Tor chased him down and tackled him to the cobblestones. Getting his arms wrapped around the cultist’s neck, he began to choke the life out of him.

Tee, glancing at the stares they were receiving from the others in the street, quickly trotted back inside – collecting her weapons as she went: They were going to have to hurry.

“The Brotherhood... will... never...” The cultist slipped into unconsciousness. Tor grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back inside.

### SHAPED BY VENOM

As Tee came back inside, she saw that Agnarr was shaking his head gingerly – Dominic had resealed the bond between his soul and body. She moved past them, performing a quick sweep of the rest of the apartment’s building’s lower level.

There were a few more nests and cocoons, along with some patches of the dangerous violet slime, but there were only two points of true interest: First, a small room near the back of the building where the floorboards had been broken from below. A ladder leaned against the side of this hole and the smell of raw sewage drafted up from below.

Second, a locked door.

By this time, Tor had dragged the unconscious cultist back into the entryway.

“The watch will be here soon,” Elestra said.

“Yes,” Tee said, coming back from her sweep. “We should move quickly.”

“Where are we going?” Dominic asked.

“Down the hole.”

But first they wanted to find out what was behind the locked door.

With Agnarr backing her up, Tee easily picked the cheap lock on the apartment door. Swinging it open revealed a room cluttered with various papers and alchemical equipment. Near the middle of the room there was a large, wooden table that had been outfitted with

crude shackles. Strange stains dotted and pitted the surface of the table.

Of more immediate concern, of course, was the venom-shaped thrall crouched low before the door on the opposite side of the room. With his demesne disturbed, the thrall attacked.

Agnarr shoved Tee out of the way and faced off against it. Under the brunt of the creature's assault, he was pushed back against the far wall of the hall, but then the vicious thrust of his counter-attack skewered it.

Tee went over to the door that the creature had been guarding and found it, predictably, locked. But it was no more difficult than the last one. Swinging it open, however, she found an even more disturbing sight: Five prisoners shackled hand-and-foot to the floor.

Tor, nursing a sick suspicion, crossed to a cocoon that was emmeshed in one corner of the hall. With a single slice of his sword, he cut it open... and a vaguely humanoid form tumbled out in a gush of acidic liquid.

"Venom-shaped... Shaped by venom." Horror and disgust were mixed evenly in his voice.

Tee moved to free the nearest prisoner. They immediately panicked. "No! Not me! Where are you taking me?"

"It's okay. It's okay, I'm here to help."

As Tee worked to undo their shackles, Agnarr headed back down the hall and grabbed the unconscious spellcaster from where they'd left him in the entryway. He wanted to keep a close eye on that one.

Questioning the prisoners they quickly determined that they had been brought here only a few days ago. There had originally been eight of them, but the cultists had been taking them away one at a time. Three of them had been kidnapped from around the city (mostly straight off the streets), but the other two reported being sold through a black market slave trade of some sort running through the Teeth of Light. And one of these reported seeing a temple with a statue of a rat-shaped man in it, leading Tor and Elestra to conclude that the followers of the Rat God must be involved, as well.

## ENTER ARVETH

But what were they going to do with the prisoners? Tee definitely didn't want to be responsible for them. And she knew that the building was being watched. They eventually decided to give each of the prisoners 10 gold pieces, told them to cover their faces, run for it, and get as far away from here as they could as quickly as possible.

But as they gathered them up to lead them out the front door, Elestra and Ranthir – who were still standing in the hall – suddenly whirled towards the front door. Two people had just come in: A blond woman and a thuggish man.

The woman hissed. "Kill them."

Then she drank a potion and disappeared.

Tee quickly shouted at the prisoners to head upstairs – there was a window with a rope: "Get out. Get out as fast as you can. Go!"

Tor rallied the prisoners and led them upstairs. Ranthir, meanwhile, dropped a thick web into the entryway – it clearly caught the thug and he hoped it had caught the invisible woman, as well.

What they couldn't see through the thick web, however, was that both the thug and the invisible woman had ripped their way out of the web, gone back through the front door, and were circling the building.

Tor had barely reached the rope on the second floor when an axe thrown from below thunked into the windowsill next to him. He ducked back... and the former prisoners panicked, scattering through the upper level – some cowering in corners, another getting ambushed by a patch of violent slime that fell from the ceiling, a third trying to climb out of a different window only to fall with a scream into the cobbled alley below.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Tee and Ranthir were rapidly gathering up the papers and alchemical equipment from the laboratory.

Between the axe and the panicking prisoners, Tor didn't notice the subtle shifting of the rope as the invisible woman climbed it. She appeared suddenly before him as her knife plunged into his shoulder.

Grunting heavily, Tor dragged her through the window with her dagger still buried in him and then slammed his sword into her. She crumpled in the corner.

By the time he'd yanked the dagger out, however, the axe-throwing thug had reached the window, as well. The thug took one swing with his axe – which Tor easily ducked – and then was run through the heart with the electric-arc of Tor's return thrust.

Tor turned to Dominic. "Heal the woman, then we'll haul her downstairs and ask some questions."

While Dominic did that, Tor and Tee gathered up the rest of the prisoners. One of them, unfortunately, had been killed by the violet slime. The one who had fallen out of the window had broken his leg, but Elestra was able to heal that. Then they sent them on their way. "Get as far from here as you can."

While Agnarr and Dominic kept an eye on the prisoners – making sure that they got away safely – the others quickly mopped up the various nests and cocoons left scattered throughout the complex, making sure that the cultists' work here was completely destroyed. They left only the barricaded room with its dangerous, gelatinous tentacles, which they resolve to deal with before going down the hole.

They reconvened on the first floor. The woman (who Tee identified as Arveth, who had recruited her into the Brotherhood) and the spellcaster were traussed up in the manacles that had formerly held the prisoners.

They were in for a rude awakening.

# SESSION 33 – MAGGOTS AND RATSBANE

December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 18<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

With the two cultists securely manacled, they went upstairs to deal with the tentacular horror of translucent protoplasm.

Tor and Agnarr removed the barricade of furniture from in front of the door. Then Tor kicked open the door and stepped through.

Its abode disturbed, the creature surged out of the broken cocoon and lurched its way across the room. As it came, it spat a viscous glob of acid spittle towards Tor's face. Tor narrowly dodged the spittle and then sinuously whipped back the other way as a pseudopod lashed out towards him.

Having kept his balance despite his acrobatic dodging, Tor lunged forward with his own blade. But the creature burst apart – opening a gap through which Tor's sword passed harmlessly.

As the creature reformed its mass, however, Agnarr slipped into the room as well, and cut down at it. The barbarian's blade ripped into it, leaving an acrid stench as it burned its way into the heart of the creature.

This sent the creature into a frenzied rage. It spat venom randomly in all directions, catching Dominic in the eyes, and then lashed out at Agnarr with a half dozen tentacles. Agnarr managed to weave his way past a few of them, but the sheer mass of the attack overwhelmed him – four of the pseudopods struck him and latched on. These clung to his flesh and then, using them like anchors, the creature hauled itself towards him. Before anyone could react, the creature had engulfed him.

Tee tumbled into the room and stabbed at it, hoping to lure it off of Agnarr. It spat venom in response. She was struck in the face and cried out in pain, trying to wipe the blinding, burning goo out of her eyes.

Ranthir, seeing Agnarr's plight, hurled the familiar spell of enlargement at him. At its touch, Agnarr literally grew his way out of the engulfing creature. It ripped painfully free from his body, leaving trails of blood to pour down onto the floor.

The creature retreated from the now enormous Agnarr, spitting venom into his eyes as it went. Crying out from the literally blinding pain, Agnarr swung his greatsword—

--and struck Tee! The blow cut her down where she stood.

But the wide swing also had the effect of forcing the creature back into the corner of the room, from which – with no place to flee – it propelled itself forward again, latching two of its large pseudopods onto Agnarr's chest. As the others stared in horror, it began sucking the blood

from Agnarr's body – sending misty trails of crimson fluid pulsing through its amoeba-like body.

The barbarian, still fighting blind, raised his sword back and struck mightily at the floor directly beneath the creature. The unsupported floorboards splintered beneath the strength of the blow, and the creature fell through the hole. It tried to drag Agnarr down after it, but Agnarr's prodigious strength held and the tentacles ripped free.

Dominic, still blind, cried out in fright: "I think the floor is collapsing! We need to get out of here now!"

Agnarr's vision, however, was clearing now, and he could see the creature still writhing on the lower level. With a grunt he leapt up and plunged down through the hole, driving all of his enlarged weight (more than two tons) onto the creature.

With a squalmous squelch, the creature burst – spattering eddies of protoplasmic grotesquerie through the room.

Agnarr straightened up, poking his head back up onto the second floor. He saw Tee lying in a pool of her own blood. "What happened to Tee?"

His wounds were still bleeding badly, but Elestra was able to tend to that.

Dominic was regaining his own vision. "Ah!" he cried. "You weren't that big the last time I saw you... What happened to Tee?"

Dominic was able to heal Tee's wounds easily enough. With a grimace of pain she sat up.

"What happened to me?"

## DOWN THE SEWER HOLE

They were satisfied that they had done everything they could to cleanse the apartment complex of the horrific experiments that had been conducted there (albeit while wreaking massive property damage).

"Well, at least we didn't burn the place down."

"We did not burn down that house!" Tee insisted.

"What should we do now?" Tor asked.

"We should hurry," Tee said. "It's been at least ten minutes since the fight broke out on the street."

"Right," Elestra said. "The guard will be coming."

"Or more cultists," Tee said.

"Yes. That would be worse," Dominic said.

They collected their two cultist prisoners (replacing the manacles with knotted ropes firmly tied by Tor) and dragged them over to the hole in the back corner of the first floor. Climbing down the rope ladder they found

themselves, as they had predicted, in the sewers. Tee came last, dragging a rug over the hole behind her to help conceal its presence, cutting the rope ladder, and then floating down using her *boots of levitation*.

They were standing at the intersection of four major sewer passages. Narrow walkways of beslimed stone ran along a wide, slowly flowing channel of raw sewage. Agnarr examined the ground and determined that the walkways to the north and west had recently seen a great deal of traffic. They suspected that was the direction the cultists would come from, so they decided to take the prisoners a little way down the southern passage instead.

Quickly searching them, they found several carefully folded and oiled silk, each of which contained some sort of alchemical substance (which Tee guessed was poison). They also turned up a thick sheath of research notes in a hidden pocket of the spellcaster's robes. They took the time to study these and the other papers that they had recovered from the alchemical laboratory upstairs.

### THE BOOK OF VENOM'S TRUTH



This small, gray-covered volume is a paean to all manners of vile activities – drug abuse, sexual perversions, acts of cruelty and violence – treated with the reverence of holy ritual.

In totality, the book appears to be a cult manual for the “Brotherhood of Venom”. They worship chaos, speaking of the “slow swarm of the Elder Brood” – by which they appear to mean the slow, methodical, and (above all) secret sowing of chaos and dissolution. They perceive ordered society as a curse and seek to undermine it through a slow and steady erosion of disintegration.

Entire passages are given over to describing the basic dynamics of power and how to subvert them – serving as a generic manual on how to infiltrate the highest levels of a society through its most important individuals.

The cult prefers the clandestine. They are patient and careful, never wanting the authorities or other potential opponents to know they exist.

A name is scrawled on the inside back cover: BROTHERHOOD OF PTOLUS

### THE MASKS OF DEATH



This folder of blood-red leather contains a collection of associated parchments which appear to serve as something of a cult manual for a group calling itself the “Brotherhood of the Deathmantle”, the Death's Grimace, or the Tears of Blood.

The cult serves chaos through the worship of murder and slaughter. The more chaos and fear each murder creates, the greater the veneration. Mass murder – the slaying of a whole town, a whole city, or a whole nation – is their ultimate goal.

Each cultist wears a death's head mask, usually of copper or bronze but occasionally of iron painted skull-white. The cult frequently associates with the undead, and there is even the suggestion that the most faithful among them are undead themselves. They venerate graveyards as holy places and speak of the end of days as “the grave of all worlds”.

Much of the book is given over to the painstaking detailing of the instruments of death: The making of poisons, the care of weapons, and so forth.

Some of the manual is given over to what they would consider the ultimate religious ecstasy: The death of a god.

### ALCHEMICAL NOTES ON ASKARA

These notes detail the creation of a magical poison referred to as *askara*. The notes appear to have been frequently altered, apparently in an effort to perfect the process. The effects of the poison are not described.

The notes appear to combine alchemical and mystical knowledge credited to both the Ebon Hand cultists and the Brothers of Venom.

### **OBSERVATIONAL NOTES ON VENOM-SHAPED THRALLS**

These are detailed notes on the effects of a poison referred to as *askara*. The poison is designed to mutate its victim in a prolonged misery that lasts for weeks or even months before the victim dies. During this time, however, the victim's mind becomes pliable – effectively becoming a slave of those administering the poison.

When victims are injected with *askara*, they weaken until they collapse. Within twelve hours, their bodies secrete a dark, syrupy substance that covers them and then hardens, forming a black, spherical cocoon. Within another twenty-four hours, the victim emerges from the cocoon, mutated into a hideous amalgam of an insect-like creature and their former selves.

A large section of these notes detail the perfection of a solution that must be applied to the cocoons during the gestation period. Without that solution, the resulting creature “lacks cohesive physical form”. This solution appears to have been difficult to perfect, and was reached only after “Wuntad assured us access to the teachings of the Deathmantles”.

Other notes refer to “unexpected activity in the post-emergent cocoons” including a reference to “violet slime” and “secondary spontaneous cellular generation”, but these are not particularly detailed.

### **THE INTERROGATION OF ARVETH**

After briefly discussing what they wanted to ask the prisoners and how they would go about interrogating them, they started with Arveth. Agnarr grabbed her by the ankles and held her upside down above the turgid sewer sludge. Tor slapped her awake.

She woke up angry.

“Who are you who dare to defy the powers of chaos?” She scanned their faces, but when she came to Tee’s she blanched.

“That’s right,” Tee smiled with vicious glee.

“You bitch!”

Tee smiled and shrugged. “Where’s Wuntad?”

Arveth’s eyes filled with confusion. “Who?”

Tee studied her carefully for a moment, and then suddenly her face broke into a large grin. “Oh! You don’t know *anything*, do you?”

“You insignificant worm! You’re not worthy of knowing the secrets of chaos!”

“Wrong answer.” Tee signaled to Agnarr, who dipped her into the channel of sludge. She came back up spluttering and gagging.

Tee pulled out the thick stack of papers they had collected. “Did you mean these secrets of chaos? Because I know these secrets. For secrets they don’t seem very well secured.”

Arveth glared. “You came so close to greatness.”

Tee laughed in her face. “Let’s try something simple. Who do you work for?”

“Dilar.”

“The centaur? Okay. What else can you tell me?”

Arveth hesitated.

“I guess you really don’t know anything. Well, in that case...” Tee raised her hand in Agnarr’s direction. The barbarian began lowering Arveth back towards the sewer sludge. Arveth panicked.

“I know things! I know!”

Tee held up her hand to stop Agnarr. “Like what?”

“There are at least eight people who come in and out of this building.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do they do here?”

Arveth hesitated again. Tee laughed. “You really don’t know anything. Did you even tell anyone before you came rushing in?”

“Yes. They’ll be here soon.”

She spat the words. But she’d hesitated for just a moment. Tee laughed again. “You didn’t! And you just tried to lie to me again.” She leaned in close and whispered in her ear. “You came *so* close to greatness...”

Tee gave a signal. Arveth had just a moment to struggle, certain that she was about to die, before Agnarr slammed her head into the wall of the sewer, knocking her unconscious again. Dominic took a moment to make sure that the wound wasn’t lethal and then they turned their attention to the spellcaster.

### **THE INTERROGATION OF URANIK**

“I’ve seen him before,” Ranthir said. “He was one of the Venom cultists who killed the cultist from the Brotherhood of the Ebon Hand.”

“The one you saw while using clairvoyance?” Tee asked. Ranthir nodded.

They blinded the cultist and Agnarr dangled him above the sewer sludge. Elestra slapped him awake.

“Whoever you are, you’re already dead.” His voice was possessed of a cruel, sardonic tone.

Elestra laughed at him.

Tee ignored him. “Do you know where you are?”

“You blindfold me and then ask me where I am?”

The man sneered.

At Tee’s signal, Agnarr hit him across the face. Hard.



The man licked blood from his lip. “All right. I’ll play along. Judging by the smell, I’d guess we’re in the sewers.”

“That’s right. We found our way down here.”

“You found a huge hole in the floor? Congratulations on your powers of perception.”

Agnarr hit him again.

“What do you want to know?”

“Let’s start with your name”

“Uranik.”

“So you can tell the truth.” Tee smiled through her bluff. “That’s right. We know who you are. Now, tell us about the Brotherhood of Ptolus.”

The man laughed. “It’s a fiction. A front for the Brotherhood of Venom.”

“Which you belong to.”

“That’s right.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Being questioned by amateurs.”

Tee wasn’t amused. She signaled Agnarr, who lowered him and began swinging the top of his head through the sewer sludge.

“Stop it.” Uranik managed to keep his sardonic tone, but there was a slight edge of tension in his voice.

“Pull him up,” Tee said. “Hmm. You seem to have gotten a little dirty. Now, I’ve got one of your fancy pieces of cloth here – the one with the purple liquid on it. I suppose I could just wipe your face clean with it...”

“This isn’t necessary,” Uranik said. “If you let me live and let me go, I’ll tell you whatever you want.” He was outwardly calm, but it was clear that Tee had rattled him.

Tee considered it for a moment. “Dunk him so that we can talk.”

Uranik opened his mouth to protest... which was a mistake.

While he gurgled they quickly talked it over. Elestra didn’t like the idea of letting him go – unlike Arveth, Uranik had been directly responsible for the atrocities performed in the apartment building above them. But the rest of them decided to accept his terms.

Agnarr hauled him back up and they sat him down on the ledge. Tee quizzed him about the work that had been done in the apartment complex, and by comparing those answers to the papers they had retrieved she confirmed that he was being truthful... about that at least.

They learned that the cultists had broken into the apartment complex and started their experiments on the residents. When they ran out of residents, they started bringing in slaves from the Temple of the Rat God.

“And what’s down here in the sewer?”

“The Temple of Deep Chaos,” Uranik said. “It was founded by Wuntad.”

They quizzed him about Wuntad. He had apparently left the Temple here about a month and a half ago and Uranik hadn’t seen him since, although he believed that

Illadras – who was now in charge of the Temple – was in contact with him. Uranik claimed to know nothing about Pythoness House.

“You work here with the Ebon Hand?”

“And others.”

“So why did you kill the other priest?”

“Reggaloch? He was planning to betray us.”

“And yet he’s the one who’s dead.”

“There were two of us and only one of him.”

“How do you get into the Temple?”

He told them of two entrances – an iron door down the western tunnel and a secret entrance up the northern tunnel. If they went through the iron door, they would enter a long stone hall. He described one of the walls of this hall as being illusionary, and said that there were four priests who stood as guardians and could look into the hall through a peephole.

“And through the secret entrance?”

“There’s a tunnel with two sentries on duty. If you can get past them, you should be able to come up behind the priests through their quarters. There’ll be a staircase down—“

“We’re going to leave you here. When you get out of your ropes, don’t try to warn your friends. We’ll make sure they know you’re a traitor. And we both know what you do with traitors.”

Agnarr knocked him unconscious. Tor loosened his ropes... slightly.

## SECRET DOORS AND SENTRIES

“We should kill them,” Elestra said.

“What?” Tee said. “We said we’d let them go.”

“You saw what they were doing to those people,” Elestra said. “They’re evil.”

“And we’re not,” Tee said.

But it was clear that Elestra didn’t want to let them go – Uranik because of what he was responsible for and Arveth because she could so easily identify Tee.

“She doesn’t know my real name,” Tee said.

“But she’s seen all of us,” Elestra argued. “It won’t be hard to track down six people matching our descriptions... not with Dominic being the Chosen of Vehthyl.”

“We could just cut out her tongue,” Tor suggested.

Tee was shocked. She thought of Tor as the moral center of the group, and now she was taken aback by the bloodthirstiness of them both.

Tee prevailed and they left the two cultists unconscious where they lay. (“Cutting out their tongue never works anyway,” Dominic said.) They also decided to head through the secret door.

But as soon as they headed down the sewer tunnel, Elestra tried to double back and kill the prisoners. But she wasn’t sly enough for Tee – in fact, the effort was so clumsy that none of them took it seriously. Tee called her

back and kept an eye on her until they were through the door.

Finding the door was easy enough now that they knew where to look. Beyond it they could see where the original line of the sewer had run, although it had clearly been diverted into new construction long ago. The reason for the diversion, perhaps, was the large sinkhole-like collapse that lay just beyond the new construction. A ladder leaning against the side of the sinkhole led down to an older passage of some sort beneath the sewer line.

Tee climbed down this ladder and scouted ahead, coming quickly to an intersection. She peeked around the corner, careful not to make a sound.

Unfortunately, the ratmen sentries had been warned by the light of the sunrod that Elestra was carrying. They took two quick shots at Tee's head with a pair of dragon rifles as she ducked back around the corner.

Tee paused for only a moment and then rounded the corner again, running down the hall and firing with her dragon pistol as she went. She caught one of the ratmen in the shoulder in a blast of scorched fur.

The others, hearing the shots of both ratmen and Tee, started jumping down from the top of the sinkhole. Unfortunately, the broken floor of the passage below proved treacherous. Most of them fell haphazardly in the attempt.

The two ratmen were standing in a T-intersection at the far end of the hall. They were firing back at Tee now, but as she came closer they suddenly ducked behind opposite corners. Tee cursed, certain that they were going to reach the other defenders of the temple and raise the alarm before she could stop them.

But Agnarr was already scrambling back to his feet and racing down the hallways. He passed Tee easily, despite her considerable head start, and then slid down the last teen feet of the passage – right past the ratman who had scarcely finished turning to run. Before the ratman could scamper down the hall, draw a weapon, or even turn back to face him, Agnarr had decapitated him.

The other ratman squeaked and retreated back towards a dead end. Tee rounded the corner and put an arrow through his eye.

As the others caught up with them, Tee knelt down to search the corpses. The ratmen had been carrying little of interest, except for the dragon rifles they had been firing. These were worn and badly damaged, marked with the clear patina of age.

"They're not chaositech, are they?" Elestra asked worriedly.

"No," Tee said. "They're just very old."

They continued into the complex. Several side passages had collapsed or partially collapsed, but they eventually came to a door of thick, sturdy oak. Tee picked a lock on this and they passed into a room that seemed equal parts meditative study and bedchamber. It was mostly empty, with only a straw mat in the middle

of the floor. On the walls hung various tapestries (which Ranthir identified as each depicting great wizards of the past). There was a door directly opposite the one through which they'd entered. At the far end of the room there was a small wooden bookshelf containing a dozen assorted volumes. These, of course, caught the particular attention Ranthir, who was also delighted to discover that one of them was a thick tome of spells.

Ranthir was not able to study the spellbook completely, but the illustrations of eyes being burnt away with acid were enough to leave him concerned.

## WATCHMEN OF THE UPPER TEMPLE

They headed out the opposite door and found themselves in another hall with doors to both their left and right. Arbitrarily choosing the door to the left, Tee picked the lock. Agnarr kicked it open.

The room beyond was extremely untidy, with a fetid smell that seemed to permeate everything. The simple furnishings were crude and ill-kept. A weasel-faced man lying on the far bed jerked awake as the door crashed open.

Agnarr hesitated for a moment, uncertain whether the man might be a prisoner or not (the door, after all, had been locked and the room stank). But then he noticed that there was a sword laying on the bed and the man had a dragon pistol strapped to his side.

Agnarr charged with Tee on his heels. They hoped to silence the man before he could say anything, but he dove adroitly off the bed and rolled to his feet, firing his dragon pistol. He started shouting for help.

Tor and Dominic, still in the hall, turned and headed for the door at the far end of the hall, throwing their weight against it.

Tee, meanwhile, circled to the side of the weasel-faced man. Her blade darted here and there, keeping the man's blade completely engaged while Agnarr came up from the other side and delivered the killing blow.

Someone threw themselves against the door Dominic and Tor were propping themselves against. It barely budged. They glanced at each and made a quick, unspoken decision. Dominic stepped away and Tor, timing things perfectly, yanked the door open at precisely the right moment.

A young elf woman – ebon-skinned like Shilukar – came stumbling through, thrown off-balance by the sudden disappearance of the door she had been planning to throw herself against.

Dominic and Tor were quick to take advantage – the former's mace crushing her upper arm and Tor's sword cutting deep into her thigh. She stumbled further down the hall, shouting over her shoulder. "Theral! There are six of them! Grealdan's dead!"

Dominic looked through the open door and spotted Theral – the Brother of Venom that Tee had seen

discovering Reggaloch's body – beginning to cast a spell. He promptly slammed the door shut.

Almost simultaneously, with a powerful sweep of his sword, Tor caught the dark elf woman in the side of the face – his sword cut through one cheek, passed through her mouth, and out the other side. Her severed jaw fell to the floor and her body followed after it.

They took a moment to collect themselves and then threw open the door again.

## HELL HOUND AT THE DOOR

A hell hound was at the door!

Like the ones that had attacked them at Pythoness House, the hound's skin was cooled lava and its gaping mouth was a lake of fire that gouted a cone of flame down the length of the hall.

Beyond the hound was a massive chamber, its walls painted in horrific combinations of kaleidoscopic color. On the far side of the hall they could see a set of wide stairs leading down. To one side of the room stood Theral. At first there appeared to be six others on the other side of the room, but then they realized that there was only one man there – Vocaetun, the cultist with an ebon hand tattooed on the front of his neck – his form blurred and duplicated a half dozen times.

Tor and Agnarr squared off against the hell hound, rapidly reducing it to a pile of slag-like magma.

Theral, seeing the body of the dark elf woman and watching the fighters demolishing his hound, cursed and then shouted to Vocaetun. "Hold them here while I fetch the damn rats!"

Theral ran off down a side corridor. Vocaetun glared at his retreating back.

As the hell hound finally collapsed, Vocaetun waved a wand in Tor's direction and then disappeared. Tor felt his eyes burning as they filled with acid.

Elestra leaped over the magma pile and headed towards the hall that Theral had dashed down. Rounding the corner she skidded to a stop.

"There's a wall!"

"Don't believe it!" Tee shouted, remembering the illusionary wall that Uranik had spoken of.

But Elestra hesitated. She didn't want to throw herself into the unknown without the others to back her up.

Then Tee screamed.

Vocaetun had reappeared and hit her with an *acidic curse* that turned her own tears to caustic acid, having somehow circled around in the meditative chamber behind them. But none of them could see that – not even Tee, who was now clawing at her burning eyes.

Ranthir, seeing Tee's reaction, knew that it must have come from behind them. "Over here! Tee's being attacked!"

The others closed in on Vocaetun, but between the mirrored images dancing around his figure, the blurring displacement that seemed to cheat their vision, the blinding attacks from his wand, and the tight quarters, things quickly got confused and cramped.

Vocaetun mounted a fighting retreat back across the meditative chambers into the hall on the far side and then through a secret door into the kaleidoscopic hall. He had been hurt and was clearly beginning to panic. Once he was through the secret door, he broke into a pell-mell run across the hall – heading towards the stairs on the far side.

## RATSBANE

As they pushed their own way through the secret door to pursue him, however, a carpet of dire rats poured through the illusionary wall.

There were dozens of them, but Agnarr just smiled grimly. "Okay, I think we've got this." Twirling his blade slowly he moved forward.

But the rats were followed by a platoon of ratmen, all armed with dragon rifles. Several of them fired at Agnarr as they entered and the sickly-sweet scent of burning flesh filled the air.

Dominic reflexively laid his hands on Agnarr and the burn marks softened away. The barbarian was already bellowing with rage and a moment later, gritting his teeth, he charged. Tor followed in his wake with a rallying cry of his own. They cut a swath through the dire rats, trying to open a path to the rifle rats... but they were going to be too late. The riflers were coming into formation and lowering their guns for what was certain to be a lethal barrage.

But Ranthir, seeing what was happening, focused all of his energy. He had already cast one *fireball* that day, and the effort of trying to reforge the pathways of mystical force through his own mind and soul through sheer force of will was literally excruciating...

A ball of fire burst forth in the middle of the room, leaving in its wake a hillock of burnt ratflesh.

With a triumphant cry, Agnarr and Tor finished their swath of death through the dire rats and cut into the three rat riflers who were still standing. The riflers fell back before them with a desperate panic in their eyes. Theral and the only rat chieftain who had escaped the blaze, seeing their seeming triumph rendered instantly into desolation, turned and fled back through the illusionary wall.

## MAGGOTS' END

Tee and Elestra, meanwhile, dashed past the melee, hot on the heels of Vocaetun (who had disappeared down the stairs during the confusion). Tee forced him to turn and fight, dissipating one of his illusionary images in the

process. But with a wave of his wand he blinded her again.

He turned to run again. Seizing the moment, Elestra murmured a few words, called upon the Spirit of the City, and laid her hand on his back... to no seeming effect.

He dashed around the corner... and then there was a bone-chilling scream which ended in a hideous gurgling.

Tee, her vision clearing, glanced at Elestra and then rounded the corner.

Vocaetun lay on the stairs. His mouth was frothed with maggots, which were also ripping their way out of the skin on his arms and around his neck. He was dead.

They quickly searched his body, taking his wicked wand so that Ranthir could turn it to their own purposes, and then dragged the corpse back up into the kaleidoscopic hall. By the time they returned, Tor and Agnarr had finished mopping up the last of the rats and ratmen.

Dropping Vocaetun's corpse unceremoniously on the floor, Tee quickly searched the bodies of the others they had slain. On the weasel-faced man they found a note:

### LETTER TO GREALDAN

Brother Grealdan—

We have intercepted letters from Reggaloch to others in the Ebon Hand. They are planning to betray us. When the signal comes, be prepared to purify the cause of chaos. Be wary.

And now they were faced with a decision: Should they pursue Theral? Descend the stairs? Finish their explorations of this level of the temple? Or retreat before more reinforcements arrived?

# SESSION 34 – IN THE DUST OF THE OLD CITY

January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The 18<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

They decided to pursue Theral and the ratling west through the illusionary wall. On the other side they found a vast, open chamber – clearly of new construction, with walls, floor, and ceiling formed of dark stones laid in strange patterns. To the south there was a flight of stairs and to the west there was another hall leading out of the chamber.

Based on what Uranik had told them, they guessed that the stairs to the south would lead back to the sewers. They thought it likely that Theral might have fled in that direction. Or, if not, then they could quickly eliminate it as a possibility.

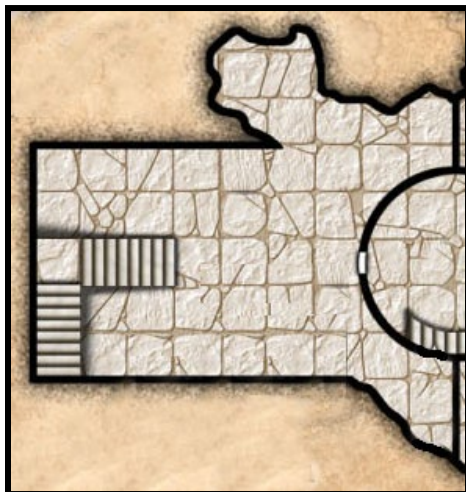
At the top of the short flight of stairs they found a rust- and grime-free door of iron. From this side it was obvious that the door had been rigged with a simple wire-based alarm bell. Tee snipped the wire on the crude mechanical device and then opened the door.

They'd been right: The door opened directly into the sewers. Agnarr studied the ground, but couldn't pick any clear or particular trail from the morass of tracks in the slime and muck of the walkway. If Theral had gone this way, he could be anywhere in Ptolus already.

They took the western hall, following it as it winded its way into a medium-sized chamber littered with garbage and feces. Amid piles of rotting refuse they could see, here and there, hollowed out rats' nests of various sizes and shapes.

Tee took one look at the disgusting muck and decided that she didn't want to waste her time poking through it.

"But we have to search!" Agnarr said with a grunt and started bull-headedly digging his way through the piles, sending various globs of filth flying into the air.



The others groaned at Agnarr's display, but then Tee's sharp eyes saw a folded piece of parchment suddenly tossed up into the air. Reaching out she snatched it.

A few minutes passed and Agnarr eventually gave up and turned back to them – his hands and forearms caked in a brown film of filth. "I guess there's nothing here."

Tee held up the letter.

## URNEST'S LETTER

You can assure Reggaloch that additional slaves will be sent to him within the week. We have become very interested to discover what our Brothers of Venom are doing that requires such a constant flow of common flock. We have asked Illadras, but she has told us not to concern ourselves with it. Be cautious, but discover what you can.

Urnest

## INTO THE OLD CITY

They were badly fatigued from their exertions over the past two hours and the spellcasters – particularly Ranthir – had almost completely depleted their mystic reserves.

But if they didn't push on, they would lose the advantage of surprise. They weren't sure what waited for them below – down the stairs that Vocaetun had attempted to flee – but they were certain that if they left they would find these halls freshly held against them when they returned.

And so down they went.

After turning many times, the old and worn stairs bottomed out into a large cavern. Pieces of fairly crude (and very old) masonry jutted out of the cavern walls here and there. The far side of the cavern ended in a wall of ancient clay bricks, out of which bulged a half-ruined tower that extended from roof to ceiling.

Ranthir recognized these ruins for what they were, and explained it to the others as they moved down onto the hard-packed dirt floor: These were the remains of the original city of Ptolus, founded by the great sorcerer who had apprenticed Danar and been destroyed by the Banelord. It was known that many such remnants of the ancient city could still be found, having been swallowed up figuratively by time and literally by the earth.

Tee left the others behind and crossed to the door in the wall of the tower. Agnarr followed, but not too closely.

Tee quickly ascertained that the door wasn't locked, but spent a few more moments performing a quick inspection for traps. She began to turn back towards the others to announce the all-clear—

And, with an implosion of sulphur-laced air, a dog-sized rat with flame spewing from its eye-sockets appeared directly behind her.

If she hadn't already started turning, she might have been caught completely off-guard. Instead, as the rat launched itself towards her, she was able to spin to one side – leaving the rat to thud loudly into the door behind her.

As the rat whirled back to her, Tee rolled onto her back and stabbed up through its neck. Almost simultaneously, Agnarr – who had come rushing forward – stabbed down through its head. Their blades crossed through its throat.

As the rat squalled a dying scream, Tee's sharp ears caught the soft murmurings of arcane chants coming from somewhere above them. But before she could shout a warning to the others, she was suddenly afflicted with a magical malaise that left her dazed.

Agnarr, seeing her eyes glaze over, frowned with concern. "Tee? Are you all right?"

### WEBS OF AMBUSH AND BETRAYAL

A hideous, spider-like creature with a human-like head and face dropped onto the floor next to Agnarr. It landed softly on its skittering legs, then raised its front claws and sent a bolt of lightning lancing across the cavern – scorching Tor and Dominic, who had just begun to charge across the cavern.

The creature turned back towards Agnarr, but it had underestimated the barbarian's speed. Agnarr's greatsword opened a gash along one side of the creature.

Tee, recovering from the enchantment that had been laid on her, stood up—

And the door behind her was swung open. Before she had a chance to turn, a sword sliced painfully into her side and sent her spinning to the floor in pain. Turning she saw Gavele – the cultist she had seen breaking up the fracas over Reggaloch's corpse – pulling back her blade with a grim smile.

Tor, scarcely slowed by the lightning that had seared him, reached the spider-like creature. He cut a gash along its other side, causing it to cry out. "Gavele! Help me!"

Gavele shook her head. "You're on your own Ibulli!" She slammed the door shut – thwarting Tee, who had just bounded back to her feet once again.

"Damn you, bell bitch!" The spider-thing skittered up the wall of the tower.

Tee activated her magical boots and began floating up in pursuit, but Ibulli – seeing her – shot a gob of web at her, pinning her to the wall. A few moments later, Ibulli slipped away through a hole near the ceiling of the cavern and disappeared into the tower.

### THROUGH THE TOWER

Meanwhile, below, Tor threw himself against the tower door and burst it open. The inside of the tower was bereft of interior walls with a floor of sandy, hard-packed dirt. A broken staircase wound its way around the inner wall of the tower, up to a trapdoor in the ceiling above.

By the time Tor burst in, Gavele had already crossed the entire tower (with seemingly preternatural speed). Tor and Agnarr raced to catch her, but she managed to wrench open the far door, slip through it, and slam it shut behind her.

But only a moment after the door was shut, Agnarr was at it. Seizing the heavy metal ring, Agnarr ripped it open. Gavele – who had been trying to hold it shut while slipping a key into the lock – was wrenched off her feet. Tor, who was only half a stride behind Agnarr, cut her down where she stood.

Tor positioned himself in the open door, keeping a watchful eye on the large chamber beyond. This chamber had seemingly been formed by excavating the space between the tower and another ancient building. The excavation was incomplete, however, with only part of the lower building exposed from the wall. Several passages led away from the chamber – two to the north and one to the south. Flanking one of the northern passages were two statues carved to look like humans in robes but with translucent, smoky grey glass spheres in place of heads.

Everything within seemed still and quiet.

While Tor kept watch, Agnarr went back to help Tee. Stuck as she was, she had managed to get a rope out of her pouch, tie it around her waist, and drop it down to the floor below. Agnarr was able to climb up this and used his flaming sword to burn her free (giving her a little pain here and there as he did).

### THRALLS AND QUASITS

Once the web was burned away, it was an easy matter for Tee to safely levitate both of them back to the cavern floor below. They joined the rest of the group in the tower.

Before they had a chance to plan their next move, however, two venom-shaped thralls leapt from the roof of the partially excavated building and landed on the ground about twenty feet away. These were large, more muscular, and less recognizably human than their brethren above – clearly suffering from a more advanced form of the *askara*-induced mutations, which seemed to



continue apace even after the victims had emerged from their cocoons.

Tor rapidly backpedaled through the door and slammed it shut.

“Agnarr!”

Agnarr quickly crossed the tower to Tor’s side.

And at that moment, Agnarr and Tor were suddenly filled with a supernatural terror. Agnarr managed to shake it off, but Tor – with a horrible scream – ripped open the door again and ran through it.

The thralls, perhaps surprised at the sudden going-and-coming, swung wildly at Tor ran past them and missed as he fled down an excavated tunnel to the northeast.

A high-pitched, cackling laugh filled the tower. Whirling to see its source, the others spotted two small, winged demons sitting on the staircase.

These quasits were laughing almost helplessly at the sight of Tor’s flight, and Agnarr – with a single bounding leap across the tower – cut one of them down before it had a chance to react. Tee took a shot at the other, blasting a large hole in its wing.

Whirling hate-filled eyes towards her, the quasit gave a sibilant hiss of pain and rage... and vanished.

Tor, meanwhile, had disappeared from sight. It was impossible to follow him, because the venom-shaped thralls were closing rapidly on the open door.

Agnarr stepped into the breach... and things turned frenetic. Blows of fang and claw came quicker than the eyes of the others could follow, but Agnarr turned each

of them – deflecting some, absorbing others with cunning angling of his body and armor.

And then the seemingly impossible began to happen: Agnarr was driving them back, using their long reach against them by repeatedly stepping in close to their bodies.

Once there was enough of a gap, Seeaeti slipped around the thralls and, with the dog nipping at their heels, Agnarr was able to start landing some blows of his own. The others prepared to follow his lead through the door and engage.

## THE RETURN OF IBULLI

But just as the tide was turning, a beam of purplish-black energy struck Agnarr in the back and the strength drained from his limbs. Ibulli had returned – slipping through the trapdoor at the top of the tower.

While Agnarr continued to hold the line against the thralls, the others – still within the tower – fell into a confused response. Tee fired, sending the spider-thing skittering across the ceiling. Ranthir backed away, but prepared to counter any more spells it might attempt. Dominic shouted out a warning to Agnarr.

Elestra raised her dragon rifle... and got a face full of web. Tee moved to assist her and found herself, once again, webbed in place.

The thralls, meanwhile, had become weary of Seeaeti hounding them and one of them turned towards the dog. Agnarr was out of position to defend him and he could



only shout in outrage and concern as Seeaeti's back was ripped to shreds. With a whimpering whine, Seeaeti twisted away from the thrall.

Dominic, hearing the hound's howl, darted through the door. At the touch of his wand, the wounds on Seeaeti's back slowly knit themselves back together. Seeaeti happily bounded back to his feet, turned towards Dominic, and licked him happily on the face.

### THE RETURN OF THE QUASITS

Elestra started cutting her way out of the web. She'd only managed to free one arm, however, when the surviving quasit reappeared behind her. It clawed its way up her legs and back, leaving a trail of bloody puncture wounds that burned with a painful venom, before burying its fang-like teeth in the back of her neck.

Elestra cut at it futilely with her rapier, but it leapt away and – chittering with malevolent laughter – vanished again.

Dominic was still wiping Seeaeti's slobber from his face when he heard Elestra cry out. He ran back into the tower. But, as he passed through the door, he, too, found himself stuck fast – another victim of Ibulli's web.

Elestra was trying to finish cutting herself free, but the pain spreading from the quasit-inflicted wounds was growing more intense. The wounds themselves were rapidly inflaming with an intense, searing heat, but there was also a chilling shake spreading through her muscles. It was poison.



### TOR TURNS AROUND

In his flight, Tor had emerged from the first passage into a roughly circular chamber. Into this chamber an underground stream flowed, pouring down into a large circular pit in the center of the chamber. He passed through this chamber and down another passage, finally coming to a stop – as his mind cleared – a short distance from an iron door.

Cursing loudly he turned and ran back towards the fight.

### THE DWARF AND THE RATS

An unnoticed door down the northwestern passage swung open. Agnarr and Ranthir were the only ones who could see a bald dwarf with a bushy black beard and eyebrows emerge. He was muttering under his breath as he circled around the melee raging in the middle of the chamber and ran towards the partially excavated building.

The others were distracted by the quasit, who had reappeared once again and attacked Tee, poisoning her just as it had Elestra. Agnarr did his best to cut the dwarf off, but the thralls were blocking him.

The dwarf wrenched open the door of the building. "Rouse yourselves! Get out here and fight!"

"We only take orders from Gavele, dwarf!"

"Gavele is dead you fools!"

Agnarr wasn't sure what to do. He was still facing two of the thralls and now there were unknown reinforcements coming. He tried to cheer himself with the thought that Gavele's men – whoever they might be – would be frightened off by the news of her death.

It was a thin hope, but a better one was coming: Tor returned, charging into the flank of the thralls.

The charge came close to routing them, but then a ratling and a ratbrute emerged from the building. The ratbrute was unslinging a greatsword of leviathan proportions while the ratling lowered another of the dilapidated dragon rifles and—

"Two hundred gold pieces for each of you if you attack the dwarf instead!" Dominic was still struggling in the goopy web, but he shouted out the offer in a voice laced with sincerity.

The ratling hesitated. Then he turned to his companion with a sly grin. "I never liked that dwarf anyway."

The ratling started to lower his rifle and turned back towards the building.

"TRAITOR!" the ratbrute cried in a thick, lumbering voice. It brought its greatsword crashing down towards the smaller ratling, who barely managed to turn the skull-crushing blow into a merely laming shoulder wound.

The ratling stumbled back, shooting at the ratbrute with his rifle. The shot went wild, but a second shot –

coming from the interior of the building – struck the ratbrute in the chest. The stench of burning rat fur filled the air.

### MEANWHILE, IN THE TOWER...

Elestra had freed herself from the webs and moved to help cut Tee from hers. But the quasit reappeared again, its vicious claws slashing at her legs.

Ranthur drew his crossbow and fired at it, but it was too small and too quick. Elestra, however, managed to stab it with her rapier. It clutched at its chest, hissed at her, and disappeared.

“It won’t be gone long!” Ranthur cried. “It’s a quasit and the wound was already healing.”

“A whatsit?” Elestra asked.

“A quasit,” Ranthur said. “A minor demonling.”

Tee, meanwhile, had finished cutting herself free. She and Elestra turned their attention to the ceiling and started firing at the spider-thing.

But Ibulli was weaving her spells again. A twisting pattern of subtle, shifting colors erupted from the air in a hypnotic dance of multi-colored light. Tee wrenched her eyes away from it, but Elestra’s gaze became arrested by the display – she stood helpless, swaying gently from side to side.

Ibulli seized the distraction to scuttle back into the safety of the upper level of the tower.

### RATBRUTE MELEE

While the ratmen had fought amongst themselves, Tor and Agnarr had managed to finish off the venom-shaped thralls. Now, however, another of the ratbrutes had pushed its way out of the partially excavated building.

Meanwhile, the dwarf had reappeared on the roof of the building. He summoned another of the flame-eyed rats and used it to harry Tor while the ratbrutes moved in from the other direction.

Agnarr turned and raced towards the building, trying to leap up to where the dwarf stood. He came up short, jumped again, and this time managed to grab onto the edge of the roof.

The dwarf, seeing him coming, ran down the length of the building and jumped off, landing behind the ratbrutes. Yanking out a scroll he used its magicks to heal the wounds that Tor had been inflicting on the ratbrutes.

Agnarr shrugged and dropped back down to the floor of the cavern. He ran down along the length of the building, trying to circle the ratbrutes and reach the dwarf.

Unfortunately, at that very moment, one of the brutes cut through Tor’s defenses and ripped open a gaping wound in his chest. In a spray of blood it carried its swing around and struck Agnarr in the back, opening a huge

gash across the barbarian’s already abused shoulders and sending him stumbling forward. As a result, Agnarr’s own swing went wild and the dwarf was able to retreat back down the wide hallway running to the south.

### BACK IN THE TOWER AGAIN

Tee slapped Elestra out of her hypnotic trance and then headed for the door.

“Tee! Wait!” Elestra called. “Help me finish off the whatsit!”

The quasit popped out of thin air and raked at Elestra’s throat, sending blood pouring down her chest. It hissed with a sneer. “Don’t call me a whatsit!”

Tor retreated back into the tower. Dominic, having finally freed himself from Ibulli’s web, infused him with a wash of divine energy that closed his wounds and soothed his battered limbs and then sent him back into the fight outside.

Ibulli *flew* down from above.

“She’s flying now!” Elestra cried. “That’s not fair!”

### THE BATTLE TURNS AGAINST THEM

Tee, now outside the tower, levitated into the air and tried taking potshots at the ratbrutes... but the dwarf, having safely retreated down the hall from the melee but still with a clear line of sight, started summoning fiery-eyed hawks with metallic, razor-sharp feathers to harry her. Their cruel beaks and claws took bloody gouges of flesh out of her.

Ranthur, seeing that Tor and Agnarr were both badly wounded and struggling against the ratbrutes outside, poured an *invisibility* potion down Dominic’s throat. “Now go heal some people!”

Agnarr was knocked from his feet. Feeling Dominic’s invisible, healing touch, he tried to get back on his feet... and was knocked right back down again.

A few moments later, Tor managed to take down one of the ratbrutes, but the other – with a howl of rage – smashed his blade into Tor’s armor with enough force that he felt blood in his mouth. Tor managed to barely turn the next blow so that the flat of the ratbrute’s sword hit him instead of the edge (which would have decapitated him), but the blow still had enough force to knock him to the ground.

And then the ratbrute’s sword plunged down, pinning him to the blood-soaked dust.

Dominic, still invisible, left Agnarr’s side and hurried quickly to heal Tor before it was too late.

Meanwhile, back in the tower, Ranthur had been preparing himself to counter Ibulli’s magic. But instead of casting another spell, Ibulli swooped down at him. He stumbled backwards... but not fast enough. The creature’s venomous fangs closed on Ranthur’s shoulder. He collapsed, frothing at the mouth.

As Ranthir fell, Elestra managed to injure the quasit again... and, once again, it disappeared.

### THE BATTLE TURNS AGAIN... AND AGAIN... AND AGAIN

Things looked bleak. But then Agnarr, who had been feigning death while secretly being replenished by Dominic's touch, surged up – stabbing the ratbrute in the back from his prone position. The ratbrute with a snarl of rage backhanded him, sending the barbarian back into unconsciousness, and then moved towards Seeaeti.

But Dominic, with another burst of divine energy, had managed to close up Tor's grievous wounds. With the vicious serrated edges of raw flesh still glowing from holy power, Tor stood up.

The ratbrute whirled to face him... and then was forced to retreat before his bloody-minded assault. It cried out to the dwarf over its shoulder. "Woreron! Help me! Help me, please!"

But to no avail. Tor cut him down.

The dwarf, having apparently exhausted his supply of spells summoning a veritable swarm of hawks to plague Tee in the air, charged back into melee. Tor, who had been anticipating doing the same to him, blocked the sudden and unexpected attack in frustration.

Ibulli swooped out of the door and up to a level equal with Tee... who promptly released the magic of her boots and dropped back to the ground as the summoned hawks began winking out of existence.

Tor headed towards the spider-thing, letting Agnarr (newly rejuvenated once more by the constant ministrations of Dominic) take his place in the skirmish with the dwarf. Ibulli and the dwarf both fought towards each other, trying to encircle the battered heroes. And then the quasit reappeared as well – darting in and out of invisibility as it harried them time and time again.

But then Dominic dumped a potion of *see invisibility* down Tor's throat, and he could finally see the invisible quasit. The quasit, on the other hand — getting ready to leap onto Agnarr's back — never saw it coming: Tor thrust his sword straight through its tiny chest.

The quasit screamed in pain and tried to pull itself off Tor's sword... but it was too late. Tor smashed the blade to the ground, cleaving the demonling in twain.

### THE FINAL BLOWS

With the quasit's death, Ibulli gave a wail of pain and redoubled its efforts.

The combatants circled each other in a furious flurry of blows, but then Elestra emerged from the tower and Woreron the dwarf found himself caught between her and Tor.

With Woreron's defenses harried, Tor was able to land a blow hard enough to dent the dwarf's armor.

Electricity arced up from the impact and the dwarf grimaced in pain.

But then the grimace turned to a grisly smile and the dwarf took a casual swing at Elestra with his battleaxe, easily sweeping aside her rapier and cutting deep into her thigh.

"A fine hit, youngling," he grinned manically at Tor. "But what are you going to do once your friend is dead?"

"What did he say?" Agnarr shouted over the din of battle.

"He's taunting me!" Tor laughed. "He's actually taunting me."

Tor swept the dwarf's axe to one side and killed him. "That. That's what I'm going to do."

He pulled his blade free from the dwarf's corpse with a crackle of lightning.

Agnarr, seeing the dwarf fall, threw his own blade aside and grappled Ibulli – thinking it imperative that the creature not be allowed to flee lest it fetch yet more reinforcements to the fray.

Ibulli struggled to escape. And perhaps, if Agnarr's massive thews had been unsapped he might have held. But eventually the thrashings of the creature freed it. It began to fly up and away...

... and Seeaeti leapt up onto its back, grabbed the spidery head in its teeth, and *tore*. The bloated body of the spider-thing collapsed at Agnarr's feet while Seeaeti landed nimbly a few feet away with the head clenched between his teeth. He padded over and dropped it at Agnarr's feet.

The barbarian laughed. "Good boy!"

### WITHDRAWING IN VICTORY

The invisible Dominic did a quick sweep through the partially excavated building from which the ratmen had emerged, but found little of interest.

Of much more interest, however, was the room from which Woreron the dwarf had come. It turned out to be his personal bedchamber, with a wooden bed, a chest of drawers, and (most interesting of all) a large iron coffer.

The chest of drawers contained nothing but clothing and personal items of little note, but the iron coffer was locked. In fact, a careful inspection revealed that it was *double* locked – with a second, concealed keyhole on the base of the coffer which disabled a trap on the primary lock. Tee quickly picked both locks and opened the coffer to find several potions, a collection of fancy snuff bottles, a silk purse filled with coins, and a thick sheath of papers.

From there they worked their way back through the complex – searching the bodies as they went. On one of Ibulli's claws they found a bone ring matching in all ways those they had recovered from the creatures which had breached the Banewarrens and they fell into a brief discussion concerning its meaning. (Was there a

connection between the cultists and the activities at the Banewarrens?)

On Woreron's corpse they found two keys (causing Tee to groan at the thought of the wasted time she had just spent picking the locks on the iron coffer).

On Gavele, they found a note:

**LETTER FROM REGGALOCH TO RHINNIS**

Rhinnis,

I think we are being foolish. The Brothers of Venom are almost certain to betray us. They seek nothing less than complete control over the venom-shaped thralls. I am leaving to warn Malleck in the Ebon Hand Temple. He must know about the violent treachery they plot. Watch your back until I can return.

Reggaloch

Tee suspected that this was the note she had seen Gavele remove from Reggaloch's corpse in the apartment complex.

Heading cautiously up the stairs in the tower, they found the second level choked full with Ibulli's webs. Hidden within the webs they found a small cache of gems and other treasures, including a finely-crafted wooden puzzle locket. Once Tee realized what she was looking at, she was able to quickly undo the puzzle, revealing the locket's hidden compartment. Within it, they found another letter – this one only half completed — written to the Brothers of the Quaan.

Then, in the lower level of the tower they found a hidden compartment beneath the stairs, containing a small bed. Hidden under the mattress of the bed, there was another letter, this one written by Gavele and addressed to Wuntad.

Satisfied that they had found all that there was to find, they quickly hurried back up the stairs and out of the Old City.

Their bodies were wracked with poison. The Brotherhood of Venom had lived up to its name and taken their toll. But, in the end, they had little difficulty escaping through the sewers and emerging onto the streets of Ptolus about a quarter mile from the apartment complex.

**UNFINISHED NOTE TO THE BROTHERS OF THE QUAAN**

Brothers of the Quaan—

The cultists' research into *askara* has proven successful. I have obtained a sample which I will send with this missive. Its effects are even more potent than we had been led to believe. They have, if anything, improved upon the arts of Jessuk. I think it truly possible that we may have gained the key for both subjugating and using the scum of the natural races.

Although my mission has been accomplished, I shall not return yet. There is another project here – one the cultists believe to be even larger than their venom-shaped thralls. They talk of a huge machine in the caves beyond, and something called the Final Ritual which will be performed [...]

**LETTER FROM WUNTAD TO GAVELE**

Gavele—

I applaud your sentiments. As long as none of the Tolling Bell are challenged and the work is not threatened, allow those squabbling fools to do whatever they want and spill blood wherever they will. The strongest shall prevail. Chaos shall reign. The Night of Dissolution nears and all acts are as homage to those who will be freed!

Wuntad

## DWARVENHEARTH RESEARCH

This is a thick bundle of parchment tied together with black ribbon. These papers appear to be a disparate collection of research pertaining to Dwarvenhearth – a legendary dwarven city referenced obliquely in many ancient texts and believed to lay somewhere beneath Ptolus.

**SEALED DOORS:** Several dozen pages appeared to have been excerpted from the reports and journals of many different delvers. These describe massive doors found in various locations deep in the caverns beneath Ptolus. These doors are all virtually identical and clearly fashioned with dwarven skills, but have apparently proven impenetrable.

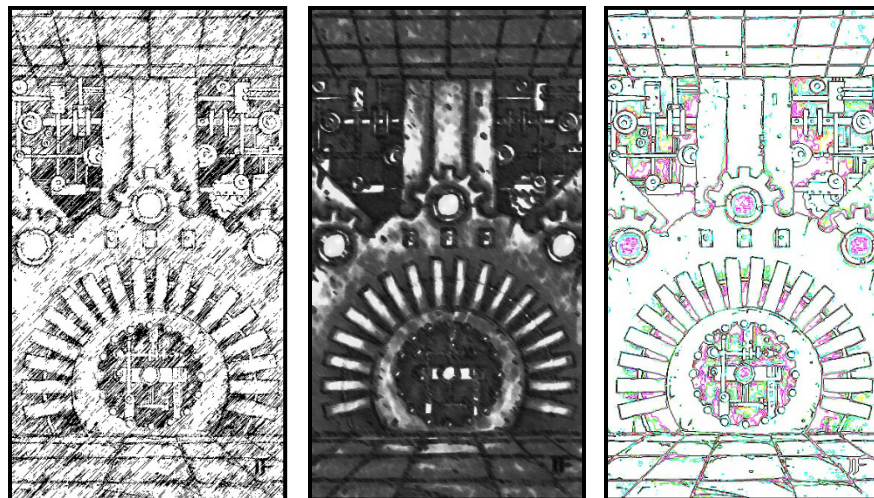
Included in these papers are several sketches of the doors, including an arcano-map of one of the doors (etching the patterns of arcane force present in the doors) and attempts to decipher (unsuccessfully) the various wards and seals protecting the doors.

**ESTIMATED SIZE:** Another large section of the research appears to be an attempt to estimate the size of the complex locked behind the doors that had already been discovered. It appeared that some of the doors were more than a mile apart, suggesting a city larger than some of the Kingdoms of the East. More than ten thousand dwarves might have once lived there.

**THUNDERSONG:** There are many myths collected from the Three Kingdoms regarding a mythical axe known as Thundersong. This is one of the great dwarven axes. There are several notes connecting various pieces of research which make it clear that the writer believes Thundersong lies within the city of Dwarvenhearth. There are references to the tale of the Woman Thane of Utarien, a legendary swordswoman of the Three Kingdoms, who the writer connects to the “Line of Queens” associated with Dwarvenhearth in several ancient texts.

**CATHEDRAL CAVERN:** In the middle of the papers, carefully wrapped in silk cloth, is what appears to be the original copy of a small, ancient painting depicting a subterranean cavern of mammoth proportions. Built on the floor of the cavern are five massive ziggurats. There is a short inscription of dwarven runes on the front of the painting. On the back, written in faded common, are the words “The Cathedral Cavern”.

**CONCLAVE OF THE QUEEN:** There is one enigmatic note buried in the various pieces of research which reads, “I believe that the Conclave of the Queen is responsible for the loss of the third testaments.”



## STUDIES OF AKNAR RATALLA

The pages of this small notebook with a cover of black leather are covered with meticulous notes regarding Aknar Ratalla.

**AKNAR RATALLA:** Aknar Ratalla was apparently a minor, but powerful, warlord in the annals of prehistory a few decades before the founding of Arathia. References to him in historical records are apparently scant, because the notebook's writer has clearly had to go far afield to collect much of the lightly detailed material.

**SIEGE OF THE DALENGUARD:** Aknar Ratalla cut a wide swath through the lands of what would become western Arathia. At the height of his power he laid siege to the Dalenguard at the foot of the Spire. In one of the texts collected here, this siege reportedly lasted for "101 days and nights through the hard winter of the wolf".

**THE END OF AKNAR RATALLA:** Aknar Ratalla possessed the "power of the Vested" and he wielded the Blade of Chaos. With these "twin might" he was "unvanquished". Nonetheless the Siege of the Dalenguard ended when Aknar Ratalla disappeared and his warriors scattered.

**THE TOMB OF AKNAR RATALLA:** In the back of the notebook are three scraps of badly tattered parchment covered with various illustrations and dwarven runes. Several pages near the end of the notebook provide a translation of this text along with an extensive and evolving analysis of it.

The writer believed that Aknar Ratalla and the Blade of Chaos were interred in a dwarven-built tomb somewhere in the caverns beneath Ptolus. After what appears to be years of research, it appears that – from the scraps of parchment and other sources – he has reconstructed the secret path that would lead to the tomb.

Unfortunately, the path originates at a place named Kaled Del – a small dwarven settlement beneath the city. Recently rediscovered by the Delver's Guild, the location of Kaled Del nevertheless remains a secret: The Delver's Guild has kept that secret in order to monopolize trade with the dwarves.

There are several pages of frustrated ruminations as the author attempts to re-discover the location of Kaled Del himself... but meets with failure.

"I shall speak to Gavele about going to the Guild directly. The Tolling Bell must surely realize the importance of recovering an artifact such as the Blade of Chaos."