Realm Quest Endless Adventures
The Demon Seed Chronicles - Book 2

A New World

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!!!!Rough Draft version!!!!!

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Raven stood next to one of the large white standing stones that ringed the shimmering portal that the companions had just passed through. Moments ago they were desperately trying to escape the watch guard of the trade city of Throffhorn. Now they found themselves on the far side of a mysterious portal surrounded by a ring of equally strange standing stones. Raven examined the nearest stone with mild interest. They were fifteen feet tall obelisks and roughly hewed out of a white marble. Veins of berry wine crisscrossed their rough surfaces. Her gaze left the giant pillar and quickly scanned the surrounding area looking for possible threats. Her military training took over as she drew her weapon and took a defensive position. She wanted to be ready for anything. There was no telling where Faumbul had sent them. An uneasy feeling gnawed at Raven’s stomach. Had she been wrong to trust a man she had just met? She had done that once before with dire consequences. She had trusted Faumbul on reputation alone. She hoped that it had been enough.

A dirt road stretched out in front of her dividing the countryside in half. A dense forest bordered her left and a rolling meadow stretched off to her right. Not a soul was in sight. Nothing about the landscape seemed familiar. Wherever they were, it was nowhere near her homeland of Houkahtan or it’s surrounding territories. Behind her Raven could hear the gentle whine of the gateway. It grew in volume as it charged with energy before a familiar popping sound signaled the arrival another companion. She didn’t turn to greet them. She just stood there silently, in deep concentration, scanning the landscape in front of her for any signs of familiarity. She could hear her friend’s gasps of surprise as each one of them cleared the gateway. Whether their surprise was for the strange landscape that sprawled out ahead of them or for the even stranger journey they had taken, Raven was no sure.

After assuring herself that the immediate area was secure, Raven pulled her gaze away from the foreign lands around her and joined her friends. There, gathered in front of the gateway, was the rag tag bunch of adventurers that by force of destiny had been joined together. Most of them were covered with nicks and cuts which were bleeding, all results of their battle with the Flaming Skulls. It was a confrontation that Raven had failed to foresee. She had been so worried about being recognized by the authorities of Throffhorn that she never suspected Flaming Skull spies. She was marveled by their devotion to their ideals of revenge. It made her wonder who the original owner of Slink’s ring had been. He must have been a person of great importance to warrant such open aggressions by the thieves guild. Fortunately the companions had suffered no casualties. And except for Gwereth none of her friends were seriously injured. Gwereth wore a bloodied gash on his leg and the woman that Slink had brought with him was growing paler by the minute. Now was the time to tend to her friends. Raven was quick to take command and bark out orders. She was, after all, the one who had brought them all to this strange land. It had been her plan to sneak into Throffhorn to seek the aid of the sage Faumbul. He was her link to finding a way to follow One Eyed Jack. It was her lust to deliver revenge upon her old friend that had brought them here. It was the reason why they were now all hurt and confused.

Damn Jack! Raven swore to herself. Now she had another reason to make him pay.

“People, as you can see, we are a long from home. Tyrahne and I will scout out the area to see if we can find some sort of town or dwelling nearby. Moonstar, help Gwereth with his wound and then the two of you see what you can do to heal the others. And by all means see what you can do to help out Slink’s friend. The rest of you check to see
what we have for supplies and start getting some sort of camp set up. We will decide later as to our next course of action should be,” Raven said and pointed at each of the companions as she directed them to their appointed task. She turned to Tyrahne and awaited his assistance.

The ranger hesitated for a moment before leaving Durenda’s side. With everything that had happened between them he wasn’t sure if he could leave her. He had vowed to keep her safe and with all the strange events that were going on in their lives Tyrahne dreaded leaving her alone. Reluctantly he joined Raven and the two of them set along the dirt road leading away from the standing stones and were soon out of sight. Durenda watched their forms disappear behind a copse of trees that hid the road as it curved left behind the forest. She sighed as she wondered how this new turn of events was going to pull Tyrahne further away from her. Trying to push the thought’s of doubt to the back of her mind Durenda turned away from the road to see if she could lend Moonstar and Gwereth a hand in healing the others.

She found Moonstar crouched over the prone Gwereth. His leg was a blooded mess. One of the Skulls swords had caught him in the thigh and slashed away the skin down across the outside of his right knee. It was still bleeding. Durenda grabbed a bit of spare cloth and pressed it against the wound in hopes of stopping the bleeding. Gwereth flinched at her touch. Moonstar began to chant softly, the magical words tumbled out of her mouth in a rhythmic pattern. As her voice grew louder her hands began to glow with a pale blue light. She gently touched her fingers to Gwereth’s leg and ran them down the length of his wound. Durenda watched as the bleeding slowed and finally stopped. Before her eyes the wound closed shut and healed itself leaving only a small thin scar and some minor bruising. Moonstar stopped chanting and looked at her handy work.

“You know the drill old man. The bruises and scar should be all but gone in a few days. I could take them away now but I need my strength to help Slink’s friend," she said and pointed in the direction of Slink and the woman he had cradled in his arms. “Besides, it will be a good reminder for you to move a bit faster the next time we are in battle.” Moonstar offered her mentor a faint smile which he returned.

Along with some help from Durenda, she pulled the priest to his feet. All three of them went to Slink’s aid. As they approached him, he carefully laid the wounded woman down on the ground. He looked gravely at his dagger that was protruding from her belly.

The woman gasped for air, “why do they keep calling me your friend thief? I am no friend of yours guild traitor.”

“True, but right now you need our help so lie still and relax,” Slink said smiled at her, remarking how beautiful she was even at the brink of death. Her face had turned an ashen gray that worried Slink but in contrast had made her dark brown eyes come alive with color. He was mesmerized by them. He felt he could get lost in them for days. Absent-mindedly he brushed a wisp of hair out of her face. The woman frowned at him.

“I wouldn’t need help if it wasn’t for you," the woman snapped at Slink, wincing as she did.

“True again, but you were trying to kill me. And one other thing, unless you like being called ‘Slink’s Friend’, maybe you could tell me your name," Slink said. The woman hesitated for a moment before speaking.

“Elyanah," was all that she said. To Slink it seemed as though it had taken all of her remaining restraint to not say any more. Moonstar propped Elyanah’s head up with a spare cloak and looked deeply into the woman’s eyes.

“This is going to hurt,” Moonstar said as Gwereth grabbed the hilt of the dagger. Elyanah braced herself against the immense pain. She let out a loud agonizing scream as the priest slid the dagger from her body. Immediately blood began to flow out of the gapping wound in her abdomen. Elyanah’s face when deathly white. She had quickly grown silent and unmoving.

Gwereth began to chant, much like Moonstar had done earlier when she had healed
him. With glowing hands Gwereth applied pressure to the bloody wound. The flow of blood slowed but did not stop. Gwereth's face looked grim with exhaustion as he turned to Moonstar.

"You try, this is beyond me," Gwereth said weakly. The priest knew that Moonstar's healing powers were immense and were far superior to his. She was one of the most promising pupils he had ever worked with. Moonstar began to chant once again. She, too, touched the wound with glowing hands. After long moments the bleeding stopped and the wound began to pull together. Moonstar let out a soft moan and slumped to one side. Gwereth caught her in his arms. Dazed, the priestess brushed off the aid of her protector and surveyed her work.

"That is all that I can do for her today. It should be enough for her natural healing processes to take over. She will live but she is going to have to stay off her feet for awhile. Slink, you should make some sort of gurney for her," Moonstar said exhausted.

Slink looked down at Elyanah. She had fallen asleep, her breathing coming more easily now, and some color had returned to her cheeks. He sighed with relief. She was going to live. As the others began to leave to tend to the others, Moonstar held back for a moment to speak to Slink. She leaned in close to him.

"I hope your happy. She is now your responsibility," the priestess said pointing at the sleeping woman. "and she may prove to be quite a burden before this is all over."

"How long could it take to heal a wound such as that? You did most of the work already. I will be rid of her in no time," Slink spoke as if the whole thing meant very little to him.

"Who said anything about waiting for the wound to heal? You are in for a big surprise Slink. You saved her, but now who is going to save you?" the priestess said and walked away with a teasing smiling, laughing as she rejoined Gwereth and Durenda. Gwereth was smiling mirthfully at Slink too.

Slink sat there contemplating his situation. He knew why he had gone through the trouble of bringing Elyanah here through the gateway. He had to save her. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen with her long brown hair and slim athletic body. There had been a fire in her eyes that flared to life when she had fought with him. It intrigued him. But what if she did not want to be saved by him? She certainly did not like him but he could change that in the future. He had been know to steal a heart or two in his time. What if she didn't fully recover from the wound? Could he handle caring for the rest of his life? Would he want to? It would be interesting to have someone around to train, a partner in crime. Slink laughed to himself thinking about the pun he had made. He had been on his own for so long. Maybe it was time to accept someone into his life to share experiences with. And who better than a beautiful rouge? Slink's mind continued to sort through the possibilities.

"So are you just going to sit there and let me rot away, lying on the cold ground?" Elyanah asked Slink weakly.

Slink had been so lost in his thoughts that he had not seen her stir. How long had she been staring at him with those big brown eyes? He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"I am going to fashion a gurney for you to help get you around until you are able to walk. It shouldn't be more than a couple of weeks," Slink said.

"Don't bother, I'll walk now. There is no way I want to be in debt to you," Elyanah said. She tried to sit up. She winced and doubled over in pain.

"I don't think that is such a wise thing to do," Slink said. He was surprised to hear how worried his voice sounded. He readjusted the cloak under her head. Elyanah reluctantly accepted the help. "I'll be back shortly." She watched the thief bound away into the nearby forest and out of sight. She sighed and closed her eyes. Almost immediately she was asleep again.

The camp had been completed by the time Raven and Tyrahne returned. Four tents had been erected around a campfire off to the side of the large stones that ringed the
area. Slink and Craedus were working on some sort of wooden device. Upon seeing them approach the other got up to greet them. Raven raised an eyebrow upon seeing the tents.

“A gift from Faumbul. He handed them to us as he pushed us through the gateway. We didn’t know what they were until we got here and decided to take a look at them,” Merrick said. Lanneth nodded in agreement. Raven was pleasantly surprised. Maybe Faumbul’s portal wasn’t as random as she first thought. The sage had obviously been well prepared for the companions departure. Did he know of their coming in advance? It was one more thing she would discuss with Faumbul when she returned to Throffhorn. She walked into the camp with Tyrahne. He immediately looked for Durenda while Raven addressed their friends.

“The road wraps around the forest for a few miles and slopes downward into a valley and eventually to a city off in the distance. In the forest just before the valley is some sort of fort. It is in disrepair but may be inhabited. Some sort of religious faction maybe,” Raven explained.

“We saw no signs of monsters or hostile forces in the area,” Tyrahne added to Raven’s explanation. Everyone discussed this new information among themselves for long moments before turning their attention back to Raven and Tyrahne. Durenda had made her way through the crowd and stood by Tyrahne’s side. Raven looked a little annoyed by her lack of discipline.

“I have talked things over with Tyrahne and he agrees that the best course of action would be for us to head for the city and find out exactly where Faumbul has dumped us. I have a feeling that we are very far away from Throffhorn and the Seven Baronies,” Raven said.

“Praise the gods for that,” Elyanah said weakly but loud enough for everyone to hear her. They turned and look at her. She got mixed looks.

“Yes, that is probably a good thing considering our situation there,” Raven started.

“Your situation,” Moonstar pointed out.

“Yes. My situation. You all should know that I sought out Faumbul in hopes that I could find a means to open the WoodVale gateway and continue my search for Maxwell. My conversation with him was cut short by the Flaming Skull’s attack upon us, the attack that forced us through Faumbul’s impromptu gateway. He may have sent us further toward those means,” Raven explained. Elyanah frowned at Raven’s mention of the Flaming Skull’s attack, but said nothing. “If everyone is in agreement with heading for the city, then we will head out in the morning.”

“I agree with looking for some sort of civilization, but what about that fort you mentioned? Religion always holds a mighty sway on the surrounding people. It would be good to ally ourselves with the local religion even if its not a chapter of Thauaras. You have to consider that half our group is of a religious nature in one way or another,” Moonstar argued. Gwereth was in firm agreement with the priestess. Durenda also nodded affirmatively, nudging Tyrahne, who quickly fell into line.

“The fort may be a religious center but might not be one also. And it seems to be in such a state of disrepair that Tyrahne and I could not even tell for certain if there were people there. I think that our best course would be to check out the city first. I am sure that we could get some information about the fort there,” Raven explained.

Frowning, Moonstar shrugged and began a private conference with Gwereth. The companions split up into their little groups and began talking about their plans to head to the unknown city. Tyrahne and Durenda wandered off, smiling at each other, laughing about this and that. Slink continued work on Elyanah’s gurney with Craedus looking over his shoulder offering various suggestions during its construction. Raven had gone to the tent she had claimed for her own. She had to shoo away Merrick and Lanneth who where still in the habit of following her everywhere. Moonstar and Gwereth continued their discussion at long length, glancing over at Raven’s tent every so often.

Slowly the sun set behind the horizon and companions began to turn in for the night.
Slink had dragged the gurney that now held Elyanah close to the campfire. The wooden contraption he had fashioned was too big to fit in one of the tents and Elyanah needed to be kept warm from the chill that nightfall had brought. Slink was still beaming and complimenting himself on how good the gurney had turned out as he sat down next to Elyanah.

“You know, if it wasn’t for the dwarf and his skill in woodworking and mechanics, this wonderful gurney of yours would never had worked,” Elyanah snapped. Slink looked at her and smiled.

“You don’t think I am going to let you rain on my parade do you?” He asked. Elyanah shook her head.

“How easily you are amused. It’s a wonder that you ever survived the streets long enough to become a thief at all,” she answered him.

“So, is this relationship going to be a love-hate kind of thing?” Slink asked.

“I don’t need your pity!” she snapped at Slink.

“Who said anything about pity?” Slink asked.

“Listen Slink. I will afford you professional courtesy since we are both children of the street and all. And I will thank you just once for saving my life. But I will never forgive you nor will I ever like you. I don’t believe that you had nothing to do with the deaths of my fellow Skulls in that pub, and I don’t believe you are aiding me out of the goodness of your heart. I have learned that nothing is free in this world and I do not want to be in your debt,” Elyanah told him harshly. Slink stared at her for a moment before smiling again.

“Good. I love a challenge,” he teased and began to laugh. Elyanah groaned and turned her head away from the grinning thief. She began to comfort herself for the coming sleep.
Visitors In The Night

Everyone had turned in hours ago and were fast asleep. It had been an hour since Craedus last turned over and grunted in his sleep. And it was a half hour since the dwarf had mumbled something that sounded like he was fighting a glorious battle against a goblin horde. It was well passed midnight and the campfire had burned down to its hottest coals glowing a bright crimson and casting a dim light over the campsite. Slink sat next to Elyanah who was sleeping gently at his side. Her breathing had become slow and steady and her painful moaning had stopped. He watched her for a moment and finally smiled before turning away to stare up into the cloudy sky. It was his turn for guard duty and he had resorted to counting stars to stay awake. He had long since grown bored and needed something to preoccupy his mind. After counting stars he had lost its charm, he resorted to trying to recall all the names of their formations. His old master had called them constellations. Each constellation had its own name which lent itself to a particular legend in the Realm’s past. According to his master, if you could read them correctly, the stars would spell out your future. Astronomy was never a strong point in Slink’s early schooling at the thieves guild. He was not a superstitious person and paid little attention to his master’s incessant babbling about the subject. Slink looked down at the sleeping form next to him and mused to himself. There were no stars in the sky that could define nor predict what was going to happen next in his life. Even before the she-thief had entered his life, Elyanah was a wild card. He had always been on his own, always in control of his own destiny. Now he had to worry about his new acquaintance and how her actions where going to change his life’s direction. He shivered at the unexpected.

The endless possibilities, both good and bad, were running through Slink’s head when he first heard it. There was a faint rustling sound off to his left. It was barely audible but had that certain muffled trying-to-be-quiet sound to it. Without giving any indication that he had detected anything in the forest next to him, Slink slowly pulled a knife out of the folds of his tunic. Looking away from the glowing embers he concentrated on listening for the faintest of sounds. As his hearing grew sharper, his eyes grew accustom to the darkness surrounding the companion’s campsite. Slink continued to listen for the disturbance. He heard it again. This time it seemed closer. There was definitely something out there among the trees that bordered the campsite. He could hear something out there beyond the darkened tree line, the sound intermingled with the chirping of crickets. Slink continued to listen recognizing that there were more than one intruder out there. Whatever or whoever was approaching the campsite was doing their best to mask their presents, but not good enough to evade Slink’s keen senses. The closer they approached the louder the muffled sound got. It sounded like muted whispers. Concentrating on the sound Slink through he could make out the word “quickly” but he wasn’t sure. What he was sure of was that there were people out in the forest surrounding him. The voices were too faint for Slink to make out the exact words but it was a whispered conversation nonetheless. Slink moved slightly to his left and the whispers grew silent. He slowly laid back and acted like he was readying himself for bed. He laid still and feigned sleep for long moments trying to pin point the exact location of his mysterious assailants.

When he thought that he had a definite location determined he sprung up from his bedroll and hurled his knife into the forest. It hit something with a resounding metallic clink. There was a muffled groan and more of the whispers, louder this time and almost formed spoken words. Slink reached down to the knife sheath strapped to his leg,
reaching for another knife, when strong hands grabbed him. A surprised “ugh” escaped his lips. It was loud enough to awaken Elyanah. She stirred, a painful groan issuing from her, and opened her eyes to see two great hands of earth reaching out of the ground, grasping Slink. Two thick hands made out of earth and clay, topped with patches of grasses and weeds, had flowed from the ground and wrapped themselves tightly around him. He was securely bound in place, one thick finger of earth clapped tightly across his mouth. Elyanah let out a startled scream that pierced the night. Slink tried to say something under the dirt finger that covered his mouth but his words came out muffled and unintelligible.

Suddenly, from out of the forest, four men in tan robes appeared. They were all tall, older men with clean shaven heads. All of them carried long walking sticks that appeared to be thick and gnarled tree branches. The lead man was wearing a large bronze amulet that was inscribed with a symbol that Slink had never seen before. The man standing immediately behind the lead man was chanting strange arcane words and had a large disc of stone hovering a few feet in front of him. It seemed to stay in front of him no matter which direction he faced.

A shield of stone? Slink asked himself. He wriggled against the grasp of the stone hands but found that he was quite helpless. What was going to happen to Elyanah? I've got to help her.

As the four men approached the campfire, Raven, Craedus and Merrick sprung from their tents. The bard was still rubbing sleep from his eyes as he casually yawned. Slink sighed in relief behind the stony finger. Elyanah’s scream had awakened his friends.

“What in Rexor’s Beard is all the racket?” Craedus exclaimed before he saw the four robed men that now stood within their campsite. Instinctively he raised his battle axe and joined an already armed Raven. Merrick hung back a bit, his sword still sheathed, but hilt in hand. He was looking more at Raven's body, which was clad in only her night garments, than the four strangers. The robed men stopped their continuous approach ten feet away from the companions.

“Hail strangers, we mean no harm,” said the first robed man. He was looking at the weapons that Raven and Craedus had raised in defense.

“No harm?” Raven asked pointing at Slink. The man that was chanting stopped doing so and gestured at the restrained thief. Instantly the stone hands let go of him and slowly slithered back into the earth, melting into nothingness, leaving no trace that they had ever been there. Slink slowly flexed his arms and legs to make sure no permanent damage had been done by the crushing hands. With a look of disdain he brushed a thick patch of dirt from his sleeve.

“Sorry about that. His attack startled me,” said the man with stone shield.

“What did you expect sneaking up on me in the middle of the night?” Slink asked defending his actions.

“Our mistake. We never meant to get this close to your camp in the first place. We were just observing you to see if you would be able to help us. For some reason our scrying technics would not work upon your camp. We had to come closer,” said the first robed man.

Craedus mumbled to Raven, “I don’t think I like anyone spying on us, especially with magics and such.” Raven hushed him. She glanced at the noise behind her and found that Moonstar, Gwereth and Lanneth had joined them.

“What help?” Moonstar asked as she yawned.

“We are the Minions of Zem, Great spirit of the four elements and all that is created with them.” The third robed man announced with great fervor.

“Sounds like nature to me,” Moonstar muttered to Gwereth.

“In a round about way, priestess of nature,” said the second robed man before bowing to her. Moonstar was flattered and bowed back. She would never offer the man a curtsey in front of her companions.

“We have been blocked from our link with the earth power. We fear that the severed
link has been caused by the recent reopening of the Silver Link Mines north of the nearby city of Ironmoore. We are in need of a group of men of civilization to seek out the answers for us," the fourth robed man said. As he explained this, the other Minions of Zem looked intently at him.

"Why don’t you just go to the city yourself and find out what the problem is?" Merrick asked. He had finally moved up to join the other companions, tearing his gaze from Raven. He absentmindedly sniffed at the air around Raven trying to catch her scent.

"We can not abide being within the confines of the city and in such a weaken state, we would not last long in their chaotic world," said the first robed man. Slink muttered something about their magics “seeming powerful enough” as Merrick muttered “chaotic?” Just then Tyrahne emerged from his tent followed by Durenda. Seeing everyone staring at her, she began to blush.

“Naughty little druidess,” Slink teased the blushing druidess. Moonstar grinned a mischievous smile in Durenda’s direction making the druidess blush even deeper. Suddenly the robed men snapped to attention and stepped closer to the companions. Raven and Craedus stiffened their stance. All four of the robed men bowed in unison.

“Welcome sister! Zem welcomes you!” all four robed men announced.

Durenda was taken aback with surprise. What did they mean by calling her “sister”? She was a child of nature much like Moonstar was and she had Fey blood within her veins, but a sister of Zem?!? Durneda curtsied and looked as confused as the rest of the companions did.

“Hail and well met. I am Durenda, druidess of Belonda,” Durenda greeted them cautiously. It sounded more like a question than a statement. The robed men bowed again.

“The minions of Zem wear many veils but you are who you are,” first robed man said cryptically. He stood there smiling at her.

“As is he,” the second robed man said pointing at Lanneth, “Although his mark is lesser than yours, he is a child of Zem.” The robed men fell into a moments silence as if to allow the companions time to consider everything they had told them.

“I am Lurdius. I would be most humbled if you would agree to come to our forest home in the morrow and listen to what we have to say. We can explain things in much more detail when everyone is properly rested and fed. Your tracker knows the way,” first robed man said. He pointed at Tyrahne who was now holding Durneda in his arms. The companions looked silently at each other. “But for tonight we bid you good night.” They bowed again and quickly stepped back into the midnight shadows and were gone, disappearing into the dark forest surrounding them. None of the speechless companions did anything to stop them from leaving. After a few moments the discussion began.

“I guess that answers the question of whether or not the fort is inhabited,” Moonstar said.

“I guess so. I suppose you are going to insist that we go there now, aren’t you?” Raven asked.

“Do you even have to ask?” Moonstar answered with a question.

“Anyone have any objections to checking out the fort in the morning?” Raven asked. No one said anything in protest. “Good. I am tired and would like to go to bed.” She headed toward her tent and noticed Merrick staring at her. “What are you looking at?” She held her hands in front of her as if to block the view of her night garments from the bard and stormed off into her tent. Merrick just smiled as he watched her go.

The rest of the companions returned to their tents. Durenda decided to take the next watch hoping deep down inside that the men of Zem would return to explain everything that they had revealed to her. Tyrahne stayed behind to talk to her a bit before turning in. The moon, just past full, sat high in the night sky and cast an eerie glow on the trees around them. They sat there for long moments before Tyrahne broke the silence.

“I bet I know what you are thinking,” Tyrahne said softly to the young druidess. She
looked up at him with solemn eyes.

“What’s that? That I am who knows how far from my grove? That I will miss the ceremony that would have made me caretaker of the grove? That I still don’t have a clue as to what my strange dreams mean? Or, now, what my strange connection to this Minions of Zem is?” Durenda asked. Tyrahne’s flirty smile faded and he grew silent.

“What about the elf?” he finally asked, this time with a smile. “Maybe you should talk with Lanneth in the morning. He was singled out by the Minions of Zem too. Maybe he has some answers for you.” Durenda shrugged and turn back toward the forest, staring at all the trees. Tyrahne stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He gently squeezed her and whispered in her ear. “No matter what happens my sweet, I will always be there for you.” She squeezed his arms tightly and began to weep.
On To The Fortress

One by one the companions awoke from their night of interrupted sleep and emerged from their tents. Once each of them had stretched the sleep out of their bodies, they quickly broke down their camp and readied themselves for the trip to the fort. Everyone was eager to move on and find out where they were and who the Men Of Zem were. Once the tents and other equipment were bundled up, they cooked a hasty meal and began to eat. Slink munched on a piece of fried bacon. He held part of it toward Elyanah.

“Bah! I can feed myself guildtraitor,” Elyanah snapped. Slink had adjusted the gurney in such a way that Elyanah would be in a semi-sitting position. She had a plate of eggs, bacon and bread resting on her lap. She nibbled at her food and winced every time she swallowed.

“Not so good in your belly huh?” Slink asked.

“Not really, but why should you care. It was you that made me this way,” Elyanah answered harshly. She glared at the rouge. Slink mumbled to himself, “I could make you feel better in others way that would be a lot more pleasant. Pleasant for the both of us” Slink smiled mischievously to himself Elyanah squinted her eyes at him.

“What did you just say?” Elyanah asked suddenly.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” Slink said and he smiled at her innocently, getting a frown and a groan from her.

On the other side of the campfire Moonstar and Gwereth where discussing their morning plans, talking quickly between bites.

“I am glad that Raven has finally seen it our way and decided to let us go to the fort. I still say that these Zem guys are our best chance on figuring out how to get back to Throffhorn,” Moonstar said.

“I don’t think Raven has changed her mind, only yielded to the best course of action at this time. Under the circumstances I think that the Men of Zem’s offer is our best chance to get our bearing in this strange land,” Gwereth explained.

“A strange land that we would not be in if it wasn’t for Raven ,” Moonstar said folding her arms together and looked sternly at Raven who was busy taking with Lanneth and Merrick. The trio was busy taking inventory of their remaining supplies.

“Do not become bitter towards Raven. She is only doing what she feels she has too. It is not entirely her fault that we are here. Remember we agreed to follow her,” Gwereth said.

“I still think there is much more to our ‘leader’ than meets the eye. I don’t totally trust her,” Moonstar said eyeing Raven.

“Who do you totally trust?” Gwereth said. He began to smirk as Moonstar threw him a look of irritation. “Remember child, Thauaras’ will guides us through many places in our life, many in which we can not explain. You need to resist less and let what happens happen. So is the will of life.”

“Are you questioning my faith old man? I just think this is a good time to use a bit of caution. Don’t you agree?” Moonstar asked.

“Indeed,” Gwereth said.

A sudden slobbering noise interrupted whatever Moonstar was going to say next. Both the priest and priestess turn to see Craedus devouring his third helping of breakfast. Two pieces of bacon, half a fried egg and a chunk of bread disappeared quickly into his mouth. Sensing eyes upon him, he stopped in mid chew and looked at
Moonstar and Gwereth.

“What?” the dwarf asked spitting a few chewed bits of egg and bread from his mouth. Moonstar looked at him for a moment and shook her head in disbelief before returning to her own breakfast. She found that she had lost her appetite and pushed her plate aside.

As the others finished their breakfast and began cleaning up, Raven and her two followers continued to double check their supplies and secured them. Faumbul had been very generous and sent quite a few supplies with them. Too bad he hadn’t included a pack mule or a few horses. The breakfast dishes were cleaned and the campfire doused. Each of the companions grabbed what supplies they could carry and left the great ring of standing stones behind them. They traveled along a wide dirt road that was bordered by a thick forest to their left and a vast plain to their right. As they walked Moonstar and Gwereth made their way up to the front of the group where Craedus was discussing the mines with Raven.

“...definitely. I think the mines would be a great place to start looking for that crystal you want. What was it again? Craedus asked.

“Mygellex,” Raven answered.

“Yes, that is it. And who knows, maybe we will find some other precious stones down there too. Of course we will have to head to the city and make sure that we can legally enter the mines,” Craedus said excitedly.

Moonstar butted into the conversation, “Yes, we wouldn’t want to end up being label criminals in yet another city would we?” Gwereth groaned and prepared himself for the worse.

“As I told you before, Throffhorn was a misunderstanding. Besides, you are getting your way. We are heading off to your precious fort first,” Raven explained.

“So you still think it is a bad idea?” Moonstar asked.

“I don’t trust them. And I think that we would have more luck gathering information in the city. I, too, am eager to get back to Throffhorn,” Raven said.

“We shall see,” Moonstar said suspiciously.

The companions followed the road as in turned to the left around a large copse of trees. After a few minutes a small hill a short distance behind the tree line rose above the tree tops.

“Up ahead is the fort. It’s just behind that hill,” Raven said to everyone. As they headed toward the hill, Durenda made her way to Lanneth’s side.

“Lanneth?” Durenda asked softly. The elf slowly acknowledged her as if he had just awakened from a daydream.

“Yes?” Lanneth asked.

“I wanted to ask you about what the Men of Zem said about us last night. All this talk about me being their ‘sister’ and the both of us supposedly being linked to them somehow? What do you make of it?” Durenda asked. Lanneth looked at her with eyes that had an amazing sparkle to them. It betrayed the cold and quietness of his personality.

“I do not recall any mention of Zem in my studies in the Forest of Silver. And I have never met them before last night. As for any similarities between the two of us and the Men of Zem, there is nothing obvious to me. Nothing by appearance sake anyway. We both come from natural settings, we are both elementally based creatures, both bonded to forests. But so is Moonstar, Gwereth and Tyrahne and none of them were singled out,” Lanneth explained. Durenda looked at him with a worried look. “Don’t worry treetender, we will find out the answers soon enough.” The elf looked up at the hill which was looming directly in front of them. Durenda looked up at it and shivered.

In the back of the line Slink huffed and puffed as he dragged the gurney holding Elyannah along. He had turned down all offers for help saying that he was solely responsible for her condition and he would bare the load alone. Now he was regretting his decision. Who would have thought the slender young woman would weigh so
much? And in his tired state he wondering why he took responsibility in the first place. It was unlike him to do something as selfless and noble as that. He had almost made up his mind, coming to an answer, when a sweet taunting voice reached his ears dragging him out of his inner struggle.

“What a gloriously beautiful day to be out for a refreshing walk. Oh that’s right, I don’t have to walk. I have my trusty mule to cart me around,” Elyanah teased Slink. The words struck a cord deep within the thief that suddenly made him feel ashamed at the selfish thoughts he had been thinking. He then realized why he had taken responsibility for the she-thief. “How is my mule doing? A little tired perhaps?” Elyanah continued to taunt Slink. She began to giggle.

Being more than slightly exhausted Slink was in an irritable mood but the sound of Elyanah’s voice and her childlike giggle took the sting out of her words. In fact it did much to answer the question that was floating about his mind. He was doing all of this for himself not Elyanah. He wanted to be around her every second of every moment. And secretly deep down inside he was more than happy that she was so dependent upon him. All of this made him smile.

“No bad, no bad at all. I am actually enjoying all this exercise. Besides with you strapped to that gurney, I know right where you are and I can always find you when I want to talk,” Slink teased. Elyanah’s smile faded. “You know I like to talk a lot don’t you. We can spend a lot of quality time together, getting to know each other quite well.”

Elyanah’s smile had completely turned into a frown as Slink teased her.

“Don’t count on it Skullslayer,” Elyanah snapped. She quickly grew silent. Slink laughed to himself as he caught up to his friends who had stopped at a small path that ran up into the forest. It continued upward to the small hill that the fort rested on.

“Are we ready?” Raven asked. Moonstar nodded her head “yes” vigorously as Durenda slowly shook her head “no”
The companions cautiously followed the forest path navigating their way up the gently sloping hillside. As they went the trees gradually thinned away until the forest around them consisted of sparsely placed giant oaks and birches. The forest floor was covered with a thick blanket of knee high ferns and creeping vines that were covered with tiny white flowers. Occasionally a chipmunk or black furred mole would dart across the path in front of the companions. The earthy atmosphere helped soothe Durenda’s growing anxiety and for a few moments her troubled mind was at ease. As the companions climbed upward the path grew rougher and more stony as it’s incline increased. Slink found that the gurney and the wounded she-thief felt even heavier as they traveled uphill. As he grew more tired Slink found himself stumbling on gnarled tree roots and large stones that were hidden from his sight. Each time he did so Elyanah would snicker at his misfortune and offer some sort of sarcastic comment.

It was a quarter of an hour later when the companions finally reached the walls of the fort. The fort’s stony walls looked in disrepair just as Raven and Tyrahne had mentioned the day before. They were a faded gray color and looked rough and peeling and in many places large pieces had broken off and fallen to the ground. Large piles of stone chips lay around the base of the walls scattered among the tall weeds. Directly in front of the companions was a set of huge double doors standing twenty feet high made out of the same gray substance as the fort’s towering walls. They were very plain in appearance and looked as if they had been hewed out of the side of the fortress’ walls. If it hadn’t been for the faint seam where the doors actually open, a person might have mistaken them for just another part of the wall. To either side of the doors was a statue of a vaguely humanoid shaped creature. They were bulky and thick and could have been some sort of warrior, possibly dwarven if not for the strange deformities. They were obviously carved from the same stone as the fortress wall’s had been. Slink looked at them and thought about the crushing hands that had flowed out of the ground to entrap him. The strange statues stood almost as tall as the door leading into the fort. Lanneth looked up at the face of the statue on the left and pondered it for awhile. Craedus ran a hand across its leg. The rest of the companions looked up at them with awe.

“They are golems of some sort. I can sense a faint magic aura coming from them, but I don’t think they have been invoked in a long time,” Lanneth finally explained. He continued to study them.

“Definitely not made by dwarves. Too rough of a form,” Craedus said taking his hand off of the statue. The dwarf was right. The surface of the mighty statues was not smooth and polished but as rough and chipped as the fort’s walls were.

“Not made, but grown,” said a man’s voice. The companions quickly turned to see two robed men standing in the doorway. They were tall and thin, wearing plain brown robes and had clean shaved heads. They looked very similar to the four men that had visited them the night before. The double doors swung open just enough to allow entry into the fort. Raven wondered how they could have opened the massive doors without detection. Stone doors as massive as those should have made a grinding noise loud enough to alert her. And how had they opened so fast? Something strange was definitely afoot here.

“Sorry to startle you. I am Jorgan and this is Kilm,” he continued as he pointed at the other robed man. “Welcome to the home of Zem.” The both bowed.

“Grown?” the dwarf muttered to himself pondering the robed man’s explanations of
the golems.

“Yes, like a tree if you will. We raise the stone from the ground over the years and use our magics to help form it into different shapes. In this case, our guardians,” Kilm explained to the dwarf. Craedus looked impressed.

“You mean these things can really become animated?” Moonstar asked surprisingly. She threw a look of disbelief at Lanneth remembering his comment about the golems being “activated”.

“Most certainly. In times of need, the Earth Golems can be quite a power ally,” Jorgan said. He smiled and gestured at the statues. Durenda looked at the huge golems and shivered. The thought of such destructive force both sacred her and excited her. And that feeling in itself frightened her even more.

“Our masters are inside. This way if you please,” Kilm said as he gestured at the opened doors. The companions followed Jorgan into the fort with Kilm taking up the rear. As they passed through the door Craedus ran a hand lightly across them and found that they were actually made out of a granite of some sorts. He turned to look at Kilm. “Yes, we grew the fort too.” Craedus was speechless. As he walked slowly through the great doors he fathomed the implications of growing stonework. The dwarves elder’s in his homeland could shape the mountain stone around them. They could use their great magics to change the ebbs of Mother Earth into something more useful, but they couldn’t create earth, couldn’t grow it. The thought was almost unbelievable.

The two robed men led the companions to a large stone hall that was brightly lit with a variety of torches. Some rested in sconces mounted to the stony walls and others were held aloft by tall poles. Their glow illuminated the entire hall. The walls themselves were the same uninviting chipped gray stone that the outer walls were made of. Thick carpets covered the floors in bold red and gold patterns that resembled flowing stone.

“The masters are busy at the moment but have left instructions for us to make you as comfortable as possible while you wait. Please allow me to show you to your rooms so you can freshen up before feasting on the light lunch that Kilm has prepare for you,” Jorgan said. With a bow he led the companions up a narrow set of stairs that led to a long hall containing many doors.

As they walked passed them, Jorgan pointed to each one while naming a companion. Each of them were impressed with the sheer size of the fortress. To allow each of them their own room lent to the luxury the Men of Zem were offering them. With another bow Jorgan disappeared back down the stairs. The companions entered their rooms to take a look about. Each one seemed to be similar in size and decor. They were small and simple yet elegant. The floors, walls and ceiling seemed to be constructed out of the same “grown” stone that Craedus had commented about earlier but someone had taken the time to polish many of the larger chips out of the wall. The end results was a rippling effect that was rather pleasing to the eyes. Each room had a small bed, a nightstand and a dresser in it, each ornately carved from a dark wood and polished to a luxurious shine. On the nightstand was a bowl of cold water, a bowl of warm water and a towel. Craedus dropped his gear near his bed and immediately began to examine the stone walls, totally forgetting about cleaning up. Within moments the companions began to fall into their little groups. Moonstar had found her way to Gwereth’s room for another one of their conferences and Tyrahne had joined Durenda to see how she was holding up. Merrick and Lanneth went to join Raven but for some reason she had locked her door and was not answering their calls. Confused and disappointed the two joined Slink and Eylanah in the thief’s room.

Slink gestured to his friends and shrugged, “I don’t know what’s wrong with her. She has been acting weird ever since we got here. Maybe you two are finally starting to get on her nerves.” The thief chuckled at the surprised look that he got from Merrick.
Lanneth just wore the same look of indifference.

While Slink was having fun with his friends, Raven was not having a good time. Locked in her room, she stared out its one tiny window at the forest surrounding the fort. The trees were full of big green leaves and small lavender buds growing from its branches. It was a species that she had never seen before. Faumbul must have gated them far from Throffhorn indeed. When they had left their homeland it was near Season’s End and the leaves had begun to change color. As she pondered this, the real reason for her somber mood, the one that she had been trying not to think about all day, crept back into her thoughts.

Raven thought to herself, What am I going to do now? How am I going to manage to get all of these people back to Throffhorn? Maybe I shouldn’t have brought them here, wherever here is, in the first place. I definitely need their help but I am in no position to lead them. I am not a captain in the Houkahtan army any more. Those days are long past me. I have learned how to get by in the world by myself. The life of a bountyhunter suits me just fine. Maybe Moonstar’s protests hold merit. Maybe Tyrahne should be the leader of this merry little band that has been pulled together by a strange twist of fate. I wish that I could talk to my father about all this. I miss him so much. She continued to ponder her doubts as she ignored the occasional knock on her door.

A few doors down another debate of sorts was taking place.

“Young one, I share your concerns but as I see it there is nothing we can do at the moment. As far as Raven goes, I don’t think that she will even entertain the idea of finding a way home until she has found what she is looking for,“ Gwereth said.

Moonstar frowned at the priest. “What was the name of that crystal she’s looking for?” Moonstar ignored his question.

“Listen old man, I understand that she fancies herself as our leader and that our best bet for the moment is to stay together and find out where we are, but do you really think that following her around this strange countryside is our best course of action?” Moonstar asked.

“Do we have a choice?” Gwereth returned.

“I think we do. Tyrahne has prove himself to be a worthy leader when he is not fawning all over our little druidess. And he was the one that wanted to come here to the fort unlike Raven. I say that we split up and seek our way home once we find out where we are,” Moonstar explained.

“Here we are lost in some strange land and you want to separate ourselves from the warriors? Our protectors? Raven and Craedus’ skill in battle would definitely be a great help in the wilderness and Slink’s knowledge of the cities could go a long way in helping us survive long enough to return home,” Gwereth argued.

“Bah! To be rid of that fool! They do not hold to the same views as we do. They are not brothers and sisters of Thauaras. We must find a way home and return the seed of the Limbrue Tree to the High Priest,” Moonstar said with fervor.

“I know how important and urgent the news of a surviving Limburee tree is, but in the long run I think it best to retain the aid of Raven and the other. Patience little one. As long as the seed is safe with us, the glory of the Tree of Life will be returned to the world,” Gwereth said and smiled at the priestess who crossed her arms and fumed, knowing that once again the priest was right.

Further down the hall, the last room in the line, Durenda stood silently in front of her window looking out at the forest. It did little to help her forget about the longing that was growing in her heart. She missed her grove dearly. She missed the spring saplings and she missed the mighty oaks. She missed the rich earthen smell of mosses and wood, of birth and decay. She missed the faces of her druidic family. More than anything else she wanted to escape from this nightmare that her life had become and return to the familiar warmth of her grove. Her thoughts pounded in her head with a dull thud. It was as if she could feel each heartbeat throb gently in her head. If she concentrated hard enough she could almost hear a whisper within them. It sparked a
small rush of irregular energy that heightened each beat. And within that whisper it was almost as if there were words for her to hear. Almost. Durenda continued to concentrate but the whisper slowly evaded her grasp, slipping away into nothingness until she was left alone in the deafening silence. She sighed once and continued to stare out the window studying the broad leaf trees that grew there. What was she going to do? How was she going to heal the growing madness inside of her? How was she going to get home? She could feel the tears begin to well up in her eyes as a familiar hand gently touched her shoulder. She turned quickly and embraced Tyrahne, hugging him tightly, weeping against his chest. For a brief moment everything felt alright.

After a half an hour Kilm and Jorgan return, rousing the companions from their rooms. Raven finally retreated from her room but did not answer the questionable looks that she recieved from Merrick and Lanneth. The robed men lead them to a large dinner hall where a great table held a bountiful feast. Upon it laid fruits and vegetables of all kinds, a few that the companions did not recognize, along side an assortment of breads and cheeses. The companions began to eat nibbling lightly on various foods engaging in little conversation. Raven was particulary quiet and Moonstar said nothing. The priestess did manage to give Gwereth a questionable look a few times and she wrinkled her nose as she watched Craedus devour a small loaf of bread in a few quick bites. It was a short and uneventful meal. After lunch Kilm and Jorgan announced that their masters where ready to see them. The announcement had the same effect as ringing a dinner bell. Almost instantly a thread of excitement weaved through the companions. Everyone’s eyes widened and a buzz of conversation rippled through the air. Even Raven seemed affected by the announcement. For the first time she acknowledged Merrick and Lanneth. She turned to Slink and nodded. The thief nodded back drawing a questionable look form Elyanah. The level of excitement grew, almost making the companions feel anxious as the two robed men led them out of the dinner hall. Durenda grew increasingly nervous and clung tightly to Tyrahne.

Jorgan and Kilm led them down a long stone hallway to a small unremarkable room. From the small room they walked down a flight of stairs to another small room that looked much like the first. On the far wall was another set of double doors almost as large as the ones the companions used to enter the fort earlier that day. Kilm and Jorgan pushed the doors open and stepped aside. Raven noted how quietly the doors parted way. The robed pair gestured to the hall beyond. The companions quickly stepped through the doors, their curiosity growing with every step. They and entered a large hall that had to be over a hundred feet in width its far sides stretching almost beyond sight. Pillars carved in the shapes of various recognizable animal such as deer, bear, cougar, wolves, and more, ran down the length of the hall. Each one rose to the height of the hall far above the companion’s heads and seemed to keep the ceiling aloft. Craedus saw that each statue was carved from the exact same stone the golems had been.

“Grew,” the dwarf corrected himself.

Along the walls, at the same intervals as the pillars were sconces in the shapes of animals, each mirroring the giant pillars. Each sconce held a blazing torch. Lying on the floor between the two rows of pillars, running the length of the hall was a brightly colored rug. The rugs were thick and soft and woven to depict animals much like the ones on the statues. Their bright golden yellows and emerald greens were a dazzling contrast to the dull grays of the hall itself.

Standing off to the side among one of the pillars that looked like a giant badger where the four men that the companions had met the night before. They were all deep in covesration gesturing sharply to one another mixing words hastily. As soon as the four robed men saw the companions they stopped their conversation and rushed over to greet their guests.

“Ah, welcome to our humble home. I am glad that you have taken the time to listen to our plea for help,” Lurdius said. He smiled at the companions, standing there with his
hands clasped together. He was once again dressed in the plain brown robes that all the Men of Zem wore. The strangely inscribed amulet dangled at his neck. “This is Carten, Milbourn, and Joesef,” he continued and pointing at the other robed men. They all bowed as their names were mentioned. Slink’s look lingered on Joesef, the man who had created the giant stone hands that had attacked him the night before. Raven went through the introductions of her friends. When she finally got to Elyanah the robed men grew concerned.

“May I ask what all the young woman?”, Carten asked with concern.

“She was gravely wounded in battle. Her wounds have been tended to, but she is still in a lot of pain. Because of this, she can’t even walk yet,” Raven explained as the robed men gathered around her.

“Joesef. To the Well of Sorrow,” Milbourn ordered. Without question Joesef grabbed the handles of the gurney and began to pull it toward the far side of the hall.

“Wait a minute...” Slink began to say, his tone expressing the same concern that could be read on the other companions faces.

“Not to worry, your loved one will not be hurt. Joesef is taking her to be relieved of her ailments,” Carten explained. Slink wasn’t exactly sure what the man’s words meant but was reassured a bit when he turned and got the “its ok” look from Raven.

“Now. Welcome to the Hall of Tranquility and the home of Zem. To get right to the point of our untimely intrusion last night, we are in need of aid,” Lurdius said


“No, none of that. We have enough guidance from the almighty Zem. We need to know what has happen to our Earthlink and what can be done to redirect it,” Carten said. “Can’t your almighty Zem help you out?” Moonstar asked. Hearing the tone and knowing the direction of Moonstar’s comment, Gwereth placed a hand on the priestess’ shoulder in hopes of calming her.

“My dear child of nature, Zem does not intervene in the affairs of mortal men. He instills us with his knowledge in hopes that we will make the best use out of it. If it is meant to be, we will make it so,” Lurdius explained. The robed man continued to smile at the priestess long after he was done talking. It was almost unnerving. Durenda looked away from the man’s probing eyes. Even Moonstar was unsettled losing much of her steam. She grew silent, an angry comment lost on her lips.

“And how can we be of help to you? There are many ways in which we are unfamiliar with this realm,” Raven said trying to make her question sound as vague as possible. She had no intention of informing the Zem that they were from a different realm, gated here by the wizened sage Faumbul.

“We need some one to go into the nearby mining city of Ironmoore. There we will need them to find all the information about the Silverlink mines that they can. We believe that it is the recent reopening of the mines that has caused the disruption of our link with Mother Earth,” Milbourn explained.

“Reopening? What exactly caused them to be closed in the first place?” Craedus asked.

“The miners there had found a great vein of precious stones deep with in the earth. It was a boon for them and the city of Ironmoore. Great wealth was brought up, but also something bad. Dark twisted creatures from the UnderEarth realms swarmed into the mines, devouring many of the workers. The mines had to be closed. It has been over a decade since then. For some reason, unknown to us, the people of Ironmoore have decided that it is now safe enough to reopen the mines,” Lurdius explained.

“Hmmmmm,” Craedus said stroking his beard as he pondered Lurdius’ words. “Hmmmmm,” Slink said fingering the blade of a throwing knife as he thought of all those gemstones in the mines.

“It sounds dangerous. Why us?” Merrick asked. Everyone seemed to echo Merrick’s concerns.

“Long have we been away from the cities of man. We would be at a disadvantage
there. You are hearty adventurers and would have an easy time traversing the city. I am sure that you are at ease within the confines of their walls,” Milbourn explained. Most of the companions agreed to this but Tyrahne and Lanneth were hesitant. “Besides, Zem was one of the few groups to oppose the destruction that the mines have caused. We are none to welcome in Ironmoore. No one would be likely to volunteer information to us,” the priest continued.

“And what about these other organizations that opposed the mines? Who are they and where are they now? Maybe they could help you find your answers,” Raven said.

“Alas, they have all been driven out of Ironmoore since the mines had first opened years ago. Fortunately we had the opportunity to leave by our own choice. Many of the others were not as fortunate. I fear that none of the others now remain within the city,” Lurdius explained. Raven studied the priest’s explanation. “That’s why we need your help. Iron Moore can be dangerous for people in our situation.”

“And what exactly would there be in it for us?” Slink asked impulsively. He looked at the robed men with business man eyes.

“We have little in the way of treasure but we can give you some gold coins from Ironmoore and the guarantee of treasure within the mines itself. Also we would be in your debt. Perhaps our magic could be of aid to you in the future,” Carten suggested. Many of the companions wondered if those magics could aid them in getting back home.

On a hunch Raven spoke up. “And what do you know of Mygellex? Would there be any within the mines or perhaps in Ironmoore already?” She asked.

“Ah, you seek the magic fossils. Yes. I believe there is rumored to be some deep within the mines, but getting it would be a perilous quest indeed. Perhaps too risky for you at this time. The foul creatures that invaded the mines a decade ago may still be down there,” Lurdius explained.

Raven was both excited and disappointed at the same time. There first glimpse at a chance to return home was just out of reach.

“Would you excuse us for a moment?” Raven asked.

“But of course,” Lurdius said with a sly toothy smile. He pressed his hands together and his smile grew. Raven shook off the uneasy feeling Lurdius conjured in her mind and pulled the other companions together a dozen feet away from the robed men. They huddled in a large circle to discuss what they learned from the Men of Zem.

“We will be able to get home if we can find some Mygellex in those mines. And the Zem are willing to aid us magically. Maybe they can take us home,” Raven said.

“Maybe,” Lanneth said indifferently. Raven was a little disappointed at the elf’s lack of enthusiasm. She had thought she was on to something but Lanneth obviously didn’t agree with her.

“We are definitely going to need some gold if we are going to survive in this strange land. Faumbul’s supplies are not going to last forever,” Slink said.

“Can we trust them?” Moonstar asked.

“Do we have a choice? They can aid us in return for our help. The Zem have not been given us any reason not to trust them,” Gwereth answered her.

“I would love to see those mines,” Craedus said.

“But think of the dangers,” Merrick said.

“I will protect you boy. I am a master at navigating mines and thwarting their pitfalls,” Craedus said rather loudly.

Slink muttered under his breath, “As long as you don’t have to follow a map to do it.”

“What?!” Craedus snapped at the thief, but Slink played innocent as if he had said nothing. He smirked at the dwarf’s back.

“Then it is settled,” Raven said. She turned to the robed men and stepped toward them. “We will help you.”

“Good, good. One last thing. To be able to restore our link, we need a spirit of all four elements to go on this quest. If your group passes a simple soul scrying test, we will be
able to continue,” Lurdius explained.

“A soul scrying test? That sounds rather dangerous to me,” Merrick said in a worried tone.

“It is purely informational I assure you. It will determine weather you and your friends will be compatible with the Earthlink, Carten explained. Raven eyed the robed man and remembered how there was always four masters together every time they met with the Men of Zem. It was the same as the four elements needed to restore the Earthlink. It made sense to her. Once again she gave her friends the nod of “ok.” The companions reluctantly agreed to undergo the test and allowed themselves to be lead to another chamber far below the Hall of Tranquillity.

The three Men of Zem led them into a large, roughly circular cavern, that had a high domed ceiling. There was a raised dais at its center. The platform was circular and about ten feet in diameter. There were four large columns, equally spaced apart from each other, surrounding the outer edge of the platform. At the top of each column was a large semi-transparent crystal the size of a man’s fist. Slink wondered how valuable they were and how difficult it would be for him to sneak one of the chamber unseen.

“This is the Chamber of Rituals. All you have to do is enter the dais one by one and clear your mind. The crystals will determine which element your spirit is attuned to,” Lurdius continued to explain. He gestured first to the raised platform and then to the crystals high above.

“And what of Elynah. She is part of our group. Is she to be tested too?” Slink asked suddenly worried about his missing patient. How long was he going to be without her? What were the Men of Zem doing to her? Milbourn sensed the thief’s unrest and tried to reassure him.

“She will be joining us shortly and will be tested like the rest of you. Shall we begin with you?” the robed man asked and pointed at Raven.

Slowly Raven approached the platform, examining it as she did, and walked up the four steps leading to the dais. She moved to the center of the platform and looked about the chamber unsure of what to do next.

“Clear your mind please,” Carten said with a soothing tone.

Raven did just that. It took a moment to consciously clear her mind but soon she was feeling that same sense of emptiness that she felt when in combat. A sense of instinct, a lack of conscience. Her friends watched in amazement as two of the crystals grew dimly, one with a pale yellow hue the other with a pale, almost nonexistent blue hue. Carten scribbled down the results with a “hmmmm” and an “ahhhh.” He didn’t seem impressed with the results. Raven was led off the dais to the other side of the chamber by Milbourn as Slink was led onto the dais by Carten. The process was repeated by the thief. But this time it took longer. A lot longer. Slink found it hard to clear his mind and had to be told to stop talking and concentrate by Carten many times. Eventually the test began. This time one of the crystals flared brightly yellow. It shone bright enough to cast eerie shadows upon the caverns walls. Moments later he was being lead off the dais.

“Is that it? I didn’t feel a thing,” Slink asked.

“The crystals are just mirroring the song of your spirit. Nothing has changed within you,” Lurdius answered the thief.

“Oh,” Slink said somewhat disappointed. At the very least he was expecting a tingling sensation. Anything to prove that something had happened during his time on the dais.

Lanneth was next. One of the crystals glowed brightly red. Merrick was after that. He caused a crystal to glow yellow and another to glow dimly red. Tyrahne made one crystal glow dimly green and another to glow dimly blue. Durenda stepped up to the dais next, a bit hesitantly, and watched as one of the crystals flared in a deep crimson flash that was almost too blinding to look at. The Men of Zem excitedly scribbled notes on their piece of parchment. Durenda took a step off the dais and faltered slightly as a
surge of adrenaline rushed through her causing her to become dizzy. In the back of her mind a deep voice seemed to call out to her for a moment and then was silent. Tyrahné quickly rushed up the few steps to the pale druidess and grabbed her weakened form. He flashed a look of concern at the men of Zem but got no response. The Men of Zem were still talking excitedly among one another. As the ranger helped Durenda down, Moonstar strutted onto the dais.

“This test is pointless. I already know my spirit is one with nature,” Moonstar said confidently.

“We will see,” Carten said eyeing the priestess cautiously.

The companions watched as all four of the crystals glowed with a soft white light. The men of Zem actually looked as confused as the companions did. Without a word Moonstar left the dais to be replaced by Gwereth who made a crystal glow green, another to dimly glow red and yet another dimly glow blue. Craedus was the last one to enter the dais and caused one crystal to glow green. The companions were pondering the significance of the test among themselves when another person entered the dais. It was Elyanah. She was walking stiffly, but she was walking. As she reached the center of the dais she stood as tall and steadfast as any of the other companions had. As the companions gapped at the sudden, unaided appearance of their new acquaintance, a crystal glowed a bright blue color. Lurdius gathered all the confused companions and lead them all back up to the Hall of Tranquility.

“You are all probably wondering about the test,” Lurdius asked the obvious question.

“And about Elyanah,” Moonstar added.

“Your friend was restored by our healers. Being linked to the elements of the lands, it is easy for us to reconstruct certain aspects of the human body. Elyanah had already been healed to some extent and was well on her way to recovery. We just boosted it along,” Lurdius explained. Moonstar looked at the recovered woman who was doing her best to ignore Slink.

“As for the test, I will can you that your group has passed it. Each color represents an element, a primary force, a building block of Mother Earth herself. Yellow for air, red for fire, green for earth and blue for water. A single glowing crystal means that a person’s spirit is tied to one true element. If the crystal flared one color that person intune with that element. A combination of colors means that the person is tied to many elements, but not as strongly. Tied to nature if you will. We needed to know if there was at least one of each element strongly represented in your group,” Carten explained. One person of each element will be needed to restore the Earthlink. And the stronger the bond the better.

“And what of Moonstar and Raven? Moonstar’s crystals all glowed white, while Raven barely registered any,” Gwereth asked somewhat confused.

“It is said that there are rare occasions when a person is strongly tied to all elements and is considered holy in an element sense. That seems to be the case with Moonstar. But often times than not, that will change latter in life to be a very strong link to one element such as Durenda’s link to fire,” Lurdius explained.

Durenda was surprised to hear those last words come out of Lurdius’ mouth. First the dreams, then the fascination with fire. Now she was actually tied to the element of fire? It was becoming too much to handle. She shrank down into the shadows to avoid everyone’s looks.

“As far as Raven, I am not sure what her results means. The test could have been inaccurate due to our limited access to Mother Earth. She is probably just linked to the powers of nature on a more limited basis,” Lurdius continued.

“So with Slink’s link to Air, Craedus’ link to earth, Elyanah’s link to water and Durenda’s and Lanneth’s link to fire, you should be able to finish our quest for us,” Milbourn announced.

“So, who needs who now?” Elyanah whispered to Slink, teasing him.

“Just because you can get around without me now doesn’t mean you still don’t need
me,” Slink said and winked at Elyanah.
   “You wish guildslayer,” Elyanah snapped at the grinning thief.
   “So what now?” Moonstar asked.
   “The quest you are about to embark on is a perilous one. I suggest you leave for Ironmoore in the morning and familiarize yourself with the city. Gain some experience and knowledge before heading out to the mines. You will know when the time is right,” Lurdius said.
   “And how will we know that?” Merrick asked.
   “By these,” Carten said. He carefully handed out a small crystal pendant, that dangled at the end of a thin silver necklace, to each of the companions and instructed them to put them on. “The portal to our link is only accessible at certain times of the year. Usually only at season’s beginning and end. These crystals will begin to glow as the time of ascension arrives. They will also afford you some limited protection from elemental attacks, should you run into hostile forces.” As Carten explained this the companions looked at their crystal pendants with wonder. Lanneth was especially excited about receiving the magical pendant and began studying it extensively. Durenda looked at hers and wondered if the crystal would react to her illness in some strange way. She expected it to suddenly glow bright red as did the crystal in the chamber of Rituals. After long moments she dropped it inside of her tunic and tried to forget about it.
   “Please enjoy your stay here at the fort. Relax for the remainder of the day and get a good nights sleep. We will meet you in the morning and help you prepare for your trip to Ironmoore,” Lurdius said.
   Milborn gave them instructions on how to get to the fort’s courtyard, the stone gardens and their rooms from the Hall of Tranquility. The four men of Zem bid them good day and headed back toward the Chamber of Rituals.
   The companions were led back up to their rooms by Kilm and Jorgan and left alone to ponder the results of their test and the forthcoming trip to Ironmoore.
Raven stood poised in a swordman’s crouch, her crowned long sword raised boldly in front of her. The sun shone brightly reflecting off of her polished Houkahtan breastplate. The two foul ogres that had ambushed her unit stood to either side circling her. They were thick creatures standing a good foot and a half taller than her own six feet. They were dressed in ragged leather mail and covered in rotted animal skins and furs. Yellow and chipped tusks protruded from their slobbering mouth’s as they taunted Raven about her imminent death. The other knights of her unit were doing their best to defeat the main ogre army while Raven had pursued these two into a forest clearing. The thought of these foul creatures being bold enough to cross into the fairs lands of Houkahtan to pillage and plunder enraged her. Her thoughts of anger were interrupted when suddenly both ogre snarled at Raven and rushed her with spiked clubs raised, one from each side.

Raven mused to herself, They are actually acting rather smart for a change. For ogres anyway.

She waited until she could almost feel their rancid breath on her face before crouching low. The ogres brought their clubs around in a wide arc attempting to squash Raven into a bloody pulp. Both clubs found air where Raven had once been standing. Finishing their savage swings, each ogre smashed the other squarely in the head. They screamed and yelp, hopping around rubbing lumps on their heads. Raven took advantage of her new position and swung out her mighty sword at the first ogre, slashing him behind the knee caps. With a blood curdling scream the ogre fell to the ground cursing. It’s partner turned and swung at Raven, who was just getting up from her crouched position. She skillfully spun to the side and dodged the hulking creatures attack. She lunged forward and drove the tip of her sword through the creatures neck.

The ogre attempted to say something in its guttural language but it just came out as a single gurgle, a long drawn out sigh that sounded wet and bubbly. It fell to the ground with a thud and laid there motionless. In the meantime the other ogre was trying to drag itself away from Raven and toward its club. Beads of sweat rolled across its brow and down it’s hairy face as it painfully clawed its way to it’s fallen weapon. With a few quick leaps Raven caught up to the ogre. She stepped down hard on the ogre’s hand as it reached out for its weapon. There was a loud snap and the ogre screamed again. It desperately tried to reach it’s weapon with its other, unbroken hand.

“I’m sorry but I can’t let you have your weapon. But here, have mine,” Raven told the fallen ogre. With a quick swipe of her sword, the ogres head left its shoulders.

Smiling, Raven bend down to wipe the blood off of her sword with the ogre’s tattered tunic. She stood up and silently congratulated herself on a job well done. Then she noticed something that she hadn’t during the heat of the battle. The forest had grown silent. Almost too silent. Had the other knights finally defeated the rest of the ogre army? There was no sound of battle to be heard. No cries of victory, no sound of defeat.

She quickly ran back to the spot where she had left her friends. Fear and anxiety filled her viens. As she rounded a particularly dense copse of trees, a grisly sight came into view. Broken and bloodied bodies dotted the landscape. There were a few ogre bodies here and there but most of them were the corpses of her fellow Houkahtan knights. She shuddered once and dropped her sword to the ground. It fell with little sound into the tall grasses. She knelt down beside one of the fallen knight. It was Sir Galden, the youngest of their troupe. He had recently been knighted and was always full of life and enthusiasm when he talked about all the glorious battles he would partake in. Now he
was just dead. Raven looked around and could see the remain of many more of her friends, Sir Joel, Sir Madren, Sir Kyles, Sir Baldera and many others whose names swirled about her mind. She bowed her head and said a silent prayer. Suddenly a loud voice rang out behind her, startling her.

“Traitor!!” screamed a man’s voice.

Raven looked up through tear soaked eyes and saw Sir Lucas. He was an opposing man to say the least. Standing well over six and a half heads high, he was broad shouldered and thick. And the way that his bushy eyebrows curved downward in the middle as he frowned was extremely intimidating. He stood there with his hand on the pommel of the great sword that was strapped to his hip, staring down at Raven. Other battered and bruised knight stood behind him.

Raven asked with a weak and confused voice, “What?”

“Do not play me for the fool Raven. I have uncovered your plot to corrupt and destroy the Houkahtan knights. No one listened to me when I said that letting a woman into our ranks was disastrous, but now they will know their mistake,” Sir Lucas said with rage, the crease between his brow growing ever sharper.

“What are you talking about Lucas?” Raven asked. Her voice was choked by shock and grief.

“That’s SIR Lucas to you Raven. Now that I have found out the truth about this ‘ambush’ you are no longer my equal. If you ever were. All shall now learn how Raven, spoiled daughter of the Houkahtan’s Armsmaster, aspired to be a man’s equal and failed miserably. And in that realization decided to take revenge by leading her unit into a trap,” Sir Lucas yelled.

“Are you crazy?! I would never do such a thing!” Raven exclaimed. “They were my friends!” She frantically gestured at the bodies that laid around her.

“No you are the one that is crazy! You have killed a dozen of your fellow knight. Seize her!” Sir Lucas barked the order.

Two of the knights standing behind Sir Lucas rushed forward and grabbed the arms of Raven, who was still kneeling on the ground. She tried to stand but her captives held her down. Her sword still lying in the tall grass a few feet away. Sir Lucas stepped forward and stood right in front of her.

“Look about you Raven. Do you see what you have done? Do you see the evil that your jealousy has wrought?” Sir Lucas asked angrily.

Raven looked around again and tears filled her eyes once more.

“My men were better than this. They should have easily defeated the ogres. If I would have known this to be the outcome I would have stayed and took there place. I would have died before any of my men.” She hung her head and wept. “This should have never happened.” The words bubbled out between sobs.

“Yes, you are correct, this should have never happened. And it wouldn’t have if the council would have listened to me and denied you application to the knighthood. Now you must pay the price,” Sir Lucas said. Raven could hear Sir Lucas draw his sword from his sheath. The slow raspy sound of steel on venomous steel sliced through the air. Raven knew the sound of a sharp blade being drawn. She looked up to see him standing in front of her with his blade raised high. “In the name of Balendine our great Lord in the heavens and in the name of our King Holldine the Mighty and in the name of your fallen comrades which you lead to their deaths, I smite thee. Go to the fiery depths of Hell knowing that your victims have been avenged,” he continued.

Sir Lucas swiftly brought his sword down upon Raven’s neck. She had but a moment to scream “NOOOOOO!” before everything when black....

* * *

It was cold and dark. The wind was blowing and he had awaken in the arms of his father. Looking up, he could see an expression of worry and confusion on the man’s
face. Sensing his son’s eyes upon him the man looked down at the boy.

“It’s ok son, we will be all right. Just a moment further Slink and we will be safe in the forest,” Slink’s father said reassuring the boy.

Slink took a look around and saw that his father was carrying his small six year old frame, running toward a dense forest. Along side his father was his mother dressed in a billowy white nightgown. Tears ran down her face cutting paths through the dirt that smudged her cheeks. Slink twisted a little in his fathers arms and managed to look around his broad shoulder. Far behind them their village was afire. People were running about screaming and yelling, some carrying valuables out of their house, others pulling loved ones away from their blazing homes. Squinting his eyes Slink could see other forms dancing about the flames. Small forms. Misshapen forms. It was about that time that Slink’s mother yelled out in terror.

“Gregor! The goblins are coming!” Slink’s mother screamed.

“Run faster Anabelle! We will be safe in the forest,” Gregor yelled to his wife.

Slink’s view of the approaching goblins was blocked from sight as his father began to run faster. He could hear his father panting as they ran. Slink could only imagine how hard it was to run while carrying him. His father was a big man, a strong man, but the sprint to the forest was taking a toll on him. Slink could also hear the frightened sobs of his mother alongside him. Slink could tell from the long drawn out sobs that his mother didn’t think they were going to make it to the forest. She was slowly losing hope. More than anything he wanted to leap from his father’s hold and confront the goblins. Using all the skills his father had taught him he could win. He just knew it. He was just about to say something to his father when the man fell. Both father and son hit the ground with a bone jarring thud. Shaken, Slink got up and went to his father’s side. His mother was already trying to help him up. An agonizing scream escaped his father’s mouth. Pain and agony laced the gut wrenching cry. An arrow protruded from a bloody wound in his thigh. He reached down and tried to pull it out. The feathered end of the arrow snapped off leaving the arrowhead buried deep in his leg.

“It’s no use. Run you two. Hide in the forest. I will hold them off as long as I can,” Gregor said panting heavily between each word. He drew two long daggers from their sheaths.

Anabelle screamed, “Nooooo!” She reached down and threw her arms around him. Gregor whispered to his wife. “Anabelle, please, you must leave me. You must save our son. You know what the prophet said about him.” Slink’s Mother sobbed and shook her head “no”. “Anabelle PLEASE!” Slowly she pulled herself away and looked at him. Tears streaked down her face. She leaned close to him and kissed him gently on the lips. She mouthed the words “I love you” and got up, stepping back toward Slink. Slink had a short dagger in his grasp and was waving it about.

“I will save us father!” Slink said boldly.

“No Slink. You must flee into the forest and protect your mother. Now go!” Gregor ordered his son. Slink looked at his father for the last time as his mother grabbed his hand and started to drag him away.

“I will father.” Slink shouted as he was pulled toward the forest. Slink never looked back but he could hear steel on steel as the goblins came upon Slink’s father. Moments later there was a loud scream and then all he could hear was the goblin’s laughing and cackling behind them. His eyes welled up with tears.

As mother and son fled the forest that loomed ahead of them grew closer and closer. Within moments the pair of them would be hidden safely among the darkened trees. They were a dozen yards the forest’s edge when the first shadow emerged from the trees in front of them. At first Slink wasn’t exactly sure what it was until the moonlight revealed its face. It was a goblin. Then another one joined it. Then another and another. Slink’s mother stopped with a scream. She threw her hands up to her mouth as the filthy things approached. All the woman could do was stand there and scream hysterically overcome with a paralyzing fear.
Without warning a trio of goblins attacked them from behind. They took advantage of the opportunity the screaming woman afforded them. She was doing little to defend herself as they laid thier filthy little hands on her. The goblins swarmed over the screaming woman and carried her off into the dark depths of the forest. Slink ran after the escaping mass of beasties. One of the remaining goblins attempted to detain the youth, bearing its teeth in an attempt to scare the child as much as it had Slink’s mother. Much to it’s dismay the foul little creature learned that Slink wasn’t the usual child. He had no fear of the creatures that had destroyed his family. The sharp knife in his hand cut deeply into the goblin’s forearm. It squealed in pain, barking at it’s cohorts in a language Slink didn’t understand. He stepped forward, ready to finish off the yelping goblin when a net was thrown over his head. He struggled in vain but could not escaped the entanglement he was trapped in. Something hit him in the back from behind and knocked him to the ground. A sharp pain radiated out across the back of his head in a dull starrning pattern. A thick pressure grew behind his eyes and caused sparkles to dance in his vision. He rolled over and was lying on his back when a twisted face appeared before him.

“What’s doo weez have heers huh? Some sweetmeats? Yummy?” one of the goblins asked. The other goblins began to laugh. Slink could hear the sounds of blades being drawn. He closed his eyes and pictured his mother and father in his mind. All three of them were on a picnic enjoying a nice summer day. He had a smile on his face as he felt the first sharp pain. Then all went black....

*     *     *

They had all warned him about his obsessive curiousity of magics. What it would do to him if left unchecked. What kinds of troubles it would cause. The elders had even gone so far as to ban him from practicing his magics within the confines of his own home. Lanneth was surprised that the other elves hadn’t decided to banish him from the forest entirely driving him out for his so-called pagan activities. There was no way that he was going to give up his magic. It was what he was made of every fiber of his being, the very reason for his existence. Lanneth figured the only way that he was ever going to have his works accepted by family and friends was to show them how important it was to him. How beneficial it could be to the village. How his magical arts could benefit all of elf kind.

Lanneth muttered absentmindedly to himself. “I will show them. I’ll show them all.” A gleam of chaotic energy twinkled in his otherwise dead eyes.

There had been a recent plague of small dark creatures that had been twisting and corrupting areas of the elves home, the Forest of Silver. No one knew for certain where the little beasts came from. One day they crept out of the dark heart of a nearby woods and over ran the elves silvery home. “Gremlocks” the forest elder had called them. Lanneth savored the name, rolling it over his tongue repeatedly. He had seen plenty of them. Barely over two feet tall they had angular faces with large black eyes and rust colored skin. Patches of hair and scaly points covered their bodies and long fingers. They communicated with a series of squeaks and growls and seemed to be extremely hungry at all times. It wouldn’t have been long before the Forest of Silver was stripped bare.

The High Elves all agreed that the Gremlocks had to be stopped but no one could decide on a solution. Lanneth knew the solution. Extermination. Lanneth had shared his opinions with the village elders, even offering to use his magics to destroy the foul beasts. Their reaction wasn’t an easy one. At first the others abhorred the idea of a mass slaying of the forest dwelling Gremlocks, no matter how evil they were. They were children of the forest just as the elves were. But soon the Gremlocks had brought their plague within reach of the elves forest home. Within reach of the elves’ sacred grove, the elders finally agreed that the Gremlocks had to be stopped even if that meant
destroying them. Lanneth was overjoyed at their change of heart. It was finally a chance to prove the usefulness of his powers. He once again offered his magics but the forest elder declined Lanneth’s offer to root out the foul little creatures and slay them with his fire magics. That was when the elders decided to address Lanneth’s fanatical behavior toward his studies of magical fires by banning their use within the village. Disappointed and angered, Lanneth stormed off to make plans of his own.

And that is were he found himself then. Deep within his secret laboratory working on a magic wand that would store and amplify his power. Soon he would have enough power channeled into the wand to enable him to destroy every last one of the evil Gremlocks. He walked over to his work table and stared at a wand that rested in an old sconce that he had mounted there. It was long and thin and had been carved out of the same silvery wood that made up the forest surrounding him. There was a large ruby fastened to the end of the wand by a large silver claw. Lanneth smiled and placed both hands around the ruby. He closed his eyes and began to chant. The room grew still as Lanneth’s words reverberated through the air. Slowly a red glow shone through the gaps between his interlaced fingers. The ruby grew brighter. Lanneth stood there for long moments concentrating on the magics flowing through him and into the ruby.

Slowly the door behind Lanneth opened. Through it came a beautiful elfin maiden. Unseen by the maiden, Lanneth’s eyes snapped open at her arrival. A smile curled the corner of his mouth and that familiar chaotic twinkle danced in his eyes.

“What are you doing down here?” asked the elf maiden.

“Nothing Lindalanna. I am busy with my studies. Please leave me,” Lanneth said continuing to concentrate on the wand.

“Lanneth are you still working on that wand? I thought you promised me that you were going to give up on that crazy scheme of yours. You know what will happen if the elders catch you, don’t you?” Lindalanna asked. At the word “crazy” the smile fell from Lanneth’s face.

“Bah! The elders will rejoice after I have freed them from the Gremlocks!” Lanneth laughed loudly. Lindalanna walked around the worktable and stared at the prone figure in front of her.

“Have you completely lost your mind Lanneth? Don’t you remember? The elders drove off the Gremlocks months ago. This obsession that you have with your fire magics has driven you insane,” Lindalanna said, worried that the elfin mage had indeed gone mad. Lanneth stirred for a moment when he heard Lindalanna’s words. She thought he was going to answer her when once again his body grew still. The room was awkwardly silent for a long time.

“The only insanity I see around here is that the elders have turned their backs on my magic. Just think of all the benefits that they are loosing out by being so singularly close-minded,” Lanneth finally said. His voice was soft and sounded as if it came from far away.

“Talk about a one track mind. Look at you Lanneth. All that matters to you is this stupid fire magic. Your greatest love is given to one of the most destructive forces known to us elves. The thing you cherish the most is going to be your downfall,” Lindalanna said sharply gesturing at the wand that was still clutched in Lanneth’s hands.

Lanneth said nothing. He just stood there with his eyes closed and began to chant again.

“I don’t know how I ever fell in love with you,” Lindalanna said. Lanneth chanted louder. “If you do not stop this nonsense I am leaving you. If you are going to destroy yourself, you will do it alone.” Lanneth chanted even louder. “I am going to get the forest elders. Maybe they can talk some sense into you.” Lindalanna turned toward the door and stepeled away from Lanneth. Suddenly he reached out a hand and forcefully grabbed Lindalanna’s arm. A mask of rage twisted the elf’s delicate features.

“NO! No you will not!” Lanneth shouted at the elf maiden. His knuckles turned white
as it gripped Lindalanna arm even tighter.

“Let go of me Lanneth. You are hurting me. How could you end up this way? You were always so gentle before,” Lindalanna asked.

“Will you forget about going to the elders and stay with me?” Lanneth asked a bit more calmly but still gripping her arm tightly. Lindalanna hesitated a moment until the pressure on her arm was unbearable. “Yes,” she blurted out painfully. Lanneth turned to look at her and smiled evily. “That’s a good girl. Now watch as you witness my greatest creation.” Lindalanna looked deep into Lanneth’s eyes and shuddered. What she saw there was pure evil. Little flames of wickedness danced in his pupils. Madness had finally overcome him.

Lanneth cackled with pure delight as he watch the realization dawn on Lindalanna face. He turned back to his work. Closing his eyes he began to chant furiously. The glow of the ruby intensified so brightly that it hurt Lindalanna to look at it. And the brighter it grew the more withered Lanneth looked. Sweat broke out across his brow and ran down his weathered face. Lindalanna watched in horror as the small drops of moisture evaporated off his cheeks and brow. Lanneth was being consumed. She could watch no more. Even if Lanneth was now corrupted by the magics he so loved, she could not bare to see them destroy him. She leapt forward and snatched the wand out of his hands and lifted it out of the sconce.

“NOOOOOOO!!” Lanneth’s scream was agonizing. It was as if someone had pulled his very soul from his body. Lindalanna held the wand up high as Lanneth jump across the table and tried to claw it from her grasp. Wild arcs of flame shot out of the wand and ran down her arm, burning her as they tried to return to Lanneth.

“No Lanneth! I will not let you destroy yourself. I love you to much to be the witness to your demise!” Lindalanna screamed at Lanneth as the pain began to take her. Chunks of bubbled flesh covered her arm as her hair burst into flames. She slowly backed away from the work table putting distance between Lanneth and herself. Fingers of flames gently caressed the walls of the laboratory.

“I must have it Lindalanna. It is so cold without it. PLEEEEEAAAAASSSSE!” Lanneth pleaded. Lindalanna twisted her body and pulled the wand away from Lanneth. With agonizing steps Lindalanna steered her blazing body toward the exit. Lanneth jumped over the table and landed on Lindalanna driving her to the floor. The force of the crash jarred the wand from out of her grasp sending it sailing through the air. It seemed to tumble in slow motion as Lanneth watched in sail toward the far wall. With the sound of broken glass, the ruby shattered against the thick oaken wall. There was the deafening sound of rushing air and then the entire room exploded with a ball of fiery death. The wand consumed itself along with Lanneth, Lindalanna and the secret laboratory. And everything became cold and dark....

*   *   *

It was after midnight and it was cold especially considering Merrick was running through the streets of Throffhorn wearing nothing but the tunic he had wrapped around his naked waist. The bard mused at the thought of how quickly something good could turn bad and then a how that bad situation could turn even worse. Not more than ten minutes ago he was lounging in a luxurious room at the Nobleman’s Inn with a beautiful young lady that he had met that afternoon. The couple had taken in a fine dinner and some finer wine and eventually went to her room at the inn. Merrick knew that she had someone special in her life, her beauty betrayed that fact the moment their eyes met. No one that pretty stayed single for long. But it didn’t matter to him. He would be gone by first light and hopefully with a little gold in his pocket.

What he didn’t know was that her husband was captain of the Throffhorn city guard. The couple had just slipped out of their clothes and into something a little more comfortable, namely the bed, and began to kiss when there was a loud bang on the
door. It sounded like someone was trying to breakdown the door with a heavy metal object.

“I know your in there!” screamed a deep voice. Another bang. And then another. Merrick jumped out of the bed just as the door splintered down the middle leaving a gapping hole down its center. A hand reached in and fumbled for the door knob. Merrick could see a thick browed, bearded and enraged face looking through the great rend in the door.

“I see you in there with my wife you skinny little pretty boy. When I get my hands on you I will tear you apart limb by limb, starting with the littlest one!” yelled the angry man. Then he laughed uncontrollably at his jest.

Merrick’s eyes grew wide with realization. He grabbed his clothes and ran for the window. He tried to put on his trousers as he ran for the exit but stumbled in the process. He heard the door splinter and groan as it cracked open wider and decided to forget about dressing. Hearing his mistress scream in terror convinced Merrick. It was time to go, by any means possible. He jumped out the window completely naked and shimmied down a drain pipe to the cold road below. He wrapped his tunic about his waist forming a makeshift skirt and headed down the road away from the Nobleman’s Inn. He could hear the angry shouts fade into the growing distance behind him as he ran further and further away. For a moment he had thought himself safe until the angry voice called out to him once again. Merrick was surprised to hear the voice ring out of the darkness in front of him. How did the captain get ahead of him?

“I don’t know where you got to boy, but I am coming for you!” screamed the man.

Merrick ran down a nearby alley and took every twist and turn he could in hopes of losing his assailant. But the longer he ran the closer the voice seemed to get, sometimes in front of him and other times behind him. Merrick ducked around another corner and came to an open courtyard. He started to dash across it when he saw figures in the shadow ahead of him. At first he worried about them seeing how he was dressed, naked except for the tunic tied around his waist, but hearing the angry voice behind him he forgot all about being bashful and continued running. He had just passed the first of the mysterious people when he tripped and fell forcefully to the ground.

“Ho ho, I really got ‘em good Pa.” said a boyish voice above him.

Merrick rolled over to see who had tripped him. It was a farm boy dressed in bib overalls and sandals. He wasn’t wearing a shirt but he had a wide brimmed straw hat on his head. His father walked up behind the boy and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Good job my boy. We finally caught him.” said the boy’s father congratulating him. Merrick laid there wondering what the heck was going on. Who were these people and what did they want with him? Suddenly he remembered.

“Farmer Joe and little Eddie?” Merrick asked.

The farmer and his son laughed and took a step toward Merrick.

“By golly the feller remembers us. How grand.” said Farmer Joe with a thick smile. Merrick inched his way back from the advancing farmer and his son. There was a strange look in their eyes that really unnerved him. His assailant’s eyes burned with a hunger that suggested they were going to devour the bard alive. Merrick’s head abruptly struck something hard behind him. He looked up to see a nobleman standing there smiling at him.

“Do you remember me? You seduced my wife,” the nobleman asked.

“And what about me? You slept with my daughter,” asked another voice. Merrick turned to see a huge blacksmith pounding his palm with a mallet. Next to him was a sorcerer of some sorts.

“And you broke my sisters heart. ‘You’re the only one for me,’ you repeatedly said until you ran off the miller’s daughter,” the sorcerer said.

Suddenly Merrick was surrounded by men, each asking him if he remembered them and the women that he had seduced. “Remember me?” continued to echo in his head
until he though his mind was going to burst. Merrick was about to scream when the voices suddenly stopped. The angry husband from the Nobleman’s Inn broke through the ring of men that encircled Merrick.

“I know you remember me. It’s payback time,” said the angry man who had chased Merrick in the first place. He reached toward Merrick with a huge gloved hand. As he got it around Merrick’s throat, the others grabbed for the bard too. The last thing Merrick remembered was a hundred hands grasping him and tearing him apart. There was a fiery pain in his lungs and then in all went black....

* * *

Tyrahne stood in the center of the woodland clearing taking in the natural setting around him. This was the best part of the day for him. After the chores were done, when he had the time to walk out to this spot, Tyrahne would reaffirm his connection to nature. He was born of nature, lived with nature, he was part of nature. The ranger closed his eyes and listen to the sounds of life within the woods that surrounded him. Birds chirped, insects buzzed and hummed, the wind rustled through the tall grasses. He could feel a gentle breeze on his face. The setting sun warmed his skin. Everything was as it should be. Just like it had been the day before and the day before that.

Tyrahne had become one with his surroundings enjoying a moment of peaceful bliss when he felt a sharp pain on the top of his head. It felt as if something had fallen out of a nearby tree and struck him. He looked up to see nothing but clouds and birds. He rubbed his head and wondered what had caused it. He looked on the ground and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Then he felt it again. This time a sharp prick on his shoulder. He looked up once again and saw nothing but a sparrow flying by. He looked around the woods and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement. It was the sparrow. It had turned around and was now swooping toward him. Tyrahne instinctively ducked and barely missed behind stabbed in the eye by the bird’s sharp little beak. How strange he thought. It was very odd behavior for the sparrow. Maybe he was too close to the bird’s nest. Tyrahne turned to leave when something bounced off his back. It had fallen from above. He looked up to see another nut fall from the tree above him and land near his foot. Tyrahne studied the acorn nudging it with his foot. As his mind puzzled over the unexpected delivery he realized that the breeze had disappeared. The air around him was completely still. Puzzled, he looked up in the branches and saw a pair of squirrels. He smiled and thought that he was going to watch the two of them gather their winter’s harvest. Instead he was treated to a barrage of falling nuts. The pain of squirrels jumped from branch to branch releasing a rain of acorns upon the ranger. Were the squirrels were bombing him? He took a hasty step back to avoid the falling nuts. He was still confused, trying to sort out the animal’s attacks in his head when he heard the buzzing. He felt something bite his neck.

“Ouch!” Tyrahne exclaimed slapping his neck.

Then another bite and another. His head was suddenly engulfed in a swarm of mosquitoes. Swatting at the nasty little things he quickly backed out of the clearing. The mosquitoes followed him. The thick cloud of insects quickly caught up to the retreating ranger. He quickened his pace, running backwards to escape the painful bites he was now suffering. Tyrahne was so absorbed in escaping the swarm of bugs that he didn’t see the raccoon in his path. He promptly fell over it. Tyrahne looked up to see the angry critter rushing for him, its bared teeth.

Tyrahne thought to himself, What is going on here? Has nature gone crazy today? Why is the forest attacking me?

He got up quickly, defending himself from the rabid raccoon, and ran away from the clearing looking for the safety of his cottage. But the faster that he ran, the further away his cottage seemed to be. Tyrahne became anxious as adrenaline pumped through his
veins. Without warning the forest grew dark and the trees around him began to tremble. The bushes began to sway and the flowers began to cry in anguish. A loud creaking groan issued from a nearby elm tree. With incredible speed a large branch swatted at Tyrahne. The ranger barely dodged the attack. Fear gripped him. With a cry he doubled his efforts to return to his cottage.

As he ran trees and bushes slapped him with their branches. Tyrahne ran blindly through the forest, his arms held up in front of his face to protect himself. From somewhere in front of him Tyrahne heard a loud booming noise that sounded like a thunderclap. He froze in his tracks wondering what was attacking him now. He lowered his arms and looked at the beast that towered in front of him. A large oak had uprooted itself and was now inching its way toward Tyrahne. A large section of bark in the tree’s trunk had been peeled away leaving a jagged opening that looked like a gapping maw. Tyrahne stood there petrified, fear rooting him in place. He could not comprehend how all the elements of nature had turned against him. What had angered them and why were they attacking him? He had always been so close to nature, a part of nature, how could he not sense this come? Had his god forsaken him? Had nature itself forsaken him? And if so did that mean he had forsaken himself?

This was all utter madness! Tyrahne screamed to himself.

The questions continued to whirl within his mind as the giant oak tree came crashing down upon him. He had gotten no answer. He was left with only darkness....

* * *

Durenda stood in the middle of her grove, head in hand, wondering why this was happening to her. Why couldn’t she just live a normal life as the Treetender of her grove? That was all that she had ever wanted. Sweat ran down her face and across the length of her arms. Her palms were clammy and her forehead was hot. She was burning up with fever. But this was no ordinary sickness that plagued her. The fire started from deep within. Whatever was consuming her was doing so from the inner fibers of her being, from her very soul. She took a step back in attempt to flee the grove. The last thing she wanted to do was bring harm to the sacred grove. A fiery pain shot through her abdomen. She grabbed her side and screamed. The pain was becoming unbearable.

“Why?” the word croaked out of her mouth.

She took another step and felt the pain surge through her body. She fell to one knee and her vision blurred. Her whole body felt so hot. Her throat became dry and she could not swallow. Her lips became chapped and bled in several places where they had cracked open. As she knelt there she looked down at her outstretch hands. They were dry and peeling. Small blisters were forming all over her skin. She screamed again as a wave of unbearable heat raced through her. She would have cried had there been enough moisture in her body to form tears. She looked up to the heavens and demanded to know why this was happening to her. She tried to voice her question but her throat had swelled shut. Her skin suddenly darkened and whisps of smoke curled up from her arms and face. She opened her mouth to scream and suddenly she burst into flames. Soul shattering agony washed over her in the moments it took for the flames to consume her. But the fiery assault didn’t stop there. It took but a moment for the expanding flames to engulf the sacred grove turning its trees into piles of ashes. And beyond that Throffhorn burned, then all of Houkahtan. Within her deadly cage of white hot flames Durenda watched the whole world burning within her flames. And then all she saw was darkness....

* * *

Moonstar stood on the balcony of her temple looking out over the hoard of people
who had gathered to honor her. Young and old alike had come to honor her. Common folk and noblemen alike. Men and women from her hometown. The elves from the forests to the south. Even the dwarves from the tall mountain peaks to the north. They had all come to cherish her.

"Moonstar! Moonstar! Moonstar!" roared the crowd.

"Ah, my people love me. Listen how they worship me," Moonstar said to herself with glee.

She smiled and waved once at the crowd. They continued to chant her name with renewed fervor. She basked in the glory of their attention for a moment before heading back into the temple. She could hear the crowd’s chanting even inside the walls of her dwelling. By the time Moonstar had reached her private chambers the smile of delight she worn had faded completely. She sat down in front of her mirror ignoring the hooded figure that sat in the darkened corner behind her.

"This has got to end little one," said the hooded figure with a deep voice.

"What has to end? Do you hear that outside? They love me," Moonstar asked.

"I have watched over you and protected you since you were a child. I know this is not you. It is not too late to go back," the hooded figure said.

"Do not presume to tell me what to do old man! You were not there when I needed you," Moonstar spat the words out of her mouth.

"There was nothing to do be done. It was his time to go," the hooded figure said.

"I could have changed that with your help." Moonstar said as she turned away from the enshrouded figure.

"Do not presume yourself greater than the power of life and death. Even the Gods are not that powerful," the hooded figure said.

Moonstar stood up and faced the hooded figure. He face had turned a crimson red.

"I AM THE GODS!!" Spittle flew out of her mouth as she screamed the words. "Do not forget that old man!!!" Rage filled her body. She was flush with anger, the veins bulging in her neck. Her fists clenched so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

"Look at you Little One. Look at how the power has twisted you. Not that it has ever done you any good. You couldn’t even save Gwereth...." the hooded figure started.

"NOOOOOO!!!!" Moonstar screamed her angry suddenly transforming into anguish.

She raised her fists in the air toward the hooded figure. Twin bolts of pure energy streaked from them illuminating the room with a flash of intense light. The lightning struck the hooded figure and hurled his stiffened body across the room, smashing him into the far wall. There was a sickening crunch and he fell to the floor like a discarded ragdoll. His body laid there smoldering in two places where the lightning bolts had struck him.

"...Gwereth.... I could have saved him if it weren’t for you," Moonstar said solemnly.

She reached down and pulled the hood away from the figure’s face. She studied the beautifully chiseled face that was framed in short curly blonde hair. It had a seasoned yet youthful look to it. It looked nothing like the wise voice had suggested. “So the mighty Thauaras falls like all the rest. The Old Gods are no more. Long live Moonstar.”

She raised her fists into the air and began to chant her name in perfect harmony with the fanatics outside her temple. “Moonstar! Moonstar! Moonstar!” She began to laugh. A shadow of darkness slowly crept across her face. Her visage slowly twisted, the image grew sharper and harder, a bitterness filled her laughter. Insanity’s tendrils dug deeper within Moonstar’s soul fuelled by the lust for power. And from that point on the world was covered in darkness and despair....

* * *

Gwereth looked across the room at Moonstar. He considered how regal she looked in her high priestess’ robe. The way that she carried the scepter of Thauaras in her folded arms accentuated her gracefulness. She was the pillar of the community and the
favorite disciple of Thauaras. She could do no wrong in the eyes of her people. In
essence she was goodness personified. Gwereth had definitely guided her to a level of
greatness that even surpassed his expectation. She was his greatest accomplishment.

So if everything was so perfect, why did Gwereth feel so empty inside? Could it be
that he had spent his whole life guiding her toward this moment. That he had forgone
any hope of rising in the ranks of Thauaras’ most favorite to help mold her? Had he
sacrificed everything for her, a spoiled little brat that played at being a priestess of their
almighty god? Everything that she had accomplished was because of him. They were
his accomplishments and it was his credit that she had used to get to the top. He could
have been the High priest instead of a lowly guide and warden. The educator of the
undeserving. His life had become empty and meaningless. It was all because of her.

Gwereth tried to shake the desperate thoughts from his mind. How could he resent
Moonstar for her accomplishments? She had worked hard and deserved her
advancement. And he should be proud of his involvement. He had helped her achieve
her goals, her dreams. He had guided her to greatness. So where was his thanks?
Where was his reward?

The conflicting feelings within Gwereth were tearing him apart. He tried to ignore the
battle his thoughts were waging and walked over to stand behind Moonstar. She sat in
front of a mirrored back dresser and was combing her hair.

“My dearest Gwereth, would you be so kind as to get my silver barrette from the table
next to you, please?” Moonstar asked sweetly.

Gwereth thought to himself, My dearest Gwereth? How condescending is that. All
that I have done for her and now I am to be her servant too? The anger welled up within
him. The jealousy poisoning his mind. It was overpowering.

“Gwereth? My barrette please?” Moonstar asked sweetly.

Gwereth muttered to himself, “demanding ungrateful wench.” He pick up a
candelabra that stood next to Moonstar’s silver barrette in his left hand. He stood there
for a moment listening to the two distinct voices in his head. One had finally won over
the other. With a mighty grip that turned his knuckles white with anger he spun around
and struck Moonstar across the back of the head. Blood splattered across her mirror
covering it with a trail of crimson gore. Her limp body fell to the floor with a thud.

“There’s your barrette bitch,” Gwereth said satisfied.

Insane jealousy burned within his eyes as he looked down at the bloodied form of his
former student. He began to laugh hideously as he nudged her still form with his foot.
His laughter began to fade away as he stared at the still figure. For long moments he
did nothing else. The room grew as silent and still as Gwereth had. A little worm of light
broke through the dark insane fog that clouded his mind. Suddenly the sight of
Moonstar’s blood on the mirror and the stain on the carpeting was to sickening to look at.
Gwereth turned away from the body of his former student. A wave of nausea washed
over him. The room began to spin.

“What have I done? Oh God what have I done??” Gwereth screamed out loud. His
body shook violently as the truth set in.

Where there was once hideous laughter there was now uncontrollable sobbing. In
one brief moment of unbridled jealousy Gwereth had taken from himself the one thing
that was most dear to him, his “little one,” his Moonstar. He sank to his knees and
huddled over the Moonstar’s fallen body. Tears streaked down his face. He lifted up her
head and stroked her sticky hair. Gwereth looked at his hands, and with horror and saw
how Moonstar’s blood stained them. Her blood was on his hands. It was more than he
could take. As quickly as jealousy had taken over his mind, grief and despair seized
him. Gwereth reached into his robe and pulled out one of his ritual daggers. He looked
down at Moonstar’s body and spoke.

“Forgive me little one,” Gwereth said gravely his soul clenched in the fist of
hopelessness. Gwereth tore at the front of his robes exposing his chest. He sighed
once and plunged the dagger deep into his broken heart. He slumped across
Moonstar’s body without a sound. His bleeding body joined that of his dearest little one, dead on the floor of the Thauaras temple.

* * *

Craedus stood upon a stony ridge that extended out from a particularly remote peak in the Serpentine Mountains. He looked out over the majestic mountains and reveled in the sheer beauty that he saw. No matter how many time he came back here, it would never cease to amaze him with the way that the sharp mountain peaks pierced the bright blue sky. The way that the rising sun glistened off the snow covered mountain tops. The way the crisp morning air filled his lungs with the vigor of youthfulness He definitely felt at home here.

A twinge of pain coursed through his back forcing him to sit on a nearby rock.

Craedus thought to himself as he stroked his long gray beard, my body is not what it use to be. But I am glad that I could have made it up here on more time.

He gently stroked the length of his beard, which was now hanging below the large golden belt buckle that he wore on the thick dragonskin belt the encircled his wait. He slowly stroked his graying beard, running his hand down its length until it reached it’s tip, the place where he once tied his lucky golden string. That was a long time ago. But it had been two hundred years since he laid it to rest along with the body of his long lost friend Slink. He had given it up as a token of his undying friendship with the thief. Craedus laughed to himself as he thought about how Slink had finally gotten his string in the end. The laugh quickly turned into a hacking cough as Craedus tried to catch his failing breath. Craedus had outlived all his friends. Even the long lived elfin mage Lanneth. Craedus had heard a rumor some fifty years back about the high elf succumbing to his magics in some failed experiment. He never bothered to go to the funeral still angry with the elf over the harsh words that they had exchanged upon parting ways. But at the end of all things Craedus found his anger softening and slowly being replaced with regret. In a small way he found himself missing the elf. But his friend was long gone now. They all were. And that saddened the dwarf. But Craedus had enjoyed a long and fulfilling life with some friends coming and some friends going. They had enjoyed many glorious adventures together and accomplished great feats of valor. There was only one thing in his long life that he had failed to do. He had never found the Lost City of the Dwarves. It was the one and only promise that he had failed to keep. And it had cost him his home. He would have been willing to cut off his own beard if it could have erased the shame that his failure had brought down upon the Stonebeard name. Years back, when he had finally taken a wife at an old age, he thought that he could have finally let his quest for the Lost City go. And for a time he did, but with the untimely death of his wife he started the doomed quest anew. With no wife or children or home to call his own, there was nothing else left. He continued on with the quest he had started so many years ago. The quest that had united him with his friends so long ago. He thought again of Slink. A single tear rolled down his ancient face. Craedus sighed and accepted his fate.

Now here he was a dying and crippled old dwarf sitting on a mountaintop that he had searched a dozen times over, never to fulfill is one and only dream in life. Craedus’ coughing subsided but he could feel the growing pain in his chest and the numbness in his hands. In was only a matter of time now. He laid down on the rock he had been sitting on and stared up at the rising sun. It slowly peeked over the mountain tops filling his eyes with its golden brightness. He closed his eyes and thought about a great and mighty dwarven city filled to the ceiling with mounds of golden treasure. He smiled one last smile before his spirit joined his wife’s in the realm of Khom.

* * *
Elyanah stood in a huge room of mirrors. There were mirrors on the wall, the ceiling, even on the floor around her feet. She carefully moved about the room looking for a way out. As she did she caught glimpse of herself in a nearby mirror. She stopped and did a double take. In the mirror in front of her was a vision of herself dressed in nobles clothes. She looked down at her clothes and saw that she was wearing her normal adventuring outfit. A red blouse and tan trousers with her leather mail vest over the top. She looked back up at the mirror again and saw that the image was not of a noble woman but a vision of her as a Flaming Skull. She turned to look at another mirror and she was dressed as a nun. She spun around and caught more images of herself. She was an Empath, an assassin, a queen, a peasant, a barmaid, a whore, a member of the city guard and on and on. There were so many Elyanah’s spinning around her that it was making her dizzy. She clamped her hands to her head attempting to make it all stop. Everywhere she looked she saw Elyanahs grinning at her. Finally could not take it any more.

“WHO IS THE REAL ME ?!?!?” Elyanah screamed out in anguish.

There was one last rush of vertigo before the room stopped spinning. And when it did, the room had changed. Standing in front of her was a single full length mirror. It was tall, standing a full three feet over her head, and bordered with elegantly sculptured silver borders. It hung in mid air, directly in front of the flustered she-thief. She pulled the hands away from her face and looked at the vision that was looking back at her. It was an Elyanah dressed in a beautiful silk wedding dress. Flowers were weaved into her hair and tied around her wrist. The Elyanah-bride looked genuinely happy. Elyanah smiled at the reflection wondering who had made her so happy. Suddenly a form appeared behind the Elyanah-bride putting his hands around her waist. He was dressed in a formal shirt, a single flower similar to Elyanah in his lapel, marked him as the groom. He looked up at the real Elyanah and smiled. It was Slink.

“NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!” Elyanah screamed.

* * *

The companions awoke early the next morning feeling like they hadn’t slept in days. Everyone had a lingering recollection of a nightmarish dream from the night before. No one spoke of them as they gathered in the dinner hall of the Fort. Most of them foregoing conversation completely. Two of the fort’s servants were awaiting them.

“I hope that everyone slept well?” Kilm asked with a smile.

The companions looked at each other warily but no one spoke. Craedus finally broke the silence

“I don’t know about the others but I feel like death warmed over,” the dwarf said. He absentmindedly rubbed at his eyes and yawned. The others suddenly looked at the dwarf with surprise, shocked by what he said about “death”, but still did not talk about their dreams.

“I am so very sorry to hear that,” Kilm said. He looked sincerely disappointed as if he had done something to cause the companions displeasure.

“I am also sorry to inform you that the masters are busy this morning and can not join us for your departure. They did want us to wish you the fondest of fare wells and to thank you once again for helping them in their time of need. They have left these packs for you,” Jorgan said. Jorgan and Kilm handed the companions two bundles. “The masters said that you would know what they are.” Tyrhane and Raven took the packages and slung them over their shoulders adding them to their other gear. The servants served the companions a quick breakfast of thinly sliced cheeses, sweet breads and fresh fruits. When the companions were finished the two men showed the companions to the main gates and once again wished them well. The companions were quickly ushered outside. The fort’s door closed with the same eerie silence behind them.
Raven turned to the others and spoke, “Is everyone ready to go to Ironmoore?” Everyone muttered something less than enthusiastic and began following Raven down the slope and back to the main road. Moonstar stopped for a moment and looked back up at the fort.

She thought to herself, Is that it? Why do I get the feeling that there is more to the Men of Zem that meets the eyes? She stood there until she heard Gwereth calling for her.

“Are you coming little one?” the priest asked. He considered his words and remembered his dream from the night before. His face grew increasingly pale. Moonstar turned and caught up to Gwereth. To Moonstar he looked visibly shaken.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“It’s nothing,” Gwereth responded and quickly turned away from her.

“Gold coins?” Slink mumbled as the companions walked out of sight, his eyes staring intently at the package that Raven was carrying.

Up in the fort, just out of sight, stood the four men of Zem peering out of one of the fort’s windows. They watch the companions as the group headed downhill.

“What if they do not choose the right path? All could be lost,” Milbourn asked looking worriedly at the others.

“They will take the right path,” Lurdius answered.

“How can you be so sure Lurdius?” Carten asked looking just as worried as Milbourn had.

“Why that is simple Carten, we now know what their greatest fears are. And fear can be a great motivator.” The four robed men looked at each other and laughed evilly as they watch the companions disappear into the forest below.
Ironmoore

The companions walked solemnly along the road to Ironmoore, some anxious about what they were going to find in the city and others still distressed by the nightmarish dreams they experienced the night before. There was conversation between until the city came into sight. It was as if the sight of the grand city sprawled out ahead of them had blown away the dark cloud that hung over their heads. The verbal floodgates were opened. Everyone began talking excitedly about all the wondrous things they were going to find once they were within the city walls. Of course Moonstar had to be the pessimist of the group.

“I can just imagine the lack of a civilized religious caste we will find in this mining town. I bet they don’t even have a temple dedicated to the Thauaras faith in there,” Moonstar said suspiciously.

“City,” Gwereth said.

“What?” Moonstar asked

“Not a mining town but a mining city,” Gwereth said.

“Shut up old man,” Moonstar snapped. Gwereth tried not to smile as his ward crossed her arms and stared straight ahead as they walked.

Raven was glad to see that Moonstar was back to her usual grumpy self. Maybe that meant that everyone else was starting to come around and be themselves once again. The whole episode with the Men of Zem had shaken up her friends. That worried her. She, herself, had been acting unusual avoiding Merrick’s questionable looks all morning. Obviously he hadn’t gotten over the fact that she had distanced herself from him and Lanneth by locking herself in her room.

Raven thought to herself, he will just have to get over it. I am not about to discuss my growing doubts and shortcomings with him.

She looked back at the rest of the companions. Durenda looked a bit more fidgety than normal. She was always flighty and had a nervous air about her as if something was always occupying her thoughts, but today she was visibly shaken. Something weighed heavily upon her mind and it shone clearly on her face and in the way that she moved. Even Lanneth looked changed. He was still the quiet withdrawal mage as usual, but there was a fierceness that burned in his eyes and betrayed his methodical mind. His inner thoughts were consuming him.

Raven thought, boy, that’s really going to help settle everyone down, especially Tyrrahne and Lanneth. Her sarcasm was lost in her thoughts. As the city walls of Ironmoore came into sight it was clear that this city was just as busy as Throffhorn was.

There were a dozen merchant wagons coming and going from the main city gate. More often than not the wagons were loaded down with heaping piles of unrefined ores. Full ones were coming in from the north and empty ones headed out in the same direction. The companions were nearly to the city gates when Slink started to pester Raven about the two sacks again. He really wanted to know what the Men of Zem had put in them and continuously offered to carry the “heavy” bags for her.

“For the last time, NO,” she snapped.

“But why?” Slink asked innocently

“You know exactly why I won’t let you carry them,” Raven said.

“Raven, I’m hurt. Do you really think that I would steal from you?” Slink asked. He gave her his best hurt look and she returned with a “don’t even try it” look that made him forget about the whole idea. At least for the moment.

Elyanah gave Slink a nudge. “So, you don’t have to carry me anymore Guildtraitor and
all of the sudden you forget about me?” She meant it to be sarcastic but it came out sounding like something else. Almost immediately she regretted saying it, especially when she saw the flirty look she was receiving from Slink.

“I would never forget about you darling,” Slink said charmingly. He moved closer to her with open arms. Elyanah frowned and shoved him away. Slink just laughed.

The companions walked up to the city gate and waited their turn. Hey were standing behind a few merchants wagon. From the look of things, they were going to be waiting awhile.

Slink began to whine, “more waiting?”

Raven gave Slink a look. “I think the first thing we should do is find an inn and book a room. We can take care of things later,” she said to everyone else. The others seemed to agree with this. Once again the companions grew silent, lost in thought. They milled around the gate area waiting their opportunity to enter the city. When the guardsman waved them over signifying that it was their turn to be inspected, the companions eagerly approached the group of sentries. Meerick was the only one to hesitate, The sight of the city guard reminded him of his awful nightmare.

Raven smiled at one of the guard and he smiled back. “Could you tell me where we are?”

“Why, Ironmoore of course,” the first guard said. He was still smiling at her as he let his eyes drop a little to take in the full view of her figure. Another guard quickly took visible stock of the remaining companions.

“No, I mean what kingdom?” she asked.

The first guard looked at her a bit oddly, “ummm, the fair lands of Auiden?!” He suddenly felt annoyed by Raven and waved her through the gate. He didn’t know what was wrong with her and why she had asked such a strange question. He just knew that he wanted her out of his sight. And quickly.

Raven shook her head, “hmmm. I see. Well thank you.” She led the others in through the gate and into Ironmoore.

The other guard looked at Raven just as strangely but watched her lustfully as she walked away.

“She’s a beauty,” a third guard said as he patted his friend on the shoulder who nodded yes. “And she is in pretty good shape.” His friend guard nodded again. “It’s that kind of woman that is going to blacken that ogling eye of yours some day.” His friend laughed.

“As long as she takes care of me afterwards, if you know what I mean,” he said and winked at the second guard. They both laughed suggestively.

Moonstar had wandered up by Raven and was looking over her shoulder at the laughing guards.

“What is that all about?” she asked.

Raven shrugged. “Men will be men.” She smiled at the priestess who feigned a smile back.

As the companions wandered through the streets of Ironmoore they noticed that the city was definitely a lot like Throffhorn. The roads were paved with a thick cobblestone and tall angular buildings towered on either side of them. There was the usual things that indicated that Ironmoore was a trade city by nature. The streets were filled with lean-to and makeshift stands. Each were filled with various wares including fresh fruit, leather goods and mining equipment. Ox drawn carts and wagons passed the companions traveling to and fro through the city toward unknown destinations. Raven noticed that most carts entering the city were filled with unrefined ore while most leaving the city were filled with crates. That meant there were blacksmiths in town. And where tradesmen like that gathered people were sure to follow. People that had a list of goods they needed to buy and information they wanted to sell. Maybe someone could help them locate some Mygellex. Raven looked around a the crowded street.

It was very busy and everyone seemed to be in a rush to get somewhere. Lanneth
felt cramped in at once. The hustle and bustle of civilization was overwhelming. The city walls seemed to close in on him and there were few trees to be seen. Tyrahne was feeling the pressures of the city too. The lack of nature and open spaces was unsettling. The ranger definitely felt uneasy but was starting to get use to city life. Durenda had been a big help with that. And he hardly noticed the other people who rushed passed him as he talked with the druidess. Raven was glad to see that he was coping with the whole situation. The last thing she needed was two of her friends succumbing to their fears and doing something impulsive. Something that would jeopardize their quest and their ability to get home. The companions walked down a few streets until they found an inn that was near the marketplace and the Miner’s District. The inn was called The Miner’s Shovel. It was a tall, three story building, that was in relatively good condition. It needed a fresh coat of paint but otherwise looked sturdy. And best of all it look inconspicuous.

They walked inside and found that the place was well furnished and quite roomy. Raven went up to the front desk to rent rooms for the ten of them.

“Rooms for ten please?” Raven asked politely.

“Ten?” the receptionist asked. She seemed astonished by the sheer number of the companions.

“Yes. Ten,” Raven repeated. The receptionist was still staring at them in amazement.

Raven fished out a pile of golden coins from one of the sacks from the Men of Zem that she was carrying and poured them unceremoniously on the counter. The receptionist’s eyes dropped from the companions and stared, with equal amazement, at the pile of gold. With a smile and a twinkle in her eyes she began filling out the necessary paperwork. Slink’s eyes also lit up when he saw the gold coins.

“I knew it! I knew it!” he shouted as he pointed at the coins.

“Settle down fool,” Moonstar snapped at the rouge.

The receptionist handed Raven a small key ring that barely held the ten brass keys attached to it. Before leaving Raven asked her for directions to the local Adventurer’s Guild and the Moneychanger’s House. Slink was especially curious about the last request. Raven quickly tried to memorize all the unfamiliar street names that the receptionist was reciting for her. She thanked the woman and the companions headed back into the hustle and bustle of the city streets.

“So....what’s the deal with the Money Changer’s house? Going to make a withdrawal?” Slink said patting the hilt of his sword. He laughed at his jest but Raven ignored it.

“Renting rooms for the week used up most of the gold that the Men of Zem had given us. We are going to have to find a place to trade in our Throffhorn gold if we are going to stay in this area for any length of time,” Raven explained.

“I could always find some extra coins for us,” Slink said looking deviously at a richly dressed man that was walking by.

“Our luck you would get caught. We wouldn’t want to get into trouble and prove Moonstar right would we?” Raven asked. Slink shook his head ‘no.’ She left Slink thinking about it.

“Hey! Who said that I would get caught,” Slink asked suddenly.

On the far side of the Merchant’s District and down a street near the Nobleman’s District the companions found the Moneychanger’s House. To Raven it looked like a miniature fortified mansion. Standing to either side of the house’s entrance was a burly warrior. They were dressed in platemail and wore large horned helms on their heads. Each one had a long beard, one red and one blonde. In each of their hands was a finely crafted halberd. A huge sword was strapped to each of their hips. To Merrick they looked like tall versions of Craedus. Both of the guards stiffened as the companions approached the Money Changer's House. They did nothing to stop them from entering but kept a wary eye on the group.

The inside of the house was very spacious. A few well crafted chairs were strategically
placed near coffee tables. The floor was covered with a thick red velvet carpeting. A narrow gold and red rug ran across the room to a tall counter. There was a wiry looking man dressed in a fine suit standing behind it. His small beady eyes examined the companions as they entered the building. He was obviously the Moneychanger. He motioned to Raven. As she started to walk toward him he gave her a strange look and waved anxiously.

"Please mind the carpet by staying on the rug," the Moneychanger said in a nasally voice.

Raven looked down and saw that she had walked to the side a bit to make room for her friends and had step off the rug with her left foot. She moved to the center of the rug and walked to the man. The others followed her careful, not stepping off the rug. When no one was looking, Slink deliberately tapped the carpet with his foot.

"Just couldn’t resist could you?" Elyanah asked frowning at the rouge. Slink shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

As Raven reached the counter she noticed that there were two more guards standing just behind the Moneychanger off to one side. They we not as big as the guards outside and they only wore studded leather mail. But to Raven they looked just as capable as the others. Their hands were resting gently on the hilt of their weapons. Leading off to the left Raven saw a hallway that ended in a huge steel door. It was also guarded by similar men-at-arms. As she turned her attention back to the Moneychanger she could hear Craedus mumbling behind her.

"Just look at were the guards are placed. The windows are unfortified and I don’t see any back up mechanisms to protect this place in case the guards fail. Definitely not the work of dwarves," Craedus grumbled. Raven was about to hush him when the Moneychanger spoke.

"Do not worry little fellow. This place is total secure. My warriors are experts at arms and if for some reason they would fall, my associate is here to help. Jenkins?" the Moneychanger clapped.

Stepping out from behind the wall beside the Moneychanger was a regal looking man dressed in finely woven silk robes. He looked like a high ranking mage. The companions were impressed. Slink let out a long and sarcastic “ohhhh” and “ahhh” which he was rewarded with a jab in the ribs by Moonstar.

"Little fellow?" Craedus asked as he raised an eyebrow to the Moneychanger. He ignored the dwarf’s questioning look.

After the moneychanger had given the companions a moment to admire Jenkins he spoke, “that will be all." Jenkins bowed and stepped back behind the wall. “So, what can I do for you and your little army?” The man’s voice was full of contempt.

"My name is Raven. Me and my army would like to exchange these.” She dumped out the contents of her sack.

Gold and silver coins spilled out onto the counter. It was all the money the companions had brought with them from Throffhorn. The moneychanger’s eyes lit up for a moment as he watched the coins dance across the counter’s top. One coin rolled his way. As it slowly rolled toward the edge of the table the moneychanger slammed his hand down and stopped it before it rolled off the counter. He picked it up and examined it closely.

“Hmm," It was all that he said for long moments. “And where are these from?"

"They are Houkahtan gold and silver crowns," Raven explained. The companions watched him study the coin.

"Never heard of this...How-ka-tan was it?" the moneychanger asked. Raven nodded. The man bit into the coin and looked at it again.

"So how much will you give me for them?" Raven asked.

"You have roughly three hundred fifty gold here, give or take a few silver. I can give you five to one for them. Seventy-five gold talons," the moneychanger said uninterested. The man set the coin he had been examining back onto the pile.
“Seventy-five! That’s it?!?” Slink was obviously agitated. Raven calmed him down. “We will take it,” Raven said. Slink looked at her with surprise. Moonstar leaned close to her. “That’s all?! Are you sure about this Raven? That is all the gold we have left,” Moonstar said. “It will be enough,” Raven said.
The Moneychanger swept the coins into a sack and handed it to one of the guards. He walked down the hallway and went through the huge door at its end. The man began to count out the seventy-five Talons that he owed the companions. “Money, money, money....” Slink babbled as he watched the moneychanger count out the coins. The rogue made an attempt to help gather up the coins and put them into Raven’s sack before Moonstar stopped him. “I don’t think so thief,” she said.

At the word ‘thief’ the Moneychanger’s guards stiffened grabbing the hilts of their swords. Instinctively Raven’s hand did the same. Slowly she calmed herself and let go of her weapon.

“If your business is done here....” the moneychanger said sharply. Raven knew that was a polite way for him to say “get out”. She grabbed the sack and led the others out. “And watch the carpet please.” Slink followed closely behind Raven, his eyes on her sack the whole time.

“Sometimes I think you like gold more than anything else in the world,” Elyanah observed. “Not more than you,” Slink said flirting with her. Elyanah blushed and dropped the subject as she thought about her dream.

The companions headed out of the Moneychangers house and proceeded to walk directly to the Adventurer’s Guild. It wasn’t long before they were standing before a huge stone build. It looked much like a basic square fortress with a tall tower sticking out of its center. There was no guard posted at the front door so they walked right in. Immediately Slink and Craedus felt at home. It was like walking into their favorite pub back home. The main room was packed with adventurers of all sort, warriors of all kind, mages, rouges, even a bard or two. Most of them were drinking and having a good time, some busy chasing women and some busy telling wild stories.

“OK people, let’s split up and see if we can track down a little work,” Raven ordered. Craedus immediately went up to the bar and ordered some ale with a silver crown that he had managed to hide from Raven. He struck up a conversation with a group of dwarves that were also enjoying a tall mug of stout ale. Slink ran off to find trouble with Elyanah close behind him.

“She didn’t stay mad at him for very long did she? I hope he doesn’t corrupt her. I don’t need two fools bothering me,” Moonstar grumbled. Gwereth just shrugged as he followed the priestess into the crowd.

Durenda was a little intimidated by the lustful looks that she was getting from many of the guild’s patrons so she clung tight to Tyrahne’s side. The ranger did his best to stare down anyone that happened to let their looks linger a bit too long on Durenda.

Merrick had pulled the now-hooded Lanneth off to the side to get a better view of the crowd. Lanneth figured that Merrick was looking at the scantily clad barmaids. It didn’t matter to him though. He just wanted to find a quiet corner were he could ignore the crowd and study his spell book. From behind him Merrick could hear an argument start. The bard tore his gaze from a particularly beautiful red-headed barmaid and turned to see three men sitting at a table. Two of them looked like any other adventurers in the guild but the third had a strange leather sash across his chest that had many strange vials and tubes strapped to it. Leaning against the wall next to him was along spear with strange feathers and furry tails attached to it.

“I told you not to call me that!” said the man with the sash. “But you are a Butterfly Collector” said the first adventurer. He laughed and slapped
hands with the other adventurer.
   “You said it Jojo,” said the second adventurer.
   “How many times do I have to tell you I collect Genjons. Crafty little critters they are. Only a few of them are bugs. The rest are lizards and furry little rodents,” said the man with the sash.
   “OK, so you are a Bug Collector then,” Jojo said. The man laughed again. His friend spit ale out of his mouth as he suddenly caught the infectious laughter. The collector put his hands over his head and shook it back and forth.
   “You guys are impossible,” said the collector.
   Raven had made her way through the crowd. Everyone that she had asked about Mygellex had never heard of the crystal. Even the mages in the crowd were clueless. She explained the crystal to them, and while they agreed that it sounded wondrous, they did not know where to find any. Slink and Elyanah caught up with her.
   “You pig,” Elyanah snapped.
   “Hey, with a tush like that it would be a shame not to pinch it. How was I to know it was yours. What were you doing bent over like that anyways?” Slink asked the fuming she-thief.
   “I don’t even want to know,” Raven said. Slink winked at her. “Any luck?” Both the thieves said “no.”
   “One of the barmaids told me that there is a board on the back wall were people post jobs. Maybe we can find something about the Mygellex on there. Or at least a job to make some gold before we all starve to death,” Slink said.
   Raven rounded up the other and found that no one had any luck trying to track down the crystal. They all wandered to the back of the guild and found the Postings Board. It was basically just the back wall with all sorts of notes tacked to it. The companions scanned the array of different colored parchments in hopes that something would interest them. Some of them were unreadable, some were in foreign tongues, others seemed to be written in a kind of code none of them ever seen before.
   Craedus read from the lower half of the board. “‘Wanted! A group of mighty warriors to help clear out a particular nasty group of giants in the Blue Peak Mountain range. Please see Lord Blackton at the Arena for more details.’ That sounds promising.”
   “Giants sound dangerous,” Merrick said.
   “I agree with our not-so-bold minstrel. The last thing I want to do is be squashed by some 25 foot giant for a few gold coins,” Moonstar said. Merrick gave her a sheepish look.
   “Hey listen to this. ‘A few good swordsmen needed to protect the coach of The Dancing Handmaidsen as they ride onto Brighnon for their next show. Much gold offered and other fringe benefits.’ I like this one,” Slink said with a smile.
   “Figures you would find the one posting that involved women Skullslayer,” Elyanah said. She looked irritated.
   “Hey, that sounds good to me to,” Merrick said. He exchanged a mischievous smile with Slink.
   The companions continued reading the postings until they had decided on three jobs that sounded promising. Raven made note of the jobs and tucked them away for further discussion back at the Miner’s Shovel. As they left the Adventurer’s Guild a scruffy looking man stepped out of the shadows and watched them go. He nodded his head affirmatively to himself.
   Scruffy man said to himself. “Yep, we’ll be seein’ those folks again.” He smiled a grin that showed missing teeth and walked back into the shadows.
   The companions made their way back to the Miner’s Shovel for a late supper. Once in the Shovel’s dining hall, they pulled two tables together, ordered their food and started discussing the postings they had discovered.
   “This is what we have found. A miner’s train needs protection to and from the mines. We have a little experience doing the bodyguard thing, well at least playing the part, and
it would keep us close to the Silverlink mines,” Raven explained. She looked down at her pendant and saw that it was still dim. None of the others seemed to thrilled about more guard duty.

“The next job involves a local mage that needs adventurers to go into the nearby forest to collect some reagents for him. The posting said that there maybe some contact with ‘carnivorous poison ivy’” The others discussed the job between themselves which quickly turned into a rejection of that posting too.

“The last is a posting that offers a lot gold and minor magical items for the return of a person named Jaxxon. It doesn’t say if this man is a wanted criminal or not. He just has to be returned alive. Slink and I have experience in this line of work, but it may prove to be difficult to capture him with a group as large as ours.” The others discussed it at length. More than once Raven heard the words “magic” and “gold”.

When it didn’t look like there was much headway being made, Raven offered the only other choice, “we could check out the Silverlink mines to see what we are up against as far as the Zem’s quest goes, but that will not get us any gold.” The companions again began to discuss the pros and cons of each mission when a richly dressed man approached their table.

“Ah, hollo there. My name is Raspin. Are you the adventurers that have recently been to the guild inquiring about work?” he inquired looking over the companions.

“Yes we are. What do you want?” Raven asked.

“I am the courier for Master Filmore, a local merchant master of Ironmoore. He has entrusted me with the task of finding an able bodied group of adventurers to go along with his merchants train for the sake of protecting it. Lately the bandits have been raiding the trains and the master has been loosing a lot of gold and valuable cargo,” Raspin explained.

“Great, more mercenary work,” Moonstar mumbled this to Gwereth who rolled his eyes behind her back.

“Why us?” Raven asked.

“The barkeep at the Adventurer’s Guild recommended you. He said that you looked like the right people for the job,” Raspin explained.

“Looked like?” Raven asked.

“He said that you were capable looking,” Raspin said.

“Is this capable enough for you?” Craedus asked as he pulled up his sleeve and made his bicep bulge.

“Y-yes. I would have to say that qualifies you for the job,” Raspin said suddenly frightened by the dwarf.

“If we were to take this job, what would the terms be?” Raven asked.

“You would be bodyguards on Master Filmore’s merchant train. The train is scheduled to leave Ironmoore early tomorrow morning and head for Brighnorn, a trade city to the west. Upon reaching Brighnorn safely with his goods intacked, Master Filmore will pay you one-hundred gold talons a piece. Of course you will then have the option to guard the returning train for its trip back to Ironmoore. I should also tell you on a personal note that Master Filmore is an excellent tipper. But I didn’t say that, OK?” Raspin explained.

Raven nodded to Raspin and turned to discuss the job with the others. “A thousand gold coins could really help us out. We would be set up for quite some time.”

“Money, money, money!” Slink said. Moonstar looked at the thief and shook her head.

“They must really be desperate for the help if they are going to offer that much gold,” Tyrahne said.

“But so are we. I agree with Raven. That gold will really be a godsend,” Gwereth said.

“So do we accept?” Raven asked. Most of them answered “yes”. Raven turned to Raspin. “We agree to your terms.”

“Ah, splendid. I will go ahead and tell Master Filmore to expect you at sun up
tomorrow morning. Meet him at warehouse number forty-three just inside the western gate,” Raspin said. With that he bowed and headed out of the Miner’s Shovel.

“Sun up? We should get 200 gold a piece for that,” Slink said. He was still complaining as they walked to their rooms and readied themselves for bed. Sun up would come early.

The companions awoke before sun up the following day and readied themselves for their new quest. Of course Slink had to be coaxed out of bed. Merrick had been elected for the dubious honor.

“Hey, elf buddy, you know you went and interrupted a fabulous dream?” Slink said a bit grouchy.

Merrick looked at the sleepy eyed thief and smiled. “Was it about that cute red head barmaid at the Adventurer’s Guild?”

“It was me and El....” Slink stopped short. “Yeah, me and the barmaid. Was a really steamy dream if you know what I mean.” The implications of Slink’s made up dream seemed to take Merrick’s mind off the thief’s slip up. He didn’t want to tell the bard that he had really been dreaming of Elyanah.

With Slink up and ready that companions headed for the Warehouse district. It wasn’t hard for the companions to find warehouse #43 considering a huge sign that read “Filmore Warehouses” hung on the side of it. The companions rounded the corner and found a dozen merchant wagons loaded to capacity waiting in front of the warehouse. Upon seeing the companions a stout man dressed in a suit of leathermail, that seemed a size too small for him, greeted the companions.

“Good Morning. You must be Raven. I am Mr. Filmore,” he said and shook Raven’s hand.

“Yes. I am Raven and these are my friends,” she said as she named off each of them. Mr. Filmore took the time to shake each one of their hands and greet them personally. He made it impossible for any of the companions to dislike him.

“I am glad to meet your acquaintances,” he said bowing slightly to the companions. His leathermail groaned in protest as he did. “Allow me to tell you a little about the task that I have hired you for. As Raspin has surely explained to you, there is a bit of a bandit problem between Ironmoore and Brighnon. Sure, every major city has its share of bandits and thugs but lately things have gotten out of hand. I have lost quite of bit of valuable cargo lately. And it seems like the officials of Ironmoore are taking their sweet old time taking care of the problem.”

As Mr. Filmore spoke he began to pace back and forth in front of the companions. The more worked up he got with his speech the faster he would walk. It was almost comical to watch. Raven was instantly taken with the man. “So I have taken matters into my own hands. I have hired you to guard my wares and if attacked, I would like you to dispose of the bandit problem. Of course that is a little more than you bargained for and I will compensate you for the extra work. I also offer you one last chance to change your mind.”

The companions barely had to look at each other before making up their minds. Raven spoke for all of them. “We would be more than honored to help you out with the bandit problem.”

Mr. Filmore smiled at them. “Bravo. Now I will have Raspin show you to your wagons and we will be off.” Raspin led the companions to various wagons and introduced them to wagon drivers and other merchant guards. Once everyone was aboard their assigned wagon Mr. Filmore took the reins of the lead wagon and led them of Ironmoore. The wagon train headed out of the western city gate and quickly reached a fork in the road. Raven, sitting in the third wagon, looked to the south down the road the companions had taken to get to Ironmoore. For a moment she wondered about the stone gate and how she was going to get her friends back home. The wagons turned right and headed north. They followed the forest line that greeted them to the left. Many of the companions enjoyed the countryside as they rode. Craedus babbled on and on to
one of the merchant guards about the glorious battles ahead of them. The guard did his best to listen to the dwarf while trying to keep his mind the job at hand. Slink soon became bored with the whole wagon ride and struck up a conversation with Elyanah.

“It sure is beautiful out here isn’t it,” Slink said. He tried to make it sound like he was genuinely impressed with the nature surrounding them.

“Yes it is,” Elyanah answered. She watched Slink suspiciously.

“Pretty romantic too,” Slink said charmingly.

“What are you up to Guildtraitor?” Elyanah asked susciciously.

“Just trying to make pleasant conversation,” Slink said innocently.

“I know what you are trying to make and I don’t think it has anything to do with conversation,” Elyanah said eyeing the thief.

Slink just smiled at her innocently. She shook her head and turned away. Slink shrugged and let the conversation drop. He turned his attention to Merrick who was playing an upbeat melody on his harp.

“So, did I ever tell you the time that I flinched this huge diamond from the home of the Duke of Wilshire?” Slink asked the bard. Merrick tried in vain to play his harp louder.

As the merchant’s train rode on the forest to the west slowly drifted away from the road. The land around them became more hilly and rocky as they traveled. The driver of Raven’s wagon began telling her how the bandits like to use the hills and surrounding ridges as points of ambush. Raven shifted in her seat to get a better position. She waved to Craedus, who was two wagons behind her, to be be ready for anything. As he released the holding strap on his axe Craedus turned and passed the signal down the line to the other companions. An half hour later the they had reached an area of roughlands. Mr. Filmore stopped the train and walked back to Raven’s wagon.

“Up ahead a few miles in a area of extremely hilly and rough terrain. There is one point were the road goes through a narrow pass with cliffs and ridges on either side. The gorge is known to be a favorite place for the bandits to attack. Before we stop for supper I would like to get past that area. There is not much light left before sunset,” he said.

Raven agreed with Mr. Filmore’s plan. She walked back along the train and explained things to the other companions. After mounting up the merchants train continued its journey. By the time they reached the cliffs, the sun was starting to set. The horizon lit up the sky with brilliant oranges and reds. Raven raised a hand to signal the others as the first wagons began to travel down the sloping road and into the gorge. Ten minutes later the entire merchant train had reached the bottom of the gorge and was starting to make its way back up. Raven strained her senses to try and hear or see a sign of the bandits. Everyone sat in their wagons, tense and with their hands on their weapons.

Slink whispered to Elyanah, “They are probably too scared to show themselves knowing that the mighty Slink is on board.” Elyanah rolled her eyes and hushed him.

There was a loud thud from the middle of the train as a huge rock hit the seat right next to its drive. Suddenly the air was full of stones and rocks. A few of the merchants guards and drivers where knocked unconscious. A small jagged stone hit Merrick in the upper thigh causing him to curse.

“That’s going to leave a mark. Lucky for you it wasn’t a few inches higher,” Slink said merrily. The thief laughed as he dodged a large rock that slammed into the wagon floor next to him.

The companions quickly drew bows and slings to return fire at the bandits who were visible on the cliffs upon them.

“This is no good. The bandits have us at a disadvantage. They are at a higher elevation. Slink! Elyanah! Get up there!” Raven ordered the thieves. She shouted at the thieves and pointed up the cliff face.

Tyrahne did his best to cover them with his bow. A few bandits fell into the gorge with arrows sticking out of their bodies. Craedus made his way over to Lanneth and was shielding him with his buckler.
“How are we supposed to fight like this? Come down here and fight like men!” the dwarf yelled at the bandits.

As if they had heard his challenge they slowed their rock and stone onslaught and began to make their way down the cliffs. Raven saw ahead of the lead wagon there was an opening in the cliff face. A dozen or so bandits dressed in leathermail wielding long swords filed into the gorge. Immediately they engaged Mr. Filmore and his bodyguards. They were utterly overwhelmed. As Raven jumped down from the wagon and engaged the enemy she could see one of the bandits thrust a sword into the abdomen of Mr. Filmore. He fell to the ground.

“NO!” Raven screamed.

She attacked the bandits with reckless abandon. Two of the bandits fell under the power of her sword strokes with slashed bellies but there was still eight more that drove her back. She was wondering how to get around her opponents when Craedus came up alongside of her and added his mighty axe to her assault. The bandits were quickly falling to the savage attack of both warriors.

“Finally a battle worthy of a Stonebeard,” Craedus roared. He swung his axe down and chopped a bandit through the shoulder and deep into his chest.

The last two bandits decided to save themselves and retreated, running back down the road and around the bend. Raven ran to the body of Mr. Filmore who lay in the middle of the road next to his slain bodyguards. A puddle of blood was forming around him. The lead wagon was gone. A large bloodied gash was cut into Mr. Filmore’s leathermail in the area that covered his mid section.

“Moonstar! I need you over here now,” Raven exclaimed. Moonstar ran to Raven with Gwereth close behind. Behind him Durenda followed. Tyrahne slowly scanned the cliffs for signs of hidden bandits. An arrow stayed ready for release. Moonstar reached Mr. Filmore and frowned.

“What a mess. It is a wonder that he is still alive,” Moonstar said gravely. She began to chant and pressed a glowing hand against the wound. Gwereth added his power to hers and was able to close the wound. “He will live but he needs to be taken back to Ironmoore immediately.

Raven grabbed one of the trains drivers, “can these wagons be backed up?”

“No ma’am but once we clear the gorge we can turn them around and head back to the city. It will take some time though,” the driver explained.

“Then do it. If you do not hurry Mr. Filmore will surely die. What would you do without your generous employer?” Raven asked. The driver realized what Raven was implying and readied the wagons for immediate departure.

Slink and Elyanah came down the cliff opening noiselessly kicking up small stones as they did. Tyrahne whirled around and had an arrow locked onto them within seconds.

“Whoa big guy, it is only us,” Slink said holding his hands in front of him. Tyrahne lowered his bow.

“How did it go up there?” Raven asked.

“Not bad. Slink managed to keep himself alive,” Elyanah mused. Slink looked at her funny.

“How did it go down here?” Slink asked. He looked around at the fallen bodied of the bandits. “As if I had to ask.”

“Not good. Mr. Filmore was been gravely wounded and is being taken back to Ironmoore. Also the bandits made escape with the lead wagon,” Raven explained.

“So, we still saved the other eleven?” Slink asked.

“Yes but the lead wagon had all the gold on it. The bandits have stolen our wages,” Raven said.

“So then what are we waiting for? We were hired to eliminate the bandit problem,” Slink said.

All the other companions had to do was take one look at Mr. Filmore, as his prone body was loaded into a wagon, to make up their minds. Raven turned to Tyrahne.
“Tyrahne?” Raven asked.
The ranger nodded and led the companions down the road in the direction that the bandits had fled. A half an hour later they found the empty lead wagon. Tyrahne searched the road to either side of the wagon.
“Well?” Raven asked.
“The bandits have fled into the tall grasses here. Their trail leads to the forest in the distance,” he explained. He pointed toward the forest to the south.
“So what are we waiting for? Let’s go kick some bandit ass,” Slink said with bravado.
Tyrahne led the companions slowly through the forest, carefully and purposely around trees and over hills. Every so often he would stop to examine a broken branch or some trampled grass. Everyone was surprisingly silent as they let the ranger do his work. Raven was obviously seething with anger, relishing the thoughts of revenge in her head. Gwereth watched with a frown as he noticed on a few occasions Raven’s hand tighten the grip on her sword. She hadn’t sheathed it after the bandit attack and she now held it with white knuckles.

The land started to slope downward with every step the took deeper into the forest. And the ground was growing damper and softer too. This made their job of following the bandits easier for soon there were obvious footprints in the soft soil. Tyrahne crouched down to examine them, about a dozen tracks in all, and noticed a strange mark. He pointed it out to the companions that had formed a half circle around him.

“Look at this here,” Tyrahne said. He pointed at a long rut that ran the length of the footprints. “You know what this is don’t you?” He asked no one in particular. Slink nodded.

“It’s the merchant’s chest that was missing off of their wagon. The bandits must be dragging it through the forest,” Slink said. Slink thought about the chest and how heavy it must have been laden with all the merchant’s gold.

In their haste the bandits must have just grabbed a hold of it and pulled it through the forest with all their might. Carrying it would have exhausted them in no time. Tyrahne resumed his tracking of the bandits and fifteen minutes later had the companions within the sight of an old rickety building. It sat at the bottom of a steep hill with some form of rocky formation behind it. The building was weather-worn and had a sagging roof. Here and there a board was missing from its walls. It’s entrance must have been on the otherside because the companions could see none from their view point. Tyrahne crouched down behind a small group of trees and motioned for the others to do the same. They quickly complied. Raven slowly moved up to join him.

Raven whispered to the ranger, “what do we do now?” Raven looked at the building and then the ranger. He had his bow out with an arrow nocked in its string. “Do you think that it is safe to approach the building? I don’t see any guards.”

Tyrahne motioned toward the edge of the building that was partially obscured by bushes. He made a shrilling whistle that sounded just like a bird. As Raven watched there was a sudden movement from behind the bushes and she saw what looked to be the arm and shoulder of a man. So there were guards down there. She looked at the ranger and knew exactly what he was thinking. She motioned for Slink to come and join them. Silently he crept over to them.

“Time to do your thing thief,” Raveb said. She motioned toward the far side of the building.

Slink smiled mischievously and with a wink he was quickly moving down toward the building. Once again Raven was impressed with the silent stealth that Slink employed. Following his movements Raven suddenly noticed that Slink had company. It was Elyanah. Moonstar made a move as if to jump up and stop the she-thief but Gwereth restrained her. Tyrahne looked at Raven as if to ask “what’s going on”. Raven shrugged and continued to follow the thieves movements. She hoped that Elyanah knew what she was doing and didn’t do anything to trip Slink up.

The thieves made it to the back of the building without incident. Slink waved to Elyanah and pointed to the back of the building. Quickly she moved around the back and
disappeared behind the building. Slink made his way around the front of the build sticking close to it’s wall and low to the ground. Slowly Slink inched his way to the corner of the building near the bushes and passed out of his friends sight. Raven silently wished him luck.

Ducking around the corner and staying within the large clump of bushes Slink found a long porch on the hidden side of the building. Standing on the porch, leaning with their backs against the building were two guards. They didn’t look very enthused about their guard duty and it was obvious to Slink that they were daydreaming about something else. They must have dismissed Tyrahne’s signal as merely a bird chirping in the forest around them. Slink slowly and silently crept along the edge of the porch, keeping himself hidden behind it’s thick walled railing, waiting for a good time to strike. Something moved within the corner of his vision. He dropped his intense gaze on the guards and scanned the roof above him where he had seen the movement. There, high above on the rooftops, was Eylanah. She was slowly slithering her way across the rickety shingles toward the roof’s edge that hovered right over the guards.

Slink thought to himself, what a gutsy move.

It wasn’t long before she was able to peer carefully over the edge at the two oblivious guards. She looked down at Slink and smiled. He frowned at her and motioned for her to get down off the roof before the guards spotted her. Eylanah must have mistook Slink’s waging as a signal to attack for when the first guard turned away from her to talk closely with his friend Eylanah slid from the roof. The momentum of her fall drove both the guard and herself through the weak floor boards of the porch. There was a deafening crunch that took the second guard by surprise. He stared wide eyed at the gaping hole in front of him.

“Henry? You OK?” he asked.

Slink was glad to see that in the confusion the guard had failed to draw his sword. Slink took this opportunity to leap over the porch railing and onto the back of the guard. He grabbed the guard by the chin and pulled his head back. With his other hand he drew one of his sharp little knives across the guards throat. The guard fell to the ground with a gurgle. Slink turned to look down the hole as Eylanah’s head popped into sight. She was smiling, obviously proud of her handy work.

Slink frowned at Eylanah, “why did you go and do that? Do you know how dangerous that was?”

Eylanah smiled even more, “were you worried about me Guildtraitor?” Eylanah giggled a little as she teased the rouge.

Slink realized the worried tone that he had used with Eylanah and began to blush. He quickly tried to cover his tracks.

“Don’t be silly. I was just worried that you would have given away our surprise by alarming the guards,” Slink. He tried to make his voice sound harsh but it wasn’t coming out the way he wanted it to. Eylanah just folded her arms and glared at the blushing thief.

“Oh but she has,” said a voice from behind them.

Both thieves quickly turned and rolled to the side as a sword came slashing down out of the buildings doorway and crashed into the porch’s railing. Stepping out of the building was another bandit guard. He was a tall man with shoulder length brown hair and was dressed in chainmail. He had a large broad sword in his hand.

“Oops,” Eylanah said. She looked at Slink and shrugged with a half smile. Slink gave a disapproving look.

Behind this new guard were more guards - - many more. The thieves immediately drew there weapons and stepped back off the porch and into the forest. The guard looked at the retreating thieves and smiled.

“Bah, the cowards retreat. Get them,” the guard, obviously the captain, ordered them the attack the outnumbered thieves.

Not that the bandit guards could have known but this is exactly what Slink wanted them
to do. Up on the hilltop the other companions could finally see what was happening.

"Damn," Tyrahne said and took a step forward and raised his bow.

Within seconds the first of the bandit guards fell to the ground with a pair of arrows lodged in his side. The bandit captain looked up at the other companions with surprise.

"It is a trap! You men, follow me up the hill. You others, get the thieves," the captain ordered. He led the large group of bandits up the hill toward the companions while four of his men stayed behind to deal with Slink and Elyanah.

Slink threw two daggers at the approaching bandits. The first one fell quickly under the onslaught. There remaining three charged the thieves.

The companions closed the distance between themselves and the oncoming bandits. Tyrahne continued to the pepper the bandit force with arrows, dropping two of them, before they were within range. He dropped his bow and readied his axe. Steel clashed on steel as Raven, Craedus and Merrick engaged the bandits with Moonstar and Gwereth right behind them. Durenda stood behind all of them, up the hill a ways, swinging a sling above her head. Tyrahne smiled at her as he ran ahead to join the fray.

The bandits and companions exchanged blows and Raven was surprised at the skill with which the bandits fought. Her first attacks were easily turned aside. The bandit laughed at her as he parried each blow. But that didn’t last long as Craedus' mighty battle axe chopped a bloody gouge in his side. Merrick was having as much luck as Raven as each of his attacks were successfully turned away by the bandits. Moonstar had made her way around the far side of Merrick and was keeping the bandits away from a chanting Gwereth when a sword glanced off her mace and nicked her arm. A surprising curse slipped past her lips as she bravely continued to press her attack. On the other side of Merrick Craedus had scored another deadly attack on a bandit. His axe chopped deeply into the bandits leg dropping him where he stood.

"A Stonebeard's axe bites deeply doesn’t it?" Craedus roared. The dwarf continued to taunt the fallen bandit as he dodged a sword that would have surely cut him in two.

"Finally a worthy opponent." He quickly side stepped and engaged his new opponent.

Raven dodged a particularly sharp short sword, jumped to the side, and then brought her sword down upon a bandit cutting him down at the base of his neck. Blood spurted out of the wound and covered her chainmail. She quickly scanned the chaos and saw that they were making headway. Tyrahne was cleaving bandits left and right with his axe freeing up Gwereth and Lanneth to cast their spells. Suddenly off to one side an arrow wizzed passed Raven’s face. She could feel the wind of its passing on her cheek. There was a muffled cry from behind her.

"Lanneth!" Durenda screamed.

Raven blocked a sword strike and quickly looked over her shoulder. Lanneth had crumpled to the ground, an arrow protruding from his side.

Over by the building, where the two thieves were doing their best to hold of the advances of three bandit with swordplay, Slink heard Durenda scream. To his side Slink could see a lone archer hiding among the trees taking aim at his friends. Slink stepped forward driving a foot into his attacker shoving the bandit back and caused him to fall to the ground. The thief took the opportunity to quickly throw a knife at the lone archer. The knife struck the Bowman in the shoulder. His arrow attack flew way off course as he dropped his bow to the ground. The bandit cursed as he pulled the knife out of his shoulder and threw it to the ground. He gave Slink a hateful look and drew his sword. The bandit turned and rushed toward the companions. As Slink watched him go, he could hear the bandit behind him get to his feet. Slink stepped back and moved to the side bringing his newly drawn sword up and into the stomach of the bandit that was trying to sneak up on him. Off to his other side the two remaining bandits had ganged up on Elyanah. She had nicks and cuts along her arms and side. They were slowly whistling her down. With amazing speed one of the bandit thrust his sword forward between Elyanah’s defenses and stabbed her in the arm causing her to drop her sword.
“NO!” Slink exclaimed. He charged forward and caught the surprised bandit across the side of the face with his sword. The bandits cheek and ear where split open.

On the hilltop the battle raged on. Raven defeated another bandit with a slash to the belly. She quickly turned to aid Merrick who was cornered by two bandits. What she saw really impressed her. The bard was quite the swordsman once he forgot about all the danger that he was in. Behind them, Gwereth had finally finished his spell.

“Auctu Manu Huel!” Gwereth chanted.

As he muttered the last arcane words, bright streaks of colors leapt from his finger tips slamming into three hapless bandits. Immediately they were struck unconscious and fell to the ground. Looking satisfied Gwereth drew his quarterstaff and joined the melee. With furious blows Moonstar had managed to back a bandit up against a tree. It wasn’t long before she had bashed him unconscious. Tyrahne was finishing the last of his opponents when Craedus ran passed him.

“More opponents to defeat,” Craedus yelled as he ran downhill to aid his roguish friends.

Raven had finally engaged the bandit captain who had hung back giving orders to his troops. Now that there were no more bandits to command, he stepped forward and threatened Raven.

“Finally found the nerve to join the fight have you? A pity your men had to die for such a coward. You would have never made a good leader in the army,” Raven said.

“Bah, I live to survive, not to lead,” the Captain snapped.

“You will not live for long,” Raven said.

“I may die here but you will be going with me,” the captain punctuated this statement by swinging wildly at Raven.

Raven easily dodged the attack and brought her sword down across the captains chest. His chainmail took the brunt of the attack. Back and forth they exchanged blows causing little damage to each other until the captain misstepped. With a wild swing he missed Raven and drove his sword into the ground. Raven spun around and beheaded the man with a mighty swing. His body fell limply to the ground. Durenda quickly turned her head away from the gruesome sight. Tyrahne pulled her close to him and comforted her.

At the bottom of the hill the Elyanah’s attacker watched Slink slash his friend across the face. The bandit turned to attack the wounded Elyanah again but the she-thief stepped aside and tripped the bandit. He fell to the ground with a thud. As he tried to rise Elyanah smacked him on the back of his head with her sword pommel. The bandit fell once again to the ground, this time unconscious. Slink was doing his best to avoid the attacks of the other bandit. Although the man’s face was slashed and was in pain, he fought on like a mad man. Slink had block three vicious attacks and was beginning to tire when the bandit suddenly went stiff and fell to the ground. Standing in the bandits place was Craedus. He smiled a toothy smile at Slink.

“Hey. Only thieves are supposed to do that,” Slink smiled as he teased the dwarf.

“He left his back vulnerable. It’s not my fault he made himself such an easy target,” Craedus said. They both laughed.

Slink turned to Elyanah. “And what about you? Feeling compassionate today?” He looked down at the unconscious bandit at her feet.

“We might need one alive for questioning,” Elyanah said.

“You weren’t that considerate about my well being back in Throffhorn were you?” Slink said smiling at her.

“Not for you Skullslayer,” Elyanah said. She was not returning the thief’s smile.

Slink did not like the look he got from her. It was hard and cold. The moment was interrupted by the other companions who joined them. Raven and Tyrahne were dragging a couple of bound bandits with them. They were alive but unconscious. Gwereth and Moonstar were helping Lanneth along. Although Moonstar had healed the grievous wound in his side, he was still sore and had difficulty walking. Not once did he
complain about the pain though. It never broke the calm cool face that he always wore. The companions did there best to bind there wounds and in Elyanah’s case Durenda used her magics to heal her wounds.

One by one the captive bandits were revived and asked questions about the other bandits, their raids and about the building. At first the bandits were uncooperative but after a few slaps and threats by the companions, especially Raven who was still upset about the attack on Mr. Filmore, the bandits talked. The building led to an underground hideout of the bandits. It was there that the bandit leaders hid all the stolen treasures. At the sound of this Slink immediately perked up.

“Well what are we waiting for? Let’s go get some treasure,” Slink exclaimed.
“I just want to find who is responsible for almost killing Mr. Filmore and run them through with my sword,” Raven said ruthlessly. She patted the sword at her hip.

The companions left the four bandits tied and gagged on the building porch promising to come back and deal with them later. From the worried looks in the bandits eyes it looked like they believed that promised. The companions cautiously stepped into the building. It was dusty and dimly lit inside this spacious single roomed building. Merrick found an old lantern near the entryway and lit it. Inside the room, which was roughly 30 foot by 30 foot square, were many crates and boxes.

“I don’t see any other exits from here. Where did all those guards come from?” Slink asked.

“There has to be a secret entrance into the lower levels somewhere in here,” Raven said.
Taking that as a hint Slink shrugged and wandered off to find that “secret entrance”. The companion search the crates and found that they contained mostly mundane and non-valuable items like torches and rations.

“They most likely took all the valuables to a more secure place in the hideout,” Elyanah commented to no one in particular. Raven just nodded as they continued to search the crates.

Moonstar muttered to Gwereth. “Spoken like a true thief.” Elyanah shrugged and wandered off looking for Slink.

After finding nothing of value the companions headed to the back of the room where Slink and Elyanah were discussing something.

“I found the secret door,” Slink said to Raven as he pushed open a section of the back wall. A draft of cool, damp, musty air rushed passed their faces. Moonstar wrinkled her nose.

“Hey! I found it,” Elyanah exclaimed.
“Did not!” Slink retorted.
“Did too!” Elyanah returned.
“DID NOT!” Slink roared.
“Enough fool!” Moonstar yelled and pushed Slink aside to get a better look into the doorway.

Slink was a little hurt that Moonstar hadn’t included Elyanah in her statement but let the whole thought go as he remembered all the treasure that was to be found in the bandit’s hideout.

“Do you think that there are more bandits down there?” Merrick asked cautiously.
“Of course. We haven’t found the bandit leader or the stolen treasure yet,” Moonstar said confidently.

Raven took the lantern from Merrick and led the companions through the new doorway. They entered and roughly formed natural corridor.

“This must be part of the rock formation that the building is built next to,” Craedus explained. Raven shrugged and they continued on.

The corridor ran forward, sloping downward rather sharply, for a hundred feet before turning to the right. Around the corner the corridor turned into a man made hallway. As they walked along it Craedus made some observations.
“Hmmm, the craftsmanship here is not bad. Not quite dwarven but fairly good,” Craedus muttered to himself as he played with his braided beard.

Lanneth looked at the walls with indifference. Another 60 feet led them to two doors on either side of the hallway. Raven hushed them as they crept up on the doors. As they approached, there was a strange click from below their feet and suddenly an alarm was set off. The doors ahead of them suddenly flew open and armed bandits began to pour out. The hallway was only wide enough for three companions to fight so Raven and Tyrahne stepped forward. Merrick, who was following close behind Raven, stepped back allowing Craedus to join the front ranks. He for one was more than happy to let the little man do all the dirty work. The bandits did their best to ward off the companions but they quickly fell to the might of the three warriors. Raven had been nicked and scratched a few times and Tyrahne had a small gash on his leg, but for the most part the battle was quickly over. The companions check the two doors and found that they led to the bandit’s barracks. The companions pulled the bandit’s bodies into the barracks during which time Slink was able to pocket quite a few miscellaneous coins. The bandits were search, as was the room, and the few coins they found where put into Craedus’ pack for group treasure. The companions found little of value here except for a few spare swords and clothing.

The companions continued down the hallway and after another 60 feet they came to a four way intersection. Down short halls to the left and right were doors. The hallway continued straight ahead for quite a distance. The companions checked the door to the right and found it not trapped and unlocked. They entered it and found themselves in a large kitchen. There was a bandit chef here who was preparing dinner.

He said over his shoulder, “out of my kitchen! Dinner is not ready yet! And what was all that racket out there?”

The companions did not answer. Sensing something was wrong the chef turned around and was startled by the appearance of the companions. He quickly grabbed a butcher knife and charged them yelling loudly. By the time that he had made it around the table, Slink had popped up behind him and smashed him over the head with a large pot. “Bong!”

“Finally these poor pots get revenge,” Slink said. He laughed as his friends groaned at the bad pun.

There was two other doors leading out of the kitchen, one to a mess hall and the other to a pantry. There was nothing of value here and even the food was of poor quality. The chef was tied up with the last of their rope. The companions left the kitchen and searched the left door. It was also not trapped and unlocked. Entering they found a small 20 foot by 20 foot room filled with more crates like the building above. Inside the crates they found torches, lanterns, small wooden bucklers and coils of rope, which they took to replace theirs. They were about to leave when Slink began babbling excitedly about something near the floor.

“What is that fool up to now?” Moonstar asked irritably.

Slink fiddled with something near the far wall and a secret door next to him popped open.

Slink stood up. “TADA!”

Moonstar rolled her eyes. Gwereth clapped.

“Don’t encourage him!” Moonstar snapped.

The secret door opened to a smaller 10 foot by 10 foot room. On the floor was four rather large chests.

“Now we are talking,” Slink said. Immediately he and Eylanah went to work on the locks.

The thieves were particularly excited to find that there were no traps on the locks and that they were simple. They quickly picked them and opened the chests. It quickly became apparent as to why the chests were not trapped. Inside the chests were countless silver coins but nothing else. Disappointed the companions filled their sacks
with as much of the silver as they could carry and left the secret treasure room.

They continued down the hallway to a small open area. Just passed this alcove were two more doors. Fearing more bandit guards Raven had Slink look for traps and hidden alarms. There were none and the companions found the two doors led to empty rooms. The hallway continued on and suddenly turned to the right again. Around the corner the hall tuned back into a natural corridor that began sloping downward. The companions followed it to a naturally formed stairwell of sorts. Raven signaled them to be ready and they headed down the steps. After descending fifty feet the floor leveled out. The corridor continued another 50 feet and abruptly ended. There was an archway to the left, a door to the right and at the dead end there was some sort of statue. Raven looked into the archway and saw nothing that posed an immediate threat. The companions walked over to the statue. It looked like a huge warrior standing guard. Slink was about to examine it when loud voices rang out from behind the door. The companions drew their weapons and approached the door.

"...and I tell you that they are a threat to the whole operation," said a frantic voice.

"They are a threat to no one. They are young and inexperienced," said a voice that was more confident.

"But they have defeated the whole garrison," said the first voice.

"Your men were lazy and useless. If they were worth anything, they would have defeated this nuisance back at the pass," said the second voice.

"What about us? Surely the intruders will be here any moment."

"Yes. And then we will see just how mighty they really are won't we?"

"You don't mean to fight them do you?"

"Yes and you are going to help me. I have already informed the master of their attack. He wants to know just how powerful and organized these strangers are. I urge you to be ready if you value your life."

The companions looked at each other, all of them wondering who this "master" was.

"If we want the element of surprise, I suggest we attack now," Slink said.

"I agree," Raven answered.

Slink went to work and managed to pick the door without making a sound. Raven and Slink kicked the door in. Craedus rushed inside first followed by the others. Standing there was a bandit that looked a lot like the captain that they had fought in the forest.

Standing next to him was some sort of mage dressed in deep crimson colored robes. He had long greasy black hair and pale skin.

"Prepare to die scum," Craedus announced.

Mage looked over the companions. "These are the warriors that defeated your men?"

He was definitely the owner of the second voice making him the man in command. The mage laughed as he began casting a spell.

The companions rushed the mage but the bandit stood in thier way and detained them long enough for the mage to cast his spell. Tyrhane and Craedus slumped to the floor in a deep slumber. Raven traded a few blows with the bandit as Slink and Elyanah snuck around them. Moonstar joined Raven and began to bash the bandit with her mace. Gwereth stepped forward and was blasted with a magic missile from the mage.

The mage cackled evilly until he was attacked by both thieves. Moonstar slammed the bandit across the side of the head smashing his ear. As he stood there stunned, Raven ran him through with her sword. He slid off the blade with a sickening sound.

"That was for Mr. Filmore," Raven said. She smiled as the bandit fell to the floor.

The dual attacks by Slink and Elyanah kept the mage preoccupied long enough to prevent him from casting another spell. It didn't take them long to find a place to stick thier blades. As the mage took his last dying breath he croaked a final warning.

"You are mighty indeed, but you will never survive the master's wrath," the mage chuckled evilly as blood bubble formed on his lips. Then he grew silent.

"Let justice be done," Raven said this to no one in particular.

Slink immediately began to look over the two bodies as the companions woke up
Tyrahne and Craedus. Searching the room the companions found that there was a little
treasure to be found including a few coins and some small gemstones. A door led to a
nicely furnished bedroom which was probably the mage’s dwelling. Searching the
room the companions found a small chest, which was actually more like a small
lockbox, pushed under the bed. Slink looked over the lock and successfully disarmed a
poison needle that was found within. Inside the chest the companions found coins of
various types along with a few small gems, a book and a ring.

“Finally some real treasure,” Slink said satisfied. He closed the chest and handed the
whole thing to Craedus who stuffed it into his sack.

On the mage’s dresser they found a strange statuette of a horrid looking demon.
Grasped in the creatures hands was a one foot diameter sphere. It seemed to be made
of a strange blue-gray stone and was cold to the touch. It was rather heavy so it went
into Craedus’ sack along with the chest. The dwarf had to pour out some of the silver
coins that he had been carrying to make room for all their new treasures. The
companions found nothing else of value so they headed out of the rooms and back to
the corridor.

Beyond the archway was a large irregularly shaped cavern. It had a high domed
ceiling and there was a pool at the far side. They searched the room and found nothing
of value. Slink was poking around at the pool with a small stick that he had found. He
was busy looking at all the little white fish swimming around in it when Elyanah snuck
up behind him.

“HEY! What are you doing?” Elyanah exclaimed suddenly.

Slink was startled and fell forward, falling into the pool with a tremendous splash. He
gasped as the cold water hit him. Elyanah laughed loudly as the others came over to
see what was going on.

“Since you are in there Slink, why don’t you take a look around,” Elyanah said.
Slink made like he was going to splash her. He gave her a dirty look and waded out
into the depths of the pool. Suddenly he dove beneath the surface of the water.

Merrick turned to Raven. “Do you think that its safe for him to be in there?”

“Maybe something will gobble him up and we will finally be rid of the fool,” Moonstar
said laughing.

Elyanah looked wide eyed at Moonstar, “you don’t really thing there is monsters in there
do you?” Moonstar shrugged at her teasingly. The thief suddenly looked worried.

Long moments later Slink’s head reappeared above the water and Elyanah let out the
breath she had been holding. Slink looked like he was struggling with something.
When he got to the edge of the pool, Raven and Craedus helped him pull a stone coffer
out of the water.

Slink gasped for air, “I found this half buried in the muck at the bottom of the pool.” He
pointed at the coffer as his teeth chattered.

Looking ashamed at what she did, Elyanah came over to the shivering thief and put
her cloak around him. She began to rub him down with it.

“Oooh ya! That’s more like it. Lower, lower,” Slink said smiling at her. Elyanah
suddenly looked disgusted and shoved him away.

“And to think I felt sorry for scaring you into the water,” she said and walked away.

“Maybe you should push him back in,” Moonstar said. She looked mischievously at
Slink and he took a step away from the grinning priestess.

The stone coffer had no hinges or keyholes and if Slink hadn’t found a small seam
along its “top” the others would have sworn that he had found a large brick. Slink took
out one of his knives and tried to pry it open. No such luck. Try as he might, he couldn’t
open the thing.

“I just know that there is something good in there,” Slink muttered to himself.

“Maybe we could bash it open?” Craedus asked.

“No that would just ruin whatever it inside,” Raven said.

They decided to store the coffer for now. It went into Craedus’ sack and out went the
last of his silver coins. They went back to the dead end and began examining the statue. It was definitely of a male human warrior who was trying to look menacing. Someone had gone and drew a large mustache on it.

“Now what kind of person would deface such an elegant statue?” Durenda asked.

“I think it looks neat that way,” Slink said lauging.

“Exactly her point,” Moonstar said.

Slink seemed to take insult in the priestess’ comment but then shrugged it off. He looked over the statue and then the small space behind it. He realized that Elyanah was standing behind him.

“You are going to push me behind here or something are you?” Slink said remembering the incident with the pool.

“Who me?” Elyanah said trying to look innocent.

Slink looked at her warily and began to look over the statue once again. There were no obvious traps or triggers but the thief found a strange indentation in the statue’s back. It was rounded and about a foot wide.

“Craedus, give me that sphere that we found,” Slink said.

The dwarf handed it to the thief and after a bit of struggling with the heavy thing, he had it behind the statue. Slink lifted it up and inserted it into the back of the statue. Perfect fit. Slowly the statue began to move. There was a loud grinding sound of stone on stone. A minute later there was a large hole in the floor where the statue once stood. Looking into the hole Slink found a set of rungs leading downward.

“There is a ladder leading down from here,” he said.

Raven grabbed the lantern from Merrick once more and led them down into the darkness. As they climbed down the ladder Merrick slipped on one particularly slippery rung but managed to catch himself before falling to the floor below. Thirty feet down the companions found a solid stone floor. They found themselves in a roughly circular cavern that was over 50 feet in diameter. The room was filled with boxes and crates, rolls of carpeting, bolts of cloth, chests and sacks of all kinds.

Slink whistled. “By the gods. This is the mother load!”

“Spread out everyone. You know what to do,” Raven ordered.

Slink, Elyanah and Merrick began working on the chests as the other examine the many other wonders of the room. The sacks held all sort of oddities. Some held clothes that looked much like the fine clothing that nobles would wear.

“Disguises perhaps?” Tyrahne offered. The others pondered this for a moment.

Other sacks were filled with exotic spices, coffees and soils. Lanneth took a sample of the spices while Gwereth and Moonstar sampled the soil pondering its purposes. The bolts of cloth were of high quality as were the carpets that they found but were too heavy for them to take.

Merrick had found a poison needle trap on one of the chest and by accident almost sprung it on himself. From then one Slink took over his duties of trap finding.

“Can’t have you dying now elf buddy, especially when we are this close to finding the good stuff,” Slink said. He tried his best to comfort the bard.

Together Slink and Elyanah disarmed the traps on the other chests which included a gas trap and two spring loaded dagger traps. They emptied the contents of the chests into a big pile on the cavern floor which made Slink’s eyes sparkle. The combined treasure included many copper coins, which they left due to weight restrictions, some silver and gold coins mixed with some electrum coins. These they took. There was a small pouch of six small gems. There was a scroll tube, a silver dagger, a sling and some stone bullets, a short sword, a buckler shield, a golden ring, an amulet and five potions. Lanneth cast a detect magic spell on the pile and the companions were happy to find that the potions, short sword, dagger, shield and bullets were all magical. Lanneth was able to indentify a few of the items but the dagger, sword and shield proved beyond his ability.

“I think that maybe we should get these items identified in Ironmoore before splitting
the up,” he said. The others agreed.
They piled the treasure in Raven’s and Tyrahne’s sacks and were making ready to leave when Slink stopped them. He was fiddling with the bottoms of the chests.
“What are you doing now? We already searched those,” Moonstar asked.
“There is always a false bottom is these things,” Slink explained. And there was.
Slink popped it open. Inside they found two large rubies and a strange journal. Moonstar grabbed the journal from the thief. Examining it they found that the journal was a log of all the raids that the bandits had performed, what they stole and their future plans. Also hidden in the back of the log was a treasure map of sorts which Raven immediately added to her other maps.
“That mage was obviously doing a little free lancing on the side. I would have to say that its time to return to Ironmoore,” Raven said.
“Yeah, lets go split up the treasure,” Slink said excitedly.
“I would like to see how Mr. Filmore is doing,” Raven said.
“I think it would be wise to take that journal to the Mayor of Ironmoore also,” Tyrahne added.
The companions agreed that it was time to go. They secured they findings and headed out of the bandits hideout.
Treasure and Training

The companions had encountered nothing on their way back to Ironmoore. It was early in the morning when they reached the city.

Moonstar stifled a yawn. “It’s about time that we made it back. I’m exhausted,” she said.

“What about the treasure?” Slink asked.

“We agreed to get the treasure identified in the morning and then split it. We are all tired so let’s get some sleep first Slink,” Raven said. She looked like she was going to yawn too.

“Maybe you could give me all the stuff and I could get a head start on identifying it,” Slink said. He gave Raven his best ‘innocent’ look.

“Do you think we are as foolish as you?!” Moonstar exclaimed. She tried to swat the thief. Slink had seen that coming one to many times as was ready for her. He quickly dodged the exhausted priestess.

“Ooookay. Someone is a bit irritable tonight,” he whispered to Gwereth. The old man shrugged as Moonstar turned around quickly to glare at the bard. “Aie.”

“Tomorrow Slink, its late,” Raven said.

It was so late that they had to call the innkeeper from bed before they could get their old rooms back.

“By the gods. Do you know what time it is?” the innkeeper said.

“And do you know what kind of mood I am in?” Craedus asked. The dwarf fingered the handle of his mighty battle axe as he gave the innkeeper a weary yet intense gaze.

It didn’t take long before the companions were shown to their room and where drifting into a dreamless sleep. The companions slept late into the day, almost past noon. They probably would have slept longer if it weren’t for Sink pacing up and down the hall making subtle noises in hope of waking them. Moonstar grumbled something about “noisy fool” as she dressed for the morning. They all met in the common’s room of their inn before heading out.

“It feels good to be out of my armor for a change,” Merrick commented.

“Bah. I love being in my armor. I feel naked with out it,” Craedus told the bard. Indeed that was the case as the dwarf was still dressed in his chainmail.

“That is because you are a battle crazed dwarf,” Moonstar said. The priestess was obviously still a little tired.

“So. What’s you point?” Craedus asked. He looked at Moonstar with confusion.

When they were all joined together they decided on what to do for the day.

“I am going to Mr. Filmore’s warehouse to see where they have taken him to heal. I would like to pay him a visit and see how he is doing. Anyone that wants to is free to join me. Everyone else can take the treasure and get it identified,” Raven said.

“I’ll take the treasure to get identified,” Slink quickly volunteered.

“Not by yourself you won’t,” Moonstar said.

“Well, er, ok then, I will take Elyanah along with me,” Slink said. He smiled a wide grin.

“Great, our two thieves are going to be responsible for the group treasure. Not!” Moonstar said.

“Why don’t we all go see Mr. Filmore and then look for a wizard to look at our treasure. I am sure Mr. Filmore would appreciate seeing all of us,” Gwereth offered.

“Yes. I think that would be nice,” Durenda said sweetly.

A dark cloud formed over Slink’s head as they headed out for the Warehouse district. Elyanah spoke quietly to the rouge, “what’s the big deal. You have waited a day
already. What is a few more hours?"

"You just don't understand," Slink said suddenly depressed.

"Hey, I am a thief by trade too. I would love to get my hands on all our stuff just as much as you would," Elyanah said. Slink looked up and smiled. He looked at Elyanah and she winked. From then on Slink was in a better mood.

They walked through the city and made it to Warehouse #43. Surprisingly Slink complained very little about the wait which surprised Raven. To her it looked like having Elyanah along was going to be a positive influence on the greedy little Slink. She allowed herself a half a smile as they entered the warehouse.

Raven grabbed the first worker that she saw she asked. "I was wondering if there was someone who could help me find out where Mr. Filmore is?"

"In there," said the worker. He pointed to the offices and then quickly headed back to work.

Surprised, Raven lead them into the offices and was startled to see the Mr. Filmore was sitting in his chair behind his desk going over some paperwork.

"Mr Filmore?!?" Raven asked.

The man looked up at them. His face was a bit flush and it was obvious that he wasn't entirely comfortable sitting still in his chair. He smiled at them.

"Raven. And all my other rescuers. How are all of you today?" Mr. Filmore asked.

"What are you doing here? You should be at home resting!" Raven exclaimed.

"Working of course. I couldn't just leave the business to run itself now could I?" Mr. Filmore explained.

"What about Raspin? I'm sure that he could fill in for a few days," Raven asked.

"He is a good man but just doesn't have the flare for leadership. More of follower, but a good follower at that," Mr. Filmore said.

"Still, you should be at home resting. You suffered a grave wound. We didn't think you were going to make it," Raven said.

"Nah, it takes more than that to put old man Filmore down. Besides I have a friend that is high priest at the temple of Quintis. He fixed me up right good," Mr. Filmore said.

"Quintis?" Gwereth asked.

"The Sun Goddess. Goddess of Healing and all that," Mr. Filmore explained.

"Oh," Gwereth said.

"The wound is closed and healing well. Barely a scar there now," Mr Filmore said as he started to lift up his tunic but the companions shy away. "Ok, maybe you don't want to see it. Thanks again for saving me. I really appreciate that."

"No problem. That is what you hired us for," Craedus said.

"Ah yes, I almost forgot, your payment," Mr. Filmore said.

Raven was about to say something when Mr Filmore struggled with a large coffer.

Raven moved to his side to help him place it on his desk. He took a little key from a chain around his neck and unlocked the coffer. Slink nudged Elyanah and nodded at the key. They both smiled. From within the coffer Mr. Filmore withdrew a small pouch and set it on the table. He pushed it toward Raven. She picked it up and opened it, dumping the contents into her hand. There was eleven gemstones, ten small sapphires and a larger emerald. Slink leaned over and whistled. Raven looked at Mr. Filmore confused.

"The sapphires are worth about a hundred gold crowns a piece, the fee that we agreed upon. The emerald is a bonus," Mr. Filmore explained.

"We can't take that from you Mr. Filmore. We didn't even get you to Brighnon safely," Raven said.

Slink suddenly looked at Raven with a frown wondering what she was doing.

"Nonsense. You saved me from the grim reaper and if I read your bunch right, I would say that you have taken care of the bandits too, eh?" Mr. Filmore asked. They all nodded. "Well then, go enjoy your reward. And if you ever need work again, feel free to come back. I can always use your help." The companions all took their turns thanking
Mr. Filmore and asking one last time about his health before leaving the man to his busy schedule. Before they had made it out of his office he was barking orders to various workers.

With Slink practically dragging Raven along, she led them to the first wizard’s shop that they could find. Entering it they encountered a short foppish looking man dressed in dull green worn robes. He had short, thin white hair and a thick curly beard. When he saw the companions he quickly hobbled over to them leaning on a gnarled wooden cane.

“Hullo there. I am the wizard Maros. What can I do for you today?” he asked.

“We need a few items identified.” Slink piped up before anyone could speak.

Maros led them over to a bare table and told them to set the items on it. Slink looked in greedy wonder as the pile grew.

“That is it? Hardly worth my casting a spell on it,” Maros said. The wizard looked more than a little put out.

“Then it should be an easy for you to earn a bit of gold today,” Moonstar said.

“A bit?” the mage asked.

Maros and the companions haggled over the price of the wizard’s services and finally ended up agreeing on a fee. Raven handed over the two large rubies that they had found and let the wizard get to work. Slink gasped.

Moonstar whispered to Gwereth, “she’s a little generous with the ‘group treasure’ isn’t she?” Gwereth just shrugged and pointed at Maros.

“This will barely tax my knowledge,” he grumbled as he began to chant.

As the wizards chanting grew he waved his hands over the pile of treasure. For one brief moment the treasure was lined with a faint glow. That faded and Maros’ hands began to glow. A moment later and it was all over. He stood there for a moment with his eyes closed.

“So?” Slink asked impatiently.

Maros slowly opened his eyes and addressed the companions.

“Well yes. The short sword and stone bullets will afford their users greater accuracy in combat. This larger stone bullet...” He pointed at the thirteenth stone which was bigger than the other dozen. “...will petrify an opponent. The buckler shield will magically protect its wearer. The scroll has these mage spells inscribed on: Gaze Reflection, Shocking Grasp, Melf’s Acid Arrow, and the ever so popular Fireball. Obviously an offensive scroll. The potions are of healing, cure poison, fire resistance and two of extra healing. I have no idea was the amulet and ring are and I do not care for they are not magical,” the mage said. He took a step away from the table.

“And the silver dagger?” Slink asked. He looked intently at the wizard.

“Oh yes, it is magically enchanted to effect lycanthropes. Exactly how...I am...not sure,” Maros said.

The wizard seemed to hesitate as he said the last few words.

“So much for barely taxing your vast knowledge,” Moonstar said teasingly. She smiled as she taunted the wizard. Gwereth nudged her a bit but she continued to smile.

“Well then. If there is nothing else, I bid you a good day,” Maros said. The wizard turned away and went back to his work.

The companions stuffed their treasure back into Craedus’ sack and left the shop. As they did Slink was grumbling about having to turn over the rubies to Maros.

“I can’t believe that you just gave the wizard the rubies. We could have gotten a lot of gold for them,” Slink said with dismay.

Raven smiled. “Relax Slink. I looked them over carefully before we left this morning. They were both flawed and not worth a fraction of what Marcos thought they were.”

Slink looked at Raven with uncertainty. “I didn’t see any flaw. How did you...” he started to say.

“Just a little skill I picked up during my bounty hunter days,” Raven said. She smiled and walked away from the flabbergasted thief.

“Now your not as special as you thought you were huh?” Elyanah teased Slink.
Slink stuck his tongue out at her and walked away as she giggled. They made their way through the city and made a quick stop at a historian shop to learn a little about the amulet and ring that they had found. The sage there turned the amulet over and over is his hands examining the large lizard carved it's front. He scratched his chin as he pondered the strange runes that encircled the lizard.

“I have never seen one of these that was so old,” the sage said.

“One of what?” Moonstar asked.

“This is a lesser token of the Cult of Draco.” The sage held the amulet out to the priestess. “And I am afraid that as long as it is in your possession, you will be in grave danger.”

“Danger?” Merrick asked with a worried look.

“Yes. The Cult of Draco worships evil dragons and Thunder Lizards. Their secrets are highly guarded and they are highly possessive of their holy symbols.” He gestured at the amulet that Moonstar had taken from him. “They will probably believe that you have slain the priest that once carried that amulet.” He paused for a moment. “You didn’t do that did you?”

“Of course not!” Moonstar snapped at the sage.

Raven thanked the sage and gave him a few coins. Leaving, they headed back to their inn and piled into one of their rooms. Raven dumped their treasure into a pile on the bed.

“I think it would be wise to handle this like the last time. The ones that can best utilize these magical items should get them with the others being compensated with gold and gems. We still have a long haul ahead of us before we can return home with little magic between us. It would be in our best interest to get the most use out of what we have,” she said.

Everyone seemed to agree with this, a few more reluctant than others.

“Oh great, no magic for me again,” Slink said. He sat back crossing his arms across his chest.

“On the contrary Slink. You didn’t get any last time around so you can pick first,” Raven said.

The thief smiled deeply and Moonstar gasped but said nothing when Gwereth placed a hand on her shoulder. Slink quickly reached forward and grabbed the silver dagger from the table. That was pretty much what Raven had expected him to do. From that point on Slink was oblivious to the conversation around him as he admired his new dagger.

“Tyrahne, you were without magic the last time around. Would you like the enchanted short sword?” Raven asked.

“No, I would prefer the bullets. Missile weapons are more to my liking,” he said.

Raven nodded and handed the ranger the bag of bullets.

“What about you Craedus? You are the other warrior of our group. Would you like the short sword?” Raven asked.

“No, nothing beats having a good axe at you side, right ranger?” the dwarf asked. Tyrahne smiled and patted his hip where his axe usually hung in battle. “You take it Raven.”

Raven nodded and pulled the sheathed sword toward her. Moonstar was watching the whole process unfold in front of her and wondered if there wasn’t something fishy about it all. Raven held up the scroll case.

“No offense Merrick, but with Lanneth being our main spell caster, I thing these scrolls would be better used by him,” Raven said. This drew looks from the others.

Moonstar whispered to Gwereth. “Main spell caster?” Gwereth seemed to agree with Moonstar’s thoughts. “I’ll remember that when I am casting a healing spell next time.”

“But I think she means Mage spell casters though,” Gwereth said. Even so, the priest seemed a little put off considering he was a mage of sorts also.

Merrick looked at Raven with puppy dog eyes. “Whatever you say m’lady.”
Raven wasn’t sure what that was all about but she was happy that she didn’t get any argument out of him. She handed the scroll case to Lanneth who wordlessly took it.

The shield and potions were left lying on the bed. Since Craedus was the last front line warrior left without anything magical, he was given the buckler shield. He commented on how he didn’t need it but took it when Moonstar told him that she didn’t want to have to heal him everytime the dwarf went into battle. The potions were divided among the others with Merrick getting a potion of healing, Durenda and Gwereth got a potion of extra-healing, Moonstar got the potion of Cure Poison and Elyanah got the potion of Fire Resistance. Each of the companions got a sapphire as payment from Mr. Filmore with the remaining gemstones and coins being divided up and dispersed to the ones that didn’t receive as much magic. Gwereth passed up with share of this treasure for the strange golden, and non-magical ring.

The remaining group treasure included the amulet and the treasure map that Raven was carrying. The companions agreed that Raven should hold onto the treasure map, seeing as how she was becoming the groups cartographer and Moonstar was elected to hold onto the amulet. She had a sneaking suspicious that it had more to do with the “danger” involved with possessing it than it did with the holy implications that was tied to amulet. It didn’t matter to her though. She would rather hang onto it that have it fall into the hands of their greedy thief.

“So what next?” Slink asked. He twirled the silver dagger in his hands.

“I thought we could turn in the bandit’s journal before splitting up,” Raven said.

“Splitting up?” Merrick asked.

“You know, training, shopping, stuff like that,” Raven said.

“Oh,” Merrick replied disappointedly.

The companions all agreed and headed out toward the city hall. Once there they entered the huge building and wandered up to the receptionists desk.

“We have some vital information for the mayor and need to see him at once,” Raven said.

There was a man and woman sitting behind the desk. The woman spoke to Raven.

“I am sorry but the mayor is in a meeting and can not be disturbed. May I help you?” the secretary said.

Raven explained the situation and handed the secretary a small sack containing the journal.

“I will make sure he gets this,” the secretary said. She immediately when back to her work and ignored the companions. Slowly the large group shuffled out of the city hall.

“How rude was that?” Merrick asked.

“I don’t know if I entirely trust leaving the journal in their hands. What if those two are in league with the bandits?” Gwereth asked.

That was a thought that had never crossed Raven’s mind but now that Gwereth had mentioned it, it made her think.

“Why not trust them old man? We are to trust that thieving fool over there and Raven’s leadership decisions,” Moonstar said. She first pointed at Slink and then Raven. They both looked at the priestess but said nothing. As they walked Gwereth leaned over to have one of his conferences with Moonstar.

“What is your problem with Raven now? I thought she handled the whole bandit affair quite well as our leader,” Gwereth said.

Moonstar waved off Gwereth’s comments, “just put it this way, next time we divide our treasure, we had better draw straws.”

Gwereth looked at her for a moment and then shook his head.

“What?” Moonstar asked.

“You just sounded a lot like Slink for a moment there,” Gwereth said.

Moonstar just glared at the priest fuming. The companions decided that it was a good time to split apart and do a little exploring of the city on their own. They agreed to meet up later to decide what their next quest would be. They broke up into their little groups
and headed off in opposite directions.

Raven headed out toward the Warrior’s Guild to train in her swordplay and battle skills. She learned a great deal in technique when using her new magical short sword. During her lengthily workouts at the guild she befriended an old retired knight of the lands named Sir Duncan. They swapped stories and opinions about their favorite combat techniques.

“I was always partial to the block, spin away from your opponent and attack them from the back formation myself,” Raven explained.

“You should try and disarm your foe as you spin away from him. Just in case you can not perform an attack after spinning away. I could show you some disarming moves if you like,” Sir Duncan said.

When she wasn’t training Raven made a visit to the local library to try and learn a little about the map the companions had found in the bandit’s journal.

* * *

Slink, with Elyanah in tow, searched around for awhile and managed to pinpoint the general location of a secret thief’s guild.

“Every cities got one,” he told Elyanah.

The two thief’s joined the guild on a temporary basis, which allowed them to use the guilds training facilities. Slink worked on all his thieving skill especially opening locks, picking pockets, and finding and removing traps. He was able to find an elder halfling thief/sage named Bilbo that helped him with his reading languages skills. Slink could not afford to have his silver dagger identified further but the thief/sage was able to tell him more about it.

“Ah, a fine blade. From what you have told me and from what I know of these sort of blades, I can tell you that it’s lycanthrope properties are of the ‘protection from’ or ‘slaying’ type. Hence the silver composition,” Bilbo explained.

With practice Slink found that the dagger had an excellent balance and could be thrown quite well. He was very proud of his new dagger. Slink’s charm and sharp tongue quickly won over the other thieves of the guild. He was always greeted with smiles when he visited the guild. For the most part Elyanah followed Slink around. He didn’t mind it at all but for the most part he tried to hide that fact from her.

* * *

Merrick was extremely happy when he found a Musician’s Guild in the city and was even more excited when he found out that the master musician there was skilled with the harp. Merrick paid for some lessons and was able to increase his harp playing ability. He also learned that in time he would be able to interweave his magic within his melodies to greatly increase their effects. One of the other musicians that was currently studying at the guild was a bard. The bard, named Kanion was much more skilled than Merrick. He was a generous man and shared a bit of magical knowledge with Merrick teaching him the spell of Glitterdust. Merrick was more than happy to give the bard most of his remaining gold in exchange for his kindness. Merrick made a few trips to the thief’s guild with Slink and Elyanah and with Slink vouching for him, Merrick was able to train there. He spent his evenings playing (but not singing) in the city squares and local pubs making a few coins and many new female friends.

“Your harp playing is simply beautiful,” a woman said.

“It’s beauty pales in comparison to what I see in your eyes,” Merrick said charmingly.

“Oooooo,” the woman said mesmerized by the bard.

* * *
Lanneth found the city’s small academy of magic and paid the hefty fee for membership. Not only did he turn over most of the gold that he had received from the bandit quest, he had to turn over one of his spells. Fortunately for him, Ironmoore was a mining city and had little in the way of magics. He was able to get by with giving up a copy of the Feather Fall spell. Lanneth wasn’t sure why they didn’t already have such a common spell but who was he to complain. There was no way that he was going to share his fire magics with them. He spent all of his time studying in the small library there researching new spells and copying the ones on his new scroll into his spell book. For a few days, Gwereth joined him and studied at the academy, but for the most part Lanneth holed himself away from the others.

* * *

Moonstar found a temple dedicated to an unknown goddess of nature and stayed there for most of her time in Ironmoore. She prayed to Thauaras and was able to reach out to her god easily in this strange land. She was very excited, and secretly relieved, when Thauaras granted her greater power over her priestly magics. When she wasn’t praying she talked (and debated) with the other priests there. Many times Gwereth had to pull her way from heated discussions.

“What do you mean that you have never heard of Thauaras? What kind of uncivilized religion do you follow?” Moonstar asked. The other priests looked flabbergasted as Gwereth pulled the little priestess aside.

For the most part the priest stayed by her side when he wasn’t at the academy with Lanneth.

* * *

Gwereth prayed alongside Moonstar and mediated her conversations with the other priests and priestess. Every so often he would sneak away to talk with a high priest about some secret subject. He spent a few days at the academy of magic with Lanneth and one afternoon he took his ring to a jeweler shop, Baubles and Trinkets, to be appraised.

"This particular ring appears to be quite valuable but I do not know of its origins. It might possibly be a noble’s ring or somebody of importance. Where did you say you found it again?" the jeweler asked.

Gwereth gained power in both his priestly and magical skills.

* * *

Tyrahne found a group of rangers and woodsmen in the city and accepted their offer to train outside of the city walls once it was obvious that Durenda was going to be busy with her training. He spent his time learning new techniques in tracking and practiced his skill with his longbow and his new sling. He had bought new non-magical stone bullets to practice with. He also practiced his skill with his axe. One particularly impressed fellow ranger introduced himself.

“I noticed that you are pretty handing with that axe of yours. And I also noticed that you do not use a shield. Have you ever thought of fighting with two weapons?” Kraven asked.

And so it was that Tyrahne was introduced to the fine art of battling with dual weapon. While he didn’t master the skill, he found that he could attack with his axe in one hand and a dagger in the other. He did a lot of drinking with his new friends and won a few friendly bets with his outstanding bow skill.

“Pay up Jarros,” Kraven roared with excitement.

“Who would have thought...all bullseyes,” Jarros said utterly amazed.

Tyrahne snuck off a few times for brief visits with Durenda but for the most part he
stayed with the other rangers and woodmen. He always thought of the druidess.

* * *

Durenda found a small temple near the local city park. There was a master gardener that lived there and he was able to teach her many things that pertained to her druidic ways. Between her studies she prayed at the temple. She studied with the gardener on some days and wandered carefully through the city on others. She looked in vain for someone that would be able to help her with her growing “disease” but didn’t find anyone who could shed any definite light upon it. She thought a lot about Tyrahne and how her problem was going to affect them and their relationship in the future.

* * *

Craedus joined the same Warrior’s Guild that Raven did and trained there also. He grew in strength and skill with his axe and hammer. He learned how to better block blows with his new shield.

“That’s good. Block and roll. Get behind you opponent. Block again if necessary. That’s right. You got it,” said the dwarf’s trainer. Craedus huffed and puffed as he completed each move.

“I think I am going to like this shield after all,” he said and smiled.

He made frequent trips to the Adventurer’s Guild where he met some dwarves from the mines to the north. He talked in length with them about the legends of the Lost Dwarven City over many flagons of ale. He also found the time to find an armory that had some dwarven platemail. Craedus used up most of his gold buying the armor.

* * *

Elyanah, for the most part, stayed by Slink’s side and trained at the thieves guild. Through it all her performance was overshadowed by Slink’s own skills and charming conversations. She didn’t mind though for it kept the lusty looks of the other thieves off of her. At first she was surprised at how the other members of the guild were taken by Slink, but then she realized that she too had fallen for his charm. Not that she would admit that though. He was after all the one who had stabbed her and almost killed her in the process. Thinking this over in her mind she became noticeably colder to Slink and avoided him more often, subconsciously overcompensating for her growing feelings toward him.

* * *

After two weeks of training and wandering about, and outside, of the city, the companions united in the commons room of their inn. They were getting low on funds and had to figure out how they were going to earn more gold.

“That is very impressive platemail you have there Craedus,” Tyrahne said.

“Thanks. I found it in one of the shops in the Miner’s District. It’s a good thing there are a lot of dwarves in the city. The shops have a lot of dwarf sized goods to sell,” Craedus explained.

The companions talked about their adventures over the last two weeks before Raven changed the subject.

“How are we going to earn more gold?” Raven asked.

“We could always go to see if Mr. Filmore has more work for us,” Merrick suggested.

“I am sick of merchant wagons if you don’t mind,” Moonstar complained.

“Doesn’t matter. I checked yesterday and found that Mr. Filmore is currently in Brighnon. Without the bandits to trouble him, he finally made his trip,” Raven said.
“We could head back to the Adventurer’s guild and check the postings again,” Tyrahne offered.

“Good idea. I have some new dwarven friends there that could help us out. Maybe head to the Silverlink mines,” Craedus said.

They looked at there pendants but saw that they were not glowing yet.

“I could take a look around and see what I can dig up,” Slink said. He smiled and winked at Elyanah who sneered back at him. “Boy, you sure are grouchy lately.”

“No thanks fool. I don’t want to end up in jail,” Moonstar said. Slink shrugged.

Slink snapped his fingers, “what about the treasure map we found in the bandits journal?” They all looked at Raven.

“I didn’t learn much about the map except that it leads to a mountainous area far to the north in the frigid wastelands. Possibly a giants lair or a frost wyrm,” Raven explained.

Everyone looked at each other and grumbled. They all agreed that it sounded particularly dangerous and quite far out of the way. They disregarded that idea for now.

“Maybe the ranger is right. We should see who is hiring adventurers at the guild,” Gwereth said.

“Great, more mercenary work,” Moonstar complained to nobody in particular.

The companions talked it over and agreed that it seemed to be the best course of action at the moment. Them got ready to leave when a messenger appeared.

“Raven and her mighty band of adventurers?” the messenger asked.

“Yes?” Raven asked.

“The mayor of Ironmoore asked me to deliver this to you,” the messenger replied. He handed Raven a scroll that was secured with the mayor’s seal.

The messenger bowed and left the inn.

Raven unrolled and read the letter out loud, “Raven and fellow adventurer’s extraordinae. I, the mayor of Ironmoore, request your presence at city hall to discuss the journal that you delivered to my office many weeks ago. It contains grave implication to the city and surrounding lands and to you, now that you have concerned yourselves in the bandit’s affairs. Please come at once. Reagan Brightwater. Mayor of Ironmoore.”

“Sounds official,” Gwereth said.

“Sounds like we might be able to get quite a bit of gold out of the mayor,” Slink said and snickered.

“Greedy fool,” Moonstar said.

“I don’t think we are going to have to worry about finding our next quest now,” Tyrahne said.

Raven nodded in agreement and lead them of the inn and to the City Hall.
The companions reached city hall and entered the huge building. Once inside they were greeted by the two clerks they had met a few weeks earlier.

“We have been summoned by Mayor Brightwater,” Raven announced. The clerks were surprisingly more friendly and cooperative this time around.

“It is a pleasure to see you again,” the female clerk said and smiled a wide toothy smile at the companions.

“And it is a pleasure to see you again too,” Slink said. He returned the wide grin, talking more toward her curvy figure than her smiling face.

Moonstar groaned and smacked the thief lightly on the back of the head. “We are here to see the mayor fool, not his assistant,” she reminded Slink.

“Right this way please,” the male clerk said directing them as he gestured toward a door that was in the back of the hall, half hidden by the clerk’s desk.

Following the male clerk, the companions made their way to the door. As they did Merrick stopped in front of the female clerk. He took her hand and kissed it gently.

“Good morning fair lady. It is indeed a pleasure to meet your acquaintance...again,” Merrick said charmingly.

The female clerk giggled and blushed as Merrick bowed. He stood up took his place with the others. Slink fell in along side of him.

Slink whispered to the bard, “pretty slick there elf bud, but don’t you think that little move will make Raven jealous?” Slink winked at the bard teasingly.

Merrick returned the mischievous little wink. “I hope so.”

Beyond the door the companions were led down a long hall. As they walked Moonstar conferred with Gwereth.

Moonstar whispered to the priest, “the clerks were a lot more receptive this time weren’t they? I guess all we had to do was drop their bosses name.”

“Indeed,” Gwereth answered. He secretly hoped that by agreeing with the little priestess he could avoid an argument.

The companions followed the male clerk down the hall and to another door. Beyond the second door was another hall that lead to a third door. The male clerk opened the this new door and gestured for the companions to enter. He did not join them. Beyond the door was a richly furnished room. There was simple yet thick carpeting on the floor. The walls were covered with exquisite looking wood which Craedus guessed was some sort of exotic teak. The furniture here, consisting of two chairs and a small couch, were made of some dark and rich polish oak. The room had a strange odor of cedar and polishing oil.

Behind a desk, made of the same wood as the chairs and couch, was a stern looking man. He had short dark hair that was graying along the sides. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit and was smoking the butt end of a cigar. There was a rugged look to his face. To Durenda the man look like a miner dressed up in fancy clothing.

“Ah good, you have come to me. Please have a seat,” said the man who was obviously Mayor Brightwater.

The companions sat wherever they could. Durenda sat on Tyrane’s lap which caused Moonstar to shake her head again as she mumbled something to Gwereth. The priest rolled his eyes behind her head but said nothing. The mayor looked at all of them with surprise.

“Well then...” the man started to say as he cleared his throat. “...I didn’t expect the whole lot of you to show up but maybe it is for the best. There will be no questions or
misunderstandings later on. I am Mayor Reagan Brightwater and I have the honor of trying to keep this city safe and happy.” He smiled at the companions. “Not that that is always an easy task. Just look at what it has done to my hair.” He pointed at the gray streaks. Durenda smiled at the mayor’s joke. “Lately, bandits have been plaguing the cities trade routes making my people unhappy and the lands around us relatively unsafe. That is not a good thing.”

“But Mayor Brightwater we have taken care of the bandit problem,” Raven said confused.

“Yes, we smashed them good!” Craedus roared punctuating his statement by pounding a fist into his palm.

“I know and I thank you for that but I fear that is not the end of our bandit problem,” Mayor Brightwater said.

“No?” Moonstar questioned him.

“No,” the Mayor continued. He held up the bandit’s journal for all to see. He waved it about before setting it on his desk. “To the casual reader this journal might look like the record of all the bandits raids and bad deeds. Looking through it you will find that there are very few contacts in other cities. This would lead us to think that the bandits you defeated were the main threat. After I had my people thoroughly examine the journal and decode what they found there, we found out that the bandit problem is a lot bigger than anyone imagined. A lot more widespread.”

The companions silently thought about all of this for a moment.

“How much more widespread?” Raven asked.

“Much more. The bandits that you defeated where just the tip of the iceberg so to speak,” Mayor Brightwater said dissappointedly.

Slink leaned over to Merrick and whispered, “what is an ‘iceberg’?”

Merrick shrugged as Moonstar leaned over and shushed them.

Mayor Brightwater continued, “it seems that the main force of bandits work out of a city to the west called Brighnon. That is where a certain co-leader has his hideout. We need to stop this man before we can truly eliminate the bandit problem.”

“What is this ‘we’ stuff?” Moonstar snapped suddenly.

“I was hoping that you and your friends would do me another favor and travel to Brighnon. There you would have to capture this man. Alive if possible,” Mayor Brightwater explained.

Murmurs ran through the companions.

“Favor? Favors can be quite expensive these days,” Slink said suggestively. Moonstar tried to swat him again.

“I can offer you 1000 gold crowns each for your troubles,” Mayor Brightwater offered without batting an eye.

“A thousand?! You got a deal!” Slink exclaimed.

“Of course I can only give you ten percent of that until the mission is complete,” Mayor Brightwater with a reluctant smile. Slink thought the mayor was enjoying watching him squirm. Slink sank back into his chair as if the air had suddenly been let out of him.

“How do we know that capturing this man will be the end of the bandit problem? We really can’t afford to have some master bandit popping up in our future to exact revenge upon us,” Raven asked.

Moonstar listened with interest. She was impressed that, for once, Raven was thinking about the welfare of the whole group.

“I believe from what I read in this journal, the weak link of the bandit's organization is in Brighnon. There is some distance between the faction in Brighnon and the ‘master bandit’. I think that if we were to stop this bandit leader in Brighnon, we could find clues that would lead us to the main group. Then we could mount a strike before they could mobalize a counter offensive,” Mayor Brightwater explained.

“Should be able too? ‘Could?’ ‘Hope to?’ Those don’t sound like positive words to me,” Moonstar grumbled.
“My dear lady, it is my thought that if the bandit force in Brighnon is eliminated, the rest of the bandits, who are far away I might add, will just forget about this area deeming it to dangerous to continue pilfering,” Mayor Brightwater said calmly with a politician’s smile.

Slink leaned over to talked privately with Elyanah. “He doesn’t seem to know much about thieves and rouges does he? Take a man’s livelihood away or take his friends life, he will fight tooth and nail to exact revenge. These bandits will not go down quietly.”

Elyanah thought about Slink’s words. “Yes, revenge. An eye for an eye and all that stuff. Kill a friend, expect revenge, right Guildslayer?”

Slink didn’t like the implications Elyanah’s look held for him. He swallowed hard and turned away from her intense gaze. Elyanah laughed silently to herself as she saw Slink squirm. Now she was the one enjoying it.

“I don’t see how we can NOT help you in this matter since it was our discovery of the journal that led to this. And our elimination of the bandits will surely put Ironmoore and her people in danger. As it probably has done to us,” Raven said passionately.

“Not to mention that we need the gold,” Slink said this to no one in particular.

Moonstar elbowed him.

“Splendid. Give this notice to Rudolpho and Anita and they will get you your funds,” Mayor Brightwater said and handed Raven a rolled parchment. Slink looked at him confusingly. “My clerks.”

“Oh” Slink said as he realized what the mayor was saying.

“Here is the papers you will need to find and meet up with your contact in Brighnon. He should be able to help you out when you get to the city. Good luck and godspeed to you all,” Mayor Brightwater said to all the companions. He handed Raven a second rolled parchment. She took it and then shook the mayor’s hand.

The companions filed out of the mayor’s office and headed back to the clerk’s office. As they walked Moonstar had a thought for Raven.

“You know that this takes us far away from the Silverlink Mines and our chance to find that crystal of yours. It will delay our trip back home and your quest for revenge,” Moonstar said. She studied the warrior’s face awaiting an answer.

“As much as I want to get back home and follow the trail of Maxwell and One Eyed Jack, I can not in good faith leave this city to the whims of some angry bandits. They seem too well organized for my liking,” Raven said solemnly.

Moonstar just nodded at Raven’s explanation and fell back into line next to Gwereth. The priest gave her a “I told you so” look but said nothing. As the companions entered the clerks office, both Rudolpho and Anita stood up to greet them again.

“I hope your meeting with Mayor Brightwater went well,” Rudolpho said with a smile.

“If there is anything you need in the future, just ask,” Anita said eagerly. She was talking to all the companions but stared intently at Merrick.

“Actually there is something,” Raven said as she handed the money voucher to Anita. Both the clerks read it.

“Would you like this in coins or gemstones?” Rudolpho asked.

Slink whispered to Raven, “take to coins. We could get short changed with gemstones.”

His suggestion, however distrusting, mirrored her thoughts exactly.

“Coins please,” she said.

Rudolpho quickly left through a different door leaving Anita to the mercy of Slink’s and Merrick’s roving eyes. Shortly Rudolpho returned with a small chest on a hand dolly.

“Here you go. Just as the mayor requested,” he said directly to Durenda. She noticed his lusty gaze and stepped closer to Tyrahnne.

“Thanks,” Raven said. She nodded at Tyrahnne who walked over to her and grabbed one end of the chest as she grabbed the other.

The companions left city hall. After they were gone the clerks broke into an excited conversation.

“Did you see the body on that blonde?” Rudolpho asked.
“No, but I sure like the way that minstrel works,” Anita answered with a question. They both sighed and went back to their work.

The companions rented nine horses for the trip to Brighnon. Craedus still insisted on running along side of them as they traveled. They bought some supplies for the trip and then cashed in the rest of their gold for gemstones. After checking over their weapons and armor the companions headed out of the western gates of Ironmoore.
36

The Road To Brighnon

The companions rode out of Ironmoore and along the road they had traveled when defending Mr. Filmore’s merchant caravan. It was a particularly warm summer day and Durenda was enjoying the mid afternoon sun. Tyrahne was extremely happy to see Durenda smile for a change. Her illness was really taking a toll on her and not being able to decipher its mystery was slowly driving her crazy. But today she had seemed to have forgotten about it as she hummed merrily to herself. Merrick pulled out his harp and began plucking a merry little tune that complimented Durenda’s humming perfectly. She smiled at the bard and continued with more fervor that before. After a few minutes, all of the companions were enjoying the melody except Moonstar who seemed to be annoyed by it. Gwereth reined his horse alongside Moonstar’s

“And why the foul mood today Little One? We are on our way to thwart a great evil. I, for one, would have thought enough to put you in good spirits,” Gwereth asked.

“Bah. Who can concentrate with all the music and such,” Moonstar brumled. She frowned at the priest.

“They are just trying to lighten the mood. Besides, it is good to see Durenda happy for a change,” Gwereth said.

“Hrmph,” escaped Moonstar’s mouth.

“So what really is the problem? It’s got to be more than just that. You rarely get this...um....” Gwereth said and suddenly averted his eyes from Moonstar’s stern glare.


“I can just tell that there is something on your mind. I have been with you long enough to know when you are preoccupied with something troubling,” Gwereth answered.

Moonstar was silent for a moment. “Doesn’t it bother you that we are moving further away from Throffhorn, further away from our plans to build a temple in WoodVale, further away from our duties to Thauaras? And with all of our new ‘friends’ which we barely know,” Moonstar asked.

“I think that this is a noble and just cause,” Gwereth said.

“That’s not the point. We need to get back to Throffhorn and to do that we need to find some of Raven’s Mygellex. Chasing these bandits is just one more obstacle in the way,” Moonstar said sourly.

“Do you hear yourself? That doesn’t sound like the loyal priestess you claim to be,” Gwereth said.

“Are you questioning my faith?!?” Moonstar exclaimed.

“Not at all, just your motivations,” Gwereth said

Moonstar sighed. “It’s just that...” she started and then thought about her next words for a moment. “It’s the Limbrue seed. We must do something about it. I can’t stay here knowing that the key to returning the Tree of Life to this land is in my pocket and I can’t do anything about it.”

Gwereth thought that she looked genuinely concerned.

“Concerned enough to abandon our friends?” Gwereth asked.

“No, no. But as soon as we take care of this bandit problem, we WILL find a back to Throffhorn and inform the high priest about the seed,” Moonstar said sternly.

Gwereth thought about what Moonstar had just said and how. There was a moments hesitation before she spoke. It was in that moment that Gwereth was sure Moonstar had toyed with the notion of leaving the others to find a way home on her own. Would he have followed her? Of course he would. After all he was her warder and was responsible for her safety. But he would not have liked it. He was going to have to keep
an eye on the stubborn little priestess. She was showing signs of a personality that was very different from the Moonstar he knew. Best to keep her on the right path from the start. She had a very promising career in the Thauaras faith ahead of her. No good letting her enthusiasm and melodrama get the better of her. Gwereth let the conversation drop and reined his horse back into line.

Tyrahne had rummaged through his packs and pulled out a small wooden flute. Both Durenda and Merrick looked at the ranger surprisingly as he began to play it skillfully. The three distinct sounds created the loveliest of lullabies. Moonstar rolled her eyes.

“Oh great, first we are mercenaries and now we’ve become street performers,” Moonstar groaned. She sighed once again and continued to grumble.

“I like it. It is rather soothing,” Gwereth said with a smile. He continued to ignore Moonstar’s dirty looks.

Durenda marveled at Tyrahne’s skills with his flute. She reined her horse alongside of the ranger and leaned over to kiss him lightly on the cheek. He smiled at her and winked. The three of them continued their song as they rode on to Brighnon.

“Ah. No woman can resist a man that plays an instrument,” Slink said. He sighed as he thought about all the hearts he could capture if only he could play one.

“I would much rather have a man that could handle a sword that skillfully,” Elyanah said defiantly. She nodded her head towards Tyrahne’s flute playing.

Slink immediately whipped out four daggers and skillfully twirled them about in his hands.

“I said ‘sword’ not those little knives,” Elyanah said. She sighed too.

Slink made a face at her as he put his knives back into the leg sheath he was wearing.

The companions continued along the road until the sun began to set in the western skies. Pinks and oranges lit up the horizon and created a spectacular vision for the companions to see. Durenda was sill marveling at the view when the companions reached the cliffs where they were ambushed days earlier. Although they knew that the bandits would not be there this time around, their hands went to their weapons. Slowly they passed through the ravine. The companions cautiously scanned the stone cliff walls around them for a sign of the bandits but found none. When they reached the far side Raven looked back scanning the route that they had just taken.

“The bodies are all gone,” Raven said.

Craedus was also looking around from his low vantage point on the ground.

“Probably wolves or other carrion feeders,” he commented.

“Probably,” agreed. She didn’t look all that convinced.

The companions rode just out of sight of the cliffs and broke for a quick meal. This gave the companions a little time to unwind and Craedus a moment to rest his legs. Merrick figured the dwarf had to be tired walking at such a fast pace for hours. Craedus quickly corrected him.

“Nah. I have been through worse. I once had to sprint through the badlands with a pack of hungry grommies after me and a few dwarves I used to adventure with. Twenty miles is a long way when you are afraid that you are going to get eaten,” Craedus explained.

“You ran twenty miles through rough terrain and didn’t get tired or lost,” said looking a little surprised.

“Nah. A little frightened by the teeth behind me though,” Craedus said. The dwarf laughed.

“Impossible. I don’t believe that for a moment,” Moonstar said doubting everything the dwarf was saying.

“You don’t know many dwarves do you?” Craedus asked.

The question went unanswered. After their meal the companions continued down the road for a few hours until the sun had completely set and darkness was creeping up on them. A forest was looming up ahead of them and Raven wanted to stop and camp
before entering the darkness of the forest.

"Best to traverse the forest during the day," Raven said.

Everyone seemed to agree with that and camp was set up just off the main road. That night everyone took their turn at guarding the camp but nothing came to bother them. And with the sunrise the following morning the companions arose to break camp and continue on their way. After a few hours of traveling and a stop for lunch, the companions reached the entrance to the forest. Raven stopped the others so that Tyrahne would have a chance to talk with them about the forest.

"You should all stay wary and be on your guard once we enter the forest. It would be very easy for someone to ambush us in there," Tyrahne explained.

"Someone?" Merrick said looking worried.

"Or something." Slink made his voice sound spooky as he made clawing gestures toward the half elf. Merrick definitely looked worried.

"Yes. Maybe something. Possibly goblins or other foul creatures," Tyrahne explained. He was gripping the hilt of his sword; his knuckle turning white under the pressure.

Durenda noticed this and put one of her small hands on his. He seemed to relax instantly.

"Shall we go?" Raven asked.

The others nodded and followed her into the forest. It wasn't as dark and gloomy as Merrick thought it would have been. Sure it was shady in there but it was far from foreboding. The forest was green and merry looking. A faint odor of pollens teased his nose and colorful flowers pleased his eyes. And the forest was alive with small animals and wildlife. He watched as three squirrels playfully fought over the possession of a lone nut. More than once small colorful birds flew over head and suddenly circled about to land on Tyrahne's shoulder. The bard was more than surprised to see that the bird's shied away from Durenda. She looked surprised too. They continued on for a few hours before coming to a small clearing off to one side. Craedus had been complaining about being hungry for the last half an hour and Raven for one was getting quite irritated by it. She decided that the clearing was a good a sign as any to stop and eat an early supper.

Raven thought to herself, Boy, these woods really have me on edge today. I better watch myself, else I take it out on Craedus.

The companions tied their horses together and were just breaking out their foodstuffs when there was a loud noise off to their right. It was the sound of something big crashing through the forest. Branches snapped and grasses bent as two giant badgers emerged from the forest and into the clearing. Tyrahne, Craedus, Raven and Slink immediately fell into a fighting stance and drew their weapons. They made a ring around the others preparing to protect them if needed. They slowly stepped forward bracing themselves for the oncoming battle. The giant badgers moved closer to them sniffing the air as they approached. The large of the two badgers grunted as it approached the companions.

"WAIT!" Durenda screamed. She pushed and shoved her way to the front of the warriors.

Tyrahne tried to put out an arm to protect the druidess but Durenda pushed it aside. Moonstar raised a curious eyebrow.

"Be careful Durenda!" He snapped at the druidess, somewhat surprised by her bold actions.

Talking over her shoulder to the companions Durenda said, “none of you will harm these woodland creatures. Can’t you see that they are just hungry?” She stepped forward and held out a hand showing that she meant the badgers no harm.

Tyrahne was about to say something when he looked again and saw that the badgers seemed pacified by the lovely druidess. She turned and smiled widely to the others.

“See? They are friendly,” Durenda said.
The moment that she turned her head to assure the companions of this, the larger of the two badgers took a swipe at Durenda with its great paw. Tyrahne immediately grabbed her and pulled her out of harms way. The others stepped forward to confront the giant badgers doing their best to drive them off with out harming them. After a few smacks from the flat side of the companion’s swords the giant badgers fled back the way they came, grunting and growling as them did. Tyrahne was comforting the shaken druidess.

“I don’t understand. Why would one of the forest’s creatures attack me?” Durenda said with a sweet yet frightened voice.

Moonstar added her two cents worth. “That is why they are called ‘wild.’ Even though we vow to protect nature and all of its creatures, it doesn’t mean that they are automatically our friends.” She frowned at Durenda, irritated that she had to explain such a basic rule of nature to a follow of Belonda.

“Aiiee!” Craedus yelled suddenly.

Everyone turned to see what had made the dwarf scream so agonizingly. There, beyond the dwarf, was a third badger that was making haste in gobbling up the companion’s rations.

“It eating all our food!” the dwarf wailed.

The dwarf quickly ran over to the badger. Before he could reach it the large creature lumbered away into the forest. Craedus looked down at the jumbled mess the badger had made of their packs. Many of them were shredded beyond recognition and most of their food was chewed to pieces.

“Great. What do we do now?” Creadus said soberly.

“I am definitely not going to eat that stuff now,” Moonstar said.

“Scavenger hunt!” Slink said gleefully.

“What are you talking about now fool?” Moonstar snapped.

“Hunting and gathering. The women can gathering roots and berries and stuff, while the men can follow Tyrahne on a hunt for fresh meat. Elyanah and I can sneak around the forest to snare up a few rabbits for stew,” Slink said and smiled at the ingenuity of his plan.

“Who says I want to be stuck with you?” Elyanah said laughing at him.

“Come on,” Slink said to Elyanah as he pulled her toward the forest.

Elyanah whispered to Slink, “you know, you are lucky that you didn’t include me in with all that ‘woman’s work’ stuff.”

Slink was still laughing when the two thieves disappeared into the trees.

Tyrahne watched the two disappear. “As strange as it seems, the little rogue has a good idea. I’ll take Merrick and Craedus into the forest to see if we can fell a deer.”

Raven nodded to the three of them and soon they were lost to the dense forest too.

“Lanneth and I will check over our gear and then join the rest of you with the gathering.”

“Woman’s work huh?” Moonstar asked. She was still complaining to herself as the others fanned out looking for some edible berries and roots.

Gwereth followed behind the priestess as she made a half-hearted attempt at gathering. It was less than a half an hour later when the two thieves came running back to the campsite, screaming and making a lot of noise. Immediately Raven had her enchanted short sword in hand and was running to meet them. She met them at the forest’s border.

“What is it?” she asked the panting thieves.

“Their coming,” Slink said panting and wheezing.

“Who is coming?” Raven asked.

Before the thief could answer Raven heard the buzzing. And it was growing louder by the second. Slink slipped away into the nearby trees, quickly followed by Elyanah as five huge forms emerged from the forest.

“Giant wasps!” Raven yelled, warning the others.

The huge yellow and black insects were upon the companions immediately. Their
speed was incredible and the companions barely had enough time to draw their weapons to defend themselves. One of the wasps had flown around Moonstar and was attempting to sting her when Gwereth smacked it in the side knocking it from it’s intended victim. On the otherside of the camp Raven swung viciously at another wasp severing on of its legs from its body. It buzzed angrily and dove at the warrior. Lanneth began chanting. Another wasp had flown around the companions and found Durenda’s back unguarded. It scratched her with one of its sharp clawed legs.

“Argh!” Durenda screamed.

Moonstar swung around and smacked the wasp across the side of the head drawing its attention from the defenseless druidess.

“Just like swatting that fool of a thief of ours,” she laughed as she defended herself from the enraged wasp.

The thieves had split up among the trees looking for a good place to lay in ambush. Finding suitable spots the thieves waited for a passing wasp. Lanneth had finished chanting and let go with a surge of magical energy. Pointing at one of the wasps a bolt of pure red magic soared toward the wasp and slammed into its mid section. It began flying in erratic patterns before falling to the ground with a thud. Slink and Elyanah quickly jumped from the trees and hacked it into little pieces.

Another wasp had flown behind Lanneth and was preparing to slash him. Lanneth made an attempt to bash the insect with his quarterstaff but failed to connect. His momentum carried his passed the flying creature. The giant bug took the opportunity to sting him in the shoulder. Almost immediately the elf’s arm went numb and he dropped his staff.

Raven saw this and moved over to aid him. Lanneth slumped to him knees. The wasp moved in for the finishing blow but Raven managed to block the attack with her shortsword. She stabbed the wasp in the abdomen. It turned its attention to her and tried to sting her with its deadly stinger. It missed her and she was able to slash it again. Suddenly there was a yell from behind the wasp. It quivered for a moment before falling to the ground. There stood Craedus, his axe still stuck in the creatures back right between its wings.

“Not to feisty now is it?” He laughed a deep laugh and heaved his axe from the fallen foe.

Behind them Gwereth and Moonstar were doing there best to fend off the attacks of yet another wasp. It wasn’t long before the wasp was bleeding yellow fluids from many different spots were the priest and priestess had bashed it. It’s wings were torn and it was flying poorly. Another wasp sneaking up behind them for a surprise attack when an arrow sunk deeply into its abdomen. Tyrahne and the others quickly emerged from the forest. The wasp with an arrow stuck in it, along with the one that was now engaged with the thieves quickly fled into the forest. Tyrahne entertained the idea of firing another arrow off after them but decided to save it. Moonstar’s wasp was now grounded, it’s wings totally shredded. It wasn’t long before Slink and Elyanah had moved it to help the others finish it off. Craedus had refused to help finish the wasp off.

“There is no honor defeating a defenseless creature,” Craedus said with displeasure. The thieves on the other hand didn’t seem to have any regrets about slaying it. Moonstar quickly went to the fallen elf. He was paler than normal and he was shaking even though it was still warm out.

“He has been poisoned,” Moonstar said gravely. She watched as the elf spasmed. She quickly fetched a potion out of her pack. Holding the elf’s head up she forced some of the liquid into his mouth.

After long moments, Lanneth’s shaking form relaxed and his breathing became easier.

“He will live,” Moonstar announced. She moved on to Durenda checking the long wound across her back. The priestess healed the druidess with her magic before sending Durenda to use her own druidic magics on Craedus’ wounds.
Raven leaned over the body of Lanneth and pressed a hand to his forehead. It felt warm to the touch but his color was beginning to return. The elf’s eyes fluttered open.

“You going to be ok?” Raven asked.

“Yes.” the elf said nodding.

The smile that Raven’s face held for Lanneth disappeared as she turned to the thieves. Slink was bragging about his skills when Raven accosted him.

“So are you going to tell me what the heck happened back there?” she said pointing in the direction of the forest. The others had gathered to hear his explanation.

“It wasn’t our fault. Elyanah and I were tracking a deer that we had come across. We followed it, skillfully and perfectly silent I might add, to an old crumbling wall. The deer was walking along it when it rounded a corner. By the time that we followed it around the corner, it was gone,” Slink explained.

“So much for all your skill,” Moonstar said laughing.

Slink paused for a moment before continuing his explanation. “Anyways, around the corner we found this huge honeycomb. We thought...”

“YOU thought,” Elyanah said interrupting the other thief.

“Ok, I thought that at least we could bring back some honey for all of us to enjoy so I climbed the tree. I was just about to root around for some sweet stuff when those wasps came after us. That’s when we ran back here,” Slink finished his tale.

Raven pondered Slink’s story for a moment.

“Maybe we should check it out. A structure in the middle of the forest.....interesting,” she said.

“I would like to see it too. Maybe we can finish off those wasps,” Craedus agreed.

“Maybe there is treasure to be found there,” Slink said excitedly.

Slink and Elyanah retraced their path through the forest leading the others back to the wall they had found.

Slink pointed to the left. “That is were the wasp’s nest is.”

“Maybe we should avoid that for now,” Raven said.

The others agreed and they continued on to the right. They followed the length of the wall until they came to a corner. They rounded the corner and followed this new wall until they came to a rusty gate. Peering through the gate they saw an old weed choked cemetery. Far beyond the tombstones was a domed tomb of sorts.

“Thar be adventure matey,” Slink said this in his best pirate’s voice.

The companions were discussing what to do next when Slink boldly, or foolishly as Moonstar stated, walked through the gate and into the cemetery.
The Graveyard and Minax

The companions quickly, but cautiously followed Slink through the rusty gates of the ruined cemetery. Slink’s daring move had surprised the others. Moonstar had let a stunned “fool” escape her lips and Durenda had gasped. Merrick looked just as worried as the druidess. His eyes scanned the new terrain looking for an unseen enemy who, in his mind, lurked just behind the next tombstone. Raven was the most surprised and angered by the thief’s actions. She ran up to Slink and grabbed his arm forcefully.

Raven said in hushed but stern voice, “what the hell was that all about. Why did you just barge into here?”
“What? Coming in here? Someone had to take action,” Slink said.
“You know how stupid that was? You could have endangered us all,” Raven said.
Slink looked down at his arm where Raven had a quite a mighty grip on him. “Raven? The arm?”
Raven looked down and noticed that she was about to pull her friends limb out of its socket. “Sorry.” She let Slink’s arm go.
The thief rubbed his arm. “I know that leading this little band of adventurers is your thing, but someone had to take action. What was the point of sitting there and discussing our next move while the sun slowly slipped away.” He watched Raven’s face as his words sunk in. “You know that Moonstar would have talked things to death and wasted valuable time.”
“But Slink, that is the way things are. You talk about things before you do them. If we are to survive there has to be a little structure to our actions. Chaos and disorder will surely be the death of us all,” Raven explained.
“You do realize that we are not part of your little army right?” Slink asked.
Slink’s words had taken Raven a back. With all the time that she had spent trying to detach herself from the Houkahtan army after her dismissal, with all her effort to find a sense of independence as a wandering mercenary and bounty hunter, with all her effort to forget her past, she was still falling back into the role of leader and soldier. Slink saw the grimace forming on Raven’s face and quickly spoke his mind.
“I’m not trying to rain on your parade Raven and I didn’t want to be that blunt. It’s just that sometime you have to remember that we are not part of the company you use to lead in the Houkahtan army. Many of us are use to being our own leader and sometimes we will just do what we have to do,” Slink said.
Raven thought about the thief’s words for a moment before replying.
“Sorry Slink. It’s seems that being a leader is a hard habit to break. It is in my blood. I thought I could escape it but I guess I can’t. But we do need to be organized and careful in this strange land,” Raven said.
“I totally agree. But lets finish this lecture later. Ms. High-and-mighty is awaiting,” Slink said laughing to himself.
Raven turned to see that the rest of the companions had followed them into the graveyard and were cautiously looking about the area in a tight little group. Moonstar was standing facing them, her arms folded tightly in front of her and she was scowling at them.
“If you two are finished could we move on?” Moonstar asked.
Raven wasn’t sure if the little priestess was impatient or a little nervous about being in the cemetery but she knew that now was not the time for to debate with her temper.
“Come on Slink,” Raven said.
Slink whispered to Raven as they walked back to the group. “But it’s ok when she

37
goes off and talks with Gwereth all the time?"
Raven let the comment go unanswered as they joined the others. She led the companions down a cobblestone path through the center of the ruined cemetery. It’s stones were broken and uneven and made for unsteady footing. At one time Merrick slipped on the damp stones. Now that it was approaching dusk, the sun cast eerie shadows across the moss covered tombstones that were scattered about the weed choked cemetery. More than once a cricket’s sudden chirping or a gust of wind made one of the companions look anxiously around the cemetery.

“By Khom’s beard this place is unnerving. If there are foes here why don’t they just get it over with and attack. I don’t like all this waiting,” CRAEDUS said.
“I don’t think I want to know what is waiting for us here. Let’s just be done with this place and on our way,” TYRAHNE said suspiciously.
Raven didn’t know what to think of this new conversation. Two of their mightiest warriors talking like frightened school boys. She admitted to herself this place was eerie but not enough to incite fright in her fellow warriors.
“I wonder why this place is out here in the middle of nowhere. And I wonder who this cemetery is for. I can’t read any of the names on the tombstones,” SLINK said curiously.
“Obviously a burial place for a long forgotten race. Wouldn’t you agree mage?” GWERETH asked.
LANNETH looked about the cemetery with disinterest and nodded in agreement.
Raven took another look around the cemetery as they approached the central tomb. The grass was tall and weedy and had turned into an ugly withered yellow color in many patches. The few trees that had grown here were twisted and gnarled and in many places were bare of leaves. Raven thought that it was too early in the season for the change. As if reading her mind, TYRAHNE answered her question.

Tyrahne pointed at the trees. “Look there Raven. I fear that the trees around here are dying. Already they are loosing their summer foliage.”
“I could try and commune with them if you like Raven. It pains me to see them in such sorrow," DURENDA offered.
“Thanks Durenda but I think that we should check out the many tomb before doing anything else,” RAVEN said.
Tyrahne and Durenda nodded and fell back into line. The central building was a large marble tomb of sorts, moss and weed choked with cracks running up and down its surface. Its was a round, domed structure that was roughly thirty feet wide and fifteen feet tall. There was a rusty yet solid gate set into the side of the tomb were the cobblestone path met it. Immediately Gwereth and Lanneth began comparing their knowledge of ancient history as they carefully examined the building. But in the end they could not figure out what exactly the structure was.
Moonstar ran a finger across the tomb’s cold stone surface. “Whatever is laid to rest here, it has been for a long time.” The priestess was marveling at the thick marble columns that held the tomb’s roof aloft.
“Ain’t so impressive. Just a house for corpses,” ELYANAH commented.
“You should have more respect for the dead, considering you were almost one of them,” MOONSTAR said. She waved her hands in front of her to imitate a healing. Elyanah shrugged her shoulders and ignored the priestess tauntings.
“Speaking of the dead......do you think they have any treasure?” SLINK said with that greedy glint in his eye.
“I don’t think that it is wise to disturb the dead,” TYRAHNE warned the thief.
“The tracker is right thief. You do not want to incur the wrath of the dead,” MOONSTAR scolded the thief.
“Well at least we can check out the area without digging anyone up," SLINK said someone disappointed.
His comment made Durenda shiver as it conjured up an image in in her mind. Without thinking Tyrahne moved closer to her.
“I think that is a good idea. Everyone spread out and search for anything out of the ordinary,” Raven ordered.

“And don’t disturb any of the graves,” Gwereth added to Raven’s orders. Moonstar glared at Slink to punctuate this.

“Anything out of the ordinary? In a graveyard?” Elyanah questioned Raven’s orders but Slink just shrugged and led the she-thief away from the others.

The companions spread out and searched the cemetery grounds thoroughly and a half an hour later they regrouped to report their findings.

“Well?” Raven asked.

“I found a lot of small bones scattered about. Maybe there is a pack of wolves or some other predator roaming about the cemetery,” Merrick said. He seemed to shiver as he said this.

“I noticed the bones too. I didn’t find any visible tracks though,” Tyrahne added.

“In the top of many of the tombstone I found strange conical holes. Maybe some sort of secret trigger for a hidden treasure cache?” Slink sasid. His eyes lit up with the thought of loot.

“Or maybe a place to put flowers fool?” Moonstar snapped at the greediness of the thief.

“It just seemed strange at the time.....” Slink mumbled. He was doing his best to avoid Moonstar’s glare.

“So. You seem strange at times and we don’t question you,” Elyanah said teasing Slink. Everyone laughed at this.

“I also found something strange. Even though the tombstones around here are so old that we can’t read them, the ground surrounding some of them look freshly overturned,” Gwereth added.

“Gravediggers! I knew that there was something good in there!” Slink exclaimed. He looked defiantly at Moonstar. She turned her head away from him in disgust.

“Hmmm. Maybe....” Gwereth pondered. He turned to look at the tomb for a moment.

Raven saw this and noticed that the sun was barely sticking up above the distant horizon. “I see where Gwereth is going with this. Let’s check out the central tomb and be on our way. After all we have a mission to complete in Brighnon and I for one don’t want to be here after dark.”

“I second that,” Merrick said.

They tried to open the tomb’s rusty gate but found it locked. Craedus gave a mighty tug on it but found that it was a lot more sturdy than it looked. Raven nodded to Slink and the thief immediately began to work on the gates lock. Slink had a few of his picks jammed into the lock and with a few flicks of his wrist the lock clicked open. Raven pushed the gate open. it was obvious that the gate had not been opened in years for it screeched loudly as it swung inward.

“Wow. That was loud enough to wake the dead,” Slink said without thinking. The others looked at him all wide eyed.

“SHUT UP YOU FOOL!” Moonstar shrieked at Slink.

Merrick leaned over to Lanneth and whispered. “Now that was loud enough to wake the dead. The elf just nodded and remained quiet.

Raven had just stepped across the gate’s threshold when the air in front of her began to blur. A vague shape began to form. A large transparent mouth that fluttered slightly as if formed of wisps of smoke appeared in front of the companions. Everyone took a step back as it spoke.

“Be wary O’ mighty adventurers for this domain is warded against intruders. While entering this place may be easy, you will find leaving this place most difficult. And the stronger you are the harder this task will be....” The magic mouth said. The companions listened intently as the eerie and rasping voice trailed off. Slowly the mouth dissipated and was gone.
“Most fascinating,” Lanneth said at last.
“Most disgusting,” Durenda added.

The companions pondered the magic mouth’s words for a moment but could not find any significance among them. It was obvious there was something or someone important in the tomb, something that required magical protection. Once inside the companions found twelve stone coffins arranged around the outer wall of the tomb, all pointing inward toward a raised dais in the tomb’s center. The coffin’s themselves were non-descript except for a single set of runes on each. No one could read the strange script so they moved on toward the dais. Lying upon the dais was another strange marble coffin of sorts. It’s top was completely covered with small tiny runes, much like the first coffins. It was well preserved and not a hint of dust or age marred it. Lanneth and Gwereth approached the dais and began to ponder the meaning of the runes. The others huddled in close around the two. Lanneth quickly and precisely wrote the runes down into his journal.

“Well? What can you make of those?” Raven said pointing at the runes.

Gwereth and Lanneth conferred for long moments before answering the warrior.

“It is definitely an ancient language of some sorts. Lanneth is working on deciphering it now,” the priest said before turning back to the mage and they continued to talk in hushed tones.

Slink poked his head though and took a chance to try and read the runes but his skills in reading languages, much less ancient ones, was to lacking. It was Moonstar and her irritation that finally saved the day. Grumbling about the wait she pushed her way passed Gwereth and Lanneth and began to inspect the runes. Her eyes blurred for a moment and she began to read them.

Moonstar read slowly out loud, “Minax reigns with holy death, upon evil with fiery breath, chaotic ones it does smite, with a quenchless thirsting bite, below it waits for righteous touch, to conquer it everlasting vengeful lust.”

Lanneth quickly wrote down everything that the priestess said.

Gwereth looked at his ward with surprise and said, “how did you read those runes Little One?”

Moonstar shook her head once and snapped out of the trace she had been in. “I just read them. Can’t you read Old Man?”

“No, I couldn’t read them. And neither could the elf here,” Gwereth said astonished. Lanneth nodded.

Moonstar stared at them and raised an eyebrow. Slink pushed passed her and began to examine the dais and the strange coffin resting upon it.

“So what is all this jabbering about ‘Minax’?” Slink said as he pawed at the rim of the coffin.

Craedus fingered his beard and said, “sounds like a really powerful being to me. Maybe a creature with all that talk about fiery breath.”

“A dragon maybe?” Tyrahn offered.

“A weapon actually,” Merrick’s sudden remark caught the companions attention. “I remember a conversation I had awhile back with a few historians who mentioned a weapon called Minax. I can’t recall any specifics about the weapon, just that it was used in a holy war and ended up deciding the final battle.”

Gwereth whispered to Moonstar, “could he be talking about ‘The Holy War’? The great Demon Crusades of a century ago?” Moonstar just shrugged, her mind a whirl with thoughts of the holy weapon.

“And where did you hear this tale Merrick?” Raven said looking intently at the bard. He blushed at the sudden attention he was getting from her.

“During my travels through the Seven Baronies a few years back. Why?” Merrick answered.

“Well, if you heard this legend in our homelands and we are now here, at the supposed resting place of this holy Minax, maybe we were not teleported that far away
from home,” Raven explained. A murmur rippled through the companions and everyone seemed to be happy with this new development. Slink was still trying to find a way into the coffin but wasn’t having any luck.

“You might want to stop fiddling with that thief. You never know what sort of wards were place on that coffin to deter thieves such as yourself,” Moonstar warned the thief. Slink would have though nothing of the priestess’ warnings except for the off handed tone she had used with him. There was no sign of her temper at all in her words. That frightened him more than the thought of any possible traps on the coffin. Slink immediately left the coffin alone and decided to find out what was preoccupying Moonstar’s thoughts.

“There is nothing here. This place is a bust,” Elyanah said disappointed.

“You said bust,” Slink laughed at his pun. Elyanah elbowed him lightly in the ribs.

“I agreed. I’ll mark this place on my map and we can come back here later after we have dealt with the bandits in Brighnon. Maybe there will be more information about this Minax in Brighnon or Ironmoore,” Raven agreed.

The rest of the companions agreed also. Raven pulled out her map case and found a map detailing the lands surrounding Ironmoore. She carefully noted the location of the cemetery on the map before rolling it up with the others, placing them back in their case.

“That’s quite a collection of maps your are gathering there,” Craedus commented

Raven nodded as she placed the case back into her pack. When the companions left the tomb they found that the sun had set and it was getting dark out. Even then the shadows had given way to dusk. It wouldn’t be long before they were lost in the darkness of nightfall. Raven cocked an ear and listened. It had grown completely silent. The rest of the companions stopped their random conversations and also noticed the lack of sound in the cemetery. Suddenly the ground about them burst open. Zombies and skeletons began to emerge from the graves around them.

“Run!” Raven shouted.
The Sleepers Awaken

Before the companions eyes, the earth erupted open spilling its decayed contents out for all to see. From great rends in the ground skeletons and zombies slowly crawled forth. The freshly turned soil of the graves the companions had found earlier parted way for partially rotted forms of long dead people. As zombies tore their way free from their earthly prisons they moaned and wailed filling the companions with the dread of their eternal suffering. Skeletal bones clacked loudly against one another creating a chorus of unnerving sounds.

“By the gods!” Tyrahn exclaimed.

“Thauaras’ Fist!” Gwereth swore.

The other companions stood there, their mouths agape, watching the steady advance of the undead army. Raven and Craedus were the first ones to react, shaking away their horror and drawing their weapons.

“Don’t just stand there people. To arms! Drive these hell spawns back to their graves.” Raven ordered.

Still stunned by the sudden appearance of the undead, the others were slower to react. One by one they drew their weapons and prepared themselves for the undead onslaught as they backed away toward the cemetery’s exit. They were about halfway to their goal when the undead were upon them. Whether it was their intent or not the undead had managed to surround the companions forcing them to fight their way to freedom. Moonstar and Gwereth brandished their holy symbols and began to chant, praying to Thauaras.

“Foul creatures of the nether world, go back to whence you came from!” Gwereth commanded.

“All mighty Thauaras, heard my plea and bath these lost souls in the brightness of your holy light and allow their souls the rest that they deserve!” Moonstar cried.

As their chanting rose in unison, a dozen skeletons and zombies stopped their unholy advance and retreated. Seven skeletons fled to cower in a far corner of the cemetery while five zombies tried in vain to crawl back into their open graves. Gwereth and Moonstar seemed to be pleased by the results of their turning but the battle was far from over. Dozens of undead still swarmed around the companions threatening to overwhelm them at any moment. Raven and Craedus hacked at the undead surrounding them and were surprised that their weapons and mighty blows were doing little to repel them.

“Damn. My axe is doing little to harm them,” Craedus grumbled.

“Neither is my blade,” Raven said as she ducked to avoid as a rusty short sword. It whizzed passed her face.

“Enough of this,” Craedus said as he hung his axe back on its belt loop.

Raven had little time to wonder about this as Craedus rush forward with his shield raised, roaring a battle cry as he went. Suddenly the hairy little dwarf crouched into a ball and rolled forward smashing into a group of skeletons. The force of his armored body sent skeletons and bone flying everywhere. Raven and Tyrahn filled the void left by Craedus’ efforts and pressed the attack. They tried to target zombies when they could knowing that their blades fared better against rotting flesh than they did against the skeleton’s hardened bones. Durenda, Moonstar and Gwereth pounded skeletons with their staff and maces, crushing bones with every successful attack. Merrick had made his way to the thief’s side. Slink and Elyanah were doing their best to hold back the undead on their front, hoping that it gave Lanneth enough time to cast some sort of
helpful spell. But Slink was finding it hard to slay the skeletons with his throwing knives and even harder to retrieve the knives that missed. The undead were giving them little ground to maneuver.

Slink muttered to himself, “using these are a waste.” He tucked away the two knives that were in his hands and drew his long sword.

Behind the group of thieves Lanneth had finished preparing his spell. With one find magical syllable a pair of crimson magic missiles soared toward a zombie and blasted it. Twin patches of burnt flesh appeared on its chest.

“Yuck! What a retched smell,” Durenda said covering her nose and mouth with one hand as she swung at a skeleton with the other.

“It is the smell of the dead,” Gwereth said.

“We are all going to be dead if we don’t do something soon!” Moonstar said gravely.

Raven surveyed the carnage and saw that they were going to inevitable be overrun.

“Moonstar is right. We can’t possibly defeat all of the undead. Head for the exit as quickly as you can. Hack your way through if you have to but make a ring around the more vulnerable. Now lets move people!”

Slowly the companions moved into a tight formation keeping Lanneth and Durenda toward the center of the group. Step by step they pushed their way toward the cemetery gate. The warriors traded blows with the undead, sacrificing many wounds to keep the others safe. There were many opportunities for Raven to beat down an undead for good but passed up the chance to instead strike at a more immediate threat. They were making good progress when a zombie broke through their ranks by somehow dodging an attack by Slink. It swung a rotted fist at Merrick and smashed him savagely across the side of the head. The bard dropped to the spongy ground like a stone, completely stunned. A small group of zombies took the opportunity to swarm over the fallen bard. Within mere moments Merrick was lost from sight, buried under a mass of rotting flesh.

“Merrick!” Slink yelled.

Gwereth yelled to Moonstar, “the half breed has fallen!”

Pulling out her holy symbol once again Moonstar tried to turn the foul creatures but her prayers had no effect on them this time. Deciding on a different tactic, she did a daring thing. She began chanting as she ran toward the zombie pile. Her hands began to glow with a familiar bluish hue. Quickly she laid her hands on one of the zombies. She was sicken by the putrid flesh that she felt but continued to press her hands against it as she chanted. Suddenly the zombie twitched and convulsed and began to dissolve where she had “healed” it. There was a moment when all the zombie stopped attacking the bard and regarded the priestess. They must have been able to sense the bright magic that she wielded and withdrew from her, leaving the bard unmolested. That was all the time the companions needed. Craedus smashed a nearby skeleton as Raven knocked a zombie back and away from Merrick. She grabbed the battered and beaten minstrel and half-carried, half-dragged him with her. The companions ran for the exit.

The undead soon came to their senses and continued pursuing the companions. At the limits of their strength, the companions finally made it to the cemetery gates. They literally fell through it exhausted landing on the ground in a great heap of bodies. Weakly they looked back and saw the horde of undead swarming at the open gate, but not a bone nor a bit of rotted flesh passed through. It was as if the undead where repelled but some sort of unseen force field. They all looked at Lanneth.

“It wasn’t me,” Lanneth said.

“Maybe the undead are confined to the magic of the cemetery,” Gwereth offered.

No one knew for sure but they were glad to be away from the undead. They had barely escaped the cemetery. Each and every one of the companions wore wounds that the undead had inflicted on them. Gwereth, Moonstar and Durenda used their remaining healing powers to heal their friends, binding whatever wounds they could not heal with magic. Merrick had been by far the worst off. He was bruised and bloodied and it was long moments before they could rouse him from unconsciousness. Raven was so
relieved when Merrick awoke that she acknowledged his flirting with a smile.
  “You saved me my fair lady. I knew that you cared,” Merrick said weakly.
  “Rest easy Merrick,” Raven told him. She smiled and placed a hand on his.
  Tyrahne searched for, and found, a suitable place for them to camp for the night. It
  was far from the cemetery, for no one wanted to be near than place during the night, and
  was within sight of the road. The horses were tied to nearby trees. It wasn’t long before
  the companions were asleep, resting their weary bodies. Nothing bothered them that
  night.
The companions awoke early the next day feeling much better than they did the night before. Most of the wound from the previous night were healed, with no small help from their magical powers, and the fatigue in their muscles was gone. Moonstar wandered through her group of friends and double checked her handy work. She muttered to herself as she checked their wounds and in most cases removed and discarded bandages that were no longer needed. Slink had cornered Elyanah and was subjecting her to another round of complaints.

“I can’t believe that we didn’t find any treasure in the graveyard. If only I had been able to look inside those graves. I just know that there is something good inside of them,” Slink said. The thief wore the most childish pouting face which Elyanah could not help but smiled at.

“Slink, we did get to see what was inside those gravesite. Remember the skeleton and zombies?” Elyanah teased him. She raised a questioning eyebrow to him. Slink shrugged in off as if the foul creatures meant nothing to his quest for treasure.

Slink grumbled, “still, all that work for nothing. We seriously have to start finding some treasure or I am out of here.”

“And were would you go? We are strangers in a strange land guild traitor,” Elyanah asked.

She placed a hand on his shoulder to comfort him. A moment later she realized what she was doing and pulled her hand away quickly hoping that Slink hadn’t noticed. But he had. He smiled softly to himself as Elyanah quickly departed the awkward situation. She had called him ‘guildtraitor’ which meant that she hadn’t entirely forgiven him, at least not deep down inside, but there was something to her gesture. Something warm and growing, the forming of a true bond between the two thieves, one which excited Slink and scared him all at the same time. Moonstar had finished with her survey of the companions wounds and had pulled Gwereth aside for yet another one of their private meetings. And as always Moonstar was doing her best to ignore Slink. His constant whining about the lack of treasure they were finding was beginning to get on her nerves. They had more important things to ponder than a bunch of glittering trinkets.

“I am telling you that we need to make haste to Brighnon and find out all that we can about this Minax. I believe that it may indeed be a holy weapon of great importance. I think that the bard speaks true,” Moonstar said.

“I tend to agree with that also. It would definitely explain why Minax is hidden out here in the middle of nowhere in that ruinous crypt. I would guess that the knights entombed there were persons of great importance in their own rights. Maybe they were the original wielders of Minax,” Gwereth added.

Moonstar gave him a questioning look as if to say that only a holy priest could wield the weapon and not just a knight. It was all about faith.

“And what about the cryptic message that we found? Obviously it points out that Minax is a powerful artifact of good. Just think about how it would help us spread the word of Thauaras,” Moonstar said. A hint of fire sparkled in Moonstar’s eyes as she spoke her words with heated passion.

“I don’t know about that but I am curious as to why you were the only one that was able to read the runes,” Gwereth said.

“Maybe I am meant to wield it,” Monstar said laughing as she teased the elder priest.

Gwereth thought to himself, that is what I am afraid of. He wondered what was bothering him more, the thought of the artifact reaching out for Moonstar or the sudden
uncharacteristically gleeful tone of her words. He said nothing but offered Moonstar a slight smile to acknowledge her jest.

Tyrahne and Durenda were just passing by the conferring priests, perhaps a bit too close, and drew Moonstar’s attention. She suddenly changed the subject and sounded a lot more like her old self.

“You know old man, we could save a lot of trouble using our magic to heal everyone if they wouldn’t get hurt in the first place,” Moonstar said seriously. Gwereth looked at her confusingly not really knowing where this conversation was headed. “If some of us would use our magical powers in a more aggressive manner instead of hiding behind others.” Gwereth knew exactly what the point of it all was when he saw Durenda stiffen a bit as she walked by. The druidess continued on without saying a word. Moonstar seemed satisfied with the results of her vague insult and wandered back to the main group.

Durenda walked a few more steps away from the others and found a dry spot on a nearby log and sat down. Tyrahne quickly joined her.

“Pay no mind to her. You know how spiteful Moonstar can be a times. It’s just her way of trying to be in control. He doesn’t realize that you are a healer and not a warrior,” Tyrahne said.

The ranger placed a hand on one of Durenda’s tiny hands and tried to comfort her. She smiled weakly and nodded at Tyrahne’s words but was lost in thought. He was right about one thing, she was a healer and a pacifist, not a warrior. She had been brought here and forced into this situation, one which she was ill equipped to deal with. It was a rare occasion when she was away from her grove and when she was, it was usually on a trip to the nearby city of Throffhorn. She had never traveled the expanses of the world like she was now and at times she found it frightening. And as far as her magics were concerned, she had grown up knowing that the powers she controlled where best used to heal the ailments of others and the forests around her. She had never thought of using her magics to harm another creature no matter how foul they may be. That action would be against all that she had learned, all that she felt was good in her heart. How could she expect Moonstar to understand that. The priestess was of a good heart, but in her quest to enlighten others to the way of Thauaras, Moonstar had a way of twisting and turning peoples ways of thinking, a way of forcing people into listening and believing her. It was the way of priests and religion. Durenda could not fault her for that but she could not bring herself to be like that either. Somehow she had to find her way through all of this madness and find a cure for her illness. In doing that she could return to her grove and away from the this chaos. Tyrahne continued to comfort her in silence, occasionally looking back to see what the others were up to.

Craedus had moved away from the group a bit and was practicing a new move that he had learned in Ironmoore. It was the tuck-and-roll maneuver, the same move that he had used against the undead. It seemed to Raven that their recent battle had inspired the dwarf to practice his skill with other weapons “just in case.” The dwarf was currently wielding his battle hammer and shield. With a quickly dash he would run forward, curl into a tight ball, bowling forward to spring upward at the last moment striking out with his hammer. Craedus was soon covered in sweat but continued to do the move over and over. Raven wondered how the dwarf could accomplish the feat in his heavy breastplate. She turned back to Merrick and Lanneth to finish their discussion about the graveyard.

“So you don’t think there is anything that we can do about retrieving this Minax?” Raven asked.

“No, I do not. It was obviously placed here for a reason, one which I do not think involves us. At least not at this time. Retrieving it at this time may prove to be impossible,” Lanneth answered.

“I for one certainly don’t want to fight those wretched undead again.” Merrick said as he absentmindedly rubbed the back of his head.
Raven noticed that he had once again donned his colorful feathered cap. The one that he had packed away in WoodVale when they assumed the disguise of merchants. She turned her attention back to Lanneth.

"Do you think that there are any connections between Minax and Moonstar? She is a priestess and all but I still find it odd that she was the only one who could decipher those runes," Raven said continuing to probe the mage’s knowledge.

"Minax is a holy weapon after all. The answer could be as simple as religion. Then again...." Lanneth’s voice trailed off, obviously trying hard to solve the mystery in his thoughts.

"Well one thing is for sure, Minax is not going to help further our quest to find and defeat these bandits," Raven said.

The three of them broke off their conversation. Raven looked about the came one more time intending to gather her friends. She saw that Tyrahne and Durenda had wandered off a ways and were now sitting together softly talking to one another. They would talk and smile and occasionally laugh until one of the companions, usually Moonstar, would glance their way. The two would then become quiet and talk in hushed tones until the prying eyes were off of them. Moonstar would shake her head and grumble, which in turn would make Gwereth laugh to himself. By the time that Raven had gathered everyone, Durenda seemed to be in better spirits.

"I have been talking with Lanneth about the possibilities of entering the graveyard again to seek more information about Minax and trying to find a way to retrieve it. On his advice, which I tend to agree with, I think that we should head for Brighton. Once there we can meet with our contact and form a plan to take care of the bandits once and for all. While we are doing that, Moonstar and Gwereth can gather whatever information they can about Minax," Raven announced.

The other companions talked this out among themselves and for the most part they agreed with it. Slink was grumbling about something. Raven knew right way what it was all about.

"Sorry Slink, the treasure hunting will have to wait," she said. She saw the frown spreading across his face and quickly added. "But don’t worry. I am sure that there is a lot of loot in this bandit’s hideout too."

The frown on the thief’s face vanished instantly as he thought of the piles of treasure that was bound to be hidden in the bandit’s sanctuary.

The companions began to pack up their camp and readying their horses. Raven was surprised that she had gotten little argument from Moonstar. But it was a pleasant surprise for a change. Once all the tents and bedrolls were neatly packed away, the companions mounted their horses with Craedus falling alongside on foot, they left the graveyard behind. They headed due west through the forest with everyone in a relatively good mood. Moonstar didn’t even complain about Merrick’s harp playing when it turned into another impromptu concert of sorts. Although she would never admit it, she thought that Durenda had a pretty singing voice. Much better that anyone in the choir she had heard at the temple back in Throffhorn. The day passed without incident. That night, even though that companions took turns standing guard, nothing attacked them. They were well into the second day after encountering the graveyard, and deep into the forest, when they were attacked.

The companions had just started moving after a small supper when the attack came. A large group of goblins, followed by a small group of hobgoblins swarmed out of the forest surrounding them. Craedus, already being on the ground, rushed for the nearest goblin and nearly chopped it in half with his great battle axe. Tyrahne wasted no time peppering the goblins with arrows. The first goblin he hit fell to the ground with an arrow protruding from its neck. It had short moments to claw at the arrow before drowning it its own blood. Before the goblins could close the distance between them, Lanneth blasted one of them with a pair of magic missiles. Twin crimson missiles struck the foul little beast with enough force to knock him onto his back. It did not rise. Slink had
successfully weaved his way around the others and was able to hurl two of his throwing knives at a hobgoblin. Both knives buried themselves in the creatures legs. It fell to the ground squealing, crippled but alive. Raven had dismounted and met the goblins just as they reached the companions. She knew that she would have had a better vantage from horseback, but there was something about battling from that position that bothered her. She felt that she had better leverage on the ground. And from what she saw, she knew that she was going to need it. There were goblins everywhere. Raven swung her enchanted long sword in a high arc and deflected a goblin’s blade. She quickly brought the swing back and cut off another goblin’s sword arm. It squealed in pain as it fled. She stepped forward to met another pair of goblins when a magic missile slammed into her side. She was shoved back enduring searing pain, but managed to stay standing.

“They have hobgoblin shamans!” Raven yelled.

Durenda rushed to aid Raven as Gwereth and Lanneth began to chant. Most of the other companions were now off their horses and had joined the fray. Merrick stepped in line next to Raven and did his best to hold off the goblin horde giving Durenda the time to heal her wound. Raven did not like to retreat from battle, if even for a moment and winced every time that Merrick took a hit from his foul opponents. Thankfully it was mere moments before the pain in her side had subsided and allowed her to join Merrick. She thanked Durenda with a nod and rushed forward with sword raised. Another hobgoblin shaman finished chanting and directed a spell in Lanneth’s direction. Suddenly Lanneth and Slink, who was in the path of the shaman’s spell, slumped to the ground in a deep slumber. Tyrahne drew back on his bow and let go an arrow that soared toward the shaman who had just cast its spell. With deadly accuracy the arrow struck the hobgoblin in the left eye and pierced its brain. It died instantly. Craedus was doing well maiming or killing almost any goblin that ventured near him. He was virtually a whirlwind of axe blades. And his platemail was doing its job in keeping most of the goblins sharp little blades away from him. He had one small gash on his forearm but he hardly noticed it. Getting a sudden break in the action, for the goblins had finally realized that they should avoid the dwarf if they wanted to live, Craedus ran forward and attempted his tuck-and-roll. Whether it was the weigh of the platemail or the exhaustion that he was feeling, or both, the maneuver failed him. He managed to knock down his opponent but couldn’t follow the roll into a standing position. The goblins took advantage of this and swarmed the fallen dwarf. Gwereth saw this and directed the spell that he was readying at the goblin mound. With the last mystic syllable the priest slept seven of the little creatures. Enraged, Craedus rose form the pile and began taking swings at any goblin standing near him. The sudden lose of numbers seemed to break the goblins morale. They began to flee into the forest. The remaining hobgoblins tried to contain their fleeing brethren but also took up flight when they saw Elyanah cut down the other hobgoblin shaman. Tyrahne killed one more of the goblins before they disappeared into the forest.

“An arrow in the back? Now that isn’t very honorable is it?” Moonstar chastised Tyrahne. She glanced once at the dwarf looking for a possible comment to this and then back to the ranger.

“Goblins are horrible, nasty little creatures that need to die for their sins,” Tyrahne snapped.

Durenda overheard Tyrahne’s comment and was surprised by the rage she heard in his voice. She wondered what had happened to the ranger to cause such a malicious attitude. Moonstar dropped the conversation and began helping the others with the healing process. Spells were cast and minor wounds bandaged. Craedus had fallen to one knee and was leaning on his axe handle. He was gasping and drawing in deep breaths. Raven walked over to him and offered him a hand up. She grunted with effort as she helped the heavily armored warrior to his feet.

“How do you ever manage to roll like that with all this armor on?” Raven said with amazement. She asked him remembering the successful move Craedus had made in
the graveyard.
Craedus shrugged, “I dunno. I guess I just do it. It doesn’t always work though. I’ll have to continue training.”

Elyanah walked over to Lanneth and the snoring Slink. She shook them both and woke them up.

“Sleeping on the job are you?” she teased Slink as he rubbed his eyes. He stuck out his tongue before preceding to get up and stab everyone of the sleeping goblins scattered around Craedus including the hobgoblin he had wounded during the battle. “Maybe I should have gotten my revenge and did that to you while you still slept Guildslayer.” She laughed when Slink gave her a dirty look.

The meager treasure that the goblins had was collected by Slink, under the watchful eye of Moonstar, and consisted of a few silver coins and many copper ones. Lanneth was not surprised that the shamans did not carry spell books on them. From what he knew of the little humanoids, they were grated their spell power by whatever dark gods they prayed to. They headed west once again. Nothing else bothered them that night nor the next. On the following day, the fourth day after finding the graveyard, the forest began to thin and by mid day the forest began to fall away to a great plain. The companions followed the road through rolling hills. A few hours later they came upon a broken down wagon on the side of the road. Standing along side of the wagon was a man, a woman and a child. To the companions, the people looked like farmers. They were dressed in rugged and worn clothing that had more than a little dirt on them. The man was unsuccessfully trying to jack up the wagon in order to remove a broken wheel.

Raven approached the wagon, “hail and well met.”
“Hail,” said the man with a huff as he let go of the stubborn jack.

The child who could have been no more than four or five skirted around the woman’s leg and clung to it tightly.

“Need a hand?” Raven asked.

“That would be greatly appreciated. My name is Randoon,” the man said.

Raven dismounted her horse and shook the man’s hand. Acquaintances were made before they tended to the wagon. Craedus and Raven used their strength to jack up the wagon and hold it in place while Randoon quickly slipped the broke wagon wheel off and slid a new one on. They talked as they worked.

“Me and my family are independent merchants, farmers actually, W are on our way to Ironmoore to sell our goods,” Randoon said pointing at sack and bushels of food in the back of his wagon. Raven noticed grains and corns and vegetables of all kinds. “I am hoping to make a few silver coins. Winter can usually be harsh in this region and with only a few months before it gets cold....” He trailed off looking grim. “With Ironmoore full of miners they lack the farmer needed to feed the city. We should be able to make quite a bit there. As long as those bandits don’t show up and rob us.” Raven took interest in the mention of the bandits.

"Why would they want to rob you? You have little of value, just foodstuffs. Now maybe if they were really hungry...." Slink asked. This earned him a dirty look from Moonstar.

Randoon laughed. “If the bandits steal this food, they will be one step closer, however small a step, from controlling Ironmoore. Could you imagine if that city had no food to feed their peoples. That’s a lot of hunger people guarding all the ore," he explained.

“I could imagine that. No food? Yikes! Kind of makes me hungry just thinking about it,” Craedus said rubbing his belly. The dwarf also got a dirty look from Moonstar. He tried to avoid the look by examining the new wheel that Randoon had put on the wagon and grumbled. “No way that this wheel could have been made by dwarves hands. It has weak spots here and here....” He explained to Slink who didn’t seem to thrilled about it.

“No need to worry about the bandits Randoon. The bandits that have been attacking the caravans of Ironmoore are no more,” Raven boasted.

Randoon laughed at Raven’s statement. “Surely you jest. The bandits are a mighty
bunch. Surely you have heard wrong,” he said.

“Nay. It was us who defeated them. They will not harm anyone ever again,” Raven said. She smiled at the man who frowned for a brief second before speaking.

“You must be a brave bunch indeed,” Randoon said.

Craedus flexed his arms, his muscles bulging, and Slink twirled a dagger quickly in his hands.

“Brave indeed,” Randoon repeated.

Raven bid the man farewell and just before the companions rode off Raven offered Randoon a few gold coins. He looked at them surprisingly.

“Just in case the prices in Ironmoore are lower than you expect,” Raven explained.

Randoon smiled and watched the companions ride away into the western horizon. As the companions passed out of sight Randoon’s smile faded and was replaced by an evil sneer. The family looked at each other and laughed evilly to themselves. They quickly jumped into the back of the wagon. The man pulled a thick tarp off one of the packages to reveal a large stone bowl full of brackish water. The family huddled around the bowl and stared at the water. Huge smiles grew on their faces as a vague and darkened face appeared in the cloudy water.

“Well?” the face asked with a deep and eerie voice.

“There are ten of them approaching the city as we speak Master,” Randoon said to the image in the water.

“Do they pose a threat to our cause?” the face asked.

“For the most part they do not. They are small in the ways of the arcane but their is a priestess of some power among them along with a knight of Houkahtan,” Randoon explained.

“Are you sure?” the face asked in surprise.

“Yes Master. I saw her medallion marking her as one,” Randoon said.

“And they were able to defeat your goblin force?” the face asked.

“A small one, yes.” Randoon added.

“Hmm. They may pose a problem after all. I think that they need a little distraction.” The face was silent for a moment. “That is all. Make your way back to the city in the usually manner and avoid contact with our ‘guests’. I will give you new orders later.”

And with that said the image faded from view.
Soon after leaving the wagon behind, the companions stopped for a brief lunch before continuing on through the great plains to the city of Brighnon.

“So Raven, what do make of all that?” Slink asked.

“Of what?” Raven asked back.

“Those farmers who where broken down along the road,” Slink said.

“What of them?” she said getting a little annoyed with the conversation.

“Do you really think that they were poor farmers heading to Ironmoore?” Slink asked.

“Yes,” she said looking at the thief inquisitively. “Don’t you?”

“I guess. There was just something strange about them. I’m not sure what it is about them but I just get this feeling…” Slink said with his voice trailing off.

Raven was pondering Slink’s words and the hidden meaning they contained when Moonstar added her thoughts to the conversation.

“I agree with our greedy little friend there. Poor farmers heading through a dark and dangerous forest to Ironmoore to sell their goods? It’s hard for me to believe. I saw nothing in their wagon that would allow them to defend themselves from the goblins we encountered,” Moonstar said suspiciously.

“Maybe they could pelt them with turnips,” Slink chuckled and dodged a swipe from Moonstar.

“Desperate times make desperate measures,” Raven added.

“I hear that,” Merick said to himself thinking about the situation that the companions had found themselves in.

Chomp, chomp, smack, BURP! The dwarf continued to devour his food as Moonstar watched him distastefully.

It was late afternoon and the companions had just crossed another rolling hill. The land before them seemed to be flattening out for the most part.

“I’m hungry” Craedus moaned as he held his stomach.

“You just ate less that two hours ago!” Moonstar said astonished.

“But I only ate once,” Craedus explained. He had a shocked look to his face.

The argument was about to continue in full swing when Slink suddenly interrupted.

“Do you hear that?” Slink asked.

“Hear what?” Moonstar answered his question with a question.

“I don’t know,” Slink answered back

“Well what does it sound like?” Moonstar snapped at the thief

“Sort of like….flapping,” Slink said almost as if he was questioning his own words.

The other companions were now straining to hear the sounds that Slink said he had heard.

“Flapping?” Moonstar said confused.

“Is this another one of your pranks Slink?” Elyanah asked. She glared at him slightly but the tone of her voice betrayed her anger. To Slink it seemed that she was afraid that he actually had heard something.

“No, I really did hear something,” Slink said defending himself.

The companions continued to listen for a moment but heard nothing. Finally Moonstar spoke.

“Fool,” Moonstar muttered and moved away from the others. They followed Moonstar along the road to Brighnon.

As they walked Slink held an ear to the wind and continued to scan the horizon for any sign of the elusive sounds. Long moments passed before he thought that he could
hear it again.

“There it is again!” Slink exclaimed.

“Don’t be silly….” Moonstar started when Craedus suddenly interrupted her with a roar.

“I hear it too!” the dwarf bellowed.

Once again the others listened for the strange noise. This time they could all here the sound off in the distance.

“It does sound like flapping. Could it be a flock of birds?” Durenda said.

“Nay, it sounds like one big bird,” Tyrahne added.

“That has to be one big bird. I don’t see it anywhere and the flapping is growing quite loud already,” Merrick said nervously scanned the relatively flattened countryside around them.

The others scanned the horizon but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Moments later Slink was pointing at a small speck in the distance slightly upon the horizon.


As the companions watched the speck grew in size and soon took on a strange form. It wasn’t a bird or a bat, even though it seemed to have wings sort of like one. It was roughly shaped like an oblong dish with a long tail trailing out behind it.

Hmmm, maybe a headless bat? Slink thought to himself.

The tips of the thing’s wings flapped gently and gracefully, making that muffled flapping noise Slink had first detected, as it closed the distance between itself and the companions. It was jet black in color and had a crimson red underbelly. A long thin red streak ran down the length of its long tail that ended in a large, flat, barbed stinger. It’s wingspan was nearly one hundred feet wide. As it soared over the companion’s heads it cast an eerie shadow on them. It was close enough to the ground to cause them to be buffeted by a slight breeze that blew their hair about. Their horses where spooked by the sudden appearance of the creature overhead and Durenda was almost knocked to the ground by her bucking mount.

“What the hell is that thing?!?” Elyanah exclaimed.

Tyrahne shrugged and looked to Raven for the answer. She obviously didn’t know either. It was Lanneth that provided the answer.

“It looks like some sort of ray,” the elf offered.

“A ray?” Slink questioned him.

“There are sea creatures called manta ray that live near beaches. They glide gentle through the calm waters there and dine on small fish. They sort of look like this thing but are usually a lot smaller. Perhaps a few feet wide at most,” Lanneth explained.

“But we are not in the water,” Slink pointed out.

“And I don’t plan on being a fish dinner,” Raven said as she looked up and watched the Ray circle around for another pass.

“We must move!” Gwereth exclaimed as he saw the great beast returning toward them.

The companions reared their horses and galloped away. Craedus ran as fast as he could alongside of the horses with axe in hand. He was heavily weighed down by his new platemail and quickly fell behind. Just as he was about to yell ahead to the other, the companions rode straight into a shepherd and his flock of sheep. All around them were dozens of sheep who had decided to rest right in the middle of the road to Brighton. The companions did all that they could to keep from being tripped up by the lounging animals. Craedus caught up to them, huffing and puffing, just as the Ray returned. The gigantic creature swooped close to the ground gracefully scooping up three of the baying sheep in its mouth. The companions watch wide eyed as the white fluffy livestock disappeared into the wide slits of the ray’s mouth never to be seen again.

“AIEEEE! That monster is eating my sheep! We will be next!” the shepherd screamed as he ran in the opposite direction.

The ray quickly glided away and began circling for another pass.

“We must help him!” Moonstar yelled to the others.
“What? And become fish food ourselves? We must make haste and ride onto Brightnon,” Merrick exclaimed.

“Some hero you are,” Craedus said still catching his breath.

Merrick turned to look at Raven and saw that she was looking back at him. She regarded him with a look that would haunt Merrick’s dreams for weeks to come -- a look of disappointment and shame.

“Arm yourselves.” Raven said dropping her gaze from an embarrassed Merrick and dismounted her horse. “Anyone with missile weapons I suggest you use them.”

“What do we aim for?” Tyrahne asked as he strung his longbow.

“Anything that looks vulnerable,” Raven said.

The ranger nodded and nocked an arrow. Raven and Merrick also drew their bows and began to ready them. Durenda drew a sling out of her backpack that Tyrahne had gotten for her in Ironmoore. She loaded it with a stone bullet and twirled it above her head. For a moment she thought about the words Moonstar had spoken the day before, and for one fleeting moment she thought about using a spell, but continued to swing the sling above her head. She pushed the dull feelings and doubt out of her mind and awaited the return of the ray. Lanneth and Gwereth began chanting as the others braced themselves for the ray’s next attack. The ray soared overhead, once again close to the ground and scooped up another bunch of bewildered sheep. As it passed by the companions let loose with their attack. Durenda’s stone bullet bounced harmlessly off the ray’s thick hide. The companions arrows stuck into the beasts underside but seemed to do no noticeable damage. Lanneth’s magic missiles had little affect either.

“Screw this,” Slink muttered out loud as he sheathed a pair of his throwing knives. “I’m not about to waste any more of my knives.” He ran over to Gwereth and whispered something into the old man’s ear. Frowning the priest nodded his head and then Slink scurried off into the mob of panic stricken sheep and horses.

Moonstar and the others were wondering what was going on but had little time to worry about it as the ray was preparing for yet another pass. Once again the companions readied their bows and sling and awaited for the ray to return. The number of sheep dwindled as they began to run off. Raven had a feeling it wasn’t going to be long before they were the ray’s target. Slink suddenly ran out from behind the companion’s horses toward the remaining sheep and stopped next to one that laid motionless on the ground. The companions view was partially blocked by a mound of dirt and some rocks that jutted out of the ground, but it appeared like Slink was trying to draw the attention of the ray. He was waving his hands back and forth in the air yelling something that the companions could not hear. They had a few shocked seconds to ponder all of this before the ray was upon Slink. The thief did something and suddenly the dead sheep next to him burst into flames a moment before the ray swooped down low swallowing not only the flaming sheep but Slink as well and also quite of bit of earth. Where Slink once stood there was only a large shallow trench left behind by the attacking ray. The companions gasped in stunned silence. The ray circled around in a wobbly arc with smoke leaking from its gill slits.

“SLINK!” Elyanah screamed as she ran towards the new hole in the ground. The others followed her.

“The damn fool when and sacrificed himself for us,” Moonstar said looking up at the departing ray. “Maybe he wasn’t so bad after all.” Her voice was uncharacteristically weak sounding.

Elyanah’s face had gone deathly white. She had to be held up by Merrick otherwise she would have fallen to the ground. Everyone else was struck speechless. Gwereth was about to say something when laughter broke out from behind them. Slink popped out from behind the few horses that hadn’t bolted during the ray’s attack.

“Are all those tears for me,” Slink feigned surprise.

The look on the companions faces turned from shock and surprise to confusion and anger.
“But you were swallowed up by that fish.” Merrick said.
“Manta Ray,” Lanneth corrected Merrick but no one seemed to notice or care.
“So it would seem,” Slink said with a devilish grin.
Moonstar turned and looked at Gwereth, suddenly realizing what had happened.
“Yes it was me. The thief had me create an image of him out there to attract the beast. I wasn’t really sure what he had in mind at the time. But it seemed to have worked. It was a lot more effective that our attacks were,” Gwereth explained.
“Yep. Throwing that bottle of burning oil on that sheep turned out to be just the thing to drive that beast away. I bet it has a real nasty case of indigestion right now,” Slink chuckled, obviously proud of his handiwork. Elyanah was still staring at him in disbelief.
“You lit a sheep on fire?!?” Moonstar exclaimed. Durenda also seemed a little distressed by Slink’s actions.
“Don’t worry, it was a dead one,” Slink said offhandedly.
“Disgusting,” Moonstar muttered leaving the thief’s presence intend on discussing the whole thing thoroughly with Gwereth.
“Good thinking Slink,” Craedus said with enthusiasm slapping the thief roughly on the back.
“Yeah, smart move,” Elyanah said and proceeded to punch him in the arm. “Don’t you ever do anything like that again.” She yelled at him.
“Wow, I never knew that you cared,” Slink said laughing. Elyanah flashed him an angry glare but looked a bit relieved that the thief was ok.
“I think that was enough excitement for one day. Let’s head for Brighnon,” Raven said
The companions rounded up their horses and prepared to leave the site of the ray’s carnage. A few minute down the road they encountered the frightened shepherd who had finally stopped running and was trying to herd a few sheep back toward Brighnon. He was startled by the sudden appearance of the companions.
“Is the great Devilfish gone?” the shepherd asked looking about the sky.
“Yes it is. You need not be afraid anymore.” Moonstar reassured the shepherd.
“Then you have slain it?” he asked.
“No, but it has been driven away,” Raven explained.
Shepherd looked around again for the unseen enemy. “Not dead? Then we are all doomed,” he said gravely.
The companions looked at each other confused but could nothing else useful out of the shepherd. He just kept babbling about the “Devilfish”. They put the man on Durenda’s horse and the druidess doubled up on Tyrahné’s steed. It was approaching dusk when the companions finally reached Brighnon.

The official (extended) edition of this book will be released mid 2006.