

CHRONICLES OF INGARDE II

THE CROWN OF KRITHALA

BY LARRY SMITH

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Dedicated to my son Lar, whose fondness for my wild imagination never flagged, and with appreciation for Adam, Dennis and Martha Champagne, Jason Delorie, and Jack Curtin, my new gaming group, whose capacity to cause chaos is already legendary.

Chronicles of Ingarde ###: TITLE

Typographic Conventions

I have tried a number of experiments in this edition of the book to make it conform with similar notions in other novels I hope to release soon. I have developed these to provide a typographic analog to the impressions certain sounds and utterances make on people. This is most obvious in the way I use certain punctuation and fonts.

The use of italics signals a change to a point of view that is very unlike human. In this volume, it is used for dragons and cloud whales. Italics are a warning that motives, feelings, and thoughts may become very different very abruptly.

The use of * and * as an alternative to double-quotes *like this* indicates a mind-to-mind communication, by magic, telepathy, or some technology permitting such a thing. Such transmissions are *private*, meaning they cannot usually be overheard by others. Kara's ability to overhear Cly talking to Kourishand in this manner is an exception that tells you something about how Kara's powers work. The hash mark (or "pound sign") # is occasionally used in words to signify parts the listener doesn't understand.

I have also made use of different fonts in the dialog. Sometimes this simply indicates a unique voice. Dragons, for instance, such as Evenshade and Cloughload, each have a different quality of voice, and the fonts are chosen to give an impression of how each one sounds relative to others. Draconic utterances usually have no quotes or asterisks since they come across in a way that makes them hard to ignore or miss. The impression is as if *both* "" and "" were being used – if the dragon *wants* you to hear, you *will*. These utterances are usually just **put in bold**.

I also use different fonts to indicate different languages or dialects in use. The default language, using the normal font, may differ from book to book since it represents the primary language of the main viewpoint – in this book, it represents Assuran, the language of the cloud whale riders, of most beings of Imri, and which also serves as a sort of pidgen for many cultures in the ring around the Great Nestick Ocean, where the action of this novel takes place. Other fonts represent other languages or dialects, and usually these are indicated when they are first used, but the convention helps with the "flavor" of the narrative when people switch languages for one reason or another. Again, the font chosen tells you something about the feel of the language and the people who use it.

One exception to the foregoing is "Truespeech," the language used for spell-casting. It is known to magic-users of various species with various languages, but the font was chosen specifically to be hard to read (though not impossible), since the language itself is actually adapted to be hard to use and (hopefully) impossible to overhear accidentally. Since text in this language usually represents a spell being cast, the actual words are meaningless (although I *have* tried to keep them consistent and mnemonic, though it should be remembered that spell-casters are trained to insert meaningless null words into spells as a way to help disguise what the words of the spell actually *are*. This is a safety feature – nothing can be more dangerous than someone mispronouncing portions of a spell they don't know how to use) so this unreadability primarily serves to give the feeling of someone having switched to something arcane, strange and not well understood by others. It *is* possible to use the language to just talk, and magic-users may do so, but the context (and the length of the utterances) should tell you whether trying to *actually* read it would be good idea.

I hope that these conventions help convey some of the feelings I wish to communicate in a fashion that enhances the narrative and I also hope you feel the same, but I don't doubt some will just find the whole idea annoying. To them, all I can say is, I think the story is still worth reading.

The world the story takes place in is large and complex, and many plot features take place because of things that are important, but not general knowledge. To help in that, you can find notes at the end of the book explaining important features of the background of the story. These aren't really needed to follow the story or appreciate it, but they can enhance your understanding of just why things happen the way they do.

Finally, I want to warn you that, though each novel will stand alone, as a whole they mesh together – but *not* in a simple linear sequence. Valkenhayn's meeting with Cly, for example, is a repeat of the one in the previous novel "Cloud Realm" – but in that, it takes place from *Cly's* point of view. Often there are subtexts or implications that can change one's perception of the purpose or tone of a scene. Many of these stories are, in fact, going on in the same time frame to various people, each of whom has their own story to tell. I hope you will find reading my experiments as entertaining as they were to write.

Larry Smith

MAP OF INGARDE NESTICK OCEAN AREA

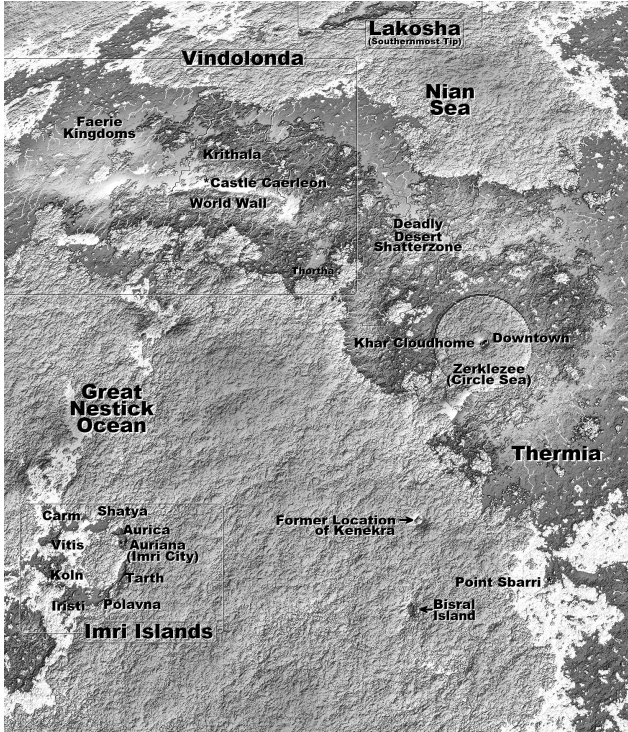


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I PROLOG

Valkenhayn stared at the enemy Wizard. The Wizard glared back from his single baleful eye. He raised his fist, speaking rapidly in the Magician's tongue.

"Telporta celixal!"

Val dodged, but it did little good – the spell struck him as had the previous ones, and it, too, vanished in a flash and a note of pure music as the bright yellow gem on the chain around his neck absorbed the power in the spell. Val allowed himself a grim smile as he came back on guard and began moving toward the Wizard. Across the altar room, McKulluh was stirring, pulling himself together from the Wizard's first blast as they had entered the altar room. The leprechaun had taken the full force of it, and lacked any kind of magical protection – but his fairy constitution seemed to have spared him the full consequences of the spell.

The Wizard gave an inarticulate growl as his spell spent itself against Val's amulet, watched as the gem grew brighter and brighter with each spell it neutralized. As he watched Valkenhayn stalking him he smiled.

Valkenhayn saw the smile and knew it was bad news. He feinted with his blade, trying to take the Wizard out before he could put his plan into effect, but the man dodged, kicking McKulluh out of the way. As he whirled to face Valkenhayn again he had another spell prepared.

"Disrupto intensil. Dag!"

Trusting to the gem, Valkenhayn hurled himself at the Wizard, trying to end the battle before the Fates took away his victory, but as he charged forward the enemy Wizard's spell slammed directly into the gem – targeting the *gem*, not him. Valkenhayn felt himself struck fair in the chest by some enormous force. His breath whooshed out as he was thrown backwards, staggering and windmilling his arms. He managed to stop himself as he fell back against that evil altar, so close to the pit behind he could smell the brimstone wafting from it.

"Not enough, Wizard," he panted, as he began to pull himself up. The Wizard was panting, too. His face was screwed up in pain. "And i think you ARE too tired to throw much more magic at me." Across the altar room, McKulluh was getting to his feet, wearily but gamely pulling out his sword.

The Wizard snarled. "Not much. *but enough!*" This time he didn't start a spell, instead he made a much more prosaic gesture, surprising Val entirely. He pulled something from a pocket and flung it at the Knight as McKulluh cried out a warning...Val looked down to see a glowing gem

strike him just below...the shattered remains of his amulet! The world suddenly flashed blue, then slowly turned to a dull red.

Valkenhayn found himself in some kind of rocky cave. Cursing he sprang to his feet and looked quickly about. It was *hot* here – and growing hotter. He spotted a likely-looking cave entrance nearby – dark and, he hoped, cooler. As he sprinted toward the cave the world gave a sudden jerk once again. The cave vanished, and Valkenhayn felt his foot drop into a soft, springy surface as ahead of him appeared the back of cloud whale's brain case. He halted quickly and looked about.

He was obviously aboard a cloud whale. The gem must've had some sort of teleport in it, though Ishta alone knew why. Maybe it was all the Wizard had left.

Valkenhayn was standing in a neat little room just aft of a cloud whale's head – what the skyjammers called a “salon.” There was a young man in Magician's robes looking at him with a surprised air, and two young woman sleeping or unconscious. That was the bloody *problem* with fighting a Wizard! Things could change so suddenly.

The Magician nodded and said, “VELCOME. VELCOME ON KHAR CLOUD VALE ZEMAJ, A LITE TRANZPORT VROM OUR CLOUD HOME AT MOUNT ZHORMA.” He was speaking tradetalk, and Val did not recognize the accent. That wasn't good.

Well, in for a shilling in for a crown. Valkenhayn narrowed his eyes as he assessed the young man.

“I DON'T BOLD WITTS THAT ARGOT, LAD. I'M NOT BUYING ANYTHINGS TODAY,” he said in High Elvish. Any reasonably well-educated Magician ought to be able to handle that one, he thought. He was right.

“YOU ARE CLEARLY AN EDUCATED MAN,” the young man replied in the same tongue. Good. Unraveling his accented tradetalk would've been a headache-inducing chore. “I BADN'T EVEN TBOUGHT TO TRY THE ELDER TONGUE.”

“I'VE BEEN AROUND. SO, I'M ABOARD,” he stopped for a moment and flipped the phonetics of the youngster's previous welcome around to account for the language shift - “KHAR-SEMAJ. A CLOUD WHALE, OBVIOUSLY. TBOUGS I DON'T RECOGNIZE THE CLAH. YOUR CLOUDHOME IS MT. SHORMA? THAT WOULDN'T BE THE SHOORMA AT TIMIAK, WOULD IT?”

“WBY, YES,” the young Magician – a journeyman, by the look of him – said, blinking in surprise. “TBOUGS I EXPECT FEW WOULD RECOGNIZE THE NAME NOW. HOW DID YOU GUESS?” he asked.

This did not sound good. No one would recognize Timiak? It's only the most obvious landmark in this area of the world, isn't it? Or rather – no

one would recognize the *name* “Timiak?” That didn’t bode well, either. Val was beginning to suspect he hadn’t just teleported, he may have shifted in time, too.

Well, at least the young fellow wasn’t flinging spells at him. Valkenhayn grinned and set the point of his sword in top of his right boot carefully avoiding the cloud whale’s springy floor. “*SBO’ORMA IS ELVISE SLAGS. ITS EXACT MEANING VARIES A BIT, BUT IT IS USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH PLACES OVERRUN BY HUMANS. KING MADOR OF HALLENDY HAS BEEN TRYING TO ANNEX TIMIAK SINCE BEFORE MY FATHER TOOK THE THRONE.*”

“I’VE HEARD OF HALLENDY – IN THE EAST OF VINDOLONDA? BUT NEVER OF A KING MADOR. NO ONE NOW LAYS CLAIM TO SBOORMA. THRONE? YOU’RE OF ROYAL BLOOD, THEN?” the Magician asked.

“FORGIVE ME MY LAPSE IN MANNERS, LAD,” Valkenhayn said. “I AM VALKENHAYN OF CAERLEON IN THE KINGDOM OF KRITHALA, KNIGHT AND PALADIN OF ISETA. AND YOU?”

“Cly Khar-Semaj,” the young man said. “OF CAERLEON? KRITHALA?” he said, looking stunned.

“YES,” replied the knight warily, “IT’S A LOVELY PLACE. YOU SHOULD VISIT IT SOMETIME,” he added sarcastically. What, does he think I don’t know my own country, he thought to himself.

“I’d love to once you kill the dragon,” the Magician said, abruptly dropping into the Imrian language, Assuran. Luckily, Valkenhayn knew that one, too. The magic-user’s eyes rolled like he’d just taken a mailed fist to the head. “Caerleon was wasted by Evenshade more than two millenia ago. He sleeps still, upon Caerleon’s royal treasure, in the great hall itself...awaiting...awaiting...by the grounder’s gods!” he swayed a moment more and then plopped himself down where he was standing. “By the Ancestors and the Elements!” he said.

Oh, this did *not* sound good. Evenshade *already* in Caerleon? Been there for *two* millennia? A dark suspicion began to form in Valkenhayn’s mind. Switching to Assuran also he said, “You can let me in on this any time.” He was trying to hold his irritation in check. “Two *millennia* ago? What year is it?” Val asked him.

“4553rd year of Imri. I should’ve known! I should’ve guessed,” Cly said, shaking his head.

“Let’s back up just a teeny bit and take this from the top,” Valkenhayn said, looking sharply at the young man. “You say it’s the 4553rd year of Imri? That’s...erm,” Valkenhayn did some quick calculations in his head to convert the Imrian calendar to the fairy one used in Krithala. “Three-thou-

sandth and change century of the Hippogriff by the fairy calender?" He desperately hoped his math was wrong.

"I'm not sure of the exact date but that's about right," the Magician replied.

Son of a freaking bitch! He'd been blasted forward in time over two thousand bloody years! "And you seem to imply the Obsidian Dragon has taken Krithala?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

The Magician nodded. "Evenshade – ah! You shouldn't say the name yourself?" Valkenhayn nodded, grimly. Shouldn't indeed. Not if he wanted to take the wyrm so-and-so by surprise. Two thousand years sitting in his family's treasure! Oh, yes, we won't say its name. Not *yet*, we won't. But we sure will when it's time!

"All right," Valkenhayn gritted through his teeth. "About two thousand years have passed then?"

"Close enough," Cly said. "As I remember the legend, the dragon Evenshade came from out of the uttermost west seeking gold and slaves and found both in Caerleon. A great battle was fought but it was a doomed effort for the empire. The dragon was at the height of its powers and commanded a vast army of the creatures of darkness. But Korin of Caerleon went into battle anyway. He would have been...?"

"My father," agreed Valkenhayn, still considering his predicament.

"He was slain in personal combat with the wyrm," Cly went on.

"That's Dad," nodded Val. "He was always the overachiever type."

"The dragon took the Great Keep that day. When came night, the womenfolk collected the fallen. Your father was still alive, though both his legs were frozen solid by the monster's frigid breath. Just before he died, he swore Caerleon would live again and swore vengeance on the dragon. He said, a prince of Caerleon would come from fire and end the life of the icy wyrm. Then he died, with a name on his lips that no one could catch." Cly concluded.

"My name, I expect," Valkenhayn said. McKulluh must've killed that cursed Wizard and gotten word back to Dad when he dropped into the volcano under the influence of some sort of time shifting spell. Stasis, most likely. He sighed.

"I was probably the only one not there. You see, I knew what really brought that dragon. It wasn't gold. It wasn't slaves. It was *commanded* to come," the knight said.

"Commanded?" gasped the skyjammer. "Who could command a dragon?"

"Humph. Who, indeed?" growled Valkenhayn. "If I knew that, I'd be sleeping in my own bed in the west tower, not riddling a skyjammer about my family's dirty laundry. I tracked one of his agents here – a wizard. I felt sure my quarry was on this island – too many of the world's troubles led to Kenekra."

"Kenekra!" whispered Cly. "The Lost City! That makes sense! Sea-Reaver's old base! The biggest slave market in the world! So this is where it is!"

Oh, good, Valkenhayn thought to himself. We're still in the area, then. The knight nodded. "I see the place is still living up to its reputation. It was certainly the base for the plot against my father and the throne. This wizard got the drop on me, spelled me and apparently dropped me into the volcano."

"Of course!" Cly said. "You were already enspelled when you fell – but the fall couldn't hurt you through the spell. Any shock or impact would take centuries to register. The spell would have held you stiff, protected your bones and flesh."

Always nice to have a magic-user confirm your suspicions. "Just so. I'd bet that word got back to my father about what happened to me. Dad was a minor wizard himself and he had access to some of the best sorcerers." He smiled to himself, thinking of McKulluh. "And I know how word must have gotten to him, too. So there's your prophesy. Awaiting only your little nudge."

He sighed. "So, here I am – thousands of years out of time – with only myself and my sword to defeat a freezedrake of legendary proportions who's been ensconced in the family lucre long enough to get ugly about whether or not he can keep it. Sound about right?" said the knight, mildly.

"Um. Yeah, I'd guess that's a good summary," Cly said, shaking his head. "I guess it isn't going to be fun living up to that legend."

Valkenhayn half-smiled. "Hey, living legends is what paladins are all about, kid. It goes with the territory. But this isn't my story and I'm owing you for breaking the spell. So what's your problem? And how does it bring you to a volcano, of all things, being as you're so fond of travel on the most inflammable beast I've ever heard of?"

"Ah. Well," Cly said, "One of our cloud whales has been skyjacked by a bunch of pirates for nefarious reasons and has been hangared in a canyon at the base of this fire mountain. We were the closest to him, came at his call raiding a fire ant hill along the way, stole all their royal jelly, used it and some borrowed magic to create an alchemical fire shield to protect ourselves from the volcano, and hid our own whale inside the caldera."

Valkenhayn digested that for a moment. "Quick thinking," he commented. "Insane. But quick."

Cly grinned and continued, "Unfortunately, all I've got for help is myself, two women both wounded from the fire ant encounter, two chirpies, who can't leave the cloud whale, and the cloud whale himself, who is, by the way, probably quite mad," summarized Cly.

"So, we need to rescue the other cloud whale, deal with the pirates based in a city that has never fallen, and escape from the inside of a volcano aboard an insane cloud whale, before I can realistically try to tackle the freezedrake?" asked Valkenhayn. "Ha! Piece of cake!"

"Do you really think so?" asked Cly in surprise.

"Nah. We're sunk," replied the knight philosophically. "But today is as good a day as any to die, lad."

"Not a pleasant thought, Sir Valkenhayn," the magician said.

"Nope. Never is. So, how did you find me?"

"Well," Cly said, taking something from his pocket and fingering it in his hand. "We're hiding from the pirates on this island. It seemed the best place to do it. I found you when I reconnoitered the...area..." He closed his eyes, seemed dazed or confused for a moment, then suddenly reached out to the knight and handed him the thing from his pocket.

Valkenhayn looked sadly at the object, a little golden disk covered with delicate runes and set with a brightly shining gem, now sitting quietly in his hand. This explained a great deal. It was the only thing that *could* explain why a skyjammer would fly his cloud whale into an active volcano. Impressive. Crazy, but impressive.

"What is it?" Cly asked, quietly. "What did it do to me?"

"It's a piece of the Crown of Krithala, lad. And it brought you here to fulfill the prophesy. As it must've been trying to do for lo these many centuries."

2 SQUARE ONE

Valkenhayn watched as the sky manta lifted off the ground taking the skyjammer back up to his huge cloud whale. Mighty Khar-Paschalon, pride of the Khar clan fleet, hung above, waiting for the manta and his crewman to return. He sighed, still watching the creature. He did not care to look around at his companions.

His little side-adventure with the skyjammers had taken him to the island city of Kenekra, the legendary lair of some of the most famous pirates to ever stalk the Great Nestick Ocean. There he witnessed the final destruction of the city – *and* the island it was built on – in a massive volcanic eruption caused by Valkenhayn and his skyjammer friends, who had been trying to free a kidnapped cloud whale hangared on the island. But that had been merely returning the favor of rescuing him from the temporal stasis that had captured him two thousand years ago. Having done what he could for the cloud whale riders, it was time to face his own problems once again.

Several of those problems were standing behind him. Corz'n zi Miratahn – “Ship Smasher” – the latest of those legendary pirates based in Kenekra. He, three of his lieutenants and his personal Sorcerer managed to escape the eruption that destroyed their island. Expedience had dictated a truce that would get everyone – the cloud whale riders, the pirates, Val himself and two young cloud whales – off of Kenekra and as far as Bisral island, hundreds of miles to the south. And so here they were.

Valkenhayn knew what was going through their minds. These men were bent on treasure, and they were likely to hang around him so long as they thought they could get their hands on some of his. Which Val was more than willing to pay them – but he had to get the freezedrake Evenshade out of his family's castle before he could lay his hands on it. All he had to offer right now was a few coins in purse and a whole lot of promises – and the pirates were chancy allies at best. And if anything in this world was certain, Evenshade would be reluctant to surrender the castle. In fact, it would probably take a war – Evenshade was not alone. He commanded a huge army of orcs and goblins and many even darker things summoned from the depths of the world below. Against this enormous array of force stood Valkenhayn, Prince of Caerleon and Paladin of Ishta, Ship Smasher the Pirate, a Sorcerer of unknown capabilities, and three assorted cut-throats. *Not* a promising start.

Val finally looked down as Khar-Paschalon moved off, still towing Khar-Droi and Khar-Semaj – the latter holding the unique distinction of being the only cloud whale to ever see the *inside* of an erupting volcano

and live to tell the tale. He looked around at the town of Bisral – same name as the island, the oldest town there and still the principal port – dusty streets, dilapidated buildings of wattle and rush construction with ratty thatch. A few questionable-looking fishing boats in the harbor. A cold sea breeze bearing the odor of fish guts and salt completed the picture. It *was* truly miserable. Which should be no surprise – “Bisral” *meant* “misery” in the language of the Litoyan people who were the first to settle here.

The knight squared his shoulders and headed off down the main street, toward what looked like a large tavern or inn. The pirates and the Sorcerer fell in behind him. As Valkenhayn approached the entryway, he noticed an unobtrusive glyph burned into the lintel. It was the sword-and-coin of the mercenary guild.

Val paused for a moment. He *had* been a member, but...his dues were now 2,000 years behind! As he considered, a voice hailed him in a heavy Erish brogue from the dark interior.

“It’s about *time* ye got here, laddie! Get in here, spot me a pint, and let’s see about yer back dues!”

“Great *Scott!*” A look of shock passed across the knight’s face, and then he smiled and stepped forward into the tavern’s main room. Sure enough, ensconced on a little stool by a back window right next to the fire, pint, of course, already in hand, was a Leprechaun. He waved the Knight over.

“Cead míle fáilte romhac!”

“McKulluh! How could it be?” Valkenhan asked, striding forward toward his friend.

“I knew you’d come sooner or later, lad,” the Leprechaun said, in fluent Assuran – though still with the brogue. “’twas foretold. But as to why *here* – why *now* – oh, that I couldn’t say. The time...*felt* right, so it did. As if invited, I was.” He knocked back a swallow and waved the mug toward the otherwise unoccupied table next to him.

Valkenhayn glanced around. Aside from themselves there were no other customers. Too late for lunch, too early for dinner. The landlady and one serving girl seemed to be all that were here. Good enough.

He sat, removing his sword, shield and cloak to the bench beside him. The pirates looked askance at the little creature, but went to the bar to get libations, taking seats at a nearby table where they could hear, but not interfere with a chat with what was obviously an old friend.

Val pulled a coin from his purse and flipped it to McKulluh. “Think *that* had anything to do with it?”

1 Erish: “A hundred thousand welcomes!” (kade meela fall-cheh row-itt)

McKulluh set down his mug and reached down into a backpack propped beside him, removing something he tossed down next to Val's coin. The Fire rune.

"It's two thousand years holdin' that piece, waitin' for it to talk to me without a voice," he said, somberly. "And I despaired of it. *le maireachtáil go deo go dhfuil dúsachtach!*"

Like most faeries, Leprechauns need not die – but most do, and far sooner than that. His friend had waited a very long time.

The first two rune pieces of the Crown of Krithala, the Runes of Earth and Fire. Val could not be surprised.

"Why was the Crown broken?"

"'Twas your mother broke the Crown," McKulluh said. "She charged it with fulfillin' yer Da's prophesy and then sent the pieces out. Each o' them carried a geas, to bring ye back to Caerleon - aye, and to collect allies to bring together the pieces o' the Crown. I took the Fire rune, so I did. The Earth rune found ye and got ye here. What the others will bring, no idea have I, but converging on ye or Vindolonda itself they'll be, seeking Krithala and Caerleon itself."

"You volunteered for the geas?"

"I did," agreed the Leprechaun.

"That wasn't something you owed me," the Knight said, quietly.

"'Twasn't somethin' I owed the *Prince*, true enough - but it *was* something I owed me *friend*."

"Not even that. But I am grateful to have you by my side again. The Goddess knows, I need all the help I can get. Do you know where the rest is?" Valkenhayn asked.

"I do not. But with these pieces together, 'tis a clue we'll be a-gettin' soon enough."

Valkenhayn considered the coins. Still lacking were the signs for the other elements, Water, Lightning, and Air, and the circlet base that would join them all together.

Valkenhayn nodded. "Why did it take so long?"

McKulluh shrugged. "No one knew where ye *were!* And no Sorcerer would look." The Knight lifted an eyebrow at that.

"Oh, 'tis God's own truth right enough. I don't even recall how many I asked. They'd look at their bloody crystal balls, go white in the face, and then give back the gold."

2 Irish Proverb: "To live forever is madness."

"Why?" Valkenhayn asked, in genuine puzzlement. "Granted I'd've been hard to get to...but not *impossible*! I was finally rescued by a *cloud whale* for the love of the Goddess!" McKulluh looked surprised.

"[From what slice of all creation, I ask? I couldn't even *find* the where o'ye, and the divil alone knew what to do to *get* ye back!"]

"You knew I was in Kenekra!" Valkenhayn said.

"I did not! Vanished off the face of the world, ye did. I *know*. I *searched*. I even found me way to the bottom o' that cursed shaft, expectin' to find ye bro-ken and fried golden crispy - but ye wasn't there at all! And tried *again*, I did, when I heard the prophesy of your Òa and took the Foire rune. I looked about those caves wit' me own baby blues. And damned near cooked *meself* into the dargain." He shook his head. "Not to mention havin' t'high-tail it when the *ghosts* showed up!"

"But that's right where they found me - at the bottom of that shaft, in stasis," Val protested.

"Lìg dom a dhualadh le tìntreach!³ Well, it wasn't there ye were when I loo - by a *cloud whale*? [From a *volcano*?!"]

Valkenhayn laughed at the look on McKulluh's face. "Yeah. A sky-jammer flew his whale down into the caldera, took himself for a stroll, just happened to find me, and took me off to break the spell."

The Leprechaun looked gobsmacked.⁴

"Cú a chur urm ar!⁵ - That's...that's *insane*! 'twould be easier t'fly through hell itself, it would!" he said.

"I'm not sure they would've made a distinction. I'll tell you the whole tale some other time," Val said. "So, fine, you looked and couldn't find me. Then what?" McKulluh looked outraged, but thought a moment and then resumed.

"'twas then I tried the Sorcerers. One after another after another... 'twas no end o' them. Traveled from Imri to Calthis - aye, and back by way of Krumm's Mote. *Overland*. Sought out any and every Sorcerer of any repute at all, at all. They answered the same, each and all, every last one of them: 'twas the monkey's paw' was all they said, and they said nothin' else!"

Val felt cold. "There are no smug Sorcerers."⁶

"Aye. And that's the right of it," the Leprechaun said, knocking back the rest of his ale and signaling the barmaid, who brought him another. She

3 Erish - "Let me be struck by lightning (if I'm not telling the truth)."

4 Erish expression in Rithian - "like he'd been punched in the mouth."

5 Erish - "You're putting me on!"

6 Rithian proverb. Sorcerers are seekers and vendors of information. One would expect such people to always be "in the know," never surprised, and therefore smug about it. This is not the case. Perhaps they know *too* much to be smug about it.

put it down before him but didn't take her hand off it – yet. McKulluh smiled. “Never ye mind it, lass. Just put it on *that* fellow's tab.” He indicated the pirates at the next table. “It's together we are.”

The barmaid shrugged one shoulder and left him the mug.

Val waited until they were alone again. “I remember the monkey paw, vaguely, but not what it meant. Did they tell you anything about it?”

McKulluh snorted. “Not that first century, they didn't. By the toime I was well into the second I was getting a wee tad less patient. Finally I told one of them – Ligre, his name was – t'take another look in his crystal ball and see what *I* do to him if I didn't get a better answer.”

“And?”

“And so he *did*. Here's what he said – the monkey paw is a *warning*, one that says not to look further than ye are already. He said, 'it guards things we are better off *not* to know.' Do ye know how they catch monkeys?”

Valkenhayn shook his head. “Bows?” he guessed.

“Nay. They put a bit of food in a jar and then tie the jar somewhere a monkey'll find it. The monkey sticks his hand in the jar, grabs the food – but now his hand is too wide to fit through the lip. He has to *let go* of the food to get free, ye see – and most of 'em won't. So that's how they get caught. The monkey's paw is of more benefit t' those wishing the monkey ill than t'is to the monkey himself. So he said.”

“Sorcerers are just *so* helpful,” the Knight sighed.

“Oh – and he said one other thing – what was it now? – Oh, yes, 'pushing past the monkey's paw will kill the cat.'”

“What in the Nine Hells does *that* mean?” Valkenhayn demanded.

“That part I didn't follow at all! A man puts a cat in a box. I got that. And the cat might *live* or might *die*. After that, he was still speakin' words I knew, but divil the sense they made t'ime. The cat is both *alive* and *dead*, he tells me.”

Val sighed. “I think I've heard that one, and it made no sense to me, either. I'd pay real money to have one of 'em explain it so I understand it.”

“Not sure they can, so I am. But *something* scared them, right enough. O'Dan's the coin I got back wet from a tremblin' hand.”

The biggest problem with magic was the fact that it sometimes seemed to know *more* than the magic-users that operate it. Most spells don't have *that* much detail in them. If a Conjuror summons up a cottage, how does it know how many beds to put in it? How does it tell whether mead or ale in the cups? Meat or bread on the plates? Valkenhayn was no Magician, but as the heir to the throne, he had been given extensive training which taught him *about* magic – without actually training him *in* magic. In the normal

course of events, he would probably have eventually moved on to learning how to actually cast spells, like his father did – but he was cursed to live in ‘interesting’ times. It would appear the era he was *born* into wasn’t interesting *enough*.

“So – what’s left? Who survived?”

“Only your Mother, God help her. And even she, not very long. Buried her whole family but ye, and ye lost even worse than they. She was a true beauty – always young and always a light heart – but she died that day, too, so she did. Her body continued a while, but her spirit was gone. Gone to look for them she lost.”

Valkenhayn felt as warm now as he had cold earlier. *Destroyed*. The dragon had left him *nothing*. And worse than that, the dragon was only the *instrument* used in the holocaust. Behind it all was the shadowy Master of the Dragon. It had been a triumph to find out *that* much, but he knew in his heart he’d never reach that evil. If he died even just *hurting* the dragon, he’d be doing well. That was all the revenge he’d get for what happened to his family. It wasn’t much, but it would have to do – and it *was* worth having.

Evenshade...*will* die.

3 A SORT OF A PLAN

There is an old aphorism known to military men. “War – is *really* expensive.” Valkenhayn no longer had access to his family’s fortune, but he still needed an army. A large, powerful, *expensive* army, along with everything that that implied.

An expatriate prince requiring such a thing usually had to find himself an ambitious king or emperor to underwrite the effort. These were generally not hard to come by, but they usually required assassination afterward for they were likely to try to claim dominion over the conquered lands – not an *unreasonable* attitude, since they *were* paying for it, but it led to some serious complications nearly every time.

While Krithala as a kingdom had ceased to exist 2000 years ago, there *were* a number of foreign lands which had such strong alliances with it that it was conceivable that even their remote descendants might be inclined to honor them. There were two possibilities here – Imri, which had partnered with Krithala to maintain the peace in the Great Nestick Ocean, and Lakosha, which did much the same to the north, and which maintained close ties with Imri as well – or, rather, used to. This three-way alliance was probably his best bet. Both Lakosha and Imri had very stable governments, and he already knew they were still around. McKulluh assured him that they were still friendly, but without Krithala to serve as a bridge – dominated by Evenshade and thus now serving as a wall between them instead – they did not have the close relations between each other they had had previously. In Valkenhayn’s time, both would have been very interested in pursuing an alliance, and he suspected that renewing such an alliance while simultaneously eliminating the draconic stumbling block that had sundered it would be very welcome to both countries. Re-establishing Krithala would also open up trade between Imri and Lakosha once again, which he gathered had fallen off to nothing because of the time and expense to get around the dragon.

He and McKulluh were discussing this over a pint (neither could remember *which* pint) when they heard a considerable commotion in the yard.

There was a crowd of excited – or angry – people gathering in the town square that fronted the pub. It wasn’t at all hard to pick up the intelligence that the Barrens wyvern had stuck again.

The “Barrens” is just the interior portion of Bisral island. It is a dry, rocky, rough and inhospitable place, said to be haunted – though Valkenhayn doubted if it *really* was, that appellation seemed to always get tacked on to nasty places. Of greater import, a goodly portion of the Barrens was

shadowed – there was no sun lighting that portion of the globe. The knight gathered there was a moon or two – likely the old suns, now nearly extinguished – but no real source of light. The wyvern seemed to like it that way. It probably had a lair in the shadowzone.

The two heard some of the history of the affair, wherein the local king (more of a Duke, really, and even that was stretching a point) had apparently ticked off the wyvern, though people disagreed as to how. Wyverns were usually not truly intelligent and so were not often subject to dragon rage – that legendary temper tantrum that could last for *centuries* – but they could certainly get quite grumpy for at least several decades if you attacked one and failed to kill it, interfered with the nest or the local hunting, or did something else that might excessively annoy the creature.

It would appear that the Barrens wyvern was quite grumpy indeed. He or she had been rampaging over the countryside. No two accounts agreed on more than that. It was a wraptor. It was a crawler.⁷ It was red, it was green, or maybe brown. It attacked unprovoked, but sometimes it didn't. There was *no* consistency.

Except one. All agreed, it was one *hell* of a wyvern. Val gathered that it was *big* – hundred-odd foot wingspan, well into dragon territory. If it was a wraptor it would stand nearly 20 feet high. If it was a crawler, it could be 50 feet or more in length. Valkenhayn had seen *dragons* that weren't as big as that. It was heavily armored, fast, *and* powerful. Reports about its' breath weapon varied as to type but all agreed that it was *really* good at it.

There was one other fact that intrigued Valkenhayn – some reports suggested it was treasure-hoarding. It sometimes carried off artifacts, including a gold sickle-and-star it wrested off a church in one of the city-states on the south coast of Bisral, and a silver statue broken off a tomb in the Royal Cemetery just over yonder. This, despite the fact that the cemetery was actively guarded. When surprised by the guards while it was liberating the statue, it apparently slew three heavily-armored men with just one burst of its' breath weapon – fire, according to that particular source. She was quite certain about that, but given that she was, maybe, twelve, and the whole account was second-hand, only the Goddess would know how much to believe. Especially when she added the detail about not being able to put out the fire. That was sometimes the case with *dragons* but he'd never heard of a *wyvern* doing it.

⁷ There are two main varieties of wyverns. Wraptors stand on two legs, wings held at the sides, like the dinosaurs. Crawlers, obviously, crawl using their wingtips as front feet.

Valkenhayn did check the cemetery. Though that theft happened years ago, he thought it was unlikely they'd replace all the stones that might have been acid-damaged. Soot would eventually wash off. There was no acid damage he could see, so score one for the fire-breather versions of the story.

A treasure-hoarder...*that* might be useful. If he took it out, he would have a legitimate claim under local law to half the treasure. And every copper would help. He was going to have to finance a *war*. *Not* a cheap hobby.

"COther CMacRec...if even half what they say is so, 'tis'n unholy terror, sure," McKulluh commented as they walked back to the inn.

"No question. But wars ain't cheap, my little faerie friend. If it's hoarding, that would give us a grub stake."

"Oh, 'tis asking for trouble ye are now! I didn't live all that toim just to have a ringside seat for the end of ye! Sure'n it'll toast the pair of us if'n it doesn't kill us with acid forst!"

"Not the pair of us. Just me. You, I want to head for Lakosha."

"I will in me hat, me duck! To kill that preezing so-and-so 'tis *alove* ye must be! Going up against a big wyvern with nothing more'n a couple of pirates at yer back..."

"Will not be enhanced much with you there. Face it, you're not a magic-user and – not to put too fine a point on it – you use a really short sword."

McKulluh glared at him.

"And d'ye think I spent the last two thousand years a-sittin' on me arse? It's perfectly well I knew we'd be fightin' for our loives. Help I knew I needed t'get. But I didn't know *what*...so, I went back home to see the wee folk there. Got in afore the Dragon finished setting up its wards."

"When was this?"

"Oh, somewhere in me thord century."

"They hadn't been driven out by the dragon?"

McKulluh snorted. "Oh, it *tried*, indade, but they've put their wee heads together and somehow tied all their enclaves together, so they did. They put up some kind of a barrier the auld wyrm can't get through. But nor can they – they can't get out without the barrier comin' down. And if that happens, it's *coortens* for the lot of em. They've no way t' defeat the dragon!"

"The *faeries* can't defeat him? With *their* magick?" Valkenhayn asked.

McKulluh sighed. "Their magick isn't all that useful in a fight, lad. 'Tisn't *meant* for that – it's meant to enchant the woods, make new flowers,

plants, animals, shape the land and the trees - healin', soothin', making beautiful t'ings - they are the Good Folk - the Seelie Court - after all."

"But the Guardian is a *repository* of offensive magic! That's what it's *for*!"

"Aye, it is - but they didn't *build* im, did they? The Guardian is a Tinker-mech - built by *humans* he was, for all that he's powered by the wee folk them-selves. But, like anythin' built by humans - he's *mortal*!"

Valkenhayn shook his head. "Mortal? He's a *Tinkermech*, dammit, he *can't* die, he's *mechanical*!"

McKulluh shook his head sadly. "No, indade - he can't, and didn't - but he *could* - and *did* - wear out."

The Knight looked searchingly at his friend.

"Wear out?" he asked in a stunned voice.

"Aye. 'Tshould be no surprise! Inside he was gears'n'cogs and wires and levers and belts and all sorts of other mechanical foo-fer-aw. *Something* gave out. 'e stopped movin' entirely. He's able to keep up the Barrier - but he can't fight."

Valkenhayn sighed, deeply.

"The whole point of that ancient bargain was to give them a place they could *retreat* to. A place they could call *home* - home *forever* - where the outside world couldn't *get* at them and *hurt* them again."

"And so 'twas. But nothin' made by man *could* last forever..."

Valkenhayn said, heavily, "That's something the King - *me* - would be honor-bound to fix - *somehow*. But what can I do about that? *Nothing*."

"Ye? No. Ye'll be lucky enough t'even *survive*, but I *knew* what was comin', so I did. So I picked up a few t'ings."

The Knight did a double-take. "Such as?"

They had been walking along a path back towards the port. They stopped and the Leprechaun unslung his backpack and removed a cylinder slung underneath. It looked like a large canteen, and so Valkenhayn had assumed it to be, but on closer inspection he saw it had a pair of handles - one at the back, equipped with a trigger, and one toward the front on the side. The front of it had a small hole, off-center. The only other feature it had was some sort of bar that came off of a pin at the front center and curved all the way back along the cylinder until it almost reached the rear handle. The entire assembly was, perhaps, a bit less than a foot long, which made it a fairly large piece of equipment for the Leprechaun, who stood just a hair over 18 inches.

Valkenhayn frowned as McKulluh held it up for inspection.

"Wow. *Most* impressive! I'm...uh...at a loss for words. Hmmm... What is it?"

"Oh, the highly experienced fighchin' man! Have ye not seen a crossbow before?"

"Yes, I have. Quite a few of them. And *none* of them looked like *that*."

McKulluh smiled mysteriously.

"Ah, ye don't see what 'tis yer up against. Nor will most anyone else. I built it meself, and ye'll not find another 'tween here and Connamara. 'Tis a *repeater*, so 'tis."

"Repeater?"

"Aye."

"What does it repeat? Limericks?"

The Leprechaun frowned.

"*Bolts*, me boyo, *bolts*. Fires a round dozen so it can, afore it needs t'be re-wound and reloaded."

"How? I don't see any arms."

"Bow arms aren't the only thing aroond what can fire a bolt, me Bucko! It's *elastic*, laddie!" Here he flipped something on the barrel, leveled the device at a nearby tree, and pulled the trigger.

In less time than it takes to tell, the machine spit out three 9 inch bolts, which slammed into the tree in a perfect row, each of them going in nearly half their length.

"You'll have a time getting *those* out," he observed.

"The bolt itself'll come like a greased kitten out of a bed. And I have plenty of spare heads. And...I've got *this*!" he pulled a metal vial with a threaded stopper out of a pocket in his pants.

"What's *that* stuff?" he asked, suspiciously.

"*Mortadun*."

"*Mortadun*?' Assassin's poison, you've joined the Assassins?"

McKulluh looked to heaven for aid.

"Ach! 'Tis thick as manure ye are - and only half the *use* of it! No! *Bought* it, I did! To make me little device here all the more deadly. 'Tis a *Tinker* I've become! And more'n adequate to it, even sayin' so meself. This is just a wee sample - specialized I did in more...*complex*...things."

Valkenhayn rubbed his chin with a hand. "Where would a *Tinker* lay his hands on *mortadun*?"

"Oh, I got me low friends in even lower places, truth be known. Laid me hands on a batch just past its 'best-by date.'"

"You're using *expired* mortadun?"

"That I am."

"Don't you think that might make it less effective?"

"Oh, Jasus, Mary, Joseph *and* their bloody dog! 'Tis poison, ye omadahnl! Ye tink *spilin'* is goin' ter make it any the *sweeter*?"

"But...never mind. So you're a Tinker now? You think you can *fix* the Guardian?"

McKulluh shrugged "I don't *know*, lad, I really *don't*. But I *do* know this - I'm a-goin' t'bloody *try*!"

"Even if all you can do is get him moving again, it'll *help*. From what you're describing, though, we'll need a *lot* more than *one* economy-size Tinker to do the job right."

McKulluh smiled. "Don't be worryin' aboot *that*, lad. I can get him where he needs to be once yer on the Throne. But if *ye* can't kill that dragon, there'll be no point to it at all. If the barrier goes down before the dragon does, the wee people are finished."

"These stakes are much higher than I was expecting," Valkenhayn said, rubbing his face with one hand. "There's a lot more people involved with this than just me. Do you really think those itty-bitty little quarrels are going to faze a wyvern like this one, even greased up with expired poison?"

"I do. And if that's not enough, I've a few other tricks up me sleeve and down me pant's leg. Besides, the wyvern'll not be going after *me*!"

"Why not? Can you become invisible?"

"Of course I can! 'Tis a thing we do, we faeries. And it *works* - wit' everybody but *ye*, ye filthy wretch. But I expect I'll not need even that. There'll be a poine large target fer the wyvern. 'Tis after *ye* he'll be goin'. Oya think he'll look at the great Knight in shinin' armor, and the wee, little Leprechaun, and decide 'tis the Leprechaun he's goin' t'go fer? 'tis a gammy idea. He'll be lookin' after yer *own* arse, me boyo. He'll never even *notice* me. It's *ye* who'll be out there with nuthin' but yer over-soized carvin' knife. Now, *how* can ye and a handful of cutthroats kill a creeer like that, I ask?"

"You ask very pertinently. A wyvern with a breath weapon, no matter what kind, would prefer to attack with that, rather than bite, claw, or try a tail strike, so it would be reluctant to close with me. If it *did* try, my armor would make me a very unpalatable option, and I would get a chance to stab it in the head. If it's a wraptor, I can try for the achilles tendon in the back of a lower leg and cripple it. In all cases, keep moving, don't let it get a bead on me, don't get distracted. I've killed these things before. I took out the Lurian wyvern before I was even knighted."

"Na!f the soiz if even *that* it was!" scoffed McKulluh.

"Granted. But I *have* picked up a few things since, I'm actually carrying *two* 'carving knives,' and I *know* wyverns."

"An' assoide from gold, what's t'be had frommit?" the Leprechaun demanded. "Yer takin' enough risks every toime ye wake up, why d'ye need take on even more?"

Valkenhayn smiled. "Let me point out there is another very good reason to kill this thing."

"Would ye be sharin' that?"

"Yes. No one has mentioned the tail. No one said it had a stumpy tail. So the tail is *intact*, and it doesn't seem to use it a lot. The venom in that tail would hurt even a dragon," he pointed out, quietly.

McKulluh looked like he was sucking lemons, but he nodded.

"Aye, 'tis true roight enough. But that tail could be yer end as easy as the freezedrakes. More, even."

"Yes and no. This armor is mithral alloy. I'm betting acid won't damage it, nor would fire, and it would turn the stinger."

"Aye, and it's a nice slow roast ye'd do if 'twere a *fire* breather!" the Leprechaun observed.

"Only if it actually spits napalm rather than breathing gas, but it's a wyvern – wyverns can't spit napalm, *that's* a *dragon* specialty. The unquenchable fire part of these tales is the *most* far-fetched. A gas fire would be bad while it was going on, but it couldn't *keep* damaging me if I get out of the line of...well, fire," Valkenhayn returned. "I *am* a trained paladin, I think I can take on even a pretty big wyvern."

"Takin' it on ain't what worries me. 'Tis takin' it *off* that'll be the trick!" McKulluh replied.

They returned to the Inn. The Pirates – and a pensive-looking Sorcerer – were sitting by the fire, drinking.

"We're going on a wyvern hunt, gentlemen," Valkenhayn announced as he and McKulluh sat down nearby.

"*Vij?*"

"The locals have a wyvern problem. Said wyvern *appears* to be a treasure-hoarder."

Ship Smasher digested *that* very quickly.

"*Zec treasure? You vill split ee? vil' us?*" he asked.

"No," Valkenhayn said promptly. "It has to pay our way to Imri, and at least make a start at getting supplies. There are things we are going to need."

"*All very vell den, Prinz. But zere is liddle reason vor uz to involve ourzelves eef ve don't get paid!*" the pirate retorted.

Valkenhayn blew out his cheeks and looked at the pirate chief sadly.

"You're going to need to decide which way you want to go, my piratical friend. If you help me you might get treasure, but your biggest reward will be a way back to civilization. You could have a title as well as money. Comfortable home. Good food. No one trying to kill you. How many pirates actually get to *retire*? You're – what? 45? 50?"

"*You make me vell oft. Forty vor, Cacerleon!*"

"Okay, forty-four. Still, getting up there. Are your arms still long enough to read, or have you already resorted to glasses?" Val smiled.

The pirate scowled. Good, he'd hit a nerve. He indicated the shirtless pirate's chest.

"Lot of gray there, too. Is that why you shaved your head? Looked old enough that maybe more people thought they could take you?"

Ship Smasher glared and folded his arms.

"Face it, you don't have many years of pirating left in you. And most of you leave the profession the *hard* way. Drown. Fade out while looking at your guts in your lap. Run over by a horse or a terror bird while you lie drunk in the gutter." He watched the pirate narrowly. He was obviously discomfited.

"Rethinking things, I *don't* need your help with pest control – I'm still not sure I really want to turn my back on you. But *you* had better start thinking *ahead*. If you live through this what are *you* going to do? Go back to pirating? Or maybe find a good woman and some comfort? *You* are going to need to decide, I can't do it for you. By the Goddess, I'll be lucky to survive this myself. I'm thirty-seven, not *that* far behind you. I don't know how many campaigns are left in me. Maybe just the one, you never know. Even if I survive, who's to say I'll be in any shape to do another? You know any Paladins with missing legs? Arms? Pancreases? Damn few of *us* make it to a decent retirement, either."

The pirate looked troubled. Good. He may have gotten through.

"Think about it while I'm gone," and he sauntered up the stairs to the room they rented, with the Leprechaun in tow.

And when they got there, McKulluh asked, "Think ye now ye can do in the wyvern *without* help, is it?"

"It suddenly occurred to me, if it *has* any treasure, I *might* not want these guys behind me when we discover it. Let me live and get nothing, stick a knife in me, get a one-quarter share? No. I think I want to see what

these guys are about before I trust them *that* much. Besides, if you're coming, it's two to one. Can't ask better odds than that."

"And when ye decide they are the cut-*t*-roads they be, then what?"

"Then we come to an amicable parting of the ways," he replied.

"An' if *t* be *not* so amicable?"

"Well, then, I'll have to *kill* them all, won't I? It's not complicated."

"I'm supposin' not if *that's* how yer supposin'."

"I'm supposin'. We *all* need to take a long view. What's that you used to say? Day rare ah kakla..."

The Leprechaun shook his head violently and tapped the heel of his hand against it a couple of times.

"Saints, *preserve* us from that accent! 'De reir a cheile a thogtar na caisleain'⁸ is what I think your blather means."

"Yes, that's it." Valkenhayn stroked his short beard thoughtfully.

"I'll need to organize an uprising. How many human or dwarf people are left in the kingdom?"

"Not enough *t*boother with, Lad. That reptilian so-and-so is a hard taskmaster, so it is. Most every mortal refugeed elsewhere - north *t*Lakosha, south *t*Imri. Some even went east, crossing the deadly desert by night in sand skips *t*reach the mainland."

"Damn. Then I'll have to raise an army and invade. Somehow. In full view of the wym, most likely."

"Aye. Ye'll have to come at it from the south. A north landing'll mean almost a fortnight's march through land under the dragon's control - morder'n orcs, trolls - and even worse yet - they'll be lined up to meet yer every foot o'the way!"

"It's much shorter from the south, but coming *that* way is going to require the lift at the World Wall. Is it intact?"

"Not loikely, Val. 'Tis a cheap enough way to cover its scaly arse from the south. The rig is still there, but there's no rope *t*be had."

"Figures. We'd need a pair of new cables. The last ones came from the apSeronins in Imri - targ silk. Enchanted, too, I think."

"Well, here's one more item fer ye to keep in mind. The apSeronins are *dead*. Dead and gone, fifteen - or is it sixteen? - hunnert years ago." McKulluh said. "Last I card, 'twas another family entirely holdin' the warrant. apTarg, methinks."

⁸ Erish: De reir a cheile a thogtar na caisleain (day rare ah kayla a hug-tur nah cosh-lawn). An old proverb: "It takes time to build castles."

Valkenhayn chuckled. “Given what they did for a living, I guess I’m not surprised. Ap*Targs*? They must’ve changed their names. Do you know what clan they were before?”

“I do not. But after this amount of toim, they must know what they’re about.”

“We can only hope. I also hope they managed to keep some of the apSeronin clan’s folklore. The kind of rope *I’m* going to need requires some pretty special silk.”

“That it does. It’ll be a bloody great rope, and no mistake.”

The knight turned to checking his equipment. McKulluh did the same, oiling, re-winding, and re-loading his repeater, as well as checking his tools – it was to be admitted, he carried quite an impressive array of tools. While Valkenhayn finished up, McKulluh then secured a supply of jerky and hard tack sufficient to get them there and back again with a bit to spare.

They shared a simple supper of meat and bread, with more ale to wash it down. McKulluh tried to bring Valkenhayn up to date on the most important developments in the last two millennia. Some of the things they talked about were astonishing to the Knight, though he was surprised – and perhaps a little disappointed – at how little *some* things had really changed.

4 CHANGE

Valkenhayn and McKulluh got a few hours of sleep but were up before the sun waxed bright. They were hiking the Shadow Road before their own shadows could join them.

Bisral was not a huge island – perhaps fifty miles long, twenty or thirty wide – but it was rough terrain, and the interior was mostly a single huge plateau. The Shadow Road headed south from Bisral Port and promptly started to climb. It was a good thing both of them were used to physical exertion, because this road had broken lesser men.

The road was wide – a good five paces, and was either bare and worn rock or well-packed gravel and rubble. In Valkenhayn's own time, his one previous encounter with this road was not so impressive.

"Looks like a trund road. They run trunds here, now?"

"*Do I look like a Bisralean merchant? Wicked things, ye'd not catch me trustin' 'em as far as I could t'row 'em.*"

By the time he stopped to eat some of the trail bread and jerky around noon, the Paladin was pretty well convinced the road must see quite a lot of trund traffic.

Trunds were huge and turtle-like. They *could* get to be enormous. There were stories about them reaching a mile and more in diameter, though the largest one Valkenhayn had ever seen himself was no more than a couple hundred paces across. But the usual size was more like four or five paces, and the weight – both of themselves and the wagons they frequently hauled – usually left wide, smooth roads like this.

But, it must be admitted, clumsy though they undoubtedly were, trunds were a good choice for rough terrain. Though slow, they were legendary at managing their footing. Their six wide feet could generate a surprising amount of suction – not very helpful on gravel, true, but the steep parts of the road were bare rock, and worn smooth enough that trunds could navigate a steeper track than people could in boots. In these stretches, the duo had to parallel the road and make their way by out-and-out mountain climbing. Valkenhayn carried a rope, hammer, and pitons to do it right, part of the light and compact climbing kit he took to Kenekra – but it took a lot of time.

By the time the orange sun had waned to the point of being unhelpful, Valkenhayn could still see Bisral Port in the misty distance to the north. They had, perhaps, made only some eight or ten miles horizontally, but had probably risen to nearly a mile in elevation.

They stopped for the night at a passing zone about fifteen paces across, allowing them to avoid camping in the road itself. This was a very

good thing, since trunds, unless towing wagons, make surprisingly little noise when they move and, though slow, are popular transports because they didn't need to stop at night. They would continue to plod onward right through the night – not just once, either, but for days or even weeks on end. Their endurance was legendary, too.

Valkenhayn was surprised at finding a passing zone, though. It implied a *lot* more traffic on the road than he would've expected himself. Either the island had grown a *lot* more than he would have thought, or it had become a center for some kind of trade. Whatever it was, it didn't seem to be happening this time of year, Valkenhayn had seen no one else on the road all day, but passing zones were not common except on the highest trund traffic roads. It was curious.

The pair ate some more trail bread and drank sparingly from their canteens. Val expected the trip would take three days or so, from the descriptions of the locals, but they would also be within the wyvern's usual range by tomorrow, if they weren't already. The latest attack had hit the High Peak Inn, which they would reach tomorrow after crossing the gap separating this mountain from the continuation of the Barrens plateau. From there the road became much less steep as it meandered south. Hopefully they would find the wyvern late tomorrow or the next day. If not tomorrow, at least they'd be able to stay at the inn.

Nothing disturbed their sleep that night. Valkenhayn woke once or twice, but heard nothing but barking bats – an annoying species found only here, whose usual echolocating chirps were, for some bizarre reason, deep enough to be heard by humans. Since a typical bat could “chirp” at well over a hundred decibels, they could make quite a huge racket, but these were apparently some distance away. They were audible, but not excessively so. He woke for the day as the sun was just beginning to brighten. McKulluh was already about, and they broke fast with some jerky and trail bread and resumed the upward trek.

Both were a little surprised after the first hour to reach a section of road that paralleled a myststream. They stopped a few moments to observe it.

It was unremarkable in itself. No more than a foot and change deep, the heavy white mist flowed between the stones like the thick fog it actually was. The surprising thing was that it was here at all. They were fairly common in Vindolonda and northern Thermia, but he'd never heard of them on Bisral. They were distinct from normal fog or mists because of the coherence of the flow – while it *was* “a” form of mist, myst tended to keep within its own volume and behave much more like a fluid than a gas, for

all that it *could* be breathed. It was faintly luminous, even in the daylight, and had multicolored lights, like tiny stars, flowing here and there, mostly along the bottom.

Myststream origins were not well understood – at least, as far as he knew. They were magical, and were known to host some highly magical creatures, though neither saw any during their stop. It was running down from the peak Val could see above him, dropping into a deep hollow along the road and then climbing right back out of it, flowing up the other side and into a small depression, where it turned away from the road and headed off to the east.

There were no signs marking it. There were no crystals deposited along it. Myststreams tended to be erratic in their courses, changing them frequently, but Val suspected from the lack of crystals this one had only recently come this way. But it proved one thing he had begun to suspect. Bisral seemed to have more magic – *much* more – than the island he recalled.

The myststream only paralleled the road for forty or fifty paces before he reached the deep crack it seemed to issue from. They trudged on past it.

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything about myststreams becoming more common on Bisral?” he asked McKulluh.

“I *have* heard they’ve become more common in Krithala. All of Vindolonda, sure. And on the continent as well. But not a word did anyone breathe time about more of them *here*.”

The road wound around eastward as it approached the peak, reaching its high point perhaps a hundred paces from the peak itself and going horizontal as it entered the Barrens plateau area. Here, Valkenhayn could see the next sun, a beautiful, if unusual, emerald green, and far to the west, shielded from the Bisral Port area by the peaks of this first range of mountains.

The road itself had gone through very rocky areas with little sign of life aside from a few very scrubby bushes clinging to the rocks. The plain before them was of a very different character.

It was grassy, with trees of some sort of evergreen type dotted along rolling knolls. Grass and trees were a greenish-lavender. Or perhaps the greenish hue was strictly from the emerald sun, and were mostly lavender themselves. Similar vistas could be found in Krithala and other places in Vindolonda. Val could see some birds in the distance – or perhaps they were pteros, they had very sharp-pointed wings. There were no large animals about, though, making the scene appear a bit...incomplete.

He could see lights, like very bright fireflies in the more densely wooded section. He frowned, thoughtfully. Bisral had *not* had native

faeries in his time. They were too far away for him to make out what kind they were.

McKulluh smiled as he looked around.

"Ah, look at that green, will ye? It looks sort of loike how I've always pictured Éirinn itself, afore taken from it we was."

"Éirinn? What's that?"

"Tis the place all the little people call home. The world we came from these many ages past. Some blackhearted scoundrel kidnapped our forebears from the one place in all o'Creation most like heaven itself."

"I didn't know the Leprechauns had legends of coming from another place."

"Ah, laddie. All of us do! Every race that breathes the air of this world knows they came from another, an ye go back far enough. Yer no different yerself."

"True enough. Father always said the Goddess Ishta was born on another world, and always missed it, even when she came here so we wouldn't be left alone."

"Tis a fact, me lad. Not a one of us lives where started we from. And not a one of us knows why not. And just as well 'tis, or 'tis all the rest of eternity we'd be spendin' tryin' t'make 'em pay for whut they done."

Valkenhayn could see the High Peak Inn – which, despite its name, was in a bit of a dell – visible from this slight elevation over the plateau proper. It looked like a sizable building to be visible from here. It was perhaps another six or eight miles to go.

But not a long way beyond he could see the shadowzone. It lay over the southern landscape like a vast shroud, protected from the emerald sun by an arm of rocky peaks thrusting up from the plateau floor. He caught the reddish gleam of a very small moon – likely the old sun that used to light the area – near the zenith of the darkest part of the zone.

Shadowzones were rare and, he had to admit, creepy. He wondered how long this one had lasted. Bisral had never had such a thing in his memory, but here was what seemed like quite a large one. They could last for centuries before another sun drifted in and lit them again. He began to wonder if some sort of cataclysmic event had happened here, heaved a sigh and started down the road toward the Inn.

He quickly lost sight of it as they descended to the plateau itself, but both knew it was on the Shadow Road, which was here now a slash of clay so hard-packed it looked as if it had been fired in a kiln, still five paces wide. It meandered a little, but not much, as they went on.

The trees, when they reached them, looked less and less like evergreens and more and more like furs. What Val had taken for clumps of needles were actually tufts of fur growing from the branches. They were mostly twelve to fifteen feet or so. They had an evergreen shape, though.

One was very slowly crossing the road. It was speedy for a fur tree. Val could almost see it moving, it would probably finish before nightfall. This, too, suggested heavy road use at some time of the year. A slow fur could easily get trodden down in the trund trains when they were running.

“Fast tree.”

“That’s not a word whut ought t’be applied to a *plant*! Plants should *stay* where they’re planted and not go wanderin’ around unsupervised.”

The area to the east looked quite dry compared to the west. Likely the entire forest was migrating. Furs could migrate quite impressive distances – for plants.

As they came around a wide curve and once again could see the Inn, they also saw that the furs weren’t the only mobile plants in the area. Neither recognized the species of runthorn bushes rushing over the road at a breakneck speed that would see them on the other side in no more than an hour or two. McKulluh picked off of one a handful of the peach-like berries they produced and they found them quite tasty. Faintly gooey, and with a bit of an anise-like flavor, and not bad at all.

Only the one bush had fruit looking ripe, but as they went on Valkenhayn guessed from the underripe clusters on all the bushes that they were probably someone’s patch, and they decided not to just help themselves to any more. Though it *was* kind of odd a farmer would let his crop wander about like this.

As they approached the Inn they began to see what the wyvern had done. It was *not* pretty.

The stables were little more than a scorched ruin. From the odor Val could tell the horses or donkeys had not been gotten out in time. The stable had been large. The people they could see had obviously been working to clear the burnt corpses since the attack had ended, but still had over a dozen to go. They came up to a couple of sweating men and one dwarf still at work. One of them nodded to Valkenhayn, and said “**T**HANKS” in a thick Litoyian accent, the first he’d heard on the island, as he muddled on to a leg and helped them drag a good-sized plow horse to the ravine across the road. The damn thing was *heavy*! The ravine was impressively deep when they reached it – no smell from *this* place!

The smell of the corpse was rank, almost chemical. A gas breather might leave some smell, but it would be nowhere near as strong. It might

be napalm, though he still doubted that, or it might be some type of fire-breather he wasn't familiar with. Score another point for fire-breathing, at any rate. He could see why there didn't seem to be any butchering going on. *He* wouldn't eat this, either.

He worried a bit about that. A napalm spitting wyvern was something new in his experience. He'd not even heard *tales* of such a creature. This wyvern might be more formidable than he'd thought. The danger of the stuff is, it *keeps* burning whatever it hits. Gas flames could ignite things, but the flame itself went out when the dragon stopped spewing the gas. Napalm just kept going. And you couldn't put it out with water. That just spread it.

The headman pulled a flask out after they watched the poor horse vanish in the gloom below and offered it to Valkenhayn, who accepted it and took a swig, then passed it to McKulluh. A red wine cooler, half wine, half sparkling water, nice.

"WALKER, NIGHT STAYING ARE?" he asked, as Val returned the flask to the local. He took a swig himself and passed it to the dwarf. "FINISH, NOT!" he said as he did. The dwarf scowled.

"Yes, I think so. The name is...Venner. Uh...Venner Carvin." Valkenhayn made up the name on the spot, reasoning that having word get out who he was might not be the best plan for remaining healthy. He wasn't known by name in the Port to anyone but the pirates. Hopefully the pirates could figure out not to blab it. "This is...Brian. O'Dell."

"Top o'the mornin' to ye."

"AFTERNOON IT IS."

"Well then, top o'the afternoon t'ye! Are ye always so bloody p'rtical'r?"

"Since the wyvern hasn't shown its snout since we crested the divide, we might as well take the break and tackle it tomorrow." Val said, easily. The Litoyian's eyebrows shot up – all of them, including the dwarf's.

"HUNTING WYVERNS ARE? IT KNOW YOU NOT! DRASKA! VERY DRASKA!" the headman said.

"Heard a lot about it at the Port. DRASKA – big?"

"BIG IS! YES! AND -- YOU SAY -- SAVITCH!"

"Savage? Mean, is it?"

"MEAN, YES, MEAN IS! HUNGRY, NOT! EAT, NOT!" as he pointed to the stables. Valkenhayn looked and now noticed quite a bit of burn damage on the main house and a couple of smaller outbuildings, too. Apparently they had saved the main house at the expense of the stable.

9 Litoyian - "Big/Strong" + "mean/cruel"

“Made quite a mess, didn’t it?” the Knight said, looking around. “Did anyone see where it came from, or which way it went when it was done?”

The headman looked askance at the Krithalan. Seeing he appeared to be confident – and determined – he pointed straight to the shadowzone. “**LAZER THERE IN. SURE WHERE NOT. PEAK, SEE?**”

“Yes, I do.”

“**POINTS TWO, STOP!**” and he moved his hand two points – or close enough for a landsman, anyway – to the left of the indicated peak. Valkenhayn nodded.

“You think it might come back?”

The headman gave a kind of reverse nod – the Litoian version of a shrug – and said, “**I KNOW NOT. LASKELY NOT. LITTYLE LEFT.**” and jerked his thumb toward the former stables. The headman was likely correct. It appeared to have attacked the stable out of sheer malice, not hunger. It might have done the same to the main house, but since it hadn’t it seemed unlikely it would come back for that reason alone. Just as well. They could use a comfortable night.

“**ANGRY MAKE NOT. HERE, BACK COME WELLO.**” The headman looked at the two with more than a little worry. The wyvern was mean. If he failed to kill it, it would likely get even meaner. He looked especially doubtfully at McKulluh. “**GOOD, GOOD, VERY.**”

“**NÁ ðac leis!**¹⁰ There is a remedy for everything but death.”

“**REMEDY NEED YOU, PERHAPS.**”

The Paladin looked seriously at the headman and said, “We will not attack it if it seems too powerful. Neither of us intend to die in this task.” He smiled reassuringly at the man. “I’ve fought wyverns before, and I’ll do my best not to get this one any more stirred up.”

The headman nodded. “**FAIR IS. IN GO. YIMHA!**¹¹ SEE.”

Valkenhayn nodded. “I’ll do that.”

There was no doubt the locals were afraid they might well stir the wyvern up. On the other hand, his equipment, at least, tended to re-assure them that maybe he really did know what he was doing, even if his strap-ping companion did not. Val hoped they were correct. Random destruction was not really typical of wyverns – even grumpy ones. Something must’ve got this one going. No telling what.

Tem%a turned out to be a rather beautiful young lady of perhaps fifteen, with black hair that ran almost like water. She spotted him the mo-

¹⁰ Erish: Never mind! (nah bahk lesh)

¹¹ The % character represents a clicky sort of “K” sound made in the front of the mouth.

ment they entered and came to welcome them, find out what they wanted, and sent them up to find Sit%a and look at one of the rooms. Aside from the darkness of her hair, she looked very atypically Litoian. She was darker, and had a build more willowy than the stolid Litoian people, with finer features. Her ears weren't exactly *pointed* but they were as sharp as they might be short of it. She obviously favored her mother, and he was very curious to see her, and know where she was from. She wasn't native – or, at least, not the natives he knew.

Tem%a was quite fluent in Assuran, despite having a name that would make most native speakers of it stumble. Her accent was very light, almost musical. He was beginning to suspect her mother might be an elf. There *were* no elves in Bisral that he knew of. But elves were usually fairer.

Her sister was a tad younger, had the same black hair, and was more than passing pretty herself. When he remarked to her that her mother must be a great beauty, she smiled at the complement but looked a little wistful.

"MOTHER, GONE SHE IS. MUSHROOMS GATHERING WENT SHE. RETURNED DID SHE NOT," she said sadly. "NEVER GO WE NOW SINGLES." And that observation spoke volumes about where her Mother had disappeared to.

The room was quite satisfactory. The two beds were sturdy and they had recently replaced the webbing. There were no mattresses, but there were a number of well-cured furs of several different kinds to serve as mattress and covers both, and they even smelled recently cleaned. There was a pitcher of water and a bowl for ablutions, though once out of his armor, Sit%a showed Valkenhayn where he might clean up, and offered to take his clothes for washing, which offer he accepted.

The bath was nice. On the second floor, pleasantly lit by the fading sun, it featured both hot and cold running water. The Krithalan had rarely stayed in so nice an Inn.

Before dinner they had a chance to confer.

"Ye'll forgive me for sayin' so, but 'tis thinkin' I am this wyvern has a yen for people in p'ticlar. And never have I heard of such a thing."

"Nor have I. *Something* has stirred this wyvern up. It is definitely not acting normal."

"No, 'tisn't. Which'll make it less predictable in a fight, so it will."

"True enough. But it's also another reason to put it down, too."

"Aye, so it 'tis. So it 'tis."

Dinner was served to them and the headman, whose name was Yeel, by Sit%a and Tem%a. There were no other guests, the people he had seen earlier must have been locals. Yeel told him the little town of V'lon was

about a half-hour walk from there, toward the emerald sun. He would be going the opposite way on the morrow.

Yeel was much more the prototypical Litoian Val remembered. He was on the short side, dark brown hair speckled with gray, broad-featured, with very light skin. He expressed some sympathy for the loss of the girls' mother, which the headman accepted, but seemed to be uninclined to talk much about her, leaving the Paladin still wondering.

Sit%a sang for them after the meal, while Tem%a played the *yeethni* – an instrument neither he nor the Leprechaun had ever seen before. It was primarily a pipe, but it also sported five strings that could be bowed. Little funnel-shaped horns at various places allowed the vibrating strings to affect the air flowing through the tube, and the strings were attached to the tube directly and so were also affected by the sounds it was making. Her bowing technique was beyond him, but the tremulo and fluttering sounds the strings added to the woodwind perfectly suited the haunting music they made.

As McKulluh had pointed out, most peoples have legends of coming from elsewhere – but it has been said that the Litoian people never really accepted this world as home, and since they had appeared there the only music they could make was sad. The last song seemed doubly so. Tem%a called it *Mother I Remember*.

Valkenhayn enjoyed a solid night's sleep and awoke to find his clothing had been returned to his room, not only cleaned but also with a couple of minor repairs neatly made.

"Proper sweet on ye, so they be, I think," McKulluh observed in a teasing tone. Yeel and Tem%a were apparently already up and working somewhere, but Sit%a turned out to be as good a cook as she was a singer, and produced a hearty breakfast for them.

The Krithalan knew enough about the Litoian people not to offer a payment directly, he left a gold sovereign and two silvers in the room, thanked Sit%a for their excellent service, and they took their leave. It was an extravagant price to pay, but these people had not had a good week, faced some very hard times, and were surely at risk for what he was about to do – but they had provided one of the nicest Inn stays he could ever recall.

5 THE BARRENS...WYVERNS?

In less than an hour, the twosome entered the shadowzone. The perpetual twilight was depressing, but Val could still see fairly well, the twilight tinged with green from the now-distant emerald sun. He was startled to enter the forest.

It was a mushroom forest. They were rare, but he knew of a couple in Vindolonda. But these were *very* different. The mushforests he knew were brightly colored, and were usually the abode of any number of the smaller faeries. There seemed to be none here, and the mushrooms were dark colored, or even black, and their twisted and tortured shapes were entirely unlike the appealing and colorful vistas of the mushforests in northern Krithala.

They continued, watching warily. There was evidence of local predators – some scat, some slashes on mushroom stems – but nothing either recognized. The road – more a “suggestion of a path,” really – seemed to fade as they went. It was not long before Val felt he was well and truly off any trail.

As he went on, Valkenhayn began to notice they were being watched. Underneath the larger mushroom caps were groups of pteros – not flying, not hunting, but awake. Watchful. Of them. Their heads swung in unison as they watched the two walk by.

They were black, and would’ve been hard to see except that the undersides of the larger mushrooms had fins of bloody red slashing across the black of the flesh. The perspective made it difficult to judge how big they were. He guessed perhaps three feet long, wingspan of six feet. One of them yawned as they went underneath, revealing a toothy mouth much larger than its body seemed to really require.

They offered no mischief, which worried Val more than if they had. They were neither fearful, nor aggressive – just alert. Unnervingly so.

The landscape tilted up as they approached the foothills. It was no problem to keep to the course, they only turned aside once to find a narrow spot to cross a stream. It wasn’t large, but it was very unpleasant in appearance, and in smell. It seemed thicker than water had any right to be. They only had to go a couple dozen paces to find a spot to cross. As Val stepped over, something moved in the corner of his vision. He stopped to look carefully – but saw nothing.

Soon the mushforest gave way to a rockier landscape. Here the way tilted back down into a rocky arroyo. Valkenhayn noticed the cave mouth near the bottom as the overpowering smell of napalm suddenly eddied around him. As he contemplated the scene below, he got the sense of being

watched. He turned his head quickly and spotted an old, old man – who promptly vanished. He felt a wave of coolness slide down his spine. There were ghosts, here.

He nudged the Leprechaun.

“I think there are ghosts about,” he said in a low tone.

“Aye. A little girl, I saw,” he agreed in a whisper. “Something there must be to keep ‘em here. Uhuh, do ye think?”

“I think the victims died *here* – *not* where the wyvern found them. A lot of kin dying in the area – like an execution zone in that respect. Ghosts tend to hang around,” Valkenhayn whispered back.

Ghosts were dangerous to the living. They would clutch at a living soul, trying to pull themselves from death, but they usually just killed the victim in the attempt. It was said there were five ways to die from a ghost attack, and only one way to live – the way chosen by Magicians, who called it the *kindling*.

Valkenhayn knew enough about magic to know about the need to kindle the power and how it was done. So he understood why mortals needed to fear ghosts, and while it was not an irrational fear, the Knight had it and for the most prosaic of reasons. A ghost could *kill* him. Quite nastily, in fact. He didn’t know what his elemental aspect *was* but he definitely wanted to *keep* it. At least for now, until *he* decided to get rid of it.

Armor helped. The metal would make him harder for a ghost to feel. And in the normal course of events as a prince of Krithala he *would* eventually have undergone this experience. *After* training *and* with some help. It was not something he wanted to do right here, right now. It could be excruciatingly painful. And one scream – or even just a groan – could bring the wyvern.

But McKulluh wasn’t a magician, had never kindled – and *wasn’t* wearing any armor!

They continued down, shifting quietly from stone to stone until finally they came to a trench.

Val caught just a fleeting glimpse of what might have been a young girl in the rocks on the rim of the trench, but she vanished before he could focus on her.

“Ah, the *darned* ting! ‘Tis a *larder* the corsed ting is keepin,’” McKulluh said. “‘Takin’ ‘em *alive*, prisoners, the bloody divil’s been puttin’ ‘em there, pickin’ one out ‘eac now and then. What a way t’go. O’Dore’s the pity,” the Leprechaun said, with equal parts sadness and a deep anger.

In times of easy hunting, wyverns had an instinct to store food. Of course, you can’t store meat, it’ll rot. So wyverns find a hidey-hole some-

where, and deposit their prey alive. The hole is chosen to be difficult or impossible for the prey to get out of, and they will generally fall on one another as they begin to starve. This is fine with the wyvern – the idea being that a few of them *will* survive for its dining pleasure later, when hunting was not so good.

There was no doubt about it, this *had* to be a larder. The trench was quite deep – thirty to as much as fifty feet. Several oblong stones at intervals bridged it. The stench coming out of it was overpowering. There was a boar – gnawed at, partially gutted – lying dead in the bottom. Hard to tell from this distance if there were maggots, but the smell said there had to be. And, worse, it wasn't wyvern work.

He wasn't sure how far the trench went. Peering left and right suggested it might span a fairly large arc around the central lair. Maybe the whole circle.

He saw the first man just around the first bend in the trench. This was no ghost. He was thin, with a feral manner as his eyes darted back and forth. He was clothed in rags, at best, and stank to high heaven. He crawled by fits and starts to the boar and began to gnaw at it, pulling bits loose with his fingers, glaring left and right with an unsavory light in his eyes. He was clearly starved – and mad.

This wyvern was lardering *people*. It therefore followed it was catching them alive, and depositing them here without food or water, nothing. Small wonder they fell on each other. The poor devil down there had clearly lost his mind, and was reduced to little better than an animal himself, just trying to survive. There was no way to tell if he could be helped at this point. He might still be salvaged. If he hadn't become too *much* of a cannibal.

The knight noticed a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye again. He looked, but saw nothing. In the trench he spotted a baby lying in the bottom, near the madman, but it, too, vanished before he could focus on it. *Lots* of ghosts.

He ducked down into the rocks, seeking some concealment from which he could study and evaluate. McKulluh did the same, sliding into one of the much smaller cracks only he could use. Valkenhayn was pondering the situation when something scraped along his leg. As he started to look it bit into the back of his knee.

He jerked back from the bite, but his attacker did not let go. He pulled his dagger and slashed across it, then used the blade to pry the fangs out of the hinge in his armor around his knee. It had gone right between the plates and punched through the chainmail. A vampire plant. As he watched, the

body of the plant retracted into a crevice, leaving the severed portion to slowly twist about on the ground.

Valkenhayn bound the wound and cursed his luck. Vampire plants were very rare in Vindolonda – mostly thanks to the bounty Krithala and the faerie kingdoms paid for their corpses.

McKulluh popped up.

“Im thinkin’ there might be...Saints preserve us, what happened t’ye, boy?”

“Vampire plant,” he replied shortly.

“I only tórned me back fer a moment, and ye get injured roight away?!”

Valkenhayn glared at the Leprechaun.

They waited for a while, hoping against hope that he didn’t get enough of the venom to be completely paralyzed, and, indeed, he was not. But he instead developed an ache and a burn in his muscles like he had been days at hard labor. It was hard to move.

“Damn. This is all adding up to something I didn’t bargain for. A very large, napalm-spitting wyvern with a mean streak and a yen for lardering, going in handicapped with a wound, poisoned, moving at less than my best speed, surrounded by ghosts any one of which might try to use me in a probably vain attempt to return to life.”

“And that’s not an end of it. I think it has *young!* There are scratches in cracks here a wyvern of that soize couldn’t possiblgive made,” McKulluh said. “It’s rare sense you’re showin’. Get our arses out, and come back wih help! We can’t do it wit’ just you and I! It’s *daft* we’d be to even *try*.”

Valkenhayn sighed, soundlessly. He *hated* to retreat, once he set his helm to do something. Especially in circumstances like these. He was a *Paladin*, helping people like this wasn’t just his duty, it was his greatest source of satisfaction, one he’d been denied now for far too long. But it would be downright *foolhardy* to continue. He began to ease his way back up the slope to the edge of the mushforest. He kept a careful watch down toward the cave – he was pretty sure it *was* the lair – so careful a watch he very nearly stepped on the baby wyvern.

“*Hssst!*” McKulluh put out in warning.

It was a crawler. Tiny, no more than three feet long, tops. It looked up at him, trembling a bit. It squawked.

Valkenhayn grabbed its muzzle with one hand and pulled his dagger with the other, but paused. He could hear sounds close by. *Slithering* sounds. A snake? That would be *so* much nicer than some of the other alternatives.

McKulluh heard too. He motioned Valkenhayn down and climbed up to try to get a look where the sound originated.

The runty wyvern struggled, but weakly. The Paladin had intended to quickly skewer the beast before it could make another noise, but even in the gloom, he could feel the creature’s scales. *Tough* scales. Between the

poison and the position he was in, he didn't know if he could deliver a killing blow in one stroke – before it could cry out.

He peeked cautiously over the rock to his right and saw another wyvern. A youngster, but much *much* larger than this one.

McKulluh came back.

“Oh, yes, me lad. A crawler, and *huge*. Even bigger than we was expectin’. Comin’ out the cave, so it was.” With that he climbed back up to where he could keep an eye on the big one.

Damn. A snake would’ve been *so* much nicer. Maybe a nice, giant cobra, or black mamba. Something a *lot* cuddlier than a lardering wyvern.

Valkenhayn held still, but the runt continued to struggle, making occasional scratching noises, and gurgling.

“For the love of God, keep that ting *quiet*! (Dama’s taking this way!)” the Leprechaun hissed from above.

Val was at a loss for something to do. He couldn’t keep it from scrapping the stone in its struggling, he didn’t dare try to dispatch it. Even if he could do it, he’d have to let go with at least one hand, and it would make even more noise.

Then it sniffed. It swallowed, convulsively, and then pulled a long sniff. It stopped struggling *with* him, and started pushing into him.

Unfortunately, that still made noise. There was no help for it. He let go and grabbed for his dagger, raised it high – and the runt licked at his hand. Once. Then again.

Valkenhayn belatedly realized it could smell jerky on his hand. It nosed around him, then started trying to climb over him. Trying to get to his backpack.

The Knight was fine with that! He shrugged quietly out of one strap, plunged his hand in, and pulled out a handful of jerky and held it before the runt’s face. It took the morsel and began chewing, no longer struggling or wrestling – and *much* quieter.

Val climbed up beside McKulluh to see for himself. As he peered over the rock he cursed his luck all over again. There were *more* wyverns coming out of the cave! Not as large as the first one, but still formidable. He guessed about a fifteen foot wingspan, maybe eight or ten feet long. They were agile, too. They *bounced* around on wingtips and feet. Gathering around the big one...

Damn! They *were* hunting a mother! She would be very protective of her offspring – four of them, it looked like – but they would also be protective of *her*. The fight was now five to one. Six to one, counting the hungry

little one here, likely of the same brood, though why so much smaller he could not guess.

Technically it would be six to one and one tenth.

The runt swallowed, then *chirruped* at him, and he hastily slipped down and fetched out more jerky and gave it to him, too. He put a couple more in front of it.

This was untenable. They *had* to disengage. Waving McKulluh to follow, he started to move toward a crack between two boulders that might give him a way up without exposing him to Mommy down below.

The runt looked up at him as he started to move – and then scrambled after him, scratching over the rocks! He stopped, frozen, and watched it crawl into his lap and go back to chewing the jerky it already had in its mouth. Down below, he heard an interrogative growl.

Valkenhayn tried to lift the runt away and point it toward the remaining jerky he had laid out earlier. It wasn't having any of it. He kept trying to put it down, it kept trying to crawl back in his arms, nudging at the backpack. Finally he gave up and stuffed another piece of jerky in its mouth.

He was getting rather exasperated. As long as it was eating, the runt was quiet – but obviously it knew a good thing when it saw one, and *wasn't* going to let him get away. Why wasn't the blasted thing down there with the rest of them?

The two of them were – quite literally – between a rock and a hard place. They couldn't move without alerting Mommy one way or another, and they couldn't stay here because sooner or later one of the younger wyverns – now exploring the rocks below – would find them. Or he'd run out of jerky. Or Runt would decide he wasn't hungry any more and start calling for Mommy.

Since he had the opportunity, Valkenhayn picked at one of Runt's scales, trying to assess how armored he was. Pretty heavily. Runt himself might even be impervious to his weapons. He was not very heavy, hitting him was much more likely to just knock him about, unless he could somehow be pinned down or against something. Obviously, that would be less of a problem with the rest of the family, but if they *all* had that armor...

He checked, peering out again. The young ones were exploring the rocks further, Mommy appeared to be cleaning her scales – but she was keeping a watchful eye out. Then he spotted one of the babies as it slithered over a rock. There was a distinct, metallic sound as it did so. Great Scott! *Metal* scales!

He had *never* heard of a wyvern with *metal* scales! In fact, he recalled the lack of them was, according to his old teachers, one of the defining differences between them and true dragons!

He tried to bend one of Runt's scales with his fingers. Nope. Too thick. The only way his sword would help is if he could contrive to thrust it against their direction of growth. Hard to do if it was *facing* you. Which it *would* be. Wyverns were not prone to cowardice.

McKulluh had watched all this and knew exactly what was going through Valkenhayn's mind. His repeater would *never* penetrate scales like that. He might as well be shooting spitwads.

Runt nosed him again and Val hastily pulled out some more jerky, sticking one of the pieces in his mouth. He went back to chewing.

Sweet Goddess! Valkenhayn was about as frustrated as he could ever remember being. He was a trained Paladin, he was a superb fighter, he was *decisive* – usually – but he could *not* figure a way out of this trap!

Then he had an inspiration. He poked one of his last few pieces of jerky under the top strap of his backpack, and then lifted Runt up over his head and down on the backpack. Runt latched on like riding backpacks was his favorite thing to do, and never stopped chewing. McKulluh just shook his head in disbelief. Valkenhayn eased between the stones and started moving as quietly as he could back to the mushforest, Leprechaun in tow.

Thank the Goddess, Runt decided to be cooperative. They worked their way up the slope, stopped to check on the family once as they went – just in time to see one of them slide into the gap they had been in not 30 seconds before. Followed by another one on its heels.

Valkenhayn went back to crawling, hoping McKulluh was following. He was making good progress, and was nearly to the lip when he felt Runt stiffen and then give a long, low hiss. Valkenhayn looked up to see a wraptor like he had never imagined, every bit a match for a good-sized dragon, standing erect right at the top of the incline. Shining yellow under the green sun, Daddy looked proudly down on his family, heaving a sigh that *reeked* of napalm.

6 THE MYSTERIOUS ALLY

Valkenhayn was not surprised when Daddy spotted him just a moment later. For a second, the two locked stares. Then the wyvern's mouth gaped open and it began sucking air.

As he looked at Incarnate Death, Valkenhayn was surprised to find his predominant emotion was anger. *This was entirely too much!* They *never* had a chance! He heard a liquid gurgle behind him...

Then a blast of flaming napalm shot over his right shoulder and took Daddy right in the mouth – *as he was sucking in air!* He stopped abruptly, coughing out burning napalm, and staggered back, unable to draw breath. Fire breathers did not really *breathe* their fire – it was *supposed* to ignite as it *left* the mouth. Getting a mouthful of flaming napalm delivered into its throat while it was drawing in breath likely felt no better for Daddy than it would have for himself. Valkenhayn looked over his right shoulder and saw Runt closing his mouth and looking toward him.

"You, I like," he told the baby wyvern as he dodged to one side to lose himself in the rocks. And immediately found himself face-to-face with one of the younger wyverns. McKulluh disappeared into a smaller crack.

Valkenhayn drew his sword out of its back-sheath and swung at the young wyvern in the same motion, catching it along side of its head. As he feared, the blade did not penetrate the scales – but there was a satisfying *snap!* as it caught one of the creature's fangs and broke it off.

The wyvern recoiled, scrambling backwards and rising to its hind feet as it let out a scream of equal parts fury and pain. Valkenhayn did not take the time to gape, but dodged again, trying to find a path through the rocks with fewer wyverns in it. But he *was* startled. He'd *never* seen a wyvern switch from one mode of locomotion to the other like that. He never even thought they *could!*

He was free for the moment but he was nearly all the way back down to the larder trench. At this point the other side was just a couple paces away.

Valkenhayn hurtled the trench and took off through the rocks on the other side. Even with Runt's inexplicable help, he was still going to die – but he made it a personal policy to cause as much mayhem as he could before doing so.

He lunged out of the cleft he was following and as quickly reversed course, taking a swing at Mommy's wing as she turned to engage him. It ripped a bloody furrow through the membrane – maybe enough to keep it from flying. Good, now it can't retreat. Sure...that'll help.

He was already behind the boulder when she cut loose with a spray of fluid. It splattered on the other side of his boulder, whose profile appeared on the massive stone across from it – and he saw the rock liquefy and begin to run.

Perfect. Mommy was an acid-spitter?!

The confusion in the stories of “the” wyvern thus having been neatly explained, Valkenhayn began to actively consider how to survive the acquisition of this intelligence. He quickly scuttled into another cleft, one he hoped Mommy was too big to navigate.

He heard that liquid gurgle again and looked up to see Runt’s flame strike one of his siblings in the face as it had started to climb into the cleft. It flinched back, lost its grip, and fell clumsily to the bottom of the cleft and landing on its back, head facing away from him. Valkenhayn did not miss his chance, he vaulted forward and slammed his sword point first between the chest scales and into its heart.

It convulsed once, and though it did not die right away, it was obviously no longer a threat. He continued over the beast, seeking deeper cover behind it.

One down, five to go. He found a deeper spot where the cleft nearly closed at the top. With even a few seconds to rest and regroup, he felt better as he saw another of the young ones slide across the narrow gap above.

He pulled his knife and threw it straight up, heard the *clink!* as it bounced off the metallic scales, and caught it deftly and returned it to its sheath continuing the one motion. He ran through the cleft, hoping to find a left turn real soon.

Luck was with him, he found a left and used it to circle the youngling and sprang to the top of the cleft, where he saw the wyvern with its sting tail up and head down, facing away, as it scabbled at the cleft, looking for him where he’d tried to knife it.

Valkenhayn buried his blade in the monster’s vitals from the rear, twisting it 90 degrees as he pulled back. The wyvern screeched and lunged forward, away from him, spinning around atop the cleft he’d just left.

And a line of little crossbow bolts stitched across its belly where it swayed over the cleft. Rising to its feet, raptor-style, the wyvern turned back to the cleft. It was spewing blood from its back end, and the quarrels – half a dozen of them – had lined up across its genital vent. Literally the only ten or fifteen square *inches* on the animal that those little bolts might penetrate. Wyverns do not have external testicles – but they weren’t all *that* deep!

It leaned over the cleft, gaping its mouth to fire. Valkenhayn lunged again, scoring along the side of its head, tearing open its cheek, and then recoiled back to ready himself as it turned.

But it was slow, and as its head came up he saw a half-a-dozen more bolts stuck in its mouth. It swayed, staggered back, and then disappeared over the edge of the next cleft. At the same time, Mommy popped up from the entrance to the narrow cleft that had brought him here, grabbing the rock with her wingclaws and thrusting her head forward as she snapped at him. He heard gurgling as she readied to fire.

As did Runt, who was *just* a little quicker. He proceeded to do the same thing to Mommy as he had earlier done to Daddy, spewing burning napalm into her mouth as she sucked it into her lungs.

She coughed it back out and a fireball slammed into Valkenhayn, knocking him back off the edge of the cleft. He managed to twist himself in midair, recovering and landing on all four limbs. He looked over his right shoulder as he jumped to his feet to see Runt, still firmly attached to his backpack, panting a little but none the worse for wear.

"Good boy!" Valkenhayn told him as he hastily extinguished his eyebrows.

He paused for a brief moment, trying to decide if the one he'd double-teamed with McKulluh was still in any condition to fight and where it might be. He chose another cleft nearby that he hoped would avoid it, and sprinted forward. It was a good guess, but it turned and widened at the same time, and he slid to a halt as he faced *another* one of the babies – this one facing him, with sting tail raised, and fully warned.

It struck at him with the tail. He dodged, but it still caught him – the damn thing was *fast*! Luckily it slid right off his breastplate. Valkenhayn swung upward at the extended tail, but in retracting the tail its' scales just slid over the edge of the blade. Quickly reversing the sword he lunged forward as he swept it forward toward the back of the monster's neck. It caught between the scales, scoring a bloody wound but not severing the spine.

He vaulted over the wyvern's back as it fired a blast of flame where he had been standing. It missed, splashing over the rock that had been behind him. The flame slid down from the rock's side leaving pits. *Pits?*

It was firing napalm *and* acid! Well, *that* was just the cherry on top of the sundae! Suddenly the wyvern pulled back, rising to its feet and gaining a ten foot height advantage. It's mouth gaped as it prepared another blast.

Runt took a shot, but the wyvern ducked under it, dropping back into the crawler pose. But it entertained the monster long enough for the agile

Knight to dive forward, roll on his shoulder back upright and use the remaining momentum to power a side kick toward its neck with a sawtooth spine on the side of his boot.

Predictably, it did not penetrate the scales. Unpredictably, there was a loud *crack!* and the wyvern let out a scream. Hmmm. A young wyvern's bones at this stage of growth are apparently not yet completely hardened, the knight noted.

It came down heavily on its chest. Whatever he broke, it wasn't the cursed thing's back, it was still moving. It fixed its malevolent gaze on Valkenhayn and drew a quick breath as it gaped...

And a dozen little crossbow quarrels peppered the inside of its mouth!

Suddenly it grew darker. Knowing that one of them – probably Daddy, from the size of the shadow – was behind him, he immediately spun about and lunged. Daddy bit down on the fire stream that had only just started and stepped back as Valkenhayn ran right under him, spinning his sword end-over-end and skewering it into Daddy's foot.

The huge wraptor bellowed and flinched back, tearing the pommel out of his grasp. Valkenhayn reached under his backpack and grabbed his own, old-fashioned crossbow, twisting it free of the relatively light twine that held it – not that it would do him any good, it needed to be cocked. And with *this* crossbow, that was not a chore to be done quickly.

Nevertheless, he tried, watching Daddy recover his balance and putting his foot down gingerly. He glared at Valkenhayn, his mouth gaped open, he drew his breath and the light appeared in the back of his throat...when suddenly a giant spider – or targ, or *something* – suddenly scuttled in and attacked Daddy's *other* foot!

Once again, Daddy bit back the torrent of fiery napalm and staggered to one side. The targ had already retreated, zipping straight up the cleft side where Mommy was getting ready to dissolve him.

Valkenhayn slammed a quarrel into the crossbow and fired it at Daddy's head. Metal scales or no, it didn't matter. It was a 250 pound compound crossbow, the utter limit of what he could pull fast enough in combat. The quarrel went right through the lower jaw and into its palate, where the barbed head locked in, effectively sealing Daddy's jaws together.

An angry roar came down from above, and Valkenhayn glanced up as he began recocking the crossbow. Mommy was spinning around, striking at something with her tail. Just for an instant he spotted the targ – now sporting a silvery coat and, apparently, waving a sword, improbable as *that* seemed – moving with unnerving speed in and out between her legs. The Knight slipped in another quarrel just as something up above fired a blast

at the targ – missing it clean but hitting Mommy in the legs. She was unappreciative of the assistance. Valkenhayn swung up the crossbow and fired at Daddy again, who was using his wingclaws to clutch uselessly at the first quarrel, and put another in just behind it. He was hoping to hit an artery, but no luck.

McKulluh popped up from a crack in the floor of the crevice, facing Valkenhayn, and fired at him. The Knight ducked just as Runt gurgled and fired another blast at Daddy – the quarrels, a dozen of them, flew through the fire stream, setting them ablaze and deflecting them from the intended target, another young wyvern coming up behind him, and causing them to fly over it – into another young wyvern bringing up the rear. As some of the bolts took it in the face it flinched back and fired a burst into its sibling's backside.

All *hell* had broken loose! Valkenhayn started to recock the crossbow when he heard the slither behind him – the youngster who had taken the shot to the rear had recovered much faster than he anticipated. He threw himself sideways. Flaming acid shot by him and hit Daddy in the leg. The noise of roaring, hissing, screeching, snarling, and the occasional blowtorch-like *whoosh!* of someone's breath weapon made a truly epic cacophony.

The targ suddenly zipped by him as he was righting himself. He caught an impression of a human-like front half, but the silver and black colors were moving around on the creature, blurring it as much as its own speed did. But it was definitely wielding a sword.

It took a swipe at Daddy's leg as it passed, hitting it across the Achilles tendon. Daddy staggered against the cleft side and began to slide down. As it completed the stroke the targ – or targataur – grabbed Valkenhayn's sword out of Daddy's foot and flipped it to him.

He dropped his crossbow, snatching the pommel of the sword, spinning with it, and slicing down at the young wyvern he'd heard coming up behind him, catching it behind the neck with all the power and force he could bring to bear. It didn't behead the monster, but it got through the scales. It crashed to the ground, spine severed.

From above he heard a sharp intake of breath, and looked up to see Mommy was about to drench him in acid – and with the dead wyvern on his left and Daddy rolling and struggling on his right, there was *no* place to go!

Without warning, Runt's head popped out from between his legs and fired a blast at Mommy. He got her again, she flinched back and then coughed up another fireball, knocking Valkenhayn flying back into the side

of the cleft he was in. The world exploded in sparks and then spun around him like a carousel.

He crashed to the ground, shook his head, and spotted his half-cocked crossbow through the haze and grabbed it, dropping his sword. He locked it back, fumbled another quarrel in, and spotted Mommy pulling herself back over the edge with rage in her face and black murder in her heart, aimed the crossbow with one hand and fired at her as she gaped – and the quarrel slammed into the back of her mouth. She spasmed, writhing in agony for a moment – and went completely limp, head dangling down into the cleft. The quarrel had penetrated her brain.

Daddy bellowed to his right. Dropping the crossbow he snatched up the sword again and leaped towards it. He found himself shoulder to shoulder with the targataur as it stabbed at Daddy, wielding a curved sword with a blade as black as night. Sparks like lightning ran *through* the interior of the blade from the wyvern as if it were drinking his very life. Valkenhayn stabbed downward into Daddy's chest with all his not-inconsiderable strength.

The wyvern fired a final blast, but his jaws were still shut by the quarrels. It was nearly enough anyway, the blast bouncing off the cleft wall and slammed past him on the left with a searing blast of heat – but it left him with his mouth burning. Valkenhayn staggered right and tripped over Runt – who had apparently been trying to stay behind his legs – and went windmilling to the floor of the cleft as another fire-and-acid blast went through where he was standing not a moment ago. Runt looked up, apparently able to see his sibling hidden from Valkenhayn's angle, and fired back.

“Óúñ do dhéa!¹²” McKulluh shrieked from above. “‘Cis *our* side yer supposed to be helpin’!”

The targataur scuttled up the cleft side and disappeared over the lip, and a moment later came an agonized squeal. And then, all was quiet.

“Anois cad é an diabol a dhéanann tú glaoch go?¹³” came McKulluh's voice in tones of astonishment.

12 Erish: Shut your mouth! (duin duh vale)

13 Erish: Now, what the devil do you call *that*?

7 THE QUEST BEGINS

Valkenhayn pulled himself to his feet and tried to take stock. The moment he'd stopped moving the pain in his muscles made him wonder if he'd ever be able to move again. He was half-deaf. His sword and armor were intact but a mess. His backpack sagged open along two seams, his cloak was just plain *missing* and he was generally bedraggled. He was thoroughly banged up, but no major wounds. He had lots of burns – both acid and heat – all over him but, Goddess be praised, none of them had done too much damage to him directly. His *other* equipment – that was a different story. There came a sudden *spung!* and his crossbow flew apart into its constituent parts. More, actually, than had been assembled to make it originally. The string had parted, the recoil of the bow arms had done the rest. He could see the bowstring smoking where some acid must've gotten it. Good thing *that* hadn't happened earlier. He sadly examined the specially-made weapon, but it was quite beyond hope.

Runt pulled himself to his feet, wraptor-style, and looked around. He didn't seem very upset to suddenly find himself an orphan. Valkenhayn heard a noise above him and looked up quickly but it was not a threat. It was a young lady.

She was an absolute dead flat black, except for her hair, which shone like spun electrum¹⁴ and flowed like myst. On her head, falling to her dainty waist – and another fall at the base of her spine that dropped to her knees. She was climbing down backwards and it was clear she didn't spend much on her wardrobe. At all. She was *very*...well-formed. As she arrived at the bottom of the cleft and turned to him, he saw she was quite short – not much over four feet. She had very large, intensely sapphire-blue eyes whose irises were so large she almost lacked any white at all. They were set off by large pointed ears, and a generous... endowment. And she was the most desirable thing he'd *ever* seen!

They regarded each other for a long moment. She was clearly an elfling, and like most elflings she looked maybe a well-developed twelve years old, but could be anything up to a century. The black coloring he'd not seen before. Her skin looked like velvet. Delves were a type of shadow elf with similar coloring, but human-sized like all elves. Perhaps this was a *delfling*? No matter, he'd never seen such a beautiful girl in his life. He coughed, breaking his gaze as he realized he had been staring.

She smiled. She had *dimples*, dammit! By the Goddess and the Great Scott, she was *cute*. And she was *sexy* and she was desirable and... he shook himself.

¹⁴ Electrum is an alloy of silver and gold, midway in color between the two.

"Uh...what...um...what happened to the...uh...targataur...er...*thing*?" he asked the lovely vision.

"I am the 'targataur thing.' " she replied in a voice like silver bells, in very heavily accented Assuran – an accent he did not recognize. She gave a little turn of her head as she looked up at him that caused interesting...side effects. She now wore a somewhat puzzled look. "See me, can you, Day Walker?"

"Well," he temporized, looking down – and abruptly back up. "Of course. You'd...be...*ahem*...rather hard to miss."

Her eyes widened, fetchingly and suddenly...the moment passed. She was still staggeringly beautiful, but he had a better lock on this emotions.

"Not so turned on now, are we?" she asked, archly.

Valkenhayn blinked.

"Right. Er...hmm...What – what *about* that?"

"You're *intriguing* to my *glamour*. Well, not exactly *intriguing*. It's still affects you but rather than making you *not* notice me't has exactly the opposite effect. *Δ...fascination*, 'I you will. I suspected't of you, but I didn't think t'hibit as I climbed down. *Εα, ως't* "

McKullah suddenly appeared behind her.

Valkenhayn was blank for a moment before he realized what she was saying. "Right. Yeah. Your...glamour...makes you...*sexy*?"

She reached a hand toward Runt as if he were obviously Valkenhayn's pet, who sniffed at it and looked quizzically at her.

"Only for you. *Δ*nd other male members of your family *methinks*, of which I know there are now none," she said. She glanced at the Leprechaun and smiled again. "McKullah has never been able t'disappear in front of you, has he?"

"Well, no. But he's not *sexy* either!"

"Oh, may the Saints be praised for *that*."

"You are just...*distracting*."

"He's the wrong sex. But there was a reason why your father married a half-elf. How distracting? *Δ* lot?"

"Well, *yeah*!"

"Might be a problem. *Δ*s we fought had you any sudden... *inclination*?"

"By the Goddess, no!" he said. "I was a little busy."

"Evil. Then't probably *isn't* a problem," she said, tossing her head and ... tail.

"Right. So...you're the one that saved me. As I was about to be roasted. I do thank you for that," the knight said. "I'm..."

“Thor Manqascha Tyel Valkenhayn, Knight of Caerleon, second son of the line, t’the throne now heir, an you can pry the dragon off’t. And you are very welcome,” she replied, smiling again.

“You – have the advantage of me,” the knight observed. Runt squatted down behind him with a little grunt and began to clean his scales.

“I am R’nyara e’Kyth (Stmarana T’far drabiz, of the Utara Deep. Dark Guardian and sorceress t’the Dark Goddess herself, long in Hell may she reign,” she announced.

“Right. Rinyera e-kizz...”

“R’nyara will do.”

“Right. Hell. Good for her.”

“I certainly hope ‘tisn’t, she seemed happy when I left her.” She put on a look both wary and puzzled. “Jocular, in fact.”

“About the...how do you do that...thing...you do?” he asked, in some confusion.

“The polymorph?” She reached down below her waist and pulled a small knife from a kind of jeweled sporran she wore hanging below her navel – literally her *only* item of clothing. “...with this.”

It was tiny, intricate, beautiful, and it made him feel a little ill to look at it. It had a blade of a black so dark and so complete, it looked like a blade-shaped slice of the universe was utterly missing at the end of the grip.

“That’s a Darkling blade, isn’t it?” he asked. The shadow elves called themselves “Darklings.” She *must* be related somehow.

“Aye.” She held it up and it grew, lengthened, into a katana-shaped sword sized for her. “We call’t a ‘*rthktar*.’ Try poking me with a weapon.”

Valkenhayn started, then drew his dagger. He gingerly poked gently at her arm – and was astounded when silvery armor appeared over the target spot an instant before the blade touched her flesh. As he pulled the weapon back the armor disappeared just as quickly. No matter where he moved his blade, wherever it threatened was in instants covered with a dense, silvery mesh, and when he moved away, it vanished again. He recalled seeing her in combat and realized it seemed to flow around her body as needed.

“Handy. And the...spider...thing?” he asked next.

The sword shrunk back to dagger size and she turned it to show him the runes on the blade and pommel. He couldn’t read them.

“Part of the *rthktar*’s enchantment. This is the formal weapon of a Dark Guardian. Seen I have some of my sisters use’t t’become any kind of a tarq they wished. I am not so skilled, and turn int’a more generic sort. Still’t can be very handy in combat. And’t has other advantages. And one *disad-*

uantage – though *you* might not agree.” She held out her arms a moment to illustrate her dress. Or lack thereof.

“Why is that?” he asked.

“Polymorph doesn’t extend t’clothes or equipment. Instant armor likewise doesn’t respect any covering already in place. So t’be properly attired, I cannot be attired’t all. T’doesn’t matter what I wear, this is how I’m going t’finish up,” she said, with a sideways glance up at his face. “Occupational hazard for a servant of the Dark Goddess. Though no one’s ever complained before. You’ll get used t’t. Besides, my people seldom wear clothes anyway. T’is good t’waste resources on vanity.”

“Good to...? *Right.*”

“She’s going to *stay* like that?” McKulluh interjected.

“I think that’s what she said. Where are you *from*?” he asked, in some consternation.

“The Utara Deep, as I said. The Lower Reaches, the deepest part of the world. What some call Hell itself. From the time we came here, we have lived there. We’ve watched many of you latecomers arrive.”

“But you *are* an elfling, aren’t you?”

“Cousins, I suppose, but t’would be embarrassing t’admit *that* in public,” she said with an amused look.

“So you...all your people...live *only* underground?”

“As deep as can we get. Never come we t’the surface,” she said, as if she herself was not standing there. “Well – rarely. Anyone who studies magic has t’go t’the Unseen University, and that *is* frequently on the surface. But t’is a special exception.”

“Then why did *you*? Leave...*come*, I mean? This *is* the surface in case you missed it.”

“I miss very little. I came here because I had t’t’ave your life,” she replied, seriously, as if that explained it all. “Twere I not there at the predestined place and time, you would be drifting ash in the wind now. While I love t’chat as much as the next fay, methinks t’would be evil t’get those people out of the larder, what say?”

“Why would *that* be evil? That would be a *good* thing, wouldn’t it?” he asked as he started toward the cleft side.

“Good? We restore t’them their right t’choose their *own* destiny. If that be not evil then I don’t know what t’is. Leaving them *there* would be good. There, they’ve *no* choices, have they? They must abide the wylvern’s choice.”

“Choice is...evil?” he asked.

"Of *course* choice is evil. 'Tis good t'give't up. Thought I even Day Walkers accepted that."

"I'm...going to want to pursue this at another time. But right now I think it would be a goo...evil...evil idea to rescue those folks."

"B'God, I think you're mad as *she* is!"

"Choose t'do't and 'tis half-done," she said. She replaced the dagger in her sporran thing and indicated the cleft wall. "You first," she said, with a very knowing smile.

Valkenhayn climbed out without difficulty, but was at a bit of a loss when they got to the larder. Dropping a rope down brought unexpected reactions – apathy for most, fear for some and of the rest, all were too weak to climb.

Worse yet, it was clear a number of people had died and their bodies had been chewed, it was equally clear a number of the captive people were thoroughly mad. Maybe *most* of them. Certainly no one looked like they were ready to rejoin society. And who could blame them?

"Ah, lad. Some things there are ye can't recover from," McKulluh observed, sadly.

"I'm in a quandary," Valkenhayn admitted. "I'd like to get these people out and back to their homes, but I also don't want to let loose a squad of insane cannibals on the local populace."

R'nyara looked at the stomach-turning scene below without any sign of discomfort and said, "Madness doesn't make them incapable, 't' merely changes one's choices."

"Well – yes, but those choices wouldn't be the ones they'd *want* to make, would they? When they were sane, I mean?"

"Perhaps not. But 'tis still a choice, is't not?" she asked.

"Right. Sort of. But it would certainly take some choices away from their kin, and may impose on them a need to kill one of their own," the knight countered.

"'Tis even worse than that. I daresay most o'these people have already been given up for dead. Let them run mad to their homes, loike *zombies* they'd be greeted. Aye, and not far off they would be, either!"

"I suppose that would be just t'good," she said. She sighed. "No choice't all is one forced. Can *you* heal them? You *are* a Paladin, yes?"

"A paladin of my order does get training and I *can* 'lay on hands,' as we say, but curing madness is well beyond anything *I* can do. Too bad we couldn't have got to them sooner," he said sadly.

"Sooner? Before they went mad?" R'nyara asked.

"That would be the idea," Valkenhayn returned.

The elfling – no, she *had* to be a delfling – looked thoughtful.

“Mayhap we could restore them as were they *before* running mad? T’would be *our* choice, not theirs. Still, Ahriman did’t for all of us, did he not? Afterward, t’would give them a much wider choice.”

“Ahriman?”

“Shaitan. Mephistopheles. Satan. He has many names.”

“Right. Evil.”

“Of course.”

“Again, we’ll come back to this by the by. How could we restore them?”

She counted the people in the trench below and tugged at an ear thoughtfully.

“Have I a vial of water from the Lethe. A small dose will forever wipe out their most recent memories. A larger one, more. A large enough one, all. How far back we need t’go I can’t say. And the amount I have isn’t over-large t’the task. I don’t see any other way t’salvage them. Death would be kinder.”

“I don’t see how that will help,” the Knight said.

“The madness came when at last they turned on one another t’survive, yes? If we take those memories, the consequences be taken also. They would have nothing t’ return t’but what they were before,” she said, reasonably.

Valkenhayn thought about it.

“That...seems so simple. But it does make sense. The guilt of what happened in the trench lives in their memories, slay it there and it can no longer keep them mad. McKulluh?”

“I think I’m goin’ mad meself, but I can’t say ‘tis wrong.”

“Innocence is the gift of the Lethe. Haul them out, one by each, from the larder, take away their memories of what horror happened here, and hope they can recall home afterward. If they can go and *not* run mad, perhaps their families can more easily accept they survived?”

“And it would avoid a massacre of the survivors.” McKulluh observed.

“Okay,” Valkenhayn said. “Let’s do it.”

He looked at the walls carefully.

“Not someplace I’d care to try to climb. Looks like the wyvern smoothed the walls some.” He straightened and looked around. “I’d need to rappel down...”

“And chase them? In darkness there is no time, but *already* we are hunted. I’m faster, I’ll fetch them out.”

R'nyara touched the hilt of her knife and her outline blurred. A moment later she stood before him, the forebody of an elf, mounted to the giant spider-like body of a cave targ.

She slipped over the side and down to the bottom of the trench. Those people still capable of locomotion immediately began to crawl away from her, but to no avail. She was extraordinarily fast in her targataur form. She snatched up one young girl and sprinted back up the wall.

"You're just handy as a little skillet, aren't you?" Valkenhayn told her. She smiled.

"I need t'detour t'pick up my kit. I'll meet the t'of you at the border of the mushforest," and she galloped off. Valkenhayn and McKulluh managed to get the girl to the edge of the mushforest, but it was no easy task. She fought them every step of the way, shattering the area with screams like a damned soul in torment. It seemed to take forever. R'nyara was already there when they arrived.

"By dhrimān, you can hear her for miles!" she said as they came up.

"You think she'll be safe enough from here? And the rest?" the Knight asked, looking at the pteros still hanging from the mushroom caps, grimly maintaining his grip on the struggling girl.

"Find out we shall." R'nyara slid open the purse and brought out a tiny scrying crystal less than two inches in diameter. She murmured under her breath as she gazed within.

"Shannhartha distini, e felis preserven, dag."

She looked up after a moment, searching the mushroom caps. She pointed, carefully.

"You kill that one, I'll kill that one, (McKulluh) can kill that one there, with the red arrow marking on t's head." She draw her weapon, flipped it to catch the blade – it grew to dagger size as it flipped – and flung it overhand. Valkenhayn's knife followed close behind. McKulluh waited a moment, as his target was occluded. Her target stiffened as the blade sparked and dropped dead to the ground. The Knight's was tacked into the bottom of the mushroom cap and struggled. The rest of the pteros exploded outward in a great panic, and disappeared amongst the mushrooms with loud cries, but not before McKulluh took out his assigned target – along with four others.

"Damn," the Paladin muttered. He rocked the mushroom back and forth until that, plus the creature's struggles, loosened the knife and the ptero dropped, where Valkenhayn could put it out of its misery.

R'nyara returned her weapon to its sheath. Her ptero had died the moment the blade touched it.

"That blade – it destroys the soul as well as the body, doesn't it?" Valkenhayn asked.

"If you don't wish t'be with something in life, why would you feel differently in death?" she asked.

The knight shook his head. She had a certain charm, he had to admit, but – there was a *lot* to get past.

"From this point most, if n't all, will leave the darkness alive. More than that I should not tell."

"I should not tell." That's lesson one in Sorcerer school, isn't it?"

"Oh, *have* you studied the art? I didn't scry that."

"No – just a lucky guess. Scrying?" he added that to his mental list of things to bring up later. "What about the vial?"

She stuck her hand into her purse again and removed a vial of cut crystal full of clear liquid.

"Hold her mouth open, Kipp."

"Kipp?"

"That's your name, 'tis not?"

"I haven't been called that since I was knighted, and then only by my family. It's only for use *by* family. *Close* family."

"I know."

"Right. Where did you learn it?"

"Where d'you think? Open her mouth."

Valkenhayn added this to the list of topics to get answers on later, and held the struggling girl with one arm and pried open her mouth with the other.

R'nyara deftly tipped in several drops of water, and the girl stopped struggling.

She blinked, looking up at the delfling. Then she rolled her eyes to Valkenhayn. He released her, keeping a hand on her back as she rose.

"~~WHO YOU ARE? PLACE? PLACE WHERE IS?~~"

The knight smiled and indicated the path.

"You're in the shadowzone. You can go home now. Just follow the path," he added.

"~~HOME?~~" she asked, as if she'd never heard of it before. She took several steps, then turned with a bewildered air and looked at them.

"Can you find your way? Do you need help? It's really not far from here," Valkenhayn said.

She nodded, uncertainly, turned, and tottered off. As she left, the knight turned to R'nyara.

"Are you *sure* about this? They won't need help getting home?"

"If we give t'much or t'little of the Lethe, they *will* need help, but *she* will not. The mouthwing you killed cannot start the flock after her now."

"Right. Mouthwing. Good."

"Yes, mouthwings are good," she agreed.

"Do ye want me t'see her back, Val?" McKulluh asked.

Valkenhayn cocked an eye at R'nyara, who pulled out her crystal, showed it to him meaningfully once again, and then returned it.

"Trust the Sorceress, I guess."

"You mean *trust* the lady with the dig..."

"Ball, McKulluh, the big crystal ball," Valkenhayn hastily interjected.

"This is my *portable* crystal. 'Tis not 'big.'" R'nyara objected.

One by one they retrieved the victims in the larder and set them on the path home. To Valkenhayn's relief, few of the other victims were as disoriented as the first girl, but they *were* upset to find themselves suddenly far away from wherever their last memory placed them.

None of them were too keen on Runt. Though he offered no threat to any of them, solemnly watching each release from a post behind Valkenhayn's knees, all of them had some instinctive fear of him. But so far, the knight was amazed and puzzled at the little wyvern's behavior. This deserves a little looking-in-to, as well. Of course, he could always ask his Sorceress. Like *that* would help.

The last victim was emaciated and nearly comatose. R'nyara looked at her doubtfully as she weighed the vial of Lethe in her hand. There was very little of it left.

She had been a beautiful woman once. Her hair, what there was of it, was white, but her skin and eyes were dark. She was clearly half-elven, the ears were quite unmistakable. She looked sort of familiar, somehow, but Valkenhayn put it down to the great population of various types of elves that lived in Krithala before the dragon came.

"This one had found a place t'hide. Very nearly missed her. Kipp, she's been here a long time. Mayhap what remains t'will not be enough t'wipe away the memories of this place," she told him.

"Do we have any alternatives?" the knight asked, grimly.

R'nyara seemed to be pondering something.

"Methinks this one is half of elven bloods. If she can speak mind-t'-mind – or even just *listen* – perhaps I can make the water more potent," she said, finally.

"Mind-to-mind? Is that safe for *you* considering what kind of shape *her* mind is likely in?" he asked.

"No," R'nyara replied, honestly. "But 'tis our last best hope t'do her evil. This I know: I continue on from this place whether mad or sane. If we do *not* do this then we *must* slit her throat. T'would be no kindness t'leave her t'die miserably, without kin, will, or wit, and even less t'gift her clan with this wreck they can only watch die and be thankful when she does."

"Right. Obviously, we must do evil to her, it's only decent," Valkenhayn replied, rubbing his forehead. This inversion stuff would probably drive *him* nuts.

"I hate t'say it, but it's *agree* I must. *Look* at her Val. She has one chance to come back, and not one other but death, quick or long, hard or not, and with or without help. And before God, I couldn't help put her down, and nor could I walk away."

Valkenhayn nodded. "Do it," and said a prayer to his Goddess that somehow R'nyara can pull this off.

"I will try t'calm her. If she does, give her all that's left," R'nyara said as she handed him the vial.

"And if she doesn't?"

"I think beheading faster and less a shock than a thrust through the heart."

"Right. Right. Do your...*thing*. Whatever."

She squatted down and took the woman's face in her hands, and then gazed into her eyes. At first, it made no difference, Near comatose, she was little but random movements, like a slow-motion fit. But she began to calm and her eyes to focus. She held her gaze locked with the dark elfling.

Valkenhayn opened her mouth and poured in the last of the Lethe, flicking the vial to get every last drop he could. She swallowed convulsively, and a shudder went through her body. Then she went limp. R'nyara kept a hand on her face, with her own eyes closed and an expression of listening on her face.

Then the woman's eyes flew open and she screamed in terror, raising her hands to ward off something horrible. She struggled, weakly.

"Listen now. Listen now." R'nyara murmured again and again. Slowly the screaming faded, and the woman's eyes closed. She seemed to relax into sleep. The elfling sighed, and looked up at the knight.

"Barely enough, even with mind-t'-mind. She was again in the forest as the wylvern seized her." She looked at the sleeping woman. "Too weak, methinks, t'get back of her own. T'he Inn with her, then?"

"Yes. Goo...evil...evil idea," the Knight agreed.

But before they could leave they had to check out the lair. The whole *point* of this little adventure was to get a grubstake, and that was likely where the treasure was – if there really *was* any. It was not unknown for a wyvern to steal something bright and shiny only to lose it somewhere in the wilderness when it lost interest. And even with the wyverns dead, this was still a chancy thing at best. There might yet be other wyverns in the nest, and wyverns were known to tolerate any number of strange creatures in their home so long as they did not threaten the nest. Valkenhayn approached warily with R'nyara right behind, both with weapons at the ready.

Runt, of course, followed along and seemed curious about their cautious manner. He wandered in and out of the cave unconcernedly.

They sidled up to the entrance and the Knight peeked in. He pulled back and said, “Whew! The place *reeks* of napalm and what I guess is acid vapor, it’s stinging the inside of my nose. It’s damn dark down there, too.”

R'nyara looked past him and for a moment he looked down at her exquisitely-shaped back and...tail...and...then she pulled back. “I can walk in dark places, but little use ‘tis for scoutin’. Have you any torches?”

“Will you *warn* me the next time you turn on the glamour? Please? It’s *distracting* as all get-out!”

“Sorry. Torches?”

“I’ve got two, but we *aren’t* going to use them in a place that smells like an alchemist’s petrochemical lab. There’s no point to surviving the fight if we promptly blow ourselves to hell.”

“‘Tis better than bein’ blown t’heaven, methinks,” she pointed out.

“If it’s down there you’re going, what about me?” McKulluh asked as he recoiled and reloaded. “Ah, cursed be ye. I’m down to me last dozen bolts.”

“Didn’t you recover any?”

“And them slammin’ into metal scales or stickin’ into mouths full of fire, acid, or both? ‘Tis lucky I was t’get *this* batch together. So, do I go forst, or do I kiver yer backsides?”

“Actually, I would feel better if someone were to stay up here. There’s nothing to say *all* the wyverns are dead, and even less to suggest that any survivors have to be in the nest already. *He* was wandering around on his own,” he pointed to Runt. “If one shows up and comes in after us, I’d much rather get some warning about it. Besides, in an environment like that, you’d be asking to be stepped on.”

“Imigh sa diabhla!!¹⁵ A(ri)gh then. I’ll stay. But so help me it’s kill ye I will if’n ye wound up dead.”

¹⁵ Erish: Go to the Devil. (im-ihh sah dee-veal)

R'nyara then pulled her purse around and fumbled within with her free hand for a moment, before she pulled out a small tube, crimped at one end and capped at the other.

"Each eye, one bit, very small. Blink 't'in, and keep your eyes closed. When you feel them go cold, walk in 'til you are beyond most of the light – in this gloaming, ten, twelve paces or so – then open your eyes."

The Knight held out his finger, got two tiny dollops and proceeded to put them into his eyes. Just before the first dollop went in he saw R'nyara do so as well.

"I thought Darklings could see in the dark."

"Of course we can. We use the ointment."

"All the time?"

"No. Only when we need t'see any distance. T'just walk is easy enough. For that you just *feel* your way, sensing obstructions by the botan-d-ary air makes botan'ing back from them."

"How can you feel *that*?" he asked, eyes shut and sliding his left foot around the corner and into the cave.

"Firstly, you learn t'use the senses you were born with and secondly don't dull them with clothes. Skin *can* see. When I say *feel* your way I mean *exactly* that. 'Tis like any other skill. Silence now. Don't make us a target."

"Right. Are we in deep enough?" he breathed a few moments later.

"Too deep in were we by half and again before either of us left home. If 'tis the darkness t'which y'refer, aye, 'tis," she seemed to sigh back at him from a great distance. Her voice was still musical, but now in a minor key, perfectly distinct, yet he could tell it was all but totally silent.

Valkenhayn opened his eyes and realized he could now see quite easily – but the entire world was in shades of – green! It looked *really* weird. When he turned to the delfling he realized she was glowing a dull red.

"What's with the weird colors?" he whispered.

She replied softly, "see we now by the warmth of our own bodies. We can't see this color normally, but the ointment takes away the blue and shifts all the colors we see down t'let us. But remember, you are now blind t'anything standing before a background of like temperature!"

She was just full of surprises. Valkenhayn moved ahead, following the tunnel down, and a moment later realized his eyes had also stopped burning. The ointment seemed to be protecting them from the acid vapor.

It was a fairly large cave opening to begin with – not surprising in view of the size of the parent wyverns – but it both widened and rose as they progressed. The chemical smell was still there but there was something else curious – not rotten meat, a sort of sour mustiness.

They came to a sheer drop of about six feet and saw they had reached a wide, oblong chamber – clearly the nest. There was an actual nest of stones, pushed into a circle, and broken eggshells here and there, mostly pretty well ground down. The place was littered with bones. *Big* bones, some of them. These were very ambitious wyverns.

Runt led the way past a broken mammoth skull – it was only then he recalled that mammoths used to be common on Bisral, but he'd not seen one since his arrival. *That* was why the grassland looked odd to him!

The bones, rocks, and other detritus were very hard to see at any distance, only becoming visible from the heat of their bodies as they got close enough. It was therefore quite a shock when he nearly tripped over the muranda skull lying upside down athwart their path.

Suddenly he felt a rush of warmth in his body, and began to recall how R'nyara moved so gracefully...he shook his head and hissed, "Knock off the glamour!"

"Sorry. The verit skull... 'tis rather dismaying. Never have I seen one taken in prey before," she whispered, like a distant chime in the wind.

"If you mean the muranda, yeah, it's impressive."

The skull was still attached, more or less, to the body, also skeletonized. It had died on its back. No small task to flip over anything with that many legs. The bones were pitted, badly. Likely from Mommy-acid. The ribs still standing ended almost six feet over their heads.

At the far end they were moving up a bit of a rise to one side of the nest. Looking down he saw the interior of the nest. Here the shells were largely intact, the nest not used much after hatching. They were all of a uniform size – he guessed each was about three feet in diameter, perhaps five long – except for one. That shell, now in three or four pieces, could not have been more than a foot and a half or two feet long, and correspondingly narrow.

Probably Runt's shell, he thought to himself as he moved past. Here, in the very back of the cave, was the hoard. He hoped.

They penetrated more deeply, moving off the ridge to the lip that separated the front part of the cave from the back. It was difficult to make it out clearly seeing only by their body heat, but the mound was quite large. At least one of the parents was a treasure-hoarder for sure. There was far more here than they would ever be able to carry. The locals will certainly profit.

Runt seemed to be hanging back, as if reluctant to go any further back in the cave. Is that just habit? Or did he know something we don't?

Valkenhayn felt a flutter in his stomach and turned to tell the delfling to turn off the glamour again until he saw she was holding a finger to her lips. When she saw she had his attention she shut it off and wound her fingers together into a startlingly realistic-looking scorpion, complete with tail. Then she pointed.

Valkenhayn turned, slowly and carefully and looked where she was pointing. It took him a moment to make out the outline, but she was certainly correct. The hoard had a guardian. Runt *did* know something.

The biggest giant scorpion he'd ever seen personally. A couple of tons if it weighed an ounce. He'd heard that some wyvern's territoriality was more limited than others, but it startled him that the wyverns let *this* thing live in their lair. Wouldn't it have killed and eaten the young at the first opportunity?

R'nyara touched his arm again. He looked back and she again used her hands to suggest circling behind the monster. She would remove the tail and he could get on top of it. That would give him a chance to get through that armor without giving it an opportunity to use those four enormous chelae.

He nodded assent, and they slipped off the lip to the back area floor and began moving as silently as they could. R'nyara, wearing nothing for all intents and purposes, made no noise at all. His armor, on the other hand, proved to be a severe liability. He hadn't gone five paces before he realized the scorpion was turning to keep them in front. It could hear his armor! He stopped. The creature flexed as he did so, but then relaxed back. The Knight realized he had narrowly avoided a strike.

R'nyara saw the problem, too, but she kept going. Valkenhayn kept still, ticking off the minutes in his mind. It took less time than he thought before the monster suddenly lunged toward him, and then spun around, splashing him with blood spurting from the stump where its tail had been.

She had *done* it! She had taken the tail right off. And it was now facing away from him, so he could continue their plan, which he did, throwing himself atop the beast which was now flailing its claws at the delfling somewhere in the darkness in back of the hoard.

The creature shuddered as it felt his weight, and tried to reach back with its upper chelae, but it was simply mechanically unable to do so. Its' struggles made his footing treacherous. He dropped down, grabbing into whatever ridges, slots or holes he could find to keep his footing, but an unfortunate bit of timing had him coming down just as it was bucking up and stars exploded in his vision as his chin hit the monster's back. In his mo-

ment of disorientation, the creature's furious bucking knocked the sword out of his hand.

The cave suddenly lit up as Runt blasted the scorpion. Valkenhayn's eyes burned and the cave went dark. The monster began bucking even more frantically. He smelled napalm, acid, and...the odor of cooking crab.

"Runt, *no!*" he shouted, as the cave faded back into shades of green – but dimmer, now. His eyes burned.

Grimly he held on, looking for more handholds and trying to get closer to its head, where he thought he might still be able to stab it in the brain with his dagger.

Suddenly, he felt a rush of warmth in his loins. He cursed to himself – quietly, from habit, since nothing had broken the silence but the scratching of claws on rock and his own shout. The scorpion was voiceless.

When the monster spun he tried to hold his place and think about R'nyara's cute tail, before shaking his head and going back to concentrating on the scorpion. He hitched forward again – and his hand felt a hole with moist air going in and out. One of the spicules?

He pulled his dagger and rammed it in, giving himself another handhold and certainly giving the monster grief. It redoubled its efforts to dislodge him bouncing madly in a circle. He rotated the blade in a twisting motion, causing as much damage to the cursed thing's breathing as he could, and all the while thought how R'nyara would jiggle so pleasantly if it were *her* up here instead of him.

Without warning, the scorpion crashed to the floor and stopped moving. Valkenhayn blinked as he tried to take this in, but the image of the delfling was all he could think of.

"Kipp! Move t'ny voice!"

He scrambled toward the voice, then slid off the front of the thing, hitting his own sword hilt, which was now sticking out of what served the thing for a face. He felt warm, feminine hands helping him up, and his nose was filled with a very pleasant female fragrance.

"Are you all right? I saw the sword..." and the Knight swept her up in his arms, holding her tightly to him as he planted his mouth on hers and kissed her – for quite some time.

Later he looked down at her in his arms and said, "I think you'd better turn off the glamour."

She smiled lazily and said, "I did. Just as you grabbed me."

He reluctantly let go of her. "Sorry. You...ah...you know how it affects me."

She was still smiling, now she twitched her...tail. “Oh, yes. No apology necessary.”

Valkenhayn took a deep breath to steady himself, then stepped to the monster and yanked his sword and knife out. He saw R’nyara had her sword back in her sporran.

“Why didn’t you use your own blade?” he asked, curiously.

“A very effective form of torture, no doubt, but ‘twasn’t *long* enough t’ pierce the brain. T’slay the soul’t one must deal a *fatal* blow. Luckily, there just happened t’be a nice *long* sword lyin’ aroond. T’only took a few moments t’find. The beast was havin’ trouble breathin’, but ‘twas no easy task t’get the sword whilse’t leapt about like a flyin’ qreeb.”

“Yeah. Funny how that works. *Do* flyin’ greeds leap about a lot?”

“No, Day Walker – *flyin’* greeds. Best are they when fried *very* fresh.”

“Right. Do you think there’s anything else down here?”

“T’may not have been loud t’hūman ears, but the fight was more than loud enough t’warn anythin’ else that might be interested. They have not attacked, so ‘tis my guess there are not.”

R’nyara reached under the scorpion and pulled something back with a loud *crack!*

“What have you got there?”

“Lunch. Courtesy of Rūn.”

“Oh. *That* was what I smelled. Why didn’t you switch to your targatur form and bite it while it was struggling with me?” he asked as he scouted the area.

“Firstly, in that form ‘tis a very...intimate...act, and secondly, the blessed thing weighed t’least two tons! I weigh 150 pounds in my targatur form, 75 normally. I didn’t have enough venom. And *thirdly*...‘tis *not* what the venom is for.”

“Well, what *is* it for, then?” he asked, curiously.

She shook her head – with interesting physical side-effects – and said, “Didn’t your Mother teach you not t’ask personal questions of a lady?”

“In *that* form Ma’am, *you* are *no* lady. But skip it. You might switch now, though, so we can make a decent haul.”

They loaded up as much of the most valuable stuff they could carry as a practical matter and then headed toward the cave entrance. As they were climbing the lip that lead to the nest, Valkenhayn looked up and noticed something. He pointed.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but those columns make a pretty tight curtain everywhere but at the nest – and the nest is backed into the gap, and the back part built much higher than the front.”

R'nyara examined the situation seriously.

"Belike, a careful arrangement t'hold the scorpion prisoner."

"That's what *I* thought. This arrangement here," he pointed along the dividing line between the living area of the cave and the hoard, "Looks very deliberate, to me."

She nodded. "Yes. 'Twas penned. Deliberately."

"How would a wyvern know to do such a thing?"

"A wyvern would not. This was a trap. *dll* of't."

Val wanted to follow up on that, but time – such as it was in a shadowzone with neither night nor day – was pressing. As they exited the lair a sudden burning in their eyes stopped both of them for a moment. It soon passed, and the Knight found his vision had gone back to normal.

"That the ointment?"

"'Twas indeed. Light renders't useless."

"Still, handy."

"Cook yer bleedin' toime, so you did, and *what* was that donnybro... Oother MacRae! Would ye *look at that!*" McKulluh interrupted himself as he caught sight of what R'nyara was carrying.

"Make you feel at home, old friend?"

"Ah, that it does, Lad, that it does. Just look at the *color* of it," he crooned.

"Don't get too attached to it. We're not stocking rainbows with it."

"Of course not! Ye haven't even got a pot to put it in!"

Valkenhayn made some field repairs to his equipment, and they started back. At first he tried to take the woman, but R'nyara pointed out it was more reasonable for her to do it. They tied the woman in place. She plus the treasure made quite a load.

"Are you sure you can handle that?" he asked.

"Belike. 'T'wouldn't wish t'carry't long, but we need only make the Port. Less than a two day hike, isn't't?"

"Yes. Okay. But let me know if you need a break or you want to shift the load. Or trade something with me."

"And so I will. Don't step on the Leprechaun."

"McKulluh! Forget the gold and *move* it!"

"Ye bloody heretic! Oh, very well..."

Their final act was to remove the sting tails of the two parent wyverns. They were different – the poison looked and smelled different – but *how* they were different they didn't know. R'nyara said Daddy's tail was good for maybe three or four stings, but Mommy's would probably be empty or

nearly so – at best, useless after just one. She had used her sting generously trying to kill the speedy delfling. R'nyara showed the Knight how to reach into the back and poke the nerve that caused it to fire. Sadly, that would only work for a couple of days, nor would the poison keep – not without an alchemist, at any rate.

None of the juvenile's tails had any poison. Apparently, they still had a ways to mature before that feature came in – a fact Valkenhayn would have appreciated knowing earlier, but better safe than sorry.

Lunch was flash-cooked scorpion leg, which wasn't as bad as it sounds. With some water from their canteens and some way bread, they made a meal of it. The woman they had rescued came around for a few moments, and R'nyara got some water and way bread into her before she lapsed back into her near-comatose state.

They headed back, threading their way through the rocky terrain and entering the mushforest. Though still gloomy, the absence of the pteros made it much less creepy.

As they walked, Valkenhayn recalled one of the remarks R'nyara had made earlier.

"You said a little while ago this was a trap? Is that what you meant about us being hunted?"

"Aye and so we are. Avoided have we the enemy's first sword thrust, but the fight continues anon."

"What fight are you referring to, exactly?"

"Yours. The battle t'slay the dragon."

"Look, I just *got* here! No one – least of all Ev...the dragon should even *know* I'm here!"

She shook her head, setting ripples through her hair.

"Nay, the battle is engaged *now*. 'Tis but the first trap of many y'll face this Quest."

"Did she just say the dragon already knows...?"

"Yes, she did. A trap." Valkenhayn felt numb. "The dragon *already* knows I'm here? It had something to do with this? How can you be sure?"

"Aye. Is't not obvious? Who confused the minds of the locals t'the number and powers of the wyverns? T'what purpose? T'was the dragon, t'trick you int'a fight you couldn't win. Bet'wee, the dragon t'was also that put the mushroom in the roast and added the scorpion if, betimes, the wyverns did fail. T'didn't know about *me*. And t'wiln't overlook *me* again."

"But – how *could* it have found out? How could it have known *when* to set up this whole situation?"

"This...and much more. The dragon was never idle. Its' only task was preparations for war. The dragon 't'was that pushed the first domino t'send the sky people t'bring you here. Why else would ones such as they enter an erupting volcano? I gazed upon *that* scene and knew't had been viewed before. The dragon, or one of its thralls, did so and in so doing insured such a scene *must* happen, and so the dragon made't so, if effort be necessary. And followed that scene with this, t'end your play entirely."

Valkenhayn felt stunned. It had never occurred to him that Evenshade might have *known* he was here from the first moment. To find out now that not only did it *know* but that it *itself* was the *agent* of his freedom was...deeply, *deeply* frightening. Now he felt he was dealing with forces he did not understand, playing a game where he didn't know the rules, or how to win – or even what winning meant.

"Tis a Quest," R'nyara said, gently.

"Quest?" he said, dully.

She reached into her purse and pulled out something that fit into her hand. She reached it out to him, and he stuck his hand out automatically. A coin dropped into his palm.

"Aye, so 'tis. Begon't did in the volcano's heart with you, but in any Quest must there be always four stalwart comrades. Side by each we gather together t'defeat the dragon. First was McKullah. Now am I joined – and we'll fetch our fourth on the way t'Imri – already waiting for us now, though *he* doesn't know't."

He looked down at his hand. Twinkling brightly there lay a piece of the Crown of Krithala. The Air Rune. He blinked.

Valkenhayn looked at her in total disbelief.

"The Air Rune? The Air Rune found *you* in the Utara Deep? What in *hell* was it doing down there?"

"T'was *searching* in Hell – for *me*," she said, smiling.

8 EVENSHADE'S NEW GAMBIT

The Earth Rune dragged in the skyjammers, so, of course, the Air Rune had to yank someone up from the depths of Hell. By the Goddess, Valkenhayn wondered, what kind of spells did they *use* to make these things?

They reached the High Peak Inn a short time later. The entire adventure must've taken longer than Valkenhayn had calculated since the emerald sun was but starting to brighten as they came around the last foothill and saw their destination. Apparently the entire episode had carried them around the clock.

They arrived midmorning. To avoid shocking the locals too much, they stashed the treasure and R'nyara switched back to her delfling form while Valkenhayn carried the woman into the Inn. There did not seem to be anyone about at the moment, so they placed her on a bench in the corner, found her a blanket, and then located some bread and cheese. With a bucket of water from the well just off the kitchen, they made a decent meal, getting some food into the woman as well when she seemed to wake up a bit.

Starved as she was, the woman could eat very little, and was soon snoozing again. Valkenhayn scouted out the rooms and moved her to the bed of the nearest, which seemed unoccupied.

He returned to the common room a few minutes later where R'nyara and McKullah were finishing up the bread and cheese. Like most faeries, they both had pretty fast metabolisms.

"I'm a bit concerned with the fact that no one is here. I checked out back, but they don't appear to be doing chores or anything of that sort."

"What is the nature of the homestead?" R'nyara wanted to know.

"A man and his two daughters. They get help from the local town, but none of it lives here."

"Mayhap the Innkeeper has gone t'town t'buy supplies? If think they wuvens make the area dangerous, methinks might be bring his daughters as bodyguards."

"His *daughters* as body guards?" McKullah asked, chuckling. "A *son* maybe, daughters I think not."

"What fool would task a *son* with a weapon?" the delfling wanted to know.

"Eh...it's a cultural thing, I guess," Valkenhayn said. "I take it only women fight in the Utara Deep?"

"Of course. Males are much too unstable, t'prone t'moods t'be relied upon. There are exceptions, of course. But then, *you* were raised t'the Royal, and probably trained t'control yourself better."

Valkenhayn chuckled again. "Yes, I probably was. I *do* try not to be *too* moody. At least when certain delflings *aren't* causing me a hormone attack." Then he pricked his ears.

"There are people coming," McKulluh observed.

"Quite a *lot* of people, by the sound of it," Valkenhayn agreed.

The Knight strode to the door, flung it open and stepped into the lane. Coming down the road from the direction of the town was one of the greatest fears of any ruler, one of the worst things that could befall any realm – a crowd of peasants with pitchforks and torches! Being daytime, the torches weren't lit, but they were obviously thinking ahead.

Yeel, Sit%a and Tem%a were at the front of it. Yeel looked determined, the girls looked worried. As they approached the crowd slowed and looked uncertain. Yeel looked thunderstruck.

"BACK YOU ARE? DECIDED THE WYVERN TO BOTHER NOT? WISDOM, 'TIS! WISDOM!" and he trailed off, having finally realized who or what was standing next to him. R'nyara was smiling.

"DELF, IS? HELD, ESCAPED FROM?" he demanded of Valkenhayn. The crowd, quite as gobsmacked as Yeel to begin with, began to murmur. It was not a friendly sound.

"I take it you people have had run-ins with these good folk at some point in the past?" the Knight asked R'nyara.

"No. Mayhap they have tangled with Dark Elves, live they in the higher strata. I wouldn't dirty my sword on them. I don't see a single trained fighter among them!"

Valkenhayn recalled the speedy targataur rampaging through the wyverns with her instant armor, waving her enchanted blade, and decided he really did not want to see any sort of repeat here, with the townspeople substituting for the wyverns. She was far too formidable a fighter. Come to think of it, he wouldn't be too keen on fighting her himself, for that matter.

"Calm yourselves, people! Just stay calm. What's the posse for, Yeel?" the knight asked.

"THE INN TO DEFEND! READY ALL WE WILL BE, WHEN WYVERN COMES AFTER YOU IT EATS!"

"Yes. I see. You figured I would get myself killed and the wyvern would come back here for revenge? And so, a garrison? Oh, ye of little faith!" Valkenhayn shook his head sadly. "I told you I wouldn't stir the wyvern up."

“COME BACK DID YOU BEHOLD?”

“No. *After* offing the wyvern.”

And, of course, Runt picked this moment to add a “Sgrauk!” to the conversation without stirring from his post by the door. They hadn’t noticed him until now.

Yeel looked confused. He pointed to Runt.

“BUT...THERE, IS!”

“Gimmee a break, you think *that’s* the wyvern that terrorized the town? Does he *look* like he’s ready to haul someone off? No, he was the runt of the litter, and was actually *helpful* ‘which being you are not now right.’ The wyvern is *dead!* That’s the news, you want the weather?” Valkenhayn said, a bit testily.

“KILLED IS IT? VICTIMS ESCAPED DID NOT?”

“Oh, I get it. No, *we* let the victims out. The last one is in the bed in room one right here at the inn. What? Did you expect we’d *leave* them?”

“BUT...BUT, REMEMBER NINE DUB! ENSLAVED THEY BE?”

Valkenhayn sighed.

“I’m sure you have realized by now they’ve been through a lot. We...they...uh...”

“We had t’use powerful magic t’defeat the wyvern. ‘Twas just a small backlash. Their memories will heal betimes. The wyvern will not,” said R’nyara with deep dimples.

The crowd milled around a bit but, lacking a target, it soon lost its cohesiveness and people began to drift back to town. A few more reassurances that ‘the’ wyvern was truly beyond hurting anyone, and it finally evaporated. Yeel and his daughters entered the inn to check on the survivor – looking askance at Runt as they passed him. Valkenhayn turned to the delfling.

“R’nyara, I *don’t* feel good about *lying* to people! You said the effects of the water would be permanent! They need to be told what happened to them or they’ll spend the rest of their lives wondering what it was!”

“The lie is better than the truth. Tell them the truth, the survivors who returned likely *ate* the ones that did not? Picture neighbors wherein one came back but not the other. Very good *that* would that be, true?”

“Right! Well. Okay, you have a point...but I’m a *Paladin*, I’m one of the goo...well, I don’t...look, lying isn’t...isn’t...it ain’t *respectful*, dammit! I’m not the sort of person who *does* that!”

“Tharm be better then? Will happier be they t’know the blood of those who did not return paid the way home those who were rejoined t’their loved ones? Would those bereft welcome back those who *ate* them? Be-

truth, why should they hate, why should they resent? This I know, Valkenhayn of Caerleon. You *don't* understand yet the truth of what you call *evil* and *good*. That's a *false* dichotomy. Don't hurt them, Kipp. 'Tisn't worthy and would be much t'good of you."

But their conversation was interrupted by screams from the inn. Both instantly drew swords and rushed inside, where R'nyara, with her more acute hearing, suddenly grabbed his arm and brought them to a stop in the great room. Down the hall, they heard weeping and muffled cries of "~~AMMA!~~ AMMA!"

"I *thought* she looked familiar," Valkenhayn said, ruefully.

"The white hair threw me off, too, so it did," McKulluh agreed.

The Knight left another silver by way of paying for lunch, along with a note about the treasure they had left behind. Someone would surely be brave enough – or foolhardy enough – to try for it, and it would surely help everyone in the area rebuild. Then the party recovered their own valuables and set out to return to Bisral Port. They hiked for some time along the well-trodden path.

As they approached the upward incline that would take them over the mountain, Valkenhayn saw the landscape had changed. The myststream he had seen on the hike in had changed direction, or a new one had come into being, for to one side of the road a mystpool had formed, fed by a myststream runoff that came down the mountain. As before, he saw no creatures, or crystals – too new for any of that. Like all such things, the mystpool whirled like an above-ground whirlpool, in a wide, slow, vortex, maybe twenty-five paces across and nearly perfectly circular. It did not seem to have a "runoff." The feeder came in, but nothing came out. Yet.

R'nyara shifted back, shedding her load, and promptly waded in, where she seemed to make herself comfortable. She appeared interested in tiny details, using her hands to cup and reshape the mystflow. As she did the myst climbed her back and flowed over her shoulder, slowly filling out her hair. In the emerald gloaming and the glow of the mystpool, she was truly a vision.

"What d'ye suppose?" McKulluh asked, in a low tone.

"I couldn't even guess. She seems quite familiar with them is all I know."

"Tis nea. Twasn't here even hours past." She looked up at Valkenhayn. "Have your people experimented with the mysts?"

"Not to my knowledge. Certainly not here, Bisral was never known for the quality of its magicians. Could you come out of there? Please?"

Those things *can* be dangerous, I've seen people spontaneously polymorph..."

"In Utara there are many. And we keep our minds more disciplined than do humans." She moved about, sometimes dipping her head as if she were trying to scent it. "This one came from very deep. Pulled up 'twas – not natural."

Valkenhayn felt his stomach lurch.

"Do tell."

"What do you wish me to tell?"

"Who. Why."

"Who I cannot say. Even sorcery cannot backtrack myst, its' magic is t'chaotic, nothing with structure remains long. But there are as many myst-streams as there are mysts, each bears the mark of its origin and travels. This one came from very deep. Very unlikely, I think, t'would take a yen suddenly for the day world – not without influence. Why? Mayhap several reasons. A means t'summon things from points along its path. Barrier t'some, highway t'others. But above all else, 'tis a reservoir of *power*. The mysts flow where needed t'power magic. And this one – 'tis cold. Very cold."

"Well, it's basically fog, right? Of a sort, anyway. That *would* be cold."

"Aye, t'would be so, but – how shall I say? – Not just *pulled* hence, 'twas also *used*. T'has powered great magic this day."

"Great magic. The wyverns?" he asked.

"Nay, that trap – 'twas set already. Some new angelry I fear afoot."

"Right. Angelry. That would be good, wouldn't it?"

"T'couldn't be more so."

"The dragon is going to strike at us again, isn't it? It's already used this power, somehow."

"Bestre. 'tis nothing less." She swirled the myst around with her hands, watching the flow. She scooped some up, lifted it, and poured it back. It didn't pour like a liquid, it twisted and turned, like smoke in reverse, as it returned to the flow. She shook her head.

"Spit it out."

"Mayhap?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Methinks I smell enchantment. T'has the feeling of compulsion, of command. Something...has become subverted."

"Can we tell what from the location, or flow, or anything?"

"I could scry an you wish't, but I need more specific questions." She sighed. "Mayhap't be mere happenstance. Some intrigue we do not know, for 'tis no concern of ours. The myststream might be drawn here for some inscrutable purpose that mayn't be concerned with us."

"Do you believe that?"

"No. Belike there *is* a connection, there must be, but the possibility does obtain. Kipp...have seen you the myst elsewhere?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. On the other side of this mountain we're about to round. On the downward part of the road." She closed her eyes and nodded.

"Ah. Well, a forlorn hope that was. The dragon moves against us, and I need no palantir t'see't."

"How can we avoid this kind of thing?"

"Tis clear the dragon holds you, somehow. T'strike from so far away, with such precision and power – a powerful link would be needed." She crossed her arms as she stepped out of the myst, looking worried.

"Does the wyrm know the name of your soul?" she asked, looking up at him.

Valkenhayn was startled. "I wouldn't think so. How could it find out?"

"I don't know. T'could be as simple as finding a scroll that bears't. A Great Bargain, mayhap, if powerful beings must answer t't."

"That doesn't sound goo...evil."

"Nay, t'wouldn't be. Armed with such a thing, mayhap and methinks we are defeated already before ever battle be joined."

"Now *there's* a cheerful thought. Is there anything useful we can do now?"

She shook her head. "I see nothing. Are we desperate enough t'scry blind?"

"What's *that* mean?"

"A sorcerer gazes int'the crystal with intent t'learn that which is unknown, but be known *of*. But one can *also* look int'the crystal *without* questions, mayhap inviting the palantir t'show you something you *can* know which *not* be known of."

It took Valkenhayn a moment to untangle that. "Is there a downside to that?"

"T'open oneself t'magic t'no immediate purpose is never wise."

"Right. Well, then, we should carry on and keep our eyes open."

She nodded. "Betwix, methinks. Be mindful of your weapons."

"They are never far from my mind – or my hand, for that matter."

The rounded the mountain and started down. This was less effort than the climb, of course, but the downhill course can sometimes be even harder on the legs. Nevertheless, they made good time.

The first myststream was still there, now meandering up and down next to the road, in wanton disregard of gravity. The flow was heavier now. The lights within were brighter, and there were crystals to be found glowing in gentle pastels in the flow, though none were larger than his thumbnail. R'nyara, of course, shed her burden and immediately stepped into it, and Valkenhayn flinched, although she seemed to be correct it wouldn't affect her.

She smelled at the flow, laid herself in the current to feel it, letting the myst flow over her like water about a mermaid. That metaphor seemed especially appropriate when he realized she seemed to be able to actually swim in it, sometimes moving without touching the bottom.

"This one is cold, too."

"Meaning?"

"Power taken recently. Was't smaller betimes?"

"Yes. It's gotten quite a bit larger, and although it *was* flowing uphill when I last saw it, it wasn't running crazy like this."

She nodded. "In this fashion 't'would make for'tself a new home. This myst will not return whence't came."

"It's now permanent?"

"Nethinks. Biscral has become more magical. A gift from the wȳrn."

"Right. Great, just...great."

"It's a bad feeling I've got about this, lad."

She stepped out of the myststream and touched his arm.

"We must go faster, and by ways harder for the wȳrn t'see. 'Tis much t'close, and we must needs somehow befoq't's senses."

He nodded. "Yeah. I concur."

They increased their pace as much as possible, but the orange sun was fading as they reached the Port.

It was curiously quiet. There *were* people about – but somehow, no matter where they went, there was never anyone *near* them. They saw no one seemingly taking pains to be away – but a feeling of *wrongness* crept upon them.

"Are my nerves *that* bad, or are you feeling it, too?"

"Aye. I feel't. Strongly. Something awaits."

"Aye. And me without me shillelagh."

"If the dragon *was* setting up an attack, would it necessarily have to give premonitions like this?"

"Nay. Such things can arise from the natural magical balance, or from the skills of one's own magic, or the quality of one's perception. Betwixt, 't' seems 't' powerful 't' be such."

"Why would it want to give warning, I wonder."

"A dragon's ire be seldom hard of detection, but't *can* be held down, and mayhap turned t'a yen t'play."

"Cat and mouse?"

"Cat?"

"I mean, *is* it playing with us?"

"Nethinks. Does the wylm have already a dislike in you? In none of my scrying have I seen y'might be already knowin t'the creature."

"If by that you mean have we had any personal interaction, no. Never met the cursed thing. Hope to. Come to think of it, do *you* know if I do?"

"I do. If not killed aforehand, you will."

They rounded a corner and crossed the open area to the Inn where they had stayed before.

"You said you were a *Sorcerer*. Speak plain, do I or don't I?"

"A sorcerer seeks *not* t'speak plain! I've not scryed all your paths, futures there are both without and with you. But if a plain answer you *must* have, I do believe you will face the wylm."

"You just said Sorcerers don't *speak* plain."

She looked up at him and sighed as he opened the door.

"You have become a very special case."

"Lucky me."

"There's none of *that* involved."

Valkenhayn had been keeping a wary eye on Runt. He had continued to look and behave more like a wraptor, but he had abruptly reverted to crawling on wingtips as they went deeper into the town. He continually craned his neck around, nervously. He, too, clearly sensed the wrongness that seemed to cover them like a musty blanket.

There was no one in the Inn. After pausing to confirm this they tried the room McKulluh and Valkenhayn had before. Finding it vacant, they unloaded R'nyara and let her shift back to her more human shape.

As she did, the Knight heard the front door open and close.

"Finally," he said. "I'll check us in." R'nyara nodded as McKulluh turned to taking care of the equipment.

But it was not the innkeeper. It was his pirates, with Shipsmasher himself at their head.

And he did not like the look in their eyes. Not at all. They were strange. They seemed to – glow.

"You haff zee treasure?"

"I'm not sure I want to answer that."

"Oh, no, Krithalan. Ve haff our vays. You haff eet. Giff eet to me."

"What have you been drinking? And did you forget our little chat?"

"No, I remember zee chat. And I haff decided to act on eet. Now, give me zee treasure, or vee vill keel you now!"

Valkenhayn shook his head. "Evenshade, is this the *best* you could come up with?"

Shipsmasher's mouth moved, but what came out was not his voice.

SOMETIMES, IT IS THE SIMPLEST THINGS IN LIFE THAT CAN SATISFY AS WELL AS CONFOUND US.

The Knight reached over his shoulder and drew his sword. It was four to one – the Sorcerer was missing. He smiled.

"It's *lame*. I expected better from you. And where's the Sorcerer? Spot you coming and bug out, did he?"

I TIRE OF GAMING WITH YOU. I WAS TOO SPORTING. NOW WE DO IT THE SIMPLE WAY.

"Great. I wonder when *he's* going to show up again." The pirates all drew their swords – simultaneously.

"You're not even giving the poor fools a fighting chance," he observed.

Suddenly Shipsmasher stepped in to him and aimed a powerful side-swipe at his neck. Valkenhayn caught the blade on his own, knocked it away, and used the force of the blow to spin and thrust. He caught another of Shipsmasher's lieutenants trying to close with him on the left, stepping around his master. The sword entered just below his sternum, and exited out his back. In a trice, the Krithalan retrieved his weapon and came back on guard. The pirate slumped silently to the floor.

Though the room was large, it was, of course, cluttered with furniture. The pirates were constrained to either come at him one at a time, or they needed to circle a table and try to come up to his side and slightly behind him. Unfortunately, since each semi-clear spot in between tables had exactly three access points that allowed attack in this manner – and given the fact that there were now, in fact, three pirates, his position was problematical.

Not that that bothered him much. He aimed a powerful overhand strike at Shipsmasher himself, knocking his guard down with the force of the blow, stepped into him as he was trying to recover, and kneed him in the groin.

That *should* have worked. But Shipsmasher simply backed up a step and then came back on guard as if he hadn't even noticed!

Then, on his right, he spotted the dead pirate getting up. His eyes were now pools of black, and he was holding his sword.

Apparently, Evenshade had picked up some Necromancy, as well as Enchantment.

"Bother! I *hate* having to kill a man more than once," Valkenhayn muttered, then vaulted the table to his left, skewering the pirate on that side. He folded, and while the others paused and then started moving around the table to close again, he took the precaution of beheading his last victim to make sure *this* one wouldn't get up again.

One of the other pirates aimed a vicious slice at his head, which he ducked, and came back up with a side swing, but the pirate caught this on his own blade.

They never changed expression. Only Shipsmasher spoke, and not in his own voice. It was like fighting golems. Their souls were gone.

Or perhaps they'd never really had any, and the dragon wasn't bothering to fake it? The Goddess knows Shipsmasher's a stone-cold, murdering bastard. R'nyara had really, *really* nice legs.

One of the live pirates suddenly went down. The zombie was coming up on his right rear, Shipsmasher was closing from the front, and the remaining pirate was coming up on his left. Valkenhayn kicked a chair at Shipsmasher and turned to the other pirate. He fainted at the man's head, and when the blade came up, he rammed his sword arm back with all his strength. There was a sound like a breaking carrot as his elbow was driven into the zombie's face as it came up from behind. She had a beautiful, hourglass shape, too. Nice wide hips.

He stepped forward again, into the pirate in front of him, and rammed a left hook into his face, and he folded over the table, but Valkenhayn had no time to follow up. The zombie's jaw was hanging off, but the blow hadn't fazed it in any way. The Paladin swung at the zombie's neck and when the blade came up to block, switched it back and then forward again, making a Z-shape, and striking into the zombie's belly. You know, he even liked that tail. Especially the way she swished it.

He spotted her for just an instant as she came up behind the zombie and stabbed it through from behind. Unfortunately, she didn't know about zombies, that wound wouldn't even slow it down.

He exchanged a couple of blows, first with the other pirate, then with Shipsmasher, and at the same time he drew his shortsword. It was time to get down to business. He'd like to get busy with R'nyara, that's for sure.

He threw a side kick at the nearest pirate as he brought his sword to bear, at the same time moving the shortsword into position to parry Shipsmasher himself. Valkenhayn managed to slice downward, past the pirate's guard, and into the man's shoulder. A nice, bloody, debilitating wound that would thoroughly compromise his ability to fight, but wouldn't kill him right away and make him a worse threat. He parried Shipsmasher and swung to re-engage him. R'nyara had a *really* sexy walk, too. As a human, anyway.

Valkenhayn heard the gurgle, but he didn't make the appropriate link until he heard the *fwoooooshhh!* as Runt, who had apparently found the wounded pirate, lit up. He expected an ear-splitting shriek from the downed man, followed by a burnt corpse getting up and coming at him, but as he traded blows with the two pirates, the eerie silence grew.

As he came back on guard he realized the zombie had stayed down before Shipsmasher came at him with a combination he hadn't seen before. There was a flurry of blows and Shipsmasher's blade made a thin cut down his left arm.

"Nice one! I'll have to remember that." They traded several more blows, and Valkenhayn was recalling R'nyara's lovely bosom when he realized the other pirate was down as well. He made a mental note to keep an eye on him in case he got back up.

"Tell me, was that combo you or the pirate, Evenshade?"

He swung up a leg and delivered a ferocious kick to Shipsmasher's solar plexus, but again, what should have folded him just knocked him back.

THIS IS BUT A PUPPET, MORT...

However, as minor as a knockback is in a flight like this, the consequences become *much* more dire when there is a darkling blade pointed at your six. As he stumbled back an inky black blade point burst through his chest, visible only in silhouette, and Shipsmasher jerked. He looked down at the darkling blade – and then he dropped like a marionette that had its strings cut. Just *like* a puppet, he noted.

Valkenhayn returned his shortsword to his belt and swept up R'nyara with his left arm, kissing her soundly. When he felt a little more normal he looked at her – still holding her – and said, "You know, I'm *never* going to be able to tell stories about these fights at the pub with a straight face."

She giggled, like a peal of faerie bells. "Y'th¹⁶, you will not be spending such time at the pub."

"What did you call me?"

¹⁶ Native Dark Elfing word. The 'th' is hard, as in the word 'then.'

She looked startled a moment and then said, “(M)ʏ ɔʋŋ lənqʉaqe. Tʼneanʃ...ʽdrʉŋk.’”

“A *Paladin* does *not* get ‘drunk.’ Not *much*, anyway,” he said.

He put her down. She was entirely too pleasant to hold for long. It’s been 2000 years, after all – he throttled *that* thought.

He looked at the motionless zombie. “I didn’t think sticking him would put him down. How’d you do that?”

“A darkling blade destroys the soul. In zombies, the animating spell is the soul.”

“Cool. Handy thing, the *ruhktar*.”

“Tʼis a very powerful artifact. Each Dark Guardian has their ɔʋŋ. Tʼʉse another’s is tʼcʉʉrt painful death. Tʼis why the Dark Goddess let me keep’t.”

“Wouldn’t be a good idea for me to try it out, I take it?”

“The *ruhktar* is also a little sensitive to gender.”

“Right. We’ll pass *that* up,” Valkenhayn said, absently, as he examined the pirates. Aside from the wounds they had put on them, there was no sign of damage. Nor were they carrying anything but weapons.

The remaining pirate was still burning, but the fire was largely contained in the body, the acidic napalm having burnt a deep hole into the poor devil, where the petrochemical part was now burning cheerfully.

McKulluh was retrieving the bolts he’d shot into his pirate. Luckily, most of them were coming out intact. He re-inserted and wound each one after renewing the *Mortadun*.

“Is that stuff actually doing any good?”

“Well, tʼwould be more obvious if you’d not be poking holes in them at the same time!”

They dragged the casualties out of the inn, placing them well away from combustibles. The damage to the inn itself was negligible, but the innkeeper continued to be absent.

The slapdash nature of the whole affair irritated Valkenhayn. The more he thought about it, the more idiotic it looked. R’nyara seemed to sense his disquiet.

“I would almost think we faced an entirely different enemy. But tʼwas the dragon’s ɔʋŋ voice we heard clearly. Was there some purpose of a military nature I don’t see that was satisfied?”

“No. None. And this just looks...*amateurish*. That whole wyvern thing was a well-planned trap, and it was executed perfectly – nearly executing *me* as well, only the intervention of a Sorceress armed with powerful magic and combat skills kept it from working. But *this* all looks like...well,

like an afterthought. At *best* sloppy. You're right, I can't believe it's the dragon."

"Curious 'tis, methinks as well. I see no point t't."

"It kills off some potentially problematical allies, but aside from that, it accomplishes nothing. I was *expecting* trouble from them but... And it's – it's *dumb*. If these guys were *so* easy to take over and use this way, why not keep them in reserve and kill me *without* warning, when I could present no defense?"

"Belike, 'tis what would I do, were I wanting t'slay you."

"That...that just warms the cockles of my heart, darlin'."

She dimpled. "Bet'ruth. Your heart has cockles? I wonder what they taste like."

"Sort of like chicken, I hear." He looked around at the pirates again and sighed. McKulluh just shrugged.

"This is a mystery. I *hate* mysteries! They give me gas."

R'nyara looked troubled. "Mystery, yes. More worrisome, I thought I'd better s'cryed what was t'come."

"Doesn't even make sense even to a Sorceress, hmm? And Ships-masher's pet Sorcerer AWOL. He saw *something* coming, no question. Did he bug out completely or is he going to show up again?"

"Mayhap he s'cryed a singularity, wherein t'many Sorcerers have meddled. Frightened would be anyone still sane t'see such. Many would seek calmer things t'see."

"Well, our next move is still the same. I'll head to the port and see what vessels we might use to get to the Imrian patrol lanes."

"No. No, t'open, t'easy. The dragon is more clever and more resourceful than's health' for us, I find." She paced back and forth, twitching her tail as she did. Then she stopped and faced him.

"The Low Road is safer by far."

"The Low Road? That's in Vindolonda and only goes East and West to the limits of the continent. How does *that* help? And Imri is close on 6,000 miles from here, walking will take an *eternity*."

"Nay. The Low Road travels the world entire. And ways there are t'travel farther but walk the less. The Road has long been enspelled – by Wizards."

"How does *that* help us?"

"Ah I did say, walk farther you can with fewer steps. The Road takes a ways that are straighter than straight."

"That makes *no* sense."

“Wizards make time their plaything, likewise space as well. Actual physical distance is of little import t’a Wizard an they wish’t otherwise.”

“So, even though we’re *walking*, it will take *less* time to get to Imri?”

“Bet’rue. And harder for the dragon t’follow. And also, we *must* go this way t’find our final q’ester.”

“Oh. I suppose that’s important?”

“Has not each q’ester surrendered a piece of the Crown?”

Valkenhayn looked hard at her.

“Yes. Yes, they did. Very well. Lead on.”

Before they set out, they tried, without much hope, to find a local alchemist to preserve the wyvern stings, or at least the poisons, since this trip would almost certainly be long enough for them to expire. Sadly, Bisral, it appeared, may have become more magical itself, but it had induced no practitioners to set up shop. Wasted effort, Valkenhayn lamented. Well, at least they got the grubstake. You really didn’t need anything *but* money to start a war...

9 THE STORY OF THE CAT

The Low Road.

The legendary underground highway said to go everywhere anyone would ever want to go to in the world, as well as many places no one would ever *want* to go to.

So R'nyara explained it as they set off once more into the interior of Bisral Island. Valkenhayn had known of an underground stretch of caverns and roads that reached from one end of Vindolonda to the other, but he had *not* heard the road could take you literally anywhere.

He was also doubtful about the time the journey would take, Wizard spells or not. It had also been obvious from the start that the only way an underground road could take them to Imri was if it passed *underneath* the Great Nestick ocean, through strata of rock recently jolted about by the destruction of Kenekra. It hardly seemed likely they were unaffected.

On the other hand, R'nyara seemed quite certain. They returned up the mountain, but instead of continuing south into the shadowzone, they instead turned right, taking a branch that lead directly into the area lit by the Emerald Sun.

As they made the turn they stopped at the sound of distant *thud-thud-thud-thud-thud...* that they could feel in the ground much more than hear.

"Saints preserve us! What manner of diviltry be this?" McKulluh said, straining himself taller to see. Runt reverted to crawling and moved under some brush.

Valkenhayn had a suspicion what it was and he was not at all surprised to see a large, turtle-like trund some four paces in diameter and a bit taller than a man, plodding its slow way up the road to the mountain coming from the High Peak Inn direction. It had a small top platform with a pair of human drivers, but it was also dragging a considerable train – perhaps a dozen cars each five paces long – behind it. The cars were all open container types, heaped with crops.

"Going to market, I imagine. I take it Bisral has a thriving farming presence?"

"Truth 'tis, they do. The settlers did first ring the island with port towns, city-states that looked great distrust at each another. But looked they upon the interior with distrust greater still. Betimes quite wild, the interior was most unfriendly. Many orcs, goblins – and such other. With the interior inaccessible, food had t'come by sea, making Bisral an expensive place t'live."

"Sounds fairly typical. What changed?"

"Orichalc."

"Ah. No number of orcs could suffice to keep men away from orichalc. Rarer than gold or silver, more beautiful when worked properly. Not quite as rare as platinum or mithril. Was there much of it?"

"Betruuth, 'twas called the greatest strike of't ever found. An untuuth, tuuth be knowan. Siumuskeep's Dwarves in Thermia had already struck a vein richer yet. But Dwarves must ever be Dwarves, told they no one about't. More strikes were made and finally the orcs became - inconvenient."

"Yes, I imagine they would. How bad was the war?"

"There was none."

"No war? I find that counter-intuitive. Orcs and goblins may not be all that bright, but they know a good thing when they see it, they'd want that metal for themselves."

"Betruuth. But came a day when an expedition was not attacked, and from this day t'that, no more orcs are there found."

Valkenhayn stopped and looked at her hard.

"That's it? They just *vanished*? Where would they go, why would they do such a thing? It's completely out of character for them."

"No lie is that. A convenient and enduring mystery 'tis t'most," and smiled most suspiciously.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary."

"Cat? " she asked, startled.

"Yes. You found out what happened. I can see it in your eyes. So where did they go?"

Her smile faded as she walked. "Tuuth 'tis, I was prideful in solving the mystery, and so did pave the road of my downfall. The orcs, goblins, and other things from Bizar disappeared, and the riches left t'men, because went they elsewhere."

"Okay, I'll play along. 'Where did they go?'"

She looked sadly at him. "TKrithala."

Valkenhayn's expression hardened.

"I *see*. Roped in by the dragon, I assume."

"Again, 'tis no lie. No sorcerer thought of *that* question but me. The dragon first used Enchantment t'summon and in Krithala bind them."

"That's...that's a pretty well organized dragon. When did all this happen?"

"Betruuth, some eight hundred years in Imri has passed since."

"So the trund road..."

"Many such, t'every port."

"...carry crops, obviously, but also ore?"

"Betwix. Each year by Orlestis, the Port's orange sun, the t'ands run into the interior and back, once for their crops, the other for ore. The miners and farmers, one and each. Summer sees them farming, winter sees them mining."

"I see. That makes sense, now. So the build-up was more the interior than the coast. I take it we are now coming into autumn?"

"Thiz I know, thiz 'tis, but there be no other of my race who could answer so."

"Heh, heh. Checked on the weather before coming up, did you? So how does all of this tie into *your* 'downfall'? And what *kind* of downfall, exactly?"

She walked along without saying anything for a while, and Valkenhayn let her have time to consider. Finally, she gave a long sigh.

"Twas predestined. Known, and fixed, already history though not yet come t'pass."

"I thought Sorcerers looked into the future so they *knew* what was coming and could *do* something about it."

"If one is cautious, careful, can they obtain clues t'guess what *might* be. Sadly, I was not, and so I awaited you at the predestined place."

"To save me?" Val asked as they walked.

"Aye. As I saw in the crystal, so't must have been though even yet t'be."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you need to save me?"

"Twas predestined."

"And exactly *how* was it predestined?"

R'nyara sighed deeply.

"Because I *killed* that cat."

"Ah. *There's* the cat again. Yes, I knew the cat would show up, sooner or later. It was inevitable. Predestined, one might say."

"I have killed many cats."

"Lots of cats. Imagine! Tell me, *why* have you killed so many cats?"

"Because I am a very good sorceress," she said, sadly.

Valkenhayn mulled that one over for a while.

"Right. What makes for a *good* Sorceress?"

"A good sorceress is very curious and very fearless. She looks where she shouldn't, sees things better left unknown. And past is her future before ever't happens. Predestined, t'becomes fixed, never may't be turned therefrom."

"Hm. I would have thought curiosity would be a Sorcerer's defining trait. Isn't that what they do? Find out things?"

"Aye. But one *can* find out t'much. And once one has, 'tis become too late t'not."

"You've seen too much?"

"Bet'ath, far t'much. The Dark Goddess bid me an evil loss, I dare say."

"Right. Right. *Evil* loss. What about the cat?"

"This is movinq int'the magic realm, Kipp. When one learns of the cat one has already set one foot in the sorcerous world – or the Wizard's. Be sure 'tis truly what you want. There is *no* going back. Deciding thus forever changes your life."

"And maybe 'twill be worth it, if only to find out whut about the damned cat," McKulluh put in.

"Learning at least one college of magic was always in my plans. My father, and his father, did when they retired from adventures. I long ago decided I would do the same."

"Wisdom 'tis betimes, t'wait one's later years before kindling. Less likely is one...t'make foolish mistakes."

"Is that so?"

"Betimes."

"Betimes. Yes. Tell us about the cat."

R'nyara gave a long sigh.

"The cat is a parable. A story t'help one understand the mystery of how the Universe works."

"So, tell me the parable."

"On your own head be't. So this: a great magician one day puts in a box, a cat."

"Right. I've heard this part."

"As well places he int'the box a death-spell triggered by dice."

"Dice."

"If the target n(um)ber do they throw, the cat will die. And do they not, the cat lives."

"I think I know where this is going..."

"If the box inside never be seen, the cat remains alive *and* dead betimes."

"I *knew* that was coming! What in *hell* does that *mean*? How can a cat be *both* alive *and* dead? If it dies, it *dies*! If it lives, it *lives*. One or the other!"

"Nay, this is the way of our Universe. So long as the inside of the box be not seen from without, the Universe does not decide the fate of the cat."

"But what does that *mean*? How does the *Universe* make any decisions?"

"All that we can know is of things that *have* happened afore we are granted the *knowing* of them. So long as the fate of the cat remains unknown, so t'is fate remains undecided."

"But at some point either the spell *kills* the cat or it *doesn't*! And sometimes the spell will kill the cat right away, and sometimes it'll be later, so the state of the box depends on *when* the spell is applied. If ever," he added.

She shook her head, sending ripples through her hair.

"When the box is opened, *then* is the decision made. In the moment one looks within the box does the interior assume the condition in which't must be. If dead the cat is, we will see the body as t'would be expected when death happened. Else the cat lives still. Only when the box is opened do we see inside the aftermath, and it's history, though only just decided."

Valkenhayn blew out his cheeks.

"Right. Okay, I can – *sort-of* – understand that that might be *one* way to look at it. But why not simply assume the cat dies *when* it dies? Isn't the simpler explanation the preferred one in magic?"

"Aye. 'Tis so. But when Wizards and Sorcerers began t'manipulate time itself with their powers, quickly apparent the difference became."

"This is a Wizard thing, too?"

"The Wizards, too, know the cat."

"Okay, but in 'real life' they amount to the same thing. Why is your way right, and the obvious way wrong?"

She took a deep breath.

"That which a Sorcerer sees in the scrying crystal, *must ever be so*, for in seeing't the decision be made, the box opened, though 'tis even yet t'come t'pass."

"If you see it...then it *must* be so? It *can't* be changed, even though it hasn't even *happened* yet?"

"'Tis so."

"Well, then, what *good* is it? What good is *Sorcery* if the act of looking at the future makes it unchangeable?"

"Have ever heard yot'a Sorcerer speak plainly?"

"Hell's bells, no! 'It would appear,' 'I believe I see,' 'Possibly,' and 'It may be' – everything is *always* qualified, doubly, triply! Or, if not, it's couched in rhyme or something and has to be interpreted and it's always so vague it justifies practically anything."

"T'foretell the future *without* fixing't forever, a sorcerer *cannot* look at what they *seek* t'foretell. We can look before. We can look after also. We can look near, or above, or below. We can look wherever we may wish t'look so long as we do *not* look at that whose future we actually seek. 'Tis why no sorcerer *can* answer plainly. Look all around, analyze, guess, and the cat living remains. Look at't directly, the cat dies, and now 't'has become inevitable as history. More. For history has boxes yet unopened, never looked in. If 'twas this not so, there could be no point t'a Wizard's travels."

"So...you can't change what you already know is certain?"

"So 'tis."

"Wait...this is a time-shifting thing?"

"Aye, 'tis so."

"So, what, if a Wizard goes back in time and kills his own grandfather...why are you shaking your head?"

"Of Grandfather, life or death be known already. If a Wizard tries t'make't otherwise, failure is also already known because Grandfather lived."

"How does *that* follow? You go back in time, shoot the guy with a crossbow..."

"And you will *miss*! Or you'll fall and shoot wild. Or a troll will eat you. The world will open and swallow you, a great rock will fall from the sky upon you – no one knows what *will* have happened but whatever't be all must understand that *something* must, for 'tis already known that't has come t'pass ere this, that one did *not* do this thing. No matter what 'tis you try, t'will *not* succeed – nor t'will even be remembered. That would be a paradox, and you cannot create a paradox. The Universe doesn't tolerate't. We hope."

"So...let me think. So, you killed that cat – by looking and seeing yourself saving me. So you then knew you *had* to make that happen – to avoid this – paradox?"

"Tis just so," R'nyara said sadly. "And many other things."

"You *hope*? What if you just didn't show up? What if you just sat still and did nothing?"

She smiled sadly, and then laughed.

"*“Such an encounter could create a time paradox, the result of which could cause a chain reaction that would unravel the very fabric of the space-time continuum and destroy the entire Universe!”*"

"What!?"

“*Granted, that’s a worst-case scenario. The destruction might in fact be very localized, limited to merely our own galaxy,*” she went on.

Valkenhayn stared. She laughed again.

“*What is that?!*”

“From a magically-re-enacted play I saw at the Unseen University. It was about time-travel using a magical machine.” She shrugged. “It was required viewing in the time-shifting course for Wizards and Sorcerers.”

“Destroy the *universe*?”

She shook out her hair and looked at him with a puzzled air.

“Paradox cannot be. Our Universe does *not* permit it. But we fear paradox may *not* be impossible. That’s itself paradoxical.”

“*Not* impossible? But you *just* said...so you *could* kill Grandfather?”

“We think one might. But in doing so, in creating paradox, which is anathema to the Universe, there can be only one way for the Universe to deal with it. By making *all* moot.”

“Moot?”

“Betwixt. So, the Universe eliminates the paradox, for’t never happened if no consequence follow. Of all the means to this end, the simplest is obvious – *destruction*. An end of all leading to, or resulting from, the paradox.”

“Of the *universe*?”

“More belike, enough of’t only to resolve the paradox. If the paradox is large enough, maybe the Universe *will* end. If ’tis lesser, maybe only our galaxy, and so on, each by another succeeds.”

“Galaxy?”

“A place wherein one finds our world.”

“So...by the Goddess! Right, so you make a paradox, and something goes *bang* and then it doesn’t *matter* any more?”

“Belike. A small paradox births a small bang. A large one, a large bang. The largest one of all, maybe, a *big* bang, and we begin anew in a successor Universe. Whatever – when’t be done, no paradox can be shown. But if we create a *tiny* paradox – for tiny creatures are we – so the bang, too, be tiny. Maybe only large enough to eliminate the *source* of the problem.”

“Successor Univ – What do you mean, ‘the *source* of the problem?’ What does *that* mean?”

“Sorcerers and Wizards betimes *have* set out to create paradox. Those who fail return. Others do not return but must still fail for no alteration do they make, no paradox can we find. The conclusion becomes obvious. A tiny paradox would require a tiny bang. Not the Universe, nor our galaxy,

nor even our world, but only the source of the trouble that began't, who caused't – the *Magician*. Sorcerers and Wizards disappear betimes. This is a fact. Seldom do other types of magic-users. This, also, is a fact. *They* don't have the power t'create paradox – and *we* do. I have been taught, with justice I think, t'*fear* paradox, for if I create one, the simplest way t'resolve't is t'remove *me*. T'remove me before ere I *caused* a paradox. I might die as a child – or never be born. I could cease t'*have ever been*. And no one would ever know I *had*. And so the Universe goes on, adjusting and re-adjusting t'remove each paradox when't occurs until comes an end wherein no paradox *ever* did."

"Cri-min-ently!" Valkenhayn sighed. "And this was all in that play you mentioned?"

"T'was the first time the principle be said. The entire play did consider the many ways of creating and resolving paradox. 'Tis significant for that reason. Also, for means of learning so grave a truth, 'tis most amusing. Belike amusement was the only intent where first the play was made, a distant planet called 'Dirt.'"

"*'Dirt?'* A distant planet 'Dirt?'"

"Aye. Dirt. Or soil. Terra. Ground. Earth. All translate t'each so and back."

"But this planet, Dirt – it isn't *Ingarde*?"

"Nay. Now come we t't. 'Tis a world unique, lying distantly in space. One of many. *Very* many."

"And how do *you* know about it!?"

"All who study in the Unseen University know this, and will you also when t'study magic you go. You will see the off-worlders, talk t'them. In the flesh – or in what they call flesh. You will see their spelljammers – starships, they call them. And you will see their magic... 'technology,' they call't. But t'me, t'looked like magic by another name."

"This is...this is...*crazy*! Just...wait, if this is so, why hasn't anyone I've ever talked to *heard* of it?"

"If speak you t'a *Magician*, you bespake one who *has* heard. But we don't – cannot – speak of these things t'those who would find't beyond their comprehension. When see you the stars this night, gaze on them in wonder. Each star is a sun – not like ours, small and part of our own world – but gigantic, each a huge ball of primal fire burning in space far, far away, illuminating and heating the planets that circle them side by each. Know, also, the vastness beyond filled with even more stars without number, t'distant for our eyes. Ingarde is but *one* world amongst a multitude." She watched

Valkenhayn with more than just a hint of amusement. He was having trouble breathing. McKulluh looked a bit bored by it all, Valkenhayn noticed.

"You *knew* about this? Of everything she's saying?"

The Leprechaun ducked his head in embarrassment.

"Aye. I *did* know. But as a race we took an oath not to speak of it to those who didn't already know. That was the price to avoid the geas that otherwise descends on all who leave Tír na nÓg."

"Tír na nÓg? What does Tír na nÓg have to do with it?!"

"Tis the place wherein one finds the Unseen University," R'nyara said. "The little people, 'tis home, of course. Come they and go at will, without let or hindrance, bound only by their oath. For those who seek t'learn magic, part of the price be the geas, *not* t'talk of these things t'those who don't already know."

"You only had to *promise*?" Valkenhayn asked the Leprechaun.

"Aye. Only a daft man would ask more of one of the Little People," he said.

"Because of Leprechaun *stubbornness* and their stiff-necked sense of honor?"

"Ye say that like it's a *bad* thing."

"Wait a minute! If *you're* under a geas and *you're* sworn not to speak of it, how can you both be *telling* me all this?"

"Curious was I t'tell if I *could*. But if you truly meant t'one day go t'the University, then the University would know already though the day has not yet come – and already have bound *you* t'the geas as well. As 'twould appear they *have*. Already accepted has your future application been. Welcome, then, t'the Kikchalic School of Magic. Congratulations."

"My *future* application has already *been* accepted? To *where*?"

"The Kikchalic School of Magic, the true and only name of the place most know only as the Unseen University. As a current student there in the future, you *are* permitted t'know of these things."

"A *current* student there in the *future*? What the *hell* does that mean?"

R'nyara laughed.

"No language spoken by mortals has the right tenses t'speak of time travel. One does the best one can. If one is a student at some time, one is always a student at any time. Someone has gazed upon your future and tied't forever t'the school. That can be now slain. Though't has not yet come t'pass't already't be inevitable as history – if be you not slain as well."

"If I don't die, it's now inevitable I will go to this school? I have no choice in the matter?"

"Bet'ruth, you *do* – an you wish t'bring about paradox. See you now first hand the monster I truly fear?"

"But...this is...no! I can't believe this – *any* of this!"

"It's hard to get it all at once like this, lad. But it sometimes happens that way - when ye ask the wrong people the wrong questions at the wrong toime. I never studied magic and don't care to start, but that much I know, so I do," McKulluh said. "Ye *asked* for it, lad. And, by God, she *gave* it to you!"

R'nyara smiled a sympathetic smile – but with a sly, keen edge on it.

"We call this, *'the Enlightening.'* 'Twill forever change how one looks upon the Universe. 'Tforever changes all who know of't and 'tis no going back. This cat be now slain as well. 'Tt cannot be again summoned t'lfe."

"Great *Scott!*" Valkenhayn exclaimed.

And then wondered why she laughed.

10 THE LOW ROAD TO IMRI

After passing the little town of V'lon, R'nyara turned off the trund road, taking a lane that rather quickly turned into a trail that meandered, but seemed to curve back around toward the mountain they had just quit. They were actually back on the mountain when R'nyara stopped in a rocky copse of scrub wood and indicated a large, flat stone. She slipped her load and morphed back to her human form.

"This is one entrance t'the underworld. Balanced most exacting, one need only push't, so!" She gave the stone a shove and it spun clockwise, revealing a dark tunnel entrance. Grabbing up a small stone, she wedged it between the spinning rock and the lip of the tunnel, chocking it open.

"In you go. I will pass down supplies and treasure. Then move t'the next room, transfer again, ever and anon, t'the chimney bottom. The Low Road begins there, room enough t'resume our way betimes."

Valkenhayn slid feet-first into the opening and found himself in a natural cave, about five feet wide, twenty feet long, with a slanting floor. Another opening was visible in the rear – a black hole.

"Tell me again why we don't need more torches?" he called up.

"The t'suffice t'reach the Road. More we will not need."

"Right. 'More we will not need.' Of course."

"We could not carry enough torches t'tight us all the way t'Imri, even if we took neither treasure nor supplies. I will teach you how t'walk the darkness."

She passed him his torches, then the treasure and equipment, which he stacked. McKullah scouted out the following room as they went, which was always down. R'nyara then descended to the next cave, Valkenhayn again passed the stuff on to her, and so they went.

Runt seemed oddly at home. He hopped down into the cave and seemed quite happy bouncing along from rock to escarpment, down and down, without the slightest hesitation.

It was a grueling 45 minutes, and Valkenhayn had no idea how deep they had gone. Only the first cave – or "room," as cavers like to call them – was even remotely level, the rest was a near-vertical climb straight down. Their route finally intersected a tunnel going crosswise, the arched ceiling some 10 feet high and the tunnel itself perhaps 20 wide. R'nyara immediately turned downhill, and morphed into her targataur form. By the last of the torchlight, the Krithalan strapped everything but his own backpack and weapons onto her back. Then, as the last torch slowly guttered out, he and McKullah followed her down.

The tunnel was an old lava tube that was probably tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years old, but it was obviously worked and maintained as a major thoroughfare. The floor was quite smooth and the tunnel was of uniform size. It descended at an angle of about 15 degrees, so they were going deeper at quite a clip. As an introduction to “walking darkness” it was ideal, since it seemed to have no side passages at all.

R’nyara vetoed any use of light.

“T’is a beacon for those wishin’ t’prey on you. A walker in the darkness sees *your* glow farther away than you could see *them* by torch. Learn t’walk darkness, well worth the learnin’ t’is.”

Valkenhayn was keeping one hand on her back, which kept him on course, but despite their current depth his discomfort level was stratospheric.

“How are you avoiding the walls?”

“Walkin’ in darkness uses every sense but sight. Like all Day Walkers, you are over-dependent on’t. But ‘tis seldom *really* needed.”

“I don’t get how to use other senses. Not for this.”

“Nor I. Bedice, ‘tis blacker than the inside of a cow!”

She stopped.

“Both of you. Turn right and step forward slowly.”

Valkenhayn did so, eventually bumping into the curved tunnel wall.

“Yeah, so?”

“Back up, then attend. Unless elaborate precautions be taken there comes a noise from any motion. That ‘tis one way you can see in the darkness. As take you each step, listen for echo’s change as you approach the wall.”

Valkenhayn thumped into the wall once again.

“I don’t hear any difference.”

“Maybe I did.”

“Turn right again, and scuff one foot. *Listen* t’the echo that comes back.”

They did so.

“Turn left now and scuff again. *Listen*, now!”

They did that, too.

“D’you hear a difference in the echoes? When you face tunnel, the sound has no surface t’bounce from, ‘tis dulled, lifeless, bearing only a slight echo from walls either side, which face only side by each, not you. Keep that echo the same both sides and you avoid the wall.”

“Right.” Valkenhayn tried it, but he couldn’t make out any real differences. Nor, finally, could McKulluh.

"That doesn't matter. *Knowing* t'listen will eventually show you what t'listen *for*. In time – and not much of't – you *will* hear. Face the wall again."

They did, as close as they could guess where it was. They couldn't know it, but they were facing in opposite directions.

"Walk very slowly. With the skin of your face, try t'feel a change in pressure of the air as you walk t'the wall."

Valkenhayn walked forward, but again, bumped the wall. McKulluh, however, stopped.

"I'll be godsmacked! 'Tis something I never *noticed* before, but she's right, so she is! 'Tis very, very slight, but I really *can* feel a layer of air just ahead of the wall itself."

"I don't see how this is supposed to work."

"Air constantly moves. E'en underground, air never is still entirely. When objects or obstacles be present, air moving toward them bounces back ever so little, making a layer minutely thicker ahead of the wall."

"But that must be at best a microscopic effect!"

"'Tis. But you *can* feel't. This is one reason why we don't bother with clothes. Attired as you are, you can really only feel with your faces. T'me, I feel't over the whole of my body, and 'tis second nature t'react. If I step sideways, or back up, with skin bare I still feel't, no matter which way I go. Covering so much skin, your own accoutrements blind you."

"You mean to tell me *this* is how you feel your way in the dark?"

"Sound is one way. Feeling another. Smell and taste, also, are used. As you close the wall, the smell of air will change. Earthier, heavier, with a slightly metallic flavor from minerals there. All different from air midst the way."

"This is lunacy."

"Ah...I'm thinking *maybe* not. Maybe me nose is more sensitive than yours, but I fancy I *can* smell what she's talkin' about."

"These ways are all known even t'Day Walkers. Do you know who 'tis in the day world who walks this way?"

"I don't know of *anyone*."

"Those who have lost their sight. All these things even Day Walkers use when their eyes fail. In the crowded day world, with so many people making so much noise, 'tis far more difficult. Sharp or precise these ways cannot be, the day world is t'noisy, and feelings often masked. In the silence of the darkness, we can walk as would you in the day."

She continued to lead the way, Valkenhayn with one hand on her rump, following, McKulluh orienting himself with an occasional touch, but

already starting to sense through the darkness – his quickness at it rather annoyed the Krithalan, but it's not the first time he'd noticed faeries being more sensitive than ordinary humans. Privately, he doubted if he *would* be able to pick it up.

It was so easy to loose track of time in the darkness. They ate when they were hungry, slept when they were tired.

She taught them how to talk all over again.

“*ʃoʊnd* can carry very far in the *ʊnderworld*. Here you both are speaking *tʰoʊdli*, and *tʰoŋq*. Learn *tʰalk* shortly, with only the breath. We call this ‘darkspeak.’”

“How do I do *that*, exactly?”

“*Liʃten* now.”

Then as if from far away he heard only the tiniest breath.

“Hear now, *ʊnderworld* way. *ʃort*. No *hʊt* in throat. Only wind.”

It was only barely audible – but as in the wyvern’s cave, surprisingly easy to hear.

“Direct *ʃoʊnd* with hands.”

Runt made a strange noise. Not his usual piercing squawks, but a barely audible trill – as if he, too, knew how to be quiet. Valkenhayn only then realized that the little switcher was still with them – but he’d not heard so much as a claw scrape rock.

She taught them all to move more quietly. This was a relative thing. McKulluh, being smaller, and without armor, and blessed with faerie agility as well, soon grew quite good at it. Valkenhayn felt *he* made great strides in it, too, changing his normal gait into a sort of glide that equalized the movement of his armor at almost every point, reducing the kind of stress build up that could cause a squeak or a scrape. But R’nyara still cautioned him he was making a deafening racket.

They even had to re-learn how to breathe. To take deep but slow breaths, keeping the air in one’s lungs longer, extracting more life from it than they normally would. This reduced the amount of air they needed to move through their lungs, and therefore reduced the sound of their breathing. She taught them to open their mouths to equalize the flow of air through it and their nose. She said this would let them use taste as well as smell.

McKulluh seemed to catch on quickly, but to his own surprise, Valkenhayn gradually began to see what she meant. The first time he stopped because the echo of his stealthy step warned him of a drop-off that could’ve sent him sprawling, he was startled.

When he realized she was following a particular flavor in the air, from infrequent dabs of a long-lasting paste that marked the Low Road, he was startled even more. As they continued to descend, he began to notice different flavors and scents as they crossed the intersections that began to appear, and he realized the entire underworld had a system of signage that used taste and smell rather than something visible.

He learned that there was a pattern to the loose stones in the trail. Tiny pebbles too small to cause a fall would appear in the center of the Road, which told them that more signage could be found by the sides – more arrangements of small stones. One such in particular must have had several hundred stones. R’nyara ran her hands over them, and then for the next several hours, she would warn them, “low,” or “step down.” McKulluh had a lot more clearance, but Valkenhayn learned to obey such warnings instantly, because she gave them only at the exact moment he needed them. Whatever system the stones used to describe the caves ahead, it was not a simple representation or model of the road – the size of a stone, its placement relative to another stone, the angle it was at, the distance between it and the next stone, and probably more factors he couldn’t recognize but which R’nyara could read with a sweep of her hand without even breaking stride.

From his combat instructors, Valkenhayn had learned the ancient fingertalk language used for silent communication, especially in combat situations where noise could be deadly. They had something similar here, too. R’nyara began to teach both her companions the bare beginnings of it, using her fingers to sketch in Valkenhayn’s palm – or, later, any part of his body that was handy. He began to understand more why her people seemed to have so little use for clothes. Aside from feeling their way in the darkness, when he needed to talk to her, all he had to do was reach out, his hand guided by her body heat, and then begin signing whatever he touched. She, on the other hand, had to contend with the armor he still wore, needing to find his face or his hands before she could impart anything useful.

Then, too, everything in the underworld had to live with much less. There *were* resources here – in abundance – but there was little labor available to extract or work them, and even less knowledge how to do so. Populations grew very slowly, but they were highly mobile – those that were not purely nomadic with no fixed base, as well as those who merely moved frequently – few wanted to remain in a fixed place. In this respect the darklings, both elves and elflings, were different, preferring to build up well-marked areas and defend them if necessary. But even so, they con-

served resources wherever and whenever they could. They could live on *astoundingly* little.

Clothes were a major case in point. They required resources to extract something to make fiber, to spin the fiber to yarn, to weave the yarn to cloth, to cut and stitch the cloth to clothes, to move the clothes to whoever wanted them, to keep them clean, keep them repaired and then, finally to dispose of them. They were a lot of work, a lot of resources, especially compared to the more parsimonious natures of the underworld's inhabitants. And they served virtually *no purpose*. In the underworld, if you didn't like the temperature, you moved. It was that simple. Hot spots and cold spots were all around. The temperature you liked was somewhere in between.

And as far as *modesty* was concerned, they *just* didn't have it. Nor did they need it, because in the final analysis – it was *dark!* You couldn't *see* people whether they were nude or not. R'nyara showed nothing but contempt for vanity or decoration for its own sake, and Valkenhayn found she classified virtually *all* clothing as serving vanity – even something as simple as color. Why should one prefer one color over another? Why should clothing *have* a pattern or decoration? In the silence and darkness of the underworld, none of it mattered, it cost time, it cost effort, and it only compromised one's ability to master the impenetrable night that surrounded and permeated them. “Fashion” was a word beneath contempt.

They talked very little. Silence was the rule in the underworld. Talking could make you prey. Only when they had holed up would he be able to quiz her about this world – at least, until she fell asleep. Which she could apparently do in a matter of seconds. As a military man himself, Valkenhayn could appreciate that ability – he even shared it, though to a much lesser extent. But it tended to cut conversations short.

But there *was* talk – of a sort. He began to learn the interlingua of the underworld. When she warned him about some hazard, she would accompany it with some faint sounds. They were nothing he would have ever noticed before – the sound of a hand touching flesh, for example. Not hard enough to be called a slap, but enough to hear – *if* you were close and *if* you were paying attention. Clicks, sharper breaths, foot scuffs or taps, even the sound of stroking an arm, leg, part of the body, each different from the others and it *all* meant something. How long it took he could not tell, but he was shocked when he realized the three of them had gone through a very rough section with drop-offs, climbs, and crawls with no words at all. R'nyara had communicated each move to them briefly, succinctly, effectively, without any use of even her breathy, underworld voice.

And he also began to *hear* what she had been talking about. The dripping that signaled a watering stop. The tiny groans or squeaks that actually emanated from the stone around him, telling him what the local geology was like – and when combined with taste told him more about the formations they were in than Valkenhayn could have ever dreamed was possible. Distant sounds of other creatures in the darkness. The feel of the air and the way it moved. Even to feel the boundary layer it made over a stationary object that you really could *feel* – if you tried – and if you *knew* it was there. And the Knight knew that he could only sense these things dimly at best. To R'nyara, this *was* “the” world, and she was perfectly comfortable in it. Vision? Who needed it?

Individual incidents were all that could be used to give order to the dark universe. Once they left the lava tube they began to move through rocky caves, slabs of rock compressed into place and left there, without the stalactites, stalagmites, or flowstone of a living cave. Here, the echoes grew more varied, as the rooms they went through changed.

And ever they continued down.

One time Valkenhayn heard something, a tiny scrape, like a fingernail might make being dragged across a stone. R'nyara stopped, instantly, as did he and McKulluh, and they listened, smelled – and began to realize they were being stalked.

Although this area of the underworld showed little of it – and Valkenhayn was none too sure he would see it, or even recognize it if it did – but there was a vast and varied ecology to be found here. Most creatures moved very slowly, conserving their energy, and reptiles, amphibians, and a myriad arthropods glided quietly through the darkness, with just enough odd-balls such as bats or even birds, to keep them guessing. The sound of scales told them in no uncertain terms they were being evaluated as a meal by one of the great cave monitors. These lizards could grow to thirty or forty feet, and weigh over a ton – but this one was smaller.

R'nyara moved around him, stepping between them and the monitor. Val had real problems with letting a *civilian* – a *girl*, no less, even if she *did* have fourteen legs and magical armor – get *between* him and danger, it offended his sense of chivalry. But she was undeniably better equipped than he. He heard the tiny scrape of claws as it charged, the subdued sound of an impact as she caught it on her *ruhktar* – and they had fresh meat for lunch. Dinner. Whatever.

And all of it in the most Stygian darkness. Valkenhayn learned what it was really like to be well and truly blind. It was not a pleasant thing, but he

learned there *were* ways to compensate, and that these went far, far further than he had ever imagined they could.

Another time there came a momentary flash and *woosh!* through the cave they were in from a side passage. In the moment of light, Valkenhayn saw Runt was missing. He was with them later, though. Apparently he was perfectly capable of keeping himself fed even down here. Val was struck at how assured he had become, compared to that wobbly little critter he had found near the larder. He hadn't grown any larger, though.

Valkenhayn also knew all that he learned was but a tiny part of the lore of the underworld. R'nyara walked at her normal pace, with never a misstep, never a false start or a backtrace. He had truly only scratched the – well, surface.

Several times she stopped at an Inn! The first time he was amazed. They were descending a flume-like arrangement of rocks at a steep angle, when Valkenhayn heard a tinkly sound, unlike anything he'd heard before in the underworld. When she heard it, R'nyara clapped her right hand shut a couple of times – meaning “turn” and in so doing she would hold out the hand she used so he could hear clearly which side to which she referred. They then entered a much narrower cleft. Something brushed against his face as he entered, and feeling up he found two thin slabs of stone polished very thin, apparently suspended from the top of the cleft. They were carefully arranged so that the slightest disturbance in the air set them to moving and they would tap just at the outer edge, making the tinkling noise. It took him a moment to realize, this was a moving-object detector! Someone wanted to know when things went by.

The cleft, too, descended a short way and ended at what seemed like a dead end, from the sound of it, a flat wall barring the way.

R'nyara stepped to one side and he heard a barely-audible grind of rock on rock as she swung the wall on a center pivot. Beyond the wall – was *light!* As they stepped in Valkenhayn saw Runt was missing again.

It was the first useful light he'd seen since the last of his torches. By his previous standards it would have been impractically dim, but after the Goddess alone knows how long in the dark, it shone clear and bright. The light was in a tiny cage, in which was something that glowed – and *moved*.

The room was low, and fairly large from the sound of it. Underneath the light was a slab of rock. Such was his acclimation to the underworld, it took him a moment to recognize a desk, or table. Behind it sat a kobold.

The kobolds were faerie folk. If elves were the largest variety, elflings the middle, then kobolds, along with Leprechauns, would be the smallest – at least, if you didn't go on to the minis. Valkenhayn judged he was about

Leprechaun-sized. He was wearing a floppy pointed hat, adorned with a candle, presently unlit. He was wearing an open jerkin – probably for the pockets sewn into it, bulging with *stuff*, some sort of belt – again, with *stuff*, including a sword about the size of a dagger – and not very much else.

“*Van’vishda*.¹⁷” The word meant nothing to him, nor could he really say where it came from, but he assumed it was the kobold.

“*ClA, norr*.¹⁸”

“*ClA Tēb*.¹⁹”

R’nyara pulled three small coins of silver from her purse and handed them over. Then she led the way to the opposite side of the chamber. This turned out to be a series of alcoves stretching from the entrance into the murk beyond, separated from each other by strings of small pebbles. In each alcove was a pile of cloth, a tall pitcher, and, rather prosaically in this fantastic location, a chamber pot.

There were a number of other patrons – but who they were, what they were up to – nothing could he tell or guess. Etiquette seemed to call for *never* sticking one’s nose into another’s business.

She said nothing so Valkenhayn and McKulluh took their cue from her. They pulled up the cloth finding three thin blankets of very thin but very warm material that felt like silk, and a slightly heavier, larger sheet, which was held down with stones at each corner, evidently the bed. R’nyara carefully and nearly silently doffed the treasure and supplies, and switched back to her humanoid form. It seemed to take a long time. She seemed tired, and to have twitchy feeling in her legs. He wondered if this was some side-effect of remaining too long in the targataur form.

She took one of the topsheets, he took another, and McKulluh took the last. They sat together on the bottom sheet. The silence was a black and palpable thing.

Some unguessable time later, the kobold appeared at their alcove bearing a tray. He unfolded legs from this making a low table convenient to people sitting on the floor, and left it there.

The food smelled good, if strange. Since all they had had since entering the underworld was some jerky and hard tack almost anything else would be welcome. There were three plates and three cups, one of each thoughtfully sized small, medium and large to match their party.

The cups contained some sort of alcohol, Valkenhayn guessed. It had that kind of bite to it, and it had a sharp peppery flavor as well. The plates

¹⁷ The name of the establishment.

¹⁸ Dark Faerie: “Three, food.”

¹⁹ Dark Faerie: “Three silver.”

had *some* kind of food, but aside from the fact that one item tasted sort of like meat, and the other tasted sort of like mushroom, he had no idea what it was. It, too, was spicy, but in *reverse* – the food was hot, but it felt very cold to the mouth. The combination of the drink and food was not unpleasant, however. Since there were no utensils furnished, they ate with their hands. Valkenhayn did not think much of the portion size, but as he finished up he realized it was more filling than he expected.

They rinsed their hands with water from the pitcher, made use of the chamber pot, and curled up, each with a topsheet, together on the bottom sheet. R'nyara was still having tics in her legs, and finally Valkenhayn reached over and started massaging them lightly. She didn't say anything, but the tics receded, and when he left off she touched his face a moment with a warm hand.

They went to sleep as if they'd been clubbed.

Morning. As if. The environment was exactly the same as it was when they went to sleep. The kobold was fussing with the light. It got brighter as he put something into the cage. The motion within became more energetic.

Breakfast was served while they were finishing their morning ablutions using a large urn of water, cloths, and a box of something that felt like sand but lathered a little like soap, all of which arrived by kobold when they awoke. The underworld having no taboos of body modesty – really, no one could see anything in the dark anyway – Valkenhayn stripped and got surprisingly well cleaned up. The sandy stuff lathered on his skin. He also took the opportunity to wipe out his armor, put a quick coat of polish on it, and washed out his undergarments. He trimmed his beard, too, as well as he could by feel.

Breakfast was a bowl of porridge. He doubted if it was actually grain, it tasted like more mushrooms, so he guessed that was probably the base. Again, the meal looked meager, but he was quite full by the time they finished.

R'nyara switched back to her targataur form, loaded up, and they quit the inn, resuming their endless trek through the darkness. The whole inn thing quickly faded from their minds as if was just a dream.

McKulluh's only comment on the whole affair was, “Dtonker ain't quite a full shit(in).”

Runt joined them moments after they left.

It was a dream they repeated twice, with small variations. The next time the inn was run by a lady goblin. This time the Knight made out what

the light was – glowing worms in a little cage. They had to be kept fed to make the light.

As they made their way even deeper, Valkenhayn and McKulluh began to develop headaches – and as they went on, they began to worsen, and at their normal rates of breathing they found that they tended to *forget* to breathe now and then, and when they *were* breathing the thick, heavy air, it sometimes made them queasy.

“Ποισονηq from t'(much) of the life part of air. Breathe *slowly*!” R'nyara told them, on several occasions.

Perhaps the strangest encounter of their journey occurred a short while later when Valkenhayn suddenly felt as if he were out in the open, naked and exposed.

“Uh...what did we just enter?”

“Caslera qulf is below. (We cross the Caslera Arch).”

“This place feels *enormous*!”

“T₅,” was all she said.

Several times Valkenhayn felt he was wandering close to a drop-off on one side or another. He had no trouble correcting, but he *did* develop a suspicion that the Caslera Arch did *not* have side rails of any description. If you wandered off the edge, that's all she wrote.

The second time this happened, he looked down and saw a tiny, distant, smudge of light.

“What's the light down there?”

“Kark. Kith enclave,” she answered shortly.

The Kith were wiry creatures a little smaller than a man, with heads that looked like an octopus wearing a nautilus shell on top. They were weird, creepy, known to take slaves, dangerous with magic, and universally described as totally *evil*. Which caused the Knight some cognitive dissonance, since R'nyara's people were also described as totally *evil* but he was beginning to suspect certain cultural misperceptions *might* apply there. On the other hand, *if* they ran into a Kithian, he was going to kill it and talk philosophy later.

After a seeming eternity hanging in midair, Valkenhayn felt the more comforting stone once again enclose them on all sides. This part of the Low Road was better taken care of, with markings engraved by branches. Most were much as he had seen – well, *felt* – before, except for the first set. He couldn't tell what they said, and they felt distinctly – *different*.

“R'nyara – what do these carvings mean?”

“Waypos₅,”

“In what language, though? They all feel triangular.”

A moment later a very dim light appeared and Valkenhayn could see she was holding her scrying crystal. She held it up to the writing.

“YAFK VAW AVIMTS AELVA”

“Kithian (writing of pidgin darkling speech).”

Kark and Points Below. An exit from the Underworld highway for a particularly unpleasant portion of Hell...

Their last stop was much the same as the previous ones, but there was no one at all on the desk. R’nyara put down three silver and a copper, and they went to an alcove. Sometime later *something* – he couldn’t even tell *what* in the gloom – *something* scuttled over and put down a platter with three plates of food he couldn’t even *begin* to identify, along with a pitcher of just plain water for them to share – but it was icy cold and very pure.

Their trek finally came to some sort of dropoff and here, there was light – nearly blinding compared to what they were used to now, but respectable even to a “day walker.”

It was a myststream, running through a tunnel wider and higher than the one they were in. It was quite the largest myststream Valkenhayn had ever seen.

There were crystals in abundance, glowing gently in a myriad of colorful patterns. The myst flowed along, carrying tiny sparks and motes of light with it. The myst itself glowed in ripples and sheets like the Northern Lights. There were mushrooms of many different species growing on the bottom and along the sides of the tunnel, many – even most – glowing in soft pastels.

There was also something rather like coral – *eunthi*, a sort of land-dwelling coral sometimes found on the surface, too. Rather than calcium, the tiny arthropods that build it use sand – silicon – which they process somehow into forms of glass they employ to build their reef. There were myriad upon myriad subspecies of these creatures, each building its own notion of what a glass coral should look like, each reef ranging in size from a fingernail to a bank jutting out from the far wall over ten feet, going beyond where he could see, and extending twenty feet above the myst, nearly to the ceiling of the channel. And the whole of it was glowing – not in pastels, like the mushrooms, but in pure, though subdued, primary colors, not bright enough to overwhelm. How the colors were generated was a mystery but, unlike the crystals, they constantly changed and shifted, with great patterns flowing through the reef taking many seconds to finish one trip.

And finally, there were animals. Something like a skate about five feet wide and three long came flapping slowly past. In short order he spotted a

small school of glowing creatures, about the size of his pinkie, that swam like fish and quite speedily, too, but looked more like feathery caterpillars. Crab-like things, scorpions maybe, crept along the bottom, ranging from barely visible to one about three feet long he could see poking around the *eunthi* reef across the width of the myst. There were a considerable variety of these. It was a very busy place. The myststreams he had seen on the surface could not hold a candle to this.

“Oh!” McKulluh said, looking around in delight. “I’ve not seen such a thing since I left *Ṭír na nÓg*.”

“Did abide there or just passing?”

“Both at one toime or another. *Ṭis* kin there I have, still.”

“There’re very few places he *doesn’t* have kin.”

“And ye can eat yer heart out over it.”

“Lo(u) Road thro(ugh) myststream here,” R’nyara said. “(n)all but older any day world.”

“*Small?! Oh! Small?* This thing is *huge!* You want us to *wade* in it?”

She winced and looked at him significantly.

“Not huge. (M)any bigger. Go faster. Don’t think overlong, t’intensely, one (s)ubject. Don’t think transformations, effects, can become so. Danger unlikely, but refuge behind me. *Ruktar*. I tell (w)hen need help.”

“Very nervous about. Can go ‘round?”

“Bestre. But longer. (M)ust enter t’fud fourth.”

“Person? Thing? – lives in myststream?”

“Day (w)alker, over-clever, now h(is) o(w)n trap.”

“Asset?”

She chuckled, quietly. “An (w)e make so.”

“And very reassuring ‘tis to hear it,” McKulluh noted, dryly.

She slid down the embankment into the myststream and waited, looking back. McKulluh climbed down next. Valkenhayn shrugged and slid down to join them, and they began to wend their way along through the myst.

Trying to follow her directions, Valkenhayn concentrated on keeping his thoughts moving, not thinking too hard on any one thing. He was aided in this by the complexity of navigating through the myststream. Although this was obviously an “official” part of the Low Road (whatever that meant), with signs of regular maintenance along it, the activity of the environment meant things were constantly changing. The *eunthi* coral was a frequent culprit, it could apparently grow faster than the maintainers could cut it back. In areas where it *had* been cut, there were piles of razor-sharp glass shards sometimes swept to one side, but sometimes left where the

crystal was shattered. Luckily everyone in the party was fairly impervious to this threat. Although the shards made for treacherous footing because of their tendency to slide over one another when pressure was applied, R'nyara's targataur form's eight clawed outer feet and the six armored feet of her inner support legs made it all but impossible to tumble her or slice her feet up and Valkenhayn's armor protected him. McKulluh was less well protected, but he could simply hang on Val through these sections, his weight was negligible. All this was good because each of these spots was a potentially deadly hazard. A fall without armor into this stuff could slice you to ribbons. At least these encounters were relatively shallow – there was one shatterzone on the surface that lay athwart the entire width of Vindolonda where it attached to the Thermian continent. No one knew how deep it went, but it was more than deep enough that no one who ever fell into it would ever be seen above it again. At least, not alive. Likely they would be reduced to a fine paste.

Watching Runt, however, taught all of them a new way to deal with it. He simply *blew* the path clear – retaining his acid and fire, his powerful lungs could huff out vortices of air that would sweep clear the path ahead of him. Eventually, they just had him go first.

Despite the light, R'nyara insisted they stick with the darkspeak, and she was probably right. Even in the light, it would be hard to see anything stalking them because of the cover provided by reefs, crystals and mushrooms, and because the motion of the inhabitants would easily cover any hostile motion they might otherwise pick up on. And even though lit, the scene remained eerily silent. None of the inhabitants seemed to make any noise as far as he could tell. Only the sounds of their own march – and the occasional dry scuttling of the scorpicroabs. And even these were weirdly distorted by the myst.

There were many other inhabitants. Targs were abundant, though mostly of the type that preferred to wait for prey to fall into their web rather than actively hunt and they were mostly quite small – at least, they were small for *targs*. The lone exception took one look at R'nyara and decided actively hunting *her* would be a little beyond his comfort zone.

There were also giant spiders – true spiders, up to three feet long, and more than a few bigger than Val's hand. There were bugs and insects of various kinds, they even passed things that looked like miniature castles – nests, R'nyara said, of a type of insect called a *rockling*. They were centauroid insects about an inch to an inch and half long and half as high. Their front limbs were adapted as manipulators, and they were amazingly good at using them. He saw tiny catapults at strategic defensive spots, one castle

even had a moat – of water – from a channel dug across the bottom into a catchment where a small stream entered. So, the castles were actually designed for defense. They warred on each other constantly, R'nyara said. Though they often acted quite intelligently, she said they were driven by instinct as well – the tiny machines and the like were largely instinctive behavior, but their placement and use implied at least a modest intellect. She also noted the ones they could see were just extensions of the actual rockling itself, which never strayed from it's armored chamber in the bottom of the castle. It handled both reproduction and thought for the creature as a whole, and could get to be as much as a foot or more across. The extensions took care of building, maintenance, defense, and hunting or farming various types of food. A complete civilization in miniature.

He was curious why the notorious myststream's propensity for polymorphs and other strange effects seemed to be absent, despite the obviously greater potential in this myststream over any other he'd ever seen. Perhaps the danger was exaggerated? He started noting various odd effects that seemed to be about. The most startling thing he discovered was that *gravity* was apparently *optional*. Wondering how the various swimming creatures were doing it even though they didn't seem to have wings, he found his weight becoming less and less, until he was just hovering, unable to move for lack of traction. He tried various swimming motions and finally managed to move with a side kick just like a frog.

Just like...a...frog...*Ribbit!*

There were dangerous things about. And he needed to find some flies or something. When a large and black thing moved near him, he tried to escape into a bank of light, but something clamped down on him, squeezing him. His body was twisted out of shape, dislocating joints that left him in staggering pain...

And then he was looking up at R'nyara from where he sat on the floor of the channel. He was naked. The pain had stopped. Gravity was back on.

"Transformative thoughts can be acted on," she said, sternly.

"Bigger bollox never put his arm through a coat," McKulluh said, arms folded.

Valkenhayn shook his head, vigorously.

"Who's the bigger bollox, the bollox, or the bollox who follows him? And I *wasn't* thinking any such thing! Where's my armor? My clothes? Boots? Backpack? What the *hell* happened?"

R'nyara winced, and only then he realized he was using his normal voice.

He got up, looking about. He spotted the heap of his possessions a short distance away. While she watched disapprovingly, he adjusted his accouterments and they got back under way.

“What happened?” he demanded of her as they walked.

“Your thought overlong. Duetpoint no longer appropriate, stream came to your aid. Discipline your thoughts or it will happen again.”

“I could wish ‘the stream’ were not so damned helpful. How did you bring me back?”

“Force body to human shape. Sometimes spell breaks with pain, suggestion. Not always. Hard to break by will alone – mind adapts like body. *Don’t let thoughts wander!*”

“Right.”

The channel meandered in spots, still heading downhill, and Valkenhayn began to wonder just how far down they were going to go.

“How deep are we?”

“Don’t know how to answer.”

“Okay, with the myst I expect a certain amount of moisture – but it’s getting harder to breathe, and I’m getting dizzy spells to go with the headaches.”

“Very deep – air thicker here. More effort breathe. Dizzy means too much of life element – you breathe too fast.”

“Right. How much deeper are we going?”

“Again, deep is deep, I cannot say!” and she lurched to one side and dropped to the ground, something not easily accomplished by a creature with a total of fourteen legs.

“What *happened*? I mean, are you alright?” Valkenhayn asked, kneeling by her.

“Legs – much pain.”

“The cramps are getting worse?”

“Aye. Over-long in fighting form. Never so long ever. Price must be paid.”

“What *kind* of price?”

“Pain. Uncertain walking. Transforming becoming harder, longer. When reach limit, must abstain long time. Or comes day when cannot change. Or, worse, freeze halfway between. To die so be good – common, even. We must find our fourth. Not far now.”

“We should leave the treasure. We can find another way.”

She shook her head, her hair flowing in waves as she did.

“This best way. I know I reach limit. That cat slain be already.”

“Right. Peachy, just peachy. We will revisit this topic at short intervals. Can you walk?”

“Break now. Taking rest.”

And she closed her eyes and folded her human half down in front of the targ body.

Valkenhayn was getting more worried. It had not occurred to him at all that this transformation power had limits, or side-effects. He thought

about trying to use the myst to assume a form like hers to take the load for a while – but he got off that thought in a hurry. He turned into a *frog* because of a *simile*, the Goddess knows what weird thing he might turn into. With his luck – maybe a politician.

“What do you think, McKulluh?”

“Sure, ‘tis a risk she’s takin’. Didn’t want to say it before, but transformations – get sticky if too long kept. I figured she knew what she was doing. The spell comes from that molly-whacker she uses?”

“Yes.”

“It’s worried I’ve been about *that* thing. We may need to get it away from her. ‘Tis a curse it could be. She may not be able to do it of her own.”

“Thanks for *that* cheerful thought!”

“Ah, ‘tis always here for ye I be.”

They rested a bit, and when R’nyara declared herself ready to resume, he had a suggestion.

“The swimming things here,” and he waved to some fish-like things with brightly patterned wings that looked like they had robbed a parrot to get them, “Weight seems to be variable. I got really light before I shape-shifted. Maybe we could try that? Just a little ways, to keep it under control?”

She looked at him very gravely.

“Mystplaces full of wild magic. Normal, well-tested spells go awry with ease, never mind new ones. Also, taking first step int’ the myst allow’t *thin*g on you. Next step easier, then easier yet. A trap – one our fourth has already fallen in. So doing risks *everything*, *none* of us might leave.”

This was by far the longest speech she had made since they descended into the underworld. His suggestion had really worried her.

“Okay. I get it. Don’t drink the kool-aid.”

“Kool-aid?”

“Don’t start, in other words.”

She shook her head as she rose.

“A curious expression bestre. Wherefrom comes’t?” She resumed their trek.

“Actually, I really don’t know, come to think of it. I picked it up from my father, he never mentioned where it came from or what it means – aside from the context.”

She nodded.

“Your Father was Wizard?”

“A minor one. He was studying for the third circle. He had a long way to go. He said it was a lot tougher than Thaumaturgy – my Grandfather went that way.”

“Ah-ha. Thought so. Likely ‘tis’t of *this* world. May’ve heard’t in the Ugyeen University. Like the Great Scott.”

“I’m getting *real* curious about *that* place.”

“Be sure. A most curious place ‘tis. If have you *any* magical aptitude you will always be drawn there.”

“Right.”

He kept a very close and critical eye on her as they continued, but she didn’t seem to show any other symptoms as yet aside from moving a bit more slowly. And, as promised, it wasn’t long before they reached a cleft that intersected the Low Road – it was flooded with myst, and it had no discernible flavor.

“This way,” R’nyara said, pointing into it.

They headed into the cleft, which quickly narrowed to a point where R’nyara had to pull in her outer legs and switch to an awkward hop to get through, before it opened up into a much wider chamber.

The chamber beyond was positively *festooned* with treasure! Piles of coins lay untidily about, with others carelessly kicked across the floor. There was gold, along with silver, mithril, platinum, orichalc, elvish bronze, redmettel, and even gadolinium, and others he could not identify. As they went deeper the coins were supplemented with piles of ingots, then with gems mixed with coins and ingots. *Fantastic* gems! Azurite, aquamarine, cat’s eye aventurine, beryls, garnets, elfstones, sunstones, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and others, *many* others, many of which were both beautiful and unknown to him. There were *huge* diamonds – beautifully cut in a staggering variety of shapes were clear, blue, canary, red, white and even chocolate diamonds.

They *looked* like chocolate diamonds. But...they *also* had the distinct *fragrance* of chocolate...

Soon they began to find artifacts – swords, armor, shields, rich clothing, intricately made boxes of rare woods, overflowing with jewelry – pearl necklaces in a rainbow of colors, chokers, chains, earrings, bracelets, arm bands, anklets, cloth-of-gold, -silver, -mithral and others. There were chalices, and frames – many with some of the most famous paintings Valkenhayn had ever heard of, and many he had not – crowns, plates and utility-ware, pitchers, combs, belts, cloaks of a hundred kinds of silks, broaches, lockets, medallions, tiaras, and statues. There was furniture, thrones, narrow, tall and regal, wide as couches, beds – several of which were equipped with trapezes hanging from the top rails or roof of each, for some reason. *Everything* made of something precious, *everything* encrusted, smothered, positively *dripping* with *unbelievable* jewels!

“Sure’n, I have to say, ‘tis (like the decorator’s taste I am,” McKulluh observed.

The clothing and furniture looked odd, however. The clothing was all tailored for someone very short – no more than three feet high, and one more portly at the bottom than at the top. And many items had a curious hole in the back near the bottom. Furniture had similar adaptations, chairs often sporting a horizontal slot at the base of the back that went from one side to the center.

Some of this was sort of explained when they began to encounter slaves. *Hundreds* of them, carrying great jewel-encrusted, precious-metal platters of the finest meats and other foods and rare, even mythical viands he had heard tales of. All of them borne – by *rats*.

Well, *rattlings*, technically. Three feet tall, with long, prehensile tails, they walked upright – scuttled, really. But despite all the hyper-expensive clothing lying around, none of them wore any of it, though they, too, were positively *dripping* jewelry.

And all of them ignored the intruders, each completely intent on going to or from an opening framed around with portable screens – bejeweled, of course, made of lapis, or marble, or jade, or nephrite, or a hundred other rare materials.

It was, without a doubt, the most garish, extravagant, lavish, over-the-top display of a truly *ungodly* amount of sheer unadulterated lucre Valkenhayn could not have imagined in his most *insane* flights of fantasy. The crowning achievement, the “mushroom in the roast” as R’nyara would call it, the cherry on the sundae – was a huge *fountain* intricately carved of gems and precious materials, with a central, cylindrical riser which was spouting – not water – but *even more* gems, many of them obviously too large to have traveled up the riser in the first place. The font below was overflowing with cut gems, in a great heap, spilling over untidily onto the floor – the jewel-encrusted floor of gold and mithril.

R’nyara was completely crippled with laughter. She dropped slowly to the floor and tried to get it under control, but as soon as she managed to throttle it, some slave would stagger past carrying a 28,000 carat diamond, or dragging a sledge of rare, jewel-encrusted furs, or something else that would top everything they had already seen, and she would lose it again.

Valkenhayn strode forward through the opening the slaves were streaming through into another room paved in rich carpets, hung about with exquisite tapestries – of thread of gold, silver, mithril, the whole lot – with a massive (say it with me now) *jewel-encrusted* throne. Upon this was a rattling, surrounded by slaves, slaves waving fans, slaves bearing food and drink, slaves fetching rare treasures to please their Lord and Master, who was at this moment lounging back in his throne with his mouth open

while one of the slaves – *Peeled. A. Grape.* And dropped it in his mouth. In his sprawled posture it was clear the ratling was male – and with that hint it was also clear that every last one of the slaves was *female*. All of them staggering beauties in the ratling fashion, Valkenhayn had no doubt at all. And behind the throne stood a boulder bearing an anvil upon it, with a legendary and unmistakable sword thrust through both, the sword the runes named *Eckscaliburr*. Valkenhayn blinked and looked at it again. *Eckscaliburr*. Not “Excalibur,” not even *Caliburn*, the sword’s *original* name – *Eckscaliburr*.

...and the chocolate diamonds *smelled* like chocolate...

McKulluh had walked through the entire splendiferous display with a half smile and no apparent inclination to help himself to anything – not a normal Leprechaun reaction to vast amounts of treasure. He looked expectantly at Valkenhayn.

Something clicked in Valkenhayn’s mind. He gazed around at the scene of barbaric, sparkling, decadent splendor and knew for certain in his heart that not one, single, solitary caret of it...

“It’s *fake*. All of it! It’s an *illusion*.”

“Ah, you’ve made me proud! And so ‘tis.”

R’nyara came through the entrance, took one look at the scene on the throne, gasped “*Eckscaliburr*” – and collapsed again in helpless laughter.

Valkenhayn shook his head sadly as he looked at the pitiful scene. It was obvious the rat hadn’t a clue. He thought he was in heaven.

Entirely missing were certain *other* symbols of wealth. First editions of famous books? None. Rare maps or scrolls? Nada. Scientific instruments? Nary a one. Not even any musical instruments dripping with jewels. If you want to live in a make-believe world, you really, *really* need to have *some* kind of imagination! The whole thing was...*trite*. And way, way, overdone.

II IT TAKES A THIEF

R'nyara's laughter was abruptly interrupted with hiccups. Powerful ones, her whole body jerked as one spasmed through her. She looked at Valkenhayn with bright eyes, jerking every few seconds, before she turned to her load and pulled out a water sack and took a drink.

Valkenhayn rubbed his eyes with his hand. For *this* he trekked through *Hell* under a bloody *ocean* going to Imri – *on foot* – so they could come by and rescue – *this*? This? *THIS*?

Then the mighty lover mounted one of his no doubt ravishing slaves. R'nyara quickly turned away, covering her face with her hands – not in modesty, though, her shoulders were shaking and her hiccups were getting worse. Valkenhayn pulled off his helmet and ran a hand through his air, then walked over and sat beside her. He looked at her, sadly.

“Mayhap we enlighten him, that he only plays with himself?” She giggled.

“By the Goddess, what are we *doing* here? Why do we need this... this *clown*?”

Taking another sip of water, R'nyara managed to still her giggles – mostly – and said, “appearances be what they may, a most talented thief lurks here.” But she wasn't able to keep a straight face through the whole sentence.

“No, really! He'll be *useful*. Δ...*diamond*?..in the rough!” And she dissolved in giggles, again.

“Why do we need a thief? That is so...*cliché*.”

R'nyara finally got herself more under control.

“The dragon is *guarded*,” she said, seriously, now. “(*surrounded* with defenses. You need an army, but know you already't cannot succeed by force alone. You must face the dragon. The final battle cannot be fought for you.”

“And he can get me *there*? He can't get *himself* anywhere, what *use* is he? He's completely taken in by this...this...this *fantasy*. Half-wit!” he said, toward the throne.

“Never claimed I he was a great intellect. He has none, what brains he possesses are corroded by greed. But he *is* skilled the way you need. He knows Imri, and northern Thernia as well.”

“I suppose I could use him for dragon-bait, though I'm not at all sure he's smart enough even for *that*,” Valkenhayn said.

“He also has bad breath and a worse attitude. Mayhap, not sharpest of the knives one can find of a drawer, but even a fool can be *useful*.”

"I *can't* restore my family's legacy with the likes of *him*! It would be...*embarrassing*."

She shrugged, prettily. "One advantage a thief has, he need not be obvious – and when *he* hides t'will not make your heart race," she grinned at him – momentarily becoming *unbearably* sexy.

"Actually, I think my heart *would* race, just not for the same reason. It would *terrify* me to have to depend on him."

"Mayhap. But of all the treasure here, one piece has he that's real enough."

"Cis that, Val," McKullah said as he sauntered to join them. He flipped a coin to Valkenhayn, who caught it in his hand and looked at it. It was the Crown's Lightning Rune. "Twas in his backpack, behind his throne. Along with all his supplies, such as they be. Bandaged he is, and no mistaking it. The poor fool is starvin' to death!"

"You see? Dicked't from the lucky sap who would've *been* our fourth!" R'nyara said, still trying to stifle her giggling.

Valkenhayn sighed deeply. A sexy demon lady from the depths of Hell – who can't stop giggling – a sardonic Leprechaun, and...*that*...this Quest wasn't working out at all like he planned. Very well. He must play the hand he was dealt and hope to his Goddess she had something in mind *besides* just having fun with him!

The Knight rose, and strode purposefully to the throne. Although the rat *was* portly, his skin was loose, and clearly his diet of imaginary grapes wasn't doing him a great deal of good. He looked back at R'nyara and McKullah.

"Do we know...*its*...name?"

And together they chorused, "Scrum!"

"*Scrum*? Perfect, just perfect, it just fills my heart with confidence," Valkenhayn lamented.

"How did *you* know?" she asked McKullah. He snorted.

"Twas embroidered on his backpack, like his Mother sent it to camp with him!" R'nyara's hiccups started again.

The Knight leaned in to the creature and shouted, "Hey, Scrum!" There was no response. Finishing with his current imaginary girlfriend he snagged in another. Valkenhayn rolled his eyes and thanked the Goddess – and the mysts – that at least he couldn't see what the fool was *really* doing.

He filled his lungs. "*Scrum! Sober up you damned fool!*" he shouted into the rodent's ears. He never reacted.

Valkenhayn rubbed his face with his hand, looked at the rat...and belted him a good one upside the back of the head.

Scrum vaulted from his throne, landing a good ten feet away. The scene wavered around them, and for an instant, Valkenhayn saw things as they actually were – the throne was a rock. A torn backpack was sitting by it, and bare rock walls. The place was lit with a few glowing crystals, none larger than his fist, there was a small bank of *eunthi*, a couple of mushrooms – or *some* kind of fungus – it was a small, sad little cave. But the riches suddenly returned.

“WHY you **FEELTHY** so and so! I’ll **SHOW** you the **CONSEQUENCES** of **ATTACKING** a **GOD!**”

He snatched his jeweled sword from his jeweled scabbard and lunged inexpertly at Valkenhayn, who stepped to one side and belted him across the back of the head again. The rat went sprawling on the floor – scattering a pile of imaginary gems – and dropped his imaginary sword.

The Knight asked McKulluh, “Does he have any *real* weapons?”

“So he does! ‘Tis a fine piece of the very best *Öwarven* work, just a wee bit the worse for the wear. A dagger. In his backpack.”

“Oh, lot of good it’ll do him *there*,” Valkenhayn said. The rat pulled himself to his feet and rubbed his head, then spun around to face the Knight again. One again he pulled his bejeweled sword – having forgotten to pick up the one he started with, the myst obligingly provided him with another to draw – and waved it menacingly.

“I’ll **MAKE** you eat **DROPPINGS** for that! I’ll have you **HUNG** UP by your own **EENTESTINES!**” he snarled.

“Yeah, yeah,” Valkenhayn responded. “Sober up, idiot. This is all an illusion. You’ll die here if I don’t drag your ungrateful fanny out.”

“You **LIE!** You eensigneeeficant **EENSECT!** I weel veesit **TORTURES** on you like you have never **EEMAGINED!**”

“Great, just...great. Fine. Go ahead. Overwhelm me with your superior force and dazzling footwork.”

“You **DARE** to **MOCK** ME!! You **WRETCH!** **SUFFER** NOW the **FATE** of **ALL** WHO **OPPOSE** ME!” and he leaped clumsily at Valkenhayn with a mighty swing of his grand weapon...

...which went right through the Knight as he stood there, leaning against the wall, waiting to be overwhelmed.

Scrum recovered and took another vicious swing at Valkenhayn’s legs shouting, “**CRETIN!** I weel take you off **AT** **THEE** **KNEES!!!**”

But the Knight was unaffected. He shook his head.

“Look, could you hurry up and vanquish me? We’re on a schedule, here.”

"**DOLT! DIE NOW!**" and the oversized rodent delivered an overhead swing designed to slice the Knight in half. But he remained stubbornly intact.

"Is there *any* point to this? Is he going to wise up? Someday? Maybe?" Valkenhayn asked his audience.

"Who cares, Lad? Me only regret is not bringing the popcorn!" McKulluh shouted back gaily.

"**You EENSTGNEEFICANT dirt-eating FOOL!!! I weel KEEL you so dead your CHEELDREN weel bee STEELBORN!!!!**" And he reared back and stabbed his weapon into the Knight...to no discernible effect.

"How is *that* supposed to work?" Valkenhayn asked in genuine puzzlement.

"**AARRGGGHH!!!! You weel NOT bee able to EEVADE my DEADLY weapon FOREVER!!! EEVENTUALLY you weel DIE!!! I weel see you DEAD, eef eet takes me a HUNDRED YEARS!!!!**" and he began vigorously swinging his imaginary sword back and forth through Valkenhayn's stomach, legs, chest – whatever was handy. The Paladin just stood there, watching him, waiting – *hoping* – the poor fool would figure it out.

"**AAAAAAIIIIIIIEEEE! DIE!!! DIE!!! DIE!!!!**" the ratling screamed as this went on.

Valkenhayn shook his head, pulled his dagger, and reversed it.

"**I NEEL KEEL you so DEAD your PARENTS WILL NEVER reproDUCE!!!!**"

"Maybe you can *sleep* this off," the Knight said, and slammed the dagger into the back of the rat's skull as he lunged.

He crumpled to the floor. The Palace, the slaves, the food, the treasure – everything but himself and his ratty old backpack, vanished as if it never was. Which, when you think about it, it never had been.

They continued on. Scrum slept, quietly, if not peacefully, slung unceremoniously over Valkenhayn's shoulder. Not stopping even to eat, they munched trail rations as they proceeded and eventually found the exit from the myststream R'nyara had planned they use.

By this point, Valkenhayn was definitely not feeling very well. Even McKulluh seemed a little green around the gills – how appropriate, Valkenhayn thought – only R'nyara seemed unaffected. Both were taken aback by the odd way sound reverberated through their heads. The delfling kept reminding them to breathe slowly.

At the exit point they climbed from the myststream and quitted the area of enchantment.

"Now is this our deepest point. From here we will head upward, t'tmri," she reassured them.

"Right. Right. Yeah, Imri. That sounds good," Valkenhayn agreed, and wondered how this Quest had gotten so *complicated*.

"And you *live* down here, lass? Ye spent yer whole *loife* down here?" McKulluh asked in consternation.

"Oh, no. Utara is not so high. Were't beneath us and were our objective, 'twould yet be many sleeps t'reach."

"*Many* sleeps! My head is *splittin'* lass! How can ye take it, I ask?"

She stopped and looked at them, and sighed.

"You suffer from pressure sickness. Much more air is over you now than ever before in life. Your bodies need time t'adapt t't, but they willn't get't. We climb now, and the pressure will be less and less, and you *will* feel better, so long as we climb *cautiously*. If we climb t'fast – you might be overcome with *crumpling*."

"Crumpling? What is *that*? That doesn't sound good. Evil. *Whatever*." Valkenhayn asked as he shifted his load around and prepared for the next walk in the dark.

"Climb t'fast and you'll get horrible pains in your joints. T'comes from the pressure, but as 'tis released, rather than as't builds, which is what you feel now. Very, very painful. T'can kill you."

"Well, thanks. Important safety tip, everyone, keep it in mind," Valkanhayn said.

"Uuuuuuhhh. *Wha...wha...heet* me?"

"Oh, the Saints be with us, it *lives*, so it does!" McKulluh said.

Valkenhayn dropped the rat on his face and turned to face him. When the rat just lay there in an untidy and utterly inert heap, he relented, reached out and propped him against the wall, a short way from the myststream they had just left.

"Okay. Are you *sober*, now? Can we talk – *sensibly*?" he asked the rat.

"**WHAT** do you **MEEN**, sober? I haven't been **DREENKING!** Through no **FAULT** of **MY OWN**, I **ASSURE** you," the rat said. It was hard to tell with no visible whites to his eyes, but Valkenhayn had the distinct impression the rat was trying desperately to focus on him. He sighed.

"Let's see. Do you recall your god-hood? Female slaves, treasure, food?"

"YES! YES! I was een HEAVEN! And then YOU showed up! Why deed you DRAG me from HEAVEN?!" the rat demanded.

"You weren't in heaven! You were in a *myststream*, you fantasized too much about slaves and treasure, and the myst provided it to you. You were caught up in an illusion. It wasn't *real*. It was *never* real. You were all by yourself, you were starving...and you were *playing* with yourself," the Knight explained. R'nyara giggled, and then put her hands over her mouth. McKulluh inspected an interesting outcropping of rock.

"WHAT do you MEEN?"

"Remember all those times you...*enjoyed*...your female slaves?"

"Yes."

"*Playing* with yourself. Like I said, *none* of it was real," Valkenhayn assured him.

He was quite subdued after that. For a while.

"WHY deed you RESCUE me, then? I deeadn't ASK for HELP!"

"I need a good thief. Apparently. You came highly recommended – although I'm not sure why. At any rate, the job pays."

"How MUCH? And WHO ARE you, ANYWAY?"

"Valkenhayn of Caerleon. Hereditary ruler of Krithala."

"That SOUNDS like a LUCRAT – WAIT! Deed you say KREETHALA??? You want ME to go up against EVENSHADE!!!!!"

Valkenhayn grabbed the rat's mouth and held it shut.

"Don't use that name again. It's not safe. No, you will not have to face the dragon, that'll be my job. All you need to do is *get* me there. That's it. Ten gold sovereigns when we reach Imri, a hundred more when the dragon dies."

The rat's eyes suddenly lit with greed.

"A hundred TEN isn't ENOUGH! I want twenty FIVE – and five HUNDRED golds!"

"And just to sweeten the deal, none of us will talk about how we found you," Valkenhayn went on.

The rat choked. R'nyara giggled and covered her mouth with both hands.

"I expect it would be *quite* difficult to be taken seriously as a thief if *that* story were to get out," the Knight mused. The rat thought it over with a deep frown.

"You're an EEVIL GIT, do you KNOW that? I've DEALT with nicer ORCS!"

"That's almost certainly true," Valkenhayn agreed, heartily.

"ALL RIGHT! DONE then! And I HOPE you DIE — right AFTER I get PAID!"

"Well, those chances are pretty good, too." He straightened up and sighed as he looked about. "Let us push on, then."

12 THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The next part of the journey had an unusual luxury for the underworld. A huge bank of *eunthi* ran through the rocks for many miles, meandering in and out of the tunnels, on the sides or tops of them. Its glow lit their way clearly. Even better – in its own way – this area also hosted an underground river of fairly impressive size. The sound of rushing water in rapids and waterfalls masked their sound so well, they actually had to speak more loudly to be heard at all. Pity it was salt water.

“I don’t get that.”

She sighed, and shook her head.

“He’s a *taker*. Not a *maker*. That is what I mean by your false duality. Your ‘evil’ and ‘good’ – you *think* they explain something fundamental in your world, but they cannot be consistently applied.”

“Right. Okay, he’s a thief – granted. By nature he’s a taker. So, yes, he does freeload off the labor of others.”

“You **KNOW** I can **HEAR** you, **DON’T** you!”

“And that someone has to *produce* or there would be nothing for others to take. But how can *that* bring you to think good is evil and evil is good? I mean, good is good and evil is evil *by definition*.”

R’nyara let out her breath slowly – interestingly – as she considered him.

“Humans think as they do, good and evil, two sides of one coin. But ‘tis not so, for in between them lies *intent*. Intent can move deeds from one side to the other, without let or hindrance.”

“Well, intent *defines* good and evil. If you are trying to do harm, it’s evil.”

“For what *purpose* is the harm? Good or evil both must have one, they do not operate at random. Purpose is intent, without’t no act can be *called* good or evil.”

“I’m not following.”

“**NEITHER** am I. I **LIKE** eet **BETTER** that way!”

R’nyara seemed to think.

“Does (wer me this, Knight of Krithala, is’t evil to slay a thousand innocents?”

“Of course! That’s incredibly obvious!”

“I’ll have to go along with *that*, lassie,” McKulluh put in.

“**And I don’t really CARE one way or the OTHER!**”

“Tis? If they are slain t’prevent their transformation int’monsters that would wreak havoc on their surviving brethren, does’t remain evil?”

"I'm...not sure."

"Innocent in themselves, the intent of another force makes them a danger t'all and sundry. Absent a means of thwarting the intent directly, one eludes something *bad* by performing a deed you would call 'evil' t'he *purpose* of 'good.' 'Tis not idle speculation. Even the surface must see zombie outbreaks."

"Well, yes – but zombies *are* evil."

"Are they? Talked t'one lately?"

"Of **COURSE** – I **SOLD** one some **LIFE** insurance!!!"

"You can't *talk* to a zombie, it would attack mindlessly!"

"Undead is neither alive nor dead and they may become so through none of their own fault. Undead need not be mindless, but powers exist manifestly that *can* rob them of themselves and make weapons of them. Indeed, they do so so often *you* do not even *consider* the case of an undead being that isn't *being* used so. With such in mind, would you destroy a thousand undead, each a person unto themselves, offering no harm or desire t'cause't, if in fear they would turn against the living at the intent of another? Beware how you answer, Paladin. I've seen much of the history of your country."

Valkenhayn had to admit a bitter truth. He knew undead *could* exist free, that they are not *intrinsically* compelled to attack the living. But he also knew they were helpless against almost *any* kind of control. The undead would be the very first tool *anyone* seeking to do evil would reach for, if they were permitted to be widespread. Which is why they were *always* "put down" – be honest, he thought to himself, they were *killed* – in Krithala. Whether they had attacked someone, or not. She hadn't picked that one thousand out of the air. She was referring specifically to a zombie uprising his father had put down even as he was being born.

So was his father evil?

"Look, anyone can contrive some sort of situation that would justify any act, it doesn't mean that there is no such thing as good and evil."

"Curious. We don't see the world that way. Not good and evil – 'those who make' and 'those who take.'"

"Back to that. I don't see it."

"Try an **EEMPACT** against the **BACK** of your **SKULL** and see eff **THAT** helps."

"Consider this. Two people. One builds a shelter, plants crops, finds a spouse, raises young, helps his own, is true t'one and all. 'Tis a maker."

"Yes?"

"The other, a thief who steals the products of the other's labor, t'enjoy himself t'the detriment of who made them. 'Tis a taker."

"That's simple enough. The thief is evil, the farmer is good."

"Your ~~MOTHER~~ ~~deedn't~~ ~~THINK~~ eet was ~~EVIL!~~"

"Very well. Simple then is also this: two people. One builds a shelter for the other, finds food for the other, guards the other from harm. The second takes all that is offered, does nothing but eat, sleep, and make babies."

"Well, there isn't any evil there, just one person taking care of another."

"And then (when need be necessary, the first does slaughter and eat the second."

"Now, *that's* evil!"

"So? The former is a shepherd, the latter a sheep. The sheep accept his care, they must also accept his purpose. Is the shepherd evil? "

"No, obviously not. But you set it up as a trick!"

"You know I ~~HAVE~~ ~~noticed~~ you are ~~IGNORING~~ me."

"No. I set't up *without* your labels so you could judge't free of any other context. And you *failed*. Each obeyed exactly the same form. If your good and evil were as basic as you say, t'should not be so easy t'flip one to the other."

"What are you driving at?"

"Who created the Universe and all the things that live in't? "

"God."

"I ~~THOUGHT~~ eet was ~~UNIVERSES~~ ~~R~~ ~~US!!!~~"

"Not Ishta?"

"Ishta's a diety, but she is not the only one, and she *didn't* create the Universe for she is as much a part of it as anything else. There must be an entity somewhere that got the ball rolling, as it were. There are many different names for Him, but most would know Him as God."

"Very well. Why did God create the Universe? "

"That's been debated by philosophers for ages. No one knows, really."

"~~PRIMARILY~~ eet was so Hee could ~~SCREW~~ people."

"Oh? I do. He did't for some reason of His own. In so doing, all are each of two kinds. One kind rejects Him, and sets about making for each and their own. The other yields t'Him, obeys Him in all things, accepts what He offers, and lives a life of taking. Not so? "

"Yes, that makes sense."

"Someday will God make use of this resource He created. He will harvest His sheep, for if nothing else be certain this is: God *likes* matton. Will He harvest the others? "

"No. Most every religion would tell you they were in Hell. Not just underground, the theological Hell."

"Betrueth. The shepherd is not evil, but the shepherd *also* likes mutton. We do not know the purpose of God, but whatever 'tis, 'tis fueled by the souls of the faithful. So they are mutton to God. Those not faithful are cast aside, and left t'tend for themselves. They are... *left alone*."

"~~SOMETHING~~ you might ~~CONSEDER~~ the next time you meet a happy ~~RAT~~."

Valkenhayn considered that for a long, long time.

"You're saying that *dependence* is wrong? That all should stand on their own?"

"No. Dependence is one way. Independence another. Neither is evil or good, wrong or right. Each has 't's own price and hardships. In the former, one surrenders one's own will. T'get the benefits offered, this is the price which must be paid. And 't'will be collected one day. In the latter one takes responsibility for one's own. Depend on others only so long as 'tis truly altruistic, carrying no price tag, as when a man raises a son, but keep the *in-dependence* always in one's heart.

"I do not chose the shepherd and his sheep at hazard. This is precisely the metaphor offered by most religions. Let God – or His church – take care of you, but you must pay the price they charge. Turn from God, you pay another price, yes, but you remain true t'yourself."

"Yes, but you wind up in Hell!"

"We're ~~ALL~~ going there ~~ANYWAY~~."

"Do you think 'tis bad? I live in Hell. So called *because* the underworld so greatly resembles the legendary Hell of the hereafter. And truly 'tis hellish – 'tis dark, what is not unbearably hot is unbearably cold. We must drill through the rock to find what we need t'survive. All must work. Even the Dark Goddess strives at tasks that are hers, alone. So, Hell, as truly 'tis in *this* world. Tell me of the Hell that *awaits* me."

"Well, we don't know much about the afterlife. Even if there *is* one, really, but we take it on faith. But many religions take an old poem, Infernario, as more-or-less likely to be representative."

"Describe."

"EET involves being ~~KEEDNAPPED~~ by a pair of ~~CRAZY FAIREES~~ and a ~~LUNATIC~~ who doesn't like ~~RATS~~."

"Well, it's a vast pit, terraced levels going down. The higher levels punish lesser sins, the lower levels punish worse."

"A pit is a form of mine, 'tis not? Do the damned work?"

"Well, not according to Dante. They were each punished according to the type of sin."

"If they were punished without being made t'work, t'would be nothing but torture. Is torture evil?"

"Of course!"

"Then WHY do you APPLY EET to RATS!"

"Then why does God do t'?"

"God doesn't do it, people suffer from their sins!"

"Did not God create the Universe? Did He not create Hell?"

"Deed not GOD also create RATS!"

"Well, yes, but he doesn't run it as his personal torture chamber!"

"Think you not? Who rules this place?"

"Most call him Satan. You called him Ahriman."

"So Satan tortures the damned?"

"No. No, according to Dante, Satan himself...is being punished."

"At the behest of God, t'is not?"

"He's suffering for his own sins!"

"Then who tortures him? Who keeps him from climbing out and going on his way?"

"I ~~THEENK~~ eets probably your ~~MOTHER~~"

"You used that one," Valkenhayn said to the rat. To R'nyara he admitted, "I don't know."

"T'can be only one of two things. Either God keeps him there and tortures him, as he does all in Hell, or he remains of his own will or necessity."

"All right. Maybe Satan *likes* being in Hell."

"I'm **SURE** eet ees **PREFERABLE** to **BEEing** near **YOU!**"

"Mayhap Satan likes being in Hell t'the alternative of being in Heaven."

"That seems irrational."

"Oh? Tell me of Heaven."

"Well, that's hard. Everyone has their own interpretation, and all of them pretty vague. I guess most versions I've heard have clouds and angels playing harps and, if you believe Dante, singing eternal praises to God."

"I'd prefer the one weeth the **JEWELS** and the beauteeful **RAT NEEMEN!**"

"Such is the eternal reward? T'sit on a cloud, playing an instrument one has likely never *touched* before, singing praises t'a being that owns your soul, that uses you t'is own purpose and design? That doesn't sound like Heaven t'me. T'sounds like eternal boredom and a single moment of overwhelming fear. An eternity of that would be the most horrible, painful,

depressing existence I could ever imagine. Much rather would I Hell. Hard t'work in a mine, betwixt, but my life is ever my own. I find what I need t'exist, take care of my'elf and my own. I cannot, and never have been able't, understand how your Heaven is a *reward*, nor how your Hell is a *punishment*. Heaven sounds horrible and Hell sounds no worse than our lives here. I do know your Good and your Evil, and of the two, I will throw my'elf into Evil and rejoice when I find my'elf in Hell. Because in the final analysis, *Good* is very bad, and *Evil* not so much."

"I would be the **FIRST** to **SEND** you to **HELL** eef I **COULD**."

They walked on in silence as Valkenhayn tried to reconcile these views. He just couldn't find a way to do it.

"Okay, if my view of Good and Evil isn't right, then tell me what *you* believe."

"All the Darklings know God created the Universe and the life in't for His own purpose, *whatever't* may be. But God *also* wished all t'have free will, so each may choose if they wish t'serve God as God wishes t'use them, or not. T'do this, God created dhri-man – the *adversary* – who seeks t'teach us our choice and school us which t'make. *You* set up dhri-man – or Satan – as God's *enemy*. He *isn't*. He is God's own creation, he does God's will. The takers will choose God – what you call 'Good.' They will take all that is offered, they will exist in a state of ease, and when God wants mutton, they will be that mutton. Or you may follow dhri-man, reject what God offers, take the harder road. Seek the resources you need yourself, use them t'make what you must have, take care of your own. Such is what *you* call 'Evil.' The Darklings chose the harder path, we take care of ourselves and our own, and if we go t'Hell when we die, 'tis but another place where we must do our utmost t'continue t'survive, and a far better place than one where we must spend eternity doing nothing useful, making nothing beautiful, but spend eternity singing praises and playing a harp – *badly*. 'And this is why 'Good' and 'Evil' fail, you cannot describe who or what we are within its framework, and because we are obviously not Good, we must therefore be Evil. Perhaps 'tis so. But we are happy and we love one another. If that be Evil, then Evil I will ever be."

"Don't put on **AIRS**, you aren't **EEVIL**! You are just **ANNAY-ING**!"

They camped later – who knows when? – and pulled a couple of crustaceans out of the water to make a good meal before they settled in for some sleep. But sleep came hard to Valkenhayn. Good – evil. Take –

Make. Obedience – Independence. He saw no way to make them fit together. But he spent a long while trying.

A few crystals, outcroppings of *eunthi* and mushrooms lit their way past the point where the ocean was pouring in to form the origin of the salt river. They reverted to their darkspeak voices through this section, but R'nyara said this area was fairly well built-up, with a non-migrating population. A population of what, she did not specify. This proved to be a startling lapse.

Eventually they came to a fairly large chamber that had obviously been worked. There was a large door, looking like a castle portcullis, complete with defensive barbicans at either side. There was even a drawbridge over a moat – although the increasing heat as they approached was proof that it did *not* contain water. The area was lit by lanterns that were both curiously bright and curiously steady. The portcullis was open, the drawbridge was down – and there was a pair of locals waiting for them.

Valkenhayn's first glimpse of one of them was a shock. It was a tapered cylinder, perhaps five feet high, 2 feet wide at the base rising to a foot wide at the top, where it ended in a globe. It stood on a round platform that seemed to hover an inch or two off the floor. It had three jointed metal limbs about 2/3rd of the way between the base and the globe which were spaced around the body at equal intervals. Just below this was a belt of various devices that encircled the – golem? – none of which made any sense to the Knight. Val couldn't see anything to mark a front or back. The globe was featureless except for three sets of round lenses set equidistant around it. Each set had one red lens, one green one, and one blue one. The individual on the right was painted red with yellow trim, the other was blue with yellow trim.

"They are Metal Masters. They run mines and trade metals with others in the underworld," said R'nyara to the party.

"What are they? Inside, I mean?" Valkenhayn asked in a low voice.

R'nyara shrugged, a motion that would have been entertaining for Val, but which he quite missed as he examined the apparitions before him.

"I don't know," she said.

As they approached the red one glided forward and waited, expectantly. How it accomplished this was a complete mystery.

"Party of three plus two pets for Imri Doon," R'nyara said, in her usual accented Assuran.

"WELCOME. PROCEED FORWARD," it announced in a metallic, echoing voice with a buzzy undertone. She nodded and led the way into the portcullis. They proceeded in silence for a few moments.

"WHAT do you ~~MEAN~~, PET, you elfling BIT..." Scrum suddenly blurted out, and Valkenhayn clamped a hand on his muzzle.

"Quiet!" R'nyara growled. "It's cheaper this way."

"YOU would be LUCKY to have a RAT for a PET!" the rat snarled quietly to R'nyara, after Valkenhayn removed his hand. "I am NOT a PET!"

"You're a pet unless you want t'pay your own fare." Scrum thought that over for a moment.

"I WONDER where I LEFT my COLLAR."

They came to a long counter with another one of the things, this one black with silver trim.

"SERVICE?" it asked in a voice identical with the first.

"Transport to Imri Down. Party of three, two pets, baggage."

"3 GOLD AND 6 SILVERS, PLEASE."

R'nyara counted out the sum, and Valkenhayn realized why there seemed to be so few customers. This was an expensive way to travel!

"DESCEND TO LEVEL 24, LEACH 64. HAVE A NICE TRIP."

"What did it say? I missed that last part," Valkenhayn wanted to know.

"Directions. Let me see. Over there," she said, pointing.

Inside there was a plaza, painfully well-lit with the steady-burning lanterns. There was a large, round, central cage in the middle. Around it wound two intertwined staircases with landings at this level, one marked with an upwards arrow head, the other with a downwards one. Between the landings a door pierced the cage, closed at present. Valkenhayn stepped closer and saw the cage surrounded a vertical shaft. It went down and up farther than he could see from this angle.

Around the perimeter of the room were a number of exits, marked with symbols. There was no one else visible in the plaza, and no activity but a distant gentle hum.

"We're in the original mineshaft," R'nyara said. She looked around at the symbols. "On level 18. We need t'go down."

"HOW can you TELL what those ~~MARKINGS~~ even ~~MEAN~~?" the rat demanded.

"Actually, they're just regular numbers, but the Metal Masters like hexagons, each rune has been distorted t'fit one. See?" She pointed out

“10” in the strange runes. It took a moment, but eventually all agreed they *could* see the number 18.

“What a BIZARRE way to WRITE!”

“Try Kithian sometime. So, downward? We take the stairs?” Valkenhayn asked. She had been stumbling badly earlier – not easy for a creature with fourteen legs – and had a few moments of freezing, unable to move her legs at all.

“I’d rather wait for the platform. Stairs are hard in this form. T’shouldn’t take long.”

“Platform, lass? ‘Tis not something ye can wait for, is it?” McKulluh said, looking around for what she meant.

R’nyara did not respond. She was looking down, with her arms folded, but Valkenhayn could see she was under a great deal of strain, and not just the load she was carrying.

“How bad is it?” he asked her, quietly.

“I don’t feel right. Inside. And...” she stopped.

“And?” he prompted.

“The *rahktar* – ‘tis getting...unpleasantly warm. I thought the...the polymorph was independent...but now I don’t think so. I think I’m...way beyond some limit I...I didn’t know’t had.”

“Damn. I don’t know much about polymorphs, except the ones I’ve seen *always* had time limits,” Valkenhayn said. “But they’re usually potions or gems. I’ve never seen a polymorphing *device*. Are the Metal Masters magic-users? Could we maybe borrow a Tinker?”

“They are very mechanical. They like gears and...levers and such things, but I don’t think they...use magic with their machines. Usually they have...some physical power – falling water...or steam or some...such. I don’t know of a real Tinker...before we reach Imri.”

Runt suddenly cocked his head and looked at the central cage. A moment later, a *whir*-ing noise brought their attention around to it as well. A platform *was* dropping into view. It stopped at floor level, and the cage’s door opened. A single Metal Master was standing on it before some sort of binnacle. It slid out and came to the opening. How it moved was a complete mystery.

“PLATFORM HEADING DOWN,” it said in a voice identical to the others.

Valkenhayn looked at R’nyara and then glanced around at the party.

“Okay. Everybody, get on.”

“I’m NOT getting ON that THEENG!”

Valkenhayn picked up the rat by the scruff of his neck and tossed him into the cage. McKulluh followed under his own power, and the Knight led R'nyara aboard.

"24," R'nyara said.

"ACKNOWLEDGED."

The platform *whir*-ed and began to descend.

"You're a right *git*, you know! *WHY* should I *HELP* you?"

"I saved your life."

"*So you say!*"

"And I'm *paying* you. Do we want to review what you were doing when we found you? And who you *weren't* doing it with?"

"*No!*"

"Alright, then."

"...*git*," the rat muttered.

The platform stopped once at 20 and picked up two more Metal Masters.

"52"

"ACKNOWLEDGED."

"65"

"ACKNOWLEDGED."

"I see they have an almost *Crish* sense of *CONVERSATION*, so they do," McKulluh observed to Valkenhayn in an undertone. The Knight suppressed a smile.

It seemed to take a long time, though it was probably only minutes before...

"LEVEL 24. THANK YOU FOR TAKING PLATFORM 6A."

"You're quite welcome," Valkenhayn said, automatically.

Scrum and McKulluh exited without problems, but R'nyara didn't move.

"R'nyara?"

"I...I can't move...my legs."

Valkenhayn took her elbow and began to pull, gently, and in a moment, R'nyara managed to move. She hesitantly stepped out of the cage into a chamber virtually identical to the one they started from.

The various exits were marked with ranges of numbers. They located the 60 to 70 range and went down that tube, passing branches leading off in groups of ten. At 64 they turned again.

This was a fair walk, perhaps as much as half a mile, going through echoing tubes where they did not encounter another living thing. And as

they proceeded, R'nyara got slower, and slower, though the way was quite smooth.

Gate 64 was, like all the others, deserted. There was a door marked in the Metal Master runes.

"EXPRESS 00 IMRI DOWN DEPARTING 34
00/00/05"

As they watched the 34 changed to a 33.

R'nyara pointed out the handle on the door to Valkenhayn, who stepped up and pulled on it. But rather than swinging out, as he expected, the moment he pulled on it the door slid to the right into the wall with a *whirr* like the platform. As it opened there was a distinct *hssss*.

It was no small task to get R'nyara aboard. She was able to stand, but she was having trouble trying to move her legs, and she was entirely unable to narrow her stance to enter the door. They wound up unloading her into the car, and then McKulluh helped move her legs while Valkenhayn pulled her arms. The counter was down to 05 before they got settled.

The car was cylindrical, about 20 feet long and perhaps eight feet across. Shelves ran on either side the full length of the car, with breaks for the two doors, the one they entered by and the one on the opposite side.

There was another counter inside, and they watched it count down to 00. The numbers disappeared and the door slid shut over the opening. The display showed the runes "000," the car lurched and they felt it begin to pick up speed. This continued for several minutes before the runes changed again to "000/22." As they watched, the 22 turned to 21.

"Looks like we'll be in this for a while. Maybe you should shift back?" Valkenhayn said.

"Can't. Been...trying. Can't even bend...my legs t'try t'sit. Tarq's inner legs...aren't really meant t'do that."

"Okay. Where'll this thing leave us?"

"Express won't stop...before Imri Down. That's an (underworld town)... directly under Imri. Tisn't part of Imri...really. The Empire doesn't run't - or even know about't. Need t'climb...from there."

"How long for the climb?"

"Don't know...how t'answer. Time, distance, don't...have the same meaning in the...the underworld they do above."

"Damn. How long in sleeps? Meals?"

"Two sleeps, 1 qress. Four or five meals."

"What about the town itself? Who lives there? Can we get some help?"

"Can we get some BEER?"

"Not *now*, Scrum! R'nyara?"

"Tis a gargoyles hive. Fairly large. Two, three hundred...worker caste. Two score or so...royals," she said. She was beginning to sweat. "They send workers up...every day t'work. Bring back down...whatever the royals tell them t'get...when they're done...for the day."

"I take it they'd not have any magic-users? Tinkers?"

R'nyara laughed, weakly.

"Gargoyles? Not a chance."

"Wait – you said they go up 'every day' didn't you?"

"I did."

"So they can get up and down *quickly* – like an hour or so?"

"I don't know *how*."

"Do you know how long *this* trip takes?" Valkenhayn asked, tightly.

"Yes. I just don't know...how t'measure't. I never...understood that," she said. "Much longer t'climb than this trip will take, though."

"I'm guessing it measures a lot less than two sleeps and four or five meals," Valkenhayn said. "They have a faster way to get up. We'll need to use that and get you up as soon as we can."

"**DESERTION**" the runes announced as they felt the car glide to a halt.

Valkenhayn had to bend R'nyara's legs by main force to get her through the door. By the time they were out, the door was sliding partially shut and then opening again over and over while the runes said "**CLEAR DOOR**" alternating with "**CAR DEPART**."

It took more time to pull out the treasure and supplies. Valkenhayn put some back on R'nyara, but distributed the rest between Scrum and McKulluh and taking the lion's share himself.

"**What HAPPENED to your LAST SLAVE! DIE of OVER WORK!**"

"Will you stop your *complaining!*" Valkenhayn snapped.

"**Not until dee DAY I DIE!**"

"Keep it up and that could be *today!*" the Knight said in a dangerous tone.

This platform was very different, it was just a cave with a perfectly square, curved wall with the door to the car on it. There was a gargoyle crouched by the only visible exit, but the light went away entirely when the door shut, and they heard the hum as the car departed.

“IYAI ΔOWM dɛɣ wɛkOɣɛɛr,²⁰” came a gravelly voice in the darkness.

Valkenhayn said, "Does anyone speak Gargoyle?"

"AAAHHH! LET me CHECK my LIST!!!"

"Shut up, Scrum! SARZOULE, do you speak RICHIAN?"

“ገጠጥ ባፀናህ በሺህ ሆረህበፀማል” came the gravelly voice again.

"Ní thuigim."²¹ McKulluh said.

"ᠰᠤᠵᠢ ᠶ᠋ᠣᠨ ᠲᠦᠭᠡᠷ ᠴᠢᠳᠤᠯᠤᠰ," came the voice once more.

"WHAT kind of LANGUAGE is THAT?"

"Well, it doesn't speak Gaelic," came McKulluh's voice.

"Elfling. Try elfling," said R'nyara, weakly.

"Can ye handle *elplins*, ye rocky Omdhah?! " McKulluh rapped out.

"Yes," the grinding voice said.

"Well, ye might've tried *that* forst!"

"That was a lot shorter, what'd it say?" Valkenhayn asked, as he felt around for R'nvara.

"It said 'yes'. What d'ye want t'ask?" McKulluh said, switching back.

"We have someone very sick, we need a magic-user to help, can they please get us to Imri by the quickest method they can?"

"The young lady is stuck in a polymorph, we need a magic-user to help! Can ye set us up to Imri fast?"

"Follow me," and with a noise like dragging stones over cobbles, the creature started to move.

With their experience in walking the dark, they had no trouble following their noisy guide. With more room to move, R'nyara managed to more or less stagger along, so long as Valkenhayn kept pulling her.

The hive was rocky, indifferently finished, and very irregular. These factors made pulling R'nyara along a real chore, although she seemed to get a bit better as they went, as if she were loosening up. Perhaps it was just the enforced stillness of the car.

The gargoyle led them to a round room, maybe ten paces across, whose ceiling was shrouded in gloom. A single double-wick candle provided entirely too little light, even to their dark-adapted eyes. There was a large woven basket here, big enough for three or four gargoyles. It was attached to ropes that ascended into the gloom. There were a number of rocks tied to it as well.

"ENTER the basket," the gargoyle said.

20 Gargoyle: "Imri Down Clan Welcome"

21 Erish: "I don't understand." (knee higimm)

They did so, Valkenhayn having to heave R'nyara in by main strength. Runt leaped to the top of one side and perched there like a giant, carnivorous parrot. The gargoyle joined them, and untied several of the stones. The basket gave a gentle lurch, and began to ascend.

They were quickly consigned to gloomy darkness. Time dragged. R'nyara's labored breathing was all the noise they heard. Valkenhayn was beginning to wonder how many sleeps and meals *this* would take when they heard voices – *human* voices – speaking Rithian.

"Another one," came a voice above them in the darkness.

"*Shut up, fool! Get ready!*"

With that much warning, Valkenhayn had his sword out well before he felt the lurch – but they didn't attack the basket. They landed somewhere above them. There was a lot of rustling, a subdued cursing, and one screech of pain followed by a string of profanities.

Valkenhayn felt the basket slow, then stop. A moment later he felt it begin to drift downward.

"Damn, they must be messing with whatever is lifting us! McKulluh, tell the pilot to land us as quick as he can, before we drop too much farther!"

"*ƧarƧoyle! Can ye get us t'che nearest landinƧ?*" McKulluh asked.

"Yes. Not know it, though," their pilot replied.

"*DeƧƧars can't be choosers. Just keep us from plummecinƧ!*"

They heard the gargoyle doing things in the basket. R'nyara again lit up her scrying crystal, providing light just as the basket jolted to a stop on a rocky outcrop. It very nearly tumbled right off and continued to fall, but their pilot evidently expected it, and succeeded in snagging a rock and holding them up.

Whoever had attacked their conveyance could no longer be heard. The basket was clearly going up no further. Behind the ledge was a dark cave mouth.

They managed to get out of the basket, bag and baggage and into the cave. R'nyara was able to help, but she was clearly very stiff and now showing continuous pain.

"Our thanks for the help. Good luck with landing," Valkenhayn told the gargoyle. McKulluh translated as the Knight held out a silver coin, but the gargoyle shook its head.

"*Not needed. Apologies for attack. Fare well. Good luck,*" McKulluh heard. He translated back as it let go and the basket dropped

into the darkness. As it fell, several large balloons with bug bodies at the bottom of each came into view, apparently the lift apparatus.

"What were *those* things?"

"Floater targets...I think. Rare in this strata, now...but the Gargoyles bring...some up from deeper," R'nyara said in a strained voice. "They must've been poachers...those men. Floater silk...highly sought after." She winced again. "We should get moving...while I still can."

"Yes. Save your breath," Valkenhayn said in concern.

They soon left the little light they had from the shaft behind and started into the cave. Their darkwalking training was very useful now, the way was rough – *very* rough. This area was also a *living* cave, they had to thread their way around stalagmites and columns, the flowstone underfoot made the way treacherous.

But they were stymied by a low crawl. R'nyara just wasn't flexible enough to clear it.

Valkenhayn cursed to himself.

"R'nyara, pull out the crystal again."

She did so without comment. It was still glowing, but she wasn't looking well. Her jet-black skin was shiny with sweat, and the whites of her eyes were yellowing. She seemed to be having trouble breathing.

But the crystal's glow wasn't enough to pierce the gloom.

"Can you make it brighter?" he asked her urgently.

"Can't...can't focus, I feel...very sick," she panted. "Spell already on. Just...command't closer."

"Closer? Closer to what?"

"The...sun."

"How can I *do* that? R'nyara? Stay with me, girl!"

She stayed on her feet, but she didn't respond.

"Did she say ~~dee~~ CRYSTAL was already ACTEEVE!"

"Scrum...yeah, that's what she said."

"~~Have focus closer to sun~~ Dag!" the Rat rasped.

"What the...?"

Suddenly the cave was flooded with an intense yellow glare.

Shielding his eyes, Valkenhayn snapped, "What did you *do*?!"

"You ~~WANTED~~ eet to beee BRIGHTER Now eet EES! So GET US OUT of here!"

Valkenhayn peered about and realized they were at the base of a chimney. It would be a nearly vertical climb for at least twenty feet to the first bend.

He pulled his backpack around and extracted his climbing rope. This he fashioned into a sling he put around R'nyara. The other end he tied to his own waist.

"Right. Scrum, take the light. McKulluh, you see if you can scout ahead – keep your repeater handy! Scrum will stay *close* behind you," he said, with a significant look at the rat. "Warn me of anything I'm going to have trouble getting through."

"I'll do that. C'mon ye rat thief. 'Tis useful you might be yet," McKulluh said as he began to ascend. The rat followed.

"OH, YES, COMPLIMENTED by an obnoxious LEPRECHAUN! NOW my day ees COMPLETE!"

Valkenhayn hauled himself up, taking up the slack slowly until he felt R'nyara's full weight on him. Between her targataur form, the treasure and assorted stuff she was carrying and his own load, he was comfortably over his own unburdened weight. He set his teeth and climbed. But he wasn't going to leave the treasure behind – not after this much effort.

Beyond the first bend the chimney slowly tilted over into a tunnel, then emptied out into a large slab room. The usual cave decorations were only on one side, the rest looked like an ancient cave in. There was only one exit. Right on the other side of the huge targ web.

Scrum spotted the web and doubled back on himself, sliding behind Valkenhayn who, not seeing this, proceeded to drag R'nyara right over the hapless rat, who dropped the crystal.

There was a delicate tinkle, and the light went out. As it did, McKulluh spotted the targ itself in the web just as it began to move.

"WILL you WATCH where you're GOING? I'm SLINKING here!"

"Scrum, you dropped the *light*, dammit!" With his dark-adapted eyes completely compromised by the bright crystal, the cave had plunged into complete blackness.

"I'm blind here," Valkenhayn said, with real annoyance in his tone.

"Ye want to keep it down, lad. It's *company* we have in here, so we do," McKulluh said, quietly. Valkenhayn heard the Leprechaun draw his sword and immediately did the same.

Valkenhayn tried to still his breathing and listen. He couldn't hear anything over the Rat's frightened panting.

"Shut up, Scrum! I'm trying to *listen*!" he snapped.

Silence descended. In a moment he could only hear the sound of his own blood moving through his ears.

Then came a stealthy, dry scrape. Then another. Then McKulluh cried out.

"By all the Kings in Tāral" he expostulated, stepping hastily back. Something large and soft had just been shoved into him.

"What happened?" Valkenhayn grated.

"It's okay I am. Hold tight," McKulluh said, trying to feel what had touched him. It felt like an oblong sphere of some soft, dry material, and it had no other distinguishing characteristics he could see. Or feel, in this case.

"I'm not sure what 'tis, lad, but 'tisn't the targ itself," he breathed.

"~~Somebody's~~ **COMING!**" Scrum said from behind R'nyara.

Valkenhayn made out the sound of something scuffing against rock. A moment later, someone opened a lantern beyond the web – just a sliver, but enough to see the targ still in its web.

"Who's there?" came a feminine voice. "You're trespassing! Only *we* have the warrant to be here!"

The voice sounded quite self-assured, but also quite young.

"We're not here voluntarily," he said, wearily. "We were coming up from Imri Down when our balloon was attacked by poachers. We're just trying to get *out* of here. My name's...Valkenhayn. The Leprechaun is McKulluh, the...person...behind me is R'nyara. Oh, and we have a rat with us."

"~~LAST but never LEAST~~ you ungrateful ~~WRETCH!~~ And the ~~NAME~~ **SCRUM!**"

There was a short pause, followed by the girl's voice again. Quietly she said, "Okay. Ed, give us enough light to see the whole room, and try to keep it off of 226, remember how light-sensitive he is with his bad eye."

The light brightened as it turned to one side leaving the targ lurking in the darkness. Though they could now make out the rest of the room clearly, the two newcomers were quite invisible behind it.

"Valkenhayn?" came the girl's voice again. "Swear you're not poaching, please?"

"I *swear* we're *not* poaching...poaching *what*? What's there to poach in here, anyway? Or are you talking about cooking eggs?"

He heard her chuckle. "If you don't know, then I guess I can trust you. Ed, pick up 226's offering, please? Valkenhayn – and company – you can follow us out, okay?"

"That's *absolutely* okay with me," Valkenhayn said, grateful for having bumped into what sounded like the only halfway reasonable person he'd heard from in days.

"Tal, I can't find the bolt," came a young man's voice from the web.

The light panned around to reveal a young man, *very* lightly dressed, standing in the web, with a wand stuck into the waistband of his – briefs. He had a hand on the targ itself and seemed to be examining its face.

“I can’t believe it’s not there, Ed. He’s been dead reliable since he gave up trying to defend.”

“I know, Sis, but it’s not here. 226 doesn’t seem too bad, his face is healing nicely.”

“That’s good. The offering must’ve fallen out of the web.”

“What are ye looking for, lass?” McKulluh asked.

“226 doesn’t like to fight, so he makes an extra bolt of silk to try to buy us off – which, mysteriously, *somehow* always works – but it must have rolled out of the web.”

“I’m thinkin’ I have it here. I believe yer beastie shoved it at me,” he said.

The light panned around again to reveal McKulluh, who raised a hand to shield his eyes, standing next to a bolt of silk larger than he was.

“Sorry,” the girl – Tal? – said as she swung the light away. “Ed, did you see that?”

“Yes. No problem. What was your name again, Leprechaun? McKilly?”

“McKulluh.”

“McKulluh, sorry. I’m coming in your direction, let me know if I’m getting close to you, I don’t want to step on you by accident.”

“Oh, ‘tis thoughtful ye are. Ye can stay right there, and I’ll roll the stuff toward ye.”

“That works,” he said.

There was a sound of Leprechaun’s boot hitting a bolt of silk, followed by Ed’s remark, “Got it.”

“Does 226 need any attention, Bro?”

“I don’t think so, I didn’t see any sign of infection.”

“WHY don’t you just KEEL the CURSED THEENG!!!”

“Because,” said the girl’s voice, “If we do *that* he won’t make any more *silk* for us. There is a direct correlation between the amount of silk we get from a targ and how alive they are,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Which, to her, it undoubtedly *was*. Valkenhayn belately realized who these two had to be.

“Tal – apTarg...right?”

“Do I know you?”

“No, no reason you should. But you folks were going to be one of my first stops in Imri. I have to place an order. A rather *large* order.”

“Great. Let’s get you to the surface and you can talk with Father.”

"That would suit me right down to the...I mean, *up*, right *up* to the ground," Valkenhayn said. "But I'm afraid R'nyara is in a bad way. Could I get some help moving her?"

"Sure." The lantern moved closer and Val made out the trim form of a willowy, young lady with a stunning figure clad as lightly as her brother – and carrying a battle-axe. Yes, that *was* definitely a double-bitted battle-axe. Sharp on only one bit. *She* would be an interesting date.

"Strange choice of weapon for someone like you, isn't that?" he asked as he turned to R'nyara.

"No, why? *What is that thing?*"

"It's a targataur. Half elfling, half targ."

"Cool." The girl swung her axe across her back and knelt.

"This is R'nyara?" she asked.

"Yes. That handle, there in her sporran-whatsit, is the source of the spell, but it's malfunctioning somehow."

She bent over the elfling.

"R'nyara? Can you hear me?"

R'nyara moaned softly.

"*Ow!* By the *Gods*, this thing is just short of bursting into *flames!*" Tal said as she examined the *ruhktar*. "You're right, she *is* in a *very* bad way. Ed, can you do something for her – get her through the polymorph?"

Ed came over and also examined R'nyara.

"She's stuck right in the middle of a 'morph, it looks like! *Gods*, that must hurt! Are you awake?" he asked. R'nyara made a non-committal sound.

"Valkenhayn says it's that thing doing it. Can you force it to finish?"

"A '*morph*? From a malfunctioning *device*? *Gods*, no, I'm not qualified for *that!* I suggest I knock her out and then we all move her."

"Are you *sure* you can't just – cut it off or something?"

"I'm not a *Tinker*, Sis. I don't mess with *gadgets*, if you don't *know* what they're all about they're a *great* way to end up dead. Or worse. Knock her out, then get her some *real* help!"

"Okay. Do it."

"*Paralysis. dag!*"

R'nyara suddenly relaxed.

"That'll spare her the pain of moving her. We need to get her to the Magician's Guild. Like, yesterday," Ed said.

"Okay," Tal said, "Everyone muckle on. Time's a-wastin'."

"Gee, thanks, *Dad*," Ed remarked.

The path to the surface was wild, crazy, convoluted, and navigated so quickly that Valkenhayn could later recall virtually nothing of the route. As they went they passed through cave after cave after cave of targs – big targs, little targs, targs that climb on rocks, targs of every variety the Knight had ever heard of, many more he had not, and even one or two he was certain he never wanted to again. The girl, Tal apTarg, talked with her brother, called Ed, about each one as they moved over, around, or through.

“891, Ed. We collected him – what? Last month wasn’t it?” she asked her brother.

“Yeah. Third trip. He’ll still be rebuilding, and he’ll be ticked.”

“Yeah, figures. We’ll go by Ayar, then,” Tal replied.

“Ayar High or Ayar Low? High would get us up faster but we haven’t plotted it since we reopened N40. Low takes us out of our way.”

“It does, but I think we can pull her through the rubble crawl that connects Ayar High to the Vorfin Chimney.”

“Tal, that’ll put us through 291’s cave. We just did them last week, they’ll still be mad.”

“I am much less concerned with angry ant-targs than I am with rammers. Besides, we’re not collecting, they’ll duck the light. We don’t need to be subtle, here, Bro.”

“Good point. Low it is.”

And so it went. Though they were speaking Assuran and in accents not too different from what Valkenhayn was used to in Imri, they might just as well have been using another language entirely. But, somehow, they seemed quite comfortable discussing routes through the three-dimensional maze of caves, caverns, crawls, chimneys, rooms, clefts, pits, and various other underground features, and just as familiar with their inhabitants, which either one seemed to be able to recall without hesitation based on names and numbers that meant exactly *nothing* to Valkenhayn’s party but which seemed natural to them. He wouldn’t have wanted to fight these people in these caves, though. They sounded and acted like the whole place was just a root cellar with a few spiders here and there. They were *completely* unperturbed by the local wildlife.

“That’s 641, hear the scuff? He’s out of his usual hunt area,” Ed remarked at one point.

“Oh, *criminally*, he’d only be doing that if he was *flushed* somehow. Another poacher! Valkenhayn, could you take R’nyara for a moment?”

“Sure.”

“High or low, Bro?”

“Definitely high.”

There was a pause while they waited in the darkness.

“Oh, yeah, there he is...”

Pow!

There was a squeal of pain and a scrabbling sound that faded rapidly.

“Did you hurt him?”

“Not even a head hit, Ed, just enough of a shot to the chest to remind him not to hunt people and that he would *really* like to stay in his own hunt area. Okay, I’ve got her again, Valkenhayn. Up and to the right.”

And so it went.

The caves were nearly always dark, but the two young apTargs seemed as comfortable darkwalking as R’nyara herself, but as they neared the surface they began to encounter the odd mushroom clump or *eunthi* outcropping providing a little light. These caves were also pretty moist, and they stopped once at a little waterfall for drafts of ice cold water before resuming their trek.

They finally – who knows how long it took? – came to, of all things, a flight of steps with a lantern hanging by it. They went up the stairs, found a heavy metal door with a big knocker on it, and used it to knock – loudly. Then they waited.

A few minutes later they heard someone on the other side – there was a muffled *clang!* and the door swung open with a subdued moan. There was an older man standing behind it.

“What’s wrong? Are you all right? Why are you back so quick?”

“We have company, Father,” Tal said. “Valkenhayn, can we rotate her or squash her legs in or something? She won’t go through the door the way we have her.”

Ed broke in, “Careful, there. Bending her legs will hurt, and might bring her out of the spell. Tipping her should be safe enough.”

“*Oh! Yes! Let’s ALL play ‘Tip the TARGATAUR!’ What FUN THAT would be!*”

“Shut up, Scrum,” Valkenhayn said, tiredly.

They found themselves in a perfectly ordinary basement. On one side were stacked barrels of ten gallons or so. There were sacks of something stacked opposite them. Bits of random debris and equipment that would be appropriate to any cellar were spotted around. The only things out of place were the big metal door, which they now swung shut and double-barred, and a targ about eight feet long sitting in a corner.

“That thing isn’t alive, is it?” he asked, pointing to it.

Tal looked in the indicated direction and said in a confused voice, “What thing?”

“The targ.”

“What tar – oh! No, that’s a practice golem. Someday we have to get around to fixing him.”

They had arrived in Imri.

13 MAGICAL EMERGENCIES

Trother apTarg – “Father” – summoned an ambulance, which arrived within minutes. Valkenhayn was not sure how he did it, and he forgot to ask when the ambulance itself arrived. It was over thirty feet long, and had no horses or other creatures to draw it. It moved on its own – probably magically, though why it belched steam and smoke, he had no clue. It was a three-piece arrangement, the ambulance itself was simply an enclosed cart at the back of the train that was being towed by the noisy machine at the front. In the middle was a much shorter, open cart heaped with shiny black rocks. The front machine had a cab in the rear, a long cylinder in the front, two large wheels and three small wheels on each side – two small, two large, and one small going front to back. The large wheels were connected by rods to each other and to some sort of plumbing along either side of the contraption. There was more plumbing and a chimney on the top of it. It sounded like it had every intention of blowing itself to hell and back again when it was in motion. Parked, it just gave off an ominous hissing and an occasional mechanical-sounding cough.

But the people running it seemed to know what they were doing. They got R’nyara onto a stretcher with wheels, loaded her into the back cart, along with a Healer, a couple of Eeyemtees – *what* an Eeyemtee was, no one explained – and, thank goodness, some sort of magic-user who seemed to know what she was doing. She gave him an address where they were taking her, they all got into the back cart – which worried Valkenhayn as it seemed to leave no one to *drive* the thing – until Trother pointed out the “Engineer” who was still in the cab with his “Fireman.” Presumably, one or the other actually steered it, he was none too clear on who all these people were, and the scene was rather hectic. Especially when they drew a crowd. The fact that they apparently expected the thing was so *likely* to burst into flames that they kept a *fireman* aboard rather disturbed him.

After the ambulance left, Trother offered to keep Runt while they went to the Magician’s Guild to see about R’nyara. Runt seemed quite friendly with them – especially the girl, Tal – so he thankfully accepted the offer.

“I need to talk with you at some length later on, when I get this squared away, so I’ll be back soon. But it is much appreciated.”

Since he had no way to carry their treasure – and because they were going to give a lot of it to the apTargs anyway, Valkenhayn also accepted an offer to store his treasure with them until he could decide what to do with it. The apTarg compound had vaults for storing very valuable silk,

they could also store his treasure, likely with nearly as much security as the apLion Bank itself.

Bisral had been different from what he remembered, but it was at least recognizable. There was very little recognizable about Auriana, Imri's capital city. To the contrary, if it were not for R'nyara's and McKulluh's assurance it *was* Imri, he would've called anyone claiming it a liar.

It looked like the entire city had been rebuilt several times by several nations using design ideas invented by autistic, drug-addled geniuses with a very poor sense of color. There were only two features he recognized once he stepped outside the apTarg compound – the bay, which was still in the center, and the vast shelf against the far wall of the massive cavern where Cloughload, Imri's dragon, still held court. The dragon looked at him as he turned his own eyes in his direction and nodded in a cordial manner – exactly as if they had chatted in the street just yesterday.

Greetings, Caerleon. You are a hard one to predict.

"Am I? R'nyara didn't think so." Valkenhayn turned to follow the directions to the Magician's Guild.

That is not surprising, considering how many cats she's killed.

"Again with the cat," he commented.

Using the Low Road was inspired. Silly me. I was watching the ships.

"R'nyara's idea. You were expecting me?"

I have slightly more insight into Evenshade's plans than your own species might. I am also more sensitive to the magic and psionics in use. I was aware when the plan was put into motion, though I cannot say I had a grasp of the details of it all. Evenshade can be a very dangerous and very subtle opponent. Admittedly, none of this required any great perspicacity on my part. It was hard to miss when the sky-jammers arrived for their refit.

"The sky...you mean *Semaj*...you *knew* about them?"

I suspected. Their connection to these events goes deep. I have not yet fathomed it. I never guessed they would head for the volcano. A failure of my imagination, them diving into that...so I failed to ask my crystal.

"Let's face it, not a lot of people *would* have anticipated that. So they are *still* tangled up in this?"

There seems little doubt. Your Earth rune could not bind any of them to the Quest since the other runes had already locked up your foursome, but it could – and must have – made some *other* kind of

link to bring them back. They show up constantly in various futures I can see.

“Too bad for them. It looks like things are heating up. aardvark”

No doubt. Your ability to walk the Low Road is unexpected. It presents options that may be of much greater help than you know right now.

“She’s a good teacher, it turns out.”

Congratulations on being accepted to Xikchalic’s school, by the way.

“Uh...thanks. I gather that that’s inevitable.”

Unless you care to investigate the science of paradox.

“No, no, I think I’ll put my efforts elsewhere,” he said with a wry smile. “Things that scare Sorcerers make me nervous.”

Understandable. Do not fear for your Darkling girlfriend. Caerleon. I am quite sure the Guild can help her.

“I hope your confidence is justified. And she’s not my girlfriend.”

Of course. No matter. Satisfy yourself. We will talk further anon, you and I, and, though it will be no small task, we will also get you some time with the Princess.

“I thought Imri was being run by a Regent.”

It is. For the moment.

That sounded ominous.

Valkenhayn remembered Auriana – also called Imri City or the Mountain City – as a very busy place, but his memories were a mere *shadow* of the furious activity going on all around. Aside from the traffic – foot and otherwise – there were thriving businesses open, street performances – one plaza had a Sorcerer bringing people from the crowd around him up to touch a palantir he had set up on a pedestal. There were open-air markets hawking foods – and things that were *claimed* to be food. There were trinkets of various sorts, artwork – some of which one could have the artist do while they were waiting. One large store they passed apparently specialized in small animal golems programmed to do various jobs. And those were just the things he could recall later on.

Magic was one thing – that had always been a part of his life. Imri always had it, too. But the *machines*! The ambulance had not been a one-off, they were *everywhere*, doing all *kinds* of jobs. He spotted a small one running a machine in a Tailor’s shop he passed. The Tailor was using it to make some garment rather than sewing it. The popcorn vendor had another tiny one in his cart doing *something* with the popper, though he couldn’t even *guess* what it was.

There were more powered carts – thankfully, smaller than the ambulance, but frighteningly faster and more maneuverable – dodging the foot traffic. Some of them made noises similar to the ambulance and also sported chimneys, though they were usually one, or at most two-piece affairs. Other vehicles ran nearly silently, without chimneys or the sound of machinery except for a steady *crumpety-crump* sound. These almost always had large and rather gruesome-looking bug's heads mounted on them – usually as hood ornaments, but sometimes elsewhere. One expensive-looking machine had the head on top, in the middle, surrounded by glass. It was made of beautifully stained and finished wood with brass accents. Most of the others were much plainer.

The streets were mostly set up for the carts in the middle and foot traffic tended to stay on a pair of smaller, higher roads on either side – except when packs of people rushed across the road in between the carts.

The nature of the people was different, too. He remembered Imri as pretty much a *human* enclave – a couple of different races of them, but all human, by and large. Even elves were rare, and he couldn't recall seeing any of the smaller faeries.

Now they were everywhere. In fact, you almost had to look twice to spot the humans. There were elves, elflings, Leprechauns and kobolds, dwarves of several different races, gargoyles, a number of very different-looking feline races, two different kinds of bipedal reptiles, and a shocking number of different kinds of huge bugs as large as a man – or even larger, as he discovered when one the size of a mammoth lumbered by in the roadway pulling an enclosed cart with another one of the engines on top of it. It didn't have any sort of driver, either, he hoped the beast hadn't wandered away. Among the bugs were a number of the type that apparently supplied heads for the quiet machines, here walking around intact. As yet. They didn't *seem* concerned or taken aback.

The air had glowing clouds of pixies and other minis flying about, plus the occasional single. One of these floated past his nose as he looked about, making him flinch back. She was a little smaller than the kind he was used to in Krithala, though still human-like, though sporting *two* pairs of dragonfly-like wings instead of the one pair – or one butterfly pair – he was used to.

There were a bewildering variety of centaurs – human plus horse dominated, frequently drawing rickshaws, they were nearly as common as humans – or even more common if you counted among their number the smaller elfling plus some kind of big cat centaurs and the rarer, but not difficult-to-find elf plus deer (sort of) centaur. But, mixed into the already

heterogeneous crowd were a sprinkling of *really* unusual species. He saw a Naga – elf plus snake centaur, and some sort of bipedal-reptile plus giant monitor lizard he had never heard of. There was even a *snailataur* – human front, snail rear – a species he'd heard stories of, but which he never thought might actually exist. The other centaurs he could more easily buy because the creatures involved were at least both *vertebrates*, but exactly *how* do you mix a vertebrate human and a land-going giant mollusc? *That* species had to be the result of some *horrible* lab accident. Yet, here one was, arguing the price of plantains. Snailataurs like plantains, apparently. Who knew?

Finally there were the rare, but real, real *weirdies*. The crystalline thing carrying a parasol he saw gliding through a small bazaar was one. And even *that* didn't seem to attract much attention. The only one he saw that seemed to have attracted a crowd was a huge feather-covered snake with eagle wings, colored in brilliant blues, yellows, and reds, and shining with so much light it was hard to make out even that much. That one he stopped to watch for a moment. At first he thought it had arms and hands obscured by the cloud of silvery sparkles in front of it, but it turned out, the silvery sparkles were all there was. They seemed to move things around as the snake wanted.

Sometimes machines walked among the crowd as if they were a part of it. Valkenhayn had seen golems before, and had spotted them in the throng already – but these weren't golems. They were noisy, no two were ever alike, and although most acted like slaves or servants, there were at least some that argued with vendors like any ordinary citizen might.

But what took him most aback was the slavery.

He suspected some of the people in the crowd – almost entirely a handful of different human races – were different. He thought maybe convicts, or public punishment for something. Slowly he began to realize they *definitely* were *slaves*. Some were naked, most were clothed in rough-spun material he wouldn't have used to make a grain sack and not much of it, but all wore chains around their necks, and most had chains of one sort or another on other parts of their bodies, most often linking their ankles so they couldn't run. Although they did not go near it, he passed a parapet that let him look down into a commercial area near the bay and saw what could only have been a slave auction going on.

Imri had *never* had slaves. They had been positively militant about it when Valkenhayn first visited, and it was something that he had always admired about them because slavery was *so* common elsewhere in the world.

This attitude was not entirely absent. Though anger and resentment was never aimed at the slaves themselves, more than a few times he overheard some remark about the slaves, the slavers, or the slave trading, and gathered that this was apparently a recent phenomena – at least since the death of the previous Emperor – and was a powerfully sore point with a *lot* of people. Sentiment toward the Regent seemed to be deeply split. He apparently had a lot of *very* enthusiastic supporters, but he also had some very, very bitter enemies. Based on the respective attitudes of these two groups toward the slave trade, Valkenhayn quickly found his sympathies gravitating toward the man's enemies. It appeared the Regent was connected into, and profiting from, the slave trading pretty deeply. Despite the wealth this brought – and the sheer *activity* of the place argued for that – there was a definite undercurrent of anger to be felt. Cloughload's comment about his talking to the Princess was starting to take on a, shall we say, much more *political* cast. He was – or at least hoped to be – a head of state before this was over, assuming the quest didn't kill him, which it probably would. These were very much the kind of issues he was just *asking* to deal with. Not as attractive as the simple adventuring life, for sure, but then, no one could do *that* forever.

Imri was definitely in trouble. How much, how dire, and how soon it might come to a head were much more difficult questions to answer. It might well be he would have to chose a side. *Which* side he would choose already seemed like a foregone conclusion.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world to get lost, but the Magician's Guild was not a building one *could* miss very easily. It took up an entire city block, straddling the palace and administrative zone and a commercial area. It was square, at least five stories high, topped by a dome that added another three floors, at least, and was ringed with a quartet of minarets that shone like gold. Another minaret topped the dome, rising higher than the others.

There was also air traffic, Valkenhayn saw. As he lost and then regained his way to the large thoroughfare called "Wessermee" he saw more giant bugs flying this way and that in a pattern not unlike the roads below them. Some were mounted, others seemed to be carrying parcels. He saw a ten foot long bee land by a crowd of working-men who opened the parcel it carried and began sharing out food. Relieved of its burden, the bee flew off again.

Above the bug level were other flying creatures. A number of smaller dragons and wyverns seemed to have a level of their own. Above them was another level that looked to be less-used, where he spotted several eagle-

like tarns and then – interestingly – a squad of et-numundie bearing soldiers.

That was interesting because as far as he knew, only *Lakoshans* routinely kept and worked with the giant, wasp-like bugs. He had not expected to find Lakoshans in Imri for Vindolonda lay between them, and the loss of Krithala, Vindolonda's largest kingdom, to the dragon had effectively cut them off. Did this mean they had restored contact somehow, or were they immigrants or refugees? He asked McKulluh and Scrum about it.

"BUGS are BUGS! Who CARES where they COME from?"

"Shut yer gob and cop on ye thieving lout. Let me think...I was last here about 600 years ago, give or take a century. Aye, it *is* busier than I remember, but I'm sure I never saw Lakoshan bugs flyin' around ere this. Do ye think they may be usin' the Low Road? Or maybe the Metal Masters have a car that goes there? I never knew there were so many ways to get here."

"The Low Road would mean a walking caravan, unless there were ways a lot roomier than the ones we took. And one of those cars wouldn't hold very much. But either way *might* allow them to maintain some sort of diplomatic contact. That would be a *huge* leg up for us, I think," Valkenhayn observed. "And as for how many ways there are to reach this place, I'd be willing to bet now that there are more we *don't* know about."

They got lost anyway. Several times. Finally, Valkenhayn hailed a young, fair, silvery-blond, elfling messenger girl with her slate and hired her to pilotfish them to the Guild. It was well worth the silver shilling she asked. She got them there far quicker than he could've ever thought possible, but for the love of the Goddess herself, he would never be able to retrace the route she took them on. And he was pretty sure they had passed through *someone's* back yard on the way. The need to climb a fence along the way also suggested this was not an approved route.

The Magician's Guild had a wide entrance, and quite a lot of foot traffic going in and out. They entered the lobby, and as Valkenhayn looked around he spotted a sign – white, removable letters on a black background, obviously changeable. Valkenhayn and McKulluh burst out laughing as they read it.

**WELCOME VALKENHAYN AND PARTY!
EMERGENCY SERVICES ON LEVEL 0
NEXT FLOOR DOWN. STAIRS TO RIGHT.
RAT WILL NOT TAKE SHINY OBJECTS.**

Scrum sputtered, **"WHAT do they MEAN by THAT? I DIDN'T come HERE to bee INSULTED!"**

"Really? Where *do* ye go to get insulted?" asked McKulluh, grinning.

"I suspect there *might* be some Sorcery going on here. Call it a hunch," Valkenhayn chuckled. "I gather you are known here, Scrum."

"I can't see **HOW** I have **NEVER BEEN** here **BEFORE** een my **LIFE!**"

"Sure," the Knight agreed.

The lobby was large but well-marked using symbols whose meaning could easily be guessed. They found the stairs easily enough and started down them.

"I will **LEAVE** the **ELFLING** to **YOU** two! I'm going to amuse **MYSELF** for a beet. **MAYBE** get up on some **NEWS**. **YOU** can peek me up **when you**."

The stairs ended, bringing them to a large corridor where a permanent sign noted <**LIBRARY** to the left and **INFIRMARY**> to the right. Underneath the latter was written **Emergency Services**> in smaller letters. Underneath the former was a hand lettered sign recently tacked up which read "*Rat will not attempt to enter library again.*"

McKulluh snorted and looked away, and Valkenhayn rubbed his forehead to hide his smile and said, "I *think* you'd better stay with us. You wouldn't want to get *lost* in here, would you?"

"They **THEENK** themselves so bloody **SMART!** The **GITS!** Those **SCROLLS** were just **LYING** there! They had **MILLIONS** of **SCROLLS!** **HOW** could they ever **MEESS** a couple?"

"Do ye think they have some SORT of pet clinic aroond here?" McKulluh asked as the threesome headed for the Infirmary.

"I have no idea. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, just a hunch. I sense the presence of many dead cats, so I do..."

"**STEEL** eet een yer **EAR** you **UNDERSIZED EXCUSE** for a **FAERIE!**"

The Emergency Services area seemed busy, with people waiting and various staff members moving to and fro with equipment or talking to people. It looked much like any hospital emergency room Valkenhayn could remember seeing except for the number of different species of the clientèle – and staff.

The types of injuries or mishaps waiting to see magic-users were different and were bewilderingly *varied*. There were a couple of goblins that had seemingly become fused somehow, next to them another pair of halflings sitting next to one another. One had one leg – the other had *three*! As they passed by Valkenhayn realized that the three-legged halfling actually only had two. A one-legged halfling was sitting *next* to the extra leg,

but it wasn't *attached* to him – or anything else he could see. He couldn't help himself, he stopped and looked in consternation.

The one-legged hobbit kind of grimaced and said, “Splinched on a tele-port. This one's actually mine, too.” And the free-standing leg kicked up and down. It was a good two feet to one side of his body, yet still somehow attached.

Valkenhayn ducked his head. “Sorry. None of my business, I know. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” the dismembered halfling said.

The receptionists – there were three of them – were also a new species to Valkenhayn. They were bugs of *some* sort, about human-sized, standing in a centaur-like pose with four legs, and a single front pair of limbs that split at the elbow joint to give it four hands, as well. Each of those limbs was the same length, but the hands of the top were oriented down, and the ones of the bottom were oriented up – they could use them together, or independently. Each of them had four eyes and a bellows-like arrangement on each cheek that seemed to supply air for speaking – at least, they pumped when the creatures spoke. Their aftmost body segment sported six tubes and moved as if there was an entirely separate respiration system. They had some sort of frill at the back of their heads, at the tops they sported a pair of antenna, and underneath those were a pair of bat wing-like ears. The overall body color was a mottled greenish pattern. But the *weirdest* things about them – and it could only be called remarkable that such weird beings could have *any* features stand out as *especially* weird – were two. On the final body segment, on the top, just in between the breathing tubes, was a sort of basket or compartment that seemed to be a part of them. They would occasionally turn their heads and forebodies around to insert or retrieve papers and small objects – like a built-in backpack. And even *that* was not the *weirdest* thing! The *weirdest* thing was that they spoke Assuran with pipey, warbling voices punctuated with clicks and trills – but each of them had, for no good reason he could discern, a noticeable Erish brogue as thick as any Leprechaun's!

Valkenhayn had a few minutes to adjust himself to the bugs while the three of them waited their turn on line. He decided he would need much longer to actually *accomplish* said adjustment.

“What the devil do you think they are?” he asked McKullah.

“Oh, that's right, you'd not have seen the loike o'thim before. They're called *Tempinichee*²². At least, they are in *Tír na nÓg* – around here, they call 'em *Pickamups*, I guess because they look like the carts with the cargo bed

22 Erish: a somewhat worn down version of “feithidí fathach” - “giant insects”

- also called pickamups which frankly muddles me. They're get'n to be quite common, actually. And from the sound of that lovely, sweet brogue, I'm guess-ing this hoive came from Tír na nÓg, itself."

"They came from the same place as *Leprechauns*? This 'Erin' place you talk about?"

"Éirinn, so it is. No, I doubt they do. But outside of Éirinn, home for all the little people is Tír na nÓg. As far we know, 'tis the last bit of Éirinn we can still reach. They've had several hoives there for as long as I can remember - which is pretty far, lad, and sure'n it's all your fault, too."

"I'm *never* going to hear the end of that, am I?"

"Oh, ye should *hope* to live *that* long."

"TOP OF THE MORNIN' TO YE. AND HOW CAN ME 'UMBLE SELF BE OF ANY SERVICE TA YE THIS DAY?" said the middle creature - T'emp'n'chiche? Pickamup? - as its previous supplicant stepped away.

The combination of the unIngardely piping, breathy voice, the clicks, the punctuating trill between the sentences *and* the Erish brogue left Valkenhayn a bit stumped for a moment.

"Uh..." he said, looking to McKulluh.

"'Twas a young lady stuck in a gammy polymorph, brought in aboot an hour ago? Rinyara? Valkenhayn party?"

"I CAN CHECK THAT, SO I CAN," and the helpful creature turned, flipped through some of the papers in its...body...and then piped something to another of the creatures, who did the same, extracting a paper and passing it over without ever taking its attention off its own customer.

"Oh, yes, she's proper shock so she is. Such a *bellex* it is when a polymorph goes south like that. The young lady is still in examining, but I've a note here to bring in any friends or next 'o kin. Room 15A, boon that away," and it pointed off to a wide corridor leading off of the receiving area.

"Go raibh míle maith agat²³, me friend," McKulluh said.

"NOT AT ALL. FAOL SAOL AGAT AGUS BAS IN ÉIRINN²⁴," it said as it turned to its next customer.

McKulluh told Valkenhayn the results and as they headed down the corridor Scrum said, in a creditable but strange-sounding approximation of an Erish brogue, "Oh, yes, we are **ALL** so **ERISH** here, so we are. **SURE'n**, I'm an **ERISH RAT!**"

McKulluh's only comment was, "Ye should be so lucky. And if'n ye were, well, 'tis me policy to never forget an Érish face, but it's an exception I'll be make'n fer the loikes of ye."

23 Erish: "A thousand good things" (Guh ruh meal/ah mawt ag/gut) - literally, polite thanks.

24 Erish: "Long life to you and death in Ireland." (fweel sail ah/gut og/us boss in air/in)

Valkenhayn thought Erish rats would *be* more plausible than giant Erish bugs, but prudently kept the thought to himself. What kind of world was Éirinn to produce such wildly different creatures?

Room 15a was a ward with a number of alcoves, but Valkenhayn recognized the lady magic-user who had attended R'nyara in the ambulance. R'nyara herself was in a sort of sling bed mounted to a rolling frame, and was still stuck in her 'morph. She seemed to be unconscious. The Magician was talking with a compatriot, whose neck chain sported a gear suggesting he was a Tinker.

The Tinker nodded to them as they came up and the Magician glanced around, nodded, and turned back to say, "Get that set up at least ten minutes ago, and we'll be ready."

The Tinker smiled as he turned away, saying, "I *didn't* promise any Wizardry."

The Magician came up to Valkenhayn.

"The news is not good, I'm afraid. Are you at all familiar with polymorphs?"

"No, I can't say I am. I've seen some, potions and the like, but nothing like a device," Valkenhayn said.

"There are lots of different ways to 'morph. There are two main ways – transfigurational, which actually disassembles and reassembles the body into the new form, and polymorphic, which wisk the body into some sort of storage and replace it with the 'morph, leaving your intellect and soul to run the 'morph until the original body is swapped back in. Unfortunately, my client has used one of the much rarer *other* ways."

"Like how?"

"The *ruhktar* – you're familiar with it?"

Valkenhayn nodded. "Seen it used, know a little of the theory."

"It's meant to provide fighting enhancements. Strength, speed, endurance, armor, and so on. The 'morph is not really the point, it's what abilities the 'morph *provides* that they cared about. So they took something of a short cut. It doesn't *really* polymorph – not the way we would think of it. In fact, they didn't use conjury, transfiguration or transformation, at all – they used *Wizardry*. What *their* polymorph does is pull up an *actual* targ body – sacrificed during the creation of the *ruhktar* – and then *fuse* it with *her* body. The means is a rather clever hyperfold, but we won't get into multidimensional hypertrigonometric paraspaces here..."

"And thank Heaven for *that*," McKulluh murmured.

“...but the bottom line is that the two bodies are actually *mixed* – that is, at the top it’s her, at the back it’s the targ, and in the middle it’s *both* of them. The cells are actually mixed together into one organism.”

“That – doesn’t sound good at all.”

“Actually, if you can guarantee the deshuffling can *exactly* reverse the shuffling, it’s a cheap, clever, low-power way to get a very powerful magical effect – and the *ruhktar* seems to be able to do that. But it’s *not* meant for long-term use. She’s not stuck in the ‘morph, the problem is the ‘morph is no longer *possible* because of *changes* in the melded body. Changes caused by one body *rejecting* the other.”

“Let’s run past that one again – slower?” Valkenhayn asked.

“Say you had a hale and healthy warrior with an arrow in his heart, and another whose head was cut off. You would think, ‘Well, I can’t save the guy who lost his head, but there’s nothing wrong with his heart, let’s take out the dead guy’s heart and put it in the other guy.’ Logical, you see?”

“Yes. But, no one *I’ve* ever heard of has ever *done* such a thing!”

“That’s because you *can’t* move pieces of bodies around – at least, not without drugs and support that can’t be found easily. Each piece of a body *remembers* what body it came from. The body of the warrior getting the heart will ‘reject’ it – literally try to kill it – even if that’s the only thing keeping it alive. There’s a whole branch of medicine dedicated to dealing with issues like that, but you won’t find any practitioners of it in Imri. So we don’t use the technique. At *all*.

“But the darklings *do*, apparently. They are banking on the fact that it takes some time for a body to realize it has been invaded this way – hours, at least, maybe a day or two – before the rejection starts. They switch, do what they need to do *quickly* and then switch back before any harm comes from it. It’s simple, reliable, and foolproof – as long as you *never* ride it to the point where rejection starts. She’s not stuck in the ‘morph, she’s suffering a massive system failure from each half of her body mutually rejecting the other half. You see?”

“Yes. I think so. Sounds grim. Now, what can be done about it?”

“This type of spell is called a ‘hold pending’ type – that is, the ‘morph is technically still going on, its now waiting for her to start it up again, but when she tries it fails, because of the body differences, and safes back to the hold again. So the shuffling it used is still in effect. We think we can *extend* it to cover the changes caused by the rejection. In a sense, we will compute the difference between her original body the *ruhktar* remembers, and her body as it is *now*, feed *that* back into the *ruhktar* and then let it complete the transformation.”

“And where will that leave us?”

“It will – we *hope* – leave us with R’nyara intact and alive. It *will* destroy the polymorph – the body of the targ will get trashed beyond all hope of recovery or use, the front part will look like it went through a cheese grater. This will leave the polymorph power of the *ruhktar* itself damaged beyond anyone’s ability to repair – it would take years of research to come up with a spell to pickle targ bodies in paraspace the way they did. So the polymorph function will be effectively removed. It’ll probably still have *some* powers, but it might become unstable in other ways, too. But that’s a gulf we will levitate across when we get to it. We’ll kill the trigger in the device, of course – activating it would be lethal.”

Valkenhayn gave a deep sigh. “The loss of the polymorph is too bad, but if it saves her life it’s cheap at the price. How confident are you that this will work?”

“We have some of the best magic-users in Imri working on it, and we’ve called in consultants from Xikchalic’s school to help. Even if she were my own daughter I’d say *do* it. But, legally, you’re next-of-kin, since we have no way to contact any others. It’s your say.” Suddenly a look of surprise crossed her features. “Oh! I said ‘Xikchalik!’ You must be a student there?”

“Apparently I *will* be. Okay. Whatever it takes. I have some treasure I’m sure will cover it.”

“You’re not GOING to WASTE that TREASURE on HER MISERABLE LIFE!! We could RETIRE on that much GOLD!”

“I could retire, *you* couldn’t, there isn’t enough treasure in all of Ingarde for *you* to retire on. I’d save your life, too, so just shut up.”

“Cost is not an issue. The Princess gave us carte-blanche from her personal accounts. There’ll be no charge for you or her at all.”

“Why would she do that?” Valkenhayn asked in surprise.

“You’d have to ask her that. Cloughload backed her, and no surprise there. More money than that you can’t get.”

“...All right, then.”

Valkenhayn did not see the actual curing. It would be a delicate operation, very touch and go, etc. etc. – all of which translated to “Non-magic-users can’t be in the lab while we work.” So he, McKulluh, and the despondent rat sat in the waiting room – waiting.

Of course, it was impossible to tell what was going on. They had at least a dozen labs in use, probably more, and no one told him what number lab she was in. Lab 4 called a “code” – whatever *that* was, and *why* would

they be coding something? What were they trying to keep secret? Whatever it was it sent magicians rushing around pell-mell and didn't subside until a quartet of sprites delivered four glowing gems of some sort, which were whisked away back down the corridor to the Labs.

Finally, several years later – although the lying clock said three and half hours – another sprite popped up next to him hovering in the midst of a blue glow.

"VALKENHAYN AT CATERLEON? YOUR PARTY HAS EXITED THE LAB AND IS NOW IN RECOVERY. YOU CAN SEE HER NOW."

As the party got up to follow the sprite pointed a tiny arm at the rat.

"I AM SORRY, BUT PETS OR SERVICE ANIMALS ARE NOT PERMITTED IN RECOVERY. YOU MUST PUT IT IN THE STASIS AREA."

"WHAT!! WHAT deed she say!! Deed she **SAY** what I **THEENK** she said?"

"I have no idea what you *think* she said, she just said the Recovery room was crowded and you need to move to another waiting area," Valkenhayn said, levelly. McKulluh's face worked.

"Oh. All RIGHT then. **WHERE** do I **GO**!"

"Would it be possible for someone to escort our...associate...to that area you mentioned?"

"Of course." Even as she spoke, another sprite – this one glowing green – popped up from somewhere and took up a post three inches from Scrum's nose, and the two of them proceeded back toward the entrance.

McKulluh looked at Valkenhayn and choked. He carefully rubbed his face blank, and gazed at him again with a reproachful look.

"Yes, I know. I lied. I'm ashamed. I feel bad. And worst of all, I feel like it was the right thing to do."

They followed the sprite to the Recovery area.

14 THE EXTENT OF THE CHALLENGE

She was lying in a bed on wheels – more of a table, really – under a thin sheet. With her jet-black skin coloring, R'nyara could not look pale, but she did have a duller complexion to go with her tired look. She looked like she had had a ghastly time of it, but she otherwise looked normal. She smiled wanly as Valkenhayn and McKulluh came into the niche, then did a double-take and tried to sit up. The Knight gently pushed her back down.

"Where's the rat? D'you think it wise t'leave him unsupervised?" she asked him right away.

"Oh, no problem. He's...under control."

"Are you lying or just incredibly trusting?"

"Both," remarked the leprechaun.

"Neither. He's in stasis, for the moment." Her eyebrows raised at that.

"How *did* you talk him int'that?"

"Uh..."

"*Λγε*. How *did* that go, again?" Valkenhayn glared at McKulluh.

"I *lied*. I told him it was just another waiting area."

"You're learning. I'm impressed."

"I intensely disapprove of my actions. I'm reprehensible. How are you feeling?"

"(My whole body aches, I'm still having bouts of nausea, and I feel weak as carrion. But I've only got two legs, so things seem t'have improved. What did they do?"

"Destroyed the *ruhktar*'s polymorph ability, basically. Did they tell you anything?"

"(Why destroy the *ruhktar* polymorph? All they told me was that I was suffering from something called 'graftversisost disease' – which is a totally new one t'me. Never even *heard* of it. Can't *imagine* where I caught it. Can we get the weapon fixed?"

"In a word – no. That disease is caused by mixing two different bodies together into one organism. Like you and a targ. You can get away with it for a few hours or a day, but longer than that and the two bodies start fighting each other, and eventually both of them die. The *ruhktar* was apparently still waiting to turn you back into yourself, but couldn't because your conjoined body had changed so much over time. They figured out a way to account for the changes, but it trashed the targ body that was part of the spell. Since they don't know the spell for getting another targ body in there, the polymorph is toast. But it's just as well, knowing how it works I could never ask you to use it again, anyway. I gather you were pretty close to terminal."

"I felt like't. I don't remember anything after someone yelled 'Ow!' – which might've been me, I'm not t'sure." Valkenhayn chuckled as McKul-luh explained.

"No, 'twas Cal apCarg. She and her brother found us in a cave complex called 'N40' – where they are keeping a *whole* lot of targs, so they are. They got us out. She touched the *ruhktar* and it gave her second-degree burns!"

"Is she alright?"

"That is a very determined young lady, says I. 'Twould take more than that to make her any the *less* alright."

She nodded, sighed, and turned back to the Knight.

"The other *ruhktar* functions? Do they still work?"

"They told me the other functions will *probably* still work, but they might become unstable in some way. They didn't know exactly how. At any rate, I believe they disabled the polymorph trigger from the hilt so you can't invoke it again. If you did, you'd polymorph into a half-dead targataur, and would be *all*-dead very shortly thereafter."

"A true blessing from Heaven, methinks."

Just then a pickamup, wearing a sort of harness with various bits of equipment on it, appeared at the entry of the niche.

"Ah, 'TIS AWAKE SHE IS! HOW ARE YE FEELIN'?"

R'nyara did not immediately reply. She gave the creature a startled look.

"Be yot a polymorphed Leprechaun or something in like sort? " she asked, finally.

"FAITH, NO, LASS. BUT ME DRIVE CAME FROM THE SAME PLACE THE LITTLE PEOPLE DID AND, SURE, ONCE YE PICK UP THE BROGUE THERE'S NO A-SHAKEN' IT. BUT, TELL ME, HOW D'YE FEEL? YER MAGICIAN NEEDS T'KNOW SOON, SO SHE DOES."

"I feel sick and weak. Aside from that I'm the epitome of health."

"YOU'LL HAVE SOME RESIDUAL DISCOMFORT AS YER IMMUNE SYSTEM CLEARS OUT THE LAST BITS OF THE TARG. BUT, 'TIS NOW A MEDICAL ISSUE, RATHER THAN A MAGICAL ONE. YER CASE MANAGER WILL HAVE ONE LAST GANDER IN 'ER CRYSTAL BALL, AND THEN LIKELY'LL SHE'LL SEND YE TO THE 'OSPITAL, WHERE THEY'LL TAKE CARE OF YE IN A GRAND FASHION. THEY DEAL WITH SICK PEOPLE ALL THE TIME, THEY DO. WHY, THE WHOLE PLACE IS JUST FULL O' THEM!"

And with that, the bug took itself off.

"I checked a calendar in the waiting room while you were in-lab. It took us a bit over two weeks to get here. Not bad, even compared to going by sea," Valkenhayn told her.

"The Low Road is very ancient, but't has been expanded and extended for many long centuries. T'can be very useful – but 'tis also a good way

t'get int'trouble an you know not what you must do t'walk't. T'weeks – longer than a couple days, yes?"

"Yes, of course," he agreed. "Why?"

"Do *not* depend on the wylern stings now. No longer can they fire, and the poison weak or useless will be."

"Oh, that. Yeah, I figured. At least we got the treasure here. The Goddess knows I can cause plenty of trouble with *that* all by itself. Once you're moved I'll talk to your doctor and find out how long you'll be in. In the meantime, I guess we'll take up Trother apTarg on his offer of a place to stay. I'll get the order for the rope set up. Once that's done, we'll talk about what to do next. Concentrate on getting better, please. Don't push it. This'll all get harder again as we move toward the dragon." Valkenhayn gave her a stern look.

"Aye. As well I know't. And don't look at *me* in *that* tone of voice! I'll be ready when you need me."

"And *try* not to kill any cats."

"No one seems t'know what happened to my crystal! I could use another reflecting surface, but t'won't work as well as my little palantir. But I'd rather not try t'work magic while feeling this way."

"Very sensible. Don't get too ambitious too fast. Your palantir suffered an unfortunate misapplication of custody which, I regret to note, it did not survive."

"*What* does *that* mean?!"

"It means 'I let Scrum carry it and he dropped it.'"

She sighed. "That was my *favorite* palantir. I made't my'elf."

"Well, we'll see what we can do about replacing it," Valkenhayn promised.

"We need t'make sure the new be not *closed* – I need t'set't up my'elf t'account for the cats I've already done in."

"I'll keep that in mind," the Knight promised.

"And Kipp – Imri City is underground, but *not* very far. There's little stone between you and the dragon now, and't may well be able t'strike at you here. Be aware, and be careful. Your future is not so fixed you can afford t'be careless."

"I'll keep a sharp eye out. But if I don't miss my guess, the next challenge will be political."

"Political? How?"

"War by another means. I'll keep you posted."

Back at the vast and ancient apTarg compound, with its weathered stone walls and turrets with their myriad, multi-layer stained glass windows, Valkenhayn met with Trother, Father and leader of the clan, to discuss his requirements. Basic cordage for an expeditionary force was straightforward enough. The problem was the hoist for the World Wall.

“How long?” Trother asked in disbelief.

“About two miles. The World Wall is a bit less than two miles high at that point – the lowest point on the southern reach – plus some extra for the bitt end.”

“With a *two ton* load rating? With a 50% safety margin, a two-mile long tether that can handle a *three-ton* load?! You’ve gotta be *kidding* me!”

Valkenhayn shook his head.

“Sadly, no. But I *know* this is possible, it has been done twice before. The apSeronins did it. Do you have their old journals?”

“Yes, of course we do. Tharne! *Tharne!* Where did that old fool...”

“Old fool yourself, Old Man. What’re you bellyaching about?” called a voice from the next room. He stuck his head in and looked at Trother.

“You know anything about the hoist for the World Wall, Tharne?”

“Sure that was...oh! *Oh*, boy, I should’ve remembered the prophesy when *he* showed up,” Tharn said, hooking a thumb at Valkenhayn. “Yes. The apSeronins *did* do a pair of cables like that. It was a pretty major undertaking, too.”

“How’d they do it? Do you recall?”

“Not well enough. I’ll find the journal,” and he left calling for Ed.

“A cable like that would have *had* to have magical reinforcement. I can’t think of a targ silk strong enough to hold it’s own weight at that length, let alone a payload. That probably means schwa targ silk – that takes a spell best. But there aren’t enough schwas in the *world* to make *that* much silk! We’ll have to team it with something.”

“Could you cut down the weight using floater silk?”

“With all of three floaters left in the North 40? Not likely. Besides, that silk doesn’t lift by itself, it needs lifting gas from the targ and has to be shaped to hold it. The tether would have to have rows of actual floater targs running up and down. Kind of hard to manage.”

“The Gargoyles in Imri Down know where to get them.”

Trother did a double-take.

“Do tell,” he said, bemusedly.

“We rode their commuting balloon a ways up here. The Gargoyles bring them up from further down.”

“Do they?”

“Yup.”

“*Interesting*. But that is neither here nor there. They aren’t trainable.”

“The *Gargoyles* control them somehow.”

“Perhaps I will look in to this in more detail when I have time.”

Tharne came back with an enormous book some three feet high, two wide, and over six inches thick. It was covered in old leather, and it was very, *very*, dusty, obviously just hastily brushed at with his hands.

“You’re *not* going to *believe* this!” he announced as he slammed the book down on the table between them and began to leaf through it, raising a small dust cloud as he did.

“Double-targ silk for the core. Highly magical, it carried the main strength spell. Diameter three-quarters of an inch. Schwa and reeshus interwoven around the core, help contain the magic and add cross-grain strength of their own – another three quarters added to the radius, that’s two and a quarter. That one carried a regeneration spell that kept the core charged, as well as a secondary strength enchantment. Finally, an outer cording of *treated* greater cave targ silk – doesn’t say how, we can only hope Yothar will know, it *must’ve* been him – another inch and a half to the radius – *five and a quarter inches total diameter!* Not quite four *miles* of it! It took them *six years* to get all that silk! The fabrication *alone* took another year and a half, almost two, work for all *eleven* of the apSeronins, and anywhere up to fifteen or sixteen hirelings, for a grand total of slightly less than four *miles* of cable in two lengths. They didn’t fill a single order of anything else while they worked on it. Total cost, nearly 280,000 gold sovereigns!”

Valkenhayn shook his head.

“That’s...*incredible!* I didn’t realize what a major undertaking this was.”

“Plus, you need a Wizard to control the bloody thing and keep it properly charged!” Tharne added.

“And you need it *when?*” Trother asked.

“Ideally, six months. I suppose I could get by with just one length to begin with, but I’d hate to wind up with half my army up and half not when it broke. In that scenario the first rope would have to be somewhat *over-built*. Hopefully the second cable would be ready by the time I needed to use the hoist again, in case the first one fails.”

“Six months? Are you *mad?*”

“I ~~THEENK~~ you could ~~TAKE~~ a GOOD CASE for eet!”

Trother glanced at the rat in annoyance and went on to Valkenhayn, "It won't be done in six years. And, realistically, bloody *never* – we don't *have* that kind of manpower!"

"What kind, Father?" Ed asked as he and Tal arrived, Ed still brushing dust off himself.

Trother quickly related the requirements of the cable. Tal gasped, and Ed shook his head.

"Well, *that* isn't going to happen. No way. Let me see that volume," he said, reaching for it.

Tharne passed it over and Ed went back and forth a few pages.

"Here it is. They had *four* collecting teams of three or four people *each*. *That's* what took six years, not just *two* of us. *We* couldn't gather that much silk in our entire *lives*."

Valkenhayn sighed. It just *couldn't* be easy.

"But the rope is *critical*. Otherwise I'd have to move the army by sea, leaving them exposed the whole time we'd need to go completely around Vindolonda, land at the north, and march overland to Caerleon. The march alone would be nearly a fortnight. The dragon would zorch the entire expedition without ever spilling its' tea."

"What about the Low Road, lad? Could ye get an army through *that*, do ye suppose?"

Valkenhayn considered that a moment. Scrum torpedoed *that* idea.

"DON'T even THEENK of eet! AHRMIES are RARE een dee UNDERWORLD, because eet ees TOO EASY to PEEK THEM OFF one by one, as dey MOVE. NO ONE is going to let an AHRMY march through dare CAVES! You MIGHT bee after THEM!" Scrum said, scornfully. Regretfully, Valkenhayn nodded.

The Caerleon Knight sighed. "Shocking though it may be, he's right,"

"GIT!" snarled the rat.

"I don't see how. I know enough about the underworld now to suspect there *would* be *lots* of folks who would resent a foreign army marching through their private demesne. We'd not be able to take anything *like* a direct path, we'd have to wander and detour to find passages big enough to take the army more than one at a time to avoid ambushes, we'd have to train the *whole* army to walk the darkness, as well as avoiding traps all the while, and all that would surely negate any time savings from wizard spells making the road 'straighter than straight.'"

"Straighter than straight." Tal echoed. She looked at Ed. "Wizard magic is mostly – what did you call it?"

"Kinetic spells. Dynomancy, they call it. Spells that manipulate time and space. With a wizard in the party, you could complete a ten mile hike in, say, five miles of walking." Trother shook his head violently.

"That makes *no* sense, Ed!" he said in an annoyed voice.

~~"MORE mageek user NONSENSE!"~~

"Isn't. It *does* make sense – *if* you understand what wizards *do*."

~~"NEEZERDS only do ONE THEENG! Del SCREW theengs UP!"~~
the rat snapped. But Ed nodded.

"Yes. In a very real sense, that is *exactly* what they do. They screw with – literally, *bend* – space and time itself. You have to understand that what *looks* like it's straight to us is so only because the light we see it by must follow the same curve – which could actually be the *long* way around. *Straighter* than 'straight,' you see?"

"Straighter than straight." Tal said, again, staring into space with her head tilted. "Where have I *heard* that before?" Valkenhayn pricked his ears.

"You've heard of something like that?"

"*Somewhere*. It *has* to be in the archives. I wouldn't be likely to read about magic anywhere else. "

"*Urk!* *Thousands* of volumes spanning almost 2500 years of apTarg and apSeronin warrants to the targ caves going back almost to the founding of *Imri*?" Trother asked.

Ed looked thoughtfully at Tal. "We *could* use a Sorcerer to scan the archives for that phrase." Trother looked startled.

"That's part of our *wealth*, Ed! Only *we* have the archives to help us manage the caves, the targs, and the business. There's no telling what a Sorcerer might pick up while searching. We're having trouble *enough* with poachers, imagine what it would be like if they actually *knew* what they were *doing*!"

Valkenhayn suddenly smiled. "What if the Sorcerer wasn't local? Someone who wouldn't stay in Imri, and so couldn't pass on any clan secrets even if they find out any of them?"

"Oh, Mother o' God, here we go..."

~~"You AREN'T THEENKING what I THEENK you're THEENKING, are you?!"~~

"Where would we *find* such a Sorcerer? The only place *I* know is the Guild, and they'll only recommend *locals*," Trother pointed out.

"As it happens, I *do* know a Sorcerer just in town and not planning to stay. Would you be willing to let her try?" the Knight asked.

Scrum looked frantically from Valkenhayn to Trother and back. McKulluh stepped on his tail. He jumped, turned, and glared.

"Don't be messing this up, now," the Leprechaun whispered. "This *is* our *own* lives in this stake as well." The rat subsided, but looked distinctly uneasy.

Trother rubbed his lower lip and looked at Tharne, who shook his head.

"This project could set us back up like nothing else. Without it, Valkenhayn fails in *his* quest and *we* fail as well in all likelihood. It may be *months* before Carl is back on his feet, and there's *no* one else we can get to help us." He rubbed the back of his head as he regarded Trother. "Targspit, we couldn't even *adopt* some poor slob at this point! We *have* to find a way to solve it. We should use every resource we can lay our hands on. Let's not look a gift targ in the spinnerets."

Trother gave a heavy sigh.

"Okay. Okay, we'll try your Sorcerer. Maybe we can make a cable that's 'straighter than straight.' I think we're *all* nuts, but let's give it a shot."

Scrum glared at Valkenhayn as he followed the Knight and the Leprechaun, muttering all the while. "MAGEEK HERE and MAGEEK THERE! We are SURROUNDED by eet! We'll ALL bee turned eento LEEETLE COCKROACHES! I can just FEEL EET COMING!"

They stayed the night with the apTargs and Valkenhayn and McKulluh left Scrum there the next morning and headed for the hospital, hoping R'nyara might be released today. Runt invited himself along. Valkenhayn was just a bit worried, but after he had seen what passed for *people* in Imri, surely a pet wyvern would not attract much notice. In this he was correct. With one fairly major exception.

Tell me about your friend. came Cloughload's mental voice.

Valkenhayn glanced at Runt and said – to himself, so as to avoid looking like a lunatic – "He followed me home. Can I keep him?"

I don't see why not. But where did you get a rejected hatchling wyvern?

"How do you know he was rejected?"

He's an adult. Hatchlings need far more food than an adult. A starving hatchling will try to switch to an adult metabolism to forestall death. He's quite the smallest wyvern I've seen in ages. He appears to have imprinted on you. You must have fed him.

"Guilty as charged. It was quieter than trying to kill him, and things followed on from there."

Why did you consider killing him?

“Well, I was fighting the rest of his family at the time. I assumed he would be on *their* side, but he actually helped *me*, instead.”

Not surprising, if you fed him. He will never develop an advanced mentality, now, but he's not stupid, either. He considers you much like an elder brother. Seeing the family that rejected him attack you, he would naturally take your part.

“I must admit, he's very, very handy in a fight.”

At the hospital the news was heartening. Having gotten several healing potions into her, the doctors felt that, if she continued to improve, she might be released soon, perhaps on the morrow. McKulluh agreed to wait around and catch a doctor and perhaps talk her out earlier, if possible, so Valkenhayn and Runt headed back to the apTarg household by themselves.

Val was feeling badly about the whole issue. He hadn't realized R'nyara was taking such a risk, but he now realized she was every bit as committed as he to this quest. It *wouldn't* just kill *him*. And the more he thought about it, the more he disliked the idea. McKulluh was as loyal and reliable a friend as could be imagined and R'nyara – Valkenhayn couldn't decide how he felt about R'nyara, but he knew he couldn't bear to see her hurt.

As far as that goes, though, he'd even feel bad about losing the obnoxious *rat*. If nothing else, the relentless flow of sarcasm made for some comic relief.

This was *all* getting more complex and more unmanageable. He'd figured he'd undertake the quest, Evenshade would kill him, and there's an end of it. It was an honorable way to die – better than throwing himself on his sword, anyway. He never *expected* to win, so the details hardly mattered. Not that he'd thought about it in exactly those terms. But *now* – and it wasn't *just* his own little group, either. The apTargs were seriously contemplating how to get him the Great Rope, and any method they decided was worth a try would take their *all*. And now he had begun to understand what kind of *all* that implied. They'd be putting *their* lives on the line, too.

Cloughload was obviously thinking ahead, also. As if it really *mattered* how he felt about Imrian politics, they'd only be important to *him* if he survived the quest, which he wouldn't. So why was the dragon doing things this way? Did he seriously think Valkenhayn could *win*?

15 STRAIGHTER THAN STRAIGHT

McKulluh got R'nyara sprung early the next morning and the twosome arrived to meet Valkenhayn just as he stepped outside on his way to the hospital.

"Great! Good to see you up and about! How're you feeling?" he asked.

"Tis glad I am I'm not going int' combat – but much better, I think."

"Good. Do you feel up to a bit of scrying?"

"For what?"

"A phrase – 'straighter than straight' – in a large library."

She shrugged. "Doesn't *solon* t'*danqerous*."

"Let's hope not," the Knight said. "But if you see any cats coughing up blood, drop it *quick*, please."

"If a simple library search gives us a Monkey Paw, we should *all* move t'*Utara*," she pointed out. "Safer t'*would* be by far."

Valkenhayn led the way to the apTarg archive, where all the living ap-Targs save Carl were brooding over various volumes, looking for any information they might be able to use to create this gigantic rope somehow.

"You are looking much better," Tal observed as they entered.

"Feeling so am I, and many thanks t'*you* all for getting me t'*help*. *You* are Tal?"

Tal nodded. R'nyara glided – there was no better word for her "normal" walk – over and took her hands, examining them.

"McKulluh said the *rahktar* burned you badly." But Tal smiled.

"Not so badly some of Master Yothar's best burn ointment couldn't help." She held her hands so R'nyara could inspect the injury, which had nearly healed up already.

"That's *very* evil. Your Master Yothar must be most talented."

Tal looked at Valkenhayn in some puzzlement.

"That means she's happy. It takes a bit of practice to talk to her," he said, with a rueful smile.

Tal introduced R'nyara around the family. Tharne gave her a courtly bow and kissed her hand, which made her laugh.

"Such a charming custom! And may the shadows always hide *your* home!" she said in reply.

Trother apTarg was more to-the-point.

"Do you understand that *all* the information you might see in here is uniquely our own, and must *never* be divulged outside the clan?"

R'nyara nodded.

"Of course. T'would be unethical t'allow't t'pass on, except t'save lives. I cannot withhold't an a life be at stake. But I think I'll not need t'actually read'very much, if all you want is t'find the phrase you seek."

"Good. Good, that's acceptable. The phrase is 'straighter than straight' – we haven't been able to localize it much, except we think somewhere *after* the fifth generation, and likely *before* about a century ago."

"In what language, then?" she asked next.

"It'll be in *Imrium Droch* – we think. That gave rise to modern As-suran, but it uses old verbs and tenses that are all but gone nowadays. We still use it for our records, though, to keep the whole archive readable to our descendants. But that particular phrase *should* be the same – spelled the same, I should say, they'd pronounce 'straighter' more like 'straughter' – but the spelling didn't change. What do you need to get started?" Trother asked.

"I've lost my palantir, sad am I t'say," she said, with an annoyed glance at Scrum, who put his ears back and slunk back into the nearest corner – muttering all the while.

"But likely t'wouldn't be large enOUGH t'search speedily anyway. T'search widely for little things, I need a *large* reflective surface – one the same color as your pages best would be. Perhaps a pane of glass placed on parchment?"

Trother shook his head. "The only parchment we have is new – it's a nearly pure white, where most of the volumes we need to search are a much deeper yellowish-brown. And I'm sure we have no unmounted glass – and most of the glass that *is* mounted is stained different colors."

R'nyara tilted her head as she considered. She moved one of the open books aside and examined the table top. Trother's eyebrows levitated up his forehead.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, puzzled.

"Considering was I using a simple puddle of water, but the grain of this – wood, is't? – will make't very hard t'make out the letters."

"We have stone-topped tables," Tharne said, pointing to a smaller, lecturn-like table sporting a dictionary. But it, too, had a very contrasting grain – beautiful, but just as hard to read against.

R'nyara looked up at Tharne. "D'you have any milk?"

"Milk? I'm not...oh! Yes! Yes, we do. Cheesemaking would be tomorrow. Why milk?"

"T'can be a reflecting surface with a white background. D'you've any large bowls? As large as possible?"

Ed brought up a pint of milk from the kitchen, while Tal delivered a variety of crockery. None were large enough for R'nyara.

"T'would take *days* even using the largest bowl. Could we clear off a table?"

"Sure," Trother said, and the apTargs pulled their books aside and stacked them, leaving a large table empty for the Sorceress. R'nyara carefully poured out the milk making a puddle that covered most of the table top.

Valkenhayn snorted and coughed.

R'nyara held her hands over the spill, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. The milk began to glow a faint yellow.

The Knight gave a strangled sound.

"Cut the malarky, ye wicked old Scot," McKulluh growled out of the side of his mouth.

"But...but she's..."

"I know! Is cuma (iom)!²⁵ Jam yer gatsby over it, ye narky grr! Don't mess up a Sorceress by crackin'er up! Oo a *ceggur* i'n ye can't hold it!"

An image of a wall of old journals appeared in the milk. R'nyara announced, "*Librius Alias - Inquesti in saying: straighter than straight.*" The image zoomed closer and gave way to images of books riffling through their pages. Small thumps were heard at the far end of the archive as each volume popped out an inch or so as it was scanned and then slammed back in.

The process proceeded, speeding up as it went except when R'nyara used some sort of sparkling control to slow it momentarily now and then as it ploughed through dense paragraphs of various written hands. It also slowed when the handwriting changed, which it did frequently, and then speeded up again.

The process went on and on. *Thump...thump...thump...thump* as volume after volume passed under the scanner. Valkenhayn reflected R'nyara couldn't actually *read* any of it if her life depended on doing it.

An hour passed. Then another. A third...

The apTargs hired cook bustled in with sandwiches and coffee. R'nyara kept one hand at the scanner controls while she ate and drank with the other. She shuddered when she sipped the coffee – then tried it again, pronounced it "evil" and then drank three cups – black, of course.

The scanner was now going noticeably faster.

In the fourth hour, without warning, the thumping stopped. All the book images vanished but one, and one more thud came from the shelves

²⁵ Erish: is cumma lum – "I don't care!"

as a single volume dropped to the floor, there came a flutter of pages, and then everything faded leaving a single, shining blue star over one page of the exposed volume that slowly faded away. The images in the milk faded away, leaving it just a puddle of spilled milk.

"Found't," R'nyara announced in satisfaction, then looking down at the puddle of milk she asked, "Does anyone have a towel? The only real problem with scrying over spilt milk is that't attracts *flies* afore longq..."

And Valkenhayn lost it.

Everyone ignored him. The entire room rushed to the book except for R'nyara, who helped the elderly cook wipe up the mess on the table.

The mages²⁶, Tharne and Ed, read the page feverishly, trying to puzzle out the archaic language. The book was older than Valkenhayn.

Tharne's finger stabbed along the lines of text as he concentrated. Trother, defeated by the archaic dialect, sat back and watched.

The finger stopped. Tharne looked up at Ed, who looked back, as shocked as he. Slowly they turned as one to Trother.

"Well? Well!? 'Straighter than straight?'"

Tharne and Ed looked at each other again. Tharne nodded as he stood and looked at the assembled gathering.

"There *is* something 'straighter than straight' – there *is* something we *might* be able to use to make the rope...maybe even to *deliver* it in time. *But...*" he paused to take a deep breath.

"What!?" Trother barked.

Tharne and Ed said simultaneously said, "Phase targ's."

"Oh, yes! Now I recall," Tal said in a pleased voice. "They killed three hundred eighty one apSeronins and apTarg's before we stopped trying to harvest them – twenty six hundred-odd years ago."

Trother shoved his coffee cup away. "I need something a *whole* lot stronger."

26 A "Magician" is an accredited practitioner of a specific college of magic. A "mage" is a generic spell-user who practices by rote. The former have a deep understanding and a subtle ability to use the type of magic in question in complex and sophisticated ways, the latter can only cast specific spells with little modification or adaptation – but they may have access to a greater variety of them. The term "magic-user" applies to both.

16 A LITTLE OVER-HELPFUL, MAYBE

Valkenhayn, threading his way through one of Imri's heterogeneous crowds, stepped aside from a small gaggle of very large bugs engaged in some sort of argument or debate with another gaggle of fairly small reptiles – aborigines, he guessed, they looked both fierce and primitive in their scaly armor, swords, fighting hooks – and their spurs, which many lizard people had but theirs looked like they had been augmented, somehow. As it happened he stepped under the shaded portico of a very small storefront consisting of an inset door and a display window some six feet wide, occupying the entire storefront between them. A *Majickal Mélange* it said on the door. The lettering moved about the large window in the door, bouncing off the sides of the frame, but halted, obligingly, when he looked at it. As he watched it changed to *Majick For Muggles, too!*

"What the Devil is a *muggle*?" he asked no one in particular.

The words changed again. *Uh...those without training in majick...I think.*

"You *think*? You're not *sure*? What kind of sales job is this?"

I don't handle sales. You need to see Beirin. I'm just the door.

"And what is a 'majickal mélange,' anyway?"

We have a wide selection of majickal appliances – roving cleaning spells, dish-stacking spells, trail-finding spells, scry...

"I don't need anything, thanks, I...*what* was that last thing again?"

Trail-finding spells?

"No – the one *after* that." Valkenhayn idly scanned the contents of the window. Quite a few spell-stones, sitting on little trivets or hanging from frames shaped like a question mark. Most were inert, but several flickered now and again as people moved past the front of the shop. One larger stone in a cage of intersecting copper circlets hung up above was flashing – two blue flashes at short intervals, with a longer pause in between them.

Scrying spells? We have entry-level palantirs, majick mirrors, and stones enchanted to warn of near-term events like unexpected guests and other misfortunes, or even of approaching death.

"That last one...does it *work*?" he asked, while he considered the Sorcerous equipment. The window also had some appliances, most of which he didn't recognize except for toys. One consisted of a string of tiny cars closely following an automaton with wings and a pointy front, which flew in a little circle about a foot over some sort of control with several knobs – *height, direction, and speed*. The automaton looked as though it were one of the Metal Master's cars caught in a polymorph to a mechanical bird.

Warning of approaching death? I don't know. I've never died.

"I wouldn't be too sure of *that*, if I were you. This fellow – Beirin? He around?"

Oh, yes. Come in. The door swung open, and Valkenhayn stepped inside. As the door shut behind him he spotted a hasty, ...*and welcome!* writ upon the door before the name of the establishment replaced it and began bouncing around the frame again. A bell rang somewhere in the back.

Beirin himself came weaving through the shop hop-walking sideways through heaps of merchandise along a very narrow path leading back. The establishment was no wider than the front window and door had indicated, but he could not see how far back it went.

There was a series of perches up and down a display to his right, positioned in front of the window but curtained off from it. Dozens of tiny birds perched or hopped from perch to perch. They were shiny and metallic, and though they filled the air with chirps and warbles, each of them also gave off a steady, grinding *whirr* – likely from the rotating key that stood out from the backs of the ones moving. Many were stationary, they and their keys motionless.

"*Good morrow! Good morrow, Sir! I'll be right with you!*" he called in Rithian, just as his black robe snagged on something in the pile next to him and caused it to rotate 90 degrees and wobble dangerously, threatening to dump a stack of abacusi, some of which were industriously clicking beads back and forth as they calculated something, over on the both of them. He stopped, hastily hugging the pile like a long-lost lover and re-balancing it. He stepped back, holding up his hands and patting the air in front of the pile. "*STAY. STAAAY,*" he said – in Elven – and backed carefully away in reverse the last few steps to Valkenhayn's side, where he turned around and presented a hand.

"*Welcome t'majickal mélanze m'luro. How may me 'umble shop be o'sarvice turoday?*" Valkenhayn himself knew the language, of course, but the accent almost made him cringe.

"*I read something about you havins scryins magic for sale here?*" he asked in the same language.

"*O'course, o'course, what might ye want t'see a-comin' yer way?*"

"*Actually, it's to be a gift to a Sorceress in need of a replacement crystal ball.*"

Beirin looked disappointed, and glanced at the crystal still flashing away, blue, blue, pause...blue, blue, pause...and looked askance at the Knight. "*I'd not be a-carryin' that sort of thing – need a license from the Guild to handle professional equipment.*"

me rocks an' such are feared t'reg'ler folk jus' needin' a 'heav's up! kind of thing. i got a nice elven knife what glows blue when orcs 'rr 'round." He reached out to a nearby display of charms and amulets and picked up a necklace with a pewter pendant set with a small garnet. "'rr take this...this warns ye about bein' exposed to mos' diseases. See it glow, change yer course, and ye can avoid gettin' that nasty color! Every'body has *somechin'* they'd like t'avoid - 'rr seek out, if'n ye know wha' i mean. Ladies with'n...*inclination*...so to speak?" He suggested, replacing the sickness stone and indicating a button sporting a tiny amethyst. "i got stones fer most anything ye could want 'rr not want..."

Valkenhayn shook his head. "No. i really need a portable scrying device for Sorcerous use."

He shook his head sadly. "No, as i said i...eh? Did you say *portable*? As in *small*?" he interrupted himself with a sudden hopeful look. "i *may* have *somechin'* that'll answer fer *that*, after all! please, wait right here!" He did his strange sideways hop through the tiny path and vanished into the rear of the store."

"What an odd character," the Knight mused to himself.

Valkenhayn idly scanned the charms display, noticing that the further to the left they went the more expensive they got – and the larger the stones they had. A closer look at the stones showed the tiny motes and ribbons of colored lights drifting about inside indicating active spells. One of the more expensive amulets was labeled "Never Be Late!" which somewhat amused him.

There were a lot of warning charms – various types of sickness, one that would warn you before you stepped outside whether you needed a coat, one for "purse-tracking" – a whole plethora of "tracking" charms – keys, umbrella, "car" – which puzzled him since the only "cars" he knew of were the Metal Master's, and it would be hard to lose one of *those* since they ran on tracks – glasses, your beverage – who could misplace a *beverage*? – your "remote," whatever *that* was, and so on. He grinned at the ones labeled "Lawyers" – one *should* always know when lawyers were lurking about. He chuckled when he saw that one also warned about nearby vampires and hematologists – apparently the same spell worked for all types of blood-suckers. There were pairs of charms that would tell who ever carried one the status of the person who carried the other.

But there were a number of other charms that sounded like they might be useful for him. A warning of upcoming bloodshed, loss of funds, or of upcoming "danger" – nature unspecified.

Beirin came back with a small handle attached to something round that was protected by a little velvet sack placed over just that portion.

"This came from the estate o'the Sage Morak, a Sorcerer o'some repute 'round here." He untied the base of the bag and pulled out a small round hand mirror a bit less than three inches across. It was exquisite, set with tiny glowing gems, made of gold with jade and silver inlay. It was really quite beautiful.

When he took it into his hand, he could *feel* the active magic in it. The sensation was like nothing he could describe, but the mirror felt...*alive*. As if he held a pet rather than an object.

"This looks like a fairly major magical artifact," he noted. Beirin nodded.

"Yes – and therein lies the problem, m'lud. Ye see, this mirror was intended precisely as a portable scrying device – and, believe me, Morak woulon't waste 'is time makin' a shoddy one. He don't sell his artifacts, they were all fer his own use, and he made 'em wit' meticulous care. But *this* one is *unfinished*."

Valkenhayn did not see anything physical that looked undone. "How do you mean?"

"Well, it's not *closed* yet – he died before he finished it."

"Why'd he *start* it then? presumably he'd have *known* he woulon't finish it."

Beirin looked thunderstruck.

"I...uh...I never *thought* of that. That's a...real good question," he admitted.

"But you can't answer it. Right. Tell me more."

"This mirror is helpful – p'rhaps *overly* helpful. Most devices that scry the future nowadays have inhibitions against revealing details that might cause certain *complications*, if ye take my meanin'."

"I do. This mirror kills cats."

Beirin looked surprised. "Have ye had training, Sir?"

"No, but I've had a lot of experience with the damn cat," he said, absently.

"Cause o'this, the mirror can be downright *dangerous* - but in the hands o'a professional Sorcerer, the appropriate limits can *still* be set up. I'm not permitted t'sell this t'anyone *but* a professional Sorcerer, but if ye are an agent o'one, i *can* sell it t'ye. He is an agent o'a professional Sorcerer, right?" he asked the mirror, and Valkenhayn's reflection faded away to be replaced with a bucolic farm scene soaking in bright sunshine. In the center was a smiling human baby, looking as if his mother had set him down and stepped away for a moment.

"That means 'yes' so we're good t'go," he said in satisfaction.

"How much?" Valkenhayn asked.

"Normally i'd charge an arm, a leg and at least two or three fingers, but i come close to grief several times wit' this mirror - the bag *helps*, but't has one sort of *nasty* tendency - it *volunteers* information. Even a casual glance at't *could* tell you something you'd be better off *not* knowing. Not only does't *scare* me, but i jus' don't *have* high-end Guile magicians or mages as customers, so no one will buy't. i sold most everythin' from that lot but this, but i've had this for *years*, and i'd like t'be shut of it. For ye - one gold sovereign, Sir, and blessings upon ye. i'd make ye a present of it, but not all magical artifacts would register an ownership transfer that way - but they *all* know about being sold."

Valkenhayn considered. It was obviously far more powerful than he expected, and it surely killed cats regularly. On the other hand, R'nyara was a professional, and she already *had* a tendency to kill cats on a regular basis anyway. This might make that *worse* - but perhaps the very danger would encourage some caution. Most importantly, it wasn't 'closed' - she would surely know how to place limits on the thing, at any rate.

"Done," he said, producing the coin and slapping it into Beirin's moist palm.

"*Excellent! Thank-you*, Sir! i'm sure it'll work out for ye *very well!*" he said, heartily. "Now, what *else* o'ye need?"

Valkenhayn started to put the sack on the mirror when the scene abruptly changed. On a rocky escarpment, an eagle or tarn reached down and seized a rat in its' wicked beak and promptly horked it down.

The rat was Scrum, and on the ground were two coils of rope glowing gently in the fading light.

He quickly hid the mirror. Did that cat die? Was Scrum doomed? *Damn*, he thought, this guy wasn't kidding about how *dangerous* this thing was!

"Sir?" The shopkeeper hadn't noticed anything.

"Uh...no. No, *that's* all, i think," he said, putting the mirror into an inner pocket.

"but," he began, and stopped. Beirin looked taken aback and glanced at the pulsing gem – which Valkenhayn now noticed had changed. One red pulse, then a blue one, then the pause – and repeat.

"Surely there must be *somechin'* else ye'll be needin'g? p'rhaps a poop-disintegration hoop? A vision enhancer, maybe?" he asked, now a bit nervous.

"This was all i really needed, so no, thanks. i'll just take my leave..."

"No! Ye *can't*...just go. There's *somechin'* else ye *need*, i'm sure!" he said, looking toward the stone again.

Valkenhayn looked at the man with a cold, waiting stare.

"i'm sure! *Somechin'*. Ye *can't* just buy the one *thin'...*" and he threw another look at the flashing stone.

The Knight nodded, slowly, and hooked a thumb at the stone. "it predicted i'd buy *two* things, orion't it? it killed a cat, orion't it?"

Beirin looked very nervous. "Yes and no. Me stones aren't calibrated for exactness – i mean, they aren't really *observin'* anythin', they just have a set of triggers. That's a *safety* feature – the stones don't really kill cats... but, the trade-off is...well...they can sometimes...you know..."

"Be wrong," the Knight finished for him.

"No! No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! Yes. Sort of. i guess the net effect is..."

"That they are wrong. So, your sales predictor was wrong. What's the big deal?"

"i just sold ye a major pain in the...i mean, a major artifact wit' the power – not t'mention the *proclivity* – for creatin' paradox. i mean, they might be unrelated, but – look, i *really* don't wanna take the chance. i'm pretty sure that *things*' been affectin' my stones! and

vice versa, i think. *Weird* things...i don't wanna take the chance! honestly, i *don't*! i absolutely do not. please buy somethin' else? *Anythin'* else? i'll...all right, i'll make ye a good price. just buy *one* more thing? please? i'm so close t'gettin' *out* of this..." and he halted, looking guiltily up at the Knight.

Valkenhayn glared a moment longer and then said, "How reliable is the danger stone?"

"The danger..." he looked around at the display. "That'll warn ye o'pain, bloodshed, bein' bound, 'rr a sudden reduction in funds - t'least o'gold and silver."

"pretty comprehensive. how far?"

"Much as an hour, p'rhaps a bit more." He picked up the stone - a small beryl it looked like - which was not attached to a chain or a hook, but was instead set in some sort of mechanism. He touched a stud and three legs sprang out. Surrounding the stone's equator, just above the tops of the legs, was a ring with the numbers 0 through 9 engraved on it.

"Ye set up where ye want the warnin', then ye turn this ring t'set the *threshold* o'the warnin'." He turned the stone down to 0 and it began flashing irregularly, at irregular intervals, not very brightly.

"That's a warnin' o'very, very *little* things. Mosquitoes. Stubbed toes. Shavin' cuts. That sort of thin'." He then turned it to 9. The stone went dark. "Now we're talking really *major* stuff. Earthquakes. Typhoons. Tidal waves. Dragon strafin's. Volcanic eruptions. Most people leave it aroun' 3 or 4."

"One silver shilling."

"*One* shillin', you gotta be *kidding* me. . !"

Valkenhayn reached into his pocket for the mirror. "Shall we see whether or not we come to an agreement?"

"*no!* *no!* *no.* All *right*, one shillin'! One lonely, miserable, measly, insignificant, silver shillin'."

Valkenhayn produced the coin and pocketed the stone.

"pleasure doing business with you."

Beirin looked unhappy. He shook his head. "look - sale's over, and ye took me fer a good ride - but i *have* t'warn ye. i may *still* a-gotten the best o'the deal."

"Oh, yeah. i figured *that* out," Valkenhayn said as he left.

17 ALLIES

When he arrived back at the apTarg compound, it seemed to be deserted except for Tal, who was curled up with a book in the front window of the shop, wearing a short bathrobe-like thing.

She looked up at him as he entered and smiled.

“Sir Valkenhayn, as I live and breathe! The prodigal son returneth,” she said, with a mischievous glint in her eye.

Valkenhayn looked at her more closely. Young, shapely, right hair color – but this girl wasn’t *Tal* at all!

“I think you have the advantage of me miss,” he said, a bit formally.

She dimpled and put her book aside, rising. “I was waiting for you. I’ve always wanted to meet the legendary warrior, the lone survivor of Caerleon. Helldiver’s *Daddy*! My goodness! You *are* every bit the strapping, muscular Knight I pictured!”

Who *was* this girl?

“Helldiver...*whose* Daddy?”

“Let’s get better acquainted. I want to hear *all* your stories of derring-do,” and she stepped to the door and flipped the latch to lock it. “Shall we?” she asked, archly, indicating one of the many mysterious doors that riddled the ancient apTarg hold.

“I think I’d rather know more,” he began, but she interrupted.

“Good! I’m glad you feel the same way. Come on!” She led the way to the door she had indicated and went through, leaving it ajar. Lacking any alternative, Valkenhayn followed in some confusion.

“What is going *on*?” he muttered to himself as he followed the girl.

He found himself in one of the many winding corridors of the massive, ancient building. A short way down the hall was a door standing open, spilling a soft light into the corridor. He reached it just in time to see the girl as she stepped through a door in the back of the room. He went through the room and just had enough time to register it was a *bedroom* before he reached the door...to the bath. A quite elaborate bath. A bit overdue for a spruce up, but very nice even so. With a huge tub, already filled with gently steaming water, and the usual appurtenances of the typical well-to-do person’s personal – well, bath.

She was smiling as she kicked the door shut, stepped into his arms and kissed him, then she said, “Let’s have some *fun*.”

She reached into a pocket in her robe and pulled out a glowing gem, which she tossed into the tub. A bolt of water shot straight up, slammed into the ceiling and then began spreading, rapidly, all around the ceiling,

then the walls, and finally the floor of the room. It froze then, taking on a strange sheen – tiny sparkles of light moved across the surface.

“There! *Now* we have some privacy,” the girl said with satisfaction in her voice. The coquette had abruptly vanished.

Valkenhayn scanned the room, bemusedly. “I see. And what are we seeking privacy *for*?”

“To confer, converse, and otherwise hobnob as the potential leaders of our respective countries. Just because the chances are slim either of us will actually *survive* to do so shouldn’t discourage us from *trying* – don’t you think?”

Something finally clicked in Valkenhayn’s mind, and he gave her a courtly half bow and said, “We may be private, but this will hardly enhance your reputation, Princess.”

“What ‘reputation’ would *that* be? Salacious rumors?” she laughed. “The first explicit pictures of *me* that were circulated, I still had my *umbilical cord* attached! With Sorcery, *no* one has privacy, and seeking any will make people wonder what you’re up to and amplify their attention on you. It’s doubly bad for *me* – so long as the Regent remains in place, I can have *no* privacy – I am monitored by Sorcery around the clock. Putting up a block would *immediately* alert all *sorts* of people who are *entirely* too interested in what I’m doing to be of any use. *But* – salacious rumors have *their* uses. If I’m sneaking off to have sweaty, irresponsible, under-age *sex* then everyone would *expect* a shield in place just to cover my imperial fanny. My Father’s letters called it ‘plausible deniability.’ No one would worry if I put up a shield *then*, because I’m obviously just covering myself from scandal. It’s not like the *Regent* would care – my dying of some revolting venereal disease would probably just make his day. Now, it would *still* be taken as too much of a coincidence to use this dodge to talk to an actual head of state – but, with you, no one takes seriously the chances of you *succeeding*! The bookies are quoting ten *thousand* to one! I put a thousand crowns against that, by the way. I’m an incurable optimist. So the idea I am just some air-headed little vixen with a hero complex and a slutty yen will cover us. For a while. To some extent.”

Valkenhayn nodded, thoughtfully. “I see. Just the appearance of secretiveness would focus even more attention on you. I’m not sure I like the idea getting around I have a taste for *very* young ladies...”

She grinned. “It will help if you look guilty and sneak a little as you leave. Then people might think your conscience was bothering you, you child molester.”

But her jocular mood did not hold. She sighed. "I have to face facts – and grow up *fast*. Lord Zales is *not* going to lay down his power. Comes *my* sixteenth birthday, my little royal behind will likely get knifed in an unfortunate accident." She looked up at him frankly. "That's *if* I'm not sold outright for whoring as a demonstration of his power and confidence. I think *that* idea floats through his mind every time he looks at me, imagining me being rented out at 2 shillings the hour. If I had any sense at all I'd have sneaked out years ago and gotten myself thoroughly lost. But impractical dreamer that I am, I want to re-establish *my* father's reign as much as you do *yours*. We're in the same boat, you and I – it only makes sense to row in the same direction. You want to – and *I* want to – bring some *morality* back to our peoples. Some sense of *right* and *wrong*."

Valkenhayn raised an eyebrow.

The Princess went on, "My family learned long, long ago, slavery is an easy habit to acquire and a nearly impossible one to get rid of. It rots the moral fiber of a nation from the inside, warps your economy, and worst of all, it holds back *real* progress. The best idea the founder of our dynasty *ever* had was to kill it off and make it stick. But Lord Zales – the Regent – makes *huge* money from it! He *bought* his titles – and his way to the Regency. My father tried to stop him – he very nearly succeeded – but he died on the eve of the vote in the Lord's Conclave, and that was it."

The Krithalan Knight observed, "You have a remarkable grasp of politics for a girl your age."

"Thanks. I think. Zales is very canny, it's not just *him* getting filthy rich from his villainy, he sees to it others do too, *lots* of them. He was there, waiting, *prepared* – for the day Kenekra ceased to exist. I'm *sure* he knew that was coming – all he had to do was ask the right questions of a Sorcerer, after all. He means to make *my* country – *my* people – the *new* Kenekra. Slavery is just the start, too. There's *worse* to come, we are already seeing more violent crime, people disappearing without trace, *drugs* – new ones every week – illicit spells and worse things even yet coming. He's in with a group of Dark Mages or Magicians, maybe Devil-worshippers – or worse, maybe even the devils themselves, I wouldn't put it past him. It's tearing my people apart – and *he's* making *money* off it! It breaks my heart, Sir Valkenhayn! I've *got* to try to make it right. And I can't do it alone."

Valkenhayn nodded, understanding. Her quest was nearly as quixotic as his own but she, too, was honor-bound to try. And everything the dragon said fell neatly into place.

"You have Cloughload in your corner, don't you?"

She nodded. “Of course. He took me under his wing, tried hard to be the father I’d lost. He was the one who warned me, schooled me and brought me along. He built on the letters my father left me. He’s a *very* tough teacher. But he’s not the only one. The apTarg’s loyalty to my family is unquestionable. Tal has been teaching me to use weapons – something I’m *not* supposed to know *anything* about, and which I suspect *will* be very useful at some point. Also, Tal tries to hang out with me as much as she can between cave dives. She’s the closest thing to a *real* bodyguard I have. The Regents ‘bodyguards’ are just *waiting* for the order to *off* me. Or *sell* me.”

Valkenhayn rubbed at his beard, thoughtfully. “Well, Princess – I want you to understand, I *entirely* sympathize, and I *would* stand ready to help in any way I could, even as just a sword swinger – but I really do not have much help to give *beyond* the edge of my blade. I regret to note, I’m more in need of it, than a dispenser of it.”

“My name is Aurora. We don’t need be formal when we’re shielded. And I *know* that, and that’s why we wanted this meeting. There *are* things I can do despite the Regent – this is a disruptive time, and not just for us. I still have *some* control over things like family assets, and anything *new* to the Empire that wasn’t given to Zales explicitly by the Regency Warrant – and there are still those loyal to my father and to *me*. So, rather than strictly focusing on what *I* need, I am also trying to help *others* – others whose character suggests they believe as I do – and we can all help each other. It would be no small accomplishment to have the backing of a re-born Krithala. Your interests and mine lie *entirely* congruent to each other. I’ve studied your family and, of course, Cloughload knew your father. Your Grandfather, even! He knows where you came from and he knows your character, too. Even McKulluh’s. We believe, and cherish, the same things. The time Krithala, Imri, and Torsheim stood together were not only the most profitable times, they were the most peaceful, and the *safest*. *Your* success inevitably helps *me* – and mine can help you. And aside from self-interest, I know I can trust you – something I can say of very few others. I knew without asking where your sympathies would lie. The *real* purpose of this meeting is to find out something *I* need to know – what can *I* do to *help* you put down the freezedrake and get back your throne?”

Valkenhayn sighed. His *own* education in politics was obviously proceeding rapidly. “How old are you now, Prin – Aurora? What kind of time frame are we looking at before Zales is forced to move?”

“I passed my fifteenth birthday a month ago next Firstday. Likely he’d want me settled well *before* my sixteenth birthday. His loss of the throne

and my ascension to it are automatic, the Conclave needn't act. Only my death will stop that – or a coup.”

“Go on.”

“In the event of my death, technically the crown devolves on to the next-of-kin – but I don't have any direct kin alive. Backing up to find more distant relations makes things dicey. On my mother's side are the apTargs. She and Tal's mother were sisters. Twins, actually. That would put Ed next in line, but magic-users are not allowed to rule. That just leaves Tal.”

“On your Mother's side. Who does it leave on your father's?”

“Doesn't matter. The Crown descends through the female line. This is *Imri*, we just *had* to do things differently. You wouldn't *believe* how many people died before the line reached Aunt Thara.”

“Try me,” Val said, grimly.

“Umm...I guess maybe twenty? Twenty-five? Nobody really thought about those deaths when they were happening – they weren't really *suspicious* – they died of various diseases, even if many of them *were* previously unknown, no one suspected assassination. In retrospect, of course, it's about as suspicious as any other part of this affair.”

Valkenhayn sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his chin again.

“Yes, it does. How long did that string of deaths take?”

“How...long? Oh. Let me think – I guess the last mysterious death was my father, which was a little less than ten years ago. Depending on how you count them, I'd guess, maybe, twenty-five to thirty or so years? Daddy was already on the Throne, I'm sure of that. I studied all the questions Cloughload thought you would ask, but I'm not primed for *that* one.”

Valkenhayn smiled. “It's a little off the wall, yes, but it suddenly occurred to me that this was a very, *very* long term plan. We are looking at the end game of a match that may have started at least twenty or twenty-five years ago, but I'd guess more – maybe *much* more.”

Her eyes widened. “How *many* more? Decades? Hundreds?” The Knight did not reply. “*Thousands*? Is there a connection with your duel with...umm – the freezedrake?”

He shook his head. “I don't see how, at this point, I really don't. But it all seems like a package deal – one wrapped up by someone not presently on stage. Everything that we know is connected has its own little sphere of concern – my family, your family, establishing a replacement for Kenekra, and so on – but each of them is affected by incidents that are apparently *unconnected* themselves. Like blowing up Kenekra. Like the freezedrake deciding *now* was the time to release me and set the ball rolling.”

She stepped closer to him and looked into his eyes. “The *freezedrake* chose the time of your release?”

He nodded. “Yes. It appears certain. The destruction of Kenekra is fueling some sort of intrigue against your family – maybe retroactively.”

“There are dead cats involved?”

“You know about paradox?”

“Cloughload explained. He’s quite a powerful Sorcerer himself, but it just doesn’t seem to *help* much! When I pointed that out he just nodded and said it was the inevitable consequence of having too many Sorcerers looking at too many things. Even if you are careful *not* to look at what *you* are trying to learn of, there’s nothing to say that *your* concern isn’t in the vicinity of an event some *other* Sorcerer is scrying around. He could be killing *your* cat and you could be killing *his*.”

Valkenhayn winced. “Hadh’t thought of *that*. Ishta’s sword, why did they ever *invent* the blasted magic?”

It was decided certain interested parties needed to know how magic would affect things in the future. Ironic, no?

“Big help *now*, isn’t it?” Valkenhayn asked, assuming Aurora, too, heard the dragon. “Wait, how can you talk to us through the shield?”

I’m not using Sorcery. Just psionics. And I am making sure *mine* are the *only* psionics in use here.

“Okay. Good.” he went back to his thoughts. “Sorcery can’t really help us, then?”

Not in the slightest. Worse. I now suspect paradoxes are not *necessarily* resolved right away. They can persist, letting us view multiple futures stemming from one event, observed, but somehow not yet fixed. But we cannot know this for certain because when a paradox *is* resolved the memory of anyone that saw an incorrect future would be part of the paradox and would therefore cease to be, as well. Once resolved, we have no way of recalling the overlap with some different version of history because we did not, in fact, live through it, so we *cannot* recall it.

“By the Goddess! This makes my head hurt.” Valkenhayn rubbed his forehead while he considered. “So answers through Sorcery *can* be wrong, we just don’t recall when it happens?”

I would characterize that as what humans call “a hunch” – since it is not empirically provable. But, yes.

“Not only can it be *wrong*, it eliminates all evidence it ever *was*. Sounds like a politician. But it looks like there are still other unknowns involved.”

If we are fortunate, that conclusion is not so closely tied to a paradox that we will not be able to recall it in our subjective future.

“Yeah. Oh, I’m just *loving* this retroactive stuff. The apTargs are working on the Great Rope. The other thing I will need will be an army – one powerful enough to overcome the dragon. Killing me stops the whole chain. Stopping the rope does, too. Stopping the army will also work.”

Then we cannot let these things be too close to one another, nor depend on one another.

“How does *that* help?”

These are the links a Sorcerer uses to navigate. The only way one can keep a secret from a Sorcerer is to insure that it never occurs to them to *ask* for it.

Valkenhayn sat, stunned for a moment. Such a simple idea – yet so profound in its’ implications! He nodded as he thought it through.

“The fewer connections, the better. The wilder the routes, the better. The more torturous the connections, the better. The more *confusing* the better. But it will all have to come together, *somehow*.” He pondered.

“At the World Wall.” Aurora said.

“What?”

“You need the rope to get the army up the World Wall. From there, how far to Caerleon?”

“Less than an hour’s march.”

“Leaving the Black Dragon the task of deducing that the army and the rope are actually *part* of a master plan, using only Sorcerous observation.” the Princess observed.

Indeed.

Valkenhayn thought about it. How could he organize and lead an army and equip it without *actually* organizing it, leading it, or *equipping* it?

“You’ll need a lot of help,” the Princess observed, smiling a little.

“Yeah,” the Knight agreed. “Dragging in lots more people to get hurt when the enterprise collapses.”

Then do not *let* it collapse. Caerleon.

“How?”

You can no longer think of this task as merely an honorable way to join your fathers. You *must* succeed, and therefore *will* succeed, because the consequences of failure will carry far beyond yourself.

What hope Krithala had to be a nation again would die. Imri’s hope to be an honorable nation again would die, too. So would Aurora, if nothing *worse* happened to her instead. *He’d* die as well, and so would R’nyara and McKulluh. At least, no one would miss the rat.

And not just you and they. Evenshade's plan would fail, too. I think.

Valkenhayn blinked. "Wouldn't that be a *good* thing?"

No. Evenshade *wants* you to win.

"You...*can't* be *serious*!"

I see we have accumulated another pending paradox. I *am* serious. Caerleon. Evenshade is a subtle and dangerous opponent. I have never won a chess game against that one. The plan has wheels within wheels, and though I cannot fathom it, I know it *will* end in death – but not your own. Not if it *succeeds*. *You* are *not* the target. *You* are a *piece*, and an important one, in a greater game. Evenshade's actual opponent is not yet apparent to me.

"Actual opponent? Who *else* could be involved with this?"

Evenshade was *sent* to Krithala.

"Yes. Someone commanded the damned thing, I got that much from my own Sorcerers before I got wind of the Wizard planning some sort of temporal manipulation and diverted to him to stop it."

Which you did not.

"I don't think he was in any shape to do whatever else it was he was sent there to do after McKulluh and I were through with him!" Valkenhayn retorted.

So think you? The Wizard *completed* his temporal manipulation, did he not?

"Completed – !" Valkenhayn shook his head. "He wasn't there to edit history somehow? You're saying...wait! You're telling me he was there to push *me* – into the *future*!?"

Your family was about to be destroyed. If you were to be of use later in the game, you had to be preserved from that fate.

"What?! You're telling me this was all a plot to...to *save* my *life*? Preposterous! That's...that's *nuts*!"

Perhaps. To quote a mutual rodent acquaintance, "I think a good case could be made for it." Mayhap our universe *appears* crazy because it *is* crazy indeed. Or perhaps we are only playing out the resolution of the paradox of the First Cause that began it. In the end, all may come to naught – quite literally, naught. But all the game pieces are not yet on the board.

"Oh, crud, I *hate* hearing a Sorcerer say things like that."

Mayhap. In amidst the feline slaughter I have slightly bruised a small kitten. You *cannot* proceed by any sort of direct route. To face Evenshade you have another task to complete.

Valkenhayn sighed. "Can I just put it on my to-do list?"

No. In a sense, you have already begun it by learning to walk the darkness. Whereas before I only suspected this need, I am now certain of it. You *must* finish it – and face Evenshade as a Shadowlord.

Valkenhayn felt cold, suddenly.

"The Shadows are long gone. There have been no reports of them for centuries – *millennia*! I mean...in my time, anyway. Has that changed?"

No.

"I can't help but think *that* a good thing! They were *not* the nicest people you would ever meet, either. They were totally dedicated to *evil*!"

As is R'nyara.

Valkenhayn paused. R'nyara considered herself "evil," the world considered her *kind* "evil" – but her interpretation of what was evil seemed far more akin to what he thought of as "good." Her interpretation of "good" seemed a pretty good match – evil match? – to his notion of "evil." Did the Shadows think the same way? Did we all just *misunderstand* one another?

By the *Goddess* what a cliché *that* is! No decent talespinner would spin *that* tale. They wouldn't *dare*, he thought. But, *he* had to deal with *reality* and knew it was under no such constraints. Unless this was just someone else's tale. He groaned and rubbed his forehead. That *would* be a paradox, wouldn't it? Reading about himself in a book?! What would happen if he read the part about himself reading the book?

He rubbed his forehead again...

"Where does all this leave us?"

The Princess smiled. "You should leave at once for the Temple of Shadows. From there thence to the rendezvous."

He looked at her. "*Without* an army? Without a *rope*? Without a *hope*, basically? Also without *directions* unless *you* know the way to the Temple. I thought it was *legendary* up until 30 seconds ago."

"It is better you *not* know of such things. Have faith, do your own part. Let the other pieces on the board do theirs."

"What other pieces?"

"You need an army. Fighting a dragon means you need an air force, as well. You need a rope, and yourself." the Princess said, ticking the points off on her elegantly manicured fingers. "There are four in the Quest. *You* will bring *yourself*, R'nyara will bring the army. McKullah, the air force, Scrum the rope."

Valkenhayn looked at her as if she had gone stark, raving mad.

"That goes against *every* military principle in the *book*! In *every* military book ever *written*. Even the ones that haven't *been* written yet!"

"Yes. No one would ever expect it!"

Indeed. A good leader must *know* when to lead – and when *not* to.

"You think the *rat* can bring the rope? Gimme a *break*! He couldn't even bring *himself*! A *Sorceress* can bring an *army*? And *McKulluh* an *air force*?! Where is he going to get an *air force*, I ask you?! Besides, I thought this was a *Quest*."

You are all bound to the *Quest*. You will all continue the *Quest*, whether together or not. The *Quest* ends for all of you when *you* face *Evenshade*.

"How do you know *that*?"

At that point have I seen the *Crown* whole again. But so much for so many depends on what *else* transpires there that the effort to open that box is simply more than any *Sorcerer* can apparently bring to bear – even an they are willing to slay the cat within, which few are – and mayhap even fewer are capable of.

"I don't *get* this. Surely it would be better to...wait a minute...what does *that* mean? 'Even fewer are capable?' Enlighten me."

A *paradox* may lie within the box. It might be the cat cannot *be* slain. If it hangs fire, it's resolution still awaiting an event no one can imagine or deduce then no question can *be* asked, and so the *Sorcerer* cannot *scry* – and thus the cat *cannot* be killed. That is what brings the *Monkey's Paw*. That's why no *Sorcerer* dares to look – or even look around it.

Valkenhayn sighed. *Unimaginable* events? Something so bizarre that even *Sorcerers* cannot imagine it, or think of a way to backtrack it and comprehend it? That could not *possibly* be good. What in the Nine Hells was he going to walk *into*?

He looked at the Princess and sighed again. For all her self-possession, she was just a fifteen-year-old *kid*! The dragon had to be *crazy*! How can you *win* a war this way? Could it *possibly* get *weirder*? *More* complicated?

He had the terrible feeling it not only *could* – it *would*. Worse yet, perhaps it had already. *Damn* the *cats*, anyway!

Valkenhayn needed some time to think after the meeting. Since he did not expect to see R'nyara again he passed over the mirror to Aurora and asked her to see to it it reached the dark elfling. He passed along the warnings as well. Cloughload waited until the Princess had put the mirror in an inside pocket and the Knight had left.

That worries me.

"Why?" Aurora asked, instantly. "It looks to be a good replacement for R'nyara's crystal ball. And she's going to *need* it, she can't always depend on someone having some milk."

Scrying over spilt milk. I had to have a hand explain that to me. I'm so used to dealing with humans by telepathy my command of the language isn't as quick as it probably should be. Not for such puns, anyway.

Be that as it may, Morak was talented – and very, very powerful. And Valkenhayn is correct, he would not have bothered to make that mirror knowing he would die before he finished it – not unless he *knew* who it was for and *why* it needed to be left unfinished. It disturbs me to realize he was involved in this, and that he was there so long before me.

"You think it's too dangerous to use?"

I didn't say that. I have been pondering what to recommend as R'nyara's replacement scrying device, and I was uncertain how to proceed and what safeguards to try to implement. It gives me pause to realize Morak was there, ahead of me – somehow. I have little doubt he knew exactly who would get the mirror and what they needed it for. What's more, he must have found these things out well before this little slice of history became the most popular sorcerous target in history. He had the luxury of *time*. And the opportunity to anticipate events *without* killing the cats involved.

"I think I understand. To use your analogy, Morak was a piece on the board before anyone realized he was even playing. We don't even know what side he was on," she said.

Yes. It was too well placed in that load of junk Bieren bought, too well *calculated* to be a coincidence – as if there ever *was* any such thing in a Sorcerous battle. I suspect he would've been on *our* side – he and the Emperor were very close. But there's is no way to tell what he meant to do or how. Even without looking, I am sure the Monkey's Paw now obscures his actions at that time. Indeed, he would surely have counted on that.

"So what should we do? Bury it and pretend it never entered the game? Or do we let it proceed?"

I think perhaps we should talk to it.

"Talk to it?" she gasped. "Wouldn't that be dangerous? I mean, I can't guess what questions to ask it, and I *know* scrying blind is horribly dangerous!"

Unquestionably. On the other claw, I am better equipped to defend myself than is Valkenhayn or Knyara. I have a suspicion that Morak may have had enough perspective to have been able to glimpse what is driving this tale. That is critical information.

"We can't afford to lose *you*. I can't afford it, and therefore Imri can't. We can spare *me* more easily!"

Not without a civil war over the succession.

"There's already *going* to be a war over the succession!"

Tal would be honor-bound to try to take the throne, and I know enough of what resources both Zales and the apTargs control to worry a great deal about what a knock-down, drag-out fight between *them* could lead to. Zales's dark forces stalking the streets would be bad enough. Countering them with the underworld vomiting up hundreds, or even thousands, of targs...

"But they can't *control* all the targs!"

No, they can't. But that may not matter. What they lack in control they more than make up for with unorthodoxy. Between the ap-Targ's bizarre resources, their desperation, and their cleverness, and Zales's overconfidence and arrogance, we could wind up with a blood-bath the like of which we've never seen before.

Indeed. Indeed, I now recall seeing targs wandering the city at least once before – yet I did not have such a memory in any previous recollection. I am sure of that – yet I clearly recall wondering what could have happened as I watched the scene. Did I actually watch such a thing? Or do I now simply *recall* having done so – because that resolves a paradox more cheaply than any other way?

Morak may have seen more clearly than ever we can now. Perhaps he left us clues.

"Cloughload, this idea frightens me more than I can say..."

If he did so, scrying it may be the only way to find them out.

"Isn't this *exactly* the kind of thing that could retroactively change everything?"

Cloudload sighed.

Absolutely. Please put the mirror on the dresser and then leave.

"I know enough to realize *that* may make *you* and *only* you the focus of a paradox. If you mean to do this, we *both* look."

I can't permit that.

"Wanna try and *make* me leave? You can't *prevent* that."

The dragon sighed as it regarded her.

No. Trying to break down *your* psi-shields would leave one of us crazy. Probably me. And it might make no difference to you. You are every *bit* as stubborn as your father.

"And you know *exactly* who we both learned it from!"

There was a long pause. Aurora brought out the mirror.

Very well. We will not begin with simply gazing at the mirror. We shall first ask it the question we apparently cannot ask any other Sorcerous device.

Aurora placed the mirror on the dresser and took the corner of the bag in her hand.

Who dared to make a slave of a dragon?

Aurora whipped the bag off the mirror and they beheld a bespectacled little man wearing a brown monk's robe. He was bald, and aged, his spectacles were thick and magnified his eyes to a ridiculous degree. A single candle lit the book he was writing in. He was not alone. In the shadows, *things* moved. They could not be seen clearly, but it was obvious they were distorted and misshapen, crawling or hitching or hopping in the deepest shadows, trying hard to stay out of the wan light. They could not make out what he was writing, but they could see that the writing sparkled and moved, clearly magical. This was no cleric.

Suddenly he turned toward them, peering myopically in their direction, and the mirror suddenly went blank.

"*Him? HIM!? That* was the guy who commanded *Evenshade*?" Aurora said in tones of disbelief.

An Enchanter need not look dangerous to be so. But that is not what he is – at least, not *entirely*. Some of the symbols he was using *were* surely Enchantment, but others I did not recognize at all. But there was more information there than just what fool would enslave a Dragon. Did you recognize what lurked in the shadows?

"Something horrid, that's all the impression I could get."

You are correct. There were scores of the things there, but I recognized two of them – for I have seen them before.

"What, then? What were they?"

One was Smallpox. The other was Bubonic Plague. Or rather, they were their avatars. The diseases themselves are creatures too small to see, but in Ingarde they can be personified and represented by magic as can anything else, really. It is how magic enables us to influence and control things that are themselves abstract, or unknown, or beyond our reach. I do not know of anyone who has ever desired to personify a disease, but clearly *he* does.

"Why?" Aurora asked in bewilderment.

Doubtless to direct who they infect and how.

"Oh, by all the Gods," she breathed. "All those mysterious deaths..."

Yes.

"He was the man who killed my father. The man who put Zales in reach of the throne!"

Yes.

"Who is he?!"

We cannot know what he calls himself, but I can tell you *what* he is. He is the Plague Master. And if the Nriethalan somehow frees Evenshade, it will only clear our way to reach our next enemy.

"Our next enemy? But *who* is the ultimate enemy?"

No!

Suddenly stars appeared in the mirror, stars racing past as if they were hurtling at unthinkable speeds through space. In a moment, the view zoomed up on a vast construct of metal and paced it. The stars behind it were blazing blue, fading to red as they zoomed to the outer part of the mirror. There was nothing to compare it to, but the impression was one of vast size and vast age. The view twirled around so they could see it was a gigantic saucer, with a great indented dish on the bottom. It was covered with pockmarks and scars as if bombarded with weapons over the eons and then rebuilt. Tiny figures moved around and over it, too small in the mirror to be made out. When the view settled, visible behind the construct loomed an immense sphere, lit with hundreds of tiny spots of light moving across it, which was spewing a tremendous plume of glowing material from the titanic hole nearly in the center of the sphere shining a fierce, actinic bluish-white. All this they saw in a fraction of a second, before Cloughload used his telekinesis to push the mirror back into the bag, and laced it tightly.

Aurora gasped. "What in the Nine Hells was *that*?!"

That was a view of our world, as it looks in reality, hurtling through space.

"And that other...*thing*?"

The dragon said grimly, You asked a question no Sorcerer would have ever, *ever dared* to ask. No other sorcerous device would have replied with anything but the Monkey's Paw. Dangerous, indeed.

For ten thousand years I have watched over this city and this world. My family has done so for far, far longer. And for me, for *all* of them, this I can say now: this is the first time any of us has ever *truly* understood what humans *mean* when they say the word...*fear*.

She gasped. "I'm sorry! I mean...the question was so *obvious* it just *slipped* out!"

But now we know something crucial. For the Ultimate Enemy is not of *this* world...at all. But how can we possibly confront...that?

"I don't know. What *was* 'that?' What *was* that *thing* chasing our world through space?" asked Aurora.

I am very much afraid...that I can't even *imagine*, the dragon said.

18 CLOUGHLOAD MAKES A MOVE

A Sorcerer must navigate by the things he can scry. You cannot scry telepathy. To coordinate this Quest, someone with that power must take a...hand.

So Cloughload thought to himself as he pondered the meeting with Valkenhayn and the Princess. Only he – or his Hands – could speak with the Questers without anyone overhearing. He had watched this situation develop, but now it appeared he, himself, *must* intervene – at least enough to push it toward success. “Success” by his *own* definition, of course – which meant to secure his City, re-establish the alliances that had stood them all good stead in the past and, finally, to help Evenshade strike back against whoever was arrogant and foolish enough to make a *slave* out of a *dragon*. In his mind’s eye he again looked that mysterious old man, surrounded by lurking pestilence, and shook his head. Powerful as they were, *magical* as they were...even *dragons* could get sick.

Valkenhayn needed the rope. Aurora was correct, the best weapon there was the rat. Not the *sharpest* weapon, it was true...

Scrum.

Somewhere in the market below came a loud squeal and a thud. A display table of jewelry abruptly bounced up. The surprised merchant looked under the table just in time to see a rat’s tail leaving under the skirt at the far end of it. She ran to the other end of the table, but the damned thing had already vanished in the crowd.

Calm down. I’m not concerned about your kleptomaniacal personality disorders at the present time.

“Get ~~OUT~~ of my ~~MIND~~ you steenking, steenking, eevil...”

I don’t think you want that. I think you’d like to get a warning about *Sorcerers* – past, present, *Future*, focusing on you, watching you, listening to you, tracking every move, every copper, wherever you go, whatever you do, ever and anon, to death...and *beyond*.

Scrum shuddered. “More ~~STEELING MAGIC!~~ YOU and your ~~KIND~~ are ~~DESTROYING~~ dee ~~WORLD~~ weet’ your ~~MAGIC!~~”

Stop talking out loud. I can read your creepy little rat thoughts without such help. Like reading without having to move my lips – another skill I have and you do not. Turn left at the next alley, go into the “Dead Cat’s Walk,” order a mead, sit down, and *shut up*.

Cloughload paused, following the rat who, somewhat to the Dragon’s surprise, did as he was told.

Your instinct for self-preservation may be more powerful than I gave you credit for. Thief. Perhaps you will live through this after all. Do not attempt to rejoin Valkenhayn.

"WHAT?!"

I said, *SHUT UP!* Cloughload hissed in the rat's mind.

The rat flinched, glancing furtively around the tavern, looking guilty as hell. Of course, he looked that way even when he was innocent – or, at least, when hadn't been caught yet.

Hee ~~ONES~~ mee ~~MONEY!~~ the rat protested – moving his lips, indeed, but at least not blurting it out for all to hear.

Scrum, there are major forces moving in this world. Forces that will squash a little rat without bothering to notice the bloodstain on their soles afterward. If you want to avoid becoming a scrap on some hobnail, I can tell you how. Otherwise, I'll find *another* rat and let you meet the gruesome fate awaiting you. It's not like rats are hard to come by.

"Not weel' ~~MY~~..."oops...*Not weel' ~~MY~~ talents you ~~ARROGANT~~ ~~REPTILE!~~!"

You are a flawed tool, but you are at least already in play. You need to help the apTargs make the rope.

I ~~DON'T~~ ~~NEEVE!~~ I ~~DON'T~~ collect ~~TARG~~ silk, ~~EEDDER!~~

You do if you want to live. You are under a *geas*, rat. Never forget that. Never forget how people who don't discharge a *geas* die...alone. In pain. In poverty...

*Deese eesn't ~~FAIR!~~ ~~WHY~~ do deese teengs ~~ALWAYS~~ happen to ~~ME!~~!"

Because you *stole* the focus from its' previous *victim*, moron. Doubtless because it *knew* you would. Next time keep your sticky little rat paws to yourself and someone *else* will be the victim. As it is, *you* are, you *asked* for it, and to discharge the *geas* you *must* see to it that the rope is made, and *delivered* – and get Valkenhayn into the Throne Room. Nothing less will free you.

Deese is all ~~VALKENHAYN'S~~ fault!

Valkenhayn is not under the *geas*, but he is not free, either. You involved *yourself*, you'll get no sympathy from anyone. Now, *listen*. The phrase "straighter than straight" can only be a reference to phase targs. The apTargs have now realized they need phase targ silk for their rope – with it, a rope only a few thousand feet long will reach all the way from the top of the World Wall to the bottom. In

the futures where they do *not* succeed, you are nowhere to be found. In the futures where they do, *you are there – alive!*

That's EASY to EXPLAIN – I'm not to be FOUND because I'm LEEVING FOR SOMEPLACE SAFE!

There is no safe place for one carrying a geas. Trust me, Scrum. No one will really mind if you get killed, but no one wants to see Valkenhayn die.

"WHY you FEELTHY ROTTEN..." Scrum blurted out loud.

SHUT UP!!! Cloughload thundered in the rat's mind.

Scrum's snout dropped into his untouched mead as he slumped, and he straightened up again, hastily, snorting his sinuses clear. He noticed many curious faces looking at his and tried to unconcernedly wipe the mead from his face, as if this were his normal way to enjoy drinking. He sneezed. A few drops of mead rolled off the tips of his whiskers.

In the meantime I shall have to see about some sort of replacement...

A tiny light suddenly lit in the rat's dark mind...

I will take CARE of THAT! NO ONE – NO ONE – gets out of oweeng MEE!!!

Cloughload suspiciously scanned the rat's mind...and smiled to himself.

Very well. Get the rope made. Get it to the World Wall and get Valkenhayn into that castle. Or die. I don't care which. And Cloughload closed the connection.

Sorceress. Cloughload sent.

Hear you, I do, R'nyara replied, mentally. She was in the apTarg library, helping them find information about phase targ. Aurora was busy at a crystal talking to someone she apparently knew well.

Good. Do not rendezvous with Valkenhayn.

What? No! That won't do! I need him – and he needs me more than he knows!

I know I do not need to tell you he must seek the Temple of Shadows. You, yourself, killed that cat in teaching him to walk the darkness. You *must* trust what the future has already shown you.

The future hasn't been so forthcoming as I could wish, Cloughload. My path leads to the throne of Krithala, but refuses to show me my fate once I reach it.

Not strong enough to kill that cat? I see. Too much rides for far too many on what occurs there. From here see I two futures, and a

paradox waiting to be resolved. The decision point comes when Valkenhayn enters the Throne Room, for Evenshade *must* try to slay him. No one has dared to look within – not I, not even Evenshade – the fate of more than just we involved will be decided there. Destiny stalks us all.

If I cannot secure the future by his side, how else can I help him?

Whatever comes he must have an army, and it must come to him ready, willing, and able to fight, but without Evenshade *knowing* that it will come. It must come from the depths. The task so falls to you. We will have to find some sort of replacement for you.

Replacement?

Ideally, one that will either lull or confuse Sorcerers following Valkenhayn.

R'nyara was silent for a long while, eyes looking at an apTarg history without really seeing it. Her mouth opened. Then she smiled. And chuckled.

Oh, Cloughload – you have slain here a cat! Slain one I thought already dead!

What?! What do you mean?

*So I in the crystal much I was unsure of, much that confused me. Your talk of 'replacement' suddenly threw all of't int'a new darkness. I did *not* kill that cat, hid't did, and lived, until just moments ago. Yes. Oh, yes. Now I know *exactly* what t'do.*

It was the dragon's turn to be silent. What had she seen? And dare he even ask? He sighed.

Sorcery is a paradox in itself. It draws nigh those most curious to know and then shows them it is often better to remain unenlightened, leaving their curiosity both aroused and unassuaged. I sense it would be unwise to ask.

R'nyara smiled.

Doubtless. Procture I will a replacement for McKullah as well.

Where?

Ask me no questions and no cats will you slay.

Cloughload reflected grimly that even *Sorcerers* found Sorcerers exasperating to deal with.

And what of the army?

*Oh, yes. *Know this then, oh seeker of knowledge, that army will shadow us wherever we go.**

You answer me with a riddle?!

I answer as a sorceress should. (More I should not tell, she smiled.

You are good at opening boxes, but in closing them again, not so much. Always lurking below our scrying are the worlds of if that can be felt but not seen, because much must change before they can be. But that may be *coming*. Mayhap we cannot recall cats already dead, but perhaps something can *replace* them with cats whose fates are *not* already known.

*Such a thing, *never* have we scryed! The probabilities are t'well known, t'widely fixed. What could happen t'would seal in't'boxes anew so many cats?*

I don't know. Yet. But I am no longer certain we know the true nature or power of the enemies we face. Indeed, my foolishness in that respect has only recently been...highlighted.

*Were we ever? I *know* not t'look on the face of the enemy. He is not the first problem. Before we deal with him we must first deal with his minions who stand twixt he and we. His foot soldiers.*

Yes. But more – much more – lies beyond. Morak left you a replacement for your shattered palantir.

*Morak? I know this name! Once was he Imri's most *powerful* sorcerer! Why would he have left such a thing for me?*

We don't know. Valkenhayn found it – doubtless precisely as he was intended to do.

Rnyara shivered.

An t'has already revealed things t'you has't not?

Yes. Morak made it well before this time slice became cluttered with Sorcerers. He had the time to explore carefully, and the opportunity to ask questions that now bring only the Monkey's Paw.

*An y'would give such a device – t'*me*? *Me*? Have not I slain enough cats *yet*? Found you new futures unexplored? Where?*

Yes. I have, and I know not where they are save they are *not* in our world. And yes, I do, for I dare not keep it myself! Morak meant it for *you*, not I, and I foolishly allowed myself to become intrigued and looked within, and I was shown things whose meaning I cannot fathom but whose significance is undeniable. I hope I have done no harm, and I can only hope Morak meant the mirror specifically for you – somehow. But it is entirely too helpful to us all. It doesn't seem to even *know* the Monkey's Paw. The temptation to look is already *gnawing* at my insides.

Suddenly a tiny vortex of swirling rainbows flashed into existence on the table before her, and the mirror appeared, tiny in the distance, but it

swiftly grew to its normal size, its top part shrouded in a little velvet bag. The tiny power gate closed with an understated *pop!*

I have sent Valkenhayn into the darkness, now I send you as well. He will return a Shadowlord, and you the army he will command. I can give you but one other piece of advice: beware disease. Be alert for the Plague Master.

Ryara put the mirror in the tiny holster hidden under her hair where it covered her neck. *As we have said so shall't be.*

McKulluh.

Oh, Mother o' God, this can't be good.

I thought Leprechauns were always optimistic.

Shows what ye know about the little people, so it does!

Well – even a dragon can fall prey to wishful thinking. We must decouple these endeavours from Valkenhayn himself. He is too obvious a focus, it is too easy to unravel what we do by observing him.

Aye. 'Tis no surprise to meself so, with Sorcerers lurking under every rock, more's the pity, and every one of 'em a short with two back pockets!

"A shirt with two back pockets?" Oh, I see. You are correct. There are too many Sorcerers involved, we are reaching a point of intrinsic instability.

And it's no argument from me ye'll be gettin'. So, what do ye propose?

Valkenhayn will need an army and a rope. These are in hand. I hope. What remains is some sort of air force, for dragons are flying creatures and Evenshade will have surely made similar preparations.

Aye, and a sparrow's part of a chance I'd have doin' it. And what of himself while I'm at it? O'ye think he'll even make it to the World Wall without meself t'watch 'is back?

I am informed by the Sorcerous Arts your replacement is already in hand. You should leave your equipment with the Sorceress. And your chances are better than you think. Evenshade will have pteros, fell beasts, dragon kin, rocs and such – the "usual suspects" I think you call them. We need some orthogonal thinking.

Oh, whaddaya think, then? A couple squadrooms o' butterflies?

Perhaps.

*Imigh sa diabhál!²⁷ Yer a chancy git, d'ye know that? What d'ye - butterflies? * he stopped, and smiled. *Butterflies! Faith! The very thing, don't ye know?*

27 Erish - "Ima sa DIA-bál!" Go to the devil

Er...no. No. I don't. But that's a *good* thing. From the look on your face, perhaps it's a very – *very* – good thing...

*Ah, but there's still *one* problem, boyo.*

Just one? *What* a novelty.

How can I get past the auld wyrm and into Vindolonda without every orc in five thousand miles landin' on me hat? Sure'n if I try t'use magic t'do it, t'will be no contest at all, at all.

Obviously. You're hinting at something...

So tell me - did Blacky ever study at yer brother's school?

You know the answer to that. Evenshade was already compromised, and never had the chance.

*Just checkin', I am. Ye and I *both* know there's *other* ways t'get aboot then conjuring.*

We have *oaths* about off-world...

*Aye, so we do, so we do. But it's not *tellin'* I really want. Just a shuttlecraft. Or some other miraculous 'tech' thing, really. Just t'get meself in under Blacky's own nose...and no one needs t'know, don't ye see?*

There was a long, long pause.

I can't think of another way in, either. I will catch hell from my brother for this, curse you. Get a piece of paper ready.

Got it right here, me ducko!

Of *course* you would. Write this down...

He closed the connection with a profound sense of trepidation.

I have assiduously studied and practiced Sorcery for thousands of years, and yet I am less informed than ever was I before. It took just *one* glance...*one* glance...in that damned mirror to drag the off-worlders into this mess... *Now* we have more new variables than I can even *guess* at. And they don't *have* Sorcery, they have something much, *much* worse. Do their computers even *know* the Monkey's Paw? *What* happens when *they* start up their machines and start trying to predict the future along with all the Sorcerers?

It's just a transport, he said to himself, hopefully. Maybe they won't notice and get dragged in. Fat chance.

Walkenhayn.

"Oh, bloody *hell!*"

Don't speak aloud.

Oh, bloody hell.

Better. There are going to be some changes in your party. Don't let surprise show, go along with whatever happens.

What?! What kind of changes?

I frankly have no idea. A Sorcerer would use the cat metaphor again, but instead I will simply state that I think I hear the distant thunder of falling dominoes.

Great. Just, great. Now what?

Find the Temple of Shadows.

*So you said before, but you've *still* not said where I should even start looking!*

That I can help you with. Seek out the island continent of Za'adum.

*How will *that* help me?*

Because it's the last place anyone ever saw them. Surely there is a clue to where they might have gone to be found there.

*Oh, surely! Have you *scryed* that?*

I find my crystal all but useless these last few days, and I have re-learned caution just recently. It's a hunch, and the best I can offer. You will need a ship. Aurora contacted the apSwan clan just moments ago and asked about the new vessel. It can only be on your behalf, for only the Ammonite could ever *reach* Za'adum. She is unique.

*Why is *that*?*

You recall what happened to Henekra island?

*I'm not likely to ever forget it. One little *oops*...*

The volcano that sunk Za'adum was sixty miles across. The entire world was darkened for decades. What's left of the Temple lies at the bottom of the Great Hestick Ocean.

*Are you *completely* mad or is this something only I bring out?*

Count your blessings. Water is nearly as hard as stone to scry through. Go to the apSwan stronghold, in the government center, near the Navy shipyards and the Colosseum. You'll need to visit both. And you'll need a competent Thaumateurge.

*What *for*?*

To Captain the Ammonite's sister ship, the Ammonite.

*You *said* she was *unique*!*

She is. For the moment, the Dragon said.

*And what *lunatic* gave her the same name?*

Tradition. Stop by the Magician's Guild on your way back.

Ed.

Yes, O Master of the Monkey's Paw?

Watch it.

Sorry. Kinda.

Never mind. If I never see that Paw again in my life, I will have still seen it too many times. You get to keep the rat.

Yay us! For certain rather loose interpretations of 'yay.'

He is yet tasked with getting the rope made, moved to the World Wall and getting Valkenhayn into the Throne Room – though I have not fathomed *how* he is connected to *that*. His geas will compel him, but an occasional cranial impact will help keep him focused.

*Not that I *object* to impacting his cranium, such as it is, but how will *that* help *us* make the rope? Or is it just for fun?*

Your first encounter with the phase targs will be fatal for you and your sister unless he is present. I can scry that *he* will leave alive. I can't tell the same for anyone else, but no one does if he *doesn't* go.

*Please don't tell me our *lives* depend on the rodent? Cause, really, that's just freaking *terrifying*.*

It didn't thrill me either. This does not bode well for you or your sister either way. In *this* future, you *might* survive – but I was careful *not* to look to see how, lest I see your actual demise instead. But the monkey paw over the whole thing convinces me whatever you *intend* to do at *this* instant will *probably* get you killed. You need to come up with something much more difficult to predict – preferably something where survival is a foregone conclusion. We have boxes within boxes within boxes – and too many variables. Far, *far* too many variables.

*I'll say there's too many! Boxes within boxes...hey, can you have an open box *inside* a closed one?*

Cloudload blinked.

I don't see *how*.

*Neither do I. But it gives *me* an idea...*

And my terror grows and grows...

*Take heart. We know you survive long enough to see the *revolt* start! At least you have something to look *forward* to!*

Sarcasm.

*Oh, you *spotted* it!*

That time I did. Whatever you are thinking, get some good help.

*I will. Don't *worry*! How bad can it get?*

I am *desperately* trying *not* to scry *that*...

Ed entered the Magician's Guild and checked the welcome board.

Welcome to [Ed a/c Targ]

Wizardry Consult 492(c) Master Necklyn

He stepped to the transporter pads, punched in "4", and stepped out again on the fourth floor, and headed for 492.

492 was a large room with rolling partitions, "a" and "b" were currently combined with a lecture on chronomancy going on, "c" was closed off. A tall wizard in a black robe stepped next to him as he looked inside.

"Shall we?" he asked Ed, gesturing into the room.

"Of course," Ed said. "After you, Master."

"Thank-you," he said, absently. He was middle-aged looking – which probably meant he was somewhere north of a 150 – with light beard as yet without gray. His hair was covered by a black turban.

"This morning's Sorcery News report tells me you are about to tackle phase targ, again, Ed."

"I see they are still on the ball," Ed smiled. The Master also smiled at the old joke.

"As much as they can be with the Monkey Paw clouding their vision. At a guess, we are already dealing with one or two paradoxes. The Sorcerers are getting rather frustrated. Also *scared*. It's starting to leak over into Wizardry, too. Temporal manipulations are becoming – challenging."

"I bet they are," Ed agreed. "It'll get worse, too. I think phase targ can shift over time as well as space. We've been going over the old chronicles. The worst massacres – they were just too convenient for the targ."

"Doesn't surprise me at all. In fact, it *does* kind of surprise me it didn't occur to people earlier."

"Not a surprise, really. The apSeronin's had *their* traditional magic and they didn't supplement it with formal training in the other arts."

"True enough. *You'd* still do better to specialize, Ed," the Magician said, smiling.

"I would as a *wizard*. I don't want to *be* a wizard. I want to be an *ap-Targ*. But you know that. Be that as it may, I'm here to discuss an idea."

The Master raised an eyebrow. "You don't often dabble in theory."

"I do when my life is at stake. Cloughload scryed the trip, too, and Monkey Pawed all over the place except somehow he *was* able to see the *rat* at least, survives. But he can't find me or Tal. At first I thought it meant we died in all possible futures."

"Logical, I'm afraid. Likely you do."

"Yes, I thought so, too. But then it occurred to me that we were trying scry through a *lot* of stone. Why *weren't* we blanking out?"

The Master blinked. "How *much* stone?"

"According to our survey, at least 6000-odd feet of basalt and granite."

Nocklyn pondered. "You're right, that's *damned* suspicious."

"I'm thinking *someone* drilled through – someone with a *lot* of power – and *possibly* killed a cat. And then *forced* that box, open *or* closed into a future that could not support it – a *non-existent* future."

Nocklyn thought about that.

"Frame-dragging. Leaving the site scryable but triggering the Monkey Paw because it can't be reached – protecting you from viewing an impossible future."

"Exactly."

Nocklyn pulled his journal and flipped to a blank page, and started jotting down magical formulae. One glowing glyph started to wander away and he had to use his right thumb to hold it in place. Ed chuckled.

"I got that, too. The Wandering Square-Root."

"Never a *good* sign. Not *necessarily* a *bad* sign, but never a *good* one..." Nocklyn answered absently. He nudged the wandering glyph back into place where it locked down and critically examined the result. Then he slammed his journal shut. "I buy it. It would totally screw up Sorcery, but wouldn't affect dynamantic manipulation. But who would do it?"

"*Lots* of people, some of them *already* involved – but *one* high-probability source I think would have to be the phase targs *themselves*. Think about it – they *must* use Sorcery or its' equivalent to tell where activity *will* occur in the web. If they force through it they can maybe kill the cat, making the *prey's* kill inevitable, and then lock it away from easy observation. And for *them* it *isn't* through vast amounts of rock, you see? But as far as outside observers are concerned it's a done deal – much easier to scry, so the rock less of a shield."

"I see what you're driving at, but what does it *mean*?"

"*Can* a phase targ *really, actually* kill a cat? Does its' 'observation' of an event actually make it *inevitable*? Or does it merely *look* that way because of the forcing?"

"Now I *don't* see what you're driving at."

"We can't actually *see* the event in question. Technically the box remains closed *for us*. In theory, the phase targs *have* seen the event. But was *their* observation actually enough to *collapse* the probability function – or

is the function *still there*, just obscured, waiting for someone *else* to look inside – when they actually *arrive*?”

“In other words...does a phase targ have enough free will to collapse a probability wave? Come to think on it, that’s a very good question. Who could tell?”

“I don’t know. But follow me on this...suppose something happened there that collapsed the function in a paradoxical way?”

Nocklyn rubbed his chin. “Go on.”

“The Universe doesn’t *like* paradox – but if the paradox can resolve *itself* then – paradoxically, as it were – it doesn’t *need* be resolved. With everything moot, no paradox...”

“...can be demonstrated. Gutsy. Crazy, but gutsy. You’re making a bet that what is occluded is favorable to you – what’s the difference between this and not even bothering to scry?”

“The fact that we have a self-healing paradox that will override any paradoxes – paradoxical? – already extant in the area.”

“How do you figure to do *that*?”

“Render *all* moot. I want to collapse not just *that* probability function – I want to collapse *all* the functions in the area.”

“You want to...hmmm...in essence that will force the *entire multiverse* along that timeline to decide those functions exactly *one* way – and, by making it impossible to be otherwise, creating paradox in futures where something else happens, thereby closing off access to them, thus rendering them all moot?” He shook his head. “Ed, that’s crazy – but it’s *just crazy enough* that it *might* work! You *really* need to go to university, my friend. We could *use* an insight like that.”

“Maybe someday, when my family isn’t hanging so near the edge of such a high cliff. So, can you help me come up with something that can do that?”

“I can. Sort of a ‘Holy Hand Grenade of Obviousness’.”

“Gods! You are *really* bad at *naming* stuff!”

“Well, forcing everything through just *one* line of probability tends to *make* things obvious. Of course, there’s no telling what the *actual, final* effect will be, so *what’s* obvious won’t be obvious until it *becomes* obvious,” Nocklyn went on, obliviously. “You’ll be detonating it in a place *loaded* with Wizardry, which may *already* have a dead cat...*but*...I wouldn’t do it for *anyone* else, but if it’s *you* and it’s behind 6000-plus feet of sturdy rock – I think I can justify it. You *are* a nutcase, Ed, but you’re *my kind* of nutcase. I want you to write a paper on this, if you survive.”

““*What’s obvious won’t be obv...oh!*” Yes, you don’t *have* to be a nutter to be a Wizard, but it sure helps,” Ed agreed, smiling. “I’ll do the writeup if *you* do the math.”

“Deal.”

“I’m going to need this tomorrow. Can we tackle it?”

“Yes, I already cleared my afternoon schedule this morning when Sorcery told me something was coming up.”

“Good. I guess Sorcery is good for *something* anyway.”

“Oh, yeah – let’s *hope* so! I’d *hate* to check my afternoon schedule and Monkey Paw. That’s a *real* inducement to just stay in bed.”

19 HOW TO CONFUSE A SORCERER

Scrum was furious. He was also scared as hell, and wondering how he was going to get *out* of this. That he was under some sort of geas seemed likely. Like it or not, he should have *died* in that trap he made for himself in the myststream, only a geas would've brought someone to help. He had been wondering why he survived that. Now he knew. For all the good that information was worth. And *who* could he get to replace himself? Who could he *trust* to collect from the Knight?

"That CURSED DRAGON seemed ta theenk All I Have ta Do ees DEELIVER de Steenking ROPE and get that Krit'alan git eento thee CASTLE! But HELPING those aptarg Peeples would mean REAL WORK – and DANGEROUS WORK, too! Dose people are NATARIOUS for getteeng HURT, KEELLED, OR BOTH! or even WORSE! They HAVE to be EEDDEOTS," he thought to himself as he scuttled through the legs of the crowd in the general direction of the city center – and the aptarg stronghold.

"That Krit'alan SO-AND-SO is going to GET AWAY without PAYING me! AND he'll WIND UP with ALL THAT TREASURE! All that BEAUTEFUL, LOVELY, TREASURE, oh, yes. WAIT!" and he stopped, slapping a grubby paw to his head as an idea struck him like a rock thrown by one of his littermates. The hunch he'd had suddenly crystallized...

He laughed out loud, then glanced around furtively. No one paid him the slightest attention. He slunk away.

Scrum took himself to the harbor where he found a shuttle to one of the other islands in the Imrian archipelago. It was not a large island, nor a well-known one. The natives called it *Kve*.

The journey took him far from Auriana, and even the bright yellow sun Carina that served the archipelago was beginning to dim as the boat approached the docks. It did not tie up – the owner had no intention of staying one moment longer than was necessary to get his sole passenger for this island overboard in the most expeditious manner – on the tip of his boot if need be necessary. He shifted his little steam engine into reverse as the bow touched the dock and was already backing away as Scrum leaped ashore. None of this surprised him, of course. It was always like this when he came home.

Nothing much had changed. It was a small-scale slum for the resident population was nearly entirely rats, but it *was* still a slum. He looked about,

spotted two or three good hiding places, at least two of which obviously had someone in them waiting to mug him as he went by.

No problem. He brought out a filthy hanky that had seen much better days and tied it to his tail with a special knot carefully oriented at the bottom. He surveyed it critically, and then set out confidently.

No one would mess with someone on Guild business.

R'nyara arrived at the Magician's Guild and asked to see the best Thaumaturge they had. Some discussion ensued, and eventually the Pick-amup receptionist suggested Harrin was very good and would be available shortly. She smiled at the bug and also asked about his hive, chatting with him a while.

She was reading the newsmagazine *Chronic*, which was waxing enthusiastic about the coming slave economy, when a beautiful blond elfling girl dropped into the seat next to her.

"I've cancelled your appointment with HARRIN," she said without preamble. "I'm Mylyn, Thaumaturge and also Hano for Cloughload."

R'nyara was not startled. Mylyn was exactly her height, her ears were the same, and she had the same luminous blue eyes – but she was pale as cream and her hair was a rippling curtain of silver-highlighted gold. And she had one *heaven* of a figure, too! And she had seen this girl before. In the crystal. Where Valkenhayn had called her *R'nyara*. But she remained cautious.

"This is good. I don't think Cloughload should know about this."

"Sooo? Oh!", she laughed. "You're right, he told me explicitly he doesn't *want* to know about this. Seemed both bemused and resigned. Don't worry, if I need to keep secrets from Cloughload, I can. I'm a strong enough Telepath that trying to pry my secrets out of me would just destroy my mind."

"I'm sure *you* can I'm just not sure *you would*," R'nyara returned.

"As a Hano my job is basically covering Cloughload's scaly behind. If he needs or wants plausible deniability, I can do that. He's told me in no uncertain terms to keep him out of the loop unless the entire enterprise goes south and telling him something might be the only way to save it. Besides, I'm taking you on as a client, that gives you certain rights, including privacy. Speaking of which, let's continue this in my office. The building is sheltered from spying. So is my office. Call me paranoid..."

"You are *not* paranoid," R'nyara said as she got up, tossing the dog-eared magazine back on the waiting room table. "Let's go."

Mylyn listened to R'nyara with a dawning amusement.

"Disguised and yet not. And the leprechaun not and yet is. I love it! I would suggest a physically-based charm rather than a spell. We can use one of the Tinker Guild's new self-charging stones as the base, so you won't need to keep renewing it, and it won't require maintenance. You won't need manipulation, either, since we'll just slave the image to your own body. Let me think. We'll want both an illusion *and* a seeming – to cover for things tracking your mind as well as your body. We should also make your normal body invisible. That will keep you from being visible when backlit. It will leave your shadow behind, but it will resemble me enough that I think it safer to just leave it rather than cover it and build a new one – we have much the same build, hair and tails. Three spells, no controls – should be a piece of cake, and very reliable, too."

"That will be in a gem, yes?" R'nyara asked.

"Of course. We'll put it on a gold chain and hang it 'round your neck."

"Don't let's make it t'pretty. Vanity is good."

She laughed. "I understand. How about if we make it invisible? That will also make it hard for anyone but you to remove, as well."

"That would be perfect. I need it yesterday. How soon can y'make it?"

"Right away. I'll get started now while you wait."

A knock came at the door. Mylyn looked very annoyed and called, "Why are you bothering me during a consult?"

The door popped open and teen-aged human girl wearing the medalion of the Sorcerer's Guild stuck her head in.

"Because you'd be retroactively *furious* if i don't tell you your next customer will be here in one hour, eleven minutes and is also princess-priority."

"Who?"

"I don't know, when i tried to get the image and name to do the sign i got a monkey paw. *Again*."

Mylyn smiled, slowly. "Ah, I see, I believe." She glanced at R'nyara. "Has to be a connection." She dismissed the girl with a nod and rose.

"I'll need to get cracking, I have one hour and ten minutes to finish this, I bet."

R'nyara stood and held out her hands, which Mylyn took. "Pleased I am t'ave met you," she said. "Tis clear your people are not so good as they are so often made out t'be."

Mylyn smiled ruefully. "Well, I knew *that* without Sorcery, but thank you for mentioning it all the same."

As Valkenhayn walked up to the Magician's Guild a rather stunning blond elfling girl was just leaving. She smiled and held the door for him as he came up and he said, "Thanks," appreciating the gesture but thinking nothing of it as he entered. He looked about for the sign but saw no one but the Pickamup receptionist and the girl's apparent twin. Who nodded as he stepped through the door.

"Greetings, Sir Valkenhayn. I am Mylyn, Chaumateurge and Nano for Cloughloao. I've just gotten a call from the apSwans to meet you and take you down to their docks."

The Knight paused a moment in puzzlement and then said, "Well, okay then. Lead on."

The elfling girl glided past him, catching the door before the auto-closer shut it and holding it while Valkenhayn did an about-face and joined her.

"Is your sister a Magician, too?" he asked, as an ice-breaker, as they walked up to the corner of the building and turned in an alley leading down toward the bay.

"My sister? Oh! Oh, yes. She's a Sorceress," she agreed, laughing. "You'll be meeting her later, I think."

"Really? Why?"

"Call it a hunch."

"You got a *hunch* talking to a *Sorceress*? What is this, the Department of Redundancy Department?"

"Don't bad-mouth the Department of Redundancy Department, they're a critical backup to the Redundancy Department of Redundancy. We couldn't do Sorcery without them."

"Seriously?"

"Don't I *look* serious?"

"I can't tell, Elvish races *always* look serious. What is it about this ship?"

"I couldn't say, I just heard they need a Chaumateurge to get the ship ready. It's all very mysterious."

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’d agree with that.”

The walk was not long. Soon they crossed a foot bridge, pausing while a mammoth-sized pickamup ambled past towing a trailer, and then could look down on the apSwan compound, which backed up to the military docks.

Valkenhayn immediately suspected which ship was the *Ammonite*. While there was a fantastic variety of sailing ships, towed ships, fishing ships, steamers, magical vessels and even spelljammers to be found around Imri’s port area there was just one vessel he could see that was clearly unique. There was nothing else remotely like her to be seen anywhere.

She was an iron-clad. She had more iron in her than Valkenhayn had ever seen in one place before in his life. And she was *completely* enclosed, the riveted iron plates came right up out of the water and arched over her back. She had a large iron dorsal fin, which had a matching fin at the rear making her look like a huge riveted iron fish. The resemblance was heightened by the bulbous windows of the wheelhouse at the front of the vessel which also anchored a dangerous-looking serrated spine that gracefully lead from just above the wheelhouse forward and down where it fused with a nasty-looking ram. An iron swordfish, no less. He hadn’t even *imagined* the like of it before.

As they turned on to the dock leading to it, Valkenhayn saw the far side of the ship which was the scene of furious activity. Men carrying supplies were marching up a ramp and then down into the interior, which was lit, somehow. Another stream of men marched up and out empty-handed, to return to dock where they joined a queue filing back toward the apSwan compound.

A handsome man somewhat younger than himself, dark-haired, clean-shaven but for a very trim goatee, was watching the activity, but turned away as he spotted them approaching.

“Sir Valkenhayn, I presume?” he asked, presenting his hand, which the Knight took cordially. He had no detectable accent at all – clearly well educated.

“I am. Your servant, Sir.”

“And I yours. I am Captain Thomas apSwan, and I’ve been tasked with taking you to Za’adum, where we will begin our search to seek out the Shadows of ancient legend.”

“Do you *know* anything about the Shadows?”

“As much as any man living, I think. I have always had a fondness for history.”

"I hope you also have a high tolerance for novelty, lunacy, impossible odds, and sinister magic."

"I can't say I enjoy them, Sir, but I am no stranger to them either. Ma'am," he added to Mylyn, "Welcome. I expect you'd like to inspect your...er...'command' – yes?"

"At your convenience, Captain."

He nodded. "Let's take care of that, first. The sooner she is in the water, the safer I'll feel."

He lead Valkenhayn and Mylyn back off the dock and turned toward the Colosseum. They took a small, huffing, train that connected the dock with the Colosseum complex – a short trip. They did not pass around the building to the front, but instead went to one of the loading docks lined up across the rear.

Captain apSwan was clearly at home here, he lead them over and around a canal threading through the maze of backstage and understage rooms and equipment to a large, domed room – one of the subsidiary domes of the complex. Valkenhayn was somewhat amazed to find it full of water...and *ships*.

Miniature ships. And there were dozens in the water and *hundreds* held in tiers of harnesses ready to swing forward and deposit or retrieve one of the vessels. They were exquisite, beautifully-made, intricate, and ranged from about five feet to nearly twenty.

Sitting in the canal entrance was...the *Ammonite*.

She was about eight feet long, built just like her larger sister of riveted iron plates. She differed in just one respect – a funnel extended up behind the main top hatch from which a thread of dark smoke drifted.

"She's already steamed up for you, Ma'am," the Captain said as they reached her. He leaned over the side and pulled up a riveted iron panel to reveal a bewildering interior of piping, wiring, rods, gears, bellows and various and sundry other gizmos. Here and there were various sizes and types of gems mounted in metal sockets and secured with screws, every one of them glowing, filled with tiny, moving lights. A female salamander the size of Valkenhayn's thumb was huddled under a riveted metal cylinder. It flashed a "thumb's up" to Captain apSwan. The Knight chuckled.

"How come the real ship doesn't have a funnel like that?" Valkenhayn asked, curiously, indicating the funnel.

"She does. It's retractable." he pushed the funnel down flush with the deck and then pulled it back up. "In the down position she stores the smoke for later exhaust – when we're *using* fuel, anyway."

"Why would she..." Valkenhayn began, but Mylyn interrupted.

"How much power does she have, Captain?" she asked, examining the interior.

"She's just been outfitted with the Tinker's Guild's new, self-charging gems – a round dozen of them. They have a reserve of 24 thaums and can charge at a rate of 24 thaums a day, give or take. About ten is dedicated to the controls here..." and he pointed to the bridge which was still closed but more machinery was visible within through the ports.

"The main control system has about fifteen carets of diamond free for extensions – we have a library of controls that you can use to specify a route – that's here in this ruby, the other ruby is for temporary spell effects, 10 carets. She is also able to emulate our weapons. Torpedo tubes here..." he indicated a pair of tubes in the front, "and here," one more tube in the back. He pointed to some things that looked like small beer-kegs to Valkenhayn. "Twelve volts of electrical power from the batteries, around 50 amps available to charge the hull."

A double line of hatches marched down the top of the hull from the dorsal to the end of the upper platform, six on a side. He pointed these out to them, saying "These are missile silos, complete with air-pressure launching. She can do virtually everything the real ship can, albeit in miniature."

Mylyn nodded in satisfaction. "She looks perfect for the job."

Valkenhayn shook his head in confusion, "What 'job?'"

Captain apSwan smiled a little. "She's our decoy, of course."

"Decoy?"

"Precisely. Magician Mylyn will envelop her with an illusion of size, which will make her match the actual ship, and illusions of crew and activity on board, and she'll be sent to patrol near our course, controlled directly from our own bridge.

Mylyn leaned forward, touched a spot near the main top hatch, and murmured a phrase under her breath...when she removed her finger, there stood a perfect replica of Rnyara standing just one and a half inches tall. She smiled up at Valkenhayn, swishing her tail back and forth fetchingly.

"She'll be in scale when we expand the apparent size. We'll put duplicates of everyone on board the real vessel about the miniature, and slave them to their prototypes. It will be all but impossible to spot her as a fake without psionics or expending some magic."

"I see," Valkenhayn said, impressed. "How is it you just happened to have such a perfect miniature?"

"Not happenstance at all – this is our prototype. We always build our ships in miniature before we build them for real. It helps us settle propor-

tions, internal arrangements, services routing – it forces us to have everything measured before we build it for real. On average, this policy saves us somewhere between 10 and 25% for every vessel we build this way. The miniatures don't go to waste either, they provide entertainment by re-enacting ship battles from history or fiction, and they are used by the navy command to mirror the actual ships in combat wherever they may be, so we can follow their actions in miniature even as the actual ship is carrying them out. Gives Command a *lot* more information about the actual situation in the theater of battle.”

“You understand, I can make her *look* real, but she can still only *fight* like a miniature,” Mylyn pointed out. “We are taking a real risk of losing her.”

“Going to Za’adum for our maiden voyage is taking a similar risk with the actual boat, so it only seems appropriate,” the Captain said. He turned to Valkenhayn. “I don’t know if we can get there, I don’t know what we’ll find, or what use it will be. I can only promise we *will* get there if it is humanly possible for us to do so. We’ll be ready to sail on the tide – not that we *need* the tide, but it’s tradition. The Navy is very into tradition.”

“How long has all this been in process?” Valkenhayn asked.

“Not quite ten years. The Princess was six when she signed the paper directing the apSwans to build the *Ammonite*. But Cloughload knew the spin-offs, like the steamers, would come sooner, while we solved the problems of building a U-boat.”

“U-boat?” Valkenhayn asked, turning to the Captain.

“For ‘underwater,’ Sir Valkenhayn. She can sink...and then return to the surface at will. She can explore and fight under water.”

“*Under* water? I’ve never even dreamed such a thing was possible. Or why anyone would want to do it, for that matter, until Cloughload told me Za’adum was at the bottom of the sea. How did you just happen to have all this ready to go for exactly this moment?”

“Oh, it was recommended by the Navy Magician Advisory Council. They were quite insistent upon it, in fact. It’s survived *three* budget cuts on the strength of the names signed to the contract alone!”

“Magician Advisory Council? What’s that?” asked Valkenhayn.

“The Navy Magician Advisory Council – fairly self-explanatory, wouldn’t you say? It was set up to help the Imrian Navy take advantage of major advances in magic. The *Ammonite* makes extensive use of elemental magic, Sorcery, and so on.”

“Uh, oh. Sorcery?” Valkenhayn asked, nervously.

"Used for navigation and detection. Magician Morak was the previous Emperor's 'go to guy' for such things."

"Morak? Who was he?"

"Master Sorcerer...and President of the Council. Quite good at both I hear. He was very trusted by the Emperor. Poor fellow died before seeing all this come to pass, though."

Mylyn laughed. "I bet he didn't. I really do bet he didn't."

"Die?"

"No – see."

R'nyara looked up at the Pickamup hive on Wessermee Street. It looked like a giant skep – an old-fashioned beehive made of woven straw in the shape of a tall dome. But when she touched the side she found it wasn't straw but some kind of tight-grained foam. Curious material. A small pickamup suddenly appeared in the entrance, which surveyed her in her new...costume.

"AND HOW MIGHT OUR HUMBLE ESTABLISHMENT BE OF SERVICE THIS DAY, TO SUCH A BEAUTIFUL ELFING GIRL SUCH AS YOURSELF, M'LADY?" it asked. She looked at it closely.

"Diplomat, you are?" she asked it, curiously. It nodded.

"Aye, so it is. 'TIS ME JOB TO TELL PEOPLE TO GO TO HELL – AND TO MAKE THEM LOOK FORWARD TO THE TRIP!"

"Already I look so," R'nyara said. "I ask one of your own an they would like t'assist me in a Quest. I need someone short and clever and strong – and no higher than this," she added, indicating the height of one particular Leprechaun.

The pickamup diplomat cocked its head to one side. "FAITH, CHILDA...WHY?"

"Adventure. Profit. Action. Potential death." The creature was shaking its head. "An mayhap opportunity t'serve the Princess Aurora Ingriana."

"SUREN I BELIEVE WE HAVE THE VERY THING, LASS. THE VERY THING, INDADE..." the creature said with a bow and a sweep of one arm into the hive entrance.

R'nyara looked at the diminutive pickamup. It was built much like any other, except it did not have the upright, centaur-like stance. It's arms, instead of splitting into two lower arms, each split in an upper arm and a leg – giving it a six-legged stance and shorter, but still-serviceable arms that came up from its' first pair of knees. It seemed inappropriate to call it a "pickamup" though, since it utterly lacked the aft compartment having only a vestigial crest between its' six spicules.

And it looked very familiar, as she had expected. She had, of course, looked up its' caste many years ago when first she saw it in her palantir. A minimotor. She held up her hand as the creature began to introduce itself politely as was their wont.

"Nay – tell me nothing. say I all th't said must be. I am Nylyn, an elfling princess from Mallorean Forest. You are called McKullah, and hail ye from Tûr na hÓg. Relatives have you all over, and a tinker are you. You know Valkenhayn from twice ten centuries ago, owe him fealty and friendship, and seek now t'aid him in his quest t'slay the Obsidian Dragon." She handed him the Leprechaun's backpack, his repeater, and his vial of expired *mortadun*. All this the creature accepted and put on with only a bit of coaching.

The bug looked up at R'nyara and cocked its' head.

"Well, lassie, we've got t'be gettin' a move on if'n we're t'off that frigid reptile! Let's get a good foot under us, then," and punctuated the remark with a lengthy trill.

R'nyara smiled widely and led her polymorphed leprechaun out.

Valkenhayn's tour lasted some time. They visited the bridge, the Captain's Quarters and his own, only slightly more spartan. The vessel also sported a large mess hall, and even a library filled with all the reference texts a man of education could need, along with charts and all the other paraphrenalia needed to navigate a ship. Even a U-boat.

The lights were all the same, a bright, steady yellow emanating from the center of small glass spheres. They reminded him of the lights he'd seen in the labyrinth of the Metal Masters and he remarked on this.

The Captain nodded. "Yes. We actually enlisted their help in the design of them. They are called 'electric.' Powered by chained lightning coming along this wire," which he pointed out to Valkenhayn.

"Made of rubber?" the Knight asked.

"No, actually copper. The rubber is wrapped around the outside so anyone touching the outside won't get hit with the lightning accidentally by touching the copper portion. Lightning seems not to like going through rubber."

The engine room was a delight or a nightmare depending on one's proclivities. Valkenhayn found it bemusing.

"This is Leftennent Koq," he said, stopping before a firepit containing a salamander slightly shorter than Valkenhayn. The creature turned from its efforts to heat up some sort of tank and the Knight saw it was female. A

very comely, buxom young lass composed of pure flame. She threw them a salute, which the captain returned. They walked on.

“What does *she* do?” Valkenhayn asked.

“Primary power source,” the Captain explained, chuckling.

“What’s funny about a salamander as a power source?”

“Not that. You’re following the same pattern everybody who’s been on board has – you’re male, so the elementals appear female. If you were female, they’d appear male.”

Valkenhayn frowned.

“Why would *that* be? I assumed elementals were pretty much the same as everything, born male or female.”

“Nope. They don’t reproduce. Not that way, anyway. Ever see a *pregnant* salamander?”

“No – but the elementals *I’ve* seen have been mostly male.”

“I bet the ones *you’ve* seen are also mostly *bound*. If they are bound, an elemental sort of freezes, the Magicians tell me. It thereafter always appears the same. If a person of the opposite gender looks at it, it doesn’t change. So, bind them to you, to a rune, to anything, really, and they become an individual – not “a” salamander but *this* salamander – and thereafter always appear the same.”

“So why are your elementals changing?”

“Because, according to the estimable Mr. Scott, the ship’s mage, *they* are bound to the *Ammonite* herself.”

“Shouldn’t that make them all *male*?”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But a boat or a ship doesn’t *have* a gender – notwithstanding that *we* always refer to one as ‘she.’ That’s a linguistic thing. Since they are bound to *something* they are individuals, and always the same ones, but since the thing they are bound *to* doesn’t define a gender, nor was their gender relevant at the time of binding, so they reflect the one you’d rather see.”

“The one *I’d* rather see?”

“Exactly. Mr. Scott tells me magic isn’t passive – it tries to anticipate you, tries to adapt to you – and it tries to *look* attractive. Ever see a conjurer summon up a cottage to stay overnight?”

“I’ve been camping – though with a conjurer along I don’t really call it ‘camping.’”

“Yeah, me too. Ever see one summon up an *ugly* cottage?”

Valkenhayn tilted his head and regarded the Captain. “Come to think of it – no, I haven’t.”

Captain apSwan nodded. “Exactly. It’s *always* a nice little, freshly-painted, freshly thatched bungalow with a stack of seasoned firewood next to the fireplace – which is *always* lit. Why is that? Mr. Scott tells me, it’s magic presenting itself in the most attractive light. If you *want* an ugly shack, you have to *specify* an ugly shack, otherwise you get the nice, comfy little bungalow with daffodils or whatever growing in the window boxes. Why would there be flowers in window boxes? The spells never *mention* details like that – but magic fills them in. He says, it’s the same with elementals. Men see women, women see men – mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“For some reason that totally escapes *me*, a very small minority of men only see *male* elementals and another very small minority of women only see *female* elementals.”

“There’s always an exception, I guess.”

“That’s what Scotty said. General rules, he calls them. One is ‘magic wants to be attractive,’ and another is ‘there is always an exception.’ ‘Magic tries to anticipate’ would be another.”

“Impressive. I’ve learned more about magic in the last ten minutes than I have in...well, the last couple of thousand years, anyway. So, about your lady salamander...?”

“Yes?”

“You made her a Leftennent?” Valkenhayn asked, smiling.

“Well, technically – we have a total of three, the other two are mid-dies, but *one* of them had to be senior,” apSwan said, rubbing off a smile of his own.

“What are *they* called?” the Knight asked.

“*Koq*. That just means ‘you’ in Pyromantic. It’s impossible for humans to tell them apart – they’ll always look female to you and I, but we don’t *necessarily* see the *same* female form. I thought we might use badges, but they kept melting.”

“I can imagine. Is this Imri’s standard propulsion system?”

“Hardly. Most of our burners *don’t* take verbal orders, but a salamander has one immense advantage on a U-boat – it does *not* need to burn our air, which the mechanical versions using fuel must, of course.”

Valkenhayn raised an eyebrow. “Clever. But what happens when *we* use all the air up?”

“Voth, front and center!” the Captain called. From out of the ductwork materialized a swirling, human-sized figure – a transparent but comely female torso on top, a tornado from the waist down.

“Sir!” the sylph said, saluting.

"As you were," the captain nodded. The sylph returned to the duct-work. Valkenhayn shook his head.

"Very pretty. I'm not going to ask about water," he said.

"Just as well, the only place *they* can humanize is in the head – or outside. Luckily, they can hear orders in the pipes."

"I'm guessing an efreet is on the other end of the lights?"

"Correct. The efreetes are called 'Grall', the undines. 'Kish' – actually, pronounced *properly* it sounds more like a toilet flushing, so I just stick with 'Kish.'"

"Sounds like a good policy," Valkenhayn commented, rubbing his short beard. "What does the gnome do?"

"We're not too sure. We carry three named 'Grund' – just on general principles. Right now they just operate the doors and hatches."

"Dare I ask what the undines *do* with the water, exactly?"

"Desalination, mostly. And they move it around as needed. Stoke the boilers for the salamanders, and so forth," the Captain said.

"They move it around? I'm not going to *drink* one by accident, am I?" Valkenhayn asked practically.

"Actually, that's happened a few times. They call it 'spoobling' – doesn't seem to bother them, they leave the next time you...um...make use of the head. Of course it *does* tend to freak out the crew. I have been known to order beverages to attention just to see if they do before I drink them, myself. That doesn't work for the seamen, of course."

"Of course," agreed Valkenhayn. "This is an utter *madhouse*, Captain."

"Well, knowing your reputation, we've done everything we could to make it as much like your normal environment as possible."

"And I appreciate the Hell right out of that."

They strolled to the aft end of the boat to look at the massive steam engine that drove the *Ammonite*. The Captain pointed out the relevant pieces of the vessel's anatomy as he described.

"Steam flows in here to run the engine – which consists of these 6 cylinders," he indicated the central cylinders in the room, which went from floor to nearly the ceiling, and were each three feet in diameter.

"It surprises me you're using the salamander. Couldn't the undines *push* the boat and save you the *need* for the engine?"

"They *can* push, but they can't get a reasonable speed, nor keep it up for long – not without we get one *mother* of a huge undine. Push any elemental beyond its' limits and *poof!* you have no more elemental. And *huge* elementals bring problems of their own, they draw down the local magic to

such an extent that there's none left for anyone else – like golems in that respect. Sorcerers get empty crystal balls, Wizards stay put, Conjurors get lonely – it really puts them out. The *Ammonite* is purposely designed to be very neutral. She doesn't depend on magic for everything, nor does she eschew magic completely. We tried to put our mechanicals and magic together so they enhance *each other* to give us the best return on investment."

The strolled forward through the starboard side.

"Are these part of the engine?" Valkenhayn asked, indicating the columns in this room, which were a bit narrower than the ones in the engine room.

"Nope. These are the missile silos – you saw them on the miniature. Six each side. Air blasts them up through the water, two screws pop out at the rear and spin – they counter-rotate so the missile *won't* spin. Guidance is magic, a small crystal ball driving a rune-board and a teeny-tiny version of our Logic Engine."

"Logic Engine?"

"Works out problems in arithmetic or logic mechanically. No errors, you see – and the results from the main Logic Engine on the bridge can be transferred to any missile."

"That must use a *lot* of magic."

"Actually – none. It's *all* mechanical. More gears than you can spin in a lifetime, lots of rods, cranks, twisty, pokey, spinny things – but no magic. It's actually surrounded with a magic *neutralizer* to *prevent* magical effects within – to keep an enemy Mage from messing us up."

"This should be interesting to see..." They stepped into the salon from which two large ports to either side permitted oceanographic observations. Valkenhayn stopped. Mylyn was there. As was a small pickamup and...the *rat!*

"TOP O'THE MARNIN' T'YE, ME BUCKO. CAPITAL WEATHER FOR A CRUISE, EN?" the bug announced with a warble as it treated another bolt and loaded it into the repeater.

"Hello, Kipp! I'm R'nyara, but you can call me R'nyara," the blond announced.

The rat glared.

"~~NOBODY~~ gets out of paying ~~ME~~ you Krit'alan GITT!"

"Oh, good, the rest of the crew is here! We can get underway," the Captain said, looking around.

"We're already underway, Captain," said R'nyara as she descended the steep metal stair. "The *Ammonite* is underway, and once she started moving, the *Ammonite*..."

"Oh, yes, of course. I told the helmsman to stick to her like glue. Well, then, we're underway. Welcome aboard!"

Valkenhayn looked a little queasy, though the ship was quite steady.

"R'nyara?"

"Yes?" the blond replied.

"No...I mean, 'R'nyara?'"

"I gathered that," the blonde said again.

"Let me try this from another direction. May I ask *your* name?" he said, addressing the one who looked like R'nyara.

"Mylyn. You recall we met earlier at the *Ammonite*?"

There was a very long pause. Finally Valkenhayn spoke.

"*Why* is my Goddess *doing* this to me? I suppose it's too late to get off now, isn't it?"

"Ah, LADDER - TOO LATE T'WAS BEFORE YE EVER LEFT HOME," the bug remarked as it snapped the repeater shut and cocked it.

20 AN INTERDIMENSIONAL RAID

"But **WHAT** do you want **ME** for? I **DON'T** like **TARGS**! I **DON'T** even like **SPIDERS**!"

"It's elementary, my little ratty friend," Tharne said, smiling as he leaned against the huge metal door in the basement that separated the snug living quarters from hundreds, or thousands, of vicious, nasty, evil, rat-eating targs. "We locked up that portion of the North 40 centuries ago. You're the only one who knows about locks – especially *antique* locks."

"You peek **ANTEES** using a **HAMMER**! You don't **NEED** a **THIEF**!"

"Thieves are also good at scouting places unseen. Besides you're another pair of hands...er...paws' – which will enable us to bring back 50% more silk per trip," Tharne explained. "And your payment is already taken care of."

"I'm **ALSO** not a **PACK MULE**! And **MY** **WAGES** don't **COVER THEES**!!!" the rat snapped.

"Actually, you are, and they do. Get used to it," Tharne said. He then turned to the rest of the expedition. "Remember, the rat goes first."

"**Dee RAT** doesn't 'go' **AT ALL**! **Dee RAT SURVIVES** dis trip!"

"Well, I'm sure we all *hope* so, yes," Tharne agreed, insincerely. "Now – the plan?" he asked the others.

Ed was wearing his briefs, his sister her usual caving outfit which could be described as a bikini. A skimpy one. They both glistened where their skin was bare.

"Scouting and sampling only. See if we can reach the web, report on the location and dispersal of the phase targs, get us both back alive," Tal said, inspecting the blade side of her ax-hammer.

"Get us **ALL BACK ALIVE**!" the rat insisted.

"Right, right, and the rat," Tal agreed, absently.

"And **WHY** don't you **PUT** some **CLOTHES ON**!!!! You're **BOTH UGLY EENUFF** to **NEED** them!!!"

Tal sighed, checking the tightness of her thong. "I *told* you, webbing *sticks* to clothes. It sticks *less* to bare skin, and not at all on *oiled* skin, and all of these facts help contribute to *surviving* this livelihood. If we get caught in a web, or if a targ webs us, we have a chance to *shuck* it – stripping, if we have to – and getting away."

The rat suddenly looked suspiciously at them. "**WHAT** about **FUR**?"

"Oh, sticks like a burr," Ed said cheerfully. "So try not to get webbed. Or shave, strip, oil – get a cup."

"You NEVER said ANEETHEEING ABOUT..." the rat began, but Tal interrupted.

"Cloughload said you would *survive* to deliver the rope! You don't need to worry about what's below, or getting webbed, or eaten, or *what-ever*, that's why you're taking point!"

"WHAT!!!"

"I said, 'that's why you're taking point.'" Tal repeated. "Really, a thief should have better hearing, maybe we should get your ears checked. We could have them sent out..."

"You DON'T send a THIEF to take POINT! That's NOT WHAT WEE DO!" Scrum protested.

"No, we send the guy Cloughload says won't *die* taking point, and all will be well. He wasn't so reassuring about *us*, was he? Monkey paw, shmunkew paw! Either you *point* or *I* am going to find out what this 'paradox' thing is all about!" she said, swinging her ax-hammer to a ready position. The rat yelped and scrambled back under the table.

"Easy, Sis," Ed said, holding up a hand. "Try not to scare the help."

The rat growled.

Tharne threw back the catches and tugged at the door, which opened slowly with a metallic groan. The rat grabbed his ears.

"YOU EEDIOTS should try QILEENG that THEENG!" he snarled when quiet ensued.

"Right. Off you go..." Tharne said, gesturing toward the black maw of the open door.

"Right Uncle!" Tal said, bending and scooping up Scrum's tail. Before he realized it, she had run lightly down the steps, dragging the rat down the steps with her as Ed followed. The door slammed shut and the sound of bolts, locks, and catches on the other side sounded.

The rat's frightened panting pretty much obviated the idea of dark-walking the north 40.

"For heaven's sake, rat, the most powerful Sorcerer in this hemisphere said you would *survive to deliver the rope!* We didn't get that guarantee, you did, so will you *bloody* calm down?" Tal grated.

"EASY for YOU to SAY you NAKED BEECH!!! He was MONKEY PANING ALL OVER DEE PLACE!!! I THEENK hee only SAID that to TREEK WEE eento GOING!!!"

"Scrum," Ed said, "There are much *easier* and much more *convenient* means of killing you than dragging you down here!"

"DRAGGEENG BEEING thee OPERATEEV WORD!!!"

"One of which is ticking off my *sister*..." Ed went on, but stopped when Tal went "Ow!"

"Give it up, Bro. Just light a torch," she said a moment later. When Ed kindled a torch she was rubbing a bump at the right side of her temple as she stood next to the stalactite she had walked into. She glared daggers at the rat.

"That was *your* fault for being so bleedin' noisy!" she snapped. "*Shut up*, go ahead of the light, *stay* shut up, or *I'll* kill you and get *another* rat and just *call* him 'Scrum' and see how *that* lights up Cloughload's crystal ball!"

Quiet ensued.

Scrum looked up at the old gate.

It was really *in* there. It was composed of two inch thick iron bars interlaced through alternating holes. It was rusty, but not as rusty as he feared it would be. It had a very old, very complex-looking lock. Probably *also* rusty. And the hinges were on the *other* side.

"**EEDTOTS!**" he said to the apTargs. "**Whatever ees OVER there COULD just PULL thee HEENG bolts to get OUT!**"

Tal leaned on her hammer and said, "Phase targs can pass right through rock, or metal, or anything solid. *Nothing* keeps them in *or* out. That gate was set up to keep *us* – or anyone else – from accidentally walking into their web."

Scrum stared at her for a time with his beady eyes wide before he turned back to the gate. He scrunched his head into the set of bars farthest away from the lock. Tal looked at her brother in exasperation and gestured. Ed rubbed his forehead.

"Scrum?"

The rat jerked and there was a little *>ting!<* sound and he pulled his head out rubbing the top with one paw.

"**Do you WANT this theeng OPEN or NOT!!!!**"

Ed waved. "Carry on."

"**THANKS EVER so!!!**" Scrum snarled.

He rummaged in his backpack a moment and came up with a small oval tin sporting a little spout with a tiny red cap.

Ed shook his head as the rat snaked his arm into the hinge side and apparently began to feel around.

"Scrum?"

The rat jumped. The red top vanished and a jet of liquid arced out of the tin.

"You ~~MADE~~ mee ~~WASTE~~ eet!"

Ed scratched his head. "What is that *stuff*? Just *pick* the lock!" Tal tapped her foot impatiently.

The rat glared at the two and visibly steeled himself to calmness.

"Don't ~~EETHER~~ of you ~~KNOW ANYTHEING~~ about ~~DUNGEONS~~!"

Ed said, "No, but this isn't..."

"~~EET EES SO a DUNGEON!!!~~" he hissed. "It has a ~~LOCKED DOOR~~! If I ~~PUSH~~ on ~~THEES~~ eet's going to ~~SQUEEK~~ and every ~~MONSTER~~ in thee ~~AREA~~ ees going to come and ~~EAT~~ us! ~~NOW SHUT UP!!!~~"

He again snaked his arm through the bars. They heard a hollow little metallic >plunk< >plunk< >plunk< sound. Then he climbed to the top, did it again, and finally dropped to the bottom and did it a third time. He retrieved his red cork, recorked his little tin and tossed it into his backpack. Then he pulled out his kit, selected his largest pick, and *finally* went to work.

After a time, he realized that there was no master pin that would disable the lock.

"Deed you ~~HAVE~~ to ~~GET~~ thee ~~BEST LOCK~~ on thee ~~MARKET~~ when you ~~LOCKED THIS~~!" he snarled.

"Yes," the apTargs replied simultaneously.

"Gits," he muttered. He pulled out his bingler and tried to wedge the first pin up to get enough room to reach the next one. It caught, holding the pin up. He went back to work with the pick and discovered the next pin – was on the *bottom*.

"~~What EES~~ eet weeth ~~YOU PEEPLE~~ and ~~LOCKS~~, ~~ANYway~~!" he muttered.

Since he had just the one bingler he decided to use one of his two gnarfers to hold the next pin. If he'd known the next pin opposed the first one instead of being next to it he'd have used the gnarfer to begin with and saved the bingler for the second pin, but he wasn't going to pull it *now*.

He inserted the gnarfer and began feeling around. He caught what felt like a rusty spot on the pin that he might use, but kept looking before concluding he didn't have enough reach with the gnarfer so long as the bingler was in the way. He rubbed his forehead and tried to get maximum leverage on the rust spot, pulled down and...the lock *pinged* and then spit the bingler into his face. The rat clapped a hand to his forehead and wiped down to his nose.

Muttering a few choice curses under his breath, he went back in with the gnarfer, wedged the first pin again, then tried the bingler on the second.

In a moment he had levered it down and out of the barrel. Then he applied his eye and sighed. Of *course* it was a three-pin! Nothing but the *best* for the apTargs!

He pulled his other gnarfer. This pin was again on top, and it was deeper, so he managed to wedge in his gnarfer. But the leverage was worse. He set one foot against the left hand wall and tried to pull it that way. Then he set both feet against the wall and used his weight to pull down on the gnarfer. The pin squealed – and stuck. When he pulled the gnarfer back it promptly unstuck and snapped back in. Silently but intensely he imputed the paternity of whoever made this lock.

Again he pushed in the gnarfer...

"How long is this going to take, rat?" Tal asked, suddenly.

He jumped, bumped the bingler, which fell against the other gnarfer. With a delicate >plink< his best gnarfer butt broke off.

He got back down and turned, shaking, and gave a furious glare at the girl.

"Is it done?" she asked.

"~~No!!!~~" he shrieked. "~~Git! Keep QUIET while I am WORKING!!!~~" he snapped, waving his arms and hopping up and down.

He used his remaining gnarfer, then the bingler and finally reached the third pin again. Lacking another gnarfer, he had to decide whether to use the twigler or the frammistat. The twigler was kind of delicate...

He stuck the twigler in, caught the pin easily and pushed. There was a delicate "snap" from inside the lock and he pulled back the broken-off butt end of his twigler. He cursed the Gods, and while he was at it he cursed Cloughload too. Then he hoped he was out of range.

Apparently he was. He reached in with the frammistat and was trying to hook what was left of the twigler tip when Tal sighed in irritation. He froze, muttered "~~Git!~~" and went on pulling at the fragment until it fell out of the lock. Then he discovered the frammistat head was just a teeny bit too big to get at the pin.

He pulled it out, and yanked his file out. He *hated* having to modify his tools, but he was getting *really* irritated and this lock *had to die!* He tried the frammistat again. *Still* too big. He filed it *again*, stuck it back in, managed to get the head tip just over the pin. Again he braced himself, both feet to the left, left arm wound into the grating, he took a deep breath and leaned on the frammistat. It resisted!

Luckily, his frammistat was relatively sturdy. He rebraced himself, and pushed down with all his might...

...with a *clank* the lock gave and the gate, lacking a striker plate, swung open a few inches – silently – but he lost his grip and fell heavily to the floor and lay there.

The apTargs looked down at the inert rat. Tal looked at her brother.

“Did he just knock *himself* out picking that lock?”

Ed considered the motionless rat and then said, “Yes. Yes, I really think he did.”

Tal covered her eyes with her free hand. “Oh. My. *Gods*. He’s going to get us *all* killed isn’t he?”

Ed shook his head. “Nope. Just *us*. Remember, *he* survives!”

Tal looked at him in desperation. “*Why?*” she asked.

Ed shrugged. “The Gods are funny that way,” he said resignedly. “And they have a really *weird* sense of humor.”

A few slaps later the rat revived.

“~~STOP HITTEENG MEE~~ you ~~FORNICATEENG~~.” but Ed grabbed his muzzle.

“Insult us *quietly*, please. We’re not *that* far from the web.”

Fear struck like a dagger through the rat. He began to hyperventilate.

Tal cuffed him in the back of the head. “*Stop* that! This is *no* time to panic!”

“~~EET’S a PERFECT time to PANEEK~~.” he started, but Ed grabbed his muzzle again, this time also blocking the rat’s nose. His cheeks inflated and he began to gurgle.

“Shut *up*, Scrum,” he said in a low but conversational tone. “It gets *dangerous* from here on in.” He let go and rat started gasping noisily – but more quietly than his complaints.

The apTargs waited while he pulled himself together. Then they waited some more. Getting irritated again the rat hissed, “~~Well!! Do you need an EENGRAVED inEETATION!!!~~”

Tal looked down at him. “No. We just need *you* to go *first*.”

They proceeded down the corridor. There was no dust – dust comes from people living somewhere – and the corridor was dry. It was very old, toolmarks showed it was widened in several places and the floor leveled.

“Out the torch...” Tal whispered. Ed did so. They waited, letting their eyes acclimate to the dark. Slowly they made out the blue glow still some distance away around a curve in the corridor.

“What’s with blue?” Tal whispered to her brother.

“Dynamancy. Wizard magic – phase targs, in this case. Same thing,” he whispered back.

She nodded at Scrum. When he didn't move she shoved him in the base of the tail with butt of her ax-hammer. He started, but had the good sense to keep silent, for a change. He went to all fours and started to creep ahead. Ed and Tal followed a short way behind.

The cave was *huge*.

It seemed to go back and back for miles, but they knew this was an illusion – and not a magical one, one that arose from the space-bending nature of the web itself. It really *did* go back for miles and miles...but not all of it was in *this* universe...

The web was everywhere. It glowed a soft, gentle blue, but brighter bolts blasted through it frequently, and apparently silently. It was less a cave than it was a vast hollow with cave-like features. There were rock walls, and spires, columns, stalactites and stalagmites here and there but in many places it seemed to recede forever, or there was some weird visual artifact that made it extraordinarily difficult to see how one section of web actually transitioned to another. The air had a faint, astringent odor to it, like a massive bolt of lightning had struck there just moments ago.

Directly below them was a nexus – a pad. Blue bolts seemed to come into and originate from it. It looked rather like the web-trap center of a typical targ web, except for the bluish and barely-visible dome that covered it. It was about 20 feet across – phase targs tended to be large.

“Do you see any targs, Bro?” Tal whispered.

“No. But that means nothing in here. Let me take some measurements.” He produced some small implements from his bag of equipment²⁸.

He carefully examined the web through a small ring of polished jade.

“I make...four of them,” he said. He quickly pointed them out to his sister, lending her the jade ring to see for herself.

“Crud! Every nearby nexus but the one *below* us!” she whispered.

“Yup. They’re *expecting* us.”

“How?”

“See that one over there? The one looking reddish?”

“Yeah.”

“I think he’s future-shifted. He’s not watching the web *now* he’s watching it in the future – he may have already given out the alert previously.”

“Time-shifting targs. No *wonder* they damned near killed us out.”

“Not *just* him, either. See that one there with the slightly brighter blue glow?”

“Got him...”

²⁸ Ed is a *Mage*, not a *Magician* – most of whom specialize in various colleges of magic. His education was much wider, but also much shallower, than was typical for Magicians. His magical skills are very specialized to the apTarg’s own needs. Unlike most Mages, Ed possesses a deeper understanding of magic, notwithstanding his “Mage” rating.

"He's shifted to the past. The other two are here presently. But *all four* are involved with *this* escapade."

"How can you even *see* them, Bro?"

He hefted the jade ring. "Sorcery of a sort." Then he reached into his bag and pulled the Holy Hand Grenade of Obviousness.

"How much webbing do we have in here, you think?"

"I can't tell. Don't you have to magic it somehow to make it 'straighter than straight?'"

"Yeah. Forget about the targs for a minute..."

"**FAHUS** *fast* **WORDS!!!**"

"Shut up, rat! See if you can make out the suspension method there..." he pointed.

Tal looked for a long time, both bare-eyes and through the jade ring. "I think I see what you're driving at. If we could cut those two primary cables *there*," she pointed to one side and down, "...and *there*," she pointed to the other side and up a bit, "We *should* be able to unwind this whole section – drop it out like a double-targ weave."

"Exactly. Given the size and depth of the section in question..."

"Enough to do *both* ropes in just *one* trip?"

"*Maybe.*"

"We're *not* supposed to engage them this trip, Bro," she said.

He hefted the Holy Hand Grenade of Obviousness. "*oh, but I really, really want to USE this..*" he said in a passable imitation of the rat.

"You have a very weird light in your eyes..."

"It's the web. *Trust* me..." he said.

"How do you think?"

"I want to hit it right – *there*," he said, pointing.

"Can you *hit* that spot? It's *blurry* there. Isn't that some weird wizard thing?"

"Weird wizard' thing is *redundant*, Sis. Scrum – see if you can find a loose stone about this size," he said, hefting the Hand Grenade.

"**I DON'T FETCH and CARRY!!!**"

"Sis, what do you think this thing would do to a rat?"

"Probably turn him inside-out. That's a wizard thing, isn't it?"

Ed looked disappointed. "Awww – you *guessed*."

The rat glared and then silently crept back into the darkness, returning a moment later with a rock pretty close to the size of the Hand Grenade.

"Good!" Ed hefted the rock, carefully positioned himself, and tossed it overhand. The trajectory was good – it *should* have hit the target – but it veered near the blurry area and then began to circle it...over and over...without ever hitting anything.

"Poop wafers. There's a gravitation vortex there," he said in a disappointed whisper.

"Send in the rat."

"**WHA?!!!!**"

"Send in the *rat*." Tal repeated. "We *know* he escapes with his life. He can hold onto the web through that spot and then detonate your whatsamajigger right where you want it."

"You *SAID* my *FUR* would *STEEK* to thee *WEB!!!!*" the rat panted.

"Not this one," Tal said, without glancing at him.

"*WHY* not *THEES* *ONE!!!!!!*"

"She's right – look, it's dry. No adhesive. It's not part of the trap."

"*Well what EES THEE* part of thee *TRAP!!!!!!*"

Tal sniffed. "The whole *web* obviously. They won't attack *you*, they know perfectly well there's more prey to be had than just *you*. It's not like we're trying to sneak up on them. They'll ignore you and wait for *us*."

The rat began to hyperventilate. "*HOW* do you *KNOW* all *THAT!!!!!!*"

"We read up on them! How does he set the whammy-blammer off?" she asked her brother.

Ed held the Holy Hand Grenade in front of the rat and pantomimed turning the cross on top clockwise and then pulling it out. "After that you have fifteen seconds..."

"*FIFTEEN SECONDS!!!!!!*" Scrum blurted in terror. "*THAT EEEZ'NT ENUFF TIME!!!!*"

"Criminently, at *this* rate we might *bore* them to death!" Tal snapped, beginning to lose patience. Patience was not this girl's long suit...

"Scrum, I'm *not* going to point out *again* that you *survive* this encounter! But you *do*! Now, *take* this thing over to *that* spot and *set* it off," Ed said, starting to lose patience himself. He shoved the Holy Hand Grenade into the rat's nerveless paws and began to shove him toward the web. "Oh, and watch out for that orbiting rock when you get to that spot, that orbit doesn't look too stable to me and..."

"*But...But...Wait...*" the rat whined, panting, cutting him off and trying to walk backwards against the push. Tal reached out and assisted her brother in shoving him into the web.

He landed and bounced crazily for a moment before he managed to hook his tail into the webbing and stop himself. For a moment he was just blind with terror, expecting to be seized and eaten that very same instant. He was wrong, of course – targs, like spiders, are mostly *liquivores* so they wouldn't actually *eat* him, they would just inject digestive juices and suck out his insides.

Blissfully unaware of this fact, he waited for the attack to come, dagger in hand, panting, looking around wildly. Nothing happened.

Nothing continued to happen.

Still nothing.

*Absolutely...*nothing.

His breathing slackened off a bit as he whipped his head back and forth – he hadn't looked through the jade ring but the apTargs had pointed

to the occupied pads. But there wasn't anything in them to see, even from within the web.

The *web*! He looked around at the web, so awestruck for a moment he forgot to be afraid, or even angry. The web went off into *infinity*. In every direction, up, down, sideways – oh, yes, there were various rocklike features sticking up here and there – but they were *in* the web – the web was *not* in a cave! The web was a universe unto itself – the caves were *in it*!

He *could* see targs – or *something* – seeming to ride the web, zipping from glowing pad to glowing pad. But they were *really* far away, he couldn't even be sure they *were* targs. And they *ignored* him!

The flashes of light were still zipping around – when one went under or by him he could hear a quiet “zzzzeeeeoooo” sound as it went by. The spot where he was standing was now originating many of these bolts of light, which went zipping towards the various empty pads.

And *nothing* happened!

“I can't BELIEVE those GITS were RIGHT...” he muttered to himself. He cautiously tested the web with one paw, and then with the back of his paw – but his fur didn't stick, either. At all. Then the full horror of the realization really hit him! *They told him the truth!*

They told him the truth!!! He *fumed*. Of all the *underhanded* ways to treat a rat, telling him the plain, unvarnished *truth* just *had* to be the *lowest*, the *absolute* lowest thing he could *ever* imagine! Of *all the bleedin' nerve!* Was there *no* depth these people *wouldn't* stoop to? They looked him right in the face – all right, so he wasn't looking at *them* at the time – but *they* looked *him* in the *face* and *deliberately* and *with full malice aforethought* told him the *exact truth!* How can a rat *prepare* himself for something like that? How can a rat *defend* himself, if he can't assume he's being *lied* to? It wasn't *fair!* It just wasn't *fair!* It almost felt like...like...like he was being *punished* or something!

Still fuming he began to make his way, cautiously, moving with three paws and tail, saving just his right arm cradling the Holy Hand Grenade of Obviousness – what a *stupid* name! First of all it *wasn't* obvious, it didn't have the *least* odor of gunpowder on it, the only thing that was *obvious* about it was the fact that it *wouldn't explode* because it was just a *stupid* little ball with a *stupid* little cross stuck in a *stupid* little hole...

And *second* of all, given all that, why *scare* him with that 15-second bit? It wasn't going to do anything in 15 seconds it couldn't do right away, assuming it could do *anything* which it probably *couldn't*. Magic users! Thought they were just so bleedin' *clever* and *amazing* and how we should all fall *prostrate* before them and *grovel* and...

He was nearly at the pad, still in a welter and belatedly, remembered the orbiting rock – it was gone! *That* had to have been a fake, *too!* He looked around for it.

Nowhere!

He craned his neck over to look down and >POW!!!< something slammed into his face...

Ed covered his eyes with his hand. “I *told* him *not* to do that!”

Tal said, thoughtfully, “You know, Eddie? Maybe we should’ve...you know?...*blindfolded* him or...something?”

“I *figured* he needed to *see* where he was *going* – but apparently *not* since he was looking *everywhere* but where he was *supposed* to be looking!”

Scrum swayed back and forth with his head ringing. He had black blotches in front of his eyes. He shook his head, glaring around to see what had attacked him. Nothing nearby. And *still* no sign of that *stupid* rock! At least they lied about *that*, he thought to himself with some small, grim satisfaction.

Despite the pain in his head he still had the grenade – of *course* he had it! It was *loot* – sort of, anyway. It would take more than *one* clubbing to the head to get a *rat* to drop *loot!* Come to think of it, when this thing *failed* to go off, maybe he should just *keep* it! Why not? They *gave* it to him! Of course, it would’ve been more to the point to *steal* it, which he *could have done!* He was just being *cautious* ‘cause they *claimed* it was magical, and you can’t be *too* careful around magic. Which *this* wasn’t!

He reached the pad, plunked the Holy Hand Grenade of Obviousness – *jeez* he would have to make up a new *name* for it if he put it up on his *mantle*. After he *stole* a mantle, of course. Something cool...Hand Grenade of...Perdition. Misery? Obnoxious magic users..?

Then he paused. *Which* way it was he supposed to turn the cross? He hadn’t paid that much attention...oh, what does it *matter* which way? It won’t work *either* way! He reached out and turned the cross counter-clockwise a quarter turn...

And the world *lit* with an blinding blue glare!

A thunderclap rang through the web – some distance away the terrified rat saw web strands parting with *twanging* noises. When the strands separated they *sparked*, still connected by *lightning!* The *web* was *going to burn!* Frantically, he turned and tried to run back to the safety of the cave opening.

Which one?! There were six of them! No! Twelve...more! What came after twelve?

There were apTargs in each one! Loads and *loads* of them! They can't all be right! Which one did he need to *get* to!?

The web heaved under him as a shock wave rebounding from a wall passed back through the area. He bounced high enough to see the web below him vanish, his head slammed into *another* web he couldn't see above him and *boinged* him back down into the web he started from.

There were little flashes of blue and yellow light all around him. He heard a grinding sound once...again...and again! Over and over it came getting *louder* with each repetition. Another shock wave hit him and again he ricocheted up and back again, this time grabbing onto the web with all four paws and his tail...

The grinding sound filled the entire cosmos...

Suddenly he was in free fall! He was plummeting *to his doom!* So *this* was how it was going to...

The apTargs looked at each other. Tal shook her head in admiration. "*Spectacular* light show, Bro!"

"Wow. That came off a *lot* better than I hoped!" he said, softly. Their ears were still ringing.

"Do you see the rat?"

"No, but he's down there somewhere. *Bet* on it. The Gods protect people like that – and they alone know *why* he detonated it right away instead of tripping the timer."

"Stupidity?"

"Let's try to be a *little* more charitable, Sis."

"*Brazen* stupidity?"

Ed began to climb down into the much smaller and now-darkened cavern.

Webbing was strewn *everywhere*. And there was *far* more than he expected. It was positively *heaped* calf-deep in spots. It was thigh-high in the middle.

But part of that thigh turned out to be the rat, lying at the bottom of the pile. Tal pulled the clump back and hollered over her shoulder "*Found him!*"

Ed struggled over.

"This stuff is dead dry, Sis, I think all we need do is wind it...is he out?! *Again?*"

"I might argue he was never really *in* in the first place but right now he is *definitely* out."

"It's a good thing the hand grenade collapsed the local space-time continuum and cut off this portion of the web! They'd have sucked him *empty* by now!"

"I love it when you use big, incomprehensible words. You don't think we need to treat this for transport?" She pulled a handful of strands through one hand. "Completely dry." She sniffed it. "No sour odor, already cured. Feels *nice* too! I can see why they were so hot to collect it."

Ed reached out a hand to her. "Sis...that pile *moved*," he said, pointing.

Tal stepped in front of her brother and approached the pile coming nose to nose with a somewhat bewildered looking phase targ as it lurched out of the pile.

Tal instantly spun her ax-hammer to the hammer side and neatly banged it between the eyes. It dropped to the floor of the cave like it had been struck down by the Gods, its' eyes dulled, and its' head lolled.

"Nice *shot*, Sis!" Ed said.

Tal had immediately and automatically checked its breathing, made sure she hadn't cracked the chitin between the eyes, looked for any sign of wrenching at the base of the antenna and did a quick check-up, sexing (female), and survey. By the time another mound started to move, she was just punching an apTarg tag with the beast's ID number through the inert chitinous collar of the left antenna. The new one charged Ed but then sprang at her when he ducked out of the way.

Tal stepped into the spring and spun her ax-hammer forward, down and around, catching it in the chest as it started to pass over her shoulder. It promptly reversed course in mid-air, returning to its launch point, and looked at her dizzily while she stepped up and carefully but firmly nailed it between the eyes.

"Keep an eye out for the others, Bro," she said as she worked this one up as well.

The other targ did not seem as aggressive – perhaps having seen what happened to its fellows – it tried to get away, climbing the wall looking for a way out that no longer existed. While it scrambled, Tal and Ed climbed after it and started pulling its legs off the wall until it could no longer support itself, whereupon it dropped like a fly, landing on its back. Since this slammed the top of the aftmost segment – where the lungs were – down into the rock, it was pretty winded, and made no further objection to the exam, the paperwork, or the tag. Tal gave it a pat. "*Good girl!*" She helped it turn over.

In the rat's opinion, *none* of this was worth what he was going to be paid. But *he would get paid* by the Gods, and *more besides!*

21 THE VOYAGE OF THE *AMMONITE*

The *Ammonite* cruised through the darkness. Behind, the *Ammonite* also cruised through the darkness. And Valkenhayn could not sleep.

The weird ship – the U-boat, he corrected himself – hummed through the water – still on the surface, thank the Goddess, it hadn't *sunk* yet, and he wasn't really looking forward to it doing so. Frankly after being on a U-boat that had sunk the *only* thing he was really going to care about would be being on a U-boat that had *desunk*. Unsunk. *Whatever*. And, of course, being a Paladin, he had to convince everyone *none* of this *bothered* him.

It bothered him a lot! And *not* just the U-boat, though *that* all by itself, pegged his insanity meter but the blond elfling insisting *she* was R'nyara and R'nyara insisting *she* was Mylyn – and the bug insisting it really *was* McKulluh *and* a leprechaun – all evidence to the contrary – it was *nuts*. *Especially* when the bug claimed it hadn't been *polymorphed*, either!

Of course, knowing the Thaumateurge was involved he had tried every standard trick in the book. *Disbelieve!* Nope, McKulluh was *still* a bug. Shadows? The "leprechaun" had a bug shadow, too! The girls' shadows looked perfectly normal. He even contrived to get the blond between him and one of those Metal Master electric lights and it shone around her without the slightest *hint* of where the illusion or seeming started or ended. "Just go along with it" indeed!

And...the *rat* was still the *rat*! He wasn't *disguised*! He was his usual, obnoxious, scruffy *self*, there wasn't a *thing* different about him – nor did he even *deny* it! But the blond laughed and said, no, he *was* disguised.

None of which made any sense. He actually *hoped* Evenshade was watching this in a crystal ball, if it confused the *wyrm* half as badly as it had *him*, the plan might work at that! When Cloughload told them to break up, he assumed they *would*. The scene in the mirror where Scrum died was obviously already fixed...somehow. So the next time he saw Scrum he should've been near the Tarn, *with* the rope! So what was he doing *here*? There *weren't* any Tarns at the bottom of the ocean! He assumed.

And he was *still* worrying about how to handle that damn bird when the time came! It looked pretty definitive, he *saw* the lump go down the bird's throat! How could he engineer it so that that exact scene *happened* but Scrum survived? *Will* survive. Survives. Is going to...*whatever* the damn tense is!

And at that point in his restless cogitations there was loud metallic *thud*, the U-boat lurched violently sideways, and Valkenhayn was launched from his bunk into the air, traveled the width of the cabin, over Runt, who had been sleeping peacefully, minding his own business, slammed into the

far wall, and hit the floor just as the U-boat lurched *up* as an encore. His armor, carefully and thoughtfully perched on the sidechair to air-dry properly, went flying all around the room with a clatter. Runt came up *wearing* his replacement cloak.

Valkenhayn leaped to his feet and smiled as he drew his sword and jumped for the door. *This* was something he could do something about! *Something* was gonna *die*! This, at last, made some *sense*.

The klaxon started sounding as he stepped through the door. The crew was already rushing about, although what they were doing was a mystery, it seemed like most of them were turning valves.

The U-boat lurched again in time to a loud, metallic *bang* from the other side.

"Away team with weapons!" he heard the Captain shout from somewhere ahead. "Repel *boarders*!" he added as the entire vessel sank at the stern.

The team, brandishing spears and pikes of an unfamiliar design, were piling up on the steps leading to the main hatch, and he quickly joined them. The Captain was doing something with the controls near the top of the hatchway steps and suddenly the lurching quieted, and the vessel came back level.

"20 thousand volts," he said, looking up at the still-sealed hatch. "Let's see if *that's* discouraging enough."

A moment later the U-boat again lurched violently to the side.

"Damn!" the Captain snapped. He did something else with the panel and suddenly it showered the men near the top with sparks. There came another lurch, and the U-boat tilted down by the head.

"Stay alert, mates! Anything that can short out this panel has electrical weapons, too! Get ready!" and he grabbed the lever and pulled. The hatch swung open and the crew – and Valkenhayn – rushed on deck in the darkness, with a single, silvery moon the only illumination.

At the front of the vessel, obviously trying to climb on board, was a sea monster the likes of which the Knight had never imagined. It's body was shaped sort of like a huge turtle, but it didn't seem to have an actual shell. It had four flippers and an improbably long neck with a relatively small head and a mouth full of teeth that was entirely too large for the thing. It had its' neck in an S-shape and it uncoiled, lashing forward at the men as they moved forward. Lightning sparked from its mouth as it did so, and someone cried out.

Valkenhayn was not used to the lurching deck, and had to be careful about his balance. He also still had his sword, whereas the proper weapon

was obviously the pike or lance thing the crew was using, so he lagged back. This was fortunate, because he spotted the second head to the right of the boat as it surfaced, glistening in the moonlight, and struck at the crew's backs.

The Knight roared a warning and stepped behind the dorsal as the head came up, spinning and thrusting his sword into its' eye as it came even with him. The thing recoiled faster than he expected and as he reflexively tightened his grip on the sword it lifted him off the deck. Runt hissed behind him, but he couldn't see the wyvern and was too busy to look.

This was obviously less than optimal for the creature, the blade pivoted on the lower eye orbit cutting upwards into the skull, but Valkenhayn's hope that this would bisect the brain appeared not to be the case. Instead it flinched backwards and away from the boat and began swinging its head back and forth trying to dislodge him. The *Ammonite* – still under power – was moving away.

He felt the sword start to slide out and grabbed the creature's neck with his legs before it could finish doing so. The sword flipped out, and he reversed it, trying to stab the thing through the spine right behind him. But he was startled when he turned and saw he was still out of reach!

He was clutching the neck of the monster, too close to the head for it to get its' jaws on him but too far down to do it any further harm, and as yet too high to reach the body. Try as he might, the thing's scales and his lack of leverage left him with little in the way of offense. It was a standoff – but as the whatever-it-was struggled with him, he was slowly sliding down.

He clutched at the neck with his sword arm, pulling his dagger with the other, and with all of his strength stabbed the point into the thing's throat.

It did not appreciate this at all. Hissing furiously it whipped its head back and forth but with the dagger firmly planted, he was much more secure. It started bucking while it whipsawed its' neck, and the Knight felt shaken the way a bartender makes a martini.

There was little he could do but hang on. In the midst of the struggle he suddenly saw the U-boat had already ditched the monsters and reversed course somehow – it was heading directly toward him!

The *Ammonite* smacked into them and then clumsily bounced away with no more effect than a balsawood model. It was the miniature! Then the turtle-monster suddenly slammed sideways and spun, and he saw the *Ammonite* again, still heading away, with three more of the things surrounding it, striking at the crewmen. As they did, he could see flashes of

lightning coming from their open mouths and thanked his Goddess this one apparently could not use *that* weapon on him. At least one of the efreets was up fighting, too – one vaguely humanlike figure seemingly composed of lightning jumped back and forth at the monsters.

In amongst the hissing, the spray, and the general turmoil he heard the gurgle...

The monster froze in the water, outlined in the flash of red light for a moment, bellowing in pain. Looking over his shoulder, Valkenhayn saw a large acid and fire burn on the thing's rump as Runt flashed by in the moonlight. He noticed part of one hind fin was missing...

Suddenly it wheeled in the water and began to swim in earnest, humping along through the water at a speed that was startling in a creature so large. Through the turmoil and spray he saw an island some distance away.

It was now not so much struggling with him as it was running for the island. Why it had decided *now* it wanted to get there, he could not imagine, but that hardly mattered now. He was going to lose the *Ammonite* at this rate!

The creature's new-found determination to run away suggested he might drop off of it and let it go with no hard feelings. He had decided to abandon sea-monster and was about to do so when a gigantic mouthful of teeth came up out of the water at him.

Well, probably not at *him* as such, more likely at his improbable mount. The new creature had a huge head seemingly bolted directly onto its body, which was long and sinuous, like some sort of enormous snake, though the head looked more like a crocodile. His mount checked itself, turning to this new threat, as the thing lunged up again.

It managed to get a flipper up and slammed the croc-thing upside the head, knocking it over and into the water. It took a moment to reorient and had already resumed its' headlong flight when the croc-thing lunged out of the water again – again, over the turtle-monster's shoulder – at *him*!

Valkenhayn abruptly realized the croc-thing wasn't interested in the turtle-monster, it was trying to get *him*! The next time it lunged he stabbed the sword into its mouth.

It didn't like that, but it didn't faze the thing, either. However, Runt switched targets, cruising along next to the panicky turtle-monster, waiting for the croc-thing to try again. It did, and it got a good dose of what the wyvern liked to dish out along the top and side of its head.

Its' scream of pain was cut off as it plunged below the water. Valkenhayn saw the body sweep from the left to the right below in the moonlight and realized it had no intention of giving up. He was ready when it lunged

at him from the right and again stabbed it in the mouth. Sadly, the water had extinguished any fire and washed away the acid, it was burned but it wasn't *near* as bad as Runt could usually do.

Nor could Runt fire, having missed the croc-thing's move under the water he was now on the wrong side. He abruptly pulled up, gaining altitude.

The croc-thing had apparently decided the turtle-monster was just not cooperating. It lunged, but under the water, striking at the turtle-monster itself. They came to a sudden halt as it recoiled, letting out a hissing screech like an Imrian steam-whistle. The water around them turned red and frothed. When next he could see down he realized the left foreflipper was now gone *entirely*. Heckuva set of *teeth* on that thing, he thought.

Now it was personal. The turtle-monster raised its' head high and struck down with amazing speed, preceded by a flash of blue lightning, and then yanked the croc-thing's head up and out of the water – it was writhing furiously and almost bonelessly, and the turtle-monster was being thrown back and forth with the power of it. More sparks came from its mouth as it apparently tried to electrocute its opponent.

But it didn't let go. Not even when a blast of fire and boiling acid hit it in the back, splashing over onto the croc-thing as well. The force of the struggle doubled and redoubled. The Knight felt punch-drunk. With a pounding *thud* the croc-thing managed to throw itself free.

When the croc-thing lunged yet again for the base of the turtle-monster's neck, Valkenhayn finally lost his grip, landing in red, frothing water having lost his dagger – still in the sea monster's neck – but, predictably, still clutching his sword. As he kicked for the surface a massive wave from the fighting monsters picked him up and slammed him sideways into a rock.

Bruised and winded, Valkenhayn nevertheless grabbed on, hauling himself up to the top, just a few feet away, where he found Runt, panting, but still watching the battle a short way away.

Now that he was out of it, it was well-worth the watching. Though the turtle-monster had the reach – and the power – the croc-thing had the mass and, undeniably, a great deal of enthusiasm, and it was throwing itself into the turtle-monster over and over, snapping those huge jaws and more often than not falling back into the water with a chunk of flesh. Though it jerked when the turtle-monster hit it with more lightning with each bite it took, it continued to attack.

But it made one lunge too many. As it came up again, throwing itself sideways against its opponent, the turtle-monster managed to snap its jaws

shut on the thing's throat. Tiny sparks flew from its teeth into the body of the croc-thing, which went rigid.

And turtle-monster would *not* let go.

The struggle went on, and on, but the turtle-monster never gave up that choke hold, never stopped shocking it over and over again. Slowly the croc-thing's struggles got weaker. The turtle-monster had stopped moving as well, grimly clamping those teeth ever more tightly in its' opponent's throat. Valkenhayn could not tell what was blood and what was seawater. Both monsters were bleeding so badly there was nothing that looked like water in the vicinity.

And that was how they died. Eventually the croc-thing stopped struggling and floated, belly up. The turtle-monster probably predeceased it – it had already stopped sparking, but it never let go. It died with its' teeth in the croc-thing's throat.

A few minutes later, a few sea creatures began to congregate to feast on both corpses. Valkenhayn jumped back into the sea and made his way to the island shore, and Runt landed beside him, still wearing the remains of the knight's tattered, acid and fire scorched cloak, which Valkenhayn got off of him and tossed away.

Neither *Ammonite* was anywhere to be seen.

22 THE SUN TARGS ARRIVE

Trother was sitting in the Archive staring pensively at an ancient journal purporting to inform readers about phase targ when the comcrystal rang. He shoved the volume to the center of the table and went to answer it.

Tapping the comcrystal brought one of the Skyjammers into focus. Her eidolon stood atop the crystal as she smiled and waved.

"Trother apTarg? My name is Kara, you may recall me from our last refit?"

"Oh, yes, of course, Miss Kara. How are you?"

"Well, *I'm* fine, but I'm afraid our cloud whales are not so good. We've had some major damage to Khar Paschalon and, you may have heard, we brought him in for refitting."

Trother chuckled. "Sorry, hadn't heard. I've been up to my eyebrows in various other issues. Do you need some silk? All we have left is a selection of the magical silks."

"Actually, it's the other way around. Pa was carrying a mated pair of sun targ from Calthis. You folks ordered them *ages* ago, but we were never able to carry it out until Semaj learned the trick of navigating the jet-streams. We finally got them, they are on Pa right now – but they're feisty, and because of the damage Pa suffered, they are loose right now. I was wondering if, perhaps, you might be willing to take delivery?"

Trother blinked. "Wow. That *was* a long time ago. I'm afraid our financial position is somewhat precarious right now..."

Kara shook her head. "We quite understand that, we made you wait for an unconscionable amount of time to take delivery and then we did it without any warning, so we have no issue at all with you folks taking some time to get back to us, but we'd really like you to take delivery *now*. We have a fitting crew standing around with nothing to do and two irate targ that *really* need a new home. Could you help us?"

Trother considered. "Of course. Let me see if I can round up some help and we'll be up as soon as we can – you're at the manta docks, yes?"

She nodded in evident relief. "Yes, we are. It'll be the busted-up cloud whale carrying a lightning storm and surrounded by a bunch of bewildered looking people."

"I guess there won't be a *lot* of those around," he said, smiling. "We'll be up as soon as we can."

"Thanks! We know you'll certainly be able to handle them better than we could. See you soon!" The comcrystal image faded away.

Trother went to the entrance of the Archive and called out, "Tharn! Ed! Tal! Front and center, we have to make a house call! Well, more of a whale call, actually, but the principle is the same."

Tal arrived first. "A *whale* call, Daddy?"

Trother laughed. "Yes – we just had a shipment of sun targs arrive and the Khars would like us to take delivery right away."

"Sun targs. You mean, the ones from *Calthis*? Which we ordered – what? – ten years ago?"

"Closer to twelve, I think. Remember, they didn't guarantee their usual turn-around." He nodded to Tharne and Ed as they arrived flanking Carl, who was moving stiffly on his crutches. "How're you feeling, son?" he asked Carl.

"I'm not at my best, Dad, but I couldn't very well ignore a *whale* call, could I?" he said. "We don't get *those* very often."

"No, I can't think of the last time we did. 'Cause we never *have*, I suspect. We need to remove them from Khar Paschalon, they apparently got loose and are interfering with the repairs they need to get done. That'll involve some climbing which I don't think you'll be up to."

Carl looked disappointed. "No, I'd guess not. Rotwebs. Oh, well," he said, turning to the others, "I guess I'll have to get the *next* whale call."

Ed said, "Do we have a place to *put* these things?"

Tharne said, "I'd suggest the big pen in the vetarinarium. We can keep them there for quarantine just in case they are bringing us any exotic bugs, and in the meantime we can scout out a spot for them below. Maybe in South 20, plenty of space and we won't be collecting there for a while."

Trother nodded. "Good plan. Okay, everyone, let's go!"

The apTarg quartet adjourned leaving only Carl – and the rat – to hold down the fortress, and repaired to the garage.

The garage was a largish room facing on Kliminy Street, at right angles to "Multi-legged Way" where their compound had its' main entrance. It had a number of vehicles, but the one they needed was clearly the transport.

This was a large, enclosed vehicle with two rows of seats and a large cargo area, all enclosed. It was made of wood, trimmed with brass hinges, rivets, and guard strips. The polish had faded and the truck had clearly seen better days, but it was in good repair and still used often. Trother stepped to the office and opened the door.

Two Pickamups were sitting there on opposite sides of a small table. Each had six legs, though a short pair of arms extended out from the knee of the first set of legs. These arms were presently engaged.

As Trother stepped in, one of them snapped down a card and exclaimed “Scotch!”

The other threw down his cards and announced, “GAME CALLED ON ACCOUNT OF DUTY, SO IT IS! WHERELL YOO FOLKS BE NEEBIN’ T’BE GOTTEN TO?”

“We’re headed for the manta docking pens to pick up a pair of targs. We’ll likely need both of you in the truck...”

The two bolted for the door leaving a cloud of playing cards in the air that began to swoop around and land in various parts of the office. They may have been playing “Scotch” but clearly they would return for a round of “86 pick up.”

Meanwhile the two pickamups had arrived at the truck where they opened up a hatch in the side of the hood and clambered in. One’s head appeared in the dome at the front of the hood and both got positioned. They waited, expectantly, while the apTargs found their places.

“MANTA DOCKS, NEXT STOP SO IT IS!” the pickup in the dome shouted with a piercing *tweel* noise that was unique to the motor caste. Both began running on the belt and with a loud “crumpetty-crump” sound, the truck pulled out through the door opening ahead of it and zoomed up the street. Meanwhile, the door closed again as the minimotor pickup in the door’s squirrel-cage cranked the door back down and secured it.

The truck squealed to a halt next to Paschalon’s main cargo hatch, and the apTargs got out. The motor under the dome popped it open and asked, “SHALL WE KEEP ‘ER RUNNIN’, GUUNA?”

“Yes, stay put, hopefully we won’t be long,” Trother said. “By *Gods* the poor thing looks like he’s been through a *war*.”

Tal said, “They weren’t kidding about repairs. Oh, look up there! That must be where the targs are, all flashy and colorful inside?”

Tharne said, “Gotta be them. Tal, got your ax-hammer?”

Tal laughed and pulled out her small ax-hammer. “Never without it, Uncle!”

The apTargs climbed into Paschalon and worked their way aft and up. Though they had been aboard Khar Semaj, they had never been on Pa before.

“Good gravy, this thing is *enormous*,” Tharne observed as they came up to a central catwalk that looked like it might go – more or less – toward the targ pen area.

“No question,” Trother agreed, just as they spotted Kara at the end of the catwalk. She beckoned them on urgently.

“Thanks for coming so quick. We’ve got to get them calmed down, they’re just skitting all over. They have what we *think* is an egg sack, we’re guessing that’s why they’re so rambunctious.

“That would do it,” Trother agreed. “Tal, give them the sedative, would you?”

Tal nodded, hefted her ax-hammer – with the hammer side out – and led the way to the end of the catwalk. The two over-excited targs promptly charged her.

She waited, stepping aside from the first one and delicately pounding his cranium as he went by, leaving him to plow mandibles-first into the catwalk, where the sedative took effect. The female was cannier, promptly backing up toward an obvious nest they had constructed in this spot. The egg sack was clearly visible.

Tal whistled a couple of times. “Come here, Girl! I won’t hurt you, I just want to pound your skull a little...” and she walked cautiously forward.

The sun targ wasn’t going to let her near the egg sack and charged when she got within ten feet. At she reared to attack, Tal applied the sedative to her as well, and the rest of the apTargs came in while it took effect, leaving her peacefully sleeping in the nest.

Tal dragged her out to join the male and then fell to doing a physical exam, punching a couple of tags that they attached at the base of the antennae, and she and Ed finished up the paperwork and moved the targs down to the truck where they were lovingly installed on some nice, soft straw. The egg-sack they wrapped carefully and kept in the passenger area.

Meanwhile, Trother, Ed and Tharne were examining the silk. They seemed to be quite taken with it, winding it this way and that, tugging and pulling in various directions.

“Will you just *look* at that silk!” Trother said as he examined a handful of his own.

Tharne looked at Ed. They both nodded. Tharne said quietly, “And I think it may be *just* what we need.”

It *was* beautiful. Left alone it was a quiet, pearly white but if stressed it would light up in various colors. More stress, more light, more color – and if torqued so it was stressed in more than one way, it began to develop patterns that would march across the surface. Trother and Tharne worked with it for a few moments and beamed in satisfaction as they found a way to hold it so the pattern became stationary. Clothes that could change color and even pattern without being removed. They smiled at that as they watched it.

Cly gave them the last of the softener, and passed along the advice they were given for their care and the apTargs took their leave in very high spirits indeed.

23 WHAT IS IN A NAME?

The local sun – a fierce and brilliant blue-white – was starting to glow when Valkenhayn awoke. He sighed as he looked around for the U-boat, but there was no sign of it. He'd better find a place to camp. Evenshade might even think he was dead. He very much wanted the dragon to continue to think that.

The island was a couple of miles long and almost a mile wide. They tramped directly inland and arrived at a clearing by a small stream feeding into a small pool. It was quite heavily wooded, though not as much so as the crest of the hill beyond the pool, but it would do.

He encouraged Runt to see what he could find for food and watched him take off. He seemed quite comfortable no matter the day or night. Probably the switcher genes – one parent likely diurnal, the other nocturnal, so obviously Runt could do either. Handy to be a dragon, even if only a small one.

He took stock of his equipment. He had a sword, a shirt, trousers whose pockets contained his danger stone – might've been handy if he'd set it *up* last night – and one wyvern, economy size, not presently on his person. That important but unfortunately short task completed, the next thing he did was to set his danger stone in the center of the area. He didn't like being snuck-up-on at the best of times, now was *no* time to get careless.

It had been some time since his last laundry, and now that his clothes were drying, they were stiffening with salt, which would not be at all pleasant if it started to abrade his skin. He stripped off, checked the water's edge – otters, a fisher, some sort of small cat, and a handful of lizards, most recently – glanced again at the danger stone, and then entered the water. He bathed, rinsed out his clothes and spread them on a rock to dry. He also picked up some breakfast when a fairly large catfish let be known it was in the area – he scooped it out by hand and it hit a rock a good fifteen feet from the water.

Luck or his Goddess still smiled on him. He found a convenient fireberry bush and made a pile of the berries on a stone. A few slaps with another stone and soon he had a tiny, smokeless, but very hot fire. He speared the fish with a sharpened stick, and made himself some breakfast. He quickly cleaned up, disposing of the remains of the catfish by burying it – which was a little difficult. The soil was quite shallow, and there was an underlying tangle of roots or something forming a mat he couldn't get into. He did the best he could and then got himself a drink. His clothes were ad-

equately dried, so he resumed them, too. He scouted around for anything useful he could find.

He located an air geyser of some sort, sucking air in and out. He'd never heard of such a thing and puzzled at it for a while but geology had never been his strong suit. When he noticed some vines looping around the branches of the largest tree nearby he climbed up, appropriated a length, and fashioned a back scabbard for his sword rigged to his accustomed overhand draw.

He looked up the ridge and spotted Runt riding a thermal less than a mile away, still looking for something to eat, or maybe just exploring. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the danger stone, noting it was still satisfactorily inert, and then something landed on him like a ton of bricks. He saw the ground coming up with a rock and that was it.

He slowly came around. His vision was blurry, he had dried blood crusted over his face, and he was being deafened by a very loud drone. Then he noticed he wasn't lying on anything. Anything at *all*. He could see straight down a couple of hundred feet to the ocean.

He next learned he was restrained. Not tied up, but held firmly by six armored legs wrapped around him from head to foot. He craned his neck up trying to see what owned the legs. It was a giant hornet!

Why had his danger stone *failed*?! It should've *warned* him there was danger there! That's what the blasted thing was *enchanted* for!

He felt around and realized he still had his sword. That was not immediately useful, even if he managed to kill the thing, the fall would do for him. He tried to rub some of the blood and grit from his eyes, and when he could see better tried to size up the hornet.

It *wasn't* a hornet. He was being clutched by an et-numundie.

Valkenhayn knew the creatures, though not from personal experience. They were ubiquitous in Lakosha, the land north of Vindolonda. The people there had made them an integral part of their culture. Everyone got an et-numundie egg to hatch on their tenth birthday, and bonded forever with the hatchling when it was born. A man and his et-numundie – inseparable. Women too. It was a beautiful thing, sure, but *why* had this one grabbed *him*?

Et-numundie were a hugely variable species. They had many castes to do various jobs. Their breeding was directed by the Brothers of the Hive – humans – who controlled the Kings and Queens. This particular one was obviously bred to carry someone. He could make out stirrups on either side and surmised it was wearing some sort of saddle. It had various holsters at-

tached to some sort of harness, some of which contained some pieces of equipment he could not make out, except for what looked like the handle of an *assagai*. That was a *weapon* – he was dealing with a *military* et-numundie! He couldn't *see* the fronts of the front legs but his arm was just barely able to feel around and, sure enough, each leg was wearing a wicked slim short sword attached above the wrist. The Lakoshan commando corps used animals like this, rigged like this. So where was the commando?

He couldn't recall how smart the critters were, but he was pretty sure they did not operate alone. Even if they did, why put the snatch on *him*? Questions and questions, but no answers. He tried to settle himself more comfortably. There was nothing to do at this point but rest. He chuckled grimly. Maybe there *hadn't* been any danger for the stone to warn him of. Maybe he should invest in a "watch out for major bloody nuisance" stone to go with it!

The flight took a couple of hours he guessed. When they passed over the wake, Valkenhayn came alert – when he spotted the *Ammonite* at the beginning of the wake, apparently circling the island he'd been on, he started to struggle.

"Land, damn you! Land! Down! Halt! Cease! *Geshtopen zi halten now!* Whoa!" It ignored him, and soon the wake fell far behind. He grimly wondered how much a stone that would warn of "something that will totally screw up any possible plan you might have" could cost.

They approached a small atoll which looked promising, but the damned thing carrying him never even looked down. As they passed over, Val could see they were actually flying pretty fast. Et-numundie were reputed to be agile flyers, but this thing was no slouch at covering ground as well.

They began to drop as they approached a fairly large island. The bug brought him in up the beach and entered the forested area – still flying, albeit at no more than four or five feet – and reached a rocky hillside sporting a cave. It flew right into the cave, executed a neat spin to face the entrance once it had done so, and landed precisely, backing off of Valkenhayn and letting him stand up.

The first thing he saw was the Lakoshan. He was lying in his bedroll, soaked with blood and surrounded by a large, bloody puddle. Valkenhayn approached and heard his labored breathing. He was still alive.

Val pulled back the bedroll and saw the wound, and carefully replaced it with a sad shake of his head. He had been literally *eviscerated*. He was still alive, but only just and not for much longer. A healing potion *might*

save him, maybe, but he had none. It was a savage wound through the stomach and abdomen. Something very large and powerful did that. Sure, that narrowed it down, he thought.

Valkenhayn guessed the et-numundie must have gone looking for help and found him. Rotten luck for all of them. Now he had to find a way back to the first island, which he couldn't do in conscience until this poor devil finished dying so he could at least give the man a proper burial. He didn't relish trying to dig through that matted tangle the other island had, and hoped the ground here was a little more congenial.

He looked at the et-numundie and sighed. He knew something about the bond the Lakoshans had with their bugs. The et-numundie didn't have a mark on it, but it wouldn't live any longer than its' partner would.

The camp was sketchy at best. Equipment had been dropped or flung around. Most of it had been used and none of it had been cleaned. He found some camping utensils.

He quartered the area, found the small stream in the cave that he could hear, now that the et-numundie wasn't buzzing its wings, which he used to put the camp to rights. He filled a cup with water and put it near the dying man in case he needed a drink when – or *if* – he woke. Then he sat and waited.

Valkenhayn was an accomplished hunter, and that was something that required serious patience. He blanked his mind, relaxed, and then tried to think how he might save the rat. Probably, he had to let the bloody bird *eat* him. But how to get him *out* before the digestive system killed him? How much time would a rat *have* in a Tarn's gizzard?

He guessed about two hours had passed before he noticed Runt peering into the cave. How the creature had tracked him, he had no clue, but he had found Val nonetheless.

Valkenhayn made the “down” gesture, hoping Runt was feeling cooperative. The switcher's attention was largely on the et-numundie, but he caught the gesture. He backed away from the cave entrance and disappeared, then reappeared on the embankment opposite, where he dug out a depression and scorched himself a bed. He spiraled himself down into it, putting his head down – but watching Valkenhayn closely. Probably mistrustful of the et-numundie, if it knew that was the agent of his transportation.

Some time later, the Lakoshan stirred.

“KEERITSAR,,,NOWARA TEN?” he muttered.

"Lakoshan battle-language? I don't know it, fellow, *sorry*. I can do Assuran. Or can you speak Richian? *Alfspeak? Or even Elvish? Sort of?*"

"I can...speak Ri...Richian. More or less," he said, haltingly.

"That I can handle," Valkenhayn said. "I am..."...who the devil should he say he was? He didn't want it known he was in the area. He shook his head ruefully. This fellow won't be sharing *that* secret. "...Valkenhayn of Caerleon, prince of the land of Krichala. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The man's breathing was very labored. "Caerleon?" He opened his eyes and looked at Valkenhayn. "You're a...prince? A...prince of...Caerleon?"

Valkenhayn nodded. "I am."

A sudden fit of coughing took the man. He throttled it down by sheer willpower and spit out some blood. "The...the prophesy? The...dragon in...?"

"In Caerleon, yes. I have come from fire to slay the beast. I hope," Valkenhayn said.

The man seemed to digest this for a few moments – or perhaps he faded back into sleep – but then spoke again, startling Val. "I am...K'thren Wino...rider of...the Thunderbolt Wing."

Thunderbolt Wing must be the name of his unit. "I wish we could've met under better circumstances, K'thren Wino-rider. What can I do for you?"

The man seemed to gather his strength for a moment. He looked at the et-numundie, standing watch over him, closed his eyes and nodded.

"I must...have...an...heir."

"Air? You need air?"

"An...heir. For...all I...have. You."

"This isn't something you really need to worry about *now*, is it?" Valkenhayn asked, worrying that K'thren might not realize the wound was mortal. That meant *he* would have to tell him.

"No. It's...critical! Before...before I die...you *must*...trade names...with me," he got out at last. Valkenhayn was taken completely by surprise.

"I can't do that, fellow! I'm a prince of the blood! I must be Caerleon to have a valid claim to the throne!" he protested.

"Not...used...names. Soul...names. Trade...trade with me!" he gasped with the strain of getting it out. Some fresh blood was seeping through the cover.

"Why? What for, K'thren?" He'd sworn his oath to his Goddess by that name. How could he...and then he realized something. Changing his soul name *might* break the lock the dragon seemed to have on him. It *must* be using his soul name to track him and attack him from so far away. It *had* to have been the dragon that sicced that sea monster on him. Maybe the ones attacking the U-boat, too.

"How can you?" he asked.

"Need to...swear by...it," he said, his eyes shut now.

Swear by it. That made sense. He could renew his vow to Ishta and confound the dragon at the same time. This might be handy. Damn shame at the price, though. He nodded.

"All right, K'thren. I'll do it. I am...I am NARR Tael," he said.

"Good. I am, Xap...tera...chipco," he managed to get out. "by my...honor...and family...by my God and...my nation...I accept...accept...NARR...Tael as...my true name...and surrender my...own."

Valkenhayn wasn't sure he really liked the new name. It sounded – foreign. But he'd already promised.

"by my Goddess and my family, by my house and my honor, I accept Xapterachipco as my true name and surrender my own," Valkenhayn swore.

But K'thren was gone.

The et-numundie swayed, then reared back and screamed a shrill, nerve-peeling screech coupled with a low-frequency throb that made Val's teeth ache. He did this again, and again, finally dropping to the ground, panting with a little warble.

Valkenhayn watched sadly. Humans could outlive the bond, but the bugs could not. Their lives ended when their partner died. He waited for the end.

Runt appeared in the entryway of the cave and slunk in on all fours. He stopped near Valkenhayn's back, watching the dying et-numundie.

Windrifter lay, panting, for several minutes, before his breathing quieted. He swallowed, coughed a little, panting, but more quietly. Gradually it eased as the creature died. Except – except he *didn't*!

When his breathing seemed almost normal he perked up. He looked at Val – and then...struggled back to his feet! He stood, swaying, but up, and looked expectantly toward Valkenhayn! Runt gave a long hiss.

This was not what he expected! He should have *died* according to everything he knew about Lakoshans – admittedly not all *that* much, but he knew *that*!

But, Windrifter seemed to pull himself together rapidly. He looked at his dead partner with great sadness, but then turned and looked at Valkenhayn quizzically.

He was *sad*, Valkenhayn knew. He was also “he” ...not “it.” And *he* had a name – *Windrifter*. Of course – ‘K’thren Windrifter’ – he named his partner as well as himself. But how could a *Krithalan* knight know all this?

A suspicion was born in his mind. How to test it? He willed Windrifter to check the entrance and see if anyone was coming.

The et-numundie started his three pairs of lacy wings and levitated into the air. Runt crouched down and Valkenhayn heard the liquid gurgle he had come to associate with the fire and clamped his hand down on his muzzle. Runt gargled and subsided.

The et-numundie ignored all this and flew to the entrance, popping out and spinning around, before flying back in and landing.

No one coming. He didn’t actually *say* that, but he might as well have. The feeling was that strong.

K’thren’s ceremony had – *somehow* – transferred the bond he had with Windrifter from himself – to Valkenhayn! By dying that way, he spared his partner from death. He *had* made Val his...*heir*.

Valkenhayn knew he had been given a huge honor, but he really could not understand why K’thren had done so, unless all he really wanted was to let his partner live.

But it was all so neat...foiling the dragon. Saving Windrifter’s life even when his partner was dying. The light dawned... Providing him with *transportation*.

For the first time, he began to think...just to suspect...that someone really *did* want him to succeed!

But the idea that it might be *Evenshade* put a huge question mark to the idea of what *success* might really *be*.

24 THE GREAT ROPE

For the first time in the clan's memory, the apTargs called in some help. Aurora showed up within an hour of the call with a bevy of Wizards lead by Master Nocklyn, Master Alchemist Yothar, and a light assortment of other magical types. She hugged each of the apTargs, even petting the rat on the head – who ducked and then sulked under a table – and gazed in rapture at the massive heap of phase targ silk they had dragged back.

"It's *incredible!*" she breathed. She ran her fingers through it, and some dim spots of blue light zoomed along the fibers. "And it feels *just* like that little face shield my Mother left me."

"Oh! I *remember* that!" Tal said, laughing. "What is it? About three inches by five?"

"Five and a *half*, if you please!" the Princess said, chuckling. "It's only the largest phase targ silk garment in the known world! Until now."

"Well," Trother said, "When we turn *this* into a rope, your shield will *still* be the largest *garment* of the stuff ever made. Unless we can get more grenades."

"Not a problem. Expensive to make, but relatively easy. We want to be very careful of them, though. It's actually a very powerful dynomantic spell – we need to do more research before we make a habit of it," Master Nocklyn said. "For lack of a better word, it's a *big* stress on the fabric of space-time. That said, doing it far underground is the best way to test it, though. Preferably at *long* intervals."

"I concur," Ed put in. "Doing it at intervals is inevitable, I'm sure it'll take some time – *local* time, I mean – for them to refill that missing chunk of web. And the effects on space-time were *awesome*. Watching the cave while the collapse was going on was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time...hundreds of phase targs, Scrum himself running around panicked, images of other things flicking by too fast to be seen clearly...and the whole thing took a *lot* longer than I expected. We did something really *awesome* – lucky we didn't kill *ourselves* trying it."

"Leaving only *Scrum* to come back?" Tal said. "What a thought!"

Master Nocklyn was thumbing through some pages of his journal, but he looked up. "Wait. You saw just *one* Scrum?"

Ed nodded, "That's it. You think maybe he's not the *same* Scrum? *I* think he is."

Nocklyn raised an eyebrow. "How can you tell?"

"Trust me, there is nothing else in the *Cosmos* like Scrum."

Nocklyn laughed, looking toward the next room, where Scrum had retreated. “He seems a droll little fellow, but there should be an *infinite* number of Scrums in the multiverse, you know.”

Tal shuddered. “Oh, don’t even *say* things like that!”

Nocklyn went on as if he hadn’t heard. “Curious that you only saw one.”

Trother said, “Never mind about the rat! We have to figure out how we’re going to make these things, enchant them, and get them out to the World Wall in time to be there for Valkenhayn!”

The spell they needed most was a simple one, *achar sacchadh*, or “distance distortion.” This would shorten or lengthen any desired span it was cast on. It did not affect the *speed* of something on the span, it simply changed the length of time it took to traverse it. This was simple enough – in theory – but it hadn’t been tried on an artifact to indicate the span distance before. The School of Wizardry was very intrigued with the idea. Previously the spell had to be cast – and usually made permanent – on the span to be shortened directly. With this idea, they could package and sell the spell without having to actually install it.

The phase targ silk turned out to be quite strong and quite willing to take the required spells. The first test version only worked so long as you could stay *inside* the rope, which wasn’t so useful, but they were able to tune it and determine exactly how long the rope had to be in order to stretch nearly two miles – and the answer was, 1726 feet, 4 ½ inches, precisely.

They did not have *quite* enough for both ropes, and it was highly unlikely the phase targs had rebuilt their web yet. Though they had earlier given their entire inventory of previously-made non-magical silk rope to the Khars, they started trying match magical impedences with some of the more magical silks still in inventory. As it happened, some double-targ silk, a mere wisp of reeshus – both of which they had in store – and most of the newly-acquired sun-targ silk could bulk up the phase targ silk without disturbing the distance distortion spell. The double-targ and reeshus silks were combined into a sheath layer, and the sun targ silk was wrapped around the outside of the entire rope. Each of them was magical in its own way, but each was also strong in its own way. The net result was a rope able to handle Valkenhayn’s specified load, the safety factor – and a little over 140 pounds extra.

Trother and Tharne set to work once the Wizards were happy with the spells. They reopened the rope walk and began spinning and counterspin-

ning the rope. Unlike the earlier Great Ropes, this one got a considerable number of the Tinker's Guild's self-charging gems wound into the core of the rope at intervals as they went. Rather than having to be continually operated by a Wizard, the new rope was self-regulating, self-charging, and required no outside magical support.

In addition to the distance distortion spell, each strand was also treated with one of Master Yothar's strengthening potions, as well as a dullness charm that would make it much harder to cut by accident. It also made it harder to cut *deliberately* but since the ropes were being purpose made to the correct lengths, this was deemed acceptable.

As the rope came together it became obvious that it was highly magical – in all but the brightest light it glowed a clear blue. When put under strain it pulsed with bolts of blue-white light that raced from the load up to the bitt. When the load was *really* heavy – near the rope's limit – the sun targ silk outer layer began to pulse yellow in a direction opposite to the blue of the core rope. Just rolled up it looked like regular rope, but if unwound and stressed it became so flashy and colorful it just *screamed* “magical rope in use here!” But Valkenhayn hadn't asked for *stealthy*.

The silk rope in that length turned out to weigh about 42 pounds. It was certainly ludicrous to look at such a tiny wisp of string compared to the ropes the apSeronin chronicles described – but whenever they tried it, it worked. When the first was done it was 1730 feet, and when put it down and walked over it, the trip was just a few inches over two miles. It was weird to watch from a vantage point outside of the rope, people seemed to be walking very slowly. But it worked.

Ed was heard to remark, “I have *no* idea what kind of weird things this rope does to space-time, but thinking about it, I've decided I *really* don't want to.”

At length the Great Ropes were finished.

“Now, how do we get them to the World Wall lift?” Trother asked those assembled – the apTargs, Scrum, the Princess and Cloughload – though the latter was not *physically* present.

That task falls to the rat. Cloughload said.

“**That task falls to the rat,**” Scrum grumped in a snide tone. “**Of COURSE eet does! Eet ALL falls on the RAT!!!**”

I suggest he go alone – tarnback.

“**WHAT!! Are you OUT OF YOUR REPTILIAN MIND!!!!!! Tarns EAT rats!!!!**” He gasped for breath and clutched both paws to his chest as if the mere suggestion had brought him to the brink of a heart attack.

"They *do*, Cloughload," the Princess said. "Any reason why a *Tarn* in particular?"

Several. While the distance is long for a single Tarn flight, we have a number that could make it if the load were light enough. I didn't think we'd be able to do that – but the weight of the rat plus the ropes comes in just under what we know either Meatscarfer, Bloodgulper, or Cyclone can handle. All of them have won such prizes before.

~~"Meat Meatscarfer!!!"~~ the rat babbled, his eyes widening.

Yes. I list Meatscarfer first since he was last year's Grand Champion in the distance event.

~~"MEAT_Scarfer!!!!!!!"~~

The Princess hid a smile. "Um...Cloughload, Tarns are fairly well-known to be...um...how can I put this?...perhaps a little more *impulsive* than et-numundie, or even wyverns for that matter. It *does* seem an...*unlikely* choice as a mount for a...rat...in particular."

~~"B-B-BLOODgulper!!!!"~~ the rat quavered.

Took second last year. Grand Champion the year before. A wyvern is close enough to a dragon that Evenshade's wards would be triggered by one getting too close to the coast. Wyverns would be expected in our air contingent.

"Et-numundie?" the Princess asked.

~~"C-c-cyclone!!!!"~~ Scrum squeaked.

Last year's second runner-up. Et-numundie won't trigger Evenshade's dragon alarms but they are *also* to be expected, especially since they are no longer found wild. They are also somewhat problematical in terms of range. Tarns are more often wild than not. Likely Evenshade sees Tarn overflights routinely. They would therefore be much less suspicious – especially if we cloaked the rat and the payload.

~~"t-t-t-tarns E-E-EAT r-r-rats,"~~ Scrum stuttered.

"Okay..." the Princess began...

~~"TARNs EAT RATS!!!"~~ the rat screamed at the top of his little rat lungs. He was hyperventilating again.

"Scrum! Just...*calm down*...okay? We're just *talking* here..." the Princess said, patting the air in Scrum's direction.

~~"TARNs EAT RATS!!!"~~ Scrum screamed again, leaping to his feet in the seat of the chair. Whites now showed all around his eyes.

"Yes! Yes, they *do* but we'll *deal* with that problem when we *get* there..." the Princess explained, quietly. "I've already noted that you are sort of mistrustful of Tarns..."

"~~TARN~~ ~~EAT~~ ~~RAT~~ ~~STILL~~" he screamed again, as if this would be news to everyone else at the table. He cringed, folding his arms over his head.

Trother, who had clapped his hands to his ears, now grated out, "Can we *sedate* him?"

"~~TARN~~ ~~EAT~~ ~~R~~" Scrum started again when Tal pulled out her *small* ax-hammer, and placed it on the table.

"Sure. No problem," she said.

Silence ensued.

"Okay," the Princess said, again. "Scrum *does* bring up a valid point, a Tarn...might...*conceivably*..."

I would suggest the Tarn be fed heavily before the rat mounts up, and an illusion of having had a heavy meal placed in its' mind, along with the notion that its' nest is at the World Wall. The enchantments should eliminate any desire on the part of the bird to eat its' passenger, and guarantee that it reaches its' destination. Scrum can then unload the bird and Valkenhayn can take possession of the ropes. Once Valkenhayn gets to the Throne Room his geas will be fulfilled. He can then fly back or not as he wishes.

"Well," the Princess said, turning to Scrum, still standing stock-still in the chair, staring blankly. "That seems to cover all eventualities. I'm sure not even a Tarn can defy an enchant..."

Scrum keeled over, out of the chair, and landed on the floor with a thud.

"...ment."

Ed sat up, looking over the table. "Did he just..."

Tal nodded. "Faint. Yes, he did. You know, he strikes me as a *tad* unreliable. Maybe *I* should deliver it?"

Sadly, no. You are just heavy enough that it would call into question whether even Meatscarfer can make the distance – and worse, from the rat's point of view, he won't be discharging the geas. If Valkenhayn gets the ropes from anyone else, or if he fails to get the knight into the Throne Room, he never will, and will eventually fade away as the geas eats at him. You are correct, someone else would certainly improve the chances of getting the rope to Valkenhayn – but, much as I hate to admit it, we owe the rat this chance to dis-

charge the geas. That is the only way the rat will live through this. If he does.

“Point of order!” Tal said, holding up a finger.

“Yes?” the Princess said.

“I would like to point out that the rat is *currently* in a *cooperative* mood and perhaps we should take *advantage* of that and get the delivery underway?” she pointed out.

The Princess looked at the unconscious rat. “It’s the kind of thing only a...um...well...”

flake it so.

Scrum sneezed himself awake. His eyes were itchy, his nose was running, and his stomach felt queasy – and he was moving. On a *boat* it felt like, up and down and *up* and *down* and *up* and *do...* and he upchucked all over the saddle.

He rubbed at his eyes and tried to look around. Right away he noticed a loop of gently glowing rope slung at his right...then another slung at his left...*up* and *down* and *up* and *down*...he had a *wracking* headache. Suddenly another sneeze exploded out of him, throwing his head back – blue sky – he looked down but there was no water immediately visible. He leaned over. Oh, *there* it was...way, way way down there like he was...

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Panting, eyes wide, he looked around...he was *flying*. He was *miles* up in the air on this...this...this...?

And the Tarn turned its’ head around to stare at him with blank eyes that shone but did not react when he sneezed again, merely turning back to its course.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The Tarn turned back again, looking at him, and Scrum clapped both hands to his mouth. It regarded him blankly for a while and eventually it went back to flying.

Scrum closed his eyes and slumped over in the saddle.

25 BACK DOORS AND AERIAL ALLIES

“‘Orthogonal thinking,’ says he – an’ sure, ye can’t get more orthogonal than *this*...” McKulluh thought, still chuckling to himself as he wandered the streets of Auriana looking for the Imperial Preferred Travel Agency.

An *air* force? The usual suspects – the Lakoshan Commandos. The Tarnsmen in southern Thermia. Or try – what, *again*? – to found some sort of wyvern corp.

But the Lakoshans were just plain on the wrong side of the continent, and it will take too long to get them there. Worse, even if they were willing to try, they’d have to cross the entire Vindolondan peninsula to reach Caerleon, which is not really very far from the World Wall itself. Even for the et-numundie, a week in enemy airspace would render them all but pointless by the time they could arrive. It would be nothing but an exercise in losing countless lives for nothing.

The Tarnsmen have the same problem in reverse. For them, it’s a near 20 thousand mile overland trek up the coast of Thermia through countless little baronies, kingdoms, fiefdoms, petty little dictatorships – in short, more *governments* than you can shake a stick at, all of whom would be hot to either attack ‘em or tax ‘em – possibly both – if any large number of aerial warriors showed up trying to pass through. And they can’t go over-sea via Imri because Tarns simply do not have that kind of range, they need to land, rest – and eat. Oh, and how a Tarn can *eat*! Even if he could figure out a way to get them up the coast, they’d still have to cross the Deadly Desert Shatterzone. No place to stop, no place to hunt, no place for water, no place to even put down without you shred your bird *and* yourself into so much Erish guacamole into the bargain. And your *surviving* Tarns – if any – would be sitting ducks by the time they reached Vindolonda, the dragon would fry them crispy and have them for breakfast with its kippers.

And *Wyverns*? Same problem *squared*. No one has ever fielded a wyvern air force successfully, and there was *no* reason to suppose a Leprechaun could do it where far more enthusiastic and, not to mention *wealthy*, lunatics have *failed*. Wyverns were popular rides in Imri – they bonded one-on-one with those who cared for them, which was why they had the next closest thing to a real military wyvern unit with their scouts – but they were never front-line fighters, and their *maintenance* costs? Stratospheric!

But McKulluh had had himself a little Leprechaun brainstorm. You see, if you *don’t* specify a minimum *size* for your flyers then there are more possibilities than just the *usual* suspects. And they are already living right

under the dragon's own nose. Butterflies. Locust. Hornets. Even humming-birds.

Faeries. For if there was any place in this world that *deserved* to be called “Faerieland” – *Vindolonda* was that place. Now *one* faerie on a nearly invisibly small mount was not going to faze a ptero or a dragon or anything else the freezedrake might have up its scaly sleeve – but 20 *million* of them certainly could! And Titania *alone* had that many fliers in her *Ríocht na Oberon* legions.

And they had *magick*. Not the standard, off-the-shelf, everybody-who's-anybody-knows-it magic, but *faerie* magick. The kind they never let the mortals see. Granted it wasn't *meant* for combat...but if half a million mounted faeries cast *glamour* well, whoever they cast it at was going to bloody well *see* whatever the wee folk *wanted* them to. The same applied to transformative, or even wizardly spells. Perhaps not *combat* magic *per se* – but enough of it could be very, very disruptive indeed. It's hard to fight a war in Krithala if your front line is teleported to downtown Calthis...

Of course, they couldn't get *out* of their enclaves with the Guardian on the fritz and a freezedrake at the gates. But a *tinker* might be able to *do* something about that – *if* he could *get* there. All he had to do was figure out a way to sneak into the most heavily-magically-guarded area in all Ingarde without the dragon knowing. But if what Cloughload gave him *worked*...

Madam Marylis regarded the Leprechaun through her half-glasses as she lounged back on her special chair – an artifact that McKulluh immediately coveted the moment he set eyes on it. It was luxuriously upholstered in the finest leather, it had carved wooden arms, it spun, it reclined, it popped out a convenient stool, it was *motorized*...it was *magnificent*! He *had* to find these *La Zeeboy* people someday...

Madam Marylis wasn't too bad on the eyes, either. Human, very female, middle aged but showing how to do it *right* and in a slinky red gown with *astounding*...engineering. Dark eyes accentuated with kohl, dark-skinned and hair so black it almost seemed to have blue highlights. If she wasn't four times his height he might ask her out and to *hell* with the bloody air force!

“ФТ's нот тат *simple* Пг. ПсКцццц, даһццг! Цндолонда is *shielded* from тгаел сонцццг!” she said in her delicious accent. “Цп-дерстапдаблч so, чоц кпощ ноц драгонс јуст нате щнеп реорле дрор пн он сем цпаптоццсед. Деч гет positively *testy* абоцт ит!”

"Ye were recommended to me as the best at avoiding, shall we say, *bu-reaucratic* stumbling blocks, Madam. Cloughload himself told me so, and sure, I've no desire to upset any dragons..." Yet, he thought to himself.

"Be *reasonable* Топіагічне – zee суггест гцлер of зат лапд has мерч *considerable* magical талант. Шнч, чоц'д likely аггнне as а...а мерч *small* бцскет of fried chicken."

"Really?" he smiled. "Original recipe or extra crispy?"

She took her glasses off and looked hard at the Leprechaun.

"Ф'м суге Ф доп'т кпош щнат чоц *meal*, Слг, апд Ф ам а мерч бцсч щоман..."

Oh, it doesn't have t'be *magical*, don't ye know?" McKulluh suggested, coyly.

She looked at him sternly. "Вцт Ф ам а *conjuror*, Слг! Ф..."

The Leprechaun sighed theatrically. "Faith'n'begorra, why don't ye let me cut through the *malarky*..." He took a piece of paper from his pocket and tossed it to her. She caught it, still looking at him, then unfolded and read it.

"Чоц haff...*transporter* cooрдinates?"

"That I do."

"Інат ам Ф supposed to до щтн..."

"Yer *supposed* to feed them into the Probable Technology Mark 6 Point-to-point local gate transporter ye keep in yer *basement*. And don't be tellin' me ye haven't got one, 'cause I already *know* yer not *really* a local."

She looked at the Leprechaun like he'd just polymorphed into last week's chutney. So much for the *date*...

"Дге чоц тгчпг то блощ мч *cover*? Because if чоц are, Пгг. Лепреснацп..."

"I'm not tryin' to blow *anythin'*, love," he said with infuriating calmness. "I just want t'get *there* withoot upsettin' any dragons in the area. I'll not be darknin' yer door again."

"Дпд нош до чоц *клош* Еленshade щоп'т бактгак тне сартгет то *me*?" she snapped.

"Because I *know* Evenshade 'as never set a wet foot in Xikchalic's School, lass. Ol' Blacky 'ould spot me conjurin' in as easy as ye loike – but ye and I both know a dragon what ain't been to the school can't pick up a subspace carrier or the wormhole that follows – no matter *how* magical it may be. You've got to *know* aboot something t' *magic* it."

She stood up, breathing deeply, glaring at the Leprechaun.

"So help me, Лепреснацп, if чоц *елг*..."

"The faster ye spin up yer off-world tech the faster ye'll be shut of me. An'sure, it's the only way yer gonna do it," he said complacently.

She glared at him for another moment and then scoffed.

"*THIS* шач..." she hooked a thumb toward the rear.

"Thank ye kindly."

Through the back door, down some old creaking steps, into a damp, cobwebby basement smelling of dirt and mold, a little spadework, a shiny hatch made of some off-world metal, bright steady lights, framework metal stair, and a snug little apartment loaded with various off-world geegaws, at one end of which was, in fact, a Probable Technology Mark 6 wormhole connector ring, and its associated control panel.

McKulluh plunked himself down on a cushion lying on the floor and picked up a *magazine* from the table. It had a picture of some sort of delicious-looking candy on the front. He started paging through it, idly, waiting for Madam Marylis to wake up her *technology* and tell it where he was going.

"Нощ до чоц елєп *кпош* абоцт *THIS* stuff?" his hostess demanded as she powered up the transporter. "Ф кпош ЖІКНАЛІС лєтс чоц рєплє гцп агоцпд штн *ALL SORTS* of classified stuff п чоцг *LITTLE* heads бцт Ф дїдп'т тнпк елєп *НЕ* шоцлд рєгмт *someone* штн *specific* кпошлєдгє of off-шоглд *tech*..."

"Oakin' me mouth water so it is," he muttered, looking up. "Well, in the interest o'keepin' the *peace* ye *might* omit t'mention this little...er...caper. Either to *himself* or to any of yer other...er...people. As it were."

She turned away from the panel and gave him a 40 kilowatt glare.

"Чоц доп'т *НАЛЕ* слєгапсє, до чоц!? *ДО* чоц?!"

"Well, now, I do'n' I don't, I do'n' I don't, but just a wee bit of extra care bein' *spared* in *terms* of *records* n' such *might* not go amiss, indade."

Behind her, lights appeared moving around the ring slowly, and then faster and faster as the transporter spun up and targeted the wormhole. A low but rising hum began in the room. Madam Marylis glanced at the gate and the panel and at McKulluh, and back at the gate...

The lights blended together into white ring around the gateway as the sound rose to a constant, whirling tone. Several chirps sounded and displays changed on the pane as McKulluh, absently putting the *magazine* over his shoulder into a side pocket of his backpack, got up eagerly in anticipation – and suddenly the gateway irised open to a pleasant woodland scene.

Madam Marylis glared at him and snapped, “Φf Φ *ever* see you again, *HO ONE SHPLL ENEA FΦId THE BOd’C!*” she grated out. “Go!”

McKulluh bowed politely and stepped through the ring into the pleasant woodsy setting it revealed. He turned to behold the gate, hanging in space a couple of inches from the ground. Madam Marylis swiped savagely at the panel and the gate irised closed, the lights on the rim began to slow, and the hum slowly died as the gate seemed to recede into the distance until it was gone.

It was a fine, soft night, the stars sparkled over head, a perfumed breeze penetrated the branches around, bathing him. It was lovely. You would hardly know that an angry dragon and a dark army was lurking a few miles away, plotting...

“*INTERESTING WAY TO TRAVEL*,” said a voice behind him. A voice like a peal of shimmery silver bells.

McKulluh turned around to find the scene unchanged – except for various colored lights visible in the trees, as if they had been festooned with tiny Christmas lights in many, many colors. Some of them were moving, most of them were not, but one carmine sphere was growing larger.

He waited as the micro came up to him. Her tiny form was just about the length of his index finger – a human would say perhaps an inch and half. She was beautiful in the typically elven way – enhanced by the two small antenna she sported just above the bridge of her nose. Her wings were buzzing so fast they could not be seen, and she hovered in a carmine bubble of light. Her eyes had a sheen like metal.

McKulluh bowed. “Top of the evenin’ t’ye. Me name’s McKulluh. Ye may not remember me...”

“Why would I not, McKulluh of Tír na nÓg?”

McKulluh peered more closely at her. “Faith...I must admit, ye *do* look mighty familiar...”

A tiny peal of laughter sounded from her.

“Know me do you! *SHRIATINITABUL* is my name!”

McKulluh gaped for a moment and then slapped his knee with chagrin. “Faith, *SHRIA* - I didn’t recognize ye in the red! Ye were *blue* when last I saw ye!”

“Truth that is, but truth also, near seven centuries the humans would count since last met we!”

McKulluh sighed. “Ah - there ye have me, m’wee darlin’. Ye would t’ink I’d’ve moved on, wouldn’t ye?”

"The leprechauns cling still to mortality. Expect would I that passed on did you long ago."

"Ah - we do, aye, we do. But I couldn't shuffle off me mortal coil while himself, our King, might still walk this world."

The light darkened.

"No King have we. Gone are mortals great and small left only are we and darkness. Each day it seeks to extinguish our light, and each day we teach it anew that that may never be. Out of mortals we have none, dead or fled are they all - all saving only yourself, now among us once more, and of yet unclaimed by Death, though claim you the right still."

McKulluh shook his head sadly. "'Tis not alone I am - himself, our King, once our Prince Valkenhayn of Cacrleon still lives as well. And he seeks to uproot the auld wyrm, and banish the darkness away where it came from. And he's a-comin' *this* way, m'wee darlin'! With an army, with a rope, with *himself* - and with ye, I hope, and ye still feel the grace. We don't know if it's even possible, but he strives, so he does, to restore our land to what it was once long ago. Aye, and we could use the help."

"My heart I pledge to ancient honor, but only the Queen can speak for us all. Out the wall 'twixt our world and yern that keeps the darkness at bay remains still. We cannot pierce it, nor can the wyrm, for the Guardian yet remains - but sleeps he still."

"I know, Lassie, I know. But I've not been idle these long centuries. I remember what I seen of his innards, and studied them I did. Learned of them, I did."

"Remember you the vow you took?"

"I do, m'love. I do."

She smiled and brightened.

"It would be good to see awake the Guardian once more."

"I'm makin' no *promises*, moind. But 'tis here t'help, am I, for one last try..."

McKulluh looked up at the Guardian.

Krashnapertha was a tinkermach - a mechanical being, but powered and directed by magic. They had been developed as replacements for golems. A golem used far more magic, and tended to strip it from the countryside as a result. Sometimes they drained entire countries of magic and froze into statues no longer able to maintain their animation spells. Tinkermechs shared most of the Golem's advantages, but they used much less magic - some, in fact, used even less than this one, deriving their power to move from some non-magical force like steam, using magic only for direc-

tion. They were superior to golems in almost every way but one...they wore out.

Krashnapertha was a very large mech. Standing he would top fifteen feet – a vaguely manlike form of sliding and rotating metal plates with a pair of huge wings behind. His head was manlike but heavy, and two huge horns extended from either side of his head, sweeping back and up. His eyes were two large diamonds.

McKulluh climbed up and looking into those eyes. Deep inside each one a tiny, but steady yellow spark was burning. Good – he hadn't deactivated since he had seen the machine last.

Krashnapertha's primary problem was simple – too much had worn, his joints had too much play, generated too much heat when used and he had seized as a result, first the wings, then the legs, and finally the upper body. He sat now, crosslegged, on a stone escarpment overlooking Titania's valley – a valley now linked with Wizardly magic to every faerie enclave in Vindolonda. The mech's heart – his control system and primary power system – was still running.

What he *really* needed was an overhaul – he needed to be torn down and rebuilt with new parts, improved ones, along with improved magic – but only the Tinker's School in Tír na nÓg had the necessary tools and skills – and they lacked the time. It would take *years* to rebuild this mech. Years the wee folk did not have while the dragon yet lived.

McKulluh began to open various access hatches around the machine, giving himself access to all the primary joints. Then he described his plan to the Queen.

"I'll need gems - enspelled ones."

Tiny Titania, glowing a clear yellow, hovered over his shoulder.

"Enspelled how, McKulluh? We do not know the manipulation magic used in the Guardian."

"You don't need to, love. What I'm going to try to do is make the joints slippery enough to work again. There isn't room inside to put a gem such as Xikhalic's School might use - so we need lots and lots of tiny ones, each of them carrying the charm ye call *síssanda*."

"The skating charm? How can that help the Guardian?" Titania asked, flickering a little as she tried to follow the leprechaun. The wee folk were not mechanically inclined.

"I described all the charms I knew ye had to Xikhalic himself, so I did - and that one, says he, works by reducing friction. That's how ye can use it to skate across any kind of a surface. If we can set enough *síssanda* in enough tiny

gems to pack around each joint, the Guardian *should* be able to move again. Not for long - but long enough I hope."

"Will he not then *again* cease to move?" she asked.

"Aye - but *before* that happens, we need to get him to Tír na nÓg to rebuild him. So we'll have only a wee short time t'try to deal with the dragon, and still be able to get him to Xikchalic's School. Once the dragon be dealt with, and the King restored, 'tis himself that can protect the faerielands while Krashnapertha is rebuilt."

Titania looked gravely first at the Leprechaun and then at the hulking and inert Guardian.

"Ask you we place in a new King much of our trust," she said.

"Without we restore our Prince t'the throne, we've no choice m'wee darlin'. The Guardian is working still, every way but physically - but he can't last forever. And when he dies, the walls go down, and nothin' can stop them." He waited a moment as the Queen wrestled with her responsibilities.

"Ye know," he said, "Ye *do* know the King, do ye not? Do ye not recall im as a young lad wanderin' these very valleys and dales, learnin' the language and yer nature?"

Titania tilted her head, looking puzzled.

"So much time - I do not know I can recall. Nor understand do I how a mortal could still walk amongst those living still. Feelings of Necromancy *haint* me."

"Tisn't Necromancy, m'wee love. 'Twas *Wizarkry* that took him across time in the blink of an eye. To ye and me, 'tis two millennia, but to *him*, 't'was only a moment since he left Krithala as it was then. He knows what needs be done t'restore the old times, for he lived in them himself. Ye would've trusted him once, wouldn't ye?"

"Would I? A blur is the past, the price for immortality we must pay."

"Aye, I understand. But I recall it all well. And *all* of us *need* this."

Titania hovered, solemnly regarding the Leprechaun for a time.

"Faith is this, then? To believe true what we cannot know is?"

"Aye. 'Tis truth, roight enough."

She made her decision.

"I will my people send forth for gems enspelled to skate. If that be the price to awaken the Guardian, 'twill be little enough to ask."

26 SHADOWQUEST

Valkenhayn was aloft, this time riding on top of the et-numundie in the saddle rather than being clutched by its' legs. Windrifter droned on, Runt came right along behind – still suspicious of the bug, but apparently willing to let matters develop before toasting it and soaking it with acid.

He recognized the islands and atolls he had passed over on the way to the island – but when he got where he figured the first island *should* be, it was *gone*.

Just *gone*! No sign of it, anywhere! Even the off-shore *rocks* were gone. Valkenhayn rubbed his eyes but it didn't help, the island stubbornly continued to be gone.

And it left him no place to land. Fortunately, Runt and Windrifter still seemed relatively fresh, so he guided his mount into a gentle circle hoping to find the island, the U-boat, a wake – something, *anything* that might be useful.

Suddenly a breeze blew past his face...

“~~V~~ALKENHAYNNNNNN...” came a distant female voice...

“What? What's that? *Who's* that?”

“~~T~~HISSSSSS ~~W~~AYYYYY...”

The breeze turned against his right side, pushing at him insistently.

“You're...what was the name? Voth? Is that you?” Val asked.

“~~W~~AAAA ~~E~~LSSSSSSE?”

He turned Windrifter to the left and proceeded that way – with the wind – the *sylph* – at his back.

Several hours later they caught up with a wake, then with the *Am-monite* – which Voth bypassed – then the next wake, and then the next *Ammonite* – where they landed. Runt and Windrifter were definitely worn, but far from played out.

Captain apSwan met them on deck, popping up as soon as the hatch opened, Voth having already entered through an air intake and reporting she had found Valkenhayn.

“Lord Caerleon! Well met!” he said, eying Windrifter.

The Knight dismounted the et-numundie which folded its wings back. He laughed at the look on the Captain's face.

“Yes, I have a new pet.”

“Are you planning to do this often? *One* pet was already pushing the rules but...”

“Captain, I'm not *planning* any of this. I'm just trying to *survive* it. And, believe it or not, this fellow here,” he waved his hand at the bug,

"May just help me do it. So, no, I'm not *planning* any more pets, but no promises. R'nyara," he nodded as R'nyara-blond-but-shouldn't-be and Mylyn-ought-to-be-but-wasn't came up the steps onto the deck. "Mylyn." The blond looked delighted.

"Evil! *Very* evil! Broken you have the dragon's hold on you!"

"How did you figure *that* out?" Valkenhayn demanded.

She waved toward the et-numundie. "CARRY YOU NOW another soul name! The Obsidian Dragon cannot now track you by your old!"

"How did you do *that*?" the Captain asked.

"Turns out to be pretty straightforward. How do *you* know all that?" the Knight asked the blond.

"T'is the only way one could acquire an adult et-numundie," she explained.

"How do you even *know* what this thing *is*?"

"Looked't up I did when I saw't join our party."

Valkenhayn shook his head.

"Another dead cat?"

"Oh, yes."

The Captain shook his head. "She seemed entirely unworried about your fate leaving the U-boat that way. Said you'd be back with the bug and told us to post one of Voth out to direct you. I figured *you* were dead and I thought *she* was nuts. Actually, I *still* think she's nuts, but now I'm beginning to wonder if I am, too."

Valkenhayn sighed. "She's a Sorceress, and she's scryed a lot of what we're going to be encountering. Sometimes I feel like I'm just going through the motions."

The blond shook her head emphatically.

"Ever must your motions only your own be t'ensure follow ye your correct path," she said.

"That's why you didn't *warn* me I was about to take a little side-trip?"

"(saw you return did I, the correct motions made you in transition. T'tell you useless would be or a paradox create. Of course I knew, but all know I, I cannot say."

"Of course not. That's chapter 1 of the Book of Sorcery."

"Again betray you knowledge of an art you should know not! How learned you this?"

Valkenhayn shook his head.

"Oh, honey...*everyone* knows this..."

The *Ammonite* cruised through the trackless sea.

“How long do you figure?” Valkenhayn asked the Captain as they stood together on the bridge looking through the forward ports.

“Hard to say. We hit the superstream but they *do* tend to wander a bit – and this is no regular destination. Even when we arrive there’s no guarantee Za’adam will be there – the eruption was so vast it could easily have lurched hundreds of miles if it wasn’t buried entirely – or blown to Kingdom Come.”

“Cloughload seemed to be pretty sure it’s still where it used to be, just covered with water. How close do you think we can hit it?”

“I’m making no promises, my friend. I tried for a fix this morning and Monkey Paw’d – *again*. How *that* information might do us any harm I cannot guess, but that’s our lot.”

There came a mechanical clatter from the back of the bridge cabin.

The Captain turned to the Logic Engine and examined the cards it had spit out. Valkenhayn eyed the strange machine. It seemed far more magical than anything he had *ever* heard of, but they *claimed* it used no magic at all and indeed, the cabinet had no gems, nothing glowed – just gears, lots and *lots* of gears, teeny little ones, spinning back and forth, around and down. How it worked only the Goddess might know – but it wouldn’t surprise him if she was stumped, too. A weirder device it was *impossible* to imagine.

“The Engine says we’re here and to initiate a search pattern. I guess it isn’t any too sure, either,” the Captain said with a sigh.

“A search pattern – for what? There’s nothing but water from horizon to horizon...” Val pointed out.

The Captain raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Oh, we’re not going to search the *surface*.”

Valkenhayn’s face went blank. “Oh. Right. Right...”

The Knight kept a firm grip on himself as the water washed higher and higher on the bridge viewpoints until finally they failed to show any blue at all. The U-boat...*sank*.

The Captain moved to the command chair with its’ banks of speaking tubes.

“Dive planes, three degrees down,” the Captain called into a one of them.

“Three degrees down, aye,” came back the tinny reply.

Soon the sparkling ceiling of this green world faded away. They were left cruising through the greenish water.

"How far to the bottom?" the Knight asked, tightly.

"Hard to tell since we passed sounding depth," the Captain replied. He was watching a gauge in front of the pilot. It was slowly dropping past the 100 foot mark. The gauge went to 1200.

"How far *can* we go?" Val asked next.

"Haven't the foggiest notion," the Captain replied cheerfully. Valkenhayn looked sourly at him. He laughed and clapped the Krithalan's shoulder.

"This is what *exploration* is all about. We invent a new way to get somewhere we've never been, and we try going where no man has gone before. Either we get there or we get killed. If we get there, we go home and tell people about it and if we *don't* – well, sooner or later someone tries again."

The depth gauge now read 400. It was much darker than it had been earlier.

"How does it know how deep we are?"

"Pressure – that gauge is connected to a cylinder with normal sea level pressure in it. The pointer reads out how much compression is occurring in the cylinder and translating it into feet."

"Pressure," Valkenhayn mused. "How much *pressure* can this boat handle?"

"Again, we're not sure. First of her kind and all that..."

The depth gauge dropped below 600 and suddenly they heard a hollow groan come from somewhere aft.

"I think I know what else we need the gnomes for, Captain," Valkenhayn said.

"Really? What?"

"Holding the hull up so it doesn't implode around us."

The Captain's eyebrows went up a fraction of an inch and he turned to the speaking tubes. "Pipe the Gnomes to duty and tell them to keep our hull from collapsing." He replaced the whistlestop after a tiny "Aye, sir," came back.

"Good idea. Should've thought of that myself," the Captain commented.

"I only thought of it when I heard that sound."

The Captain tapped one wall. "Grund?"

Suddenly the wall rippled – some metal crested, some dimpled, and in a moment a young maiden's face of iron looked out of the wall. The depth gauge read 850.

"PRESSURE IS BUILDING UP, CAPTAIN. SOME PLATES WERE ABOUT TO BUCKLE WHEN YOU CALLED US, BUT WE GOT HOLD OF THEM IN TIME."

The helmsman suddenly called their attention to the window.

"Something below, Captain!"

They crowded to the bubble ports and looked out, but already they could see something – it was bright, *very* bright – and getting brighter.

As they dropped past 1100 feet they passed a huge ball of yellow light floating in the water.

"Is that a *sun*?" Valkenhayn asked in disbelief.

The Captain shrugged. "It sure looks like it. How can a sun burn under water? And how come the water doesn't seem to be boiling?"

"I have no idea," the Knight replied. "Take a look down there," he added, pointing.

The depth gauge reached 1200 and stopped.

"Dive planes flat, stop descent," the Captain ordered.

They looked for a long time.

"That's a *big* city," the Captain commented.

"Yup," the Knight agreed.

"Busy, too," the Captain went on.

"Yup," the Knight agreed.

"Make out the inhabitants?"

"Some of them," the Krithalan said.

"Look like...merfolk," the Captain said.

"Several different kinds," Val pointed out. "What would you call *those* things?"

"The furry sea-snake looking things with the compound eyes?"

"Yes, those."

"I'd call them 'furry sea-snake looking things with compound eyes.'"

"Meaning you don't know."

"Not a damn thing. Think that's Za'adum?" the Captain asked.

"I think we should waylay one of the locals and *ask*," Valkenhayn replied.

"Good idea. But how are we going to *talk* to them? They probably don't speak any languages we know."

"I have a suggestion."

"Which is...?"

"Bring a glass of water with us...*after* you see it come to attention."

“Okay. I’ll be in the head...” the Captain exited the bridge.

27 ZA'ADUM

“How are we going to interact with them?” Valkenhayn asked when the Captain returned.

“There are a couple possibilities. We have suits that will enable us to survive underwater. They have some problems, though – like crumpling.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll pass on *that*.”

“You’ve *heard* of crumpling?!” the Captain asked in surprise.

“Yup. Hellish sort of thing. What else we got?”

“We are carrying a number of charms for adapting the human form for water. The simplest is water-breathing, the most complex one actually polymorphs you into a merform.”

“Water-breathing – that might do, although we’ll be a long time swimming about with it.” Valkenhayn said. “The polymorph – tell me, does it employ a multidimensional hypertrigonometric paraspaces hyperfold interleaving two bodies, a transfigurational assembly-disassembly method or a spirit-switching system wherein the intellect and soul are left to control a body swapped in while the original body is moved to some sort of temporary storage?”

Captain apSwan looked at Valkenhayn for some time.

“I haven’t the *least* idea,” he said, finally.

“Well, these things matter, you know. The hyperfold can result in graftversusost disease, for example.”

“I...didn’t know that.”

“Now you do.”

“What are you, some kind of magical theoretician or something?”

“Me? Nah, I’m just a Paladin. I can cut people up and heal them, too.”

“You are a man of many...unexpected...talents.”

“Yes, well, I do try to pay attention. Keeps me alive. So far. So, what about the ‘morph?”

“Oh, yes,” the Captain said, blinking. “Let’s let the ship’s Mage deal with that one.”

The ship’s Mage – not a “Magician,” an actual, fully-accredited member of some college of magic – was a GSP, a General Spell Practitioner. Valkenhayn had heard his name before, but now he met the man – middle aged, a bit rumpled – one finger was missing on his right hand – but otherwise unremarkable. The Captain had Valkenhayn repeat his question, not daring to try to do so himself from memory. Mr. Scott regarded the Knight thoughtfully.

"I dinna take the Theoretical courses, Laddie. The magic aboard *this* vessel is kept *simple* to keep it *reliable*. But ye c'n take my word for it, the merforms use polymorphic spirit-switching. I don't hold with spells mucking aboot with me individual cells."

Valkenhayn shrugged. "Okay. Let's start there."

R'nyara and Mylyn – or Mylyn and R'nyara – demurred.

"Clotghload says I killed this cat, but recall't do I not. I've not scryed this path, and I tire of the Monkey's Paw. I must trust t'you your own fate in this," the blond said.

"You don't know how this is going to come out?"

She shrugged and sighed. "'Tis nearly as hard t'scry through water an 'tis through stone. I bethought no connection between Hell and this realm. I'd've believed't not even an I saw't. But this I know – return ye do and continue we on with another. Confident must I be with that."

The rat snorted. Valkenhayn shrugged and looked at the bug.

"You going to risk polymorphing from a polymorph?"

"Oh, BUT I'M NOT POLYMORPHED, ME BACKO. AND WHO'LL BE WATCHIN' YER BACK BETTER THAN I, I ASK?"

"I don't know that's a good idea – you polymorph a polymorph and you might recurse to death."

Scrum choked. "Ees ~~THAT~~ a ~~MATHEMATICAL JOKE!!!~~ WHERE did you ~~LEARN~~ that much ~~MATH!!!!!!~~"

Valkenhayn looked at him sharply.

"The *real* question is, 'where did *you* learn enough math to *recognize* a mathematical joke?"

The rat looked panicked, whipping his head left and right as he looked for an out. Every bit as transparent as fine crystal.

"Uh...uh, well, I...uh...I use eet to ~~TOTAL UP MY LOOT!!!~~ Yeah! That's eet!!! I ~~COUNT~~ my ~~LOOT!!!~~ Eet should be ~~OBVIOUS!!!~~"

Valkenhayn looked at him for a time. "You use a recursive algorithm to add up your loot?" he asked, finally.

Scrum scowled. "Dere are ~~LOTS~~ of ~~WAYS~~ to ~~ADD!!!~~"

Val said, "Uh huh," shrugged, and turned back to "McKulluh" with a questioning look. "So? Want to recurse to death?"

"NOT BLOODY LIKELY, BOYO. WHEN I CORSE, I DO A GOOD JOB OF IT IN THE FIRST PLACE, I'D NOT LIKE T'DAVE T'DO IT AGAIN!" He punctuated this remark with a rising trill.

Scrum snapped out scornfully, "You ~~EED~~ ~~BUG!!!~~ That's ~~NOT~~ what eet ~~MEANS...~~" and he broke off as the Knight focused on him, again.

"Never mind. I just remembered, I don't want expired *mortadun* dissolving into the water," Valkenhayn said aside to "McKulluh" – while staring at the rat.

...and *continued* to stare at the rat...tapping his elbow with one finger of his other hand...

Scrum's eyes went wide. His eyes darted to the open salon observation windows – they were gathering a curious crowd of...spectators.

"ah, NO!!! NO WAY, YOU Krit'alen NUT-CASE! I was BORN a RAT!!! And I'll DIE a RAT!!!"

Valkenhayn recalled the scene in the mirror. "Well, okay, I can go along with that."

The Captain appointed a pair of sailors – Ryn and Liffey, both young woman officers, both very competent-looking – to accompany Valkenhayn. He also assigned an undine to accompany them, forming something he called "The Away Team." The women each wore a ship's jumper, a single formfitting piece in black but Liffey was also wearing a glowing amethyst on a chain around her neck. They led him to the "airlock."

Ryn was last into the chamber, which was smooth metal all around except for the hatch they entered by and another inset into the floor. She closed the hatch and watched the gnome morph it into the wall again.

Valkenhayn watched that operation with interest.

"What do we do if we don't *have* a gnome?" he asked Ryn.

"We have to undo these fasteners and *crank* it open. It's a major pain in the tuckus, but we can do it," she said.

Liffey pulled out two more chains very similar to the one she was already wearing, each sporting a small amethyst with a tiny, sparkling sun inside. She handed one to the Knight and one to Ryn and once they had placed the chains around their necks they both began to disrobe.

"You'd better too," Ryn said. "We're shifting to *shidri* – and the spell only deals with your *body*, not your clothes or equipment. You'll burst right out of that armor, maybe hurting yourself in the process."

Valkenhayn shrugged and followed suit. "Simplicity?"

"Got it in one."

"What do we use for weapons?"

"We don't want to be too obvious about that – but I did notice most everyone outside is carrying a spear or a trident of some sort that isn't sporting a knife," Ryn said. "We have a selection of all three in the equipment bay below the hatch. Take one when you hit the water, and then let's *not* make any threatening moves with them."

Liffey tapped at the floor hatch, which the gnome began to morph open. Ryn asked Val, "Any other questions?"

"Just one. How can we talk to them?"

"Liffey will handle it," Ryn said, confidently.

"I'm a trained Hand – I can sort of hear them already, even through the iron of the hull," Liffey explained.

"You can't be empowered, though, can you? We must be a thousand leagues from a dragon."

"I'm not right now, but I can still do low-level stuff. For a while, at least. I'll set up a four way telepathic rapport between us and then tap into whoever we want to talk to on an outside circuit."

"Four way?"

"We must include Kish-sh-sh."

"Oh, right. How long can you keep that up?" Valkenhayn asked.

"About two hours before I start getting a headache – but we should be back in no more than three hours anyway, which is just about my ragged outer limit without draconic support. For you and Ryn the polymorph is hard-wired to a three-hour time limit, anyway. Three hours...then you revert whether there's air around you or not."

"Any way to hold it if we need extra time?"

"No – they weren't designed with controls, they just go *on* or *off* according to whether you are in water or not."

"Simplicity."

"Exactly. It's a bitch, sometimes," Liffey said with a shrug. "My polymorph is a little different though – it'll go *off* in water and *on* in air and has no time limit built in. Although I need to shut it off for an hour or so a day at a minimum."

Val looked to her as the gnome irised the hatch open. Some water welled up and over the edges, but it didn't start spewing in as Val expected. Suddenly a hump appeared in the center, which rose up to form the top half of a beautiful, nude girl seemingly made of the water itself.

"Kish-sh-sh-sh, SIR VALKENHAYN," she said.

Valkenhayn was distracted from his next question by this apparition. "Oh! Hello, Kish-sh-sh. Spooled anyone lately?"

"GOT THE COOK LAST WEEK BUT HE PISSED ME OFF. I'LL BE WAITING OUTSIDE," she melted back into the water.

Valkenhayn digested that for a moment before asking the two women, "Did that elemental just deliberately *pun* at me?"

Both laughed. "Never ask that question of an undine, Sir Valkenhayn, they just *love* giving that answer," Ryn said.

Liffey grinned. "It's not as painful as pissing off a *gnome*."

Before he could stop himself, Val asked, "Why would *that* hurt?"

Liffey said, "Kidney stones!"

He groaned. "I *knew* I was walking into something! Why couldn't I stop myself?" he asked, rhetorically.

Ryn said, "Okay. All kidding aside, let's get this Away Team in the water. Are you ready?" she asked the Knight.

"I was *born* ready," Valkenhayn said, confidently – as if he did this sort of thing all the time.

"Let's go then." Ryn dove in first, followed by Val, and then Liffey.

There was a momentary feeling of violent dislocation. His vision blurred and he felt much like he had when R'nyara had seized him as a frog and forced him to human shape. It passed in seconds.

He was breathing easily. Looking down at himself he appeared to be unchanged – down to the waist. Below that, his abdomen and legs were *gone* – from that point down, he was a manta ray!

He looked like a pearl diver halfway swallowed by a giant manta. The gills were visible in the usual manta locations and, although he could feel himself breathing, he wasn't expelling any gas – but with each feeling of "breath" his gills pulsed.

Conspicuous by its absence was his manhood. He casually felt along the slot in that general region and was relieved to discover he was still male, just more...streamlined.

Ryn was hovering beside him, smiling, and pointedly *not* watching the Knight. He looked back, seeing Kish-sh-sh and Liffey – Liffy, too, was now half manta, swimming loops and giving little cries of delight. Ryn gestured to her.

YOU AND I ARE NOW POLYMORPHED, she sent. BUT SHE ISN'T – SHE'S POLYMORPHED TO HUMAN WHENEVER SHE'S ON THE BOAT. SHE ONLY GETS TO REVERT WHEN SHE'S IN THE WATER.

Kish-sh-sh swam up beside them. Though hard to see she could be made out as an outline in the water. She was still humanlike from the waist up, but her lower half looked like an elongated whirlpool, almost as if she were propeller-driven. She was carrying several tridents, and handed one to Ryn and to Val.

Val examined it. It was clearly more a thrusting tool than it was a cutting one, though the tines were quite sharp. It was weirdly asymmetrical, the center prong was ordinary enough but the left prong was cocked back in a Z-shape, coming forward again where its tip formed a wedge at 45 degrees pointing up to meet the center tine, giving it a slashing effect at the

end. The other prong came out of the base of the fork at a right angle, and swept both forward and backward – the backward sweep ending in a sharp-looking hook or scimitar arrangement. The front swept forward and then bent sharply to terminate over the center prong, giving it, also, a cutting edge.

Ryn swam over while he was examining the weapon.

HOLDING IT CLOSE TO THE BUTT IS THREATENING, HOLDING IT BY THE CENTER IS LESS SO. SEE THESE TWO STUDS? She pointed to a pair of buttons opposite one another about a foot and a half from the base. WHEN YOU SQUEEZE TO DEPRESS BOTH BUTTONS, AN EMBEDDED HIGH-VOLTAGE BATTERY IS CONNECTED TO THE HEAD – DIRECTED AT THE BRAIN OR HEART REGION OF A TARGET, IT CAN KILL EVEN QUITE LARGE CREATURES. THE BATTERY IS GOOD FOR ABOUT 10 SECONDS OF TOTAL USE, SO BE CAREFUL NOT TO HOLD THEM UNLESS DOING SO WILL ACTUALLY DO SOME GOOD.

Liffey pulled up, breathing heavily – apparently – and pointed at the crowd. LOT OF CURIOUS PEOPLE.

Valkenhayn started swimming away from the *Ammonite* toward the heterogeneous crowd by the prow of the vessel. Kish-sh-sh-sh paced him while the two ladies brought up the rear. He was relieved to note his “wings” seemed to do the right thing if he went through the “walk” motions.

Outside the *Ammonite* the view of the city was awe-inspiring. It was huge, a massive assembly of various types of reefs, including coral, glowing *eunthi*, and many massive buildings built of a huge variety of materials. Some seemed to be extruded into place, others looked like assemblages of other things – giant shells of various types by the look of many of them, cleverly trimmed and fitted together and apparently sealed. There were a great many different types of residents. He saw nothing like a tinkermech or a golem, but there was no end of other things – fish, mollusks including a variety of large, apparently intelligent cephalopods – Valkenhayn so assumed since several were carrying what appeared to be purchases from shops. There was a veritable fishmarket of crustaceans – *that* was an observation he should keep to himself, he thought – and a variety of different types of merfolk. There were far more different *kinds* of merfolk than he had ever imagined, human/dolphin, human/fish, elf/octopus elf/nudibranch – this place could rival Auriana!

Curiously, there was a fairly large myststream taking a meandering course as if it were touring the city. It went over, around, through and below buildings, hugged the bottom, or flowed right off of it for a while before dropping down again – like its’ land-based version, completely

indifferent to gravity. It was old and well-established, and even more well-furnished with the usual mysty brik-a-brak than was the subterranean myststream they had used when finding the rat.

There were a number of levels of traffic ranging at various depths below them, many consisting of various swimming creatures, but others included several that were dedicated to machines – not tinkermechs, most of them were apparently piloted, nearly all had some sort of transparent blister where the pilot could be seen. At various points around the city, much larger machines were visible, too – including a number of what *had* to be large, powerful-looking, U-boats – they were settled into docks or service gantries, or were anchored in an area of what the Knight took to be dedicated parking spots. Most of these *dwarfed* the *Ammonite*. Some were clearly cargo haulers, others might be passenger vessels – but a lot of them were clearly and unmistakeably military. These machines appeared to host many of the smaller ones, since he spotted a couple of the latter disappearing or appearing from large hatches in a couple of docked U-boats.

The bottom traffic layer was an array of tunnels that seemed to connect nearly every building to every other, as well as forming some sort of main thoroughfare. It took a moment of looking before he realized the creatures within were apparently *walking* – the tunnels were full of *air*! It appeared the city played host to surface dwellers – or, at least, air breathers.

It was perhaps a quarter mile to where the crowd started. The incoming spectators were forming up in a huge sphere with the *Ammonite* at the approximate center. More were arriving every moment.

The crowd seemed a bit subdued, Valkenhayn thought. Definitely not gay, or morose, or aggressive – maybe bemused? Or perhaps – frightened? That seemed to fit the mood – but he couldn't see why. The military hardware on display in this neighborhood *alone* was enough to wipe out the *Ammonite* – how could *one* U-boat, no matter how heavily armed, be perceived as a threat?

Approaching the crowd they saw other merfolk there – shidri, like themselves, a few of the others, but one a positively breathtaking lionfish. She and one of the furry sea-snake creatures held their position as the rest of the crowd fell back a little – obviously elected spokescreatures by unanimous consent.

Val nodded to them as they came up. ~~GREETINGS!~~ he sent.

The lionfish lady drifted closer using her many fins to remain upright as she did. As she got closer Valkenhayn saw her humanlike upper form appeared to be middle-aged – a well-preserved middle age, it was true, but

she projected an aura of gravity, and was clearly a person of consequence. She wore some jewelry – very, very *nice* jewelry. *Definitely* a VIP.

MA AM, he said to her. He looked toward the furry sea-snake and nodded as well. SIR, I M GUESSING, OF COURSE, I VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE YOU, SO PLEASE EXCUSE ANY INAPPROPRIATE GENDER USAGE,

'Sir' is appropriate, dryling, came the reply, evidently from the sea snake. I am male. You can call me Phth'sst. This is the Lady Onessa, and it – he – waved a tentacle toward the lady lionfish.

Valkenhayn nodded cordially again. MY NAME IS VALKENHAYN, THIS IS RYN, THIS IS LIFFEY, AND OUR UNDINE COMPANION, KISH+SH+SH,

Lady Onessa nodded in return to each and then focused on Valkenhayn. WHAT BRINGS SURFACE WORLDERS TO OUR TRANQUIL DEPTHS?

WE ARE SEARCHING, he said, FOR ZA ADUM, I M TOLD IT DISAPPEARED A LONG TIME AGO FROM THE SURFACE BUT THAT MUCH OF IT MIGHT STILL BE FOUND AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA, WE VE COME TO LEARN,

The Lady Onessa tilted her head to the right, regarding him. Then she glanced at the Ammonite. YOU ARE IN ZA'ADUM, BUT IT IS A VERY LARGE NATION THAT INCORPORATES MANY, MANY CULTURES. YOU HAVE GONE TO A GREAT DEAL OF TROUBLE TO LEARN, VALKENHAYN. WHAT DO YOU THINK WE KNOW THAT YOU WISH TO?

Valkenhayn sighed. IN TRUTH, I WISH TO LEARN OF THE SHADOWS, AND TO LEARN THEIR WAYS, I AM ON A QUEST TO TRY TO RESTORE THE CROWN AND THRONE OF MY FATHERS, AND TO LIBERATE MY PEOPLE FROM DURANCE VILE,

WORTHY GOALS, TO BE SURE, she commented. BUT WHY INVOLVE THE SHADOWS? THEY ARE AN ANCIENT AND POWERFUL SPECIES BUT THEY ARE ALIEN. TERRIBLY, TERRIBLY ALIEN. THEY DO NOT THINK AS WE DO – NOR EVEN THE WAY DRYLINGS DO. THEY ARE DISRUPTIVE. IT IS SAID THEY CAUSE WARS AND TUMULT. THEY HAVE SLEPT QUIETLY FOR COUNTLESS CENTURIES IN THEIR TEMPLE. WHY DISTURB THEM NOW?

IN ALL HONESTY, the Knight replied, BECAUSE I WAS TOLD BY A SORCERER THAT I HAD BETTER IF I WANTED TO SUCCEED, AND I MUST SUCCEED, AS TO THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES, I AM TOLD THAT MUCH OF THAT IS BETTER LEFT IN THE DARK, I VE LEARNED ENOUGH OF SORCERY MYSELF TO THINK THAT GOOD ADVICE,

Lady Onessa sighed, clasped her hands and contemplated them for a while. IN TRUTH, SIR VALKENHAYN, WE, TOO, HAVE OUR SORCERERS, AND THEY HAVE LONG FORETOLD OF THIS DAY WHEN THE SHADOWS WILL BE RECALLED FROM THEIR HIBERNATION. IT WILL BE LITTLE SURPRISE TO YOU TO KNOW THAT I AWAITED YOUR COMING WITH FULL KNOWLEDGE AFORETHOUGHT, AND WITH DREAD. IF THE SHADOWS BE ALLIES KNOW THAT THEY WILL BE PROBLEMATICAL ONES, AND IF THEY BE NOT, KNOW THAT THEY ARE TERRIFYING

AND COMPLETELY RELENTLESS ENEMIES. SORCERY HAS TOLD US IF THEY AWAKE, THEY WILL ONLY RESUME THE TERRIBLE WAR IN PROGRESS AT THE TIME THEY HID AWAY FROM THE UNIVERSE.

Valkenhayn digested this silently. Finally he said, *PERHAPS WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN CONFLICTING ADVICE?*

Lady Onessa glanced at Phth-sst, who gestured with his tentacles in a way Val could not interpret.

As I have said, My Lady, this choice cannot be ours.

She sighed again, looking at Valkenhayn sadly. *WE HAVE SLAIN MANY CATRISH TRYING TO LEARN MORE. OUR ADVICE DOES NOT CONFLICT, BUT NEITHER OF US POSSESSES IT IN FULL. BUT WE KNOW ONE THING I THINK YOU DO NOT: WITHOUT THE SHADOWS AWAKEN, OUR WORLD - OUR ENTIRE WORLD - IS DOOMED. SOME ENORMOUS CATAclysm AWAITS US ALL. PERHAPS YOU CAN AVERT IT...BUT PERHAPS EVEN YOU CANNOT. EITHER WAY, YOU ARE ABOUT TO TAKE A VAST AND TERRIBLE POWER INTO YOUR MERELY HUMAN HANDS. YOU ARE TAKING THE LIVES OF US ALL AS WELL. NEVER FORGET THAT. PHTH-SST WILL SHOW YOU WHERE THE SHADOWS LIE, VALKENHAYN. AWAKEN THEM, AND SAVE OUR WORLD...*

Phth-sst, it turned out, was one of the air-breathers. He returned with them to the airlock and cycled through it with them, showing no discomfort when he entered the air-filled chamber. Each of their party - excepting Kish-sh-sh-sh, who entered her own way - pulled themselves into the *Ammonite* and each polymorphed back to their normal - or, in Liffey's case, her *abnormal* - selves.

As they rose to their feet once this was done, Phth-sst reared back and regarded them. *It has always astonished me how humans can balance that way. Every moment you look like you are about to fall over, but you never do.*

Valkenhayn grinned. *WE CAN STUMBLE PHYSICALLY ON OCCASION BUT WE ARE PRONE TO METAPHORICAL STUMBLES MUCH MORE OFTEN.*

Such things can be deadly dangerous with the Shadows. Phth-sst observed.

I ASSUMED, I AM WELL AWARE I AM PICKING MY WAY THROUGH A MINEFIELD KNOW WHAT THAT IS?

I do, the creature replied.

SO FAR I HAVEN'T MADE A SINGLE MOVE WHERE SOMEONE DID NOT RAISE THE STAKES FOR THIS MISSION, NOR HAVE YOU BEEN ANY EXCEPTION, I MIGHT ADD, BUT I MUST STILL DO MY UTMOST TO SUCCEED, TOO MUCH IS RIDING ON ME ALREADY, MORE CAUTIONS WILL NOT HELP MORE INFORMATION MIGHT, Valkenhayn said as he opened the hatch to the salon.

Valkenhayn led Phth-sst into the salon. Ryn returned to her duties but Liffey stayed with them to maintain the telepathic link. The Knight made the introductions to the other Questers and to the *Ammonite's* senior officers who were already there.

"WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO?" The Captain asked – verbally, though Liffey's rapport had been expanded to cover all present. Valkenhayn realized he'd better keep the conferences short and to the point. Liffey was doing all of this without draconic support, it was bound to be wearing on her already.

The Shadows are found much closer to the surface – in the caldera of the vast volcano that sunk these lands so long ago. Phth-sst replied, looking about curiously.

The Captain was astonished. "YOU MEAN THAT VOLCANO DIDN'T GET BLOWN TO SMITHEREENS?"

I imagine that 'smithereens' are very, very small pieces. No, it did – it was reduced to a huge crater. But it did not die – it is still active, still erupting, still growing. It is not far from the surface now, and well-lit by surface light, as it must be.

"WHY MUST IT BE?" Valkenhayn asked.

Because there can be no Shadows without light. Phth-sst replied.

"How could they possibly exist in an erupting volcano?" the blond asked.

I do not know, Phth-sst returned. Nor do I wish to. The Shadows terrify me. They should you as well.

"HMPH, I'M GETTING THERE," Valkenhayn said. "CAN YOU GIVE A COURSE TO THE CAPTAIN?"

I can.

The *Ammonite* surfaced – much to the Knight's great relief and entirely without incident – and cruised north. The view of the sea through the bridge and salon windows was of particular interest to Phth-sst, who spent hours watching the water slide by. It probably fascinated him the way the clouds had Valkenhayn when he viewed them from above on his first cloud whale voyage.

Phth-sst, they learned, was their new *liaison* from Urien, the sea bottom capital of Za'adum, appointed so by Lady Onessa – who was not a *Queen* but who seemed to be pretty much in charge in Za'adum – to find out what happened when Valkenhayn woke the Shadows, and to report it back to Urien. He called himself a *socserit* – his eyes were compound, like an insect, but made of many smaller eyes similar to mammals. They looked

like two pools of moist caviar. Over each was a brow that swept back to a pair of antennae. His face was armored with chitin though his body was furred like an otter's and every bit as sinuous. His fur was blue dappled with yellow spots atop and merging into a cream on his belly. He had two clusters of half a dozen tentacles, one on either side just behind and below his eyes. He swam using a pair of membranes that ranged down each side, and folded them down when he moved on a dry surface. He was also a telepath.

When Liffey began to flag and had to break down the circuit that permitted them to talk together, he casually brought it back up – so casually it wasn't even apparent until Liffey mentioned quietly to Valkenhayn and Captain apSwan that he had done so. Nor did it seem to stress him much to maintain the circuit.

My species evolved to use telepathy and various forms of extra-sensory perception much the way your whales and dolphins evolved their sonar systems, as a means of seeing through water. We are nowhere near as powerful as your dragons, but for relatively limited tasks like communication, it is no great effort, he explained. They were in the salon, where Phth'sst was examining a book – not *reading* it, just *examining* it, he had never seen anything like it.

"I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING QUITE LIKE YOU, IS YOUR SPECIES WIDESPREAD?" Valkenhayn asked.

We are spread widely, but not deeply. We are split into two races, those like me, comfortable in the sea, and the other which is arboreal, and is most comfortable on land in dense jungles. Nevertheless, we maintain communication with each other. We have only recently expanded our presence into the Nestick Ocean basin, and are mostly my own kind here as yet. We are more numerous in the Sar'i Basin on the other side of Thermia – or Urlan as we know it.

Valkenhayn considered the strange creature. **"TELL ME, DO YOU HAVE LEGENDS OF COMING FROM ANOTHER WORLD?"**

Phth'sst looked up, the book forgotten. *We do. More than legends. How did you know that?*

The Knight shrugged. **"JUST A GUESS, THE ONE CONSTANT I'VE FOUND AMONGST ALL SAPIENTS IS THAT SAME LEGEND, HOW DO YOU MEAN MORE THAN LEGENDS?"**

Can you hear the name 'Hikchalic'? Phth'sst asked.

"YES, THE HEADMASTER OF THE UNSEEN UNIVERSITY, I'M GOING TO BE STUDYING THERE, ACCORDING TO THE SORCERERS – IF I LIVE THAT LONG," he said.

Captain apSwan broke in. "I'M SORRY - I DIDN'T GET THAT. WHAT WAS THE NAME?"

Valkenhayn and Phth'sst looked at each other.

"CAPTAIN, COULD YOU GIVE US SOME TIME ALONE? I BELIEVE WE ARE RUNNING AFOUL OF A GEAS."

"GODS!" He sighed. "ALL RIGHT. I'LL BE IN THE CHARTROOM IF THE SERVICES OF A MERE SHIP'S CAPTAIN ARE REQUIRED..."

When the door closed, leaving them alone, Phth'sst went on.

Our world is called Sor'orea, it is called by humans Eta Cassiopeiae A III.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND, I KNOW THE LEPRECHAUNS REMEMBER THE NAME OF THEIR WORLD, BUT THEY DON'T SEEM TO RECALL - OR HAVE NEVER MENTIONED - THAT HUMANS KNOW IT BY ANOTHER NAME."

We have lived on this world for several thousand years. But when first we began to send students to Tir Na nOg we discovered some of our people were there already. They had come from a distant world - a world that is not Ingarde. Have you heard of such things?

"YES, YES, I'VE BEEN 'ENLIGHTENED' AS THEY LIKE TO CALL IT."

The humans knew of our world, and called it by that name as it is the third world out from the star they call Eta Cassiopeiae A. It is some 20 light-years from Mars.

"20 LIGHT-YEARS? IS THAT DIFFERENT FROM 20 HEAVY-YEARS?"

Perhaps it is so. I do not understand this measurement and merely pass it on. I gather it is a short distance by human standards.

"HOW FAR IS IT FROM INGARDE?"

I do not know. It is my impression that it is a long way, but they consider their research here to be important and so are willing to take the time needed. I also believe by inference that Mars is also very far from Ingarde, but the humans, too, are willing to take the time to come here.

"WHAT IS THIS 'MARS' PLACE? WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT THEY'D MENTION IT LIKE THAT?"

Mars is one of the two capital worlds of the Union of Worlds - humans and many other species working together. It is also called Sol IV. I presume because it is the fourth planet of the star the humans call Sol.

"HM, WHAT'S THE NAME OF THE OTHER CAPITAL?"

I do not recall the name used by the people who live there. The humans call it Tau Ceti III.

"HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF A WORLD CALLED 'DIRT' OR 'SOIL' OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT?"

No. Though I have been to Tir Na nŌg, I have never been to this school in my own person, and I have now passed on all I think I know of the Universe beyond our world.

"WELL - YOU KNEW A LOT MORE THAN I DID, SO THANKS FOR THE LESSON, WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF THE SHADOWS?"

They are an ancient species. One of the earliest to awaken to intelligence I have heard, and perhaps it is true. They are said to be warlike, and have fought wars for all their history, until the last of them came here to sleep away time.

"YOU SAID EARLIER THEY WILL LIKELY RESUME THE WAR THEY HAD GOING WHEN THEY WENT TO SLEEP?"

Yes. That, too, appears to be the case, though, again, I am told by others and do not know of my own.

"WHO ARE THEY FIGHTING?"

Again, I am sorry. That also I do not know. I have been told by those who have been to Tir Na nŌg that very little is known of the Shadows, but much is suspected. Almost none of it good. We have rejoiced in their absence but some time ago we learned that would end when you came. We know you seek to slay the Night Dragon, to regain your country. But you are also the focus of some sort of nexus. No one seems to be able to tell what you do within the nexus, but it may save the world. Or it may destroy it.

"SO - YOUR SORCERERS GET THAT FAR - BUT NO FURTHER? THEY CAN'T SCRIV INTO THIS NEXUS THING?"

I am told so by the species that live here. Magic is a thing my people understand even less than we do the other topics you ask of. It would appear they are stymied, but how or why is not something I can answer either of my own knowledge or in the words of others. Such questions would be best directed to the Sorcerers themselves in Tir Na nŌg.

"THAT'S GETTING TO BE A LENGTHY LIST," Val commented.

The Temple of Shadows became visible the next day, but it took over a week of steady cruising before they arrived at the edge of the caldera itself, and three more crossing the caldera before they reached it. It was visible because it was no longer submerged.

The Temple was a vast pyramid - a true pyramid, four equilateral triangles, one of which formed the base down in the caldera some 400 feet below and the other three rising half a mile from that. It was clearly visible, transparent, but although they had the impression of looking far into its' depths, they could not see all the way through it.

It glowed, faintly, even in the bright light of the nearby blue-white sun. It didn't *feel* like anything. Touching it brought no sensation, not heat, nor cold, no texture – not even any *pressure* although their hands could not penetrate it.

Valkenhayn looked up at the thing from the deck with his hands clasped behind him and sighed. Captain apSwan, beside him, did the same. Behind them was a cunningly-made statue of a lovely young lady entirely of iron. It moved, looking back and forth from the men to the pyramid.

"You can't feel it at all?" Valkenhayn asked the gnome.

"I CAN'T PUSH THROUGH IT – SOMETHING STOPS ME – BUT I'M SURE IT ISN'T METAL OR GLASS OR ROCK OR ANY KIND OF MATERIAL THING. IT'S MORE LIKE – HARD AIR."

"Hard *air*?"

"YES. AIR IS EMPHEMERAL. I CANNOT FEEL IT IN ANY WAY BUT I KNOW IT IS THERE. I CANNOT FEEL THIS, THOUGH IT STOPS ME FROM PASSING THROUGH IT. IT IS HARD – BUT I CAN'T FEEL IT. THE CLOSEST THING I CAN THINK OF IS HARD AIR – OR MAYBE ICE."

"Ice?"

"GNOMES CANNOT BECOME WATER. EVEN WHEN WATER IS FROZEN – BECOMES HARD – WE CANNOT PASS THROUGH IT, EVEN THOUGH IT NOW PARTAKES OF THE SOLID. THIS IS LIKE THAT – IT IS SOMETHING I CANNOT MANIPULATE, CANNOT EXIST WITHIN – IT IS NOT SOLID, BUT NEITHER IS IT LIQUID, OR GAS, OR LIGHTNING – IT IS NOTHING I HAVE EVER EXPERIENCED."

"How do you want to proceed?" the Captain asked.

"Phth-sst says it was not above the water the last time anyone looked at it. He guesses a recent eruption elevated it – but not so recent that the lava hasn't had time to cool. Surely they have Sorcerers, too. They *must* be expecting me...but..." he trailed off.

"I have no idea. I guess the logical thing to do is to circumnavigate it – at the surface and below, given that that is as far as we can reach. There must be *some* way in," Valkenhayn said.

"Sounds reasonable and I have no better suggestions. Clockwise or counterclockwise?"

"Clockwise. Why swim up current?"

The Captain laughed. "Clockwise it is."

The *Ammonite* and her twin now prowled the perimeter of the pyramid. It took nearly a full day to complete the circumnavigation – and once they had done so, they were no wiser. No matter which side you viewed it from, it remained an enigma.

It was the same below the water. From sea level to the bottom, all the way around, it was the same. When they returned to their starting point they surfaced, held station, and Valkenhayn, the blond R'nyara, the Lep-rechaun bug and the rat went topside with the Captain.

"Eet ~~SEEMS~~ pretty ~~OBVIOUS~~ to ~~THEE!!!~~ They don't WANT you!!! And WHO can BLAME them!!!" Scrum grumbled.

Valkenhayn addressed the blond R'nyara.

"Okay, I'm stymied. I can't find a way in, and the Shadows have not contacted us outside. You've got to spill *something* or we might just as well go home and get drunk."

The blond girl gazed up at the pyramid. "(So much I saw could I not understand, but *this* place was unscribable. I could not look within't - t' seemed as if there *was* no within. No Monkey's Paw, no warning, no, nor any failure indicated. I could find't not - t'was as if the inside of't did not exist. But how entered you is no mystery - Windrifter did fly you t'the top, and alone came back."

Valkenhayn tipped his head back. "The top? I might've known. Did you see me leave?"

"Nay. Immediately did you return and a course set we for the World Wall straightaway."

"Immediately I returned?"

"Bet'ruth. Step you will from the shadow," she said, pointing to the shadow of the dorsal fin lying sharp on the deck in the brilliant sunlight.

"NOT LIKING IT AT ALL, SO I AM. 'TIS A LONG DROP FROM THAT HEIGHT..." the bug observed, peering up.

Valkenhayn stroked his short beard. "And a Sorceress couldn't even *find* the interior...like it wasn't there at all. Blast! What *good* is Sorcery with these kinds of issues?"

The blond shrugged. "Entered have we a nex'us wherein events do unfold driven by things we cannot imagine. Without we imagine, no questions can we ask, and no answers can obtain. In truth, such times have never before been - and pray I that never they be seen again."

The black R'nyara calling herself Mylyn added, "MAGIC has limitations, but what they are and why they are - we simply do not know. No one claims to understand the innermost workings of magic. In it's essence, magic seems entirely sufficient to itself, adjusting and adapting - obedient to us for reasons known only to itself. Never in history - and a student of that am I - has magic seemed to have tied itself into such knots. Sorcery is nearly paralyzed. Wizardry be not far behind. Of others I hear little, but troubles there too

would not be a surprise. We face something that strikes at the very foundations of all we know, something so alien we cannot conceive of it and so have no way to talk to magic to understand dangers that only magic itself seems aware of."

She sighed, looking toward the peak of the pyramid. "Whether you can learn shadow magic or become a Shadowlord - I no longer seek such goals. Now I seek to know what magic knows. Perhaps *they*," she nodded to the pyramid, "have *some* answer, some piece that will spur our imaginations to encompass the enemy so that at last we can use our magic to defend us once again."

The blond said, "Very correct, she is. Know this - this is not a limit in magic, 'tis a limit in us. And we must overcome't, or we will be overcome even as magic tries in vain to save us."

Valkenhayn stood in deep thought for a time. A few moments later, Windrifter came out of the hatch unbidden to stand beside the Knight, where he swung his wings to the ready position and began to warm them up.

"All we can do is to do what it looks like we need to do. So, I'm off to do it." He swung his leg over Windrifter who began his deep drone.

"Godspeed, my friend," Captain apSwan said, as he lifted off.

They all watched as the et-numundie and its master grew small in the distance as they climbed to the top of the pyramid. It was too far to see very well what happened next but soon they saw Windrifter dropping swiftly to land alone on the deck.

28 THE SHADOWS RISE

The very top of the pyramid was flat – an equilateral triangle of the same substance as the walls about three feet across. Valkenhayn eyed it, then moved Windrifter directly over it and, keeping him aloft, dismounted.

The scene changed abruptly. He found himself at the bottom of a vast space, still standing on the three-foot-wide triangle, though now it was as reflective as a mirror. At the zenith directly above was a sun, a rather mundane yellow and not overly strong. There were three walls that ascended from the base triangle leading outward and upward. He was standing at the base of an inverted pyramid.

The interior was a maze. On the four walls – the three rising from where he stood and the one on the other side of the sun – there were more walls – walls that stood out from the background, which was a uniform off-white. Some of them were high, some low, most crooked, they ran without rhyme or reason every which way. The crazy angles made the interior hard to look at – the shadows were sharp as knives, the interior was so choppy-looking and had so much contrast it was an effort to even look at it.

~~Welcome, Valkenhayn,~~ came a thought unbidden to his mind. He did not actually *hear* a voice speaking – it was more like he had an *impression* that the words had been spoken, in a whispery, oddly-modulated voice.

“Thanks. So, you’re the Shadows?”

~~We are known by many names. That one will do.~~

“What is *this* place?”

~~A place to pause.~~

“Pause? Pause what?”

~~The War.~~

“Ah. The one you’re about to resume, right?”

~~Yes.~~

“So, who are you fighting?”

~~Their name would mean nothing to you. To us they are only the Enemy.~~

“Well, *that* seems basic enough. Takes two to fight and all that.”

There was no reply.

“So, why *are* you fighting them?”

~~Because they seek to destroy us all.~~

“What do they have against you?”

~~You have based that question on an incorrect implicit conclusion.~~

“Gee, sorry about *that*. Uh...what was it?”

~~You took my use of the word “us” to be inclusive only of our own. That is not correct. It refers to all who are *not* the Enemy. Ourselves. You. Your~~

species. Your companion species on this world and others. All of life in the Universe wherever it may be.

"The Enemy seeks to...destroy *all* life? All like *everywhere*?"

The Enemy toils ceaselessly toward that goal.

"Why?"

it is what they were created to do.

"Well, who *created* them?"

That no longer matters. They were the first to die at the hands of their own creation.

"They created the Enemy – and it turned around and *killed* them?"

Yes.

"Talk about your poetic justice. That was probably a mistake, I'm guessing?"

No. They knew their creation would destroy them.

"Then why did they do it?!"

They didn't care.

Valkenhayn had no answer to that one. "They created something, tasked it with destroying all life, everywhere, including themselves, and then turned it lose – because they didn't *care*?"

They believed life was an unreasonable burden on the Universe. That all would be better if there was none. How or why they decided this is something none of us will ever know. Now we must deal with the consequences of that belief.

"This Enemy – it's what enslaved the dragon?"

indirectly, it works through an intermediate agent thus far.

"But the purpose is to kill us all. They just decided to start with my family on Ingarde?"

They did not start there – they have been at their work now for over a billion years, and we have always fought them. They have denuded entire galaxies – billions of stars – of every living thing. We contain them as best we can, but neither side has ever achieved supremacy over the other. But that may be changing now.

"Why?"

Discovering Ingarde started this cascade of events. Your own tragedies are merely milestones in the sequence. The sequence itself must be stopped.

Valkenhayn's eyes narrowed. "What was it about Ingarde that started this... 'cascade'?"

You call it 'magic.'

"Magic? What is it about magic? You seem to have plenty of it yourselves, how does ours make any difference?"

Victory will go to the Enemy if they acquire it.

"If the Enemy gets ahold of it, all life will be destroyed?"

Yes.

"And what if *you* get ahold of it?"

It is sufficient to our needs only to deny it to the Enemy.

"Won't getting magic mean your side will win?"

No. By our nature it is of little use to us.

"Why?"

This Universe is larger in ways your kind do not understand. We dwell in places you cannot go. Magic will not serve us, nor can we make it do so by enslaving you. We must rely on our own technology.

"Technology?" Someone I know once called that 'magic by another name.'"

They are different means to similar ends.

"But if the Enemy gets it, they'll win?"

Yes.

"Why will it serve them and not you?"

The Enemy is more of your own nature and may be able to use it directly. But even if it cannot, it has already demonstrated it can enslave agents to use it on their behalf.

"Agents...like the one that controls the dragon?"

Yes.

"How is this going to go down? What does your *technology* tell you about what's coming up?"

We approach a time when many timelines converge, but of those that emerge again, only one does not lead to the Enemy's victory, and it is of low probability.

"Of course it is! So, what do we need to do to get *there*?"

We must unwind the Enemy's grip on this world and remove the possibility they will obtain magic in any manner.

"So, you've scanned the future and you have a punchlist of things we have to do, right? No! Wait! Lemme guess...you can't resolve the path because (a) it's too complex, (b) there's too many variables, (c) there's too many unknowns, or (d) all of the above?"

There was a long pause...

That is sarcasm. Sarcasm appears to be a common human trait.

"No! Ya think?"

Yes.

"...and you don't know how to handle it."

it does not seem to require special handling. i merely observe that most of our human agents have exhibited this behavior.

"Maybe it's something *you're* doing."

An interesting question but it is of very low priority at this time.

"Too bad. Are you going to make me a ShadowLord?"

Yes.

"What does that *mean*, exactly?"

We have developed a means for species in your realm to access some of our realms and technologies. in order to reduce learning time and increase execution speed, we have made use of various metaphors in the presentation of these facilities.

"Great! Great. Just great. What in the Nine Hells does *that* mean?"

Sometimes a shadow is just a shadow. But if you know how to make it so, a shadow can become a doorway into our realm.

"Sure *sounds* like magic."

indeed - we have used what we have learned of magic to create this facility.

"You used magic to *make* magic?"

And we didn't even recurse ourselves to death.

"By the Goddess! You have a sense of *humor*!?"

Yes. Funny. isn't it?

There are these things called *dimensions*.

Well, of *course* there are...length, width, and height.

As it turns out there's also...duration, meta-left, meta-right, meta-up, meta...lots and *lots* of them.

They were pointless for humans. Humans existed in their little 3-spatial dimensions and 1-time dimension and that was *that*. They couldn't *move* in any of those directions. How do you go meta-up? You can't. You just can't.

But the Shadows could. In fact, they *lived* in some other set of dimensions, but they could somehow move between them – as easily as humans could move through theirs. But this was nothing a human could do. Or understand. Or even *visualize*.

So you accessed it by *metaphor*. Want to go meta-right? You project your will at a convenient shadow and then step into it...may the Gods help you if you *misstep* this way, though. You could wind up in some dimension where a human just doesn't fit and that would all for *you*.

So you learned to *look* through shadows, for within shadows are...*more* shadows. You can look through those, and through even more

and so on until – *hopefully* – you find your way back to one of the human dimensions. *Then* you step *through* all the shadows – and find yourself where you wanted to go. *Viola!* You’ve just stepped meta-right, courtesy of the Shadow’s user-friendly hyper-para-meta-anaphasic-multidimensional what’s-a-majigger. It wasn’t *called* that. Valkenhayn could never remember just what it *was* called, and probably couldn’t pronounce it verbally even if he could.

What shadows to look through was enough to make your brain feel like it was turning sideways in your head. He early caught on that there *was* a *pattern* – but it took him a long time to work out a series of shifts, skips, hops – meta-hops, para-skips, whatever it took – so he could get a glimpse of something like the *real* world and step through it. He didn’t doubt for a second the dimensional shifter could take him to a vast number of different places – not all of them even in *this* Universe, apparently – but he began to suspect that hypertrigonometric paraspaces were maybe not all *that* complicated by comparison.

There were other tricks he could do with these tools, though. *Arming* was one. You reach into the appropriate shadow in the appropriate way, close your hand, and you could pull back a sword – or a spear, or most anything you could want, really, they had an entire *armory* in there. Most of the weapons were even familiar.

“Why would you *use* a sword?”

We would not. We are long past the need of them. But we don’t want to even try to explain a paradimensional disrupter to you – nor would we care to see you make a mistake with it. Stick with the metaphorical stuff. We’ll handle the hyperdimensional artillery.

Which seemed good advice because even *that* was challenging enough.

“*Shadow* sword?”

An ordinary sword such as you are familiar with shifted through a shadow – but not quite all the way.

“And this improves it how?”

Because it retains the strength of the normal dimension of the weapon, but the cutting edge becomes so thin it can slice through almost anything.

“Geez – it sliced that granite like it was a hunk of salami...”

We are not familiar with salami weapons.

“No, I mean...skip it.”

That was a joke. We have a sense of humor.

“Oh, good, ’cause I *always* wanted to meet a paradimensional *comedian*.”

And *that* was sarcasm again. Want to know what happens when you pour vodka out of a klein bottle?

"I *know* I'm going to regret this, but...what?"

it *stays* in the klein bottle.

"Your multidimensional jokes just leave me flat."

Good one!

The interior of the pyramid was confounding in more ways than just visually. It turned out each face of the pyramid had its own, private, gravity. You could walk all over the inside. Transitioning from one side to another was tricky.

The interior walls were set up to provide a myriad of shadows – with no two of them exactly alike. He could navigate by recognizing the *particular* shadow he could see. This was a big help, but he knew that in the *real* world, shadows were not so crisp or distinct. But every bit helped.

The days stretched out. The sun neither waxed nor waned, he had no way to tell time. He ate when he was hungry, slept when he was tired. Eating was an issue.

"Beans *again*?"

Yes.

"Did you *know* humans require *variety* in their diet to remain healthy?"

No. That is counter-intuitive. Why have you not developed an ideal food and standardized upon it?

"Because it's against our religions to *kill ourselves*!"

He came to regret that complaint however, since he never got the same thing ever again. The pasta with red sauce wasn't bad, though whatever the herb in the buttered toast was could've knocked a Tarn right out of the sky. Some was good. He got some jerked venison once. A nice roast haunch of chevon. The stir-fried beetles-and-nuts were okay if you didn't think about what you were eating. Some of the stuff mystified him, though. The little box with a round, two-layer sandwich of chopped mystery meat, some kind of sauce, some sort of shredded vegetable, and a couple little round sour things, all on a roll covered with seeds, and the little sack of floppy strips of something...which one of the Hells did *that* come from? He found a couple new things he really liked, though. The best one was an improbable-looking jar of some kind of slime called "Skippy."

But there was *one* thing he wanted to know but couldn't find out.

"But what do you *look* like? How do I *know* when I'm looking at a Shadow?" he asked.

We don't look like *anything* to you. You couldn't even perceive us except as three-dimensional cross sections of various body parts as we moved through your dimension. We couldn't even appear as a single continuous creature. imagine an ant's confusion faced with nothing but two human feet. They're both the same creature, how can *that* be? We cannot be packed down into few enough dimensions for you to ever perceive us in totality.

"I *still* prefer to know *who* I'm working with, even if it's not an ideal view."

let me put it this way - humans *have* gone mad at the sight of us. We are uncertain if they were insane to begin with or were made so by their experience of perceiving us, but i see no good reason to try experiments to re-search that using you as a test subject.

"You're probably right, I might be crazy already."

Exactly.

It was hard work. Stepping through shadows was *very* wearing. He found he was tired after no more than two or three, and even with practice, doing more than a half-a-dozen in one day was likely to leave him exhausted, and tired the next day. He asked about that.

By presenting a metaphor you can manipulate you are accessing and moving through spaces you are not otherwise physically capable of reaching, let alone using. But these are alien spaces with alien physical laws which your body is subject to while you dwell there. Doing so for any significant amount of time is counter-indicated.

"You can say *that* again!"

Doing so for any significant amount of time is counter-indicated.

"That was an *observation* not a *suggestion*."

That was a joke. We have a sense of humor.

"No, I don't think you really do. You just *think* you do."

With this magic, every shadow, anywhere, was linked to every other. As if there was but one shadow in the Universe but only bits and pieces could be seen where it stuck out. Stepping in and out, moving things in and out - these were the basic skills. But how you *used* them was up to you. If you had some *imagination*...

The really cold place...you could leave food in that particular shadow and it would come back frozen solid as a rock - but still good no matter how long it stayed there.

The really *hot* place - you could use *that* like an oven. You could even yank it into a closer shadow and let it heat up the area you were in.

There were *stash* places everywhere where you could leave things and fetch them back later.

He even figured out how to make a shadow with his hands that he could then reach through, retrieving or storing small items.

There were dangers. He reached into one shadow and something grabbed him and started to pull him in. Fortunately, he had been working with the cold place a minute earlier and so he shoved part of the whatever-it-was into the cold place and held it there – the freezing cold made it hard to feel like it was dying, but when he pulled back all he could find of the whatever-it-was was a frozen bit of tentacle. Luckily he was carrying a healing potion to take care of the frostbite.

It was dangerous, but it was exhilarating. It was exhausting, but it was rewarding. And after a while, the Shadows told him he was ready.

“That’s it? ‘You’re a ShadowLord, see ya around.’ No diploma?”

No. To be a ‘Shadow Lord’ you need only be known to our instrumentality to allow you to access it, and sufficient knowledge to be able to learn further how to use it. Each time we have given an agent this knowledge they have used it differently. Usually in ways we did not anticipate. This is even more important for you for we do not have a list of specific tasks we wish you to do. You are rather more like a probe, to help us navigate a place we do not currently understand.

“This stuff makes *me* a more formidable fighter...but I still need an army. I still need support. There’s no way I can do this alone.”

You will not be alone. We will travel with you. Look for us in the shadows and we will be there. But when you do – have a plan. Until we can fathom how this sequence will play out, we will have very limited powers to affect it. But we expect – we hope – that through you we will detect the correct moment to strike decisively. That is the moment that will decide the fate of us all.

“In the meantime I face an army of dark forces. How can you help with that?”

We can strike from the shadows. And we will. This situation has forced us into uncharacteristic passivity – and uncharacteristic cooperation. We understand we are not the controlling factor here. We look to you for guidance to get through it. Then we will resume our war. And you may resume your life.

“Deal.”

One more item before you go...

“Yes?”

A coin suddenly dropped past his face. Reflexively, he caught it, and held it up. The Water Rune.

“How did you get this?” he asked.

We believe it found us. How it even came to our dimensions is a puzzle we have not yet solved. Your “magic” seems to have a will of its’ own.

“That’s what I’ve heard.” He pocketed the coin. “See you around.”

Valkenhayn looked to the nearest shadow, and searched forward looking for that jagged curve...and stepped through.

He stepped out upon the deck of the *Ammonite* – and the blond grabbed him and kissed him soundly as Windrifter settled to the deck.

29 THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

McKulluh peered at the glowing stuff in his palm. Leprechauns do not have large palms, and their eyes are arguably better than most any of the larger races – but how Titania’s people had managed to cut and polish 58 facet brilliant cut diamonds out of chips too small for *him* to see was nothing short of awesome.

There were *millions* of them, all kinds of colors – thoughtfully sorted by color, too – to McKulluh they made a glowing paste with an almost unnoticeable gritty texture. A human would’ve seen something that looked and felt like glowing whipped cream.

Each near-microscopic diamond had also been treated with oil, so the resulting substance was easy to spread, but disinclined to drip away. It could be packed around whatever needed to be slippery and have no tendency to leak out.

The first delivery was a mere thimble-full, but McKulluh climbed to Krashnapërtha’s head and used it on the two eyes – as he treated each one, it swiveled to look at him. McKulluh smiled as he climbed back down.

“It’s goin’ t’work, so it is, m’wec darlin’. It’s goin’ t’work...” he said to Titania.

She smiled and said, “I will master the legions.”

Day after day, larger and larger amounts of the slippery, glowing paste arrived from every part of Titania’s domain. And every day, more and more faeries arrived, were briefed, and sent away with whatever equipment they would need. Each of them was a mini – sprites one and all – but there were so *many* kinds!

Titania’s own people were the Qwenyo – each had a pair of filmy wings sort of like a bee, but larger in proportion. But as time went on, McKulluh saw Pulo, whose butterfly wings bore fantastic colors and patterns, Iarta with their double-paired wings like dragonflies, and the Oyeira with their filmy, translucent triple-lobe wings. When they began arriving in legions of multiple tribes or races he began to lose track. At night the valley was *alive* with colored lights, some steady, some flashing at various rates, some synchronized between different individuals. It looked like a lightning storm bursting out of a paint shop.

Titania took McKulluh aside one day.

“Tell me of things sweet and dainty to eat?” she asked.

“Sweet...and...dainty? What, like, strawberries? Or – I don’t know, honey-suckle?”

“These flavors we know. But how do the huge ones like to eat them?”

"Oh - you mean like a candy? Cookie? That sarrt o'thin'?"

"Yes. *How big are they? How are they shaped? How are they decorated? How are they made irresistible?*"

McKulluh was mystified. "Well - beditte - I've never tried to make anythin' of the kind! I - I don't *know*..." He cast his mind out but devil of a clue did it bring back. He scratched his head - that didn't help, either. Titania hovered in a yellow glow pulsing faintly blue. And inspiration slammed into his head like a thrown brick...

He fished out the off-world *magazine* and showed it to the Queen, first the cover with that delicious-looking thing, then other pages showing a staggering variety of consumables - cookies, cakes, tarts, turnovers, muffins, long and thin, short and stubby. They couldn't read the words but they didn't have to. They were both famished before they even reached the Reader Survey card stapled in the middle.

"Is *that* the kind o'thin' yer talkin' aboot, Lassie? Divil the sense the text means to me, but the pictures seem clear enough."

Titania nodded happily. "Never imagined I such creations! Oethinks this will do. ODay I have?"

"Take it and welcome. All it would do fer me is blow me diet anyhow."

McKulluh worked long hours on the Tinkermech. He carefully cleaned each joint and packed it with luminous ointment, then sealed it again. When he treated the neck and collar area, Krashnapertha addressed him in a creaky, rusty voice that was nevertheless music to his ears.

"It is a relief to talk again. My wards are under constant strain. My power is slowly ebbing."

"I know, lad, I know. It's tryin' to fix ye we are, but ye can't build a castle in a day. We have to get ye runnin' again - so's ye can fight. And after that, with luck, ye might still be able to get you to Tír na nÓg where we c'n fix ye up rosey."

Then Titania came again to McKulluh as he was dragging himself back from his work on the Tinkermech.

He stopped and sniffed. "Faith, love, what is it ye been *cooking* these last few days? Makes me feel bloody *hollow* it does!"

"Refreshments."

"Refreshments? For *who* might I ask?"

"*The enemy*," and she gave him a very nasty smile.

"Roight. I don't think I care t'know more..."

"Need we wags to haul things we cannot take up afar. A Tinker thing is this?"

McKulluh rubbed his eyes. "Aye, lassie, 'tis a tinker ting. Are the tings too heavy fer yer bows?"

"They are. Many too heavy also for our steeds, though a few are not so."

"Ye'll need a ballista fer the small tings. Probably a trebuchet fer the larger. What will ye be needin' *this* stuff for?"

"Deliveries. Are hard to build? Could one who knickknacks be told?"

"A knicknacker - I hadn't thought o' that! They're the very ones that make all yer equipment aren't they?"

"Yes. Tinkers for faeries. Can make?"

"Faith, lass, I don't be seein' why not! Let me sketch it out fer ya..."

McKulluh was dog-tired...so tired he couldn't even get his eyes to focus. But it was a *good* tired because the monumental task was done.

Oh, he made a God-awful amount of noise. He creaked, he groaned, he occasionally buzzed, he limped badly and couldn't fly at all - but he *moved*. Some careful testing had shown he could move well enough to fight - but they little knew how long before he seized again. And *if* he seized again, there might not be a way to unseize him, even in Tír na nÓg.

Titania buzzed in her ball of golden light. "It is well to see the *GUARDIAN* move once more."

McKulluh nodded. "Aye. But he won't last long, lass - not long at all. If we don't manage to take out the dragon, there'll be the very *Óivil* to pay."

She smiled. "*Tired are you and little faith have you so. Take heart. With the next sun - we master!*"

When the sun glowed again in the morning, Titania stood upon McKulluh's shoulder, watching, as across her domain her people mounted their steeds and launched into the air. First up were Qwenyo aboard their war hornets. Close behind them came the Pulo's butterfly squadron - the very image from his own childhood that had popped into his head while he had talked with Cloughload. The Iarta's combat hummers began to launch in waves, and then came the others, more, and more, and more, 'til the sky was filled with buzzing wings making a canopy so dense it nearly returned them to the night.

McKulluh looked at Titania, who nodded. She launched into the air toward the head of the massed air force, he climbed to Krashnapertha's shoulder. In a moment came the Queen's signal and as one the legions

burst into their battlesong – and the column moved south. Krashnapertha strode, limping, but moving, underneath the vast column. As they approached the limits of the linked faerielands, the shield that had protected them for so long vanished like a dissolving mist, and they entered the domain of the Black Dragon.

30 AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT

The alarm klaxon sounded in every chamber of the *Ammonite*. Valkenhayn rushed to the bridge, where he found Mylyn-as-R'nyara and the Captain studying a display set into the table. A moment later the klaxon cut off.

"I think we lost her. It was so *sudden* – and there was no *warning* I saw!" she said, tracing an empty slice of ocean with a finger.

"I'm going to take a wild guess here and wonder out loud that we've lost the *Ammonite*," Valkenhayn said grimly.

Mylyn – he was *pretty* sure – nodded unhappily.

"Damned right we did – and without the slightest warning or clue what happened to her. She was there – and then she was gone!" the Captain said grimly, turning up his hand and splaying his fingers to illustrate the suddenness of their escort's disappearance.

"How close are we to the lift?"

"Perhaps ten miles from the shore. We've started shelving but we're still over a thousand feet of water at least."

"Well – that's about where *I'd* put my first guardian," Valkenhayn pointed out. The Captain straightened.

"Bosun!"

"Sir!"

"Sound battlestations."

"Yes, Sir!"

The klaxon started again, a different pattern. The boat vibrated as the crew moved to action stations.

"What do you think?"

Valkenhayn shrugged. "At this distance, I'd have put a fairly butch monster, but only one – a tripwire, basically."

"Bosun!"

"Sir!"

"All shifts on Sorcery, scanning forward. Ahead, standard, prepare to dive the boat."

"Sir!"

They waited tensely.

"Boat ready to dive!"

"Diving planes five degrees down, maintain neutral buoyancy."

"Planes five degrees, neutral buoyancy, aye."

The *Ammonite* slid beneath the waves and cruised through the green water. They all watched the forward viewports.

"There!" the Captain pointed.

"Missed it," Val said, shortly.

"It'll be back – watch there..." he indicated another spot on the opposite side.

Suddenly looming out of the green murk ahead they spotted the guard. It was huge, but they could not make out what it was.

"Sorcery reports subsurface contact, one life form, probably megalodon, 90-plus feet!" the bosun called.

"Charge the hull to 20 kilovolts, arm forward torpedoes!"

"Dare I ask?" Valkenhayn said out of the corner of his mouth.

"*Really* frickin' *huge* shark," the Captain replied. "Load battle program into Logic Engine."

"Logic Engine battle program, aye!"

The crewman at the Logic Engine station yanked open a panel and removed a flat round drum with one hand and pulled open a housing with the other. A reel was spinning within and a moment later there was a *flap flap flap* as it reached the end of whatever was on it – looked like a long strip of paper. With astounding speed the fellow whipped off the reel, opened his case, extracted and inserted another reel, put the first one in the case, and shoved the end of the paper strip on the new reel into a slot. It promptly started to spin, and a moment later the clattering Valkenhayn associated with the Logic Engine began – but with a new pattern of clacks. The old reel was put in the case and returned to its panel.

"Sorcery, report contacts," the Captain called.

"Sorcery, one contact now circling, 500 yards."

The Captain narrowed his eyes. "Circling. The decoy crossed some limit, but *we* haven't – *yet*. So rather than attack it just loiters."

"Sorcery, correction, object identified hammerhead megalodon."

Valkenhayn frowned. Captain apSwan shook his head. "Never heard of that before – but hammerheads have the most sensitive electrical senses of almost any shark species in my experience. And at *that* size, *that* implies..." He pulled a slide rule from a back pocket and pulled and pushed on it.

"Yeah, thought so. The muscle mass that would normally power the electrical senses is *gigantic*. I bet it's got an electrical attack as well. *Has* to. That *may* work to our advantage." He leaned forward and blew into the torpedo room pipe.

"Torpedo room, aye!"

"Electrode torpedoes, tube 1 and 2, connect for simultaneous launch, 5 by 100."

"Cables 1 and 2 shorted, 5 by 100, aye!"

"Get me a firing solution from the Engine," he ordered next. The clattering from the Engine redoubled.

"What are you thinking?" Valkenhayn asked, crossing his arms.

"I'm thinking it will be very, very unhappy if we short it out," the Captain said. "I'm also thinking throwing extra current in may make it a little *less* unhappy and a *lot* more dead."

"Firing solution locked in, tracking," the Engine operator said.

"Sorcery report contacts."

"Sorcery, no change, one contact hammerhead megalodon."

Captain apSwan leaned to the Engineering tube. "Ahead slow."

"Ahead slow, aye!"

The *Ammonite* glided forward.

"Sorcery, Call distance to target," the Captain said.

"Sorcery, aye, 475"

"Sorcery 450"

"Sorcery 400"

"Sorcery 350"

"Any time now...Helmsman I want 20 degrees port all back full on my fire command," the Captain directed.

"Sorcery 300...Sorcery! Target turning on our vector!"

"Figures. All stop. Wait 'til it completes the turn."

"Sorcery, target closing, 200 yards!"

"Sorcery, closing 150 yards!"

"Fire," the Captain announced calmly. "Torpedo room, explosive 1 and 2. Hold on everyone."

A pair of thuds one right after the other sounded as the boat suddenly lurched in reverse. The helmsman spun the tiller. An acknowledgement came over the speaking tube but no one really heard it.

The giant shark appeared in the forward viewport charging them, but it was tracking slightly right as the boat backed up on her new heading. It started to turn immediately...

But it did no good. The barbed torpedo "electrodes" slammed into it, one just below its' right eye, the other nailing it halfway between the sidefin and the tail. Valkenhayn saw wires trailed from each back toward the *Ammonite*. Both electrodes began to spark.

"All stop!" the Captain called, and they lurched again as power to the screws was cut. "Efreet's, full power to electrodes!"

The immense fish went into a massive convulsion, apparently no longer able to control itself. It thrashed, wildly, becoming more and more frantic.

“Maintain power,” the Captain ordered. “Stand by tubes 1 and 2.”

Suddenly sparks raced down its side between the two electrodes and the monster doubled on itself and froze, quivering.

“Fire 1,” the Captain called.

A thud sounded from the nose of the *Ammonite* and a single torpedo streaked toward the megalodon, catching it full in the side. The boat rocked with the force of the resulting explosion. Bubbles, blood and shredded flesh filled the viewpoints.

“Torpedo, explosive one,” the Captain called, watching the mess outside closely.

When some of the bubbles had cleared they spotted the monster, sinking, upside down, with a gaping hole in its side.

“Yellow alert,” the Captain ordered. “Make your course 000, standard ahead. Sorcery report all contacts.”

“Standard ahead, course 000 aye!”

“Sorcery, reporting all contacts, aye!”

“Yellow alert, all hands, yellow alert,” came from the master speaking tube.

“That was impressive, Captain,” Valkenhayn remarked.

“He helped electrocute *himself*, stupid fish.” He glanced toward the Knight.

“Don’t bet *that* will happen again, I think we just used up our entire allotment of good luck.”

“I used mine up a long time ago, Tom. You get kinda used to it,” the Knight said, philosophically.

The normal sounds of the boat resumed, and the *Ammonite* glided through the late combat area heading for the rendezvous.

The *Ammonite* cruised toward the elevator just ten feet below the surface. The questers – minus the rat – were on the bridge, watching, tensely, with the others.

“Sorcery, two surface contacts! Ironclads.”

“Signal IFF,” the Captain said.

Valkenhayn turned to the Captain, “IFF?”

“Identify, Friend or Foe.”

“Sorcery, countersign received, routing to Logic Engine.”

The Logic Engine had burst into activity and within a few seconds spit out another card. The operator grabbed it before it fully left the slot. “Logic Engine confirms two *Thunder* class cruisers, *Ocean Thunder*, and *Thunderbolt*.”

"Excellent. Acknowledge." the Captain smiled and glanced toward the Knight. "They're ours." Valkenhayn raised his eyebrows.

"How does *that* happen?"

"We should shortly see more. The Princess promised us some backup when we approached the beach."

"You might've *mentioned* that!"

"And let whoever's been monitoring you know the Imrian Navy was going to make trouble for them? I think not."

"Sorcery, three surface contacts, appear to be wood."

The Captain frowned. "Send IFF."

"Sorcery, countersign received, routing to Logic Engine."

The Logic Engine burst into activity again and spit out another card. The operator sang out, "Logic Engine confirms two Manta-class corvettes, *Storm Skipper* and *Storm Hopper*, one Hammer-class first rater, *Kjoldnur*."

"That isn't good," the Captain said.

"Why not?"

"Those are *Regent's* ships. They're *not* supposed to be here," the Captain said, grimly. "I wonder if the Rebellion has *already* started."

"Sorcery, surface contact, UFO."

The Captain glanced at Valkenhayn who raised his eyebrows interrogatively.

"Unidentified Floating Object. Course?"

"Sorcery, UFO course 180!"

"Coming right at us. Wind?"

"Sorcery, wind coming from 000."

"Figures. Details?"

"Sorcery, uh...not sure, Skipper. It's got a *lot* of booms or gantries and things hanging out. Thing's bloody *huge*, too. Contact! Two more UFOs, same type."

"What in the Nine Hells have they sent out at us?" the Captain asked rhetorically.

"Sorcery! UFOs ID'd, *combat Nautiloids*!"

"Where did the dragon get *them* from?"

"Never heard of 'em," Valkenhayn said.

"Cephalopods. Distantly related to the chambered Nautilus. Large, powerful, smart, electrical, and, quite literally, a *born* sailor," the Captain said. "Sorcery, what's their vector?"

"Sorcery, Captain, the Nautiloids appear to be angling to intercept the corvettes and the first rater."

"I don't like the sound of that," the Captain muttered. "Sorcery, give me a visual."

He reached out his left hand and pulled up a handle that elevated a six-inch crystal ball convenient to his side. It was already showing the combat area.

"Sorcery, Regent task force altering course 270!"

"I *thought* so! The rebellion *has* started," Captain apSwan growled.

"Nautiloids altering course 325!"

"Get me firing solutions on Nautiloid 1 and 2 forward tubes, and on *Kjoldnur* aft tube," apSwan commanded.

"We're going to fire on our own ship?" Mylyn-as-R'nyara asked, horrified.

"That's a *rendezvous* course, not a *combat* one, those Nautiloids are trying to link up with them, not sink them! They're fighting on the *dragon's* side!" the Captain snapped. "Missiles 1 and 2, get me a solution on manta-class vessels!"

"Torpedo solutions locked in, tracking!"

"Fire."

"Missile solutions locked in, tracking!"

Two *thuds* sounded from the bow.

"Fire."

Two, much louder and more metallic *clang/thud* sounds came from aft.

"Sorcery, Thunder cruisers making course 090!"

"They must see something we don't," Captain apSwan said under his breath. "Sorcery, scan toward 090, try to ID contacts in area."

"Sorcery, one subsurface contact, very large, apparently organic, probably a lesser kraken."

"Rig for depth charges!" the Captain called out. He glanced toward Valkenhayn. "The cruisers can handle it, but they'll have to use depth charges and that's going to knock *us* around some, too."

Suddenly a double explosion sounded ahead of the *Ammonite*.

"Damage assessment," the Captain directed. "Also find out what happened to the shot at *Kjoldnur*."

"Sorcery, one Nautiloid sinking, the other has wheeled to course 090, listing to port scuppers. *Kjoldnur* backed sail and stalled herself in the water, we missed."

A thunderous explosion sounded from aft, followed seconds later by another. The *Ammonite* lurched to port as the shock waves hit her.

“Sorcery, good hits on manta classes, both ships on...” – a thunderous roar slammed the boat hard apart – “...ooff...fire, still maneuvering. *Sub-surface contact! Giant manta, incoming from below, confirmed!*”

“All back full!” The boat lurched as her screws reversed, she began backing up, picking up speed. The questers, the only ones not strapped in, went crashing to the deck. Valkenhayn contrived to get his legs under one girl and an arm under the other as he fell.

In the Captain’s crystal he caught a view of the manta as it spun dorsal side down and stroked its’ wings, trying to divert from its’ upward course to follow the backing *Ammonite*.

The manta broke the surface, upside down, and vanished beneath again.

“All ahead full!” the Captain ordered. Valkenhayn and the two women held on the chairbacks grimly and the boat reverse her screws again and leaped forward.

“Efreet, full power to hull! Torpedos 1 and 2 fire!”

The boat bucked twice and *thuds* echoed through her interior.

Suddenly a giant maw appeared in the front viewports.

“Oh, my, that’s a *big* one,” the helmsman said, and they were suddenly plunged into darkness. A moment later there was a terrific impact, throwing the questers to the deck again and even breaking straps on the Logic Engine and Damage Control operator consoles, throwing those luckless sailors forward as well.

“All back full!” the Captain roared, and the boat bucked but there was no lurch. She was tilting to the rear.

“Sorcery, my crystal’s gone dark!”

“No kidding!” the Captain said, pulling himself upright. “Helmsman, report all depth!”

“200 and dropping, Captain,” the Helmsman gasped as he pried himself off of the wheel.

“Helmsman, rock us with the forward and reverse levers, see if you can pull us free!” the Captain called.

The helmsman applied himself with a will, reversing the screws at full power, they heard the entire drive train protesting as the engine surged, and surged again, jolting back and forth. The deck was now down at the rear by 45 degrees.

“300, Skip!” he called as he continued to rock the boat. Valkenhayn was amazed at the man, spinning the wheel, rocking the boat, and still calling the depth.

“Add opposite dive planes, roll us!” apSwan ordered.

The helmsman redoubled his efforts, snapping switches, pulling levers, and spinning his wheel. “400 feet, Skipper!”

The boat was lurching back and forth, rolling left and right, and Valkenhayn was starting to feel seasick before there came a *ripping* sound. The helmsman slammed her into reverse and again, everyone not holding or strapped down was thrown forward. This worked to their advantage, since the boat had rotated straight up and down, and the floor had more places to hold on to, and no one really wanted to inspect the Logic Engine more closely. The boat was now sinking stern first under power.

The *Ammonite*’s viewports suddenly cleared and they saw the monstrous bulk of the manta above them.

“Dive planes twenty degrees down!” the Captain called, and the boat began to pitch over on her back.

“All ahead full,” and with one more lurch the boat reversed once more and surged up toward the sinking manta, barely clearing its’ lower lip, she dove toward the surface.

“Sorcery, what’s going on?” the Captain called.

“*Kjoldnur* is stationary next to the Nautiloid. Wait a sec...damn! She’s transferring *cannon* – breach loaders – and *shells*!”

“Oh, really?” the Captain said in a menacing tone. “Aim us right at her keel. And when we surface, I want missile solutions on that Nautiloid, 3 and 4, transfer and fire immediately.”

Everyone held on to whatever was handy. There was some smoke in the air, and the smell of burning oil. The massive steam engine was knocking, badly, and the boat shuddered throughout her length every few seconds, but she picked up speed nevertheless. As the RPMs rose the sound of the screws rose, too. They closed like a rocket on the keel of the *Kjoldnur*.

Valkenhayn went weightless as the U-boat slammed into the *Kjoldnur*’s keel directly amidships. Her spur and cutting spines tore through the sturdy oak like so much paper, she sliced upward, tearing up the top deck as she finally halted with her rear half still buried in the hull. The tableau held for just a moment before *Kjoldnur*, with an agonized groan, capsized, slamming the *Ammonite* – right side up – into the water where her spur just missed the Nautiloid, which was desperately pushing itself away from the ship.

In moments the Nautiloid set a complex series of sails, had heeled around, and was already picking up speed. Two metallic *thuds* came from behind the bridge, both missiles flew the 300 or so feet and landed in the middle of the Nautiloid – which was promptly converted to sushi, and

served airmail to every vessel within half a mile – with a complementary dessert of twisted iron cannons.

The wave from the blast slammed into the *Ammonite* and her hull groaned, too. The *Kjoldnur* was going down, down to Will Turner's locker, never to return – and she was taking the *Ammonite* with her to her watery grave.

“Damage report,” apSwan asked, calmly.

“Captain!” came an excited voice from the Engine room. “The starboard piston has seized! We’re dead in the water!”

Not a moment later there came a thunderous explosion from the aft as the boiler blew up, taking out *Ammonite*’s starboard side from midships to screws.

“Undines! Girls, do what you can to get us to shallow water!”

The boat joggled a little, and then she glided free of the deadly embrace, heading toward shore.

Closing all watertight doors in the ship stopped the flooding, and the crippled *Ammonite*, listing nearly 45 degrees to the starboard, moved forward until they heard the grating of her keel on the gravel of the beach. The beach where a full-scale war was already in progress.

31 THE INVASION OF KRITHALA

It appeared that, lacking a rope, Evenshade had landed a considerable task force to hold the beach before the enormous vertical cliff of the World Wall.

There were many invitations to the party. Crab warriors, larger than a man, were the primary bulwark, wielding weapons that looked more like large can-openers rather than military regulation. Nevertheless, they were proving effective against armored dwarves charging up the beach from their own amphibious landers. The boats bore the flag of the Imrian Empire.

During their own personal travails the battle had proceeded with astounding speed. At least a dozen of Imri's ironclad dreadnaughts were cruising off the beach, apparently shelling the World Wall itself. Turning to inspect that, Valkenhayn saw ballistae nests were set up on various outcroppings. Some were getting blasted, but it required extraordinary marksmanship to hit one with the single, enormous cannon elevated into position on the prow of every ironclad.

Further out, fighting sail vessels were trying to engage more ironclads. It was an unequal fight, even as he looked one of the first or second-raters suddenly blew up in a massive explosion as a dreadnaught's shell took her in the gunpowder magazine.

The dwarves were not alone. More boats were visible in the distance, the next one already surfing in was firing arrows in a continuous stream, almost arrowhead-to-feathers, as if they were all tied together. It took quite a few to bring down a crab warrior – on the other hand, they didn't seem to be running out either. When that boat shelved and dropped its landing ramp, Elves – predictably – came swarming out.

Valkenhayn knew Imri was a pretty large empire. He hadn't realized it encompassed so many species, or to what extent. As the U-boat ground to a halt, one of her gnomes dilated the iron near the prow allowing them to exit from the bridge, wade through thigh-deep water, and reach the shore.

The *Ammonite's* undines were in the water, and her sylphs were in the air, all staying close to help shield the more mortal members of the crew. A moment later saw three iron statues of statuesque young woman splash ashore, each wearing a cloak of living flame – the salamanders. A crash sounded from the cutting spine above the boat's spur, lightning struck the shore, and the three efreet's also appeared.

Runt fluttered out of the hatch, looked about for the Knight, and half-splashed, half-hopped towards him.

The mortals were sadly reduced. Fewer than half of the people that had crewed the boat managed to make it to shore. The Knight spotted Ryn, but not Liffey. He hoped she had escaped to the water in her natural form.

Captain apSwan appeared in the bridge hole holding a package of some kind and quickly waded ashore. He looked ruefully at Valkenhayn.

"None of that went exactly as I planned, but we're here. What's next?"

Valkenhayn pointed straight up. "I gotta get up *there*." The greenish-orange sun was directly south of them. "Damn it! Not even any shadows!"

"Voth? Can you girls get him up?" apSwan asked.

Three whirling tornados converged on Valkenhayn and, though they managed to knock him over twice, they couldn't seem to keep him in the air.

"~~He's too heavy with the armor.~~" panted one.

"~~I think we can do it,~~" said one of the Grunds. "~~If we can get to the rock face!~~"

The salamanders took point, followed closely by the Iron Maidens, and charged up the beach. The salamanders had their *own* way of dealing with the crab warriors – each one leaped into the shell of the first crab she came across. Moments later they would stop moving, fill the local area with an appetizing smell, and the salamander would pop out and rush at the next hors d'oeuvre. All they needed was melted butter.

The group fetched up against the cliff where the Iron Maidens each leaned against the rock and went still. A moment later, they popped up, living sculptures in granite, and dilated open a bubble in the rock.

"~~Going up!~~" called one.

R'nyara-the-blond started forward but Valkenhayn grabbed her elbow.

"You have nothing more you need to do."

"Oh, yes – Much! Very, very much, have I 'do!"

"The Crown could not have demanded a geas continue past this point!"

"Oh't didn't. This I do because don't *must* be!"

"You and your *bloody* cats!" Valkenhayn said. He looked over for Scrum – and realized he was missing!

"Where's the *rat*?" he demanded of no one in particular.

"Landin'g soon – I hope! Y'thy, we *must* go!"

Captain apSwan tossed his own package to him as he turned.

"Blanket of warming! I think you'll need it more than I! Godspeed!"

"McKulluh?"

"FAITH AND BEGERRA, HAVE YE NOT FIGGERED IT OUT YET, LAD? He's up there so he is, waitin' fer ya." The bug tossed him the Leprechaun's equipment. "But 'tis a genuine pleasure it's been t'be helping ye. Good luck, boyo!"

Valkenhayn took the equipment, dropped it into his backpack, and stepped into the bubble with R'nyara. Runt made it in halfway before the Knight grabbed him and shoved him out. "Not this time, Pal" as the bubble dilated shut.

"YER GONNA NEED IT, LAD. YER GONNA NEED IT," the bug finished sadly.

"**KEEP YOUR FEET MOVING UP!**" a gnome said as the bubble began to move. Up and up they trudged, each time they raised a foot, the bubble would surge up on that side, reach the foot and then coast up for a while while he lifted the other leg – and repeat. It was going to be a *long* walk upstairs, but between his own shank's mare and the gnomes – hopefully it wouldn't cripple him for life.

As they trudged, R'nyara reached up to her throat and pulled off something he never saw there – instantly resuming her normal form. She looked down as she climbed.

"Oh! *Much* better!"

"Someday I want someone to explain to me how you and that Thaumaturge pulled this off."

She smiled – in an elfling, it would be a sunny smile, on her it was probably a dark smile – "Never shall I tell! Professional courtesy!"

She began sorting through her equipment as they climbed. She handed him the darksight ointment saying, "Take care! For one use only is there left enotugh! No more, no less."

Then she pulled out a small gem which she handed him. A little ruby – with spells drifting inside.

"Silence spells. Shake t'let one out," and she heaved a great sigh.

"What's the matter?"

"For years have I carried. *Years.*"

When they stopped for a breather, she helped him remove some of his armor and wrap the blanket of warming around his torso, refitting the armor over it. It was not likely to be a powerful magical artifact, but every little bit helps.

"**ALMOST THERE!**" gasped a gnome as her face appeared for a second in the stone over their heads.

The bubble broke the surface of the rock and lifted them to the top. Quickly Valkenhayn looked around. The place was a *riot* of flashing Christmas lights flying all around him!

One bright yellow light zipped up to his nose.

"Welcome back to the Kingdom of your fathers!" said the mini glowing within.

"Titania! Oh, geez – the wards are down?!"

"Down be they, but the Guardian stands with us!" she said gaily pointing over his shoulder. The hulking form of Krashnapertha limped forward, with McKulluh perched on his shoulder.

"Y'thy!" R'nyara shouted, pointing over the cliff.

Valkenhayn spun around to see a wild Tarn, lacking rider and saddle, swooping at them. He pulled his sword, but R'nyara put a hand on his arm.

"Wait!" she said.

He saw the giant bird intended to land – its' legs and feet were not in position for a strike – and a moment later it did. Scrum, in high dudgeon, suddenly appeared atop the bird – praise to the Goddess, *with the ropes!*

"You Krit'alan, GIT!!! LOOK what your LUNATIC FRIENDS DEED to MEE!" He yanked at a buckle and the two ropes, shimmering lightly, slid from the saddle to land in two magnificent heaps.

The rat struggled with his own straps – it kind of looked like he was tied on – and the Tarn shook its' head rapidly.

Scrum tipped off and landed with a small *thud* on his backside, and immediately leaped to his feet and strode – if his most determined waddle could be called that – toward Valkenhayn.

"They TIED MEE to DIS MONSTER!!! Dey sent mee out ALONE, and HELPLESS and and and WHY are you LOOKING at mee like THAT?"

And the Tarn seized him in its wicked hooked beak. It gulped back, leaving the poor rat in its throat with only his frantically lashing tail visible.

R'nyara gasped and started forward but Valkenhayn grabbed her and pulled her behind him. He waited.

"Come on, come on, swallow you Goddess-cursed..."

And the bird swallowed. Scrum went down the hatch.

And Valkenhayn aimed a powerful blow at the bird's neck before it could react, taking its' head clean off. Blood fountained from the bird's neck as it reared back, the body, still upright, stepping toward the cliff!

The Knight sprang forward, grabbing two handfuls of feathers, and dragged the bird's body back on solid ground. As it finally sank down, he rammed his hand down its throat and started feeling around.

"No...no...no...dammit, he's in here *somewh...*" and his hand clamped down on a furry snake. He grabbed on as hard as he could and yanked, and

yanked again, and again, pulling Scrum tail first out of the bird's throat by degrees until he had the bedraggled rat dangling from his fist.

His eyes were open, though he didn't react as Valkenhayn set him down. He looked numbly up at the Knight, then at the bird's headless body, still twitching. Then he looked at his tail...and *shrieked*.

"~~MY TAIL, MY TAIL, YOU CUT OFF MY TAIL!!!!~~" he leaped to his feet, holding his tail in both paws, and started jumping up and down in a panic. "~~I'M BLEEDING, I'M BLEEDING, I'M DYING!!!!~~"

Valkenhayn leaned forward and seized the tip of the tail in his powerful grip. The rat shut up like he had turned a switch. The Knight's eyes were closed and his lips moved.

And when he let go, the tail wound had closed over completely.

The rat stared at Valkenhayn in bemusement.

"Sorry about shortening it, but I figured better *that* than inspecting the inside of a Tarn for the last experience of your life." The rat's eyes narrowed.

"~~YOU KNEW!!! YOU KNEW!!! YOU KNEW THAT THEENG WAS GOING TO EAT ME!!!!~~"

"Yes, I did," the Knight agreed. He looked toward R'nyara. "I saw it in your mirror as I bought it. I've been trying to figure out how to save you since then," he said to Scrum. "It was pretty plain, you went down its throat, I saw the lump going down. But the scene *ended* there and this was the best I could come up with."

The rat stared at the Knight with a stunned expression. "~~YOU KNEW!!! And you were TRYING to FIGURE OUT how to SAVE me!!!!~~"

"Without causing a paradox and maybe narking the *both* of us. Yeah. I told you I'd save *your* life, too."

Acting quickly, Valkenhayn got one of the ropes attached and then stood, aghast, looking at it. It looked *ridiculous* – *that* little hunk of *string* was going to reach *two miles*?! Not bloody likely. But it was all he had, so he went through the motions.

It seemed even *less* likely when he began to let it down – it ran out quickly, far sooner than it should have to reach the bottom of the cliff. When he ran it out to the bitter end he stood, looking sadly at it, along with McKulluh and R'nyara.

He turned to Scrum and opened his mouth and then distinctly heard and felt someone tug on the rope twice! He looked toward the rope in consternation, stepped to the winch, reversed it, and began to reel it in. It was heavier – *much* heavier!

At the elevator appeared far below but far sooner than it should have, he saw it was packed with bickering elves and dwarves arguing over who was going to lead the charge. He shook his head as he locked the winch and got the thing unloaded, and then sent it down again. How, in the name of the Goddess herself, was this thing doing what it looked like it was doing? How? It made no sense at all!

He was muscled out of the way by the excited dwarves, “**TOO SLOW! TOO SLOW, BOY! CRANK THAT MOTHER!**” who began reeling up the rest of the army at incredible speed. Then he looked to the Elves who were getting everything organized as each contingent arrived – noticing they had thoughtfully put their *own* contingent nearest the road. An occasional screech came from above while this was going on, but nothing was getting through the air cover.

“McKulluh, *why* are the faeries setting up teeny little ballistae next to a...is...is that a *buffet*?” he asked the Leprechaun in some bemusement.

“Deliveries, me doyo. Deliveries.”

“Deliveries? Deliveries to whom?”

“Why, the enemy, o’carsel! They’ll be laying out quite the feast! Aye, and pushing it ahead as we go!”

“*Why*?” Valkenhayn asked in utter bewilderment.

“Lad - d’ye not remember the old tale about Rip Van Winkle, and what happened to *him* when he ate the food the wee folk gave him?”

“Yes...oh. Oh! I don’t suppose that a lot of Orcs have ever *heard* that one, d’you?”

“Pretty sure that’s a no, so it is. And now, ye best be going. Ye’ll need the time to get in and get ready, and the army’ll march within the hour!”

Valkenhayn nodded. “Right.” He glanced around, then down, and found the scruffy rat standing next to him, the very picture of sad resignation.

“**YES, YES, I’M HERE!!! LET’S get thees OVER NEETH!!!!**”

32 A MOST TALENTED THIEF

Valkenhayn moved from shadow to shadow, avoiding the orcs patrolling the area by stepping back into the Shadow realm when they came too close. The rat followed closely and – for *once* – silently. Not that he had a choice! The Knight had used one of his silence spells in the ruby.

They circled the eastern side of the main castle, closer to the family quarters and the throne room. The orcs were distracted, not really looking around themselves at all – they were listening to the distant sounds of combat. And they wanted to be in it. You could see it in their faces and their eager hands clutching weapons.

He scanned the ramparts. There seemed to be a lot of statues...then he realized – not *statues* – *gargoyles!* From the number of them on this wing alone, probably an entire hive. Funny choice, though. They are notoriously hard to control magically, although they *would* fight anyone who attacked the castle once they established the hive.

Curiously, the eastern drawbridge was *down!* Why would the dragon leave such an obvious hole in its' defenses? As the two crept closer in the shadows, Valkenhayn saw bails of jerky and hard tack being taken from the castle and stacked behind the outer curtain wall. Apparently, this part of the castle got the warning to get ready late – or they were slow. With orcs, could be either one, they weren't the most reliable creatures. Not until the blood started to spill – after that they were reliable as *Hell*.

There were too many to consider the bridge, but Valkenhayn didn't need to. He spotted a distinctive shadow across the moat and stepped right across the croc-infested channel without breaking stride.

The main gate area on this side had far too much traffic going in and out, but this side also had the private family entrance – with luck, it hadn't even been discovered. The two slunk around the barbican.

No such luck. It *had* been discovered. Discovered – and *fortified*. The outer masonry shell had been removed, the inner door was perfectly visible – and there were no guards. Something had been added above the door they could not make out at this angle.

“It looks like a *trap!*” he whispered to Scrum.

“Of *COURSE* eet's a *TRAP!!!* Do you *THEENK* I'm an *EEDIOAT!!!*”

“Do you *really* want me to answer that? Never mind. They did something above the door. I want to find out what before we decide how to go on.”

The circled warily. They did not have much of the night left.

Valkenhayn caught his breath when he came around to the front of the door and saw what had been added. The door had no guards because it *needed* none. It was guarded by a bound spirit.

It was housed in a skull, set into a niche over the door. It's eyes glowed a fell green. They could easily see them sweeping back and forth over the ground in front of the door.

Valkenhayn cursed his luck silently. There was no telling what it was set up to do if tripped. It might just scream to high heaven, but it *could* be programmed with anything from a teleport to demon-summoning. And try as he might, he could think of nothing he thought could *stop* the cursed thing from activating!

He could easily put a dagger through an eye socket – but the thing was already *dead* that wouldn't stop it! It probably wouldn't even *discourage* it.

That wasn't the only problem. There were lights around the keyhole area of the door. A *magic* lock! These things were quite prosaic in one way, but they *were* things the dragon had not used before. With the size of its army, why bother to use magic to block this one door? In fact, why use magic at all? He would've expected the whole thing to be bricked up before being magicked like this.

The more he looked at it, the more it looked like a trap. But it was either this, the main gate – or retreat and try to win militarily. That would likely *not* work and would get *lots* of people killed. He glanced at the rat and then to the sky for aid. Then he quickly swung back to look again at where the rat was *supposed* to have been! Looking around frantically he suddenly spotted the rat sidling up to the door! He was going to spring the trap *for* him!

Valkenhayn glared at the lunatic rodent and prayed for *something*. Anything!

And the rat stepped into the lit area and casually sauntered right up to the door! He looked up at the skull, who glared back down at him.

"**Password**" came a creepy whisper into his mind.

And the rat recited... "**A BOX without HEENGES, KEY or LID, yet GOLDEN TREASURE eenside ees HID.**" And waited.

The silence stretched out...

Then the skull's eyes rolled up to the sky as it pondered the riddle!

Scrum leaped for the door and started feverishly pulling out tools – gnarfer, stickulum, small pick, large pick, wand...*wand*?

Scrum pulled out a *wand*! Not a large one – maybe five or six inches. He tapped around the magic area, a few times, then pulled one of the tools – the Knight couldn't even see which – and started poking at the door lock.

The symbols around the lock flickered, drifted, and moved about. The rat kept glancing at them, twice pulling his wand out again to move some

glyph from where it had wandered back to some other part where he evidently wanted it.

Valkenhayn was utterly *flummoxed*! Who could've *known* the rat *knew* about magic locks? And *guardian spirits*?

Suddenly the door flashed and then changed color – and Valkenhayn heard the sound of something magical powering down!

He knew *wards*? He was a *rat*! Where did he get *this* stuff?

And suddenly the door unlatched and popped open.

The rat turned and bolted back toward him. He was halfway when suddenly the skull spoke again.

“Is it an egg?”

Scrum froze, skidding to a halt. His eyes went round and he started to hyperventilate. A look of sheer, unmitigated *terror* crept across his features. Valkenhayn waited for him to panic and bring about the end for them both.

Then a crafty look crossed his features. He turned his head over his shoulder and said, “~~Ees THAT your FINAL answer?~~”

Time slowed. Slowed again. Stopped. The tableau stood there in the silver moonlight.

The skull said, ***“No.”***

The rat pumped his fist once and darted forward, frantically waving Valkenhayn on toward the door. He wasted no time, vaulting the rat, he rushed into the door way and slammed the door shut behind him.

Through the door he heard, ***“Wait. It IS an egg!”***

There was a pause.

Then he heard, ***“That’s my final answer!”***

There was another pause.

“An egg!”

...

“Hey! It’s an egg! Dammit, where did he go?”

Valkenhayn shook his head in consternation, and waited. Nothing! The bound spirit apparently forgot all about its’ actual *guard* duties while it tried to solve the riddle! *How* had the rat *known* that? Still shaking his head in disbelief, he stepped into the darkness before him, heading for the throne room.

33 EVENSHADE'S VENGEANCE

The darkness was near absolute. Valkenhayn moved silently through the south hall heading toward the main tower that crowned the throne room – and the Obsidian Dragon. All around was shattered battlements and statuary, and over all clung an icy cold mist whose tiny amount of luminescence was the only light – if it could be called that. It was really just a minor reduction in the strength of the murk.

The mist seemed to cling to his limbs, yielding to his legs reluctantly, like water and ice. His feet were getting cold. Physically *and* mentally. All that kept Valkenhayn from turning back was his pride in his family, and the knowledge that this chance to infiltrate the keep was being purchased with hundreds – maybe *thousands* – of lives. It was a fool's errand, when the highest reward he dared hope for was a death not too painful and not too pitiful to sustain him when he stood before his Goddess.

He approached one of the kitchens, the one used to prepare meals for the watch. The door was hanging on its' hinges, but the other side looked exactly like some enormous claw had gouged out the jam and the stone on the other side. Valkenhayn paused, took out his ruby, and shook out another silence spell. The way was clearer than he had expected, he was making good time.

Darkness was a bane and a servant. The black dragon's powers would be at their height – but so would the power of the Shadows. Would it be enough? Most likely not, he thought grimly.

The kitchen was a shambles. It looked – and smelled – like orc work. No matter. From here he could enter the lower keep and reach the tower stair to the throne room.

Valkenhayn's eyes scanned the darkness, seeing everything clearly in shades of green. And he was lucky to have it, any kind of a light would ring out in the darkness more clearly than any bell.

Despite his worries and misgivings, Valkenhayn had no trouble finding the hall and the first landing. He carefully examined every nook and cranny, but the thick silence was undisturbed. Were there *no* guardians? Could Evenshade be *that* sure of its' power? The dragon was a unfathomable mix of near clairvoyant intelligence and almost laughable oversights. Valkenhayn wouldn't know which this was until the battle was joined.

He glided up the stairs, stopping to check his silence spell and deciding to shake out a fresh one. He stepped out of stairwell, past the main entrance to the throne room, and headed toward the throne entrance. He

stopped only once when he chanced to lay a hand against the wall and felt, rather than heard, a low vibration – the first evidence of occupants.

The tapestry covering the throne entrance was still in place! Valkenhayn could not countenance this much luck. Granted the tapestry was exquisitely rendered and even had a dragon on it, but why would Evenshade leave it? The dragon depicted was being killed by his great grandfather!

He shook his head clear and scouted the shadows. The darkness made them very hard to discern, but he found one that would let him step right into the tapestry. As he did he parted the tapestry and cold struck out at him so powerfully that he caught his breath thinking he had walked into the dragon's icy blast – but no. A direct hit from *this* dragon would freeze him so fast he wouldn't even have time to feel it. But the air was so cold it hurt to breathe. It felt as if his lungs were freezing with delicate little frost cracks.

AHH, MY OLD FRIEND. YOU'VE COME AT LAST. The words came unbidden to his mind, and Valkenhayn consigned his soul to his Goddess. This was no surprise.

COME IN, said the voice in his mind. Evenshade spoke with a mellow, almost cultured, voice, not the raspy hiss that marked most dragons. Higher than a baritone – close to a contralto.

I REGRET I CANNOT OFFER ANY REFRESHMENT. I FEAR THE STAFF HAVE THE NIGHT OFF.

A...joke?! No fear, no surprise – no *anger*. If he didn't know better in his heart it would sound sincerely...*polite*?

"Thanks, but I had something before I left camp," he replied. As he stepped around the throne a cold blue radiance lit the room – coming from everywhere, and no where, lighting it clearly – and utterly without shadows! As before, his eyes burned and then went back to normal. If the dragon banished this light he would be blind. He glanced around. There were no shadows at all. He checked his hand against his thigh. Not even there!

NONE OF TITANIA'S FARE, I HOPE. SHE'S ALREADY PUT THREE REGIMENTS TO SLEEP.

"No, no, just rations."

OF COURSE, the dragon said. The obsidian dragon was curled up in the middle of the throne room on a pile of treasure – a small pile. Surely there was more than that in the castle.

"I like what you've done with the place," he remarked, putting a hand on his dagger hilt. It would do him little good in this fight, but his primary

weapon was in his shoulder sheathe, touching *that* would be a little obvious. "Tasteful little bed for a dragon such as yourself. Hard to get to the family gold?" Aside from things having been moved there was no evidence of damage at all. Hardly what he'd pictured.

SADLY, MY COMFORT IS OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE, the dragon replied. It was not in any kind of attack position, lying at ease upon the pile. MOST OF YOUR FAMILY TREASURE IS GONE. YOUR PIRATICAL FRIENDS WOULD HAVE BEEN DISAPPOINTED - SADLY, THOUGH, ONLY AFTER THEY HAD KILLED YOU.

"After? I suspected the thought had crossed their minds - more than once. But they had more to gain *with* me than *against* me."

NOT REALLY - SHIPSMASHER HAD MANY SOURCES OF INFORMATION, INCLUDING CONTACTS THAT COULD WELL HELP HIM FIGURE OUT HOW MUCH I'D ALREADY SPENT. HE WOULD HAVE KILLED YOU IN IMRI.

"I see. So, to save my life, you killed him off?"

YES. AND WELL HIS SORCERER KNEW IT WAS COMING.

"I suspected as much," Valkenhyn admitted ruefully. "So, the family treasure is gone. Spent on what? Your army did not strike me as the type needing gold and a paymaster. Mostly blood and guts types."

MY ARMY IS NOT LIMITED TO ORCS AND GOBLINS, LITTLE BROTHER. I HAVE SPENT CONSIDERABLY ON AUGMENTING THE DEFENSES OF THIS CASTLE. YOU MIGHT HAVE NOTICED THE GARGOYLES? The dragon asked.

"Odd choice, there, by the way. Gold may get you gargoyles, but once they've set up a hive, their allegiance lies there, not with an employer," Valkenhayn observed.

TRUE. BUT THEN, THAT IS EXACTLY WHY I GOT THEM. THE SAME APPLIES TO THE CRAB WARRIORS, THE GIANT SCORPIONS, THE MURANDAS, AND SO ON. NO NEED FOR ON-GOING PAYMENTS AND THE CASTLE IS MORE SECURE. THERE ARE OTHER DEFENSES, TOO. Evenshade said.

"But none of them challenged me," Valkenhayn observed.

WHEN I SENSED YOUR APPROACH FROM THE SHADOWS I PUT THEM ON STANDBY, Evenshade said, as if it made perfect sense. THAT WAS VERY IMPRESSIVE. I KNEW THE SHADOWS WOULD COME - I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WOULD BRING THEM. A FAILURE OF IMAGINATION ON MY PART, I MUST ADMIT.

"Though you had the radiance spell ready anyway, just in case. But you *wanted* me to come here," Valkenhayn noted. "I'm guessing it will not be so easy to leave?"

YOU WON'T BE LEAVING, I'M AFRAID. I REALLY DO HAVE TO KILL YOU, the dragon said in a reasonable tone. It actually sounded a little...*regretful*. It cocked its head for a moment as if listening, and added, TITANIA'S AERIAL FORCES ARE NOW ENGAGING THE EAST FLANK. ORCS AND TROLLS. SHE'S BOMBARDING THEM WITH CINNAMON BUNS. HOW SPECTACULARLY UNCONVENTIONAL. HOWEVER DID YOU GET HER INVOLVED? I EXPECTED HER TO STRIKE AT ME WHEN YOU DID, OF COURSE, TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION - BUT NOT AS AN ALLY, AND NOT SO BRAZENLY. OR SO WELL SUPPORTED. YOU EVEN FIXED THE TINKERMECH. REALLY QUITE IMPRESSIVE.

"There are an amazing number of people involved. I'm not distracting you from your defenses, am I? I'd hate to be a bother, Trolls *can* be so hard to supervise."

THEY ARE CONTROLLED BY ENCHANTMENT SPELLS FROM HERE, OF COURSE. I CAN COMMAND THEM AND OBSERVE THEM SIMPLY BY WILL - ING IT TO BE SO.

The dragon was positively chatty! And why would it be explaining how it's command structure worked?

"You don't seem in any hurry to kill me," Valkenhayn said, leaning against the throne.

OH, VAL, I SO SELDOM GET TO CHAT WITH A KINDRED SPIRIT! I MEAN, WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATION CAN YOU HAVE WITH AN ORC? 'URG, URG, URG. ME KILL. HIT WITH ROCK.' TROLLS ARE EVEN WORSE.

Val decided to play his ace card. He didn't see how it could help, but it was all he had left.

"I imagine most of the treasure went to your *boss*," he said, as if 'twere obvious. "The Plague Master?"

AH. I THOUGHT YOU KNEW. NO, VAL, MY MASTER HAS NO DESIRE FOR TREASURE, the black dragon said.

Valkenhayn's eyes roved all around the hall. There was a large black sphere nestled in the coils of the dragon's tail. *That* was a mystery. It was *far* too large to be an egg - and where would Evenshade get one? Nothing else seemed out of place, the tapestries were unharmed, the walls and furniture undamaged. The only thing out of place is the few buckets full of gold pieces and a couple random treasure items that had been scattered in

the middle of the hall to make and decorate Evenshade's bed. Then he spotted the little table.

It was small – meant as children's furniture, really, though it was exquisitely inlaid with rare woods forming a marquetry of a trund bearing a siege tower on its back. Valkenhayn was not examining the table however. He was captivated by what sat upon it. The circlet base of the *Crown!* The final piece! What in the Nine Hells was it doing *here*? It was *supposed* to be gathering *allies!*

“So what *did* Master want?” he asked.

THE SAME THING HIS MASTER WANTS, OF COURSE. DEATH.

“His Master?”

THERE ARE WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS. BUT THEY ALL LEAD TO DEATH.

“Death? Of who?”

EVERYONE.

“Everyone? Like, *everyone*?”

EVERYONE. EVERYTHING. ALL THAT IS ALIVE.

“Why?”

BECAUSE ALL MUST DIE. THE COSMOS MUST BE AT PEACE. LIFELESS. FOR ALL ETERNITY.

Valkenhayn pondered. This certainly matched what the *Shadows* had said. He had known – and finally accepted – that he would probably never get past the dragon to its Master, the ultimate source of the evil done him and his family. But he had tried not to take that – well, *personally*. His family...was just...in the way. An inconvenience. But Cloughload's remarks were suddenly cast in a new light. And that deep, psychopathic desire to destroy every living thing?

“Your Master's Master – is the Enemy the Shadows seek.”

YES.

“Why *us*, then? Why are *we* all involved in some off-world war we didn't even *know* about?” he demanded of the dragon.

WHY WE? WE ARE PIVOTAL. WHY YOU? YOU WERE A MEANS TO AN END. THE GEAS DEMANDS DEATH. THE MORE DEATH I DELIVER, THE MORE SATISFIED I CAN BECOME. WITH THIS ARMY I CAN MOVE ANYWHERE, DELIVER DEATH IN WHOLESALE LOTS. IT PLEASES MY MASTER, AND HIS MASTER TOO. ESPECIALLY IF MY OWN FIGHTERS DIE AS WELL.

“Seems rather...indiscriminate, if you ask me,” the paladin observed, bitterly.

YOUR FAMILY STOOD ATOP THE PINNACLE THAT CROWNED THE ENTIRE NESTICK OCEAN. PERHAPS HALF THE KNOWN WORLD. THE DEATH SUCH TREASURE COULD FUEL WOULD DEEPLY SATISFY.

"And yet you've managed to kill so few. All you did was sit here, surrounded by an army, and waited!" Val said in exasperation.

OF COURSE. THE LONGER I WAITED, THE MORE PREPARED MY ENEMIES WOULD BECOME...AND THE DEADLIER THE WAR, WHEN IT CAME, AS IT INEVITABLY MUST.

Valkenhayn looked cautiously into the dragon's shimmering eyes, protecting his own will but trying to read the Dragon's...and began to suspect – or perhaps, to realize – that Evenshade was engaging in some sort of self-deception. Everything it did was seemingly oriented toward making some putative future war more destructive and more deadly. That fit the pattern it had shown since he had begun this quest. But he was beginning to think that that future war would *never come* – so long as the dragon could convince itself that it could be made worse...with just a *little* more preparation.

A geas rides your mind, but it has no judgment. It *must* rely on *yours*. If you can lie to *yourself* and do so *convincingly...even knowing that you are lying*...it can hold off a geas. It made Valkenhayn feel ill to think how it would feel, day after day, for millennia, keeping itself convinced it was about to cause Armageddon, yet always not *quite* ready. Then, he knew – deep in the dragon's heart, buried down where it could *not* think about it, but still driving it – the knowledge that it never *would* launch that war. If it thought *that* thought, the geas would know.

What a tightrope! Sitting here for two thousand years trying to think that it was going to do something, to also *not* do it, and to never, ever think of *why*? The dragon must be *insane*! That would also explain a lot. Either way, the dragon still had to be stopped. If the geas couldn't be broken, then it *had* to die. And if it *could* be broken, surely it would have been by now.

Valkenhayn knew he was living on borrowed time. Chatty or not, the creature had already told him it was going to kill him, and drawing out the conversation was not going to change that. He leaned back, pushing the tip of his back sheathe against the throne and loosening his sword. Neither his armor nor his Shadow magic would be of any use. All he had was his old blade, and the blanket of warming that might, or might not, help him withstand an attack.

He shifted his shield as if he were getting stiff from the weight but in so doing he covered his other arm. He flipped his sword up out of its' sheathe and grabbed it by the pommel as it was still rising. Knowing the inevitable response he dropped to his knees behind the shield. Something

that felt like a huge bucket of water slammed into his shield and a clear liquid splashed around him, already boiling as it pooled on the floor. None of it landed on him, but his shield turned white with hoarfrost and the temperature went from painful to *agonizing*, and Valkenhayn could not honestly say if it was fire or ice, it was so intense it could be either.

Valkenhayn charged ahead still in a crouch, slamming into the dragon's chest. His shield shattered on impact as if it were a fine plate dashed against a rock. The dragon grunted, spilling more of the freezing liquid onto Valkenhayn. It seared across his back, but he could not tell if it was frostbite on his skin or the blanket of warmth trying to combat the cold with a burst of heat. He was staggered but he was still on his feet. He slashed at the dragon, but his sword simply glanced off the scales.

The dragon had started back when Valkenhayn charged, but it did not loose its' grip on the black sphere, so it stepped clumsily back into Valkenhayn who ducked under the creature.

Evenshade hissed – sound only, the first truly draconic sound it had made. It lifted its' right foreleg and groped underneath trying to extract him. Valkenhayn was doing whatever he could to frustrate that while using both hands to stab upward. But there just wasn't any gap in the scaly armor! He suddenly felt some mysterious buffeting...mysterious for less than a moment. Evenshade was trying to drag him out with telekinesis.

Valkenhayn felt himself dragged but his foot slipped and he went down. He had stepped on a gold-inlay breastplate. He grabbed for it and hoisted it into a shielding position just as Evenshade stopped trying to grab him and instead fired another burst of its searing cold breath directly underneath at him. The full force of it splashed off the breastplate onto the dragon's own belly. Valkenhayn tossed the frosted breastplate at the black sphere where, as he expected, it shattered on impact. He reversed his sword and struck upward at the hoarfrosted scales with all his strength. Several of *them* shattered, too.

Evenshade reared up with an earth-shattering roar, but Valkenhayn came up with it. Reversing the sword again, he used both hands to slam it into the bared skin of the dragon's chest with all his strength.

Evenshade let out a hissing scream of pain, waving a leg at the puncture as if trying to extract the sword, but the hilt was much too small for its massive talons. It gasped, breathing heavily, looking down at the knight as Valkenhayn jumped back. Evenshade then dropped onto the treasure bed and coughed up a black substance which hissed and smoked as drops fell into the pitiful "hoard."

Valkenhayn somersaulted to one side, grabbing a jeweled ceremonial mace from the treasure and coming back up in a ready position. Evenshade looked at him...and laughed.

Valkenhayn stared. Laughing? *Laughing?! But it was true.* Evenshade coughed moistly, drooling more of the corrosive black blood onto the hoard. Draconic faces are not known for their expressiveness, but on the dragon's face there was...a smile.

The dragon huffed and pushed itself back up, rearing high into the air, and shouted – mentally, and *physically* – FREE AT LAST! FREE AT LAST! THANK THE GODS ALMIGHTY I AM FREE... and crumpled to the floor with a groan. AT LAST... it whispered, and coughed again.

If the dragon had suddenly turned into a daisy Valkenhayn could not have been more surprised. “Free?” he asked.

The dragon nodded, weakly – it seemed to have a lot of human-like gestures – and said, FREE. FROM MY...MY UNKNOWN MASTER, said the dragon. I HAVE FOLLOWED YOUR EXPLOITS...OPPOSED WHEN THE...DAMNED COMPULSION FORCED ME TO...AIDED WHEN I COULD...COULD JUSTIFY IT...UNDER THE GEAS. I KNOW YOU...it coughed, wetly, and its breathing became more labored. YOU WERE BROTHER TO ME...AND...YOU HAVE...HAVE FREED ME. Evenshade's eyes were fading, the little facets growing duller and their sweeping patterns slower.

“You...*wanted* to die?!” Valkenhayn said.

DEATH WAS MY...ONLY ROUTE...TO FREEDOM...MY FRIEND, the dragon said, panting. The temperature of the room was rising noticeably.

“By the Goddess – you were *trying* to commit suicide?!”

Evenshade smiled again but it turned to a rictus of pain. HOW ELSE...COULD I...END THIS?

The dragon was straining now. The vitality of dragons was legend, but this creature had a *sword* in its heart. Evenshade fell back. Its eyes darkened. NOW BROTHER...AVENGE ME.

“What?!”

REMEMBER...YOUR OATH. REVENGE YOUR...FAMILY...AND...ME. USE...USE WHAT I HAVE...LEFT...LEFT YOU...

“Who was your master?” Evenshade did not respond.

“Tell me!” Valkenhayn shouted.

The eyes glowed again, weakly. The dragon looked toward him.

“Who!?”

I...DON'T KNOW. I KNOW...ONLY THE COMPULSION... IT PUT IN MY MIND. It gasped. MY MIND...and the light faded from its eyes, which

went inert, gray and dull – and now always would be. The mighty breathing was stilled.

Evenshade was dead.

The deadliest freeze Drake in millennia had been defeated, his family's honor was intact, Caerleon and the country of Krithala returned to his line. His quest had succeeded.

...or *had* it? He didn't *feel* victorious!

Evenshade had played to *lose*. It *wanted* to die, must've known the geas could not be broken any other way. But still it wanted revenge on its' "Master." So the Obsidian Dragon had built *Valkenhayn himself* as a weapon, each forging stroke as carefully and precisely delivered as any master swordsmith. Equipped him and armed him with a vast army, resources, *allies*, removed the obstacles that would hold him back – and tasked him to destroy the shadowy Master of the freeze Drake – and finally stepped aside. To loose revenge on the one who styled himself Evenshade's *Master*. And then to let fly the Shadows against the Master of that Master.

It was *not* over.

The army outside was *his*! Castle Caerleon was now a fortress – a *Citadel* – a base of operations for the next battle, obviously. But chatty as it had been of its command-and-control, he didn't *know* how to command this army, or the castle defenses. Even if he figured *that* out, how to proceed? Even the *dragon* didn't know the Master! Where is he? How to find him? *How* to strike back?

Valkenhayn walked to the little table and took up the final piece of the crown. He took the runes from his backpack, and fitted them to the circlet in their correct order. They sealed tight to their connections, multicolored sparks of light raced around the circlet, in and out of each rune, as the Crown's magic reformed. The metal glowed, and he felt the power begin to radiate from it. The glow wasn't very obvious, but the feel of the Crown was unmistakable.

I AM WHOLE AGAIN, came a deep, sonorous voice that Val was unsure was in his mind or in the outside world.

The Crown of Krithala once more stood ready to serve him. But for what?

From somewhere nearby he caught a growl that sounded like two huge bounders grinding against each other. It dissolved into a hiss – and then the shell of the black sphere cracked.

It *was* an egg! But...so *huge*! The crack widened, the shell levered open. The hatchling – *hatchling*? It was closer to a young adult than to a

new-born dragonet! It rolled into a reclining position, breathing deeply, but not showing any sign of effort or strain. For nearly a minute, it just lay there and regarded him.

It was black as night. Black as Evenshade itself had been, but the tips of the wings, ears, tail, and the base of its claws were trimmed in a deep bloody red. It yawned, showing multiple rows of shark-like teeth. Its eyes slowly brightened into an icy blue, and a pattern began to appear in them, as if ice could burn. It breathed deeply, and Valkenhayn felt a wave of cold.

Evenshade...had been...*female*? He could scarcely credit it, he was so used to thinking of Evenshade as *him* – or *it*. But that creature *looked* like Evenshade. A miniature replica, perfected, an ideal of what Evenshade might have been like had he – *she* – not been forced to the path...*she*...had had to take.

It heaved itself up just as the first ray of the breaking dawn spilled into the throne room. It turned to gaze at the lightening window, where the sun was building now to its daytime glow.

As the light waxed brighter, the red trim began to spread from the tips and edges, inward. In moments new color had swept across the hatchling. From black as night, it was now a fierce, fiery red, no black remained – but for the tips that had been red before but now had become black. It looked up and coughed out a ten foot plume of flame, wiping out the cold it had released before. The glow from her eyes turned to a blazing crimson shot through with flashes of yellow and blue so bright they seemed to burn in her sockets.

Black *and* red. Freezedrake *and* firedrake – in *one*.

She still *looked* much the same – but the details added up differently now. She looked – *familiar* – somehow. Then he had it.

A perfect miniature of Cloughload. The most powerful firedrake, the most powerful freezedrake – combined in their offspring.

She wobbled very little as she turned to face him, walking towards him with a visibly improving serpentine grace. Longer in proportion than either parent, she was built lower to the ground. Where her parents had looked powerful she looked *precise* – and *deadly*. The eyes could burn with fire or ice but they still held a grimness in them. A determination. By the time she reached him the wobble was quite gone. She was slinking in a powerful glide.

She stopped before him and sat back, rearing her front half into the air, and looked down at him from perhaps twelve or fifteen feet. A huge pair of wings, still wet, fanned out behind her. A moment later, a smaller pair just

behind the main pair unfurled as well, fitting perfectly into the rear of the big wing's profile. At the tip of the tail a spined webbing erected to form a "V" at the tip of the tail. Evenshade's tail – Cloughload's wings. The "hatchling" was already nearly 50 feet long, her primary wingspan *had* to be over 100 feet!

Suddenly, Valkenhayn sensed the army all around. Many minds, most simple, bloody-minded, short-sighted – or *alien*. The fighting had halted. Through the command Sorcery he saw both sides, every faction, looking about in utter confusion. He realized he could now give orders and they *would* be obeyed. He felt his mind expanding as he looked into the searing eyes of the dragon.

Xapterathipco, came a feminine voice in his mind. Sultry, sexy, even...but with a steely undertone he could hear as plain as plain could be, even if he *knew* no one else could. There was a deep anger there – leashed, controlled – but...*waiting*. How could he *tell* these things? *It was like he had known her all his life!*

I am Vengeance. And you...are my Hand. The Plague Master shall know my Rage and Justice. I shall visit it upon him and his Family, Clan and Country and upon their Heirs unto the Seventh Generation...

Her eyes burned into his...

...and beyond...to his Masters...until Eternity...or Death.

Next: **THE HAND OF VENGEANCE**

--- --- FONTS USED IN THIS BOOK ---

- The primary text is in FreeSerif and represents text in unaccented Rithian. This is the primary language of Krithala and Valkenhayn's native tongue. It is fairly well-known in Vindolonda and northern Thermia, less so elsewhere.
- CAELDERA and Argos MF are used in headers and headings.
- **GEOMANTIC**, the Earth element language, is Colossus.
- **AEROMANTIC**, the Air element language, is "Windswept MF."
- **PYROMANTIC**, the Fire element language, is PhoenixOne.
- **AQUAMANTIC**, the Water element language, is the unfortunately named "Aliens ate my mum."
- **ELECTROMANTIC**, the Lightning element language, is the stunning appropriate font "Inner Flasher Version 2.0."
- **Truespeech** is in "trattorian 2." It's also in multiple colors and has animated sparkles, but my publisher didn't offer that...
- The *dialect of Assuran* used by the pirates, uses the aptly named font "Arrr Matey BB."
- **TRADETALK** is good ol' "Arial Unicode MS" available on every computer ever made, practically – admittedly sometimes under another name.
- **EVENSHADE THE DRAGON** uses "Avalon Quest."
- **Vengeance the Dragon** uses "Sidhe."
- **Scrum the Rat** uses the embarrassingly appropriate font "Disgusting Behavior."
- Although **Truespeech** is the language of spellcasting, when a magical item speaks it does so in it's own unique voice. The **CROWN OF KRITHALA** itself uses "Cenobyte."
- **McKulluh the Leprechaun's** native language is, of course, Gaelic, but it is a dialect that would be almost unintelligible to modern Earthly Irish – at least as bad as an Irishman trying to speak Gaelic to a Scotsman. Equally, McKulluh would find modern Gaelic just as incomprehensible. The language is called "Erish" in the story, and is represented by the font "Umber SSi."
- **HIGH ELVEN** is the language of the Daoine Sidhe or "High Elves," it uses the font "Ambrosia MF." "Daoine Sidhe" is properly pronounced "Deeny shee," it's Gaelic.
- **Rithian** is represented by "Celtic Gaelige." This is the language of Krithala and also used by many of the faerie races in Krithala and Vindolonda.

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