

# SESSION 18 – KEY TO THE PAST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## AN UNEXPECTED LETTER

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is it?”

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

## DELIVERING BAD NEWS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ALARUMS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right," Ranthir said.

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

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

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

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

"...you're kidding."

## MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aye, the black-skinned elf!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The idol was gone.

## YARROW STREET

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

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

so they quickly gave new instructions to the carriage master.

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

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

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

“Now what?” Tee wondered aloud.

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

“Good to see you again.”

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



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

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

“Well? What is it?”

“Money first.”

“How much?”

“250 marks, as we agreed.”

Tee paid him.

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

Tee arched an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

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

“Fine. Thank you.”

### THE CRIMSON COIL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### A CLEVER IDEA

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

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

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

Tee smiled. “Friends. Come on.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What about the alley on Yarrow Street?”

### ON SHILUKAR’S TRAIL

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

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

“Master Torland of Barund.”

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

“We need to find a thief named Shilukar.”

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Shuul?” Ranthir asked.

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

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

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



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

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

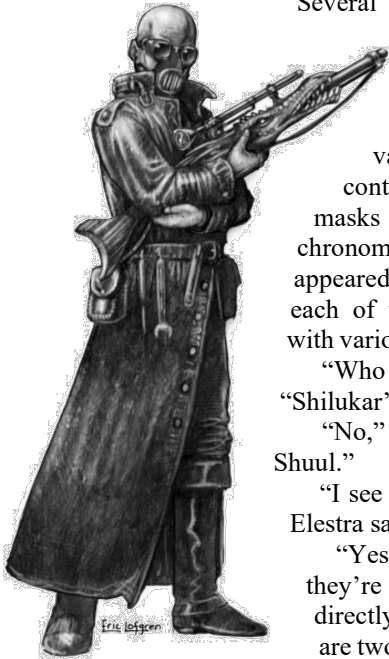


“How much time do we have before Shilukar gets here?” Elestra asked.

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

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

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



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

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

“No,” Tee said. “They’re Shuul.”

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

“Yes,” Tee said. “It looks like they’re keeping the building directly between them. And there are two more who are keeping an

eye on a rear entrance on the east side of the building.”

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

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

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

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

“Picking the lock will take time.”

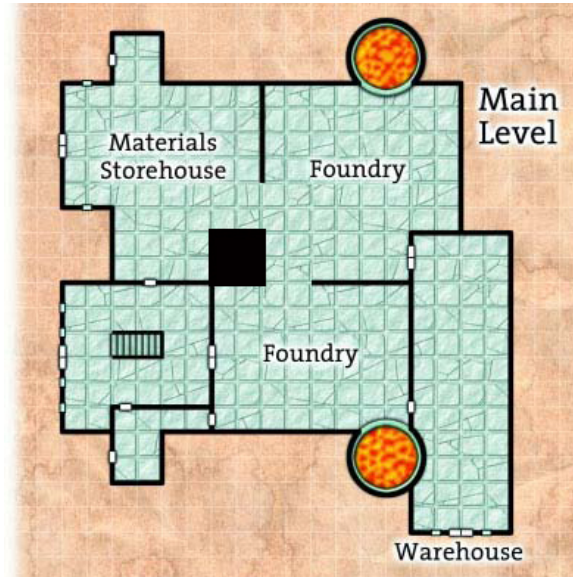
“I don’t need to pick the lock. I’ll climb the wall and head in through the windows.”

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

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

## INTO THE FOUNDRY

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



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

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

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

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

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

“Did you hear about Korben?”

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

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

“Wait. Did you hear that?”

“Stay here while I check it out.”

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

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

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

### SHILUKAR’S DISTRACTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### CHAOS IN THE FOUNDRY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# SESSION 19 – THE END OF SHILUKAR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Get out here!"

## SHILUKAR APPEARS... AND DISAPPEARS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ROUTING THE SHUUL

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

“Drop your weapons.”

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

“Drop the sword! Drop it now!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## SEARCHING FOR SHILUKAR

Agnarr strolled into the entrance hall.

“What’s going on?” Tor demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE WORKSHOPS OF THE SHUUL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### SEARCHING THE WORKSHOPS

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

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

Brother Savane—

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

Maeda

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

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

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

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

"What's wrong?" Elestra asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But there was no idol.

### TORTUROUS PLANNING

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ALTERNATIVES TO TORTURE

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

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

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

"We have captured Shilukar."

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

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

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

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

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

"Seven thousand marks."

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

"Come with me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Arrest him."

### THE OTHER BOUNTY

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

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



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

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



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

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



# SESSION 20 – PYTHONESS HOUSE

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

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

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

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

## IRON MAGE'S LETTER

My dear friends—

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

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

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

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

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

THE IRON MAGE

## IT WAS TIME FOR A REST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## FUNERAL FOR A PYTHON VIPER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

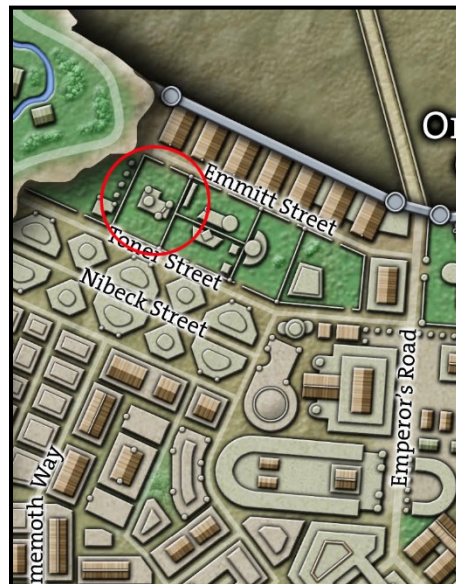
## LEARNING MORE ABOUT PYTHONESS HOUSE

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

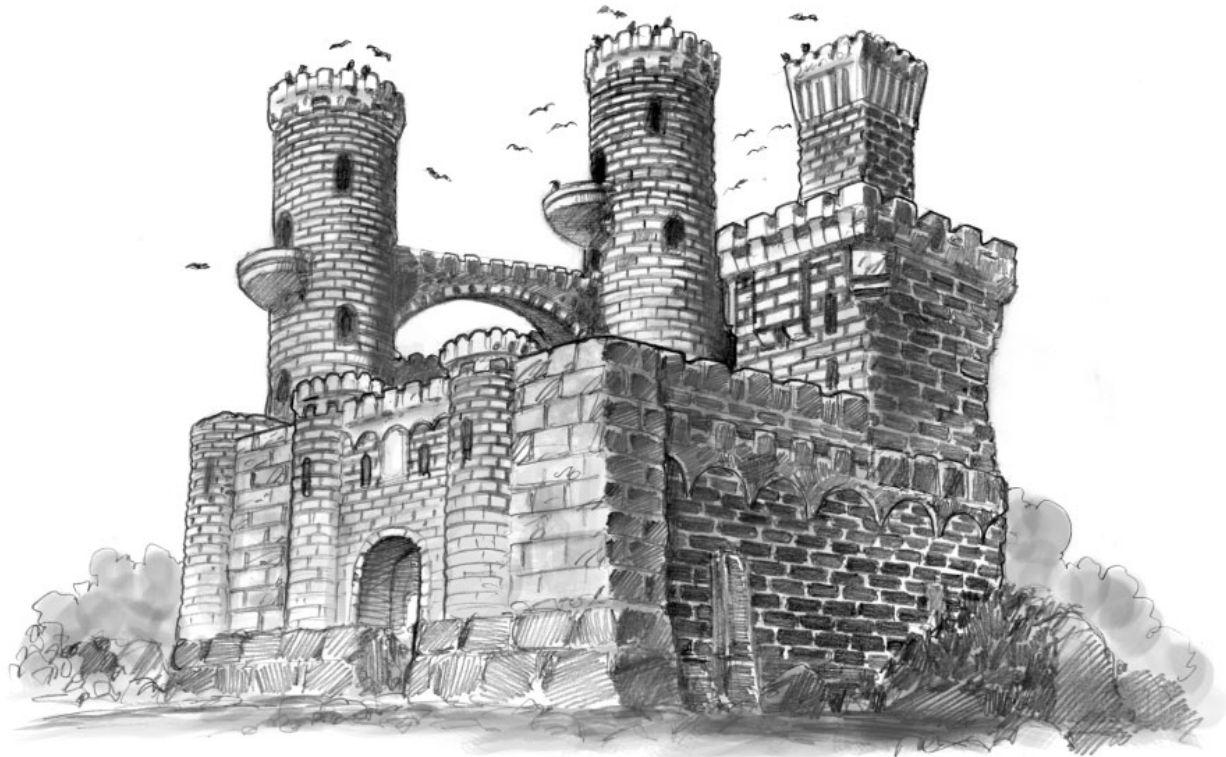
### WITH BLUE IN THE GRASSLANDS

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

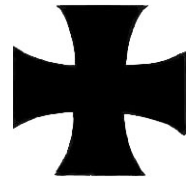
### **TEE AND THE SILVER FATAR**

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

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

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

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



*Athor's Cross*







*Order of the Dawn*

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

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

Tee nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## DOMINIC AND THE SILVER FATAR

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

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

“Will you come with me, Tee?”

“Of course!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## GATHERING AT THE GHOSTLY MINSTREL

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes!” Elestra said.

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

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

### ANOTHER INTERLUDE WITH TEE

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

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

"Leytha?"

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

"With the help of my friends."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh?"

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

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

Tee nodded.

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

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

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

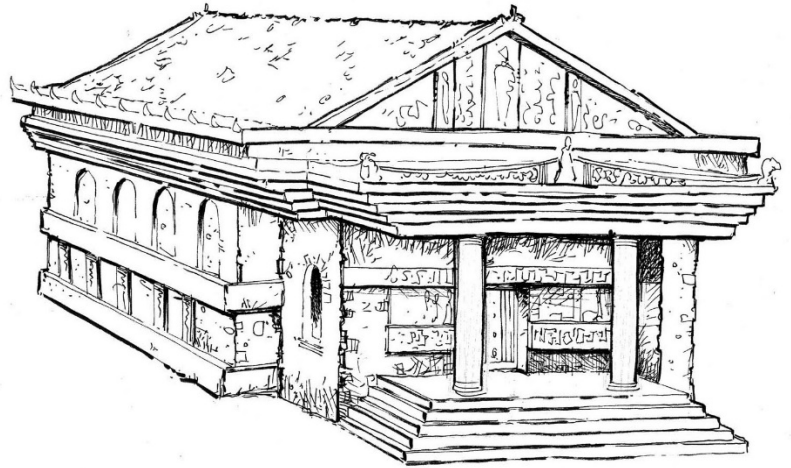
### AN EVENING WITH TEE

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

### TEE AND THE DREAMING APOTHECARY

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

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

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

“Of course!”

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

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

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

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

“What do you wish from us?”

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### RANTHIR’S LABORS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Ranthir named his familiar Erinaceidae.

### MAND SCHEBEN (09/09/790)

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

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

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

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

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

### INTO PYTHONESS HOUSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then there was silence.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## HAUNTINGS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is it?” Elestra asked.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A SECOND AMBUSH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### UNWELCOME TAIN

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

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

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

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

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

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

### RAT WARRENS AND DINING ROOM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## SECOND HAUNTINGS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tee grimaced. “Agnarr...”

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

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

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

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

## THE GHOST APPEARS

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

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

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

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

The trapdoor slammed shut.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The spirit whirled: "LEAVE THIS PLACE."

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

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

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

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

"LEAVE THIS PLACE!"

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

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

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

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

"Is it gone?" Tee asked.

Dominic gasped. "I think so."

## LOOKING AROUND

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

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

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

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

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

## COOKING RATS

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

### A DEAD PROPHET

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

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

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

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

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

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

### COOKING RATS, PART 2

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

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

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

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

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



## THE DAY'S CODA

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

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

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

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

porcelain bathtub.

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

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

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

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

## MAQUENT'S JOURNAL

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

### **Ulanseyl 18, 786**

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

### **Ulanseyl 22, 786**

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

### **Ulanseyl 29, 786**

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

### **Duelsayl 10, 786**

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

### **Siythtural 10, 786**

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

**Thoral 1, 787**

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

**Siltarsal 15, 787**

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

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

**Noctural 14, 787**

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

**Essaseyl, 788**

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

**Taranal 10, 788**

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

**Taranal 18, 788**

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

**Ildelial 2, 788**

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

**Ildelial 15, 788**

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

## LEAVING PYTHONESS HOUSE

“I MUST FEED...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were trapped.

# SESSION 21 – THE SAINT’S SCHISM

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

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

Tee turned around. “Ranthir?”

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

“I thought we got rid of the ghost.”

“Apparently not,” Agnarr said.

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

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

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

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

“What was it?” Elestra asked.

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

## A TORMENTED LEAVETAKING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I need help!” Dominic called out.

The stone block began to rise back into the air.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE TEMPLE OF ITOUR

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

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

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

## SERVANT OF THE SURGEON

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

“Yes,” Elestra said.

“Why?” Tor asked.

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

“We don’t have them,” Tor said.

“Would Mistress Tithenmamiwen have them?”

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

“I see.”

“How can we contact you?”

“I will... wait.”

They backed carefully out of the room and headed upstairs.

## THE STAR OF ITOR

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes.”

“Is it true?”

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

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

Tee hesitantly interrupted. “Can Rehobath be trusted?”

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

“Why don’t you trust the Church?”

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

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

Dominic stayed. “How were you Chosen?”

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

“He actually speaks to you?”

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

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

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

“Who?”

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

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

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

“Yes, please!” Dominic grinned.

## TURNING THE SURGEON AWAY

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

“Welcome... Mistress Tithenmamiwen.”

“You know who I am?”

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



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

“I don’t have them any more.”

“But you could obtain them?”

“I doubt it.”

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

“We’ll think about it.”

“I cannot... persuade you?”

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

“We will... contact you.”

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

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

### AT THE COMMISSAR’S REQUEST

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

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

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

Mistress Tithenmamiwen—

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

Commissar Urnst

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

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

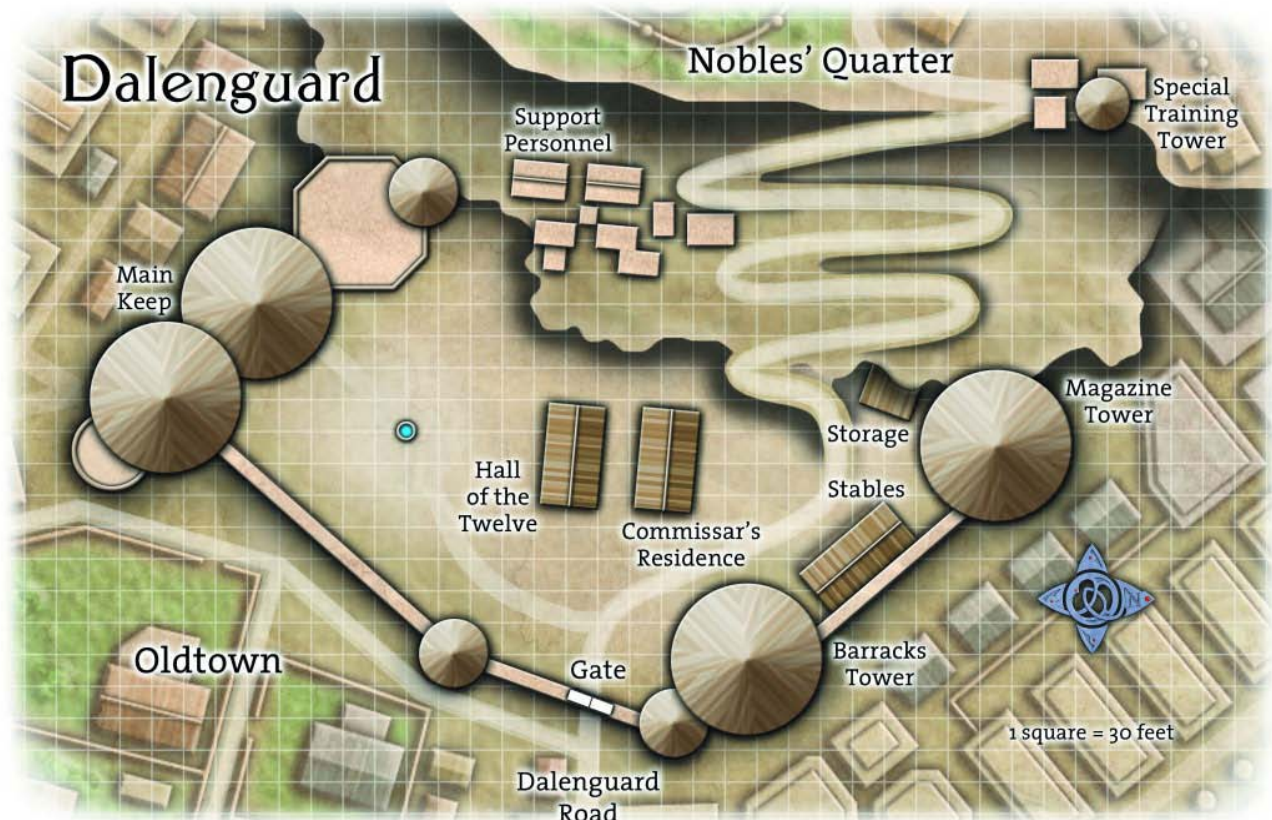
The rain had eased itself into a gentle drizzle, but the sky was still filled with a cold, grey light. The Commissar stood by himself, inspecting more than a dozen cannons.

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

“Mistress Tee?”

“Yes, Commissar.”

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tee again found herself at a loss for words.

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

### OF PRELATES...

(09/10/790)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ... AND NOVARCHS

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The crowd gasped. Rehobath whirled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# SESSION 22 – RETURN TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## DORAEDIAN'S COUNSEL

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

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

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

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

"Neither were we."

"And where's Dominic?"

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

"I see."

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

"Did he?" Doraedian raised an eyebrow.

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

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

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

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

"Of course." Tee smiled.

## LET'S GO DELVING

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

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

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

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

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

## RETURN TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

“COME TO ME...”

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

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

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

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

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

“If she dropped it down there...”

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

“What if the rope breaks again?” Elestra asked.

“We'll just have to risk it,” Tee said, handing one end of the rope off to Tor.

Tee had climbed down about ten feet when the booming voice returned: “I MUST FEED...”

Tor, distracted by the voice, jerked his head up. As a result, he missed seeing the rope fraying in front of his hands. With a sudden snap, the rope broke. Tee, feeling the rope go slack, attempted to push off the wall and control her fall... but she slipped on the slick, moss-covered stones. She tried to roll in mid-air, but only succeeded in cracking her skull against the far wall.

She landed heavily on her shoulder. Fortunately, her fall had been cushioned by a thick layer of dead leaves and detritus. She felt blood trickling down her forehead.

“CHAOS IS THE KEY...”

“Are you all right, Tee?!” Everyone up above was peering over the edge.

“I'm fine,” Tee struggled to her feet. Probing gently at her aching shoulder she mournfully remembered the *boots of levitation* she was still carrying in her *bag of holding*. “Give me a couple minutes.”

Tee started poking around in the dead leaves. Less than a minute later, she was triumphantly grasping a rusty iron key in her hand: “I've got it!”

## RADANNA

Tee had no problem using the *boots of levitation* to lift herself back up to the others in the ruined garden. Key in hand, they began studying the journal again and discussing different possibilities.

They figured they had to find some way into the square tower. From what Maquent had said in her journal, it seemed as if the secret, locked entrance to that room would be located somewhere up high – maybe a ceiling or on the outer surface of the tower itself.

“And that'll get us half of the spiral key or whatever it is,” Elestra said. “But what about the other half?”

“The journal says that Maquent gave it to the ‘Cobbledman’,” Ranthir said.

“But who is that?”

“I think it might have been the guy I tried to shoot yesterday,” Tee said. “I probably shouldn't have done that.”

“FIRE!”



Arrows suddenly fell among them. One of them clipped Elestra's shoulder. All of them were suddenly in motion – diving for cover in different directions.

Somehow six skeletal women – most clad in the tattered remnants of their brothel fineries – had crept onto the upper terrace and were now firing arrows down into the ruined garden at them.

Tee, sliding in behind the limited cover of the parapet, pulled out her dragon pistol and began to return fire. Her first blast caught one of the skeletons in the chest, turning its emaciated ribcage to dust.

Agnarr and Tor, meanwhile, had drawn their swords and were charging up the stairs. Ranthir, quickly assessing the situation, began weaving his magicks and managed to seize partial control over the mind of one of the skeletal warriors – tricking it into believing that its weapons were cursed and “suggesting” that it would be best to hurl them into the courtyard below.

Elestra, following Tee's lead, sought cover behind the parapet and pulled out her dragon rifle. The two of them laid down a barrage of energy blasts, but the skeletal women were implacable. Ranthir ducked out of sight as another arrow came too close for comfort.

As Tor and Agnarr reached the upper terrace, the two nearest skeletal women dropped their bows and drew short swords. Stripped of their skin, the skeletons moved with preternatural speed – forcing Tor and Agnarr into defensive stances.

One of the skeletal women was wearing chainmail. She had been the one to shout the command to fire, and now she drew out a battleaxe and darted towards Agnarr and Tor. She moved even faster than the others, slipping between their ranks and taking a swing at Agnarr that cut deep into his upper leg.

Agnarr, roaring as he let the pain feed his burning rage, swung mightily. His flaming greatsword cleaved its way through one of the skeletons and nearly caught the chainmail-clad leader before she ducked out of the way.

One of the skeletal women broke and ran, opening a secret door in the side of the keep and racing through. Elestra and Tee shot another as it attempted to turn its bow on Agnarr, while Tor cut down another in midstride.

This left only the chainmail-clad skeleton. She fell back towards the secret door, fighting tooth-and-nail with Agnarr and Tor at every step. She was wily and crafty, ducking this way and that – her ancient bones moving with a lithe and vicious life. “You fools! None can cross the power of chaos and live!”

With the upper terrace cleared of archers, Dominic was free to come out from cover. Following close behind Agnarr and Tor, he reached a begrimed window on the wall near the secret door.

He found himself looking into a large and once-sumptuous bedchamber. Unlike those on the ground floor, however, this room featured only a single large bed. It was surrounded by a wealth of furniture – a

dresser, padded chairs, divans, braziers, and tables. He didn't see any sign of the skeletal woman that had run into the room, but he did see another door to the left and a staircase leading up. He gestured towards the other door.

Tee leapt up from behind the parapet and ran down the short hallway leading to the second door. It was locked. She whipped out her lockpicks and set to work on it. Ranthir came up behind her. “What are you doing Tee? Are you going to pick the lock? Oh, I see!”

Tee groaned silently to herself.

“The power of the Crimson Coil shall never die!” the skeletal leader backed into the room. She raised her battleaxe and brought it crashing down on Tor's chest, but Tor's breastplate turned the blow.

“You're already dead!” Tor roared and pressed his attack.

Meanwhile, Tee – unseen – had gotten the other door open. Seeing the skeletal woman with her back turned to her, she pulled out her dragon pistol and fired. Unfortunately, the skeletal woman chose that moment to dart forward, and the blast splashed uselessly across the back of her chainmail.

The skeletal woman whirled. “No! None shall enter my chambers!” In an utter, unthinking rage she charged across the room at Tee. Tee fell back, firing wildly.

Tor took advantage of the situation and followed at Radanna's heels, plunging his sword down into her skull. It cleaved through the top of her head and lodged there, sending purple arcs of electricity bursting from her eyes.

Dominic followed Tor into the room. His eyes darting around – taking in the holes in the dusty floor where skeletal bodies had lain for years; the blood-stained knife laying upon the floor in the center of a pentagram traced with blood. He drifted towards the large bed tucked into one corner of the room... and spotted the other skeletal woman cowering behind it.

He gestured frantically towards Agnarr. Agnarr, taking his cue, charged across the room and leapt full-bodied over the bed. “FOR THE GLORY!”

The skeletal woman shrank back against the wall. “No! PLEASE!”

Agnarr's sword sliced down through her skull and shattered the bones of what had once been her body. As she crumbled slowly into dust, her final whisper drifted into his ears: “Thank you... I am free...”

Agnarr grunted and sheathed his sword. “You're welcome.”

Meanwhile, the skeletal leader – in a frenzied flurry of blades – had been cut down by Tor and Tee. Tee, inspecting the body, discovered the chain armor was of superb quality. The woman had also worn a ruby ring and matching gold bracelet worth a small fortune. On the interior of the bracelet was inscribed a name:

RADANNA



Laying near the gruesome remains of whatever deadly ritual had been held here there was a slim, red book. On the cover, traced in blood, was the symbol of a spiral. Ranthir began examining it as Tee continued searching the room.

### THE SCARLET OATH



On the cover of this book, written in blood, is the symbol of a coil. On the first page is an oath:

“I pledge my body, soul, and purpose to the furtherance of chaos. We shall act as one. We shall breathe as one. We shall think as one. And in our crimson coils we shall choke out the life of those who would bring us death. We shall choke out the order which stifles life. We shall choke out the civilization which crushes liberty.”

The rest of the book teaches the ways of the Brotherhood of the Crimson Coil. The cult acts like a virus – their faces hidden; their identities submerged into the Coil itself. The members of the cult do not mix in normal society, preferring to remain cloistered in remote temples or hidden demesnes. The only time the cultists make an appearance is to carry out a Purging. During a Purging the cultists appear *en masse* to carry out some act of terrible destruction.

The cult chooses a target, seemingly at random, and then show up to burn down a building; set fire to a field; slaughter a family; or deface a monument. They are neither subtle nor gentle. They show neither mercy nor fear. Usually, their raids come so suddenly and unexpectedly that they meet little resistance. They usually appear in numbers so great, they simply cannot be stopped—a hundred cultists to burn down a single house, a dozen to murder a merchant walking down the street. They disappear quickly, often using spells to cover their escape.

## THE FIFTH FLOOR

While Tee and Ranthir studied the book, Tor shuffled through the cluttered effluvium lying out on one of the tables in the room. There were several bottles of perfume here, still stored in crystal vials. They brought a smile to Tor’s face, reminding him of the faces of his family. He pocketed two of the vials, thinking that he might send them back home as presents for his daughters.

There was nothing else of true value left in the room: Moldering silks and other expensive clothes lay in ruins. However, in one of the wardrobes Tee did find a single red robe decorated with the same spiral symbol as the book’s cover. This robe, unlike the other clothing, seemed to have been perfectly preserved.

Lying on the floor behind one of the divans, Tee found a portrait in a broken frame. Although badly dilapidated, they could still make out a young man with lanky brown hair. His features seemed queerly unsymmetric. A small brass plaque on the frame read:

### WUNTAD

They went up the stairs, emerging into a large empty room on the fifth floor. Another staircase on the far side of the room headed up towards the sixth floor, but they turned towards the room’s single door instead. This opened into a small hallway that ended, off to their right, in the ruined remains of a small balcony (which they had previously seen from below while trying to climb out of the castle).

They crossed the hall, opened another door, and looked into a small, oddly shaped room. Four piles of bones had been neatly arranged in random locations on the floor. There were also some old wooden bookcases along one wall.

Ranthir, hearing the word “bookcases”, started forward – but Tee waved him back: There were no books left on these shelves. Instead, three human skulls marked with the spiral symbol of the Crimson Coil sat next to a small iron coffer.

Tee pondered the situation for a moment and then decided not to take any chances. Drawing her dragon pistol, she fired directly into the nearest pile of bones. The pile exploded to no effect.

Shrugging, Tee holstered her dragon pistol and headed over to the bookcases. Grabbing the iron coffer she quickly picked its lock and flipped it open, revealing five vials set into padded lining. Four of the vials contained a black liquid, while the liquid in the fourth was a silvery-gold in color.

While the others remained behind, Tee and Agnarr headed through into the next room – an empty, circular chamber with an open archway leading out onto a balcony filled with dirt and dead leaves.

Tee took the time to move out onto the balcony and look down into the ruined garden below. Turning back, her eye happened to catch a runestone that hung from the wall. Her familiarity with the archaic elven tongues allowed her to recognize it as the rune for “blessed protection”, although it had been badly damaged. Smiling, she reached up to take the rune down off the wall.

As her fingertips brushed against the runestone, however, she felt her mind being invaded by strange, alien thoughts. A horrible compulsion seized her to race for the edge of the roof and hurl herself down to oblivion.

Her right foot twitched, as if to turn her towards the edge... but then her own thoughts imposed themselves again. She gritted her teeth and forced her foot back to the ground. Pulling her hand back from the runestone, she felt the compulsion fading from her completely. She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

But even as Tee was fighting to control her own body, Agnarr caught a sudden movement in the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw one of the skulls from the bookcase floating across the doorway towards one of the bone piles. With lightning reflexes, he hurled himself back into the room, drew his sword, and neatly cleaved the skull in two.

Elestra, her attention drawn by Agnar’s sudden movement, stepped into the room from the opposite direction with her dragon rifle drawn. Seeing the two remaining skulls on the shelves begin to move, she quickly took aim on the one to the right and blew a hole straight through its eye socket.

With one great stride, Agnarr reached the bookcase and brought his sword down on the other, shattering it into countless shards of bone.

Tee came back into the room. “What’s going on?”

Agnarr turned to her. “Nothing now.”

## THE SIXTH FLOOR

They rejoined the others. Concluding that there was nothing else of interest on the fifth floor, Tee and Agnarr took the stairs up to the sixth floor. These stairs reached what appeared to be the base chamber of the keep’s central tower. However, the way up to the next level of this tower had apparently been bricked over years ago. However, there was a door off to one side and an open archway led to the bridge between this central tower and the eastern tower.

The door was locked, so Tee knelt next to it and got to work. Agnarr, standing nearby, decided to start oiling the hinges. Tee, remembering the last time Agnarr had decided some hinges needed oiling, began grinding her teeth, but managed to ignore him... mostly.

Tee finished up, hearing the satisfying sound of a tumbler clicking open. Standing up she reached for the

handle. But Agnarr, wanting to test his handiwork, pushed past her and twisted the handle himself.

There was a click and a hiss—And Tee hurled herself out of the room as the entire chamber was engulfed in a massive explosion that blew out onto the balcony and followed her into the lower chamber where the others were still waiting.

Agnarr – on fire and screaming in pain – rushed down the stairs a moment later. They managed to quickly smother out the flames and Dominic channeled a burst of divine energy into his body to undo the horrible burns. Agnarr gasped with the sudden relief of it.

“Well, at least it was me instead of Tee who took the worst of it,” Agnarr said. “It’s a good thing that I was the one to open that door.” Then a thoughtful look entered his eyes. “Wait... is *that* why you always have me open the doors first?”

Everybody looked at each other. “We thought you knew!” Elestra said.

Agnarr, in a surly temper, headed back up the stairs. “Well, at least the door’s safe now.”

It took Tee a moment to realize what he was doing. “Agnarr! No!”

Twist. Click. Hiss.

Agnarr came hurtling out of the doorway and tumbled down the staircase an instant before a nearly identical explosion was unleashed. “I knew that click. I knew that hiss!”

Tee, shaking her head, headed back up and took another look at the door. After several minutes of work she was feeling fairly confident that she had disabled the trigger for the magical explosion.

... but she was wrong. And this time she took the brunt of the blast, collapsing with her lungs blackened and burnt by the scorched air. Dominic was forced to expend even more of the gods’ power to get her back on her feet. Then, out of pure stubbornness, she went back to work.

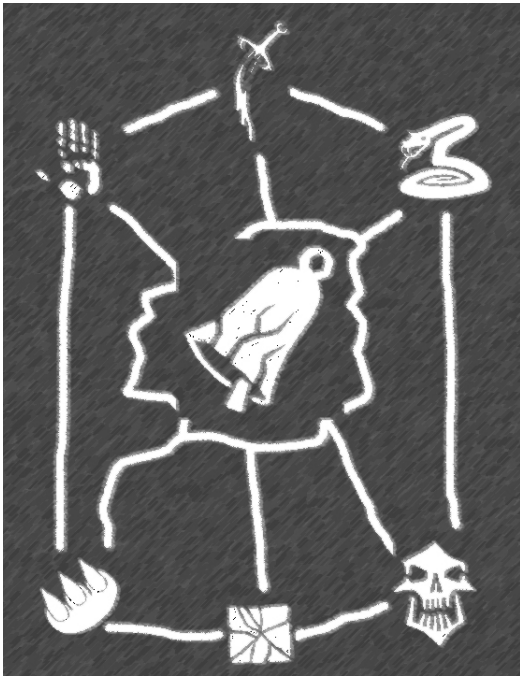
This time she was successful. With a grim satisfaction, she swung the door open.

## WORKINGS OF THE CHAOS CULTS

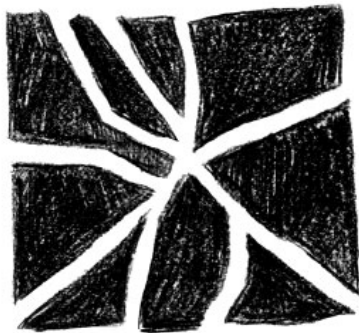
The walls, floor, and ceiling of the room were covered in a haphazard array of magical circles, symbols, and strange characters. The sight was almost dizzying. After little more than a glance, Tee called out for Ranthir to join her.

Ranthir quickly identified the symbols as belonging to a variety of rites, although none were immediately known to him. He did note that many of them bore a more than superficial resemblance to the rites performed by the Seyrunian demon-binding cults of the previous century. And others seemed to have something to do with the creation and binding of energy. Some simply seemed to be mad scribbles to which Ranthir could not ascribe

any immediate sense. One particular section of the wall had been completely covered in charcoal, and then written upon in chalk:



Tee, meanwhile, had discovered that one of the wood panels on the floor was loose. Prying it up revealed a small cache containing two books and a gold ring bearing the device of a broken square:



Ranthir was immediately distracted by the books. Eagerly taking them from Tee's hands he began flipping through them.

## TRUTH OF THE HIDDEN GOD



What appears, at first, to be a copy of the *Book of Athor* is nothing of the sort: The pages inside are covered with scrawled diagrams and heretical desecrations of the Nine Gods.

A closer reading reveals this to be a cult manual for the "Brotherhood of the Blooded Knife". The cult venerates chaos in all its forms, focusing their blasphemous rituals around the practice of human sacrifice. These sacrifices are given to a Galchutt named Abthoth, who they venerate as the "Source of All Filth" and the "Lord of the Zaug".

Disturbingly, much of the book is given over to material designed to mock the holy rituals of the Church. It appears that the cult establishes itself secretly in society by posing as other religious orders. Actual followers of the deity may choose to join them, usually to their dismay – either they come to join the cult itself or they die beneath the cult's "blooded knife".

In other cases, a few cultists will infiltrate another religion and use force, blackmail, magic, or simple persuasion to sway its members into secretly worshipping chaos. This process can take years, but eventually the cult eats the other religion from the inside out, consuming it until the temple is entirely a front for the altars of the Brotherhood hidden in their subterranean complexes.

The last few pages of the book appear to be a prophetic rambling of sorts, beginning with the words: "In the days before the Night of Dissolution shall come, our pretenses shall drop like rotted flies. In those days the Church shall be broken, and we shall call our true god by an open name." The remainder of this section is a description of the faux religious practices for a fanciful "Rat God", with the apparent intention being that a church could be openly established for this "god". Eventually, the prophecies, say even this "last pretense" will be abolished and "Abthoth shall be worshipped by all who are not blooded by the knife".

## TOUCH OF THE EBON HAND



The pages of this volume are filled with disturbing and highly detailed diagrams of the most horrible physical deformities and mutations. A closer reading quickly reveals that these deformities – referred to as “the touch of the ebon hand” – are venerated by the writers as the living personification of chaos incarnate. Particularly prized are those functional mutations – an extra eye or oversized arms, for example.

The rest of the book describes horrid rites which make it clear that the Brotherhood of the Ebon Hand not only idolizes deformity and mutation, but seek to inflict it and spread it as well: Ritual scarring. Magical alteration. Alchemical experimentation. Chaositech-induced mutation.

Members of the cult have no distinctive garb, but they usually bear the symbol of a black hand in some form: A tattoo. A charm. A small embroidery on their clothes. Or so forth. Of course, most of them are also marked by their mutations.

## **THE COBBLED MAN**

As Tee continued searching, Elestra also came into the room. Looking over Ranthir’s shoulder she pointed at the charcoal wall: “We’ve seen three of these symbols now. The hand, the knife, and the broken square.”

“I wonder what the others could mean.”

“Something to do with the cults, I guess.”

They continued chatting quietly as Tee probed at the walls and the floor.

Dominic, in the tower outside, stood looking in at them. And then pain rushed through his body as a heavy blow landed across the back of his skull.

Stumbling forward he felt a horrible wave of nausea rip through his body. Turning he saw a horrific,

monstrous man: A second head had been awkwardly attached to its shoulder, and the muscles of its arms and legs were grotesquely over-developed. The hair on both of its heads was greasy, lanky, and sparse. The eyes on one of the heads was shut, but the eyes of the other were filled with rage. In its right hand it clenched a silvery rod.

“WHY ARE YOU IN WUNTAD’S ROOM?”

Its voice was a dull boom. Its words sullen.

Tor, reacting almost instantly, rushed up the stairs from below. Emerging into the cramped base of the tower, he was clipped nastily along the side of his head. Like Dominic, he felt a nauseous wave pass over him. Shaking it off, he swung his sword – opening a vicious gash in the creature’s arm.

Ranthir rushed out, as well. “Can’t we just work this out?” But his voice was drowned out in the sudden chaos of the melee.

But then Tee shoved her way past him and her voice carried a greater authority: “Stop it! Wuntad sent us! Stop it now!”

The creature froze, its massive hand hovering to deliver a devastating blow on Tor. “Wuntad sent you?”

“Yes,” Tee lied, putting as much earnestness into her voice as she could. “He sent us.”

“He’s been gone so long. I’ve been alone for so long...” The dimwitted voice was filled with painful sorrow.

Tee softened. “Are you the Cobbledman?”

“... someone called me that. Once. They left too. A long time ago.” The Cobbledman clutched absently at the rags on his chest. “They left me all alone... Do you have any food?”

Ranthir fumbled at one of his pouches and then held out an iron ration. “Why didn’t you leave?”

“Can’t leave.”

“Why can’t you leave?”

“Wuntad put something in my brain. Make me loyal. Make it hurt to leave. Can’t leave until Wuntad say I can leave.”

Ranthir had a sickly certainty that this was a betrayal of the flesh. He could see telltale lumps beneath the Cobbledman’s skin – tubes and... other things.

“What happened to Wuntad?” Tee asked.

“Don’t know. The angry men in the metal suits came. There was lots of angry noise. I hid in my tower. And then everyone left... You’ll leave me, too, won’t you?”

No one had an answer for that.

“Cobbledman,” Tee said carefully. “Do you have a piece of metal that looks like a spiral?”

A look of something very like panic entered the Cobbledman’s eyes. “Yes.”

“Could we have it?”

“No! No! My friend gave it to me! I have to keep it safe! She said so!” His hand groped against the rags on his chest, clutching something beneath them.

“I understand,” Tee said gently. “But if we promised to bring it back, do you think we could borrow it? You could even come with us.”

“Maybe...” The Cobbledman seemed to be losing focus. “Do you have any more food?”

Ranthir gave him some more and the Cobbledman chewed it absentmindedly. “I’m going to go to sleep now. So very hungry...”

He began shambling back across the bridge and disappeared into this tower. They watched him go, sadness and pity filling their hearts.

“Well,” Tee said. “At least we know where one part of the spiral key is. Now we just need to find out where Radanna hid hers.”

# SESSION 23 – THE COMING OF THE CHAOS CULTISTS

June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008

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

“WHO DARES TO VIOLATE THIS SANCTUARY OF CHAOS?”

They whirled around and looked up. Above, on a balcony in the tower directly above them, a demon with a goat-like head was floating several feet off the ground. It carried a vicious looking axe with a blade that gleamed in the sun.

Its powerful legs pushed off the wall behind it, propelling it above their heads. It then dropped to the balcony, floating a few inches above the floor as it swung the axe towards Tee’s head.

Tee tumbled backwards, rolling to her feet in a low crouch. Tor and Agnarr pushed past Ranthir, raised their swords – which they had held uneasily by their sides during the conversation with the Cobbledman – and attacked.

The demon caught Tor’s blade with the broad side of his axe, but Agnarr’s sword cut deeply into its arm. It felt as if he was chopping into a block of solid wood, but the magic blade cleanly cut through the thick skin and found the blood and bone below.

The demon threw back its head and howled in pain. It swept the axe violently back and forth – first smashing the broad side of it against Tor’s head (sending him staggering) and then reversing the blow to smash into the Agnarr’s ribs.

Agnarr gasped as the axe cut through his armor and deep into his side, sending a gush of blood pouring from the wound. The demon’s horns jutted forward, smashing into Agnarr’s forehead.

Elestra reached out, feeling the Spirit of the City and using her own force of will to energize the strength of it around her.

Ranthir, meanwhile, was thinking quickly: He hit the demon with a powerful disenchantment, causing its levitation charm to vanish. The demon fell, landing awkwardly and stumbling forward.

Agnarr, grimacing through the pain, took advantage of the momentary distraction and swung his sword again.

The demon whirled away from the blade, but it still cut deeply into his side. Then it ducked under Tor’s blade and leapt over the parapet, murmuring demonic

syllables. Arcane powers caught it up in the air and it levitated out over the central courtyard.

As it turned back to them, Elestra finished gathering her strength and focused a sizzling arc of lightning which tore through the demon where it flew. But the demon seemed entirely unfazed as the electricity leapt from its horns and arced through its body, instead crying aloud: “You will rue the day that you crossed the path of True Chaos!”

Tee, who had retreated back into the keep itself, suddenly heard heavy footsteps thudding across the stone ceiling above her – which would mean that something was on the roof! “Look out!”

But she was too late to warn any of them. Two hounds of hell leapt from the upper level, landing on the balcony near Tor and Agnarr. Their skin had the appearance of cooled lava; their eyes were smoldering pits; and their nostrils breathed goutts of flame. As they skidded across the balcony, they turned and gaped their mouths: Twin cones of flame washed across Agnarr and Tor.

But Tor had raised his shield at the last possible moment, and Agnarr had eased in behind it: Although they still felt a little broiled in their armor, they were mostly angered by the fell beasts.

Although that might have been more true for Tor than it was for Agnarr, because a huge grin was growing across the barbarian’s face: “Dogs! They’re dogs!”

Tee called out from behind him: “You are not allowed to keep one!”

The smile fell from Agnarr’s face, and he dutifully moved forward with Tor. Their blades worked in quick unison and – although the hounds were covered in skin like liquid stone – their magical blades made quick work of them.

Meanwhile, the demon had fled – abandoning his hounds, reaching the far wall of the keep, and dropping down out of sight.





## THE SQUARE TOWER

With the demon gone and the demonic hounds reduced to a pile of burning slag, Elestra released the powers of lightning she had called and the smell of ozone faded from the air. Turning to the others she said, "So where to now?"

"I still want to try to get to the square tower," Tee said. "If Maquent's journal is still accurate, then the other half of the spiral contrivance or key or whatever it is must be hidden in there."

There had been a trapdoor in the ceiling of the room filled with arcane symbols and the remnants of old rites, so they climbed up through that to reach the roof. From there they were able to cross over to the square tower.

But they found that the square tower had no doors or windows. Tee donned her *boots of levitation* to reach the top of tower, but there was no entrance there, either. She then spent the better part of half an hour scouring every inch of the tower's 24-foot high walls, convinced that there must be some hidden entrance.

Ranthir, meanwhile, was looking through Maquent's journal. Just as Tee, in frustration, was giving up on her search, Ranthir reread the entry from Noctural 14<sup>th</sup>, 787 YD. Then he read it out loud to the others: "I have somewhat befriended the Cobbledman. He grows more mad with each day, however. I hid my half of the spiral contrivance in his tower with him. I shall not even tell Radanna. Of course, she will not tell me where she keeps her half, either, but there's only one place it could be. *Certainly no one could sneak a ladder up to that secret door without her knowing about it.*"

"If the key is in the square tower and it requires a ladder to reach the secret entrance, maybe that entrance isn't on the wall of the tower – maybe it's *under* the tower."

They returned down to the large, empty room on the fifth floor of the tower. "We should be directly beneath the tower here," Ranthir said.

Tee floated up to the ceiling and quickly found a bit of false plaster. Scraping that aside with one of her dragon-hilted daggers, she revealed a small keyhole. She took out the key she had found in the nook below the ruined garden and found that it was a perfect fit.

When she turned it, however, the entire stone block – 6-feet to the side – came loose and fell. It slammed into her and spun her down and to one side. Agnarr, standing below, was caught squarely by the block and driven to the ground.

Dominic rushed forward to help. Agnarr pushed the rock off of his crushed legs and waited patiently for the priest's holy energy to repair his broken bones. "I'm getting tired of falling rocks in this place."

"I think they went with cheap mortar," Dominic said, reaching out to lay a hand on Tee's bleeding scalp as she settled woozily to the floor next to them.

"When we move in here it'll have to be the first thing we fix," Ranthir said.

"We aren't moving into the demon-infested house," Tee said.

Tor smiled. "It won't be demon-infested when we're done with it."

"That's right," Elestra said. "We've already scared off one demon today."

"He'll be back," Tee said grimly.

The stone block had revealed a hole leading through the floor into the bottom level of the square tower. Niches carved in the sides of the hole would make it easy for someone to climb up if they were at the top of a ladder, but they were superfluous for them: Tee's head was clearing now and so she floated up through the hole.

She emerged into a small, square room. A ladder of iron rungs driven into one wall led up to a trapdoor. The other walls of the room were covered with carved niches. Most of these niches were empty, but in four of them Tee could see flasks of liquid. In another there were a half dozen sticks of black-and-gold incense. In a sixth lay a small gray idol.

Tee grimaced. "I hate idols. Idols haven't been nice to me." She unlaced her boots and dropped them down so that Agnarr could follow her up.

Tee climbed up the ladder to the next level of the tower. Here she found a plain room of stone with an iron chest lying off to one side. The ladder continued up to a trap door of stone secured with a thick iron bar.

The lock on the chest proved tricky, but Tee eventually managed to get it open. Inside she found bags of silver and gold coins, a thick candlestick of pure gold, and a finely-crafted headband of woven silver. Laying at the bottom chest was half of a circular disk of black obsidian with a bright red stone spiraled through it.



Tee climbed back down the ladder and found Agnarr peering quizzically at one of the niches. "Don't touch anything. I've found Radanna's half of the contrivance... key... whatever it is."

“Now we just need to kill the Cobbledman for the other half.” Agnarr grinned.

“I don’t think we’ll need to kill him. He seemed all right with the idea of letting us borrow it.”

“I thought it was inside of him. He grabbed his chest when he was talking about it.”

“I think he was just grabbing at something under his shirt.”

“Oh.” Agnarr thought about this for a second and then jerked his head towards the niches in the wall. “Should we take this stuff?”

Tee glowered at the idol. “I guess we’d better figure out what it is. Why don’t you go back down and send Dominic up to look at it.”

Agnarr shrugged and jumped down through the hole. He handed the boots over to Dominic, who murmured a prayer to Vehthyl and floated up just high enough for his eyes to clear the edge.

He was able to quickly identify the flasks as containing unholy water. The incense had a strong aura of magic about them.

“And the idol?” Tee asked.

“It has no enchantment upon it. I think it’s safe.”

Tee picked it up and found that it was formed of compressed ash. It was really nothing more than a trinket. She stuck it in her bag, decided against taking the unholy water, and then gingerly picked up the incense.

Dominic, meanwhile, had floated back down to join the others. Agnarr threw the boots back up, Tee laced them up, and floated down. She held out the sticks of incense. “Ranthir can you identify what these are?”

Ranthir took them and raised his eyebrows. “I can, actually. These golden runes on the side are unmistakable. This is vision incense. The six sticks must be burned simultaneously, and their conjoined enchantments create a powerful connection between this world and the dreams of those nearby. Great truth can be found in the visions revealed by incense like this. There are many in Isiltur who use it.”

### CLEARING THE KEEP

They headed across the bridge and into the Cobbledman’s tower. Climbing down, Tee found herself in a chamber littered from broken bones and filth. On a dirty pallet of grey straw, the Cobbledman lay sleeping.

Tee approached him and gently shook him by the shoulder. He stirred, and then the eyes on his second head – the one that hadn’t spoken before – shot open. His hand shot out and grasped Tee by the throat, choking the life out of her. The second head let out a low growl of rage.

Tee panicked for a moment, but then thought quickly. She slapped the other head soundly across the cheek. It woke up, bleary-eyed. It took in Tee. It took in the other head. “No! Don’t!”

The Cobbledman’s other arm darted out and punched the Cobbledman’s second head.

The hand on Tee’s throat dropped away and she fell to the floor (realizing only then that she had been lifted up into the air).

“Are you all right?” the Cobbledman asked. The second head was glaring and sulking.

“I think so,” Tee said, rubbing her throbbing throat. “I’m sorry I woke you up. But you said we might be able to borrow the spiral key that Maquent gave you. Do you think we could do that?”

The Cobbledman grasped at his shirt front. “...I don’t know.”

“We have the other piece,” Tee said, holding it up. “We’d only need it for a little while. And once we were done, you could have both parts.”

“Really?” the Cobbledman’s right face split into a wide grin. “All right.” From under his shirt he pulled out the other half of the spiraled disc:



With a sharp tug, he broke the leather strap it was hanging from and handed it over to Tee. She smiled, thanked him, and gave him some more food. Then she climbed back up to where the others were waiting.

“Got it.”

“What do we do with it?” Elestra asked.

“I don’t know,” Tee said.

“Could this be the key you were looking for?” Tor asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Tee said. “I think the key we’re looking for is below the statue. I think this is something the cultists made.”

“How will we get the two pieces back together again?”

Tee shrugged and pressed the two pieces together. There was a bright flash of light, and the pieces were seamlessly joined.



“I thought that might work.”

Even with the key in hand, they still wanted to make sure that the rest of the keep had been cleared out before doing anything else. Leaving enemies at their back while they journeyed down into whatever waited beneath the house didn't seem like a good idea.

Fortunately, they had already explored most of the keep. They started by climbing the stairs that led from the roof of the house up to the central tower. There they found a chamber filled with a weblike nest of bits of old cloth and other rubbish, held together with a hardened, glistening excretion of some kind.

“Disgusting,” Tee said, and then stepped aside to let Agnarr chop his way through it. She could see that there was a ladder on the far side leading up to the tower's parapet. But a few moments later she was holding up her hand: “Stop!”

Agnarr stepped back and Tee stepped forward: She had been right. There were two more of the red robes which had apparently belonged to the Crimson Coil cult stuck in the nest. “These might come in useful,” she said, carefully prying them out. One of them was in fairly shabby condition (“I can fix that!” Elestra said.), but the other was in good condition (albeit filthy).

Agnarr went back to work, and within a few minutes Tee was pushing open the trapdoor leading to the parapet. Poking her head through, her gaze was immediately arrested by a crown sitting in the center of the parapet.

With a closer look, she quickly realized that the crown itself was nothing but cheap wood painted gold. But her interest was piqued by the eight large blue garnets: To her trained eyes, these appeared real... and, if they were, they would easily be worth 200 gold crowns each.

### BINDING FOUL AND FAIR

That left only one nook left to explore: The lower levels of the Cobbledman's tower. These couldn't be accessed

from above, however, so they circled back down through the keep and then climbed back up.

This brought them to a small, poorly furnished room. In the center of the room there was a rickety wooden table. On the top of the table a pentagram had been inscribed in charcoal. Three objects stood within the pentagram, positioned at points of power within the diagram: A jar of yellowish liquid; a short, fat candle half-expended; and, on a copper plate, a book.

Tor, looking at the jar, grimaced. “We've found somebody's chamberpot.”

Tee turned back to the ladder. “Ranthir! Get up here!”

Ranthir was quickly able to identify the ritual as an exploitation of sympathetic magic. “It's a binding ritual,” he explained. “The jar is either formed of diamond crystal or a polymorphed diamond – I can't tell which. But you can see that the purity of the crystal has been corrupted. The pattern of the pentagram also suggests that it was, in fact, a dual-binding ritual: One spirit was bound here, to this jar. But this minor ritual was used, through the laws of sympathetic magic, to trigger a much larger binding somewhere else. And the spirits would have been opposed – one evil or chaotic; the other lawful or good. The burning of the candle would have triggered the sympathetic connections of the ritual and... Yes, here on the candle we can see inscribed the name *Segginal* in arcane runes.”

“Who's Segginal?” Tor asked.

“I don't know,” Ranthir said.

“The Cobbledman,” Tee suggested. “One bad head; one good head. A spirit bound to each.”

“Perhaps,” Ranthir said. “But the nature of the ritual suggests that one of the spirits is still bound here, in the jar. Or rather to the jar.”

“Then which one was bound in the jar? The good one or the bad one?”

“It could be the spirit that haunts the castle,” Tor said. “The ritual could have been what bound it here.”

“Well, the book should tell us more,” Ranthir said, and picked it up. He flipped it open... and the pages seemed to blur before his eyes, forming a black maw that seemed to open inside his very mind... threatening to overwhelm him... to swallow his very mind...

Ranthir jerked the book away, slamming it shut and throwing it onto the table.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

Ranthir rubbed his forehead. His thoughts seemed blurred. The edge of his intellect dulled. “The book... the book betrayed me!”

Ranthir remained in a rather foul mood as they discussed their options. He'd heard of the foul corruptions which could turn a book into an inversion of itself – a consumer of knowledge instead of a giver of knowledge – but he still felt personally violated by the

experience. It was a betrayal that struck at the heart of everything he held dear.

After weighing their options, Tee decided that they should break the jar. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Death,” Tor said.

Agnarr, hearing this as they came back down the ladder, grinned. “Sounds like my kind of plan.”

They went down to the courtyard.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” Dominic asked.

Tee shrugged and threw the jar against the stone wall. It shattered into shards and, where the shards fell, a whirlwind sprang up. It grew suddenly in strength, whipping their hair and causing some to fall back a step. Elestra cursed. Tor tightened his grip on his sword.

And then the whirlwind gave way and disappeared. In its place, a tall figure with pale blue skin and white-feathered wings hovered in the air. He looked down at them with eyes of pure light.

“My name is Edlari. I thank you for freeing me from my foul imprisonment. I owe you a debt that cannot easily be repaid.” He turned his gaze to the sky and frowned. “What year is it?”

“790.”

“Has it been so long?” He shook his head sadly. “I can sense a great evil in this place, but it lies beneath us where I cannot reach it. Will you accept my aid, meager though it may be?”

“Of course,” Tee said.

He flew to each of them in turn, his heavy wings beating softly at the air, and laid his hand upon their brows. They felt their wounds and aches fade from their bones and blood. Ranthir could feel the fog left by the evil tome fade from his thoughts. Tee, with great joy, could feel the rigors of the taint fading from her soul... although, in the same moment, she felt the weight of the dark items which lay in the bag at her side.

“And now,” Edlari said, “I must return to the Pale Tower. Seek for me there if you would speak with me again.”

With that, he was gone – his wings carrying him up and over the walls of the keep.

## BENEATH PYTHONESS HOUSE

As far as they could tell, the keep was now empty except for themselves and the Cobbledman. They turned their attention to the statue in the first hall of the keep, and were surprised – as they rounded the corner towards it – to discover that a gap had opened in the statue’s stomach, revealing a circular depression into which the spiraled disc would fit perfectly.

They concluded that the depression must have opened when they had joined the two halves of the disc together.

Tee stepped forward, but Agnarr took the disc from her and fitted it carefully into the statue. With a twist of the wrist he was able to turn it counter-clockwise. With a rumbling groan and a burst of stale air, the statue rolled down the hall towards him. Agnarr stepped deftly to one side and saw, where the statue had been, a hole in the floor.

A twenty-foot shaft dropped straight down into a room with a ten-foot-high ceiling. Iron rungs set in the side of the shaft made it an easy climb. The chamber itself was of plain stone, but the floor to one side was interrupted by a fleshy membrane that quivered in the draft of air that flowed up towards the keep above. On the other side of the room, slumped against the wall, was a giant’s skeleton.

The skeleton was of titanic proportions and clad in age-tattered robes. The hem of these robes were embroidered with strange, round-shaped runes. Ranthir, glancing over from the iron rungs as he climbed down, instantly recognized them as Lithuin runes. These strange runes – now unreadable – were believed to have been used by the Titan Spawn of the legendary city of Lithuin. Only a few samples of such runes were known to survive. He was excited to study them in more detail.

But as Tee’s foot touched the floor, the skeleton began to stir – clouds of dust rising from its form as it slowly lurched to its feet. “Agnarr!” Tee cried. “Tor!”

Agnarr let go of the ladder and dropped to the floor (he was only a few feet above it in any case). Tor, taking up the rear guard as usual, had to jump clear of the wall to avoid hitting Ranthir and Dominic on the way down, but he landed easily, his sword already drawn.

Things went poorly at first: The titan spawn skeleton’s massive hand easily swept past their defenses, delivering bone-crushing blows. But then Dominic reached the floor and was able to lay his hands on Agnarr – at his touch, the familiar divine strength poured into Agnarr’s body and he grew to match the skeleton’s height and girth.

And despite his size, Agnarr was still possessed of greater speed and agility than the lumbering skeletal giant. Even as he finished his divinely-inspired growth, he whirled low and whipped his sword around – cutting at the giant’s shins and shearing straight through one of its legs.

“Don’t hurt the runes!” Ranthir cried, darting forward a few steps from where he stood in the corner (keeping a safe distance from the titanic struggle).

Dominic, summoning his inner strength, called upon the same divine energies a second time and let them flow into Tor.

Tor, growing as Agnarr had done, followed Agnarr’s example. Ducking low, his blow swept in from the opposite direction and cleaved the giant’s other leg. It crashed precipitously to the floor.

With perfect timing, Ranthir released an arcane attack – piercing the creature’s barrel-like eye socket with a blast of frigid energy that froze the bone. The jarring impact of its collapse caused the brittle bone to break and shatter, sending great gaping cracks racing across the dome of its skull.

Whatever enchantment had knit those bones together in undeath was broken, and the giant collapsed.

## THE FRIGID CAVERN

Ranthir drew a knife and carefully cut away the Lithuin runes from the hem of the titan spawn’s robe. Meanwhile, the others were moving towards the fleshy membrane. It was slightly translucent and appeared to be stretched across another shaft leading down.

“What do we do?” Elestra asked.

“Well, the key we were looking for – are looking for – must be down here somewhere,” Tee said. “And there’s no where else to go.” She shrugged, drew her dragon pistol, and blasted the membrane.

The membrane ripped apart, and as it did so a howling blast of frigid air rushed up from the shaft below. Looking down through the hole, Tee could see that the frost-rimed shaft ended in another chamber twenty feet below, although all she could see of this chamber was a narrow patch of floor that appeared to be covered completely with ice.

“I’m going to go down and check it out.” Tee pulled out a sunrod, stepped off the edge of the shaft, and levitated down.

The chamber below appeared to be some sort of natural cave, but it was unnaturally – even impossibly – cold. The floor, walls, and ceiling of the cave were entirely coated in a thick layer of ice. The air was cold enough here that Tee thought there might be a real risk of frostbite.

Tee noticed that along one edge of this cavern, the ice appeared a little thinner. Looking at this broad patch more closely, she could see what appeared to be liquid water under the surface.

With a thoughtful look, she floated back up to the others. “Ranthir, I need you down there for a second.”

It took more than a second, but Ranthir was able to perform several divinations which confirmed that the unnatural cold was the result of a magical aura permeating these chambers. He could also tell that this magical aura extended through the liquid water in a tunnel that curved down and away before it passed behind too much solid rock for his arcane sight to penetrate. He attempted to unwork the magic of the aura, but failed.

Tee and Ranthir returned to the others and reported what they had found. “I think we have to go through that tunnel,” Tee said.

Tor shook his head. “If it’s as cold down there as it feels up here, we’ll all get hypothermia trying to swim through that water.”

“I know certain magicks that could protect us against the cold,” Elestra said.

“So do I,” Dominic said.

“Between the two of us, we should be able to protect everybody.”

“But we’ll need to prepare the proper spells,” Dominic said.

“I hate to wait,” Tee said. “I’ve got an appointment tomorrow. But if we need to rest, then we need to rest.”

“We could stay here,” Agnarr suggested.

Elestra gave the barbarian an incredulous look. “I think we should head back to the Ghostly Minstrel.”

“Assuming we can leave,” Tee said ominously.

“That’s true,” Tor said with a slightly worried tone.

Ranthir, meanwhile, had been getting a thoughtful look on his face. Now he suddenly turned to the others. “Come with me! Quickly!”

The others followed him as he climbed back up into the keep. Once everyone had joined him, he reached out and easily pulled the spiral contrivance out of the statue. As soon as he had done so, the statue rumbled back to its original position.

“It suddenly occurred to me that there was still a demon wandering around up here,” Ranthir said. “We could have been trapped.” He pushed the disc back into place. As the statue rumbled open again, he turned to Tee. “Once I’m down below, remove the disc and wait a couple of minutes. Then open it again.”

Tee followed his instructions. Ranthir, from below, watched the statue close above him... there was no keyhole for the spiraled disc down here. When Tee opened the statue again, Ranthir climbed up and informed the others. “As long as we’re down there, we can be trapped by anybody who comes along and removes the disc.”

## HUNTING A DEMON

“We have to find that demon,” Tee said.

“And kill it,” Agnarr added.

“Well, we saw it descend beyond the outer walls, correct?” Ranthir said. “Perhaps we should start by searching the grounds outside.”

The others agreed, but after circling the keep they could see nowhere that the demon could have been hiding.

“Maybe he’s returned to his nest,” Ranthir suggested.

They walked back through the gate. “At least we know we can get out of here now,” Tee said.

“COME TO ME...” The familiar voice echoed through the keep.

“Didn’t he already say that?” Elestra asked.

“A couple of times, I think,” Tor said.

The demon had not, in fact, returned to its nest. Tee sighed heavily with frustration. "All right, let's go back to the Minstrel. Maybe when we come back tomorrow, the demon will have returned and we'll be able to kill it."

But when they reached the gate, they found the invisible wall of force had once again been raised to block their passage.

"You've got to be joking," Tee said, her hand pressed up against the energy field.

### TRAPPED AGAIN

After a brief discussion, they decided that – if they were stuck here anyway – they might as well try a more mundane way of overcoming the frigid chamber below: Fire. They would gather up the older furniture from around the keep, drag it to the icy chamber, and then burn it.

But when they returned to the statue, they found that the hole in its stomach had closed up.

"It's like its reset or something," Elestra muttered.

"I MUST FEED..."

Now, standing in this hall, they were sure that the voice was emanating directly from the statue itself.

"It must be Segginal," Ranthir concluded. "They bound Edlari so they could bind Segginal to this statue."

"What does it mean by 'feed', do you think?" Elestra asked.

"I don't know," Tee said. "Maybe if we feed it, it'll open the keyhole again."

Tee walked up to the statue and touched it... she instantly felt a sharp pain and was overwhelmed by dizziness. Pulling her hand back, she saw that her fingertips were covered in a sheen of blood. She cursed.

Next, with a certain sense of desperation, Tee tried breaking the spiral key in half again (it broke naturally along the same line as before). Then she rejoined the two halves. There was another flash of light and the disc was made whole again... but the statue stubbornly remained shut.

"There might be another way," Agnarr said. He led them back to the courtyard and pointed to the well. "It's almost directly above the icy caverns below. There might be another way of reaching those caverns at the bottom of the well." A way not blocked by the statue or its spirit.

Agnarr took the *boots of levitation* from Tee. He drew his sword – both for protection and for the light its flame would provide – and descended more than fifty feet into the dark, cramped well before he spotted the well water below him.

Something seemed to be stirring in that water... some great, white shape rising towards him. Instinctively Agnarr retreated back up the shaft, but before the slow power of the boots could take him far enough a flaccid arm of doughy white flesh burst out of the water and grasped his ankle.

Whatever the foul creature was, it began dragging its way up the length of Agnarr's leg. A face of melted, white flesh emerged – gaping a maw of vicious, needle-like fangs.

But Agnarr had already reversed his grip on his sword and, as the creature lurched up towards him, the blade plunged down through its gullet and Agnarr, with a savage whipping of his thews, tore the creature in half.

Taking a deep breath of the now acrid air, Agnarr descended into the greasy, gore-spattered water... and met with a dead end. The water had a depth of perhaps fifteen feet, but did not open out into any larger cavern. He returned to the surface to report his disappointment to the others.

"What do we do?" Elestra asked again.

"Let's try talking to the Cobbledman," Tee suggested. "He lives here. He might know something about the statue."

They found the Cobbledman in his tower.

"Cobbledman?" Tee asked tentatively, unsure of which head was in command.

"Tee!" The right head grinned broadly and the Cobbledman lurched to his feet. "You came back! ... do you have food?"

Tee smiled. "Yes, I have food."

She handed it over and the Cobbledman began munching contentedly.

"Do you know who Segginal is?" Tee asked.

The Cobbledman's face became crestfallen. "Bad fat man!"

"He was a bad man?"

"Bad fat man!"

"Who is he?"

"Wuntad brought him. Now he watches. Watches all the time."

"Does he do anything else?"

"Sometimes. Hurts when you touch him."

"The statue?"

The Cobbledman nodded.

"Is there any way to stop him from watching?"

The Cobbledman shook his head. "But sometimes he goes away."

"When does he go away?"

"Chaos is the key..."

Tee thanked him and gave him some more food. Then she climbed up to where the others were waiting. "The statue is Segginal. And he's on a cycle."

"Is there any way to speed it up?" Elestra asked.

Tee shook her head. "Not that he knew, anyway."

Since it seemed as if they had nothing better to do for the moment, they began a complete search of Pythoness House again – from top to bottom. Perhaps the demon had snuck back into the keep and was hiding somewhere. Or perhaps there was some undiscovered nook or hidden door.



But that didn't seem to be the case. Fortunately, as they finished their search and gathered back in the courtyard, the voice of the chaos spirit boomed forth once again: "CHAOS IS THE KEY..."

They returned to the statue and confirmed that, once again, the keyhole had opened on its stomach.

"The gate should be open now, too," Tee said.

Since they understood the patterns and limitations of the ritual now, they felt comfortable in recuperating before journeying any deeper beneath the keep. They returned to the courtyard and headed towards the gate...

### THE CHAOS CULTISTS

... and found their way blocked by more than a dozen sinister men and women.

At their head was a massive, humanoid creature with wings of darkness and shadow that crackled with blue arcs of lightning. His flesh was a sallow yellow-green, and his long, grey-white hair seemed to be coming out in clumps. His drooping eyes glowed with a white malevolence, and his muscles seemed to bulge unnaturally beneath his skin. Strapped about his broad chest was a silvery breastplate.

Behind him, flanking him to either side, were a litorian and an adrak: The litorian had familiar symbols of chaos shaved into her fur and burned into her skin.

The adrak, likewise, had symbols burned or branded onto its scales.

And behind them was a rabble of another half dozen thugs.

The sallow-skinned leader chuckled darkly as they halted in their tracks. "Give me the weapons of chaos and you can leave here with your lives."

"We don't have them," Tee said.

"Don't lie to me child," the creature said. "Or you will die."

"We don't have them!" Elestra cried. "We didn't get them yet!"

The litorian waved her hand and a beam of light swept over them. She scowled. "They're telling the truth, Wuntad."

Wuntad turned to her. "You're sure?"

The litorian nodded.

Wuntad turned back to Tee. "Very well. Then you'll go and get them and then bring them back to me."

"We can't do that right now," Tee said.

"You *will* do it or you'll die."

"It's not that we won't, we can't. We need to rest first, and then—"

With a bellowing roar, Agnarr charged. He caught Wuntad by surprise, but his sword caught on the cultist's breastplate. With an answering roar of rage, Wuntad swung a muscular claw at Agnarr's head. The barbarian laughed. "You don't look much like your picture!"



The other cultists, after stepping back in shock at the suddenness of the assault, were recovering and drawing their weapons.

But they were too slow for Ranthir, who was already completing the casting of a spell: A thick, bulbous sphere of viscous web exploded in the midst of the cultists. It entangled them thoroughly and suspended itself between the wall of the keep and the ground.

Unfortunately, the web blocked their own path of escape. Fortunately, the torch Tor had carried during their explorations through and beneath the keep was still burning. He darted off to one side and began burning a path through the web.

Agnarr had also been caught in the web and he began tearing himself free. But Wuntad was the faster, his wings of lightning-lit darkness tearing through the webs like razor blades and – with a single, powerful beat – propelling him into the air above.

Nevertheless, it seemed as if things were going well: Ranthir's spell had neutralized most of the cultists, and if they could capitalize on that moment of opportunity, then—

The litorian managed to free her hand and held aloft a bell of tarnished silver. She rang it and, at the beating of its clap, a wave of dizzy darkness swept over them. Tor fell unconscious, the burning brand which had been leading his path falling uselessly at his side. Dominic fell behind him. Agnarr sagged where he stood, only the thick webs holding him aloft.

Elestra, Tee, and Ranthir struggled on... but the bell rang again, and this time both Tee and Elestra toppled.

Ranthir, too, fell... but he was bluffing, hoping that the ringing of the bell would stop if the cultists thought they had all been affected. He was right. The litorian lowered the bell, and the cultists set to work trying to burn or chop their way out of the web.

Once the cultists were thoroughly distracted, Ranthir eased himself over to Tee, who was laying only a few feet away from him. He gently shook her awake.

Unfortunately, as Tee stirred to wakefulness her movement attracted the attention of the cultists.

“Kill them!” Wuntad cried.

“Wait!” Tee shouted. “Just wait! We’ll get the weapons for you!”

Wuntad smiled grimly. “A wise choice.”

### AN UNRESOLVED DEBATE

Tee woke the others. They were upset at the thought of surrendering, but she made it clear that they had no choice. In sullen silence they retreated back to the hall where the statue of Segginal stood.

“What are we doing?” Elestra asked. “We can’t help them!”

“Do you have a better idea?” Tee asked. “They took us out pretty easily last time. I’m pretty sure they’ll be able to do it again.”

After several minutes of discussion, it became clear that the group was divided: Some felt they should at least find out what these “weapons of chaos” were. Others felt strongly that they should try to fight. Others suggested that they might escape.

The tide of their argument seemed to be turning strongly towards this latter course of action – escape – when the statue spoke to them: “Wuntad’s patience wanes. I see everything that happens in this house. Bring him the weapons of chaos *now*.”

Tee grimaced and slapped the spiraled disc into the statue’s keyhole and twisted. The shaft opened. “Let’s go.”

### THROUGH THE CAVERNS OF ICE

(09/11/790)

They went down, but they didn’t go far. They stopped in the first chamber and began unpacking their camping gear.

“All right, we’re down here,” Tee said. “Now Wuntad can just wait until we’re ready.”

They kept watch in short shifts throughout the night. In the morning, Elestra and Dominic prepared and cast the spells which would allow them to endure the freezing temperatures below.

Agnarr’s flaming sword easily chopped through the ice above the underwater tunnel and, with the spells of Elestra and Dominic, they were able to pass imperviously through the frigid waters.

At the other end of the watery tunnel, Agnarr needed to hack his way through a second sheet of ice, allowing them to emerge into another icy cavern. On the floor here, rimed with frost, were six chests. An iron door, entirely free of ice, stood on the opposite wall. Off to the left and the right, frozen into the thick ice covering the walls, were two minotaurs.

Tee eyed the minotaurs carefully, but they appeared to be dead. Satisfied that they were no immediate threat, Tee crossed over to the chests and began inspecting them while the others hung back near the pool from which they had emerged (with Agnarr, in particular, making sure the hole in the ice – and their potential retreat – remained open).

The heavy iron chests had been bolted to the stone floor beneath the ice. The top of each chest was marked with an inscription:

“Mysteries of the Purple City”  
“Blades of the Galchutt”  
“The Kingslayer Spear”  
“The Despairing Word of Chaos”  
“The Tools of Chaos”  
“Freedom’s Key”



Tee pulled out her lockpicks and set to work. The locks on the chests, however, proved difficult, and she reflected glumly that if she had received the magical tools she had requested from the Dreaming Apothecary this would be a much easier task. Magical protections or not, she could still feel the cold of this place seeping into her bones.

As Tee was struggling with the first lock, however, her work was abruptly interrupted: The sudden, sharp sound of cracking ice made her look up to see one of the minotaurs punching his way out from his icy tomb. The ice in front of the other one was clearly melting, and she could already see thick cracks spreading through the ice as it, too, struggled to be free.

Thinking quickly, Tee reached quickly into her *bag of holding* and pulled out the least damaged set of Crimson Coil robes. She quickly slipped the robes on and stood up.

“Ah, the Night of Dissolution is come at last!” The first minotaur was stepping free from the wall of ice, shaking the ice from his eyes. The second was also emerging.

The first minotaur turned bleary eyes towards Tee. “Who are you?”

“A servant of Wuntad.”

“And has the Night of Dissolution come?”

“Yes.” Tee moved up towards the door on the far wall, trying to position the minotaurs with their backs to the others. “What’s behind this door?”

The second minotaur approached her. “Did Wuntad not give you the password?”

“He didn’t,” Tee said truthfully.

A worried look entered the minotaur’s eye. “Then I wouldn’t go in there.”

“Wait,” Tee said, looking meaningfully at the others. “*You* wouldn’t go in there?”

But none of the others were taking her cue, so she decided to take a different tact. “Do you have the key for these chests?”

“Wuntad didn’t give it to you?”

“No, he did not.”

“And why isn’t Wuntad here to greet us?”

“He has been barred from the keep by magic,” Tee said, expressing a truthful suspicion that she had. “Go to him and fetch the key.”

The minotaurs seemed guileless – or perhaps deferred completely to those wearing the crimson robes. Without another word they both headed to tunnel of icy water and dived out of sight.

Tor, having watched them go, turned to Tee. “Did we just send him reinforcements?”

“Does it matter?” Tee said. “I didn’t see any of you leaping to stop them.”

“They won’t get far in any case,” Ranthir pointed out. “The statue is shut.”

“Well, let’s get these chests open before they come back.”

## THE SIX CHESTS AND THE KEY OF FREEDOM

Tee turned to the smallest of the chests, the one labeled “Freedom’s Key”. She was certain that this was what they had come to Pythoness House for in the first place. Once she defeated the lock, she opened the chest to reveal a golden key laying on velvet lining.

The end of the key seemed to be twisting and, looking more closely at it, Tee could see that it was actually made of innumerable pieces almost too small for the eye to see – they were constantly in flux, seeming to warp and twist and move in an almost impossible manner, as if their movement were not truly determined by the limitations of the natural world.

Tee was fascinated – almost enthralled – by the artifact. With delicate fingers she reached down and picked it up...

And felt a coldness rush up from her fingers and seem to bury itself in her soul. Despite the throbbing pain and waves of weakness emanating from the key, her curiosity could not be contained. She turned to the next chest, the one labeled “Mysteries of the Purple City”. Inserting the golden key carefully into the lock she turned it.

The lock opened with a satisfying click. But the pain and the cold intensified. Tee almost felt as if her soul were being ripped out through her. Her hand flew to her head and she sagged, nearly fainting where she stood.

“Tee!” Elestra cried. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m fine,” Tee said. “But I don’t think I should be using this key any more.” She slipped it into her *bag of holding*... but even there she could still feel its presence like a cold weight on her soul.

Inside this second chest there was an ancient-looking box of ironwood inscribed with several strange, round-shaped runes. Ranthir confirmed that these, like those on the robes of the giant skeleton above, were Lithuin runes.

Opening the ironwood box revealed four crystals as large as a fist and a journal with a worn leather cover and yellow, blood-stained pages. Without even bothering to glance at it, Tee passed it over to Ranthir and moved onto the next chest.

Tee returned to her lockpicks and began opening the other chests as Ranthir began to quickly skim through the journal. The “Blades of the Galchutt” were two matched longswords of blackened steel with hilts carved in the shape of demons’ heads. “The Kingslayer Spear” had a shaft of adamantium carved with strange runes similar to those they had seen on the idols within Ghul’s Labyrinth. “The Despairing Word of Chaos” was a rod of strange metal.

The last chest, the “Tools of Chaos”, contained several strange items: A cloak of rich red fabric, two small vials filled with ash-like dust, and a skull marked with several symbols of chaos.

Ranthir, meanwhile, was comparing what he was reading in the journal to everything he knew of the lost city of Lithuin. He knew of the ancient tales which claimed that a fleet bearing mystic giants known as the Titan Spawn founded the legendary city of Lithuin on what was now the coast of Arathia. It was said that the earliest caravans and merchant houses were specifically founded to ferry goods to and from the great city. After generations of such trade, the Titan Spawn succumbed to some form of madness and their ships sailed back across the ocean to their mysterious continent of mists. Lithuin itself “fell into the sea” and its treasures and lore were lost to the ages. But the journal claimed that the city – or some fragment of the city – had been found...

### LITHUIN JOURNAL

This hand-written journal appears to be the record of an archaeological exploration. No specific year is given, but the entries seem to be spread across at least three months.

Several names are mentioned, most notably Wuntad – who appeared to be in charge of the expedition, although (in the opinion of the writer) not particularly proficient with the methods of excavation. The other names explicitly mentioned are Ibard, Kambranex, Coluvien, Falant, and Navanna – although it’s clear that there were at least several others, left unnamed, accompanying them.

The location of the expedition is eventually identified as the ancient city of Lithuin – or at least, what they writers believe to be the city of Lithuin. Progress appeared to be slow, and hindered by a variety of small catastrophes. Over the course of the journal, these catastrophes grow in severity. In one particularly tragic collapse, Coluvien was apparently killed.

Wuntad’s frustration with their lack of progress – marked by frequent rages – also become a common theme of the journal. Then, after nearly two months, they find a “box of remarkable crystals”. Wuntad becomes fascinated by these and, reportedly, retires to his tent to study them incessantly.

The last entries of the journal become short and erratic. There are references to “moving shadows”, “ancient shadows”, and “the shadows are coming”. Then the entries come to an abrupt end.

## BATTLE OF THE MINOTAURS

Tee gathered up the items, put them into her *bag of holding*, and then headed back towards the underwater tunnel.

“Wait,” Elestra said. “What about the key we came for?”

Tee looked at her quizzically. “I think it was the key from the chest.”

“The one that hurt you? But that doesn’t make any sense. And we’ve found lots of keys here. Maybe there’s another one. Why would we want a key that hurts you to use it?”

“We don’t know why we wanted the key,” Tee said. “We don’t know what it’s for.”

“We should open the door,” Elestra said. “See if there’s another key back there.”

“The door the minotaurs were afraid of?” Tee said. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Maybe they were just pretending to be afraid.”

The argument continued for several minutes, but eventually it was decided that they would at least look through the door. Tee picked the lock and edged the door open, peeking through it.

There was another icy cavern, this one larger than the rest. A multi-headed construct of frost-rimed brass and leviathan proportions lay in a heap in the center of the floor. But even as Tee’s eye fell upon it, the construct stirred – one of its heads slowly rearing up with the rasping sound of metal upon metal.

Tee slammed the door shut.

“We need to go. Now.”

WHAM!

The cavern rocked with the bone-shaking impact of the construct on the far side of the door.

“What is it?”

WHAM!

“Go! Now!”

They fled back through the underwater tunnel and up through the fleshy membrane... and found the minotaurs waiting for them.

“Segginal tells us that Wuntad sent you on a mission. Give us the weapons of chaos.”

Tee was bleary-eyed and exhausted, still suffering from the ill effects of using the key. She didn’t want to do it, but they didn’t seem to have any other choice. With

a heavy sigh she reached into her bag, pulled out the spear, and handed it to the nearest minotaur.

Agnarr attacked.

“Agnarr! No!” Tee was perhaps even more surprised than the minotaurs. Her hand was still half in her *bag of holding*, reaching for the next item. She quickly changed her aim and withdrew the modified dragon rifle. But she was too weak to fight, and simply stumbled back towards the nearest corner.

The minotaurs roared. The claws of one smashed into Agnarr’s side, sending him spinning towards the other who caught him with a similarly devastating blow. Agnarr dropped to one knee. He swung his sword feebly

towards them, but then a third blow crashed down on his head and he slumped into unconsciousness.

Tor hesitated, his sword half-drawn from its sheath, waiting to see what would happen. With Agnarr down, would Tee begin negotiating again?

Perhaps she might have, but even as Agnarr thudded heavily to the ground, Dominic extended his hand and murmured a prayer. A bolt of silvery energy emerged from his fingertips and struck one of the minotaurs. The energy flowed about the creature as if it were liquid mercury, and the motions of the minotaur slowed... and stopped. It had become frozen in time.

Tor finished drawing his sword and charged the other minotaur. He nimbly weaved his way through the flurrying claws of the creature, turning the closer blows with his shield. His sword, crackling with electricity, struck here and there – opening painful wounds in the creature’s thick hide.

As Tor kept the creature occupied, Elestra and Dominic darted forward and laid their hands on Agnarr. Their joint strength flowed into the barbarian, healing his wounds.

As Agnarr groggily regained his consciousness he quickly focused on the battle being waged almost directly

above him between Tor and minotaur. He grabbed up his sword and stabbed up... straight through the minotaur’s groin. The creature gave a bellowing roar of unimaginable pain and collapsed in a pool of its own blood and viscera.

As Agnarr stood up, shaking off some of that same blood and viscera, Tee weakly stepped forward, lowered the modified dragon rifle, and immolated the surviving minotaur (who was still trapped by Dominic’s spell).



## LEAVING WITH THEIR LIVES

“Wuntad is very angry with you.”

It was the voice of Segginal – the statue-bound chaos spirit.

“I don’t care, Segginal.” Tee shouted. “Open up!”

After a moment, the statue above them slid aside. They climbed up and then moved away from the statue before discussing their options.

“We could still try to escape,” Agnarr said.

Tee shook her head. “We couldn’t beat them before and now I’m less than useless in a fight.”

“They might have left.”

“I doubt it,” Tee said. “But we can check.”

They climbed up to the second floor, hoping to look down through one of the tower windows. As they reached the tower, Elestra asked the question that was weighing on everyone’s mind: “Do you think the Segginal guy is telling Wuntad where we are?”

Tee looked out through the window. “Yeah... I think he is.”

Wuntad was standing on the path before the gate, staring straight up at her. He was now accompanied by more than a dozen of the cultists. Now he shouted, his voice loud enough to be heard through the lead-framed window.

“The minotaurs don’t matter to me! They were foul, primitive creatures. Unworthy servants. All I want are the weapons! Give them to me and you can still leave here with your lives!”

“Damn it.” Tee sighed heavily and turned away from the window.

“We’re not going to give them to him, are we?” Elestra asked.

Tee looked at her. “I’ll say it again: Do we have any other choice?”

“But we can’t! We don’t know what he’ll do with them if he gets them!”

“But we do know what he’ll do if he doesn’t get them.”

“We could always try going out the back way,” Dominic suggested.

“With Segginal telling him everything we’re doing?” Tee said.

“If we do give them to him,” Tor said. “I don’t want to go out there. I’m sure he’ll betray us.”

“Maybe we could get the Cobbledman to give him the items? I don’t think he can actually come into the keep. Otherwise he would have just killed us and gotten the weapons himself. Or done it years ago.”

A shadow fell across them. Wuntad had flown up to the window and was looking in at them. “This is your last chance.”

“Will you agree to free the Cobbledman?” Tee asked.

Wuntad’s eyes narrowed. “He lives?”

“He does. And he misses you.”

Wuntad seemed to mull it over for a moment. “Very well. If you give me the weapons, I will free the Cobbledman.”

“Fine,” Tee said. “We’ll have him bring the items to you.”

They found the Cobbledman, once again, sleeping in his tower. Tee carefully woke him.

“Cobbledman? Wuntad is here.”

“Wuntad’s here?”

“He is. He’d like to see you. He wants to free you. But I need to ask you a favor.” Tee quickly explained what they needed the Cobbledman to do.

They went down to the courtyard. Wuntad and the cultists were waiting just outside the gate. Tee loaded the Cobbledman’s arms full with the various weapons... but she deliberately held back three items: The journal, the ironwood box inscribed with Lithuin runes (and the crystals it held), and the golden key. She hoped that Wuntad might not notice the missing items, and if he did then—

“Where is the box of ironwood?” There was great anger in Wuntad’s voice.

“It’s right here,” Tee said, pulling it from her bag. “But his arms were full. Send him back and he can bring it out to you.”

And, as she had hoped, Wuntad had noticed the missing item most precious to him... but not the key. Nor did he open the ironwood box and notice that the journal was missing.

“Cobbledman,” Wuntad said. “You are free to leave Pythoness House.”

Wuntad then turned to them. “I am glad that you saw... reason. But pray that our paths do not cross again.”

The cultists turned and left. The Cobbledman came back towards them, a wide grin on his kind face. “Did you hear?”

“We did,” Tee smiled. “I’m very happy for you.”

“Do you have any more food?”

Ranhir laughed and handed him another bar of rations. The Cobbledman, munching contentedly, headed back towards his tower.

“We should do something for him,” Tor said. “He shouldn’t have to stay here.”

“What about those people that Urlenius was talking about?” Tee suggested.

“The Brotherhood of Redemption?” Dominic said.

“Right. They might be willing to help him.” She looked around. The cultists were gone. “Well, shall we go?”

“Not yet,” Agnarr said. “There’s one more thing I want to do.”

Agnarr returned to the statue of Segginal... and smashed it to pieces. As the last of his destructive work was done, a mournful wind howled through the keep and,



with a malevolent laugh, Segginal's voice echoed through the halls: "You will bear my curse *forever*."

Agnarr grunted. "Nice guy."

### A PEACEFUL AFTERNOON

As they emerged from Pythoness House, the aershship of House Shever passed above them – heading out towards the Southern Sea. They followed in its wake, heading down into Midtown and returning to the Ghostly Minstrel.

Tee had an appointment to keep, so she only stopped in long enough to drop off her *bag of holding* (with its tainted items and, most importantly, the soul draining key) and then left again.

Tor, too, only went to his room long enough to pick up a fresh set of clothes before heading over to the bathhouse on Tavern Row. (Where he sat quietly in a corner, speaking to no one.)

Agnarr headed to the common room and ordered a meal of feast-like proportions.

Elestra and Dominic, meanwhile, talked things over and decided to spend the afternoon trying to find help for the Cobbledman. Elestra knew that the Brotherhood of Redemption maintained a small chapterhouse in the Guildsman District (although there were rumors that they also maintained a large underground fortress somewhere beneath the city).

As Elestra and Dominic headed back out through the front hall, however, a cry came from the common room. "Mistress Elestra! Mistress Elestra!"

Before she even turned to look, Elestra knew that it was Iltumar. She suppressed a groan.

Iltumar was sitting at a table with an elven woman with dark brown hair. The glint of mithril chain could be seen under the woman's clothes.

"Elestra, this is Lavis," Iltumar said. "I've solved Tee's riddle! The answer is 't! T for Tee!'"

"Very good, Iltumar!" Elestra smiled, exchanging a look with Dominic.

"I've got a new one for you, too: 'My house is not quiet, but I am not loud. I am the swifter, at times the stronger. My house more enduring, longer to last. At times I will rest, but my house rushes on. Within it I lodge as long as I live. Should we two be severed, my death becomes sure.'"

Elestra leaned over towards Dominic. "Do you think it's a snail? I think it might be a snail."

Dominic shrugged.

"Do you want to join us for a drink?" Iltumar asked eagerly.

Elestra turned back to him. "I'm sorry, Iltumar. But Dominic and I have something we need to do. In fact, we were just heading out."

Iltumar's smile fell away.

"But I'll let Tee know about your new riddle. I know she'll be excited to hear it."

"It's okay," Iltumar said. "I know you probably have much more important people to see."

Elestra awkwardly tried to figure out how to make her farewells. Lavis exchanged a sympathetic look with her. But, at that moment, Ranthir was passing by on his way to fetch his customary bowl of soup for the evening. Overhearing her distress, he tapped Iltumar on the shoulder.

"Iltumar, I have some studies to attend to this evening. Would you, perchance, be interested in assisting me?"

Iltumar's smile returned, even larger than before. "Really?"

"Yes," Ranthir smiled. "I have to fetch some food, but then we could begin immediately... if you like."

### FOURTH LESSON OF THE DREAMING

Tee – weakened by the draining effects of the golden key and distracted by the myriad thoughts racing through her mind – had difficulty focusing upon her training. She had difficulty even achieving the dreaming trance, and could do little of consequence.

When the frustrating trance work was completed, Tee began gathering up her things to leave. But Doraedian stopped her.

"The dreaming trance requires a difficult art of balance. It shall never be without effort, although you will find that it becomes easier in time. However, there is another matter that we must discuss today. There are many paths through the arts of the Dreaming, and from this day forward your training will be of your choosing."

"Choosing?" Tee said.

"Yes, while your lessons with me will continue, you will also be trained in one of three specialties.

"First, there is the Dreamsight. The Dreaming is the wellspring from which all reality is born and the grave to which all living memory returns. As such, those who can see the Dreaming with unclouded eyes can perceive deep truths of the world around them.

"Second, there are the Dream Pacts. The Lords of the Dreaming are powerful and fey. Those skilled enough in the dreaming arts can turn their souls into conduits through which the Spirit Lords can be made manifest in the world around us. But following such a path requires supreme self-control, for the Lords of the Dreaming are capable of reshaping your very soul.

"Finally, there is the art of Dreamspeaking. Those practiced in the dreaming arts can reshape the Dreaming around them. Those who are masters of the Dreaming, however, can reshape the world around them by reshaping the dreams from which the world is born. These arts have been perfected into the dreaming tongue – a primal language which not only describes the most

fundamental aspects of reality, but can be used to transform it.”

“I’m not sure what I want to do.”

“It is not a decision to be rushed. Take your time. Explore your thoughts. Write me by letter before your next lesson on the 18<sup>th</sup> and let me know your choice.”

## BROTHERHOOD OF REDEMPTION

Elestra led Dominic down to the Guildsman District. They found the public house of the Brotherhood of Redemption to be a rather small and unimpressive affair. When they knocked on the door, it was answered by a meek-looking man.

“Welcome. Can the Brotherhood be of some assistance to you?”

“I think so,” Elestra said.

“You have captured some bestial creature in need of the gods’ redemption?”

“Not exactly,” Dominic said.

“We met someone in need of help. He’s gentle. And kind. But a little lost and confused.”

“We are no common charity,” the man said. “If this creature is civilized, then he is beyond our purview.”

“Well, half of him is,” Dominic said.

“What do you mean?”

“He has two heads,” Elestra explained. “One of them is civilized, I guess. But the other definitely isn’t.”

“An ettin-like divided consciousness?” The man was not only intrigued, but excited. “With one turned against the other? Well, if you can bring him here we would certainly give him any help that we can.”

Taking their leave, Elestra and Dominic – primarily at Elestra’s prompting – decided to return to Pythoness House, by themselves, and try to find the Cobbledman.

They got no further than the courtyard, however, before they realized – given the possibility that a demon was still wandering about the place – that this might have been a good idea. Elestra called for the Cobbledman a couple of times and, when he did not come down into the courtyard, they left.

## SHOPPING

They reconvened at the Ghostly Minstrel. Agnarr took the many rat tails they had collected and turned them into the proper officials for the bounty, feeling a great sense of fulfillment at finally managing to accomplish one of the first things he had vowed to do upon awaking in Ptolus.

Tee gathered up the items they were going to sell and led the rest of the group on a shopping trip. Ranthir chose not to go with them, instead remaining behind to continue his studies (while trying to find some useful way for Iltumar to contribute beyond petting little Erin),

but did ask Tee if she could try to find for him an item with a particular enchantment laid upon it.

Ranthir described the enchantment in detail. Tee glossed over most of the technical details, but captured the gist of it: The item would attune itself to the rhythms of Ranthir’s own body. Once it had done so, it would be capable of nourishing him, intensifying the refreshment of mind and body during periods of sleep.

“Instead of needing to sleep for eight hours every night,” Ranthir explained, “I would only need two hours of sleep. And in the extra hours of the night I could be copying my scrolls or studying the many books we have discovered or anything of the like.”

Tee knew that Ranthir was frustrated by how little time he was able to devote to his studies and preparations, and she herself had worried that they weren’t spending enough time studying the various books of lore they were discovering. So she was quite happy to discover that Myraeth had recently received a ring with just such an enchantment laid upon it. Ranthir did not have quite enough money to afford it, but Tee talked it over with the others and they decided it would be in their best interests to pool their resources and help him buy it.

“After all,” Tee said. “The best wizard is a well rested wizard.”

## THE PALE TOWER

They went back to the inn. Ranthir excused himself from Iltumar and joined them in Elestra’s room for a conference. They decided to follow-up on the offer that Edlari had made and go to the Pale Tower to speak with him.

Ranthir poked his head back into his room and spoke with Iltumar, who was more than willing to wait for him to return. Ranthir smiled, nodded, and then ran to catch up with the others.

Standing in the northern reaches of Oldtown, not that far from Pythoness House, the Pale Tower stood in stark contrast to the structures around it, rising up from the midst of a perfumed garden more like a marble monument than a building. The windowless round tower was faultlessly white and seemed to shine as if newly built, and yet there was an air of great age that hung unmistakably about it.

There were two great knockers of gold upon the double doors of godwood at the front of the tower. Tee reached up and clapped one of them loudly.

The doors parted without visible hand, revealing an antechamber of marble. The rune-carved Graven One stepped forward to greet them.

“What business brings you to the Pale Tower?”

“Edlari asked us to seek him here.”

“I see.” The Graven One’s solemn face seemed to smile. “I shall seek him and return.”

At his gesture, they stepped into the antechamber and the outer doors of the tower swung shut behind them. The Graven One turned and went through an inner door. They caught a glimpse of a long hallway beyond it, making it clear that the Pale Tower's interior was vastly larger than its exterior.

A few minutes passed, and then the Graven One returned, leading Aoska through the inner doors.

Aoska smiled. "The Graven One has told me that you seek Edlari." Her voice was like honeyed silk.

"He asked us to seek him here," Tee said.

"He did return here," Aoska stood. "And told us of what you did for him. We thank you for freeing him from so foul an imprisonment. But he has left us again, and stepped through the Jewels so that he might stand once more before the Nine Gods and cleanse his soul of the taint that has been left upon it. He may not return, and Sephranos himself counseled that he should feel no need... but Edlari could not bear the touch of it."

"We know something of the Taint," Tee said. "We have suffered its touch in attempting to cleanse the evil from that place where Edlari was imprisoned."

"I can sense it in you," Aoska said. She seemed to think carefully for a moment. "Come. It is the least that we might do to see that such accounts are set to rights."

She turned and led them through the inner doors, which parted at her approach. They passed in silence through many pillared halls and open gardens, each seemingly more beautiful than the last.

At last, Aoska brought them before great valves of silvered adamantine. She turned to them then and said, "You shall have audience with Sephranos, the First Among the Chosen."

At her touch the doors parted and opened, revealing a hall of ivory and gold. Atop a dais at the far end, upon a throne of mithril, sat a gold-skinned man with white-feathered wings. His eyes were pits of pale blue fire shining out from a face both regal and welcoming.

Aoska approached him and whispered into his ears, and then his eyes were turned upon them. And, most particularly upon Dominic.

"We are honored to give audience to the Chosen of Vehthyl." Sephranos smiled and turned his gaze to all of them. "We thank you all on the behalf of Edlari. We were saddened to see him leave us once again, but glad that he is now free to find his own path again. What boon would you ask of us?"

"When we freed him, Edlari healed us of the dark wounds we had sustained in the place where he had been imprisoned," Tee said humbly. "After he had left to return here, we faced greater dangers and suffered similar wounds. We had hoped that we might find healing here."

"This shall I do for you."

Sephranos raised his hand and a golden light shone forth from it. For a moment it seemed as if they had had lost consciousness – but rather than darkness, it felt as if a bright white light had embraced them.

Then their eyes opened once more and all was as it had been – Sephranos upon his throne and Aoska at his right hand upon the dais. But their wounds had been healed without any lingering trace or ache – and even the soul-hung weariness which had afflicted Tee since using the golden key had passed from her.

Aoska stepped forward and led them out of the hall. As the valves of silvered adamantine swung shut behind

them and Aoska led them back towards the entrance, Tee turned to her. "Aoska, we have in our possession many artifacts that bear the taint. We know that there are many people seeking them for dark purposes, and we can't carry them safely. We know that a hallowed place would serve to hold them and even to cleanse them, but the churches we have approached have turned us away. Is there such a place here in the Pale Tower where they might be kept?"

"We could not bear to have these objects mar the purity of such a place as the Tower," Aoska said.

Tee nodded sadly. "Yes, we've been hearing that a lot."

Aoska smiled. "But there is a place in the Temple District. A hallowed vault and sanctuary where such items may be kept."

They couldn't help but notice, as Aoska gave Tee the directions to this vault, that their path back through the



Pale Tower was not the same path by which they had come.

"There's something else," Tee said, hesitantly.

"What is it?" Aoska smiled encouragingly.

"We... lost some of the tainted artifacts," Tee struggled to find the words and then, like a pent-up river bursting its dam, babbled the rest of it. "We were ambushed by chaos cultists. They were led by someone named Wuntad."

"I know the name," Aoska said. "A minor cultist of some recent years. We had thought he had long since fled the city."

"He's back," Agnarr said gruffly.

"Is there anything you can do?" Tee asked.

"Perhaps," Aoska said. "But there are many things of greater import to concern the powers of the Pale Tower. There are many such cultists, and their danger is not to be dismissed. But there are also larger dangers in this world."

The thought of that didn't sit comfortably with Tee, and she found herself changing the topic. "I was also wondering if you knew Eida Laevantha. I have met her and she once mentioned that she had affairs with the Pale Tower."

"Yes, I know her," Aoska said. "Our paths have crossed often in the Dreaming."

And then they were back at the entrance of the Tower and saying their farewells to both Aoska and the Graven One (who waited there still).

### REDEMPTION FOR THE COBBLEDMAN

It seemed quite strange to emerge out of the marbled wonders of the Pale Tower onto the common streets of Ptolus, but after taking a moment to orient themselves they decided that – since they were in Oldtown in any case – they should return to Pythoness House together

and try to bring the Cobbledman to the Brotherhood of Redemption.

They found the Cobbledman sleeping in his tower again. Tee gently waked him (from a safe distance) and explained that they had found people who could help him. "You don't have to live like this any more."

The Cobbledman seemed trepidatious, but also hopeful. He followed them down to the Guildsman District, and there they placed him in the Brotherhood's care. Ranthir gave him one last iron ration and, as they left, he was munching it contentedly.

### THE FATE OF PHON

They headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel and then split up again: Ranthir returned to his room (where Iltumar was still reading). Agnarr decided that he was going to return to the caverns of the Clan of the Torn Ear. Dominic retired to his room to study the *Book of Vehthyl*.

Elestra went out into the streets. Most of the city was still captivated by the story of what Rehobath had done the day before. The newssheets had dubbed him the Novarch-in-Exile and public opinion seemed evenly split on whether Rehobath's actions were weal or woe.

But Elestra also discovered that the day before Rehobath's pronouncement, there had been another Flayed Man killing in the Warrens... and there were many whispers of worry coursing through the city.

There had been another atrocity that day, too: A house in the Temple District had burned down. Three dead bodies had been found inside and the rumor of the street was that the Balacazars were responsible.

A sickening suspicion entered into Elestra's head, and asking further she confirmed it: The house had been Helmut's. It appeared that Phon was dead.

# SESSION 24 – LET SLIP THE HOUNDS OF GHUL

June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008

The 11<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Tor left the Ghostly Minstrel and turned north towards the Temple District, heading towards the Outer Cathedral. In the three weeks since he had come to Ptolus, he had felt a deep frustration growing in his heart. He had left his home and his family to become a knight and follow the path of honor. But he had found little of the certainty he had hoped for traveling with these strange companions that the mage Ritharius had sent him to. They were good people – of that he was certain, although there had been times when he had doubted – but they seemed lost in a time when he desperately needed direction.

And so he was intent in seeking out Sir Kabel Dathim, the leader of the Order of the Dawn. He had seen Sir Kabel's cold reaction to the proclamations of Rehobath and this had, for whatever reason, created some sense of trust in him.

When he arrived at the Cathedral, Tor spoke with one of the lesser priests and was led to Sir Kabel's quarters. The priest knocked on the door, entered, and returned only moments later to usher Tor forward and shut the door behind him.

Sir Kabel's quarters were small, but well-furnished. An inner door led to what was most likely a bedroom, and the main chamber into which Tor stepped served as both an office and a lounge of sorts. Sir Kabel was sitting at his desk, but as Tor entered he closed a thin ledger, rose, and crossed towards the couch.

"Sir Kabel." Tor bowed deeply. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me."

Sir Kabel returned the bow with a nod and then sat down on the couch, motioning Tor to a nearby chair. "Sir Torland of Barund, if I remember correctly? We spoke of horses at Harvestime, did we not?"

"Yes, but I am no knight, sir."

"Truly?" Sir Kabel raised his eyebrows. "Yet you bear a sword at your side and you carry yourself like a warrior."

"I am trained in the blade," Tor said. "But I belong to no order."

"Would you like to?"

Tor couldn't contain the grin which erupted across his face. "That's why I've come to you!"

But now Kabel's face, which had been drawn in thought and consideration, became clouded with suspicion. "You're in league with the Chosen of Vehthyl, aren't you?"

Tor's grin dropped away and he chose his next words carefully. "He has recently been my companion."

"How recently?"

"A few weeks."

"And what do you think of the Novarch-in-Exile?"

Kabel couldn't keep the contempt out of his voice.

"I think he's dangerous," Tor said plainly. "And I don't trust him. I don't think Dominic trusts him, either."

"And yet he stood at Rehobath's side."

"He didn't know what Rehobath was planning. None of us did."

Kabel nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think Dominic is truly the Chosen of Vehthyl?"

"I don't know. I don't think he knows." Tor shrugged. "But he bears the signs. That's no trick."

Kabel grunted and then stood up. He circled behind the couch and began pacing, his words coming thoughtfully. "I don't trust Rehobath. He claims to speak with the voices of the Gods, but the Gods speak through the Church and he would raise himself against it. I serve the Church. Not him." He turned to Tor. "I'm not sure what to make of your friend, either. I would squire you into the Order of the Dawn, but as part of that I must ask you to keep a wary eye on Dominic."

Tor frowned. "I won't betray my friends."

"I'm not asking you to," Kabel said. "Are not two of my men – men who are more loyal to Rehobath than me – already standing guard at

the Ghostly Minstrel? And you can be sure that those are not the only eyes that Rehobath has on him. I am only interested in making sure that Dominic himself does not turn against the Church."



Tor had to think deeply, but in the end he believed that what Sir Kabel said was true. Or, at least, true enough. "I can agree to that."

"Then come with me."

Sir Kabel led Tor out of the Cathedral and into the large complex of Church-owned buildings just to the north.

This complex was capped by the Godskeep, which housed the Order of the Dawn. At first, Tor thought he was being taken there, but instead Sir Kabel stopped in the small practice field just outside the keep's southern gate.

A handful of knights were scattered here and there, practicing or skirmishing. Sir Kabel went over to the racks of practice weapons and pulled down two wooden swords. He tossed one of them to Tor. Tor caught it out of the air.

"I'll rest on little ceremony here," Kabel said. "This is your First Trial of Arms. We'll begin with the Test of the Blade. Strike me. If you can."

Tor attacked... and Kabel easily parried the thrust. "Good form. Controlled, yet fierce."

Tor feinted to the left and then slashed to the right. Kabel almost completely ignored the feint and easily parried the slash, but Tor deflected his blow and plunged the point of his blade toward's Kabel's chest. Kabel was forced to twist his own sword in order to parry the follow-thru. "Excellent!"

Tor backed off half a pace and then quickly brought a strong blow down directly towards Kabel's head, but Kabel was quick enough to shift his footwork, right his form, and block the blow.

"Enough!" Kabel cried, disengaging. "Now for the Test of the Shield. Defend yourself!"

Tor loosed the shield from his back and lowered himself into a defensive posture. Sir Kabel unleashed a withering flurry of attacks, and although Tor blocked many of them, Kabel's sword seemed to constantly find the weak points in his defense.

After several exchanges, Kabel stepped back again. "I'm impressed. It's clear you have had little formal training, but your instincts are strong and you have clearly been tested by the true heat of battle. The Order would be honored to have you serve as its squire."

Kabel drew out a ring marked with the sigil of the Order of the Dawn and gave it to Tor.

Tor's heart leapt. It was the dream he had sought, but scarcely hoped for. He quickly made arrangements with Sir Kabel to return once every other day for his training, and then made his way back towards the Ghostly Minstrel.

### AGNARR'S ABORTED MISSION

Agnarr headed across Delver's Square to Ebbert's and purchased a variety of supplies, particularly a large bulk

of raw meat and other food supplies. Loading all of it into his *bag of holding*, he set out for Greyson House: His intention was to travel down to the caverns of the Clan of the Torn Ear, gift them with the food supplies, and then practice sparring with them. The fact that he spoke none of their tongue dissuaded him not at all.

Once he made his way into the tunnels beneath Greyson House, however, he found them unexpectedly disturbed: The pit of chaos had been covered over with a thick layer of stone... albeit a layer of stone which now seemed to be slowly bubbling and boiling away as a result of the powerful forces of primal chaos trapped beneath it.

Agnarr doused his flaming sword and proceeded carefully down the hallway. As he approached the complex where the bloodwights had nested, he heard many voices and the muffled sounds of some activity.

Toying with the idea of brazenly entering the complex and confronting the intruders, Agnarr instead decided for prudence. He retreated silently back to Greyson House and returned to the Ghostly Minstrel.

### THE MEETING OF ALL THINGS

Having returned from the Pale Tower and the Brotherhood of Redemption, Tee pulled Ranthir aside and spoke with him regarding the golden key they had recovered from Pythoness House. It was the only direct connection they had to their missing memories, and Tee felt strongly that they should pursue it as rigorously as possible. She wanted Ranthir to research it at the Delver's Guild Library as soon as possible.

But as they discussed it, they realized that they had a wider need to take stock of what they had accomplished, analyze what remained to be done, and make some hard decisions – as a group – regarding what their immediate and long-term goals should be.

As the others returned to the inn, therefore, they gathered them together in Elestra's room.

Tee asked the most important question: What are our immediate goals?

**Iron Mage and the Hammersong Vaults.** Ranthir pointed out that they had only two firm commitments: The Iron Mage had asked them to collect a crate from the *Freeport's Sword* on the 21<sup>st</sup>. And, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, they would gain access to their Hammersong Vaults.

Elestra, looking at the calendar, realized it was her own birthday. She had completely lost track of time.

Tee grinned, "My birthday is on the 14<sup>th</sup>."

**The Golden Key.** Tee again raised the issue of the golden key, and the others agreed that Ranthir should research it as soon as possible.

"Should we use the key to open the Vaults?" Elestra asked.



Tee shook her head emphatically. “It’s too dangerous. It felt like it was draining the very life out of me. It could almost certainly kill any of us. Since we’re going to be able to access the vaults without using it, I think it’s better if we just wait.”

**Ghul’s Labyrinth.** Dominic mentioned Ghul’s Labyrinth. “Should we finish exploring down there?”

“And there was still a lot of treasure we needed to recover,” Tee pointed out.

Ranthir pulled out the carefully executed map he had been drawing during their explorations. He pointed out the areas they hadn’t fully explored yet, including the sealed vault door they hadn’t been able to get past. “We could also get rid of the tainted items Mistress Tee is carrying.”

Tee emphatically agreed with that idea. And she was also in favor of taking the time to loot the more cumbersome treasures: Her own funds, in particular, were once again beginning to dwindle.

At this point Agnarr mentioned that he had just gotten back from the tunnels beneath Greyson House.

Tee was shocked. “What were you doing down there? Why did you go down there alone?!”

Agnarr quickly explained what his plan had been.

“You don’t speak goblin!”

Agnarr shrugged. “But I wasn’t the only one down there.” And he quickly explained what he had seen.

Ranthir pointed out that they had sold the location of the orrery, and that it was probably just workers from House Erthuo retrieving it. Tee agreed that it was likely, but they all agreed that they should confirm that sooner rather than later.

**The Night of Dissolution.** Then began the bulk of the evening’s work: The reading, sorting, and analyzing of the mass of paperwork – letters, notes, maps, books, and the like – that they had accumulated over the past several weeks.

Tee called their particular attention to the Night of Dissolution.

The first reference had been found among Helmut’s astronomical predictions: “The key is found. The lost shall be found. The night of dissolution comes when the barbarians arrive.”

Then a reference in Maquent’s journal from Pythoness House: “Radanna and her friends have become obsessed with the ‘Night of Dissolution’. They will speak of almost nothing else. They are convinced that the ‘coming changes have arrived’.” And later in the same journal: “The cultists say the hidden weapons will strike down their enemies on the Night of Dissolution. I no longer care. Their true future is too entwined with chaos to foretell with any accuracy. Perhaps what they say is true. I do sense great changes in the next few years.”

One of the minotaurs beneath Pythoness House had also said: “Ah, the Night of Dissolution is come at last!” As if they had expected to be awakened only when that night had come.

And in *The Truth of the Hidden God*, one of the chaos lorebooks they had discovered, the last few pages were a prophetic rambling of sorts, beginning with the words: “In the days before the Night of Dissolution shall come, our pretenses shall drop like rotted flies. In those days the Church shall be broken, and we shall call our true god by an open name.” The book went on to describe the faux religious practices for a fanciful “Rat God”, with the apparent intent that a church could be openly established for this “god”. Eventually, the prophecies say, even this “last pretense” would be abolished and “Abthoth shall be worshipped by all who are not blooded by the knife.”

“I’m worried that we’re somehow responsible for bringing about this ‘Night of Dissolution’... whatever it is,” Tee said. “We found the key. And the ‘Church shall be broken’, isn’t that Rehobath has done?”

“It sounds like an apocalypse,” Elestra said. “How can we be responsible for the apocalypse?”

“Well... Are we causing it? Or are we supposed to stop it?” Dominic asked. “Is that what we were trying to do?”

“Maybe the golden key is an essential part of whatever brings the Night of Dissolution about,” Tor suggested. “Maybe we were looking for the key in order to stop the cultists from doing whatever it is they’re doing.”

“If that’s the case,” Tee said, “Then Wuntad is going to come looking for it. And for us.”

“All the more reason we should get out of the Ghostly Minstrel,” Tor said. “Everyone knows we’re here. We should get a house. Try to find some place private.”

“We could move into Pythoness House,” Agnarr suggested.

“It would certainly give me room to study,” Ranthir agreed.

**The Galchutt.** Studying the *Truth of the Hidden God* drew Ranthir’s attention to the Galchutt. The Brotherhood of the Blooded Knife, to which the cult manual was dedicated, practiced blasphemous rituals of human sacrifice. These sacrifices were dedicated to a Galchutt named Abthoth, who the cult venerated as the “Source of All Filth” and the “Lord of the Zaug”.

But the first time they had encountered the name Galchutt was in the final, fragmented pages of Morbion’s journal: “JUIBLEX. HE IS OF THE GALCHUTT. THEY ARE—“

And “Blades of the Galchutt” had also been inscribed on one of the chests beneath Pythoness House. Specifically, the chest containing two matched longswords of blackened steel with hilts carved in the shape of demons’ heads.

This discussion of the Galchutt made Tee remember something: The *Book of Faceless Hate*, the queer volume she'd discovered in Pythoness House and then forgotten about in the chaos which had followed. Ranthir set to work deciphering the hard-to-read text...

### **THE BOOK OF FACELESS HATE**

No title marks the tattered, dark brown cover of this book. Its contents are written in a nearly illegible scrawl that could only have been born of hopeless madness. The first several pages of the book are covered in repetitions and variations of a single phrase: FACELESS HATE. (*They wait in faceless hate. We shall burn in their faceless hate. The faceless hate has consumed me. And so forth...*)

**CHAOS:** True chaos, or “deep chaos”, is a religion based on the fundamental aspects of hate, destruction, death, and dissolution. The philosophy of chaos is one of constant and endless change. It teaches that the current world is a creation of order and structure, but that it was flawed from the dawn of time due to the lack of foresight into what living sentience truly wants and need. The gods of creation – the gods of order – are untouchable and unknowable. They are aloof and uncaring, says the teaching of true chaos.

**THE LORDS OF CHAOS:** According to the book, the Lords of Chaos – or “Galchutt” – are gods of unimaginable power. But they are “mere servants of the true gods of change, the Demon Princes”. It is written that the Galchutt came to serve the Princes during the “War of Demons”, but while the Princes have “left this world behind”, the Galchutt still “whisper the words of chaos”.

**VESTED OF THE GALCHUTT:** Although they sleep, the Galchutt still exert some influence upon the world. This influence can be felt by the faithful through the “touch of chaos” and the “mark of madness”, but it can also be made manifest in one of the “Vested of the Galchutt” – powerful avatars of their dark demi-gods’ strength.

**CHAOS CULTS:** The book goes on to describe (but only in the vaguest of terms) many historical and/or fanciful “cults of chaos” which have risen up in veneration of either the Galchutt, the Vested of the Galchutt, or both. These cults seem to share nothing in common except, perhaps, the search for the “true path for the awakening of chaos”. The book would leave one with the impression that the history of the world has been spotted with the continual and never-ending presence of these cults – always operating in the shadows, save when bloody massacres and destruction bring them into the open.

All of this material suggested a connection between Morbion, the gods worshipped in Ghul’s Labyrinth, and the modern chaos cults.

**Dreaming and Chaos.** Speaking of the worship of chaos, was there a connection between the Dreaming and Chaos?

When they had first awoken in their rooms, both Ranthir and Tee had in their possession copies of a work known as *The Dreaming Arts*. There were also their common experiences with the Dreaming Apothecary.

None of them were entirely sure what the Dreaming was, but they had also seen references to it in the *Notes on the Corruption of Wa’tuel* from the research material they had recovered from Shilukar’s laboratories. The exact nature of the “corruption” remained unclear, but there were references to a “theft of Dreams” and a “severing of the Dreaming” which would “result in an utterly alien character”.

Similarly, Shilukar’s *Notes on the Blood of Ravvan* had contained references to the Dreaming: Those suffering the “dreamless corruption” and “trapped in the Dreaming stasis” appeared to be “more receptive to the whispers of the Beast”.

This discussion reminded Tee and Agnarr of a notebook they had recovered from a reptilian sorcerer named Serrek Tarn in the adventures they remembered immediately prior to their amnesia. Amidst a mad scramble of mathematical notations and geometric enigmas, there had been several legible fragments, including:

“Lessons from the tainted dreaming” (*written in a large bold hand near the top of the notes*)

“Sessural is the depth and the circumference”

“The bastion of purity is not untouched. If it could be destroyed—then victory.”

“The shard has not been found.”

“The inner eye sees all, but all there is it does not see.”

“To see the blackness, one must look into their own soul. The blackness is of the body and the bone and the blood.”

“The dreaming must be made one with reality. The key is the sanctuary; the sanctuary is the key; and the apprentice of the One Who Speaks in Dreams shall be the master’s voice within the world. When he is made whole, the endtimes of the beginning shall renew.”

There seemed to be a connection between the chaos and taint of chaositech and the chaos and taint of the

Galchutt. Was there also a connection between chaositech, the Galchutt, and the “tainted Dreaming”? None of them could guess.

**Silion.** Another name that they had multiple references to was “Silion”. They had first found this name in a letter recovered from Linech Cran’s office: Silion had written to Cran demanding delivery of a shipment (presumably of shivvel). The name Urnest, an associate of Silion’s, had also been mentioned in this letter.

The name had been mentioned again in papers recovered from Shilukar’s lair. A report from Shilukar’s minions had read: “We have been contacted through intermediaries by Silion. They have apparently obtained a bone of iron that requires repair. They inquire as to whether your services might be available?”

Who were Silion and Urnest? And had there been, as Elestra now suggested, some sort of connection between Shilukar and Cran?

This discussion also stirred Dominic’s memory: While discussing the results of their mission to Cran’s with Mand Scheben, Dominic had mentioned the name Silion. Scheben had noted that the name belonged to a lascivious and rather unkempt priestess who ran a small and disreputable temple somewhere down on the Street of the Gods. He had meant to follow up on it, but then Phon had disappeared and it had simply slipped his mind.

**Ravvan.** Sifting through the papers from Shilukar’s lair brought Tee’s thoughts back to the Idol of Ravvan. She considered it to be a major threat, in no small part because the mention of it had clearly given Lord Zavere himself considerable worry.

“We should make it a priority to find the Eyes of Ravvan and the Idol of Ravvan.”

Everyone agreed... but they had no leads.

“Wait a minute,” Tor said. “Could it have been Wuntad who took the idol? The gardener we rescued said that a litorian was among those who had taken it.” And there was litorian among those following Wuntad when he had ambushed them at Pythoness House.

“It’s possible,” Tee nodded. But since they didn’t know where Wuntad was, either, it didn’t help much. Besides, she wasn’t sure that she *wanted* to find Wuntad. Their first meeting had ended poorly.

**Helmut’s Prophecies.** They had found Shilukar by using the prophecies they had discovered at Helmut’s house. That alone made it clear that the prophecies had at least some validity to them. In the hope of finding similar insight, they turned their attention to the rest of these prophecies and collated the following commentaries on them:

*Sitting alone at night. H upon the scope of the sky. A slight flame comes out of the void and makes true that which should not be believed in vain.*

H could be Helmut, the astronomer who “sits upon the scope of the sky”.

*When the crowd gathers upon the hill in the oldest town, the new republic shall be troubled by its people. At this time the lord shall be weak.*

This seemed like a clear description of the Riot in Oldtown. It had led them to the conclusion that Helmut was not just interpreting the prophecies, but working to bring them about or use them to his advantage.

*In the world there will be made a king who will have little peace and a short life. At this time the ship of the Novarch will be lost, governed to its greatest detriment.*

They theorized that “the ship of the Novarch will be lost” could refer to Rehobath declaring himself Novarch-in-Exile – although whether that referred to Rehobath or the Novarch in Seyrun was unclear. If “the ship” referred to the Church, then it could be assumed that Rehobath’s actions would not be to its favor.

Could “the king who will have little peace and a short life” refer to Dominic’s role in Rehobath’s ascension?

*S shall find the golden statue while it still breathes. But the Idol of Ravvan brings doom. His lair lies beneath a vacant lot of brandywine.*

This was the prophecy which had led them to Shilukar’s lair. The “golden statue” most likely referred to Lord Abbercombe.

*They will be driven away for a long, drawn out fight. The countryside will be most grievously troubled. Town and country will have greater struggle. Salesia and Corinthia will have their hearts tried.*

Salesia was the capital of Arathia and Corinthia lay on the eastern edge of the Southern Pass (a city-state jointly held by Arathia, Barund, and Seyrun).

*The wands must be selected before the swords.*

Ranther had found a set of notes jammed into a book at Helmut’s house. These notes included the phrases “What are the staves of Ghul?” and “Asche shall deliver the Swords of the City”. Ranther wondered whether this meant that the staves of Ghul needed to be selected before the Swords of Ptolus... whatever that meant.

*The eye of Ravvan will be forsaken, when his wings will fail at his feet. The two of Ptolus will have made a constitution for Amsyr and Duvei, which the goblins will trample underfoot.*

Duvei was an Arathian city-state. Amsyr was a Vennocan city-state. The identity of the “two of Ptolus” was unclear.

The Eye of Ravvan had been mentioned among Shilukar’s papers and associated with the Idol of Ravvan.

Ranthir raised the possibility that the goblins might “trample underfoot” simply by walking under their feet... in other words, to live underground. So this might be a reference to the Clan of the Torn Ear.

*Arrived too late, the act has been done. The wind was against them, letters intercepted on their way. The conspirators were fourteen of a party. By the street of kings shall these enterprises be undertaken.*

A reference to “brandywine” had led them to Brandywine Street. It was possible that the “street of kings” could refer to the King’s Road in the Nobles’ Quarter.

*How often will you be captured, O city of the sun?  
Changing laws that are barbaric and vain. Bad times approach you. No longer will you be enslaved. Great H will revive your veins.*

*The mimics have seen the lance. Doom.*

When Tee had been struck by madness in Ghul’s Labyrinth, she had been left with two sentences burning in her mind: “The lance is being built. The runebearers will not come in time.”

*The knights out of time shall move again. Their oath shall not be broken, though their dreams lie shattered like their city.*

Tee wondered whether this might refer to the strangely armored figure they had seen on the street outside of Greyson House.

*A coffin is put into the vault of iron, where seven children of the king are held. The ancestors and forebears will come forth from the depths of hell, lamenting to see thus dead the fruit of their line.*

*After combat and naval battle, the great ??? in his highest belfry: Red adversary will become pale with fear, Putting the great Ocean in dread.*

*The elves shall quarrel. Dark out of the depths. Blood shed under silver moonlight*

*Vehthyl and Itor, and the silver joined together. Beyond the depths of the Deeps, one will say the ether trembles.*

Could the first sentence somehow be a reference to Dominic and Urlenius?

Ranthir knew that the Deeps were the mid-point of the Southern Pass. The city of Deeptown lay near their center.

*The rune born of crime (DB???) will walk the clouds.*

This prophecy had led them, inadvertently, to Dullin Balacazar and the unknown catastrophe which had beset the Cloud Theater. (“And let’s not do that again,” Tee said.)

*When they will be close the lunar ones will fail, from one another not greatly distant. Cold, dryness, danger towards the frontiers, Even where the oracle has had its beginning.*

*The key is found. The lost shall be found. The night of dissolution comes when the barbarians arrive.*

Could the key refer to the key they had found in Pythoness House? Could “the lost shall be found” refer to their memories?

“And is Agnarr the barbarian?” Dominic said.

“Well, he’s large,” Tee said. “But I don’t think he’s large enough to count as multiple barbarians.”

“Then perhaps the night hasn’t quite started yet if we aren’t the barbarians this refers to,” Ranthir said.

*The warrens are opened. Great evil pours forth. No seal may be found while the heart remains untouched.*

Could this be a reference to the Banewarrens? There had been two references to them before: The schematics for a “Drill of the Banewarrens” that they had discovered in Ghul’s Labyrinth. And the Prophecy they had found scrawled on the wall of Pythoness House: “The Saint of Chaos shall return and the Banewarrens shall open their maw. And the name of doom shall be Tavan Zith.”

*Within the closed temple the lightning will enter, the citizens within their fort injured. Horses, cattle, men, the wave will touch the wall, through famine, drought, under the weakest armed.*

**The Sealed Box.** Although they had identified the golden key from Pythoness House as their only connection to their lost memories, they realized that

there was another: The sealed box that Ranthir had found in his room after waking up with amnesia.

It was an enigma. And like any lock she couldn't open, it seemed to be taunting Tee.

But Ranthir hadn't entirely forgotten it, either. He had been preparing more powerful spells that could be used to unlock the chest... but they didn't work, either.

They decided on two courses of action for the next day. First, Ranthir would go to the Delver's Guild Library and research the golden key.

The rest of them would go down into Ghul's Labyrinth and check on whoever was down there. After Tee's equipment from the Dreaming Apothecary arrived, they would return to Ghul's Labyrinth and open the doors that had previously eluded her skill.

"And if nothing else, we'll have *finished* something," Agnarr said.

## THE NEXT MORNING

(9/12/790)

But when Tee woke up the next morning, she discovered that the Dreaming Apothecary had finally delivered the items she had purchased. They were laying, neatly displayed, on her bedside table.

There were two small, golden discs designed to be affixed to the temples. Tapping either of the discs caused a scintillating field of golden energy to cover Tee's eye sockets. Although this effect prevented others from seeing her eyes, it enhanced her own vision.

There was an armband of black silk with Tee's dragon sigil embroidered upon it in silver thread – thread that was not merely silver-dyed cloth, but actual woven silver.

And, at first, Tee felt there had been some mistake because there was no sign of the glamoured lockpicks she had requested. Instead, there was a large ring set with a faceted ruby. Closer inspection, however, revealed a tiny trigger near the base of the stone. Pressing the trigger revealed a set of tiny prongs, wires, and other small devices crafted from mithril. Slipping the ring on, Tee found that she could control the minute motions of these precision tools with a mere thought.



Since Tee had received her tools, it was decided that the entire group would first return to Ghul's Labyrinth and finish their explorations there. (As a result, Ranthir's researches into the golden key were delayed.)

Returning to the tunnels beneath Greyson House, they proceeded carefully past the point where the pit of chaos now lay entombed. The stone above it was now visibly warping and buckling, making it clear that the effort to seal away the pool would not last for more than a few more days at most.

But, soon after, their fears regarding the unknown intruders were laid to rest: Drawing near to the former bloodwight nests, Tee could easily distinguish the distinctive sound of elvish voices. Stepping into the open, she confirmed that this was a party of workers and scholars from House Erthuo.

The leader of the Erthuo expedition stepped forward and introduced himself as Faeliel. He grew quite excited when Ranthir introduced himself, shaking his hand vigorously. "Cordelia told me that you might pass this way. I'm most pleased to meet you. Would you like to see what we've accomplished with the orrery?"

Ranthir smiled with delighted surprise and eagerly followed Faeliel. With only a glance he could see that the orrery had already been partially restored.

"That's right," Faeliel said. "We're trying to restore the orrery before moving it so that we can preserve as much of it as possible. The mechanisms are badly damaged, but we're learning a lot by observing it in a relatively unchanged state. This damage over here seems quite extensive and recent, unfortunately."

Ranthir explained about the bloodwight which had burst its way out of the orrery shortly after they discovered it.

"Oh!" Faeliel gasped. "Well... I'm glad we weren't the first ones here, then!"

They both laughed, and then fell into a spirited conversation. Ranthir was able to offer several insights into the workings of the orrery before the others pulled him towards the bluesteel door.

## THE FIRST HOUND OF GHUL

They were careful not to let any of the workers from House Erthuo overhear the password as they passed through the bluesteel door.

Tee had been intermittently obsessing for weeks now over the cryptic mysteries hidden behind the locked secret doors near the alchemical laboratory. Now, with her new tools, she was eagerly looking forward to trying her luck with those locks once again.

But before she did that, as they passed through the first antechamber (where the four colossal statues of Ghul looked down upon them), Tee swung open the double doors leading into the strange and tainted temple of obsidian. Through those doors she hurled every

artifact of tainted chaositech she carried, feeling her very soul lightened by the loss of their burden. With a deep satisfaction, she swung the doors shut behind her and then turned aside towards the laboratories.

One of the secret doors lay in the chamber with four alchemical pits, where the fetid fungus had threatened to overwhelm them in a living, undulating wave. While Agnarr and Tor moved cautiously towards the pits to ensure that no new dangers were breeding in their depths, Tee moved toward the section of the wall where she had discovered the concealed keyhole. Removing the ruby on her new ring, she slid the delicate mechanisms into the keyhole.

With a satisfying click, a section of the wall popped open with a burst of stale air. Sliding the wall panel to one side, Tee revealed the hidden chamber. To one side, a small wooden desk was half-rotten through. To the other, what appeared to have once been large crates had been stacked in the corner, but many of these had collapsed under the weight of many years.

And the sound of deep, laborious breathing echoed through the chamber...

Tee motioned for the others to keep silent and then moved quietly into the room.

She discovered the source of the breathing behind the desk: A large, gracile creature with chocolate-brown fur lay sleeping. Its neck and hind legs were curiously elongated, but it was clearly a hound.

Tee backed her way out of the room and told the others what she had seen. Then she moved back into the room, searching it while being careful not to disturb the dog. Agnarr followed her in to keep an eye on the creature and watch her back.

But as soon as Agnarr laid his eyes on the creature, a huge smile spread across his face. It was his dog! He had spent so much time looking for a faithful hound to rear and train, and now he had found it in the most unexpected of places!

Most of the room's contents had decayed to dust and ruin, but among the shattered boxes Tee found three spears of solid steel and high craftsmanship that she felt might fetch a fair price in the city above. But her persistence paid off particularly when she found a secret compartment hidden inside the ruined remnants of the desk... and, inside the compartment, a half-rotted purse containing several dozen blood-red rubies.

As Tee stood up, slipping the gem purse into her *bag of holding*, Agnarr gestured towards the dog. "Try to wake it up."

Tee gave the barbarian a skeptical look, her thoughts returning to the vicious, yapping, porcelain puppy that Agnarr had last fixated on in his quixotic search for a faithful companion. But she could tell that he wasn't going to be easily dissuaded, so she gave the slumbering dog a half-hearted prod. It didn't stir.

Tee shrugged. "No such luck! Let's go."

She headed towards the door, but Agnarr didn't follow. Instead he sheathed his sword and gave the dog a more powerful prodding with his foot. There was still no response.

With a thoughtful look on his face, Agnarr reached into his own *bag of holding* and pulled out a raw steak. (Tee: "Why do you have raw steak in your bag?" Agnarr: "For the goblins." Tee: "Well... that explains absolutely nothing.") Agnarr waved the steak under the dog's nose.

The dog didn't stir.

But Agnarr was not to be easily dissuaded: Laying the steak down, he grabbed the dog with both his hands and gave it a mighty shake.

The dog's eyes popped open! It lunged at Agnarr's face! Tee, cursing, whipped out her rapier—

... and the dog began ecstatically licking Agnarr's cheek.

## THE SECOND HOUND OF GHUL

A few minutes later, the dog was following Agnarr and the others down the hall towards the far side of the first level. (After a brief discussion they had decided to break through the crudely blockaded hallway they had discovered near the fountain decorated with the statues of three strange-looking hounds, and thus finish their explorations of this upper level.) Agnarr was busily trying out different names for his new dog.

With a wry grin and a wink at Ranthir, Tee said, "What about an elvish name?"

"I'd like that!" Agnarr said.

"Well, C-A-T is the elvish word for 'faithful companion'."

And Agnarr promptly named his dog Seeaeti.

The blockade was formed from large chunks of rock, furniture, shelving, and the like. It had all been stacked in a great, jumbled heap – completely blocking the corridor and clearly designed to either keep something out... or keep it in.

Looking at it again, a fresh debate arose about whether this was a good idea. But, ultimately, their desire to completely explore every nook and cranny of the complex decided the issue for them.

It took Agnarr and Tor, working together, the better part of an hour to clear a crawlspace. After considering its narrow expanse – and thinking back to the disastrous rope-induced bottleneck in Morbion's oozy lair – they spent another hour widening it so that two of them could go through it together (which would hopefully speed any necessary retreat).

Tee was the first one to crawl through. As she emerged into the hall beyond, she suddenly became very aware of the dim light pouring through the narrow opening behind her... and the dark, impenetrable shadows that lay beyond its reach.



Agnarr squeezed through behind her, and his flaming sword extended the light's reach, but Tee was already moving down a side corridor that lay almost immediately to her left. (She wanted to make sure that any side chambers had been cleared before they pushed down the length of the main hall.)

The corridor emptied into a small, empty room. Another narrow hallway left this room and paralleled the main hall that she had left behind. There were tiny pieces of debris scattered thickly across the floor.

Tee stooped low. Tor was coming up the hall behind her now, and by the light of the torch that he carried she realized that she was looking at fragments of furniture and other fixtures... all smashed almost to the point where they had become indistinguishable.

She straightened suddenly and whirled, looking down the length of the second hall: Something had moved down there, just at the limit of her elven sight and heading towards the main corridor. Something large.

Back at the crawlspace, Seeaeti began to growl – his hackles rising even higher and his long neck bunching tautly. Elestra, just pulling herself through the barricade, hissed at Agnarr to keep the dog quiet. But all of Agnarr's focus had followed the hound's. His grip tightened on the hilt of his longsword as his gaze attempted to pierce the shadowy depths of the corridor.

Tee, meanwhile, had motioned Tor to silence and headed back down the side passage towards the others. But she had barely opened her mouth to whisper what she had seen than her head whipped around: A heavy, tapping, clacking noise had echoed ever-so-softly and ever-so-distinctly down the hall.

Everyone fell silent. Impossibly, the shadows seemed to deepen. And then, out of the darkness, the second hound of Ghul appeared: It was a bony, undead thing. At its shoulder, it stood nearly twice as tall as Agnarr. Four interlocking, razor-sharp sabered fangs punctuated a jaw of jagged teeth. Its claws were nearly as large. Its bones were thick and at the end of a long, sinuous tail was a bulbous ball of bone twice the size of a grown man's skull.

"By the gods..." Elestra murmured, utterly taken aback.

With a roar, Agnarr charged. But the hound's tail lashed out and the bulb of bone smashed into his side, hurling him into the wall. With a groan, Agnarr slid to a crouch on the floor, trying to find his bearings.

Tee and Tor came running around the corner, skidding to a halt at the sight of the skeletal hound. Elestra fumbled for her crossbow. But the creature was drawing closer to Agnarr now; its maw gaping wide; its fangs reaching out for the throat of the staggering barbarian—

"STOP!"

They all turned to look at Ranthir – perched halfway through the crawlspace with one hand stretched out

towards the skeletal hound... which had now frozen in mid-stride. There was a moment of perfect silence, and then Ranthir lowered his hand and scrambled the rest of the way out of the crawlspace.

While the others watched with some mixture of amazement, confusion, and bemusement, Ranthir walked down the length of the hall and stopped near the creature, examining it closely. "Hmm... Interesting!"

"What did you do?" Elestra asked.

"Hmm?" Ranthir turned to look at them. "Oh! Well, it's a rather simple necromantic creation. It's mindless... or nearly so, at any rate. So I simply took control of its ley lacings and—"

"What is it?"

"It's the skeleton of a ghulworg. Or, at least, I think it is. They have long been thought to be either extinct or legendary. They were either related to the worgs, created from worgs, or the ancestors of modern worgs... the lineage is rather confused. If this creature were still living, the blood in its veins would be boiling hot – protecting it from fire and making it immune to cold. It is even said that the blood could scald attackers who were foolish enough to attack it. But if you look here--" Ranthir gestured lightly and the ghulworg skeleton snapped its jaws shut and lowered its head to him. "You can see that it's bones have been laced with adamantine. That could only have been done after death."

## RAMPAGING THROUGH THE LABYRINTH

"We should kill it now!" Elestra said.

"Wait a minute," Tee said with a thoughtful look. "Let's not be hasty. How long can you keep this thing under control, Ranthir?"

"At least a day," Ranthir said. "And I could always prepare the same spell again tomorrow."

"So you could keep it under your control indefinitely?"

Ranthir nodded.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Dominic said, eyeing the ghulworg warily.

They thought it was a great idea.

Just down the hall there was a door that even Agnarr's stout shoulder couldn't open. They had the ghulworg smash it open. Inside they discovered nearly a half dozen orc corpses and the half-rotted remains of a barricade.

"They must have locked themselves in here to escape the ghulworg," Agnarr said, moving between the skeletal remains with his sword drawn.

When the undead orcs began to rise up from the floor a few moments later, they beat a hasty retreat and sent the ghulworg in to smash them to sepulchral dust.

Around the corner they found a large room filled with a shallow pool of blackish, brackish liquid. After a brief examination, Ranthir determined the liquid was the

diluted remains of necromantic fluid. Although the pool still radiated with the faint traces of necromantic energy – and would have once been a powerful tool for creating undead – it was now no more than a curiosity.

There was a side-chamber overlooking the pool which proved of little interest, but everyone's attention was immediately arrested when Tee discovered a secret passage leading away from the pool room.

The ghulworg was barely able to squeeze into the passage, but with Tee and Ranthir leading the way it followed loyally behind.

Halfway down the passage, they found the broken remains of a black centurion hanging from its rack of machinery. The centurion didn't stir at Tee's approach, but they all had dark memories of their last encounter with these constructs. Just to be safe, they used the ghulworg to batter it to pieces.

The far end of the passage ended in what appeared to be the back side of another secret door... but Tee wasn't able to figure out any way of opening it. With a shrug, she had Ranthir bring the ghulworg forward and smash through it.

The door opened into the chamber where, a couple weeks earlier, they had discovered a chamber rigged with dozens of arrows that fired automatically. They had been somewhat puzzled to discover that the arrows would strike everything in the chamber *except* the person who had triggered the trap, but now Tee was able to unravel the mystery: One of the arrows was designed to hang loosely out of the wall and pulling that arrow would have opened the secret door. She theorized that the trap must have been built as an escape route: Someone fleeing down the hallway could trigger the trap, kill their most immediate pursuers, and then escape through the secret door.

"Does anyone else find it disturbing that someone felt there was a serious chance they might need to run away?" Tor asked.

"Given what I've seen, *I* want to run away," Elestra said.

Ranthir had the ghulworg squeeze his way out into the hallway and the rest of them circled up to discuss their next option. They briefly considered the idea of taking the ghulworg down to the lower level and using it to smash open the sealed vault. ("And then we could take it and smash open the Hammersong Vaults!" Elestra joked.) But they eventually decided it was too risky... the ghulworg might be destroyed by the lightning rods!

Instead they returned to the construct laboratories on the second level and used the ghulworg to haul up the heavy loot they had been forced to leave behind – the adamantine-edged Drill of the Banewarrens; the workshop tools; and the construct elements.

They stacked all of this material just inside the bluesteel door leading back to the bloodwight complex. (If nothing else, Tee was more comfortable with the idea of having hired laborers potentially lugging it up to the surface from there, rather than trying to lead them deeper into the dangerous and unpredictable complex.)

Although the ghulworg had made moving the material possible, all of them had taken part in the labor one way or another and now they were beginning to feel their exhaustion. They discussed returning to the surface, but Elestra thought she might have a better option: Turning to the nearest wall she sung softly under her voice, calling on the Spirit of the City to open one of the hidden ways to her.

The bricks of the wall turned upon themselves and twisted back to form an open arch. Beyond the arch there lay a circular chamber of worn stone, furnished with a variety of couches and chairs in the center of the room and curtain-veiled beds around its circumference.

# SESSION 25 – THE SECOND END OF GHUL’S LABYRINTH

June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008

The 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Kadal in the 790<sup>th</sup> Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

They stepped forward into Elestra’s sanctuary. The wall closed behind them, transforming itself into a fireplace with a crackling fire already lit. Directly above the fire, a mirror was hung.

“What is this place?” Tee asked.

“A secret,” Elestra said, looking around with a sense of vague familiarity overwhelming her. “I think I’ll be able to open a doorway to this place no matter where we might be. We should be safe here. No one can see the entrance from the outside.”

Ranthir, too, was struck by the familiarity of the place. Following some instinct he turned suddenly towards the mirror above the fire. Touching it, he was surprised to see the mirror’s surface suddenly frost over. When it cleared a moment later, it was a transparent window looking out into the hallway they had just left. They could see the ghulworg skeleton crouched there, waiting patiently for their return.

“What did you do?” Dominic asked, looking slightly alarmed.

“I don’t know...” Ranthir said contemplatively. “It just seemed like the right thing to do...”

“Well, at least this way we don’t have to worry about getting ambushed when we decide to leave,” Agnarr said.

Dominic started poking at random things around the room. “If it worked for Ranthir it might work for me...”

Tee smiled and took over where Dominic left off, giving the room a quick and cursory search without turning up anything of particular interest.

Tor, meanwhile, had counted the beds. There were just enough. “Well, at least I won’t have to bunk with Agnarr again.”

## EXPLORING EVERY CORNER

(09/13/790)

The next morning they returned to the stairs and headed down to the second level. There was still one small section of the complex that they had not yet explored: The hallway beyond the torture chamber from which the undead horror with long, blood-sucking claws had come.

There they found a long hall containing a table of black stone and massive, yet elegant, high-backed chairs. There was also a large aubrey of preserved oak containing a large number of silver goblets and three bottles of ancient orcish bloodwine – all perfectly

preserved by one of the many preservation spells which had been laid on these halls.

Unfortunately, these preservation spells had turned the next chamber – an office of some sort – into a rather gruesome scene: The large desk on the far side of the room had been smashed into two pieces, which lay upon a once-luxurious carpet which had been horribly stained and soiled... and so laden with blood that it squished beneath their feet.

Fresh blood made them nervous, so Agnarr was nominated to check it out. He found the desk to be nothing but splintered wood, but as he backed away cautiously he suddenly gasped in pain as a sharp blade lacerated his ribs from behind.

A black centurion had silently entered through the far door and taken them all by surprise as it lunged out of the flickering shadows cast by the flames of Agnarr’s sword. There was a moment of fear at the sight of such a deadly opponent... but then they realized that they were still being followed diligently by the ghulworg.

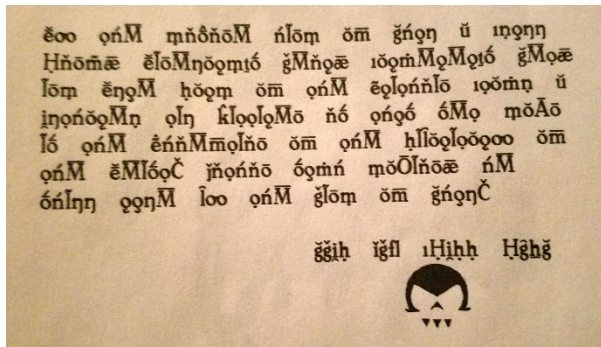
Agnarr backed away from the centurion, carefully parrying its blows. And then the ghulworg leapt in, smashing it to bits in mere moments.

Pushing through the door the centurion had come from, they discovered a small complex essentially identical to the one in which they had fought the other centurions. In fact, several more centurions were already in the process of activating. But their numbers made little difference: The ghulworg made short work of them.

In fact, the group showed such little concern over the matter that Tee was already searching the blood-soaked office before the last centurion fell. In the floor, under the oozing carpet, she found a hidden safe.

A safe meant there might be something particularly valuable. So, with a fair degree of excitement, Tee quickly broke the combination and spun the door of the safe open.

She was somewhat disappointed to discover that the safe was almost entirely empty. The only thing it contained, in fact, was a heavy roll of parchment. Unrolling it she discovered a text of thick, reddish-black Orcish characters. Despite being written in Orcish, the entire document appeared to be elegantly scribed. Near the bottom of the page an immense black seal had been set and impressed in the wax was a familiar skull-shaped sigil. A piece of black-and-gold ribbon had also been attached to the wax.



Tee handed the scroll to Ranthir, who quickly deciphered it using a quick bit of legerdemain:

By the divine hand of Ghul – Skull King, Banelord’s Heir, Sorcerer’s Get, and Blue Lord of the Arathian Stock – Ulthorek tal Yattaren is thus set down as the Chieftain of the Laboratory of the Beast. Within such domain, he shall rule by the Hand of Ghul.

GHUL THE SKULL KING

“Interesting,” Elestra said. “Is it worth anything?”  
 “If that’s actually Ghul’s signature and seal, it might be worth quite a lot, actually,” Tee said... although she was doubtful that Ranthir would be willing to part with it. (In fact, he had already slipped it into one of his many pouches.)

They were now confident that they had mapped out every corner of the complex (with the exception of whatever might be inaccessible behind the various bluesteel doors they had discovered), which meant that there were only a few loose ends left for them to investigate.

They started with the vault they had unsuccessfully attempted to break into before. The four iron rods, each topped by a ball of brass, still stood in the corners of the room – menacing only because of their vivid memory of the electrical bolts which Agnarr had triggered twice before.

While the others kept to a safe distance, Tee tried to access the vault door using the magical properties of her new ring... but this failed spectacularly, and she only narrowly managed to dodge the worst of the electrical bolts she triggered in the attempt.

With a shrug, Tee got to her feet and left the room. A few moments later, the ghulworg had smashed down the vault doors (although many of its bones were visibly blackened from the electrical storm it suffered in the process).

They were very disappointed, however, to discover that their painful efforts had been in vain. The walls of the iron-shod vault were lined with numerous shelves both large and small, covered with small, carefully-crafted niches which were each clearly designed to hold some unique item. But all of the niches were now empty.

### BACK TO THE CLAN CAVES

Which left only the seemingly bottomless pit at the center of the massive, silvery-grey pool.

Using her *boots of levitation*, Tee “walked” her way across the ceiling above the pool and then dropped down to the walkway circling the pit. Behind her she could hear Elestra trying to convince the others that they should start prying out the glowgems on the ceiling. She shook her head in exasperation and made her way around the edge of the pit, carefully keeping her distance from the familiar brass-tipped rods of iron positioned around the walkway.

Halfway around the perimeter she noticed that a line of pitons had been driven ladder-like into the wall of the pit. Even with her keen elven vision, Tee couldn’t see how far down they might go.

She called out to the others, telling them what she had seen. They decided to see where the pitons might lead. Elestra transformed into a hawk and flew the *boots of levitation* back and forth, allowing the others to safely cross the pool one at a time.

They climbed down the pitons. After more than a hundred feet, they ended at a narrow fissure that cracked the otherwise smooth sides of the pit.

There was still no bottom in sight below them. Tee, who had taken back her *boots of levitation*, used them to descend another 500 feet and still couldn’t see any end to the sheer shaft.

She returned to the others and they decided to pursue the path of the pitons. Squeezing through the fissure they worked their way through a series of tight caves that gradually widened as they delved deeper. For awhile they were able to walk in a rather cramped fashion, but then the caves narrowed again and they found themselves crawling for a long while.

At last, they crawled their way out into a larger passage that – as they stood up, brushed themselves off, and stretched – looked rather familiar. Turning to the right, they quickly confirmed their suspicions as they entered a cave with a familiar message written in Goblin upon the wall: “These caves belong to the Clan of the Torn Ear.”

They were surprised, however, to find that the holy symbols of Vehthyl and Itor had been written on the wall directly beneath the familiar greeting.

They were still discussing what this might mean when a goblin entered the cave. They didn’t recognize her, but she certainly recognized them. She told them

that she had just come from the fungal farms, but she would be more than happy to take them to Crashekka and Itarek.

Passing through the siege gate, they entered the Great Hall of the clan. Crashekka sat in her place of honor at the far end of the hall, and Itarek stood beside her. They greeted the heroes with wide, toothy grins.

“Welcome, heroes of the world above!” Crashekka said. And then Itarek strode forward and shook their hands, a custom that they had inadvertently taught to him.

Tee carefully asked them about the holy symbols they had seen, not certain of what their reaction might be. But Itarek seemed more than happy to explain. “Our tribe has been touched by the gods of the holy man,” he said, gesturing towards to Dominic (who fidgeted nervously). “I was the first to receive their visions, but many have dreamed their words. And there are greater wonders, too.”

He took them to the maiden’s chambers where Dominic had saved the lives of the tribe’s woman. There he showed them newborn goblins, each bearing a sigil of one of the Nine Gods.

Dominic’s brow furrowed. “Does this mean I need to stay and teach them?”

“I don’t think so,” Tee said, but she couldn’t really keep the concern out of her voice. She wasn’t sure what any of this might mean.

When the question was put to Itarek, he shook his head. “No. I know you have your own path to follow in the world above. And we shall have to find our own path to the Gods’ Truth.”

## THE SURGEON STRIKES BACK

They left the clan caves and returned to the Laboratory of the Beast. As they passed the large sigil of Ghul on the first level of the complex, however, they heard voices coming from the antechamber. Motioning for the others to stay back, Tee stealthed her way forward.

The door to the temple of obsidian was open.

Tee waved for Ranthir and the ghulworg to come forward. They tried to keep their approach quiet, but between the awkward wizard and the massive creature of bone-and-adamantine it wasn’t clear which was less discreet. After a particularly loud noise, the voices coming from the temple suddenly stopped.

Tee signaled them to stop and then moved quickly to her left and hid behind one of the large statues of Ghul.

She was just in time. A moment later, a strangely horrific creature emerged from the short hall leading to the temple. The lower portion of its body had been replaced with an artificial creation of steel and flesh resembling a giant spider. An ogre’s upper torso jutted up from this spider-like body in front of a large, bulbous abdomen. The ogre’s arms had been replaced with two

large, blood-encrusted blades. Its entire torso was covered in a thick shell of adamantine.

The spider-ogre glanced around the antechamber and then began slowly circling the perimeter. Tee quickly began climbing up the statue she was hiding behind, hoping to avoid the perimeter search.

This worked, and the spider-ogre passed her by. But there was little chance that it would miss Ranthir and the ghulworg standing in plain sight down the next hallway. Tee wracked her mind, but she couldn’t think of anything to do.

It didn’t matter. As the spider-ogre reached the hall, Ranthir sent the ghulworg on a charge. With a single, bone-crushing snap of its jaws, the ghulworg bit the spider-ogre’s head off.

It had happened so quickly that the spider-ogre had not even a moment to respond. Not so much as a gurgle had escaped its throat. They all froze in a moment of silence, waiting to see what would happen.

And then a voice came from the temple: “Is everything... all... right?”

It was the distinctive, buzzing drone of Ribok – the servant of the Surgeon in the Shadows.

Tee tried to bluff her way through it, assuming a deep voice and calling back: “Everything’s fine.”

There was a moment’s pause. And then Ribok spoke again: “Mistress Tithenmamiwen?”

Tee cursed under her breath. Ranthir waved his hand and webbed the hallway leading to the temple.

“Yes, Ribok. It’s me,” Tee said.

“And my... ogre?”

“Dead.”

“I see...” There was another pause. “Perhaps an... accord... could be reached?”

In other circumstances, Tee might have considered that. But there was a terrible suspicion growing in her mind. “What happened to the workers from House Erthuo?”

A long pause came here.

“They will no longer trouble... anyone... in this world.”

“Neither will you.”

They used the ghulworg to form the center of a “wall of death”, with Tor and Agnarr slowly burning their way forward through the web.

As they approached the temple doors, however, sudden waves of fire from the modified Shuul dragon rifles they had left in the temple suddenly washed over them. This burned away the last of the web, but also scorched them badly... and filled them with the dread certainty that the powerful chaositech they had left in the temple would soon be turned against them.

A brief melee broke out around the doorway. There were two rifle-wielding thugs there – their muscles bulging out to an unnatural size and in unnatural locations. Jagged shards of bone jutted out of at their

elbows and knees and shoulders. The bones of their hands, too, stuck out in scythe-like protrusions which they used to slice viciously at any bit of exposed flesh. A half dozen more of these thugs stood further back in the chamber, and Ribok himself stood atop the highest terrace in the room.

Tor finally cut down one of the thugs. The other two fell back, joining the rest of the thugs as they suddenly broke for the sides of the chamber.

Agnarr grinned. If they were going to hold back like that, then they could just send the ghulworg in and—

Suddenly chaositech arrows shot out from the sides of the chamber, turned sharply in mid-air, and rushed towards Tor and Agnarr.

“That’s what those do?!” Tee cried in outrage. “I should have kept them!”

“They were tainted,” Dominic pointed out.

“I don’t care!” Tee said.

As Tee’s joking suggested, they were still feeling pretty confident. But things took a rapid turn for the worse: Ribok thrust the glass sphere filled with black liquid above his head and shattered it. The thick, viscous liquid poured down over his body, forming itself into the thick, black hide of a hideous demon. The metal of his implanted eyes melted away, revealing empty sockets filled with flame.

“The Galchutt have seen all that you intend!” he cried, his voice transformed into a bass thunder. And lowering his out-stretched hand, he began launching soul-rending arcane energies lancing down the hall.

In the confusion of the moment, the party’s battle formation foundered into something of a muddle. No one seemed certain whether they should be pushing their attack as planned or retreating to regroup under the unexpected conditions, and so they waffled in the middle as arrows continued arcing unnaturally around the corner and the demonic blasts of the Ribok demon burst in their midst.

Agnarr was the first to fall, dodging a volley of arrows but getting caught by a blast of dragon rifle fire in the narrow hall.

Even as Agnarr fell, however, Tor was able to cut down the second rifle-wielder and advanced into the temple itself.

But just as it seemed like he might be able to rally them, Ranthir was caught by one of Ribok’s blasts. And as Ranthir slid to the floor...

The ghulworg skeleton went feral.

Tee cursed loudly. Tor, realizing the danger and hoping to control the battlefield, turned and slammed the doors of the temple shut behind himself.

Seeing the massive doors cut off their sight of Tor was disconcerting for the others, but they had little time to worry about it. The ghulworg was creating complete chaos. The bony bulb of its tail had smashed Dominic to the floor, crushing his ribs and knocking him

unconscious, before the priest even realized what was happening.

Tee, with little choice, drew her longsword and attacked... but the adamantite-laced bones of the creature turned the blade easily. Before she could try again, the creature’s claws lashed out and raked from under sternum to hip. Tee collapsed in a froth of blood.

But Tee’s attack had been worth it, buying Elestra enough time to dive for Ranthir. Laying her hand on his unconscious form, she let the strength of the city flow into him.

Ranthir opened his eyes, muttered an arcane syllable... and the ghulworg was once again under his control.

The wizard stood up. “I’ve had enough,” he said with a grim determination. With a wave of his hand, he sent the ghulworg charging down the hall. It smashed into the doors.

On the other side of the doors, Tor – who had been fighting an entirely defensive battle with his back pressed up against the door and blocking as many blows as he could with his shield – was uncertain what to think. But then Elestra cried out, “Tor! Open the doors!”

Tor swung the doors wide and the ghulworg bounded into the temple.

The Ribok demon fell back, but the ghulworg’s tail lashed out and smashed into him. The demonflesh encasing Ribok seemed to deform, and the horrendous sounds from cracking of bone and ripping of sinew echoed against the obsidian walls. With a horrible, unintelligible curse, Ribok vanished in a flash of light.

The remaining thugs fell upon the ghulworg and finally succeeded in hacking his splintering and broken bones apart.

But the ghulworg had bought the rest of them enough time to get Agnarr back on his feet. He rushed down the hall to Tor’s aid, and – without Ribok’s demonic assistance – the bone-sharded thugs proved no match for them.

They were shown no mercy.

## **BLOOD ON THE ORRERY**

As Dominic and Elestra began healing their remaining wounds (and Ranthir mourned the loss of the powerful ghulworg), Tee grabbed Agnarr and ran back down the hall to check on the workers from House Erthuo.

The scene they found was gruesome: Bodies were scattered throughout the first two chambers of the bloodwight complex, many in various states of dismemberment. Faeliel’s body was spread-eagled across the orrery itself, dripping blood down upon the silver spheres.

Ranthir, coming upon the scene, eased Faeliel’s body to the ground. With tears welling in his eyes, he turned back to the others with a crack in his voice. “He wouldn’t



have wanted the mechanisms damaged... is there anything we can do?"

He wasn't asking about the orrery. But the stench of decay was thick in the air and he knew the answer before Dominic said: No. They had been dead for too long.

The death of these innocents struck the companions hard. They had been the ones to give House Erthuo the location of the orrery. They had been the ones followed by the Surgeon's men. And they had only been a few hundred feet away as they were helplessly butchered. They knew they didn't truly bear responsibility for this atrocity, but it nonetheless sat heavy on their souls.