A Paladin's Bargain

Season Two – Episode Two
Chapter Eight: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

ROLE	PART ONE	PART TWO	PART THREE
Rowan Lawson	X	X	X
Garnett	X	X	X
Artie	X	X	X
Despair	X	X	X
Ronnie	X	X	X
Stella		X	X
Sheridan "Shart" Smithwick			X
Fairuza the Math Witch			X

Part One

[SFX: Outdoors, in the station. Crowd, people.]

DESPAIR
Hey Lawson! Over here!

GARNETT
There you are!

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
We've been looking for you! Where have you been?

ROWAN
Hey there! (burp) You're not going to believe what happened. Sorry for the delay. I stopped at that food cart.

GARNETT
What was it?

ROWAN
It was… on a stick?

GARNETT
Oh, yeah, no.

ROWAN
Eh, with a little ketchup, they weren't half bad.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
Were they at least half meat?

ROWAN
Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies.

GARNETT
You can't lie.

ROWAN
Oh right. Yeah, it was terrible. But I've had worse. This one time in Rockport, (we were so hungry that we ate)

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius) (interrupting)
Rowan Lawson, I am stopping you right there, for the sake of me eating ever again.

ROWAN
But you know, once you cut off the tail, you couldn’t tell it was a…

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius) (interrupting)
Are. You. Done?

ROWAN
Yes.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
Can. We. Leave?

ROWAN
Yes.

GARNETT
What was up with the screaming?

ROWAN
Weird set of circumstances. I’ll tell you about on the road. If we’re heading out, maybe we look for Shart? See if he wants to join us?

GARNETT
We thought the same thing. We tried knocking on his door, but he wasn’t there. I suppose that leaves…

RONNIE
Hi Despair! Hello, Mistress Garnett! Hello, Sir Rowan!

DESPAIR, GARNETT, and ROWAN (with varying degrees of enthusiasm)
Hi, Ronnie.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
Wait. Who is this urchin? And why are you suggesting she come along?

GARNETT
Goodman Regulus, this is Ranger Ronnie. She was part of our crew last night in the forest while you were – indisposed. Ronnie, this is our esteemed employer, Goodman Regulus.

RONNIE
Pleased to meet you, Goodman sir!

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
And was she an effective part of your team last night?

GARNETT
Oh, she was very effective at finding the spiders, wouldn't you say, Ronnie?

RONNIE
Well, I (umm… I dunno. If you say so.)

ROWAN
Goodman Regulus, she's a local and an aspiring ranger. She knows the territory. But I notice, you don't have that shield you found last night.

RONNIE (very sheepishly)
Well, I may have kinda, sorta, sold it?

ROWAN
What? That was an amazing shield! Give me two good reasons why in the world you would sell that?

RONNIE
Eating and sleeping indoors.

ROWAN
(sigh) Well, there's that.

[acoustic pause]

[SFX: outside walking noises with daytime birds, etc]

GARNETT
So how did you leave things with Thalestris?

ROWAN
Looking like she had bitten into a lemon and smelled someone else's fart at the same time.

GARNETT
That… creates a frighteningly vivid image. Thank you.

RONNIE
(laughs) But he's not wrong, Miss Garnett. I don't think I've ever seen her smile the entire time she's lived here.

DESPAIR
Ronnie, have you ever even been to the Domina’s chapel?

RONNIE
Not very often. My mom used to like to go, but we can’t afford it any more.

ROWAN
Hold on. Afford what, exactly?

RONNIE
The services. The door fees and the blessings cost a lot of money and we’re only barely getting by. The Domina says if only we’d come more often, the One True God would bless us and we might earn more. But it’s hard to get that cycle started, you know?

ROWAN
So much for the word of the lord being free for all. I knew something was weird about her.

DESPAIR
Speaking of weird stuff. I want to hear more about why that man at the guild pulled you away. You’re saying he gave you permission to abandon his boss to the goblins so long as you can get the key?

GARNETT
That was the highest paying option, yes.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
Are you considering taking that option?

GARNETT
Not necessarily. The situation is fluid right now. And I’m trying to make sure we don’t have too many fluids spilling all over the place. Do you know Guildmaster Milton, Ronnie?

RONNIE
I know him by sight but only so I can stay out if his way. He comes in to all the places I work and he always treats people like poo.

DESPAIR
Oh, he sounds terrible.

RONNIE
And it’s not only me. A few days ago, I overheard some people talking at the market. They thought his wife had murdered him and hid his body under the floorboards of their home!

GARNETT
Oh, that’s horrible!

DESPAIR
That’s dumb. You never do that in your own house. You hide the body under the house of your enemies so they take the blame.

ROWAN
Wait, what?

GARNETT
In any case, the ransom drop-off isn’t until tomorrow night. In the mean time, I hope we can find some more information about your situation, Goodman.

RONNIE
What exactly are you looking for, Goodman Regulus?

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
Before I go there, there are a few things we need to discuss.

GARNETT
Whatever you need, Goodman.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius) (Trying to not say “Ronnie.”)
(Ahem) Private matters?

ROWAN
Oh! G, you hang back and talk shop with the boss. Ronnie, you’re with me on point. This place looks way different in the daytime.

DESPAIR
Let me come with you, Miss Garnett.

ARTIE (as Artie)
It was strange enough when the blacksmith commented about Larkspur picking up strays. But now you’re bringing this child along while I’m trying to rescue my packmates. I don’t know her and I don’t trust her.

GARNETT
We want to water the flowers, Artie.

ARTIE (as Artie)
Excuse me?

GARNETT
I wish there was a better way to explain it. It's… tradition to help out people like Ronnie: they're starting out, searching for something and wanting to explore rather than being out for revenge. We water the flowers that we want to see bloom in the world.

ARTIE (as Artie)
It's a dangerous sentiment. If I am going to track my packmates, I need my real nose to do it, which means I have to reveal my true shape to her. If she tells her friends about me, I'm gonna be on the next slave wagon out of town. You made that choice for me and I do not appreciate it.

DESPAIR
Artie's right. You said it yourself: you can feel people's eyes on us in this town. They tolerate strangers with gold, sure. But it sure helps when those strangers look like they do.

ARTIE (as Artie)
Thank you, Despair.

DESPAIR
At the same time, I know I'm not supposed to read people's minds too much, but Ronnie's good at heart, even if she looks at me weird.

ARTIE (as Artie) (heavy sigh)
You are clearly seeing something I'm not. But at this point, I have so few options. Heaven and earth hear me: if she's the one who throws me under the wagon, I swear my ghost will haunt your asses yelling "I told you so" until your dying days.

GARNETT
Isn't that a bit much?

ARTIE (as Artie)
And then my ghost will kick your ghost's ass. Cold comfort, but worth it.

GARNETT
Artie, I understand. You are a stranger in a strange and dangerous land and your pack's at risk. We've got your back. (beat) And Despair, to be certain: You know that weird look Ronnie gives you is because she has a crush you.

DESPAIR (does not compute)
A crush?

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
(sigh) She's interested in a romantic relationship with you.

DESPAIR (three very different emotions)
Oh! Oh? Oh.

GARNETT
Sounds like you get to have your own awkward conversation sometime in the near future. You go keep Rowan company. Artie, since I started this, I'll lead the awkward conversation with Ronnie about keeping our secrets. Is that alright with you?

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
If you can negotiate a relationship with a Paladin, I guess I can hardly wait to see how you manage this. Lead on.

GARNETT
Hey, Ronnie! Hold up a moment, please? We need to talk.

RONNIE
Sure, Miss Garnett.

GARNETT
So, this isn't easy. We need to tell you a few things, but we could get in a lot of trouble if people found out. You can't tell anyone, not even your mom.

RONNIE
My mom thinks I'm in school.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
School? I'm sorry? I heard the schools closed a long time ago?

RONNIE
They closed when I was six. And every morning, my mom packs me a lunch and sends me off to school.

GARNETT
But you've told her…

RONNIE
She thinks I'm lying to get out of going. And sometimes she thinks I'm still six years old. A few times, she's called me by my sister's name, and she left home almost ten years ago. And before you ask, she doesn't trust healers and refuses to go.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
So what do you do?

RONNIE
Well, I used to read in the library before it burned down. These days, I take the lunch and I go to work. I'm one of the few young people left in the station, so I can pick up jobs wherever I can: I sew with Mr. and Mr. Taylor; run errands for Madame Ubehr, the shop keeper; or I pump the bellows for Old Joshua, the blacksmith.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
That sounds like a lot.

RONNIE
The good days are when I can trade with Madame D'Aubigny. She says she's teaching me about combat, but mostly I get to be the target for her other students.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
But, you learned how to fight?

RONNIE
I mostly learned how to not get hit.

GARNETT
That's combat.

RONNIE
But regardless where I work, at the end of the day, I go home with food that my mom never questions how I paid for and I slide any change into her purse. So even if I did tell her, it wouldn't matter.

GARNETT (this was originally Artie's line)
So when you said your mother won't let you go to ranger school.

RONNIE
I mean that I’m staying here to take care of her.

GARNETT
Oh honey. I’m sorry. I promise, we will keep your secret.

RONNIE
And I promise that I’ll keep yours. Whatever it is. (pause) But it’s not like you’re evil, right? I don’t qualify for a sacrifice anymore.

GARNETT (chuckles)
You’re safe. Well, as safe as you can be in a forest like this.

RONNIE
Oh good! So, what’s this big secret you’re keeping?

GARNETT
Goodman Regulus? I believe this is your part.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
Garnett, smooth as a prickly pear. Thanks. (To Ronnie) We’ll start with: My name is not Regulus Tiberius and Goodman Larkspur was not my uncle.

RONNIE
Oh, I knew about Larkspur’s pretending. Folks have been talking about that forever.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
That’s not all. My name is Artie and I am… not a merchant. I am a druid. Like you rangers, druids tap into the natural world for the source of our magic. The shape you see is not what I look like usually. I will share my true form with you in due time, but again, is critical that you to keep this secret to yourself.

RONNIE
I understand, Artie. Thank you for trusting me.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
You might want to turn around for this part.

RONNIE
I’ll respect your privacy, but if it’s alright by you, sir. I want to understand what you’re talking about. If this is, like you say, part of the natural world, I should embrace it, not run from it.

ARTIE (as Regulus Tiberius)
Bless you. Well, here we go then.

[SFX: The vivid liquid and cracking sound we used for his transformation.

ARTIE
Ronnie? Are you alright? (pause) Say something? (pause) Please?

RONNIE
THAT WAS SO FUCKING COOL! I have so many questions! And I'm sure most of them are none of my business. But yes, if keeping your confidence means you can continue to do that and be awesome, you will never ever hear a peep out of me.

ARTIE
That was unexpected. Most people pass out.

RONNIE (you can hear the smile in her voice)
Most people aren't me.

[commercial break]

ANNOUNCER
And now a word from our sponsor: Bard *Community* College

THE VOICE OF BARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Some of us are destined for the open road: to discover the hidden cave, to fight the monster, to rescue the maiden.

The rest of us? We need jobs.

Bard Community College now offers a 6 week Certified Non-Player Character Course. Your local adventurers need you! For just 25 gold, you'll learn to engage them with riveting lines such as "Our prices are reasonable!" or "I hear the king has a new advisor!"

Learn how to offer adventurers clues and items from your CNPC kit and send them off on their next wild goose chase. You too can participate in the adventure without ever leaving the comforts of home! We'll send you the curriculum of approved CNPC phrases and a fully stocked CNPC kit within 30 days of payment.

The kit contains an assortment of common household objects, mysterious letters, matchbooks, and slightly damaged articles of clothing. You'll have everything you need to study for the CNPC Practice Exam.

Bard Community College: They said you couldn't do it, now it's time to prove them wrong.

[SFX: BCC signature power chord]

(Disclaimer voice: Test fees not included. Certificates are issued by the Association of Non-Player Characters and Affiliated Extras, completion of certificate requirements is not guaranteed.)

ANNOUNCER
And now we return to: A Paladin's Bargain.

Part Two

[SFX: Outdoors, forest, daytime]

GARNETT
Everything alright, hon?

ROWAN
Mostly?

ARTIE (all this episode as Artie)
DAMN! Rowan what did you roll in?

ROWAN
What are you talking about?

ARTIE
Dude, you seriously smell horrible.

ROWAN
The only place I've been without you was the chapel.

ARTIE
Maybe? Human churches always have stanky-ass incense. Smells like death.

GARNETT
But you didn't notice the smell before because?

ARTIE
Because that was my human nose. Canidid nose is completely different.

ROWAN
Well shit.

ARTIE
No, dude. Shit would be an improvement. Please stay downwind of me for a while.

GARNETT
So with that, what's up, Ro?

ROWAN
I don't know how we managed it, but we found what's left of the bandit camp from last night.

GARNETT
That’s where we were headed, wasn’t it?

ROWAN
But no spiders or the funeral pyre.

DESPAIR
And no Mistress Fairuza, or those pretty, pretty barrel hex traps.

ARTIE
But you followed the wagon tracks?

ROWAN
As deep and as obvious as they were last night.

GARNETT
How curious.

ROWAN
That’s not all. The campsite is here. The tents are still standing, completely undisturbed, but the bodies of the other bank robbers are all gone.

ARTIE
Do you think they raised? Rose? Risen? Do you think they’re revenants?

ROWAN
Likely as not, yeah. I’m going to look through Marley’s stuff. See if I missed anything from last night. Artie, I see you’re ruff and ready to start your searching.

ARTIE
(very obviously clears his throat)

ROWAN
(sigh) Right. I am not in charge. You are your own grownups. That said, there may be revenants still in the area. Please be on your guard, and keep an eye on each other’s backs. Don’t be caught skylarking. Don’t wander too far off (and be sure…)

[SFX: A bird flies down and squawks loudly]

ROWAN
And what the nine hells is this?

ARTIE
It’s a Stellari. I hear they’re fairly common around here.

ROWAN
Not like your magical batshit at the pass?

ARTIE
Sadly, no. However, they are very smart, (in fact, our stories say…)

RONNIE (interrupting)
This is my chance to help! I want to try out this neat trick I learned! (spellcasting voice, very haltingly) Bark and meow, roar and ook! Let me read you like a book! (regular voice) Hello, bird friend!

STELLA
(caw) Got anything shiny?

RONNIE
Ooh! Yes! I have a (rustles around) here you go, bird friend!

[SFX: ping! Of a coin being tossed and landing on the dirt. Bird flies down.]

STELLA
Thanks!

[SFX: bird flies off]

RONNIE
Wait! Where did they go? (calling after) I wanted to ask you some questions!

[All laugh]

ARTIE
So, here’s the thing you need to know about Stellari…

[acoustic pause]

GARNETT
Alright, this is getting silly. (calling out) Ronnie? Come on back in. (regular voice) We have been at this for hours now. I got nothing.

DESPAIR
What about that other bandit? The one I warned you about? Charlie?

GARNETT
No footsteps, no dragging furrows. It’s like she vanished. You?

DESPAIR
Nothing. No glow, no clues, nothing. It’s too…

GARNETT
Stop! Jinx, jinx, jinx! Do not say the Q word!

DESPAIR
Miss Garnett, pretend I’m not from around here. What are you talking about now?

GARNETT
There’s a particular phrase that sounds completely normal. The word starts with a Q and it ends with people screaming and bleeding. Trust me. (beat) Hey, Artie. Any luck with your nose?

ARTIE
Nothing. Any scents I can find that aren’t from Rowan are the same residual, like what I got from the wagon this morning. It’s stale and it’s getting staler.

GARNETT
Keep heart, Artie. We can do this.

ROWAN
Well, I turned the tents inside out. Nothing except Marley’s red cloak. Weighs a ton.

GARNETT
Maybe bring it back to Severina?

ROWAN
Makes sense. Hey, Ronnie. Any luck?

RONNIE
Everything I found matches what you told me about from last night. His stealth ability was off the charts. Sir Rowan, with the forest as my witness, I found exactly one footprint.

[SFX: A bird flies down and squawks loudly]

STELLA
The forest disagrees with your assessment.

RONNIE
Oh hai! You're back!

STELLA
Got anything shiny?

RONNIE
Not again, you sneaky bird.

STELLA
Hey, it was worth a try. What would you like to know?

ARTIE
Well, to start with, (have you seen any other Canidae?)

RONNIE (interrupting, not getting everyone can understand the bird)
The Stellari might be able to help us everyone!

ROWAN
We can understand the bird, Ronnie.

RONNIE
Artie, what did you want to ask our fine feathered friend?

ARTIE
I'd like to know if they have seen any other Canidae – any more people like me – within the last few days.

STELLA
Yes, I (saw two Canidae a few days ago.)

RONNIE (interrupting – laying it on thick)
Kind Stellari, have you, with your far sight and wise vision, seen or perceived (any creatures, or rather people)

DESPAIR
Ronnie? The bird is speaking our language. We understand it.

RONNIE
Wait. That’s not part of the spell description I read.

STELLA
Ah ha! Looks like somebody caught up with their Perception check!

[All laugh]

ARTIE
Stellari are smart enough that some learn how to speak with people.

STELLA
Correction, Canidid. We are all smart enough, most of us are too smart to speak with the two-legs.

RONNIE
Then why are you speaking to us?

STELLA
Because you gave me something shiny. I’m a simple bird.

RONNIE
You’re welcome (kind Stellari)

STELLA (interrupting)
and I’m bored. So yes, two Canidae recently. One was fair, like a birch in autumn. The other was shaded, like the Tabaxi here.

ARTIE
That’s wonderful! Thank you so much! How can I possibly thank you?

STELLA
Got anything shiny?

ARTIE
Friend, if I find these two, I will get you so many shinies, you won’t know what to do with it all.

STELLA
Ooo! You say the sweetest things.

RONNIE
I suppose we should make this formal or something. I am Ronnie. What do they call you?

STELLA (laying it on thick)
I am the screamer and the herald of Ymir.
I am the thief and the taste of salt on your tongue.

RONNIE
Really?

STELLA
No. I'm messing with you. People call me Stella.

ARTIE
Pleased to meet you, Stella. I'm Artie, and (this is Garnett.)

STELLA (Interrupting)
No offense, I won't remember your names. Lots of people pass through here, asking lots of questions, and none of them stay for long. (beat) Except the ones who stay permanently and they don't talk much.

ARTIE
Noted.

ROWAN
I have a question for you as well, please.

STELLA
Well, gotta pay the songbird if you want to hear him sing.

[SFX: Coin flipped through the air and landing in the dirt.]

STELLA
Bolverk's ballsack, where you get that coin?

ROWAN (obviously shaken)
What? It's an electrum coin? Some goblins attacked us, the other side of Temple Pass. We got it off of them. You know this coin?

STELLA
Yeah, get that evil shit away from me. That's… Wait, did you say goblins on the other side of Temple Pass? When was this?

ROWAN
Uh, like the day before yesterday?

STELLA
How many?

ROWAN
Six? Yes, six. We killed them all.

STELLA
Well, thank you for that. If they're edging out of the valley, I must tell the others.

ROWAN
But wait, we have other coins, see? Here's two silver. Please stay?

STELLA
Alright, alright. Ask your questions.

ROWAN
So, last night, there was a group camped here.

STELLA
Yeah. Big "was." Go on.

ROWAN
Before the fight, one of the group snuck away. He would've been about my height, but thinner.

STELLA
That's not saying much. But yeah, pale skinny guy, black cloak, white hair. Trying to be quiet like a mid-field mouse.

ROWAN
That's the one. Did you see where he went?

STELLA
Well, I've got some good news and some bad news, sunshine. The good news is, that he went the same direction as the two Canidae.

ROWAN
Well, that makes sense. What's the bad news?

STELLA
You're going to have to keep up to find out!

[SFX: A bird taking flight and flying away]

ROWAN
Come back here! (beat) G, do you realize what this means?

GARNETT
That Artie can find his packmates?

ROWAN
It means I was right about electrum being evil!

[SFX: Several sets of feet running through the forest and the flapping of wings overhead.]

[commercial break]

ANNOUNCER
And now a word from our sponsor: The Deepwater Health Department

THE VOICE OF DEEPWATER HEALTH
Ahoy, Water Adventurers!

That river might look clean, but sandy river beds can hide Evard's Black Tentacles. These mats of black tentacles might look pretty at the bottom of your decorative pond or aquarium, but they can escape into the environment, contaminating rivers, ponds, and lakes, threatening pets, small children, and low-level bards.

Be sure to clean your shoes and adventuring gear before you leave for the dungeon and after you return. And never transplant a tentacle.

Did you see tentacles on the trail? Send a pigeon or familiar to 555-EVIL with the location and time of detection. By working together, we can eradicate Evard's Black Tentacles once and for all.

For a free field identification guide, come to the Deepwater Health Department office, 1347 Black Death Memorial Parkway. Across the hall from the Fish and Underdark Department.

Stay healthy, Deepwater!

ANNOUNCER
And now we return to: A Paladin's Bargain.

Part Three

ARTIE
Mud and mange, would you look at that.

RONNIE
Oh shit!

ROWAN
Gods above and devils below.

GARNETT
Sweet mercy grace.

DESPAIR
That… changes things.

STELLA
Welcome to the Outpost, friends! Don’t worry. We’re far enough away, they can’t see you.

DESPAIR
That’s seven… no, eight caves?

STELLA
Ayup. Massive cave complex in under there. And yes, all your standard death-and-mayhem groups, plus grudging acceptance from the orc faction. Over on the far side of that waterfall, those three caves house the goblin brigade. The bottom two in the center? One each for the hobgoblins and gnolls.

ARTIE
What about those two caves on the east?

STELLA
That’s the orc contingent. They keep to themselves, mostly.

GARNETT
Which would explain why that river embankment looks more like a fence.

DESPAIR
Maybe they don’t play well with others?

STELLA
There is no love lost between them, that’s for sure.

ROWAN
What do you mean? All those groups hate one another on the best of days.

STELLA
Is no one going to ask about the cave mouth in the middle?

RONNIE (stunned, flat)
Hey, bird friend, why don’t you tell us about the gigantic, ornately carved cave mouth with pillars and statues lining the paved entrance?

STELLA (milking it)
Does anyone want to guess?

ARTIE
Is that where my pack mates went?

STELLA
Nope! They are over on to the west side with the goblins.

ROWAN
Is that where the white-haired elf ran off to?

STELLA
Nope! Twinkle-toes missed a spot check, fell in a trap, and was captured by the orcs.

DESPAIR
Then what is the one in the middle? Please?

STELLA
THAT is the entrance to the temple. That is where the Blood Emperor holds court.

ROWAN
The Blood Emperor? Gods above, is he twelve?

STELLA
Laugh all you want. He is the one bringing all the war bands together. His name screams edge lord but his reach is far.

ROWAN
It makes no sense. They're evil. With an outpost this big, I should have a screaming headache, even from this distance.

STELLA
I wasn't finished, meat shield. All that gray at the cave mouths is not stone. That is a nice heavy coat of lead paint to keep the nosy paladins away.

ROWAN
Oh, shit.

GARNETT
The monsters know what they're doing.

STELLA
Yes, they most certainly do.

ROWAN
Alright, this is beyond us. We couldn't get in there with an army. And it would be an absolute slaughterhouse to try.

ARTIE
Who said anything about a direct assault?

GARNETT
Who said anything about going in there at all?

ARTIE
I did. My family is in there.

RONNIE
Maybe there's another way? There's been talk at the station about kidnappings, maybe we could ransom your packmates?

ARTIE
You, me, and what Charisma save?

STELLA
Umm, folks?

DESPAIR
Do you think there's a way we could (sneak in there?)

RONNIE (interrupting)
Is your magic THAT good, Despair?

GARNETT
Not to mention how broke we are, plus how expensive everything is at the Station.

ARTIE
It’s my family. What part of this am I not making clear?

STELLA
I really hate to interrupt, (but you should know…)

ROWAN (interrupting)
But if we pay their ransom, we are financing the army they’re building!

GARNETT
Or forcing them to kidnap someone else with less powerful friends?

STELLA
Oi! Flightless bipeds!

ROWAN
Stella, what are you… (shock) Where the hell did you come from?!?

SHART (quiet)
The Old Ones as my witness, it is a miracle yar not all dead.

GARNETT
SHART! What are you doing?

SHART (pissed but quiet pissed)
Same thing I do most days: watch absolute fools with the survival skills the gods gave a turnip, try to get themselves killed.

STELLA
I tried telling you he was coming, but you were too busy arguing to bother listening to little old me.

GARNETT
Alright. Thank you, Stella, for trying to warn us. I’m sorry we weren’t able to hear you. And thank you, Shart for the reminder that we need to be more careful.

SHART
Don’t piss in my beer and call it a refill. Ya should’ve known better. And ya, Rowan. Beory wept, I expected mar out of ya!

ROWAN
I got nothing. You’re right.

SHART
Right? I don’t want to be right! I want ya to live! Ya got so wound up fussin’ and discussin’ that a clumsy old dwarf in plate mail managed to sneak up on ya in broad freaking daylight! (catches himself) However, simply because the bird thinks we’re out of earshot from all of them, I suggest we step away so we can talk a little mar privately.

DESPAIR
Will you tell us more about this Outpost?

SHART
That too. But mar importantly, I’m not done yelling yet.

[acoustic pause]

[SFX: forest sounds]

SHART
I’m not mad at ya for hiding yarself, Artie. Yar kind have been getting the sticky end of the stick for a long time now. Yar secret’s safe with me and you are safe with me, too.

ARTIE
I appreciate that, Sheridan.

SHART
Eh, my friends call me Shart. You’re on the list.

GARNETT
I’m glad you’re alright with this, Shart. But we need to talk more about how the folks at Gauntlet Station refuse to believe the outpost exists?

SHART
Eh, it’s not so much they “refuse to believe” and mar “refuse to act.” They think themselves in the superior position. So they stay in the station and let the tarists try to handle the outside problems.

DESPAIR
Ronnie, have you ever heard anyone talk about this Outpost?

RONNIE
Not by name or anything. The adventurers who come back always tell stories of massive armies and such, but no one believes them.

SHART
The kid’s missing out on an important detail. One that ya noticed already but haven’t made the connection yet.

ROWAN
Master Smithwick, sir? We stayed after class and we wrote “I will not yell in the woods” a hundred times. Can we jump ahead to the big reveal, please?

SHART
Ya always act this prickly when ya get caught with yar pants down and yar kilt up?

ROWAN
Shart, you’ve spent the last half hour grinding us into dust for being sloppy. Lesson learned. And it’s abundantly clear you know more about this situation. Would you be willing to explain that part of the story, please?

SHART
Ya think I spend my days holed up in my room? Maybe spreading rumors at the Middle Finger in exchange for my root beer? For longer than ya’ve been alive and a pain in my sit-down, I’ve been watching these woods. Watching perfectly competent adventurers get turned around and get tripped up and get dead from stupid mistakes.

ARTIE
Well that’s remarkably helpful.

SHART
I save who I can. Those are a lot of the survivors Ronnie speaks of.

GARNETT
So what about this forest keeps killing adventurers so easily?

SHART
I know a confusion curse when I’m in one.

ROWAN
Ohhhh, that would explain a few things.

DESPAIR
Wait, isn’t that a by-product of (the Math Witch and her hex traps?)

FAIRUZA
I’ll keep my own secrets, thank you.

[Everyone reacts in shock]

GARNETT
Sweet mercy grace, you keep doing that!

FAIRUZA
My neighborhood, my prerogative.

SHART
Afternoon, Mistress Fairuza. Yar looking as lovely as always.

FAIRUZA
Good afternoon, Sheridan. You’re as full of shit as always.

ROWAN
Hold on. You two know each other? Last night, it sounded like you’d never met before.

SHART
No, I kept my mouth shut. A feat I know ya struggle with, Rowan. (to Fairuza) But last night was the first time I’ve seen yar cottage in quite a while.

FAIRUZA
Mistress Despair’s senses may have helped with that.

SHART
And to be sure, ya said ya all made it from the Forest Road to the bandit camp without seeing the spiders or Fairuza’s digs.

FAIRUZA
I wanted you to hear it from me first: Yes, there is a variation of a confusion curse on certain areas of the Boar Forest. I won’t bore you with the mechanics of it.

DESPAIR
Awww… But I wanted to hear more about how it worked for my thesis!

FAIRUZA
But it’s not my arrangement that’s causing it. I call where I live “my bubble” for a reason.

ROWAN
Hold on. It was strange enough last night, but to be sure, you’re aware of what’s over???

SHART (under his breath)
That way.

ROWAN
Yes, over that way? The outpost? The army?

FAIRUZA
Well aware. They’re why I created my safeguards the way I did. They would have to burn down the entire forest before they found me.

GARNETT
Judging by the rest of the valley, folks are well on their way to doing exactly that.

RONNIE
But the confusion doesn’t seem to affect you, Master Smithwick?

SHART
Eh, affects me less. Still gets me loopy if I’m not careful.

ARTIE
Alright. Let’s try this again. Mistress Fairuza, do you know for certain this is not coming from the Outpost?

FAIRUZA
Yes, quite certain. It’s 127 degrees opposite the focal of the Outpost. That’s a prime number. No standard magical harmonic (could do that.)

ROWAN (interrupting)
So you DO know where this is coming from?

FAIRUZA
I can point you in that direction and you'll run into some steep cliffs. The source has to be before there. But I must warn you: I'm good, but whatever did that? I'm not THAT good.

DESPAIR
Oh wow. That means it's something extra strong, Lawson. I don't know if we can manage that.

SHART
Which is also why I haven't tried to solve it myself.

GARNETT
Hold on now. WAIT.

ROWAN
What's going on, G?

GARNETT (pissed)
SIR Rowan, if I could speak to you for a moment? And to the two telepaths in the group: Stay out of this.

[SFX: Stomping]

GARNETT
Alright. Let's pretend that we've had the fight about doing this. It's over. You won. But tell me: How, exactly, does this help us?

ROWAN
Wha? You're joking, right?

GARNETT
Serious as a saving throw. How does this help us figure out how Marley robbed the bank? Because that's what we're on the hook for, remember?

ROWAN
I remember, I (thought it would help us)

GARNETT (interrupting)
We have a (catches herself and says more quiet but still pissed) We have a geas on our heads before the next new moon: we solve that riddle or we die.

ROWAN
I’m well aware.

GARNETT
So is your plan to save Lord Protector Viereck the trouble and commit suicide by side quest? Because to me, it looks like you’re getting distracted by what’s happening now instead of focusing on what’s next.

ROWAN
I’m doing it because we’re broke, alright? Yes, we have to solve how Marley did the bank job. But if we don’t get a few more gold pieces in the kitty…

[Garnett growls low]

If we can’t afford to stay at the Middle Finger, our choices become One: have a sleepover at Shart’s house, or Two, pitch a tent in the middle of this cursed forest. (beat) A curse that powerful would require some high-end magical components. Dismantling it could get us some gold. Which means food and shelter for our growing gaggle of misfits. Which means more time to focus on the riddle of the geas instead of poking around out here. It’s killing two birds with one stone.

STELLA
I heard that!

ROWAN
Stella! So help me, I will put you on the wrong end of a turducken.

GARNETT
Wait! Wait. Stella? How long have you been listening?

STELLA
What answer will prevent me getting plucked and roasted?

ROWAN
The honest one. (spellcasting voice) Would you be willing to tell us the truth?

STELLA
Yes. I heard you from the beginning. You told the telepaths not to listen in, so I figured I was fair game.

ROWAN
You still might be. G, where are you going with this?

GARNETT
You heard me say the word (braces herself) geas?

STELLA
Yes. You both have a geas to solve a mystery before the new moon. Something about a Marley and a bank?

ROWAN
What in the nine hells? We weren't supposed to be able to talk about that in front of anyone.

GARNETT
Thank Pakhet. Thalestris said "any living soul." Do birds not have souls?

STELLA
That's an excellent question. Our stories say that the first Stellari traded their soul for something shiny. Some of our greatest philosophers have suggested (that this isn't a metaphor.)

ROWAN and GARNETT (interrupting)
Shut up.

[SFX: Squawks and flies away]

GARNETT
Alright, we are doing this.

ROWAN
What changed your mind?

GARNETT
I may be overly optimistic because we figured out that little weasel word in the geas, but that does put us another step closer to solving this. You were right.

ROWAN
What was that?

GARNETT
Don't press your luck.

[SFX: walking back]

STELLA
… And that’s why they can’t tell you about their real mission.

ROWAN
Stella, gods dammit.

SHART
It’s true, lad. The bird told them everything.

GARNETT
And no splitting headaches?

DESPAIR
Not a single icicle in my brain. I don’t know if that means we can talk (about Marley and the bank.)

Interrupted simultaneously by:
[SFX: geas doom knell]
GARNETT: Wait!
ROWAN: (cries out in pain)
SHART: Again?

DESPAIR
I’ll take that as a “no.” Sorry.

FAIRUZA
This is fascinating. (beat) No offense.

SHART
None taken, Farah. (beautiful)

FAIRUZA
Stop that. Now that I know what you’re dealing with, let me see if I can figure out any other ways to counteract that… situation.

DESPAIR
If anyone can do it, it’s you, Mistress Fairuza.

ARTIE
And until then, we can all agree not to talk about your problem unless we absolutely have to.

GARNETT
Well, thank you. All of you. To the other matter at hand…

DESPAIR (interrupting)
Say no more, Miss Garnett. We're all going with to explore the curse.

ARTIE
Even before Stella came back, we all talked and decided while you were off arguing with Rowan.

GARNETT
We weren't arguing.

ARTIE
(Disbelieving) Un-hunh. One way or another, we're in this together. If this curse is as powerful as Mistress Fairuza thinks, your economy is going to need as much action as it can get.

ROWAN
Well, I… Thank you. All of you. That means a lot to us. Only thing remains is finding where exactly this thing is coming from. Mistress Fairuza?

FAIRUZA
Stella, from what I can tell, the point of origin is (spellcasting voice) HERE. I need you to guide them for me, please.

STELLA
But you said it was dangerous! I'm here for witty banter and backstory! I'm too pretty to die!

FAIRUZA
What's the matter? Feeling chicken?

STELLA
So cold.

[end credits]