A Paladin's Bargain

Season Two – Episode Four
Chapter Ten: A Dance with the Crossroads Devil

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
Primrose Milton	X	X	X
Sheridan "Shart" Smithwick	X		X
Stella	X		
K'Thol the Defiler		X	
Guildmaster Milton		X	
Hobgoblin Shaman		X	
Hobgoblin Lieutenant		X	
Brother Owlbear			X
Goblin #6			X
Brother Lotus			X

Part One

[SFX: Outdoors, day]

RONNIE
What is it, Sir Rowan?

ROWAN
Don’t get me wrong, Ronnie. I’m surprised to see you, is all. After you, you know, walked out here, by yourself. Along the Forest Road where there’s been a rash of kidnappings. To bring us… lunch?

RONNIE
Well, you didn’t come back after breakfast, and Master Smithwick wouldn’t say much except you’d be here. From what you were saying yesterday, I figured you might need my help.

ROWAN
I think this evening is going to be a very dangerous situation.

RONNIE
More dangerous than going up against seven bank robbers?

ROWAN
Tonight is more dangerous because we don’t know what we’re up against.

RONNIE
You mean like the minotaur cave? Or the spiders?

ROWAN
(groans in frustration)

ARTIE
If you two are going to talk about your feelings, I’m going to go check in on Miss Garnett and Despair.

RONNIE
Ooo! Can I come?

ROWAN
No! I need you to stay here.

RONNIE
You don’t want me to go with Artie and you clearly don’t want me here. What do you want?

ROWAN
Ronnie, I’ve known a lot of young soldiers like you. You’re happy and enthusiastic and you want to help. I want you to see you go somewhere, whether it’s being a ranger or whatever else your heart desires.

RONNIE
And you think I’m going to get hurt.

ROWAN
And I think you’re going to get killed.

RONNIE
I know. Believe me, I know. I thought about it the whole time I was walking out here. Every twig snapping, every bird taking flight, I thought it was something coming to get me. But then I thought about you and Miss Garnett…

ROWAN
And Despair.

RONNIE
You could tell?

ROWAN
On the Scale of Subtle from one to twenty? I give that a two.

RONNIE
But I thought about you three, and Artie, and even Master Smithwick. You’re helping Goody Rose. You’re doing something good and right. And that’s something I want to be a part of: helping people. So yeah, I brought you some lunch. Yeah, there might be a fight tonight, but I’ve trained. I even paid good money to get that shield back from the armorer. I’m not a coward, I’ve just never been tested.

ROWAN
Damn, kiddo. If Ranger doesn’t work out, maybe consider Bard College.

RONNIE
But on top of that? Yesterday after the minotaur, you casually handed me more gold than I've ever seen and acted like it was no big deal. Miss Garnett said I shared the risk, so I shared the reward, but all I did was run away. You've been kind to me and I want to help you.

ROWAN
Alright, so let's do this. We didn't get much of a chance to talk before the minotaur. Do you want to talk about how things went? Or how you're feeling now?

RONNIE
Umm, well? I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous.

ROWAN
That is completely natural. In the Guard, if I ate before battle, it would be on my boots before the first charge.

RONNIE
When does the nervous stomach go away?

ROWAN
I'll let you know when it happens for me. Now, You've got a bow for distance and a shortsword for close up, that's a good combination. And yes, you retrieved that shiny shield that you found. Look here: if you sling it over your other shoulder, you can switch from bow to sword faster. See?

RONNIE
Oh, I never thought of that.

ROWAN
Faster is always better. But remember: the ice that you're feeling in your blood is there for a reason. Trust your gut. What is your gut telling you?

RONNIE
Honestly? I'm still feeling a little woozy from the other night.

ROWAN
You didn't go to the healers like Shart told you, did you?

RONNIE
No sir. I've never put much stock in healers – leeches give me the willies.

ROWAN
What about Domina Thalestris and her acolytes?

RONNIE
Between the two, I'll take my chances with the leeches.

ROWAN
Don't blame you. Tell you what: This is a special Paladin's blessing I'd like to give to you. Is that alright?

RONNIE
Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!

ROWAN
(spellcasting voice) O mickle is thy powerful grace.

[SFX: The healing choir]

RONNIE
Oh! I feel better already! Thank you!

ROWAN
Sure thing. Now remember what Shart told you last night: Keep that shield between you and the bad folks.

RONNIE
Yes, sir! Ooh! I almost forgot: I was working with Mr. and Mr. Taylor this morning and I found something that might help.

ROWAN
Another spool of thread?

RONNIE
Nope! This.

[SFX: fabric rustling]

ROWAN
I like the way you think, kid.

RONNIE
Ohh! Look who's coming.

ROWAN
Hunh? Oh, good. (calling out) Afternoon, Shart. Lovely day for a walk. Goody Rose.

PRIMROSE
Rose, please.

ROWAN
Apologies. Good afternoon, Rose.

PRIMROSE
Good afternoon. Sir Rowan, you didn’t tell me that your party kept a Canidae servant. I saw him run off while we were approaching. Please tell me the gate guards didn’t force him to stay outside.

ROWAN
He’s (uh) not a servant. But hey, that’s an awfully thick cloak for such a fine spring day.

PRIMROSE
Miss Garnett said to come prepared. And I wanted to make sure no one saw this.

[SFX: Bag of coins jingling]

ROWAN
Excellent point and well done.

PRIMROSE
Thank you. Although, I noticed Sheridan picked up a rather large coin-purse from the guild bank before we left. He was rather tight lipped about it but said you could explain.

ROWAN (awkward, squirming)
And why didn’t you explain it to her, Shart?

SHART
Because I know what that tattoo on yar neck means.(beat) And I’ll admit, I wanted to see ya squirm a bit. For someone swarn to tell the truth, ya sure spend a lot of time dancing around it.

ROWAN
In my defense, I wasn’t completely awake last night.

SHART
You were drunk.

ROWAN
I have one conscience already, thank you. I don’t need another. But yes, Rose, it’s true. The Guild also received a ransom letter for your husband and swore them to secrecy as well. Suffice to say, this makes us more cautious than curious. The rest of the team is scouting the terrain to best position ourselves.

[SFX: Jay squawks, approaching from a distance.]

STELLA
Hey, hey!

ROWAN
What the… Stella?

[SFX: Bird lands]

STELLA
How could you tell it was me?

PRIMROSE
What? A talking bird? Well I never.

STELLA
But yo’ mama and daddy did. I got a message for you.

ROWAN
Me?

STELLA
No, I mean grumpy.

SHART
Very funny.

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

What’s the word, bird?

STELLA
The word is “ambush.” There’s something headed toward the crossroads.

SHART
Figured they might try something. I'll go check it out.

RONNIE
That's a rather steep cliff, Master Smithwick, and my map shows the only other way up is either a mile back that way or up at the crossroads.

SHART
Lemme see that. That map is older than you are, Ronnie. I know because I helped the fool who drew it. And I made sure he left off a few of my favorites. Can you hold down the fart while I'm gone?

ROWAN
As much as I hate splitting the party even more, yeah. Just be careful.

PRIMROSE
Do you think there will be bloodshed tonight?

ROWAN
All I know is that I have a very bad feeling about all this.

SHART
And when exactly was the last time ya didn't have a bad feeling about something about to happen?

ROWAN
Ten.

SHART
Ten what? Ten arrs ago? Ten days ago?

ROWAN
No, I mean, I was ten.

[acoustic pause]

[SFX: Outdoors, day. Some forest noises with a stream close by.]

[SFX: Despair sneezes (like in Episode 1).]

GARNETT
(Sniffs awake) What's going on?

[SFX: Outdoors, day, with a burbling stream close by]

DESPAIR
Sorry, Miss Garnett. There’s something nearby that’s driving my nose crazy.

GARNETT
It’s spring. There’s a ton of pollen in the air. Are you going to be alright?

DESPAIR
I think so. (sniffles) I was about to wake you up though.

GARNETT
Thank you for letting me get a short me-nap. What happened while I was out? We have guests?

DESPAIR
Yup! Lots! I’ll start with the good thing. Apparently this is a big deal here but: You were right. Even though the ransomers told Rose to meet at sunset, they got here about an hour ago.

GARNETT
But we got here before they did. Good. What are we looking at?

DESPAIR
There’s a hobgoblin at the crossroads.

GARNETT
Only one? Pfft. I won’t call it easy, but that’s alright.

DESPAIR
And six goblin archers, up on the ridge to the west.

GARNETT
That is more of a problem. Those little buggers love to snipe from the shadows. But luckily, they’re short range. They’re to the west, so we’ll have to stay to the east. Anything else?

DESPAIR
And a giant warg, perched on a rock on the east side of the canyon. It’s not chained up and it is gnawing on a bone so big, I don’t want to know where it came from.

GARNETT
How much longer is this list?

DESPAIR
Not much longer.

GARNETT (fake enthusiasm)
Oh good.

DESPAIR (Stifles a sneeze)
The hobgoblin is wearing a lot of bones. I think he might be a shaman?

GARNETT
Bone decorations are pretty typical for hobgoblins.

DESPAIR
More bones than usual, a big black staff, and absolutely radiating with a nasty aetherial glow?

GARNETT
Alright yeah, caster. What about us?

DESPAIR
Still not done yet. About ten minutes ago, the shaman did some sort of blessing? Cursing? I’m not completely sure what it was, but he started glowing all over.

GARNETT
Some sort of buff?

DESPAIR
I thought so at first, but some of my stuff started glowing.

GARNETT
Probably detect magic then. Are we still within your range for your spells?

DESPAIR
Only barely. The thing is, sunset is still some time away. If he’s casting it now, that means he knows it will last a long time.

GARNETT
A good magician never reveals their secrets, but a weaponized detect magic spell means he can see what's coming. If you're done with our list of adversaries, now can you tell us where we are?

DESPAIR (not understanding the expression)
We're hidden, behind a big rock in the river wash to the south, near the bridge.

GARNETT
(sigh) I meant, what is the status of the rest of our team?

DESPAIR
Oh! I sent word to Shart. He picked up the ransom from the Guild Bank and is making sure Rose gets out of the station safely. Lawson found a spot off the Forest Road and he's waiting for them there.

GARNETT
Alright. What about Artie?

ARTIE
What about me?

(Garnett and Despair stifle cries of surprise.)

GARNETT
Sweet mercy grace, Artie. I almost sliced you open.

ARTIE
Sorry! I figured I'd sneak up here and check the situation.

GARNETT
Archers to the west, a magically twisted wolf to the east, and a power caster in the middle.

ARTIE
Oh joy. Are you going to warn Rowan and Shart?

GARNETT
No. Despair sensed some sort of magical detection in the broader area. Let's not risk it.

DESPAIR
But if we don't (Stifles a sneeze)

ARTIE
What’s up with that?

DESPAIR
Welcome to round world, please check your Constitution at the door. But if we don’t warn Lawson, isn’t that setting them up for a trap?

GARNETT
Shart knows these woods. I’m sure he has something in mind.

ARTIE
And we have some extra help: Ronnie came out too.

GARNETT
Ronnie signed on for this?

DESPAIR
She really looks up to you and Lawson. And Artie your transformation really blew her mind.

ARTIE
Yeah, and she’s really got the hots for you.

DESPAIR (not understanding)
The hots?

GARNETT
She… You tease the knots of that yarn in your own time. But I’d suggest you talk with her soon before she starts picking out bridal patterns from Mr. and Mr. Taylor.

DESPAIR
Oh look! A distraction! Can we change the subject now, please?

GARNETT
Right. Head in the game. The bigger issue is that evil warg sunning himself on those rocks to the east.

ARTIE
You know what? I think I might know how to handle him.

DESPAIR
Are you sure? He looks pretty big to me.

ARTIE
Wargs are kinda like my ex: Just because they're smart enough to talk doesn't mean they can't be stupid in other ways. I think I'm going to go have a little sniff around.

GARNETT
Be careful, puppy.

DESPAIR
I suppose we trust everyone will stick to the plan?

GARNETT
Yes. Although I'm sure Rowan is coming unglued having the party split out in so many places. Anything else of note?

DESPAIR
That shaman has been nervous and pacing the whole time he's been there. He cannot stand still.

GARNETT
(sigh) Because he knows a fight is coming.

DESPAIR
Why do you say that?

GARNETT
Because there's one thing missing from that little strike force you mentioned: no Guildmaster. This ransom is about to turn into either a robbery or a slaughter.

[commercial break]

Season Two – Episode Four– Final

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

Part Two

DESPAIR
What I don't understand is: in all the books I've read, they talk about these big, epic fights. But it seems like ours are over so quickly.

GARNETT
Long fights are for exhibitions; they're for pretend. Most real fights are nasty and short.

DESPAIR
But why is that?

GARNETT
Battle plans are like spells. They work great right up until you start taking damage. Once the bleeding starts, it's really hard to stop – with or without healing magic.

DESPAIR (mumbles)
The smallest drop heralds the flood; all the more for the feast.

GARNETT
What?

DESPAIR
Nothing. Never mind. Ooh, look! That's the guildmaster coming through the trees… and another hobgoblin?

GARNETT
Where? Oh, I see her. Damn. That hobgoblin is huge. Weird looking armor and that sword she's carrying… Can you see a glow on any of it?

DESPAIR
No glow, but I still wouldn't want to get hit with it.

GARNETT
That's why we're back here, where it's safe… -er. Let the folks with armor take the hits.

DESPAIR
You were right about the guildmaster being a walking hairball. Even from this distance, he looks… slimy.

GARNETT
Also notice how he’s walking on his own; no manacles or restraints, so again with the suspicious behavior.

DESPAIR
(Begins muttering in Infernal)

GARNETT
What are you doing?

DESPAIR
Uhhh, praying?.

[SFX: same sort of warped sound effect to just a very slow heartbeat and no outdoor noises]

DESPAIR (You can hear some slight infernal to start but turns into:)
Oh great K'Thol. Mighty is your terror. I humbly beg for your help.

[SFX: Bell]

K’THOL (super distorted demon voice)
What do you desire, Despair of a Thousand Sorrows?

DESPAIR
I desire to live, thank you. But for right now, I would like to know more about Guildmaster Milton. Can you see his mind? What is really going on with him? I have no blood to offer but my own.

K’THOL
Very well.

[SFX: Bell]

DESPAIR
(muffled cry and some heavy pain breathing)

K’THOL
(smacks lips) I do not need to see his mind to see his path. He is an avatar of greed, nothing can satisfy him. There is no oath he will not break; no confidence he will not betray.

DESPAIR
But what is he trying to accomplish?

K’THOL
The smallest drop heralds the flood. He is not content with only one… vice.

DESPAIR
I don’t understand.

K'Thol
Enough questions. That was pitiful little taste you gave me. You will need all the blood you can spare for the fight to come.

GARNETT (muted and slow, like a record at the wrong speed)
Despair! Hey, Despair!

[SFX: heartbeat speeds up, outdoor sounds return, and Garnett speaking as normal]

Hey, D! Where’d you go? You alright?

DESPAIR (stifles another sneeze)
Mostly. What’s wrong?

GARNETT
I won’t say wrong, but the warg came down off that rock he was laid out on.

DESPAIR
Where’d he go?

GARNETT
Behind that boulder. Probably lifting his leg. But don’t forget he’s over there. (beat) Hey! Showtime. Look to the Forest Road.

DESPAIR
Here comes… the Guildmaster’s wife?

GARNETT
It sure looks that way. Big cloak with a big hood and I’ll bet that’s a rose embroidered on the shoulder?

DESPAIR
But where’s Lawson?

GARNETT
I’m sure he’ll be here when it counts. Trust the process.

DESPAIR
I would if you would tell me more about it.

GARNETT
Standby and wait for the signal. On my mark, unleash mayhem.

DESPAIR
Ooh, that I can do.

GARNETT
I wish I could hear what they're saying.

[SFX: The Whoosh we use for a perspective shift.]

GUILDMASTER MILTON (smarmy AF)
Oh hello, my dear! You made it! Aww, is it too cold for you? Have to keep your hood up? Yes, I'm sure it is. You always were such a delicate thing. Did you bring the money like I asked you?

[SFX: Jingle, jingle]

Good, good. Thank you so much. I must say, I'm so happy you managed to bring all this money, out on the Forest Road, all by yourself? Telling no one? (tsk tsk tsk).

[SFX: A muted dog's yelp in the distance]

Oh and look! It's… (Calls out) Wait, who are you? You're wearing the Guild livery but I don't recognize you.

RONNIE
Uhhh, Kevin sent me?

GUILDMASTER MILTON
Fucking Kevin. I had hoped he would've brought the money himself. Ah well. I suppose I've seen you around. Fine. But you brought your ransom? (beat) Oh, that's a nice large bag. Well done, whoever you are. Don't worry, these big, bad hobgoblins won't hurt you. Come on, come closer. This is so wonderful! You see, my random temp, you get to buy my freedom from these captors. If you would be so kind?

[SFX: Coin purse hitting the dirt.]

(to the hobgoblins) Are you satisfied?

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
Check the bag.

HOBGOBLIN LIEUTENANT
I’m in charge, you check the bag!

[SFX: They continue to argue in the background.]

GUILDMASTER MILTON
And meanwhile, my dear, you have brought me my treasure. I think it’s time you know: I’m leaving the Guild. In fact, I’m leaving this godforsaken valley to start a new life with the woman I love. Which, sadly, isn’t you. The hobbos will take care of the messenger girl, but I wanted to kill you myself. Goodbye, Primrose. Hyah!

[SFX: Metal clang of a dagger bouncing off of armor.]

GUILDMASTER MILTON
(reacts in surprise)

[SFX: Cloak flourish and sword being drawn.]

ROWAN (Proud reveal)
I love you too, sweetums.

[acoustic pause]

GUILDMASTER MILTON
You’re not Primrose! (to the shaman) You said you could detect any magic nearby. How did he disguise himself?

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
Well actually, only magic is shield with girl.

ROWAN
Who needs a disguise? You were too busy drooling over your treasure to notice I’m a head taller than your wife, jackdaw. And I have it on good authority her name is Rose, but I suppose you would have had to pay attention to her in order to know that.

[SFX: Punch and crunch]

GUILDMASTER MILTON
Uh! By doze! You boke my doze!

HOBGOBLIN LIEUTENANT
Hey! This bag full of chains!

ROWAN
Sorry, friends. I brought no gold, only iron.

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
Get them!

ROWAN
Puff of smoke!

[SFX: Glass shatter and Poof! followed by gas/fumes escaping. Both hobgoblins cough.]

ROWAN
Alright, Ronnie: get this asshat out of here.

RONNIE
Yes sir! Move it, hairball. I think you have some explaining to do.

GUILDMASTER MILTON
I'b nod going wiff… OW!

RONNIE
I said: move it. You don't get to treat me like poo anymore.

ROWAN
Alright, let's dance!

[SFX: Whoosh/perspective shift to the river G/D]

[SFX: In the distance, Poof! followed by gas/fumes escaping]

GARNETT
That's the sign! Blast 'em! Aim for the shaman!

[SFX: Bow twang]

DESPAIR (You can hear some slight infernal to start but turns into:)
Oh great K'Thol. Mighty is thy SNEEZE)

[SFX: Bell]

K’THOL (super distorted demon voice)
WHAT IS THIS ABOMINABLE NOISE YOU MAKE IN MY PRESENCE!? Such disrespect!

DESPAIR
Wha? What? Put me down!

GARNETT (from far away)
D! No time for levitation! Get back here!

K’THOL
You need to learn a lesson.

DESPAIR
Wh-wh-what?

K’THOL
I don’t want you sitting in the back like a coward. I want to see some blood on those dainty little hands.

DESPAIR
But, I don’t have any armor!

K’THOL
I am sure you’ll think of something.

[SFX: Thud. Weird ugly magic sound ends.]

ROWAN
Alright, let’s dance. D, what are you doing here?

DESPAIR
I’m helping?

ROWAN
(takes a hit) Are you sure?

DESPAIR (light infernal in the background, but in real time)
(spellcasting voice) Agathys, Mistress of Mirrors and Queen of the Frozen Wasteland. Dress me in thy armor. Shield me from mine enemies and return their hatred to them tenfold.

[SFX: I’ll find something. (ice breaking])

ROWAN
Whoa! Where’d that come from?

[NOTE FOR CJ: For this entire combat sequence, this is a total code shift for you. You are icy, cold, and uncaring, almost delighting in the combat. Playing with your food?]

DESPAIR
Hel.

[SFX: Combat music]

ROWAN
Can you keep the shaman distracted?

DESPAIR
Very. (calling him out) YOU!

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
(cough) Oh! Junior Goth Girl! I see your kind before. I kill your kind before. (spellcasting voice) GR-THAGH!

[SFX: some sort of flame spell]

DESPAIR
Fire? For me? You are as stupid as you look. [Spellcasting in Infernal]

[SFX: Spell lash]

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
(pain reaction) I know who you bleed for. No need to hit you; I wait. You bleed yourself to feed your master. (spellcasting voice) NAG-MAKAH!

[SFX: Another zap of some sort.]

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
Worth it, demon humper?

DESPAIR (continued cold, dead tone)
Worth it. (spellcasting in Infernal, followed by)

[SFX: Eldritch zap and hobgoblin cry, followed by a wooden thump]

DESPAIR
Oh look, you dropped your staff. (picks it up) Ha! What will you do without your precious little stick?

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
Wait, wait. Do not hit me with that!

DESPAIR
(Yells)

[SFX: Thwack followed immediately by a gong!)

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN (very relaxed)
Ahhh. Thank you.

DESPAIR
It’s a healing staff?!?!?!?

HOBGOBLIN SHAMAN
(laughs evilly) (spellcasting voice) HA-TR-TR!

[SFX: Another zap of some sort.]

DESPAIR
(Despair yells in pain.) Enough! You’ve played your games. You’ve met Agathys, now meet Hadar. (spellcasting in infernal)

[SFX: a slurpy, tentacled sound reaches out and consumes the shaman, who screams in agony and then suddenly stops. Think Ben from Umbrella Academy. An audible gulp, maybe a burp.]

(very calmly) All the more for the feast.

[acoustic pause – mixed with a rewind sound]

ROWAN
Whoa! Where’d that come from?

DESPAIR
Hel.

[SFX: Combat music]

ROWAN
Can you keep the shaman distracted?

DESPAIR
Very.

ROWAN
Good. Hey, ugly!

HOBGOBLIN LIEUTENANT
Me?

ROWAN
You answered. I must say, that is a shiny shirt you’re wearing.

HOBGOBLIN LIEUTENANT
I add you to my armor. You die now.

[SFX: Swords clash: Clang, clang, clang.]

ROWAN
Eh, not quite yet.

[SFX: Arrows landing nearby]

HOBGOBLIN LIEUTENANT
We have army above and behind you.

[SFX: Swords clash: Clang, clang, clang. Followed by a Wilhelm-type scream and a whoop! from Shart]

ROWAN
We have a dwarf with some breathtaking anger issues who likes to shove things. But that’s there. Let’s focus on our dance, shall we?

HOBGOBLIN LIEUTENANT
I kill you!

[SFX: Swords clash: Clang, clang, clang.]

ROWAN
Ah, ah! First things first. I notice that you’re consistently leading with your left foot, and yet you chop from the right.

[SFX: Swords clash: Clang, clang, clang.]

ROWAN
But that’s sloppy footwork. You get three solid attacks in each round, which means you have some experience. But you also keep your elbows really high after you strike. So I thought, maybe you’re setting up Piranessi’s Defense. But if that was the case.

[SFX: Swords clash: Clang, clang, stab, squelch, hobgoblin grunt.]

You wouldn’t fall for that. Which means either you are an idiot or you’ve never heard of Piranessi.

[SFX: Swords clash: Clang, stab, squelch, hobgoblin grunt.]

Or both! So now you’ve taken two big hits to your torso and you’re bleeding pretty heavily if you don’t mind me saying. Your caster is

[SFX: The squelchy noise of Despair killing the shaman]

otherwise occupied. If you were anyone else, you’d probably surrender or run away.

[SFX: Swords clash: Clang, stab, squelch, hobgoblin grunt.]

But you’re a hobgoblin and your honor is at stake, I’m guessing you’re going to go for a grandiose gesture allowing me to spill your guts on the ground.

HOBGOBLIN LIEUTENANT
Ha! For once, you wrong.

[SFX: Horn blowing once, twice, and the third gets cut off with a squelchy stab and a body hitting the floor.]

[SFX: combat music ends]

GARNETT
Do you THINK you could talk a little longer next time?

ROWAN
Hey, I set you up for a perfect flanking sneak attack. (sigh) Thank you. You alright?

GARNETT
Yeah. Good job on the shaman, Despair. You hurt?

DESPAIR (weak)
I’m going to need a minute, please.

ROWAN
There’s no shame in…

[SFX: Despair vomits and starts to cry.]

ROWAN
Yeah. It’s different when it’s up close.

GARNETT
Where’s Artie? There was a warg over on the east flank.

[SFX: A very intimidating snarl.]

ROWAN
Round two! (charging) Arrr!

GARNETT and DESPAIR
No!
Lawson, stop!

ARTIE
Whoa, whoa, whoa! Friendly! Friendly!

ROWAN
Artie? Nine hells, man..

GARNETT
That’s twice you’ve scared the crap out of me today!

ROWAN
Seriously, warn a guy!

GARNETT
How did you manage to solo that warg?

ARTIE (really embarrassed)
Well, I needed to distract him, so I made myself into a very specific type of warg.

ROWAN
Go on…

ARTIE
I may have also cast… “Estrus?”

GARNETT (catty)
Oh, you dirty bitch!

DESPAIR
Hey! That’s not nice!

ARTIE
Well, I suppose, technically? But yeah, totally like my ex. Once he thought THAT was on the menu, he couldn’t think about anything else. He didn’t notice the club.

ALL LAUGH

ROWAN
We need to beat feet back to the station before it gets dark. But first… (beat) That is the strangest scale mail shirt I’ve ever seen.

ARTIE
It looks like it’s made out of coins?

ROWAN
Electrum coins, specifically.

GARNETT
Not to add to your little conspiracy theory, but looks like the shaman has a belt made in the same style.

ROWAN
Grab the belt. No way I can get this shirt off her quick. Despair, grab that staff and… what are you doing? I don’t think the hobgoblin has got much in his pockets.

DESPAIR
I saw something glowing around his waist earlier. And here, it’s… a doorknob?

ARTIE
What in the (hell is that?)

DESPAIR
I’ll examine it later, but it’s definitely magical.

ROWAN
Alright, let’s get moving. Oh, and Despair. If you’re feeling up to it, could you reach out to Shart, please?

DESPAIR (exhausted)
Yeah, sure. (beat) He says he’s chasing down the last two goblins from the ridge. “I gotta hammer, I gotta smash ‘em all”?

ROWAN
A true professional. And hold on. Where’s Ronnie? Rose? Rose?

ARTIE
Biscuits and bones, what happened to the guild master?

ROWAN
Let me… He’s dead. Rose? Where’s Ronnie?

GARNETT
What happened to the Guildmaster?

ROWAN (snaps)
Milton’s dead; Ronnie might still be alive. Where did she go, Rose? (snaps fingers)

PRIMROSE (in shock)
She… she heard Sheridan on the cliffs. Said she wanted to help. Something about cutting them off at the pass?

ROWAN
Gods above, spare some grace for enthusiastic children.

ARTIE
Want me to go catch her?

ROWAN
You know what? It’s her and Shart against two goblins. She wanted to fight, let her fight.

GARNETT
What happened to Milton?

PRIMROSE (still in shock)
I saw you at the crossroads. He tried to kill you, me, us. If I had been there, I’d… But… After the girl left to fight, he came at me again. I had to defend myself. Did he say anything to you?

ROWAN
His exact words were, “I wanted to kill you myself.” I’m really sorry.

PRIMROSE
I suppose that qualifies as “until death do us part.”

[SFX: In the distance, three horn blasts, same as the hobgoblin.]

GARNETT
Rose, this is going to sound weird no matter how I ask it, but can you excuse me? I need to search his body.

PRIMROSE
He no longer has anything I want or need. What are you looking for?

ROWAN
The Guild needed the master key to access the bank vaults, with or without your husband attached.

PRIMROSE
Let me guess. Weasel-looking guy with a nasal voice and little mustache?

GARNETT
That’s him.

PRIMROSE
Fucking Kevin. Milton always said that he was angling for a promotion.

GARNETT (Frustration noise)
No joy. Unless it’s somewhere special, the key isn’t on him.

PRIMROSE
If it’s not around his neck, it was taken from him. He wears… wore it on a thick black chain, but it doesn’t look like a regular key. It’s an ornate disc about the size of my hand with the teeth on the front. The teeth of the key look like, well, teeth.

GARNETT
How strange. Are you sure?

PRIMROSE
I saw it around my husband’s neck every day for the entire time we were married. He even went to bed wearing it. Because that adds to the sexy, let me tell you.

ROWAN
In any case, we should get headed back to town. I’m not a magistrate, but I don’t think anyone would convict you, Rose.

GARNETT
What? Guildmaster Milton clearly fell on his knife.

ARTIE
He fell on it five times.

PRIMROSE
Six. (sigh) After this, I no longer have anything tying me to Gauntlet Station. There’s a Gnomish monastery over beyond the bridge. I’ve heard they will take in travelers for the night. I think I will head that way.

GARNETT
That sounds like a lovely plan. In fact, we (know someone there.)

RONNIE (interrupting, in the distance)
ROWAN!

ROWAN
Whut? Is that?

DESPAIR
There she is! At the tree line! Lemme… (telepathic effect) What’s wrong, Ronnie? (pause) Oh no.

RONNIE and DESPAIR simultaneously.
RUN!

[commercial break]

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

THE VOICE OF DEEPWATER HEALTH
That delicious rat burger might smell great cooked over the campfire, but unless it’s properly cooked, it can spread diseases like Dungeon Crawls and Nasal Flame.

Rat is a perfectly nutritious and safe protein source when sustainably harvested and prepared properly. Thoroughly remove all hexes, curses, and pelts before cooking up to an internal temperature of 165°.

Mom may have served rare rat dishes like Rat Tartare, but those days are over. Protect your family from preventable disease with safe rat handling!

For your free recipe book, stop by the Deepwater Health Department office, 1347 Black Death Memorial Parkway. Just downstairs from the Siege Weapons Registration desk.

Stay healthy, Deepwater!

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

Part Three

[SFX: Combat music]

GARNETT
We're leaving. Now.

ROWAN
What about Shart?

DESPAIR
On it. He says, "They'll… catch you… on the… Forest road. Cross… the bridge."

GARNETT
But what is Ronnie running from?

[SFX: horn blowing a single blast followed by goblin charge]

ARTIE
Cedar and starlight, that is a lot of goblins.

GARNETT
Twenty?

ROWAN
Full platoon; twenty-seven. Let's move, people. To the bridge!

[SFX: running]

GARNETT
What about Shart?

ROWAN
He's cut off and he can't move like Ronnie can. He's been trained. Either he'll hide or he'll make a stand.

GARNETT
And Ronnie's not moving so quick. I can see a few arrows sticking out of that shield.

DESPAIR
And one in her shoulder.

ROWAN
Tender mercies. Alright. Despair, you get Rose across the bridge.

ROSE
I can walk on my own, thank you. In fact, I'll run. Goodbye and good luck.

ROWAN
Fine. You have any ranged spells left?

DESPAIR
I think?

ROWAN
G?

GARNETT
I've got my bow but nowhere near enough arrows.

ROWAN
They're moving fast enough, it won't matter for long. They're gonna overtake Ronnie if we don't do anything soon. Artie?

ARTIE
I can't hit from a distance, but I can close that distance. Cover me. [spellcasting voice] Make haste, make haste; no time to waste.

[SFX: fast feet of Artie leaving]

[SFX: Rowan, Garnett, and Despair's running stops]

ROWAN
Argh! Alright. Get as much damage down range as you can but keep it away from Ronnie and Artie. Got it?

GARNETT and DESPAIR
Got it. Yeah.

ROWAN
And keep an eye open for Shart. (sigh) Unleash mayhem.

[SFX: Plunk, plunk, infernal zap. Plunk, plunk, infernal zap. Plunk, plunk, infernal zap.]

DESPAIR
Got one!

ROWAN
One. Keep going. Keep moving, Artie.

[SFX: Plunk, plunk, infernal zap.]

[Perspective shift WHOOSH. More running feet]

ARTIE
Ronnie, it’s me. Come this way! Jump on my back!

RONNIE
Artie? How?

ARTIE
Later! (pain grunt) Grab on and hold on!

[SFX: more running paws with the sound of an angry mob behind.]
[SFX: Whoosh]
[SFX: Plunk, plunk, infernal zap.]

GARNETT
(Hiss.) I’m out.

ROWAN
Take some of mine.

GARNETT
Different size arrows.

ROWAN
You told me size doesn’t matter.

DESPAIR
(casting in infernal) There’s too many!

[SFX: Plunk]

ROWAN
Keep firing. Out of all of us, you can’t run out.

DESPAIR
No pressure, right?

ROWAN
No! Lots of pressure! Artie and Ronnie might make it to us!

DESPAIR
(casting in infernal) And then what? There’s still too many of them!

ROWAN
We’re stronger together than apart. Fire! (mutters) Come on, Artie.

[SFX: Whoosh]

RONNIE
I think I can… OW!

ARTIE
Don’t let go!

RONNIE
But I…

ARTIE (grunts in pain)
You fall, you die. Don’t. Let. Go.

[SFX: Arrow hitting shield]

RONNIE
I won’t let go, Artie. I promise.

[SFX: Whoosh]
[SFX: Plunk, plunk, infernal zap.]

ROWAN
They’re almost here. Take one more shot, cross the bridge, and draw.

DESPAIR
Draw what? I’ve got nothing but a dagger and harsh language.

GARNETT
What about that armor you had at the crossroads?

[SFX: infernal zap, running, dagger drawn]

DESPAIR
This isn’t the field trip I signed up for.

[SFX: plunk, running, dagger drawn]

GARNETT
(sigh) Sweet mercy grace.

[SFX: plunk, running, sword drawn]

ROWAN (to Garnett)
Well, I got my wish. I got to spend the rest of my life with you.

GARNETT
You ain’t dead yet, tall, bald, and handsome.

[SFX: heavy paws]

ARTIE (winded)
Thanks for waiting for us. Ready to dance?

ROWAN
Everyone! Back to back!

RONNIE
Despair, I love you!

DESPAIR
Thank you? (I… think highly of you, too.)

RONNIE
What?

GARNETT
Here they come!

[SFX: Horde approaches followed by a large volley of arrows and lots of goblin cries. Combat music stops, unresolved]

(BEAT)

ROWAN
WHAT IN THE NINE HELLS JUST HAPPENED?

BROTHER OWLBEAR
Greetings, weary travelers!

GARNETT (breathing heavy)
Uh, thank you? And where did you come from?

BROTHER OWLBEAR
Welcome to the domain of Sunnyvale Monastery. All are welcome here.

ARTIE
Oh yeah?

BROTHER OWLBEAR
All except the goblins. Fuck those guys.

ROWAN
(chuckles) You say your prayers with that mouth?

BROTHER OWLBEAR
I wasn't always a monk, you know.

RONNIE
Thank you so much.

ROWAN
Sincerely, you saved our lives. Thank you. Oh D, can you reach Shart?

DESPAIR
Nothing. Do you think they took him behind those lead walls?

GARNETT
Let's hope. Oh, and… Brother? There was a human woman who crossed the bridge a little earlier?

BROTHER OWLBEAR
Yes, she seemed very intent on getting to the monastery, so we let her pass. Let's get you there too.

GARNETT
We were lucky you were here. How did you… (know we were coming?)

BROTHER OWLBEAR (interrupting)
We are an open hand to the weary and a closed fist to those who threaten our peace. A fire team is stationed here day and night to protect travelers along the Forest Road.

RONNIE
But, we didn't see you?

BROTHER OWLBEAR
Miss, we’re three feet tall and wear no armor. Stealth and surprise are kinda important to us.

GARNETT
Wait, wait. You said you’re from the Sunnyvale Monastery?

BROTHER OWLBEAR
Yes! Sunnyvale is an open door and… (a gateless gate.)

DESPAIR (interrupting)
No. She means, we know one of your order. Brother Lotus?

BROTHER OWLBEAR (shocked)
You know Lotus?

ROWAN
Yeah! Seven feet tall! Black skin! Lots of bright red tattoos!

BROTHER OWLBEAR
Come with us, please. There is someone who wishes to speak with you.

ARTIE
But what about the…

BROTHER OWLBEAR (very insistent)
Come with us. Now. Please.

[acoustic pause]

[SFX: Cell door slams, the thud of a body hitting the floor.]

GOBLIN #6 (taunting and menacing)
Wait here. We come for you soon.

[SFX: Another heavy door slams shut]

BROTHER LOTUS (exhausted but still upbeat)
Hello, I am Brother Lotus Bloodbath. And who are you?

SHART (who’s just had the shit kicked out of him)
(cough) Sheridan Jameson Smithwick. My friends call me Shart.

[END CREDITS]