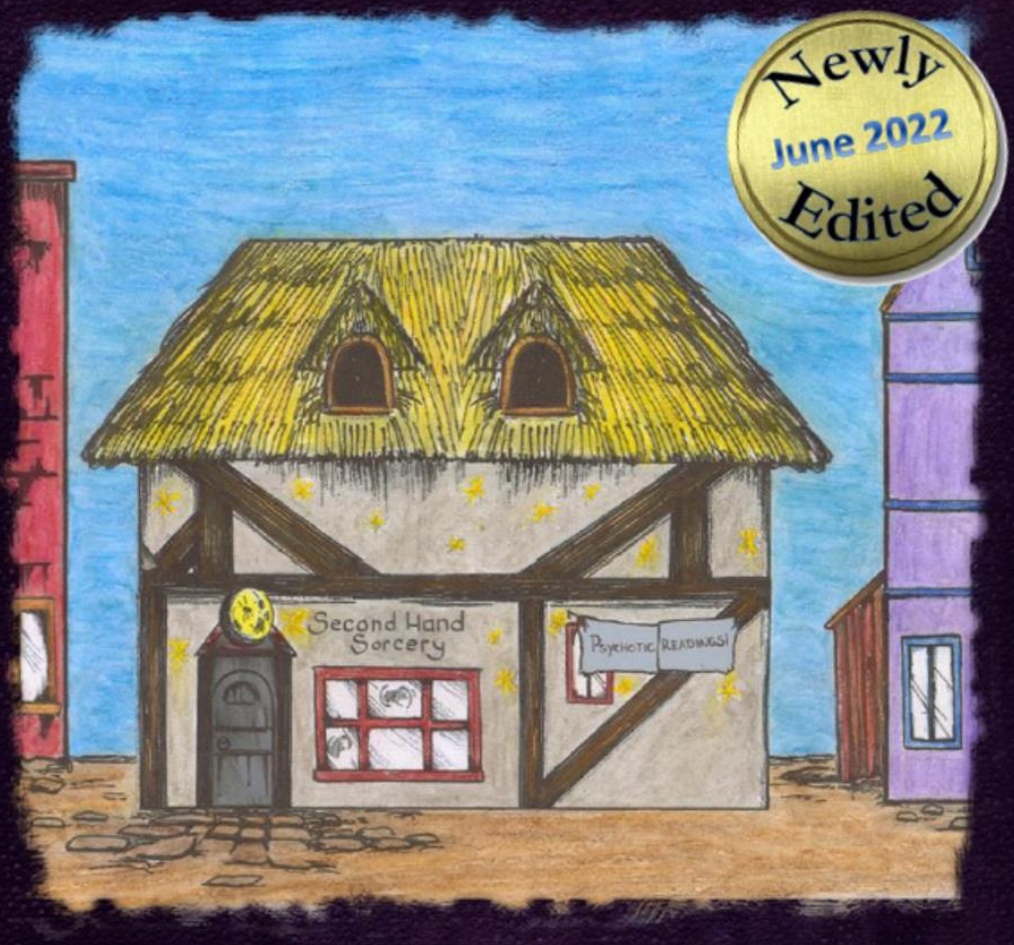
BEST SEQUEL YET!

GNOMES AND HALFLINGS AND ASSASSINS! OH MY!



TALES FROM A SECOND HAND WAND SHOP: BOOK TWO

Robert P. Wills

RATED M FOR BLOODTHIRSTY, HOMICIDAL MIMES

Gnomes, and Halflings, and Assassins! Oh My!

Book 2: Tales From A Second Hand Wand Shop

Any similarities between the characters in this book and persons living or dead (or undead) is purely coincidental. The author has made an effort to avoid using the names of real places or businesses in his story and any similarity is coincidental. And also disturbing. Honestly; who'd name their place the 'Braziered Bear' or 'Ensorcelled Monkey'? Creepy!

And as usual, no animals were harmed in the writing of this book. Several were given treats, however.

Written by Robert P. Wills

Illustrated by Nikki Taylor

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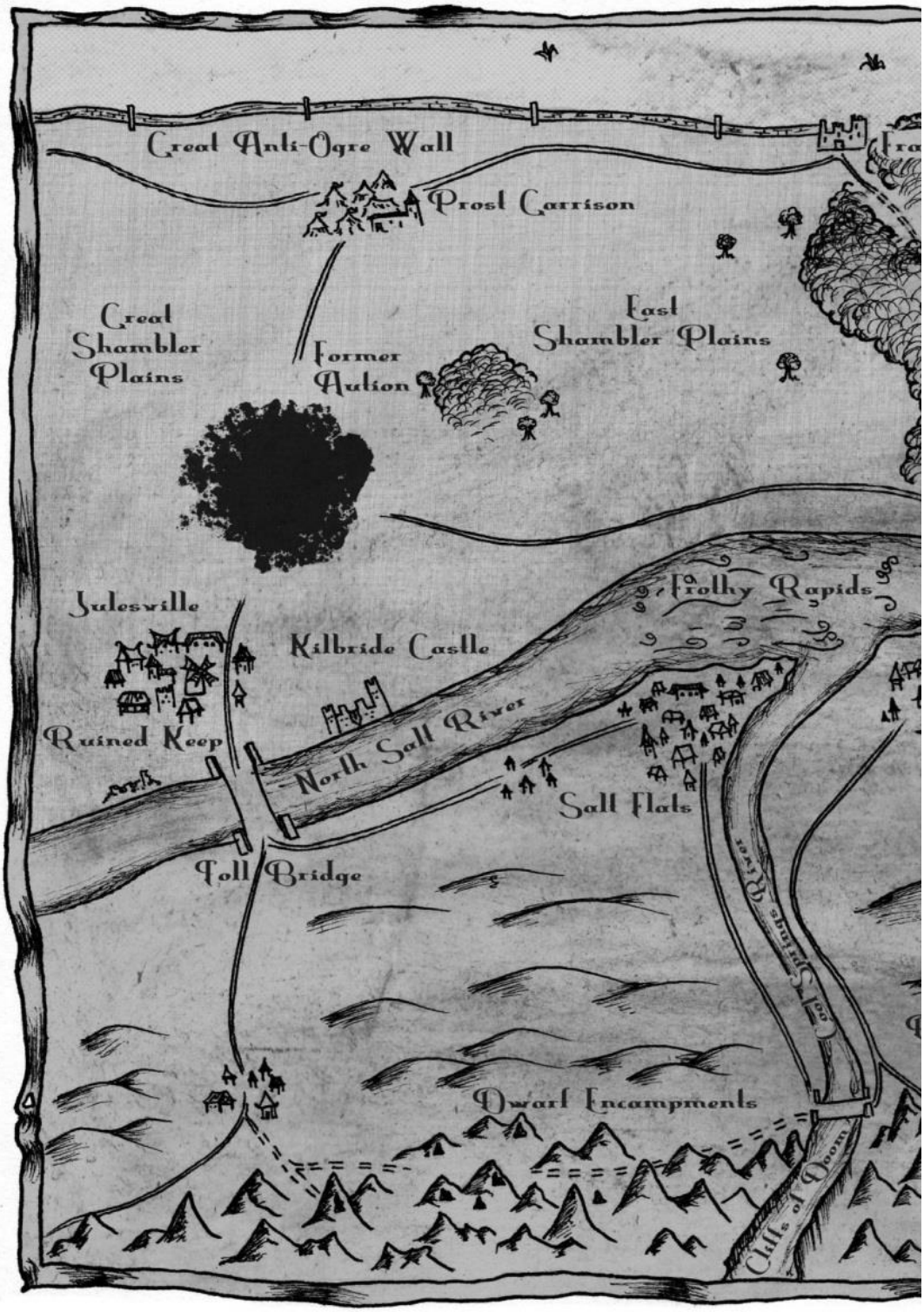
Also, I would like to thanks the talented Chance for his excellent cover work.
Find his music at **www.mynameischance.com**

Kudos to Mary Grace Allen for being able to spot an extra space from across the room. And thanks to Donna Allen; she, knows where, commas, should, go. Hah hah? ,



Grimbledung and Drimblerod - Getting Along Nicely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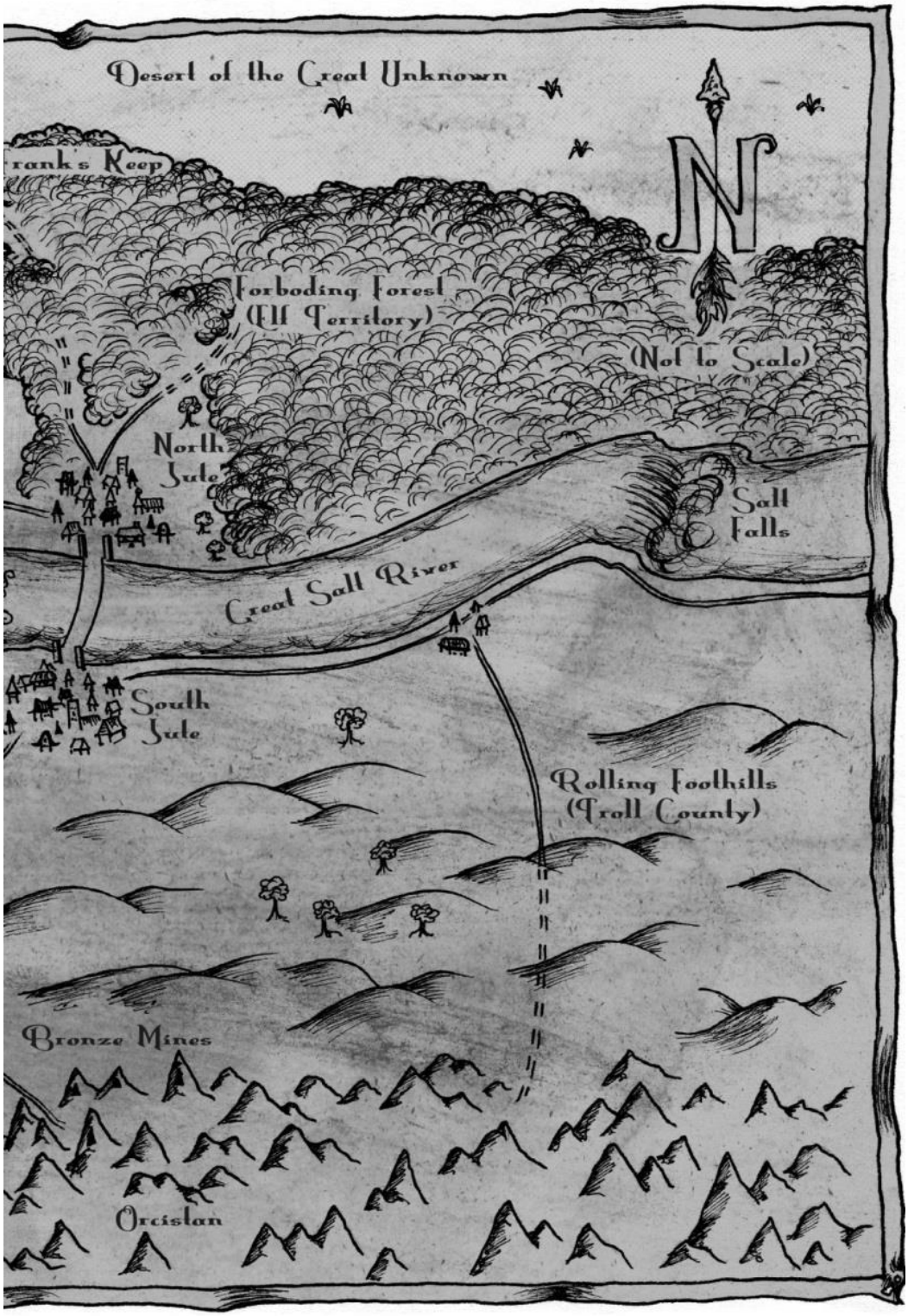
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rank's Keep
Forboding Forest
(Elf Territory)
(Not to Scale)
North
Jule
Salt
Falls
Great Salt River
South
Jule
Rolling Foothills
(Troll County)
Bronze Mines
Orcistan

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It Was Dark and Stormy

It was dark. Very dark. And stormy. Very stormy. Grimbledung struggled to move his legs. He was running from something, but from what he was unsure. There was heat all around him, of *that* he was sure. That, and nothing more. It was as if a large black blanket enveloped him, smothering him and hindering his movements at the same time. *Smothering*! His arms felt as if they each held a Halfling. *Halfling*? What would make him think about Halflings? On the edge of his mind he knew that they were important, but the reason stayed just out of reach. To make matters worse, he felt as if he were running through knee-deep (at least to a Gnome) mud. Every step was a struggle and the heat kept getting closer. There was no escape! Halflings! *Heat*!

Grimbledung startled awake. It was dark. **Dark!** He struggled to move and felt penned in on all sides. Penned in! Realization washed over him; he was tangled in his blanket. His trusty Black Shambler, ShamblerSnuggee® wool blanket. Sleeves on a blanket *seemed* like a good idea at the time- now, half the times he woke up, the thing had him in a death grip. Maybe Rat had somehow Jinxed the blanket; after all, he *did* know a thing or two about Shamblers. Grimbledung took a calming breath and tried to relax. He untangled himself from his (possibly) possessed blanket and sat up. He was covered in sweat. Maybe a summer-time blanket was in order. A sleeveless one. Perhaps a Red-Toed Shambler SpouseBeaterSnugee®.

Grimbledung looked around at his home- an abandoned livery stable. It was ramshackle, drafty and smelled of animals. It was situated in the West End of the town of Aution where even respectable thieves did not venture. "Ahhh, home," said Grimbledung with a sigh. He looked around again, confused. *The stable? Was it all a dream?* He stood to take in his surroundings. There in the corner, was his trusty wagon wand-shop. Easily moved when the authorities came looking. Now all that was missing was Rat. "Rat!" he called. "Where are you Rat?"

"*Trying* to sleep you daft Gnome," came a familiar reply from his long-time companion. "If it weren't for all the shouting."

"Rat! I had the absolutely worstest dream!" Said Grimbledung, "You'll never believe it!"

"Do tell," said Rat as he rolled into a sitting position, "because I probably couldn't stop you anyway."

"Well, you were there," he began. "Let's see, who else? Oh, so was I."

"Obviously."

"And we were working at this hoity-toity wand shop across town. There was this other Gnome, and this Troll woman, and an unstable werewolf Constable."

"That sounds excitingly absurd," said Rat as he lay back down. "Except for the Constable part. That part is true. Akita *is* unstable. Great, now I'm helping the story along."

Grimbledung nodded, "It was exciting! We were making good coinage and things were going nicely."

"Grimbledung"

"…until these Halflings showed up in town…."

"Grim"

"… and I had set up this great Jamboree with food and music and stuff."

"Grim!"

"… it was going great until this fire started. I'm not sure who was to blame, but I think it was the Halflings. Then we were running for our lives and we ended up going to this school for Wizards and Witches run by this gloriously, delectably large woman…"

"GRIM!"

Grimbledung startled awake.

"Get up, Grim!" Said Drimblerod, "we need to talk to Big Julie about setting up our shop again."

"Wait, what?" Asked Grimbledung confused.

"We need to talk to Julie to make sure we get a good spot to put the shop," said Drimblerod testily. "You really need to get rid of that ridiculous blanket. Who ever heard of a blanket with sleeves?"

Grimbledung sat up and looked around. He was in one of the dorm rooms of Big Julie's School of Magic for Wizards and Witches. There *was* a Trolless. *And* a werewolf Constable. And no Aution.

"What's wrong with you?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Steaming Rolton Chips." Grimbledung scowled. "Nothing a good breakfast won't fix." He paused and considered a thought. "Say, did the Halflings start the fire?" He asked hopefully.

Drimblerod stared at his partner unbelievingly, "Are you nuts? That was you. All you. You can't just pretend none of those antics ever happened because you didn't like where the story went. That would be the worst cop-out ever."

"Rolton Chips with raisins on top." Grimbledung frowned. Apparently, the real nightmare was yet to come…

Sorry.

One (finally!)
Wherein the Gnomes, Nulu, Dummy, and Rat Are Making Their Way to Big Julie

The clouds scudded across the sky as the motley group rolled along in silence. It had been an hour since any had turned to look back at the column of smoke rising from what had once been the bustling town of Aution. Anything that could have been said - accusatory or consolatory- had been said. An hour ago.

Drimblerod sat in the front of the wagon, marginally holding the reins. It was always more for show since RatShambler knew where he was going and would take offence to any offer of direction. At the moment Drimblerod's eyes were closed. Mainly because he was sleeping.

"Anyone want to hear a song?" Asked Grimbledung, "I just made one up." He was hoping to break the silence because the clouds were moving too fast to actually form anything interesting for him to look at. 'Streaks' just didn't cut it. "It's about the town," he added hopefully.

Dummy turned to look at him and shook its head. Since they had left town, Dummy had switched positions with Door and was now on top of it. The risk of fire was gone so he no longer needed to cower under Door, and since Door didn't have any way to enjoy the scenery, they decided to swap places- Door was friendly that way. Of course, Dummy didn't have eyes either, but that had never seemed to prevent him from seeing.

"You sure? It's not very long and it rhymes and everything."

Dummy shook his head again.

Nulu, who had taken to walking beside the wagon (on the opposite side of Grimbledung) so as to not have to sit next to him, moved around to his side of the wagon. "Grim, I don't see how a song is going to make anything better. We lost everything. I lost everything. Everything." She thought for a moment. "*Everything."* Her face scrunched up angrily, "Since my money was in the bank in town, it's

melted along with everything else. All I have is a Frost Wand to my name."

"You have your looks," suggested Grimbledung. "And a great Troll face. And honestly, your body language is in all capital letters."

Dummy nodded heartily and gave her a thumbs-up for emphasis.

"That has to count for something, right?" Grimbledung smiled hopefully.

"My good looks in capital letters, a Frost Wand, and a thumbs-up from Dummy is supposed to make me happy?" She clenched and unclenched her massive fists several times. Mercifully, she merely returned to the other side of the wagon without giving Grimbledung another look. Or a good throttling.

Grimbledung sighed as the group continued quietly.

The silence was deafening. Blissfully deafening.

It wasn't going to last long…

Two
Wherein Grimbledung is Forgiven-Mostly

Grimbledung mulled over his current situation. Things looked bleak. After decades of being involved in bleak situations, he knew that acting sooner rather than later was always better when one was trying to extricate themselves from said bleak situation.[1]

With a howl, Grimbledung bounded to the front of the wagon, clambered onto a surprised RatShambler's back and made a jump over his head. He was hoping for an impressive landing that would get everyone's attention. He landed in a heap. When he stood up, everyone was looking at him. *Mission accomplished*, he thought. "OK. Let's have this out," he began angrily. "Out right here, even."

"Don't you dare spit at me."

"Shaddap Drim!" Snarled Grimbledung as he moved beside RatShambler to get a good view of everyone, "Everyone shut up and listen. To me, even."

"No one's saying anything, Grim," offered Nulu.

"SHUT. UP!" he howled. "That's the whole problem!"

Nulu opened her mouth to offer a response but a glare from Grimbledung made her just close it again.

"Not a word from you people while I talk." Grimbledung realized that RatShambler had not actually stopped walking and he was now beside the wagon instead of in front of it and he was steadily losing ground. He drew his wand. "Rat, *I swear* if you don't stop walking, I'll cut you in half and we'll see how the enchantment deals with *that!*" He pointed his wand menacingly at RatShambler's midsection.

RatShambler, not wanting to have to deal with what would invariably be called The Great Splitting Incident of 978, stopped.

"That's better," said Grimbledung as he once again took a position beside RatShambler. "Now listen up. I. SAID. LISTEN!" He aimed the wand from Drimblerod, to Nulu, then Dummy, then back at Drimblerod. He did two complete revolutions of wand aiming.

"For Delberger's Hand, what are you getting on about?" It was RatShambler. Since Grim hadn't pointed the wand at him (last), he felt he was in the best position to demand an explanation. In the back of his mind, he was also fairly certain that cutting him in half - although probably painful and messy - would not do him in. He was also curious as to which half would grow, or if he'd end up with a twin. Which would make the pain worthwhile.

Grimbledung did another circuit of pointing his wand at everyone- this time including Rat then he took a deep breath. Then another. Finally, Grimbledung dropped his wand to the ground and began to sob. Great wailings escaped from him as he half-fell, half-sat down. He tugged his ears with his hands as tears ran down his face.

No one moved a muscle.

A ShamblerFly landed on Rat's shank, and even then, he didn't twitch as it chomped down and began to drink its fill of blood.

"I AM SORRY!" finally made its way out past the sobbing which wracked Grimbledung's body. He tugged furiously on his ears. "IT'S ALL MY FAULT AND THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO TO CHANGE IT!" He looked up at his companions, eyes red and wet. "I RUINED EVERYTHING!" he fell back and sobbed at the clouds. The ones that were scudding along.

"Grimbledung," said Nulu as she moved around the back of the wagon, "It's all right. I'm sure it was an accident." She moved forward beside RatShambler. She had her arms outstretched and had begun to kneel to console the Gnome.

Grimbledung sat up, "You're just saying that," he sobbed. There was a substantial tendril of snot dangling from his nose but he did not seem to be aware of it in his current state of anguish. "None of you will ever forgive me." This began another round of ear tugging. The tendril of goo swayed back and forth but still refused to lose its grip somewhere in the nether regions of Grimbledung's sinuses. He turned and looked up at Nulu. "Especially you, I'd imagine." He sucked in through his nose, making the tendril shorter for just a moment. It returned to its original length almost immediately.

When Nulu spied the wayward tentacle, she stood up quickly; Trolless or not, there *were* things that gave even her the heebie jeebies. Consoling would occur at a distance. "Listen Grimbledung," she began. She paused and thought for a moment. Saying '*no one blames you*' was definitely not the right phrase since -rightfully so - everyone did.

Grimbledung looked up at Nulu and finally ran his arm across his nose. His sleeve developed a sheen. He inhaled and it sounded like an someone drinking the last of a frozen drink through a straw.

Nulu's stomach did a little flip. Her biggest fear now became the probability of a hug at the end of her pep-talk. "Listen Grim," she began again. "It's alright. We can work through this together." It was noncommittal, non-accusatory, and -more importantly- most likely correct.

Grimbledung sniffed as he wiped his eyes with his sleeve. His eyebrow slicked down because of the snot. It was as if he were completely unaware of the capabilities of his sinuses.

Nulu took a step back.

"You're just saying that. I've ruined everything," his tears began to finally dry up. "I had a good place to live, good income, a good job, and good friends." He paused and considered that last part. "No, I didn't have good friends. *I had a family for the first time in centuries."* A torrent of tears followed along with another round of ear tugging. "Now I have nothing!" He pulled his legs up to his chest and began to rock back and forth.

"Grimbledung," offered Drimblerod, "Nulu's right. We will work through this. And you haven't lost everything. We're all safe and together. And we're not getting rid of you because of a little fire."

RatShambler turned to look at Drimblerod, "Little Fire? Have you not looked over your shoulder lately? Even from here you can still…" He was cut off as Nulu slapped his flank. Hard. The only bright side was that the apparently insatiable ShamblerFly who had taken up residence on his rump was distracted enough to stop eating.

"Whaddaya want me to do about it?" The fly squeaked. It took off with some difficulty (due to the full load of RatShambler's blood currently in its belly) and flew off looking for some shade to relax in as it digested its meal.

Its last meal.

Unfortunately, when RatShambler transforms back to just Rat (in Chapter 3 if things keep moving at the current pace), the magical ether will make its way back to the fly (we were going to call him Carl, but since this scene is the limit of its existence, it's not worth the effort), it explodes.

Fine- *Carl* explodes.

Ignoring the (both literal and figurative) pest, Drimblerod continued, "We can work through this." He finished simply with a head nod.

"Do you really mean it?" Asked Grimbledung as his tears slowed again. The rocking was still going on.



2

"We do" said Nulu. Drimblerod and even Dummy nodded in agreement. RatShambler, rear still stinging, nodded as well.

Even door underneath Dummy clattered his latch.

"So why don't we all get in the wagon and get to Big Julie's place and see what we can lay our hands on as far as land?"

"You really mean that Drim?"

"I do, Grim," Drimblerod smiled at his partner, "Let's go find a new home. For all of us."

Grimbledung stood up and wiped his nose again. This time with the other sleeve.

Nulu took a precautionary step backward.

"If you say so." He moved past Nulu (who had moved her hands to her hips to avoid implying there were hugs to be had) and to the back of the wagon. *Mission accomplished* he thought to himself. As he hopped on the back of the wagon, he was unable to control himself so he gave Dummy a sly wink.

Dummy flailed its arms around frantically. He had been going along with the others to ensure his continued employment and existence. Even with a head full of cotton bunting and straw -*and no eyes*- he could plainly see what the conniving Gnome was doing. He just didn't have any way to warn the others.

"Yes, Dummy. We're all glad that's behind us. Now let's sit still while we make up some time. We really need to be at Julie's place before nightfall," offered Drimblerod.

Grimbledung stuck his tongue out at Dummy just for fun.

Drimblerod snapped the reins at RatShambler who begrudgingly picked up a faster than normal pace. For him at least.

Three
Wherein the Group Arrives at the Wizards and Witches School and Searches for Big Julie

The sun was hanging low in the sky, minding its own business, as the wagon finally made it onto the smooth road that led to Desplaines' School for Young Wizards and Witches. As they pulled up to the massive windmill that was the main building, they had to slow their pace because of the students milling around the courtyard.

"Does school always run so late?" Asked Nulu.

Drimblerod looked around at the mass of students. "I have no idea. We never really talked about the actual school schedule when we were here last time. Julie mentioned sporting events. Maybe one of those is going on." He guided the wagon to one side of the two massive gargoyles that were positioned on either side of the two double doors. The gargoyles continued to look straight ahead as the wagon went past.

None of the students seemed to pay attention to the wagon as they milled about in their socioeconomic/physical attribute/ or whatever-method-students-used-to-discriminate-against-each-other groups. Until Nulu jumped from the back of the wagon. She landed near a group of students holding matching pennants; athletic grouping in this case. "Say!" Said a startled student -a Dwarf - "Who's got a *Troll* for a mother?" He smiled, looking forward to the taunting that would accompany the excommunication of said student from whatever group they happened to find refuge in. Two or three weeks of tormenting would invariably follow.

Nulu turned to face the student. He barely came past her knees. Moving close, she looked almost straight down at him. "I've eaten bigger things than you," she said flatly. "And pooped them out later that same day."

The Dwarfling blanched and took three steps back.

Nulu took a half-step forward and closed the distance again. "If you run, you'll just die tired." She smacked her lips as she squinted at the

Dwarfling. For extra emphasis, she rubbed her hands together. "Dwarf stew. Roasted Dwarf. Dwarf Mincemeat Pie," she paused for effect, "Dwarf Flambe'. Drim, hand me your wand for a moment, will you?"

The Dwarfling (and his cohorts) turned and ran at, what for them was top speed.

"Nulu! Stop being mean to those kids," scolded Drimblerod, "that wasn't nice at all." He smiled, "Fun to watch, but definitely not nice."

Nulu frowned. "I got teased by kids like that growing up. I have *no* patience for them whatsoever."

Grimbledung got down from the back of the wagon. "I think we should see where Julie is. If there is some sort of event, she's probably going to be busy. We might not even find her." He moved beside Nulu, "Wanna go look for her in the Windmill while Drim searches the grounds?"

"Sounds good to me, I suppose." She turned and moved towards the double doors.

Drimblerod noticed that both gargoyles were now facing Nulu even though he did not see them turn their heads. "I'll check out by the dueling arena and then meet you both back here." He turned and began to walk around the windmill toward the other buildings.

Grimbledung turned to look at Dummy. "Stay here and keep these little urchins off the wagon." Dummy nodded in approval. "Rat, want me to change you back?"

RatShambler shrugged his large shoulders. "I suppose so. Then I can sit in the wagon and ward off any sticky fingers as well."

"Wouldn't you be more imposing as a Shambler?"

RatShambler shook his head. "A foot long, talking rat with sharp teeth? That's about as imposing as you can get, I'd think. Plus, I'd have claws that I could grab the little grubs with. You know what they say: 'never shake a baby, but older kids are fair game'."

"No one says that," Nulu pointed out.

With a nod, Grimbledung transformed him back into Rat.

Suddenly something wasn't right.

"Help me! Heeelp Meee!" Squeaked Carl.

Right before he exploded.

We warned you...

Rat hopped onto the wagon and sat down. "Don't worry, Grim. I have the wagon under control. You go weasel us a place to put down for the night." He began to survey the students with his one good eye.

Grimbledung nodded at Rat and went to join Nulu. "OK Nulu. Let's find big Julie." He resisted trying to take her hand and only gestured for her to enter ahead of him.

As soon as they were inside, Rat went to sleep.

Nulu and Grimbledung moved around the stream of students to Julie's office door. "This is a whole lot of kids for one school. There has to be something big going on," commented Nulu.

Grimbledung knocked on Julie's door. "I hope she's in."

After a moment without anyone answering, Nulu knocked on the door herself, "Maybe with all the noise she didn't hear," she suggested.

After another long moment, the two decided that the office was empty. "Let's go see if Drimblerod had any luck," said Grimbledung.

"Sounds good to me."

When they got to the wagon, it was covered in kids of several species.

"Let's rob the bank next!" Said a Human child as he snapped the reins. "They'll never know what hit them!"

"Kapow!" Said a Gnomeling as he leaned over Dummy and waved a nonexistent wand. "Take that you stinking security guard; I spotted your red uniform a league away!

Dummy was hunched over with Door pulled up against him for protection. He was providing excellent cover for the would-be bank robber in the process.

"Pass out all yer gold if you know what's good for you!" commanded the Human.

On the other side of the wagon, two Dwarflings were involved in a duel with wooden swords.

"Take that!" Said one as their swords clunked together. "Stealeth MY wagon willst thou?"

"You lost it fair and square!" countered the other as he parried and then thrust. "Everyone knows that three and a half of a kind beats a full flush! You better learn how to play Trufflidge, whelp!"

"Whelp?"

The swordplay became even more heated.

Under the wagon, several girls had set up what appeared to be a tea party. With cakes.

Rat slept soundly through the din.

"LISTEN UP!" Roared Nulu. Rat startled awake and rolled out of the wagon onto the ground. "Everyone out of the wagon!" She turned to face the duelers. "*AND* a full flush beats three and a half of a kind. Every day of the week including Grunsdays."

"Hah!" cheered the youth, "told you so!" He turned to face Nulu. It did not even seem to register that Nulu was an angry Trolless over three times his size. "Thanks!" He moved beside her and brandished his sword at his would-be attacker. "That settles it*, unless* you're going to impugn the good name of this fair maiden! Then I shall have no choice but to run you through to restore her honor."

"Errr…" was all the other youth managed to say. It had registered quite well with him what Nulu was. "No?"

The boy faced Nulu, he raised his sword in a salute, jauntily flourished, then sheathed it. "Fair well, Maiden!" he said with a bow before hopping out of the wagon.

"That is one odd child."

Nulu turned and squinted at Rat.

"Ahhh…" he continued shakily, "And a very good judge of character, to be sure."

Nulu shook her fist at Rat, "I'm of a mind to test that enchantment that keeps you around… *personally* with a good old fashioned Troll Pounding."

Rat blinked its good eye at Nulu. A good old-fashioned Troll Pounding? With capital letters even- it was not a prospect he had considered. Now that he had, he wished he hadn't.

"Clink."

"Rat! You're supposed to be watching the wagon!" Scolded Grimbledung.

"Clink."

"One little task to keep these kids out of all we have left in the Lands, and you're sleeping on the job. What if they had gotten into the wands? Someone could have gotten hurt!"

"Two lumps, please."

"And…" Grimbledung looked at Nulu. "Did you hear that?"

"Two for me as well, please and thank you."

Nulu got on her hands and knees and looked under the wagon. The tea party was still in full swing. "Didn't I say for you kids to get lost?" She asked testily.

One of the girls turned to look at Nulu. She shook her head. "You said you wanted everyone *out* of the wagon. We're *under* it."

"And we're not stupid boys making a racket," offered another girl. She appeared to be a Half-Elf.

"Well, as soon as we start to move the wagon, you'll have to move your tea party someplace else". *Dealing with kids was definitely going to take some getting used to*, she thought. "We'll give a look under here to make sure before we go."

The girls raised their tea cups in a toast to Nulu. "Come back if you want some tea," offered one girl.

"Or to yell at the stinky boys again," suggested another.

They all nodded in approval.

Nulu stood up. "This is going to take some getting used to," she affirmed to Grimbledung. "Rat, get on the wagon *and stay awake*."

Rat nodded.

"Let's see if Drimblerod had any luck."

The two of them went in search of Drimblerod, at Grimbledung's suggestion- around the Cafeteria.

Drimblerod made his way around the windmill. The majority of the students seemed to be moving in his same direction as he. "Hey kid," he tapped a student moving past him (who oddly enough, appeared to be a full-blooded Orc), "Where's everyone going?"

"We play match!" Said the youth (definitely full blooded) as he waved a pennant. It was green with a large, angry looking bee on it. Emblazoned over the bee were two interlocked green 'B's'. We play Cool Springs United. They big rivals." His voice dropped an octave. "Big rivals." Orcs were not known as a verbose race. They were however, fanatical sports enthusiasts. 'Can't spell Fan without Orc!' Orcs were often heard to say. Since they were Orcs, no one ever challenged them on it. Losing life or limb in a spelling debate with an Orc never seemed like a good way to go. The odds were that if there were an actual obituary in the local parchment, it would include the words 'ill advised', 'bad judgement', and 'stupid'. Not necessarily in that order.

"Bee Bee?" Asked Drimblerod as he pointed at the banner. "What's that stand for?"

The boy looked at Drimblerod as if he had grown horns. "What? It stand for Bek'Ham Benders 'course. That who C-S-U is playing."

"What's a Bek'Ham?" Asked Drimblerod confused, "is that a type of bee??"

The boy let out an exasperated sigh. "No. That Orcish for sissy Elves." He frowned. "But not nice word like sissy." He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone. "Word Mother not like me use."

"So this school's mascot is a bee then? Why would they spell it in Orcish?"

"No, no." the boy shook his head. "Gnome live under rock or something? This school Desplaines. It has evil clown under Double Arches on banner. They no play today."

The two had stopped walking as the stream of students had started to taper off. "But you said *we* are playing Cool Springs. I figured that meant that the banner belonged to this school."

"Just because Stan go here, don't mean Stan no support different team. Bee Bees my home town team."

"Stan? Your name is Stan?"

"Yeah... *Stan*." Suddenly the youth seemed irritated. This line of questioning had gotten old several years ago. Since he had been -what did they call it? *Mainstreamed*. Why his parents named him Standlich, instead of a good and proper Orcish name was beyond him. He just tried to make the best of it, in as peaceable a manner as he could. Or at least as peaceable as his Orcish blood would let him. *Here it come*, he thought.

"Like Stanley or Stanford or…?"

Stan cut him off, "No. Stan**D**lich. Like me Stan**D** on your head if you ask again," he narrowed his eyes, "like that." Sure, it wasn't subtle or even polite, but it *was* an effective way to end the line of questioning. Only once did he have to actually provide a practical demonstration of his name to get his point across. That's when word got out at school that just accepting 'Stan' as 'Stan' was the healthiest way to go.

Drimblerod took a step back. "I see. Well, Stan. It was nice meeting you," he lied. A thought popped into his head, "Say, Stan, do you happen to know where Julie is?"

Stan nodded, "Sure. She at field for the coin toss."

"Coin toss? What kind of game are you playing? Some sort of absurdly magical type of game with wands and brooms with no apparent consistency in rules, gamesmanship, or boundaries?"

Stan stared at him. "What? No! We play best game ever created. Rugby! What is game you talking about? Sound stupid."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Never mind. It'll never catch on anyway. Rugby you say? Never heard of it."

Stan gaped at him.

Drimblerod pushed on, "Is it exciting?"

Stan shoved Drimblerod in the chest, "Never heard of it? Hah! You make joke! Rugby most exciting game ever! It like battle with out of bounds lines!"[3]

Drimblerod recovered from the shove, "A battle? That sounds dangerous. Is it like Soccer? I've gone to those games and they go on an hour and a half and more! They have out of bounds too but you're allowed to go past them as long as the ball doesn't." Drimblerod had been to a Soccer match several decades ago. If Rugby was anything like Soccer, it would be a fun evening. "Is it like Soccer then?"

"Rugby? No. Soccer played by Elves. Them teams play for long time and sometimes score go one to zero. Sometimes one to one!" He shoved Drimblerod again, "Usually zero to nothing. That boring."

"Soccer boring? You're nuts, Stan," said Drimblerod. He tried shoving Stan back but only managed to push himself away instead, "They kick the ball back and forth and almost score over and over. Real exciting stuff, that."

"With Rugby, fights break out. Riots too. Once, *war* start over game that was big upset. Urkai United beat by Helms Deep. *That* not go over nice." He smiled with pointed teeth, "And that just the fans."

"The fans do that? Wow. That's a lot like Soccer then. The fans are borderline insane." He thought for a moment, "Of course, the players aren't like that too much. If another player bumps an opposing player, they fall down and act hurt until the referee comes over and scolds the first player." He nodded, "That's the Art of Soccer."

Stan shook his head. "The Art of Rugby is break other player before they is break you. Once Stan see player get break in leg but play not stop. He lay there bone sticking out until ball move to another part of the field. Then stretcher get him off field of play." Drimblerod received another shove. "Come see game. Real warriors make game." With a grunt, Stan turned and followed the trickle of students towards the stadium. He held the banner high over his head and waved it back and forth violently as he went. The students gave him a wide berth. It forced him to have to reach out just to hit one of them with the banner.

Drimblerod shrugged. “Strange kid. Well-spoken for an Orc though.” He turned and headed back towards the windmill; Julie had been located, now he had to gather the rest of his recently-made-homeless friends.

“I say we just go back to the wagon” said Grimbledung, dejected. Not only had they not found Big Julie but the Cafeteria was closed and the Gnoll Brothers were nowhere to be found. “We’re never going to find her at this rate.”

Nulu nodded, “I agree. Let’s wait by the wagon in case Drim comes back.” She considered that for a moment, “Or Rat decided to take another nap.” She smiled as she put her hand on Grimbledung’s shoulder and pointed him in the direction of the wagon. “Let’s go.” The two made their way across the campus towards the imposing windmill.

Drimblerod rounded the corner of the windmill to see Rat shaking a Halfling by the shoulders. The child’s feet were on the ground but only occasionally. “Rat! What are you doing?”

“This little rascal was… well, he was doing something suspicious. Besides, he’s only one I was able to grab,” explained Rat.

“Put that kid down! We’re trying to make a good impression here, you know,” scolded Drimblerod, “and shaking the students isn’t the way to go about doing that.”

“Th th thanks Mister,” stuttered (obviously) the boy as Rat continued to shake him.

“RAT! Stop shaking that kid!”

Begrudgingly, Rat released the Halfling. With a sour look at Rat, the boy scurried away. As the boy rounded the other side of the windmill, he ran headlong into Grimbledung, knocking himself to the ground. “Y Y You’ll be hearing from my Fa Fa Fa Father!” he said as he got up. “Then y y you’ll be sor sor sorry you No No Gnome!” The youth got up and with a snort, scampered off.

"Yeah, ki ki kid?" Grimbledung called after the Halfling, "I don't see *that* hap hap happening! Tell your wee father to look me up when he's in town! WAY UP!"

Although not as drastic as Carl's fate, Grimbledung would indeed be sorry for his taunting of Corporal Gigantous' son. In Chapter Thirty-Three if things keep going like they are.

He looked up at Nulu, "Halflings. Sure, in large numbers, they act tough, but the day hasn't come when a Gnome can't go toe to toe with one of those runts. It will be his biggest mistake in a *month* if that kid's Dad tries to mess with *this* Gnome." **NO skipping ahead to Chapter 33!!** To drive his point home, he struck a heroic pose.

"Grimbledung Sixtoes. Mighty Gnome. I see that," said Nulu as she laughed. "Let's go find Drimblerod. It's getting dark and I sure don't want to sleep in the wagon." She paused for a moment and reconsidered, "Or under it."

The two rounded the corner and saw Drimblerod shoo-ing off two more kids. "You're a natural at that" said Nulu as she approached. "You should settle down and raise a dozen kids."

Drimblerod shook his head, "I acquired a kid and my life got twice as complicated- you want me to have *eleven* more of them?"

Nulu laughed.

"You have a kid, Drim? I didn't know that. I'd love to meet the tyke," said Grimbledung.

"Oh, you've met the juvenile delinquent," said Drimblerod as he raised an eyebrow at him.

"Really? I don't recall meeting him." Grimbledung furrowed his brow in thought. "Is he a Gnome?"

"How about I give you a hint, Grim," said Nulu. "He's wanted for arson at the moment."

"Arson? My, my; that's a serious crime. That boy needs to get his life straightened out if he…" Grimbledung's eyes got huge, "Hey! I resent that!"

Nulu gave him a shove, "We're just messing with you, Grim." She considered the accusation, "Well, actually no. You *are* wanted for arson."

"If there's a ransom, I'd turn you in in a Pixie wing-beat." Rat showed his teeth, "Is there a ransom?"

"I'm not going to stand here and get insulted," said Grimbledung.

"Oh? Where do you usually go?" Said Rat without missing a beat. If people were going to pitch him softballs, he was going to swing at them. And aim for the fences, "You'd better get there quick. I'm sure there's a line of folk in Aution that're ready to insult you. With tar and feathers."

"All right, all right. Let's just go find Julie. According to a student I talked to, she should be at the games arena," said Drimblerod. "Let's go see what we can do about a place to sleep before it gets dark."

"What're they playing?" Asked Grimbledung as the group moved towards the arena.

"Something called Rugby," said Drimblerod, "I've never heard of it."

"Me neither. Is there magic involved?"

"Rugby? None at all. You'll love it. It's all brute force and action," said Nulu. "It's a favorite pastime for Trolls."

Four
Wherein a Rugby Match Breaks Out At a Riot

Drimblerod, Grimbledung, Nulu, and Rat sat in the stands and watched the game before them. As Standlich had said, it really was more like an organized brawl with out of bounds lines, than anything else.

"Those students are nuts playing a mob of Orcs!" Said Nulu as a Bee Bee player delivered another open-field tackle. The oblong ball popped out and another Orcling picked it up and rushed to the appropriate goal. At one point, he veered out of his way just to hit an opposing player as he went. The splayed-out opposing player - a scrawny Human – managed to get to a sitting position in time for three things: 1. Witnessing the Orcling score another goal, 2. Get kicked in the head yet again as another Orcling jogged past and 3. The Goal-scoring Orcling throwing the ball at an opponent's back knocking him to the ground. It was a hat trick and the Orcs in the stands cheered mightily.

"Why are they even playing them?" Asked Grimbledung. "This is absurd."

"I agree." Rat had taken to watching from Grimbledung's shoulder since he wasn't able to see sitting just on the stands.

"Well, you have to play all the teams in the division." Nulu remarked. "No matter who they are." To help those around her, she was sitting where people put their feet and was leaned back against the back of the seat portion, her legs dangling below the stands.

"Yeah!" Said a voice behind them. "They should go back to sucking on a teat till they is grown!"

Grimbledung turned to look (way up) at the Orc sitting behind him. "And those Orcs out there should get back to what they *is* do best." He squinted his eyes.

"Please don't do it, Grim," asked Drimblerod.

Ignoring him, Grim finished "Dragging their knuckles around and grunting as they stink up Orcistan."

"What you say?"

"Grim," entreated Drimblerod.

"I SAID ORCS ARE AS HARD OF HEARING AS THEY ARE DENSE!"

"What dense?" Anticipating an insult, the Orc squinted his eyes back at the Gnome below him. (Way below)

"Don't do it," requested Drimblerod.

"It means," said Grimbledung as he stood on his seat (he still had to look up at the Orc), "that Orcs are dumb. Dumb as a bag of hammers."

"Grim," begged Drimblerod

"But not nearly as useful."

The Orc stood up and glowered down at Grimbledung, "Wot?"

"Oh, sorry Orc," began Grimbledung.

"Grim," beseeched Drimblerod.

"That's not what I meant to say," said Grimbledung in an apologetic voice.

"That good to hear," said the Orc angrily.

"Grim," besought Drimblerod.

"I didn't mean to say that Orcs are as dumb as a bag of hammers."

The Orc nodded in approval. "Yeah. That wot I thought."

"GRIM," appealed Drimblerod.

"Comparing the intelligence of an Orc to a bag of hammers is an insult…"

"GRIM!" Supplicated Drimblerod.

"To bags of hammers everywhere." Grimbledung finished triumphantly. Unable to stop himself, he took a bow.

The Orc's eyes got huge. He wasn't exactly sure *why* that was an insult- his mind had wandered sometime around the other Gnome's beseeching -after all, there *was* a game going on. But it sure seemed like it was. Especially with that bow at the end. He let out a roar and clenched his fists.

Quickly, Nulu clambered up from her seated position. "Settle down, mister Orc. Let's keep this civil." Standing a row below, the Orc had her by a full head. "How's that sound?"

The Orc looked up from Grimbledung to Nulu. 'Civil', as far as he knew, meant a brawl *without* weapons. "Ok, civil," he agreed. It sounded reasonable since, after all, there was a game going on and there were kids around. So, he punched Nulu in the mouth. Hard.

Grimbledung gaped at the Orc. With a howl, he launched himself high at the Orc. And grabbed him around the thigh. And sank his teeth into said thigh. Hard.

"GRIM!" Shouted Drimblerod.

"GNOME!" cursed the Orc as he looked down at the rabid creature now attached to his leg.

Nulu rocked back from the punch. She saw spots of white before her eyes. They were quickly replaced by red blotches of rage. As a Trolless, Nulu had been involved in her share of fights, brawls, and battles. "Hey," she said calmly, "know what happens when you hit a lady?"

The Orc looked up from the Gnome who had now drawn blood as he gnawed. "Wot?" He asked.

Nulu reared back and punched the Orc high between the eyes. Hard. The Orc's head snapped back violently and now white spots danced before *his* eyes. They were quickly replaced by blackness as the Orc crumpled unconscious to the stands. Several Orcs stood up as their own fell.

"*That*," she snarled. "Hit higher, buster," Nulu said to the still form of the Orc as she wiped her bloody mouth. "You gotta get that head to snap back to put the lights out." She nudged him with her foot. "Just like that."

Grimbledung looked up from the Orc's leg and at Nulu. "Very nice! Very nice indeed. I distracted him for you, you know. Stupid Orc."

Behind Nulu, Grimbledung saw another Orc reach for her shoulder, "Behind you, Nulu!" he called.

Nulu crouched down quickly expecting a roundhouse punch. Instead, the Orc grabbed her shoulder as she kneeled, bringing his head down. With a mighty howl, Drimblerod punched the Orc in the side of the head. Several bones in Drimblerod's hand snapped as he hit the rock-hard side of the Orc's head. He sat down in a heap. "Gah!" he exclaimed.

The Orc looked over at Drimblerod, "Yer gonna be dinner, Gnome!" He snarled.

This time Nulu didn't bother trying to engage the Orc in conversation and instead punched it in the side of the head. Thanks to Troll bones in her hand instead of Gnome bones, this time the effect was felt by the punch-ee not the punch-er. Still, she was at an awkward angle and could not deliver a full-force blow. The Orc looked up at her and snarled. There was a dazed look in his eyes, but that could have just as well been normal for him. Sadly, it was hard to tell when an Orc was knocked senseless.

Suddenly, two humans jumped on the Orc's shoulders bringing him to his knees. They began to pummel the Orc. They weren't hard blows individually, but they did add up.

The Orc reached around and grabbed one of the Humans by the throat. He quickly began to turn purple. Nulu grabbed the Orc's wrist and twisted it roughly. The Orc released the Human but still tried to reach for his neck. "Do a gal a favor and pick your chin up a bit, will you, dear" she said to the Orc as she twisted his wrist some more. Reflexively the Orc turned and looked up at Nulu. His Mate of twenty-five years had trained him well; requests containing 'dear' were meant to be followed. Or 'Mister Cudgel' would come out from the umbrella stand by the door. The Orc did not like 'Mister Cudgel' and obeyed quickly. However, unlike other times in their house, instead of seeing a gnarled ironwood club, his field of vision was filled by a Trolless' fist. The effect was mostly the same.

With a fierce downward swing, Nulu hit the Orc in the head. His eyes glazed over as an unmistakable dazed look washed over his face.

Nulu spun from the now stunned Orc back to Grimbledung, "Thanks, Grim!" As she smiled, blood ran down her chin.

Emboldened by his success, Grimbledung hopped up onto the first, still unconscious Orc's back and raised his fists in triumph. "Behold Grimbledung Sixtoes! Mighty Gnome!" He let out a big "Whoop!"

Around them, fights were breaking out along distinct racial lines; Orcs on one side, everyone else on the other. Even so, the Orcs seemed to be holding their own. They were, after all, Orcs.

After several minutes, a loud horn broke over the din of the brawl. Everyone looked towards the sound. It was coming from the middle of the field. "Game over!" Shouted Big Julie. "As of right NOW!" Orcs in mid-punch let go of their victims. Humans and Elves, Dwarves and Halflings followed suit. Everyone looked a little embarrassed. "I call this game in favor of the Bee Bees! Twenty-one to Ten." The other team scored while the Orclings were celebrating. Twice. It may have been unsportsmanlike to take advantage of the Orclings that way, but when all was said and done, the points standings at the end of the year were quite important.

"Great, just great Grimbledung," said Drimblerod, "because you just hadn't caused enough mayhem today, you had to go and start a brawl at the one place we had a chance of setting up shop. Because burning down an ENTIRE town wasn't enough. Right?"

Rat - who had clambered under the stands when the brawl started, came back out. "Good going you daft Gnome. There's no way Big Julie's going to let us stay here after *this* display of your Gnomish insanity. She'll think you'll burn down her Windmill next."

"But…" began Grimbledung. He looked around at the carnage of broken bleachers and unconscious figures, "He started it!" He pointed at the Orc - who still hadn't regained consciousness. Nulu was, after all, a full grown Trolless and threw punches to match her pedigree. As the Orc's head lolled to the side, Grimbledung commented, "That's the second largest Orc head I've ever seen."

"Drimblerod!" called a familiar voice. "*Grimbledung!*"

"Here we go," said Rat as he turned to look at Big Julie. She was coming up the stairs integrated into the bleachers. "Good thing we didn't unpack the wagon."

"How are things?" She asked as she moved closer. Everyone got out of her way as she went. She was, after all, Big Julie, former Crime Boss and more importantly Head Mistress, and of a goodly size.

Rat's one eye got large. He turned to Drimblerod, "She doesn't know!" He hissed.

"Know what?" Asked Grimbledung.

"That we… *you*… started the brawl," said Rat in a loud whisper, "so keep quiet about it."

"Big Julie. Good to see you again," said Drimblerod amicably.

"That's some brawl you boys started." Julie said.

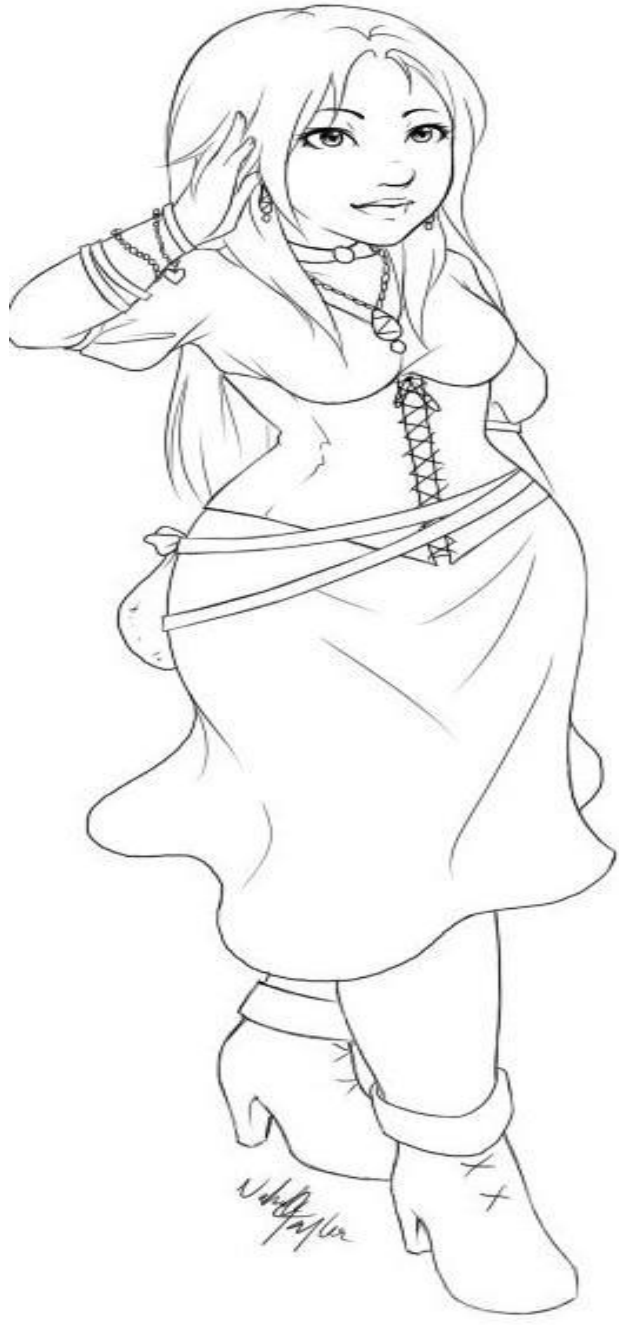
Drimblerod's smile melted from his face. "Errrr" was all he managed to say.

"Meet you at the wagon," said Rat. "If I hurry I at least have a chance of getting some tea and cakes from the girls before we're sent on our way." He sat on his haunches dejected. "As soon as the official ruling comes down, I'm hitting that tea party."

"Ahh... Hi, Big Julie," said Grimbledung from behind a large smile. He was still standing atop the slowly-regaining-consciousness Orc. "Good to see you again." He switched from a heroic pose to one he hoped looked more natural. As natural as a Gnome standing on a splayed-out Orc could look.

"Grim, how'd you enjoy the Melonchello?" Big Julie asked as she winked at him.

Grimbledung beamed. "Oh! It was great. First I got killed then I got conscripted, then I got thrown out of Prost Garrison forever. In all I lost three whole weeks! It was fabulous." Unable to stop himself, he struck a heroic pose again.



Julie was taken aback. “Oh. Wellll… ??” She was unsure if she should give congratulations or condolences; even after their short time

together, she knew either could be appropriate. There was just no telling with Grimbledung. "Okay then," she tried noncommittally.

"Big Julie, I don't think we've met," interrupted Nulu as she moved to the riser even with Big Julie. Nulu was a full head taller than Big Julie. "I'm Nulu," she said as she offered her hand, "Nulu Bentknees."

"Big Julie, but you can just call me Julie if you prefer." Julie shook Nulu's hand. "That's some jab you have there." She smiled amicably.

"Oh. Wellll… Thanks?" Replied Nulu. Then before she could help herself, she added: "The Orc started it."

Big Julie shrugged. "They usually do. Sometimes, surprisingly, it's the Elves though."

"Wait a grain of sand here," said Grimbledung, "are you telling me that you *regularly* have brawls at these games?"

Julie thought for a moment. "Not at every one. I'd say about one or two out of four games end in a brawl." She thought on that for another moment, "Or they start with one." She shrugged again, "Or there's one in the middle of a game. I finally got the horn so I could break it up before the bleachers get completely flattened, or the fight spills out into the school area." She stuck out her tongue. "Sports Parents. They're so unpredictable."

Grimbledung and Drimblerod both released sighs of relief.

"So… What brings you this way? Do you want to get your wands set up in the bookstore? I wasn't expecting you for a couple of days yet."

Grimbledung suddenly took a keen interest in the bleachers around his feet.

"Actually no," began Drimblerod, "We are kind of in the market for a place to set up shop."

Grimbledung's interest switched to the bleachers behind him.

"I don't know if you've heard or not, but Aution experienced a… small incident."

Grimbledung began to examine passing clouds. Even though it was dark out.

"And we're in need of a place to stay for what is as of yet, an undetermined period of time."

"Grimbledung?" Asked Big Julie as she looked in the direction of Aution. There was still a plume of orange-tinted smoke coming from that general area which had now spread into a mushroom shaped haze over it.

"Did you need something that would make you use my name?" Offered Grimbledung.

"Yes," verified Drimblerod flatly.

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Maybe I can get some of the players to sign my program," he said quickly. He scooted down the bleachers to the quickly emptying field waving a nonexistent program.

"What happened?" Asked Julie.

"With the brawl… or Aution?" Asked Drimblerod nervously.

Big Julie smiled, "I'll let you off the hook on the brawl. Let's talk Aution."

"It all started with Grimbledung's First Annual Aution Gatherers Division Jamboree" began Drimblerod.

"That sounds fun," offered Julie.

"And ended with Grimbledung's First and Last Aution Conflagration," finished Rat.

Julie blanched. "I see. Well if you folks are going to stay here, you'll have to keep him away from flames. I can't afford a fire." She paused for a moment, "So, what do the Aution residents have to say about the affair? Should I expect angry mobs at the Windmill doors one night? I have to tell you, *that* never turns out well." She thought for a moment, "Even without mad scientists in the mix."

"Except for a couple of people, they don't know it was him that started it," said Drimblerod. "And if at all possible, we'd like to keep it that way."

Nulu and Rat nodded in agreement.

Julie's eyes narrowed as she looked again at the pillar of smoke. "So Aution's gone, huh?" As her eyes narrowed, wheels in her head began to

turn. They were grinding out a plan for a new town. Built around the Wizards and Witches School. *Her school.* Julesville. "That means there's a lot of people without somewhere to live, doesn't it." It wasn't a question (notice the missing '?').

The wheels in Nulu's head sprang into action, "There are," she agreed. "As a matter of fact, I am in the market for a new location for my bar and restaurant."

"And an inn for people to stay," said Julie absently.

"Well, I *suppose* I could add an inn above the bar and restaurant, but I have no experience running one," said Nulu.

Big Julie snapped out of her revelry. "What?" She did not realize she was speaking out loud.

"You said 'and an inn for the people to stay' and I said I never ran an inn before." Nulu paused and considered the suggestion, "Of course, an inn would be needed if we're rebuilding the town. People need a place to stay."

Big Julie turned from the pillar of smoke and faced Nulu, "I think you and I need to sit down and talk. We have some planning to do, I think."

Feeling left out, Drimblerod stepped closer to the two women. "I agree there's plans to be made. We need to get the wand Shop back up and running as well."

Big Julie turned and looked down at Drimblerod, "That sounds fine to me." She paused and considered that for a moment, "That is as long as you can keep Grimbledung under some semblance of control." She winked at Drimblerod as his eyes got big. "He's one unstable Gnome, that one."

"I hate to say it, but he's actually gotten better since we were here last," offered Drimblerod.

Now Julie's eyes got big, "Really? Wow. Was he serious about getting killed on account of the Melonchello?"

"Well, in all actuality, it was Rat that killed him. He was a Shambler at the time and kicked him in the chest. But Grim doesn't remember that so we do *not* bring it up."

Big Julie nodded. "Got it. No mentioning of Rat killing Grim. I can see how that could cause… trouble." Big Julie stifled an unexpected yawn. "Wow, all of a sudden, it's late. So how about if you all bed down for the night in the dormitory? There're plenty of extra rooms there and tomorrow after breakfast we can sit down and discuss the plans for a new town," she said-mainly to Nulu.

The others nodded in agreement.

Since the situation seemed safe, Grimbledung approached his cohorts. He had no idea what they were discussing. Even so he pressed himself into the conversation, "That sounds like a great plan, Big Julie. We owe you for this," said Grimbledung. "I'll try to find some way to repay you, I promise."

"What plan? We didn't make any plan."

"There's no plan? I figured you'd have a plan by now. Really?" Asked Grimbledung with a frown on his face. "No plan, huh?"

"The only thing we've decided upon was to have all you sleep in the dormitories and then tomorrow we'd figure out something."

Grimbledung perked up, "That's a great plan!"

"Those are some low expectations," said Rat. He shook his fur, "What am I saying? He's the *king* of low expectations." He smiled a wry smile. "If low expectations were people, he'd be the Great City of Putch."

"See?" Said Grimbledung as he put his hands on his hips and struck a heroic pose (it was becoming a habit). "Even Rat agrees it's a good plan."

"Grim, it's no fun insulting you if you're not going to get my insults," complained Rat, "that's downright inconsiderate."

"Thanks, Rat!"

Julie ignored the exchange, "So Nulu, Drim, we'll meet tomorrow around nine in the Cafeteria?"

Drimblerod nodded.

"That sounds great to me, Julie," said Nulu, "and we'll bring along these two for comic relief," she added as she pointed at Grimbledung and Rat.

Big Julie chuckled, "I suppose that would be… entertaining."

"Then it's agreed!" Said Grimbledung, "what a great plan that is Big Julie! And for coming up with it, I'll come up with some way to repay you."

"You know, Grim," began Drimblerod, "the way conversations work is you *listen* to what the other person says, then answer them. You don't just ignore everything and just push on with your own ideas."

"I'm glad you agree, Drim!" Said Grimbledung. "This will be great!"

"Maybe we'll just leave them behind," suggested Nulu.

"I got it!" declared Grimbledung with a wild look in his eyes. He moved in front of Big Julie. Directly in front of Big Julie. Directly in front and *close* to Big Julie. "Yes, I've got it."

Big Julie took a step back, "Ahh, no…" she said- even though she was unsure of what the half-crazed Gnome was referring to.

"I'll do something to pay you back for all you've done." said Grimbledung.

"You don't have to do that, really," she offered.

"Oh yes, Julie, I do. Say! I got it. I could turn up your sheets for you!"

"Uhm, Grim?" Began Drimblerod.

"Yeah, yeah! I could turn up your sheets for you!" Grimbledung beamed. "That'd be great!"

"I… I think the term is 'turn down your sheets'," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung thought for a moment. "Why would you turn *down* sheets?"

"Well, before you get into bed when you're staying at a fancy inn, a servant comes in to turn down the sheets so the bed looks welcoming to you."

"I don't think that'd be as nice as being there to turn *up* the sheets. Once Julie's in them."

Big Julie took another step backward. "I think I'll just go with handling my own sheets, Grimbledung."

"All right I guess, but we'll have to come up with something else to try."

"I'd rather not think of anything to try with you while I'm getting into my bed, Grim."

Grimbledung frowned, then shook his finger at Big Julie, "Fine, but I'll think of something else to do to you…"

"*For,"* corrected Drimblerod

"For you." said Grimbledung without skipping a beat, "to show you how much I care."

"Okay?" Big Julie didn't make eye contact with the Gnome.

"So. If you do decide you want your sheets turned up, just let me know."

"You'll be at the top of my list of people to call last," assured Julie.

"Thanks!"

"You're absolutely bonkers you know that?" Offered Rat. "You're exactly two peasants short an angry mob."

Grimbledung smiled wide at Rat. "Thanks, Rat!"

Nulu shook her head. "Well, that's enough creeping willies for me. Let's get inside before the bugs eat us alive."

Big Julie raised an eyebrow at Drimblerod, "You sure you can keep him under control?"

"He just gets excited easily, is all," offered Drimblerod.

"He gets insane easily, is all," added Rat.

Big Julie looked down at Grimbledung. "How about it we just call it square?" She offered.

Grimbledung shook his head, "Oh no. You're helping us out so I'll come up with some way that's really great to pay you back. Just you wait and see." He nodded hopefully

With a shrug, Big Julie turned and walked down the bleachers and the others fell in step behind her.

Nulu stuck out her tongue. "Make her some book ends out of some rocks. That's nice and simple." She smiled mischievously, "And safe."

"That's a good idea. And there's plenty right in your head you can use so you won't even have to go searching for some," teased Rat.

Grimbledung snorted. "Just you wait. You'll see."

After returning to the school, the Gnomes, Rat and Nulu headed over to the dormitory, and after only a moment's haranguing by Grimbledung, who passionately extolled the benefits of them all sharing one room, they went to separate rooms.

Five
Wherein a Plan for Julesville is Discussed

The group sat at a large conference table above the cafeteria. "We need a plan for the town," said Big Julie. She was sitting at the head of the conference table. This was mainly due to the fact that it was *her* conference table in *her* conference room. But also because she had arrived fifteen minutes early. Of the four conference rooms (used more for seminars and small group instruction than actual conferences) this was to become Rat's favorite. Later, it would be the one used by default since Rat would wax on and on about his favorite conference room whenever they were in a different one. Waxing on and on. And on. Of course, when they were in his favorite conference room, he would gush and glow about the Gnoll brothers. It was chosen this day out of mere chance.

"If we're going to make Julesville a success we're going to need a few things," began Big Julie as she mentally kicked herself for letting 'Julesville' slip out.

"Should we let the Gnolls know we're going to be down for lunch?" Asked Rat. (see?)

"I agree," said Nulu, "and first thing we need is the King's approval."

"To eat lunch?" Rat shook his fur, "that's some in-the-weeds ruling."

Nulu gave Rat a harsh look, "Would you keep quiet about eating? The Gnoll brothers make enough to feed a small army. Our bigger concern is when we go to the Royal Court as a delegation for this town. Or *if* we go, I suppose. We could just send a request for township. That's an option as well."[4]

Everyone was silent. On the 'things that one enjoyed doing' scale, visiting the Royal Court was about even with going to Akita's Office. Maybe even below it.

"What's the difference, Julie?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Well, if we just decide to give the town a name and establish it without the Royal Court's approval, we run the risk of the King's soldiers coming down here and removing the town."

"That's a pretty big risk," said Rat.

Big Julie shook her head, "Well, only if we have a town name that brings us to the attention of the Royal Court. If we come up with a good one and the Cartographer's Guild likes it, they just add it to the maps. And as long as the King doesn't mind it, he doesn't send anyone. So, the big issue is making sure we have a proper name."

"Say, has anyone thought of a name for the new town?" Offered Grimbledung. He moved forward in his chair, "What do you think about New Aution?"

"I wasn't all that fond of the *old* Aution," said Rat, then unable to help himself he added, "I say we toss Aution to the wind."

Another sharp look from Nulu rewarded Rat's pun. "Well, we'll need something before we go before the Royal Court or illustra.... err... Cartographer's Guild." Nulu frowned, "I'd hate to end up like some of the other towns that showed up unprepared."

"Why do we need a name for the Royal Court? All we need to do is paint it on a sign and stick it in the ground, right?"

"Not quite, Grim" said Big Julie. "Weren't you listening? The King reserves the right to name any and all towns in his kingdom. That way he's sure not to have stupid named towns."

"What does he care about that?" Asked Grimbledung, "it's not like he lives there."

"If he let any loon establish a town and name it what they wanted, he'd have a kingdom full of 'Straightawaybends', 'Rock Candy Mountain', or 'Fred's Town o' Fun."

"And?"

"And? And it's hard enough to keep other kingdoms from attacking you on a normal day without having all your towns have silly names that just entice other armies to come flatten them."

Grimbledung considered that for a moment. "I see your point. Then how about we name the town Oozing Sores?"

"Then no one would want to live there," said Julie, her face scrunching up.

Nulu sighed. Loudly. "That's why we need a plan ahead of time. You can't just show up at the Royal Court and not have your proposal all ready to lay out. When other committees have done that, things didn't turn out well at all."

"What happened?" Asked Grimbledung worriedly.

"Well, for one, Ur."

"Ur?"

"Yes. The way I hear the story, a long while back, two or three kings ago, a contingent from a region out near the Ur Fradies River (the king even added the name to the local water way, to add insult to injury- but that's getting ahead of the story) went to the court to request the sanctioning of a new town. When they got to the court, the guy who was going to speak got nervous when the King asked him the proposed name of the town and he said 'Urrrr'. Well, the King, who had a notoriously wicked sense of humor, immediately said 'DONE!' and *Ur* became the royally sanctioned name of the town. It's been that ever since." She smiled. "Ur. That was a good one."

"Well, I have a thought that might work," began Grimbledung hesitantly.

Nulu raised an eyebrow at him.

"How about Passing Wind?" Said Grimbledung with a straight face. "It's pleasant enough, yet not so unusual to draw attention."

"Don't do it," said Drimblerod quickly.

"Passing Wind?" Asked Nulu without thinking hard on it. "Why?"

"Because I *love* passing wind, of course." A smile crept across his face as a sound much like a deflating goat-bladder sack was heard by all.

"I really wish you wouldn't just hand out straight lines like that," said Drimblerod as he put his head in his hands.

Disturbingly, a smell much like the *inside* of a goat filled the room.

Drimblerod slapped Grimbledung's ear.

Grimbledung cackled, "Potty humor. You never really out-grow it, do you?"

"I really wish you'd at least *try to*... Gads! What have you been eating?" Big Julie stood (along with the others at the table).

Grimbledung pointed at Nulu, "It's her food. Blame her. Maybe the Gnolls can cure me."

Nulu slapped Grimbledung across the back of his head as she moved to the door. "You rotten Gnome. And I mean *ROTTEN*. I say we finish this discussion outside and upwind."

The group moved outside and stood in a semi-circle. Except Grimbledung who had been shoo'ed to a spot downwind from the group. He tried to mope, but his giggling got in the way.

When no one spoke, Big Julie took a deep breath. A fresh one, fortunately. She had been waiting for the opportune time to make her bid for the name of the town, but between Grimbledung's odorous and otherwise side-tracking antics and Rat's waxing, there never seemed to be just the right time for her. "Well, on a serious note," she began cautiously, "I was really thinking of naming the town Julesville."

"Julesville?" Asked Nulu. She pondered it for a moment. Either allowing the town to be named after Big Julie would be the concession that would allow her to work her own angles, or it was the start of a slippery slope with Nulu at the bottom of it. From what she knew of Big Julie, and what the Gnomes apparently thought of her, Nulu didn't think that Big Julie would be the kind to cross would-be friends.

"That doesn't have a bad ring to it," said Nulu as she offered an olive branch, "The Cartographer's Guild should go for that." She pondered the name for a moment, "As long as it's a traditional spelling, of course. Those Cartographers can be a testy lot."

Big Julie shook her head, "Nope. Nice and simple, just like it sounds."

"Anyone want my opinion?" Grimbledung called from a short distance away.

"NO!" the rest responded in unison.

"How about Yellow River?"

Nulu picked up a rock and heaved (it was a large rock) it at Grimbledung. It (purposely) didn't hit anywhere near him, but the message came across loud and clear.

"Julesville sounds great to me," Grimbledung offered meekly as he crouched down.

"OK. So Julesville it is then?" Asked Big Julie tentatively.

Nulu and Drimblerod nodded in unison.

"That works for me, Julie," Rat said. "It does have a nice ring to it." He paused and looked back longingly at the building they just vacated. "Do you think we can celebrate with a mid-morning snack? I really am getting behind on my naps and you just can't nap properly on an empty stomach."

Big Julie sighed. "Sure, that sounds good. I'm a little peckish too, Rat." Then louder to her currently ostracized Gnome, "And you can come too Grimbledung as long as you can control yourself." Then unable to help herself, she added, "And your bowels."

Grimbledung walked over haughtily, "My bowels are in complete control. Why, you'll never see an A, E, I, or U ever take control of *me*…" He raised an eyebrow.

"A*nd Why*?" Said Julie, tossing him the obligatory straight-line.

"Why? Because I like you." He smiled as he trotted ahead of his companions and into the cafeteria.

"That Gnome of yours," said Big Julie to Nulu.

"Mine? He's not *mine;* Drimblerod brought him along." She hooked a well-manicured (and purple painted these days) thumb at Drimblerod.

"I blame Rat," said Drimblerod.

Rat feigned injury as he also trotted ahead to join Grimbledung. "I'm just along for the ride, folks. Poor old Rat. That's me."

"Well, while those two characters eat, we need to come up with some placards that we can put up advertising the start of a new town. If we don't get people moving here, there's no way we can get a town going and we really need to do it before the people in Aution scatter to the six winds." Said Big Julie. "I have a couple of students… Elf sisters.

That are pretty artistically inclined. I'll ask Dani and Nikki, if they'll do it for some extra credit."

The three moved into the cafeteria to join their two companions.

Over the next week, placards were placed far and wide, extolling the virtues of Julesville, Finally, after merely a week, wagons started to arrive- wagons of former Autionians looking to make a fresh start in the new town. 'Julesvillers', 'Julesvillians', and 'Julestonians' had been discussed but the former seemed a little to ostentatious, and the latter too dark, so 'Julesvillers' was selected and added to the signs.

Of the hundreds of citizens who saw the sign, two in particular looked forward to a new beginning in Julesville; a cantankerous Dwarf, and a werewolf. They were still dealing with the repercussions of the fire and trying to rebuild their lives in Aution. Hunting down a certain Gnome was also high on their list of things to do. They both thought that they might have to search the new town when they got the chance.

Six
Wherein Grimbledung Reveals a New Model Business Model for the Wand Shop

"It's done! It's done!" Exclaimed Grimbledung, "Drim, come see!" He was hopping back and forth excitedly.

Drimblerod sat up in bed, "There's one thing I'm going to make sure our new place has." He rubbed is eyes. "Is separate bedrooms…" He ran his fingers through his hair. "With locking doors."

"DRIM!" Screeched Grimbledung.

"For Delberger's sake, we're in the same room. Stop shouting at me."

"Drim," said Grimbledung in a fake-theatrical whisper. It was barely softer than his previous voice. "*Come see!*"

Drimblerod hopped off the bed. "You know, we've not yet been here a week. Julie's not in *that* big of a hurry to kick us out of the Dorms." He walked over to the table set in the corner of the room. *It was a nice room, after all. Another month or so of planning wouldn't be so bad*, he thought. "I think we should wait another month or two until a few more people get set up so we can get a feel for where foot traffic is going to be." He let out a long sigh. "I've explained this to you over and over."

"But DRIIIIM!" pleaded Grimbledung.

"Fine, fine. What have you got to show me so early in the morning?" Said Drimblerod as he walked over to his partner.

"I've come up with our new business model," said Grimbledung proudly.

"I think wand selling is going pretty well, I don't know what we would change about it," said Drimblerod, "it's not like you can *rent* the things out." He considered the thought for a moment, then shook his head, "No. Not renting. That'd be absurdly difficult to manage."

"Right. So, I have a new business model," said Grimbledung confused, "and I wanted to show it to you. I worked on it all night."

"But how can you write if you can't read. Those two things go hand in hand, I'm pretty sure." He considered the prospect. "Otherwise, you'd have no idea what you were writing, and then if you didn't know what you were writing, then how would you know what you had written?" Drimblerod took his head in his hands, "Curse the gods, your condition is contagious. I'm talking like a loon now."

"What?" Asked Grimbledung, "I have no idea what you're talking about. I didn't write anything down."

"So then how did you create a new business mod…" he stopped as he looked down at the table. "Grim…"

"It's our new business model!" Said Grimbledung proudly.

"Ahh, Grim, that's a model of our business," he said as he looked at the two-story model that had to have been built out of pieces of paper, bits of wood, and what seemed to be pieces of cloth on the windows. "Grim…"

"It's not to scale at the moment," explained Grimbledung.

"That's the least of its problems." Drimblerod chuckled.

Grimbledung suddenly got angry. "What's so funny? You think this is a joke?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "Now don't get upset. It's just that you made a *model* of our new business not a new *business model*. That's all."

Grimbledung calmed down. He was still confused. "What's the difference?"

Drimblerod thought of the best way to explain the difference. He chose the simplest way; "One is written down, the other is made of wood and paper." He smiled genuinely at the model, "That is a pretty good model, Grim."

Grimbledung began hopping again as he beamed. "Thanks! I worked on it all night. Want a tour?"

Drimblerod looked at the model. It seemed pretty self-explanatory. "It seems pretty self-explanatory." He shrugged. "I suppose?"

"Have a seat at the table then!" Said Grimbledung as he slyly motioned to one of the four chairs around the table- it was a really nice room.

Drimblerod pulled the chair out from the table and sat down. He peered into the windows. "Are those curtains?"

"Hah!" Exclaimed Grimbledung as he drew his wand in a flash. He pointed it at his partner.

"Grim?" Asked Drimblerod worried, "what are you…?"

Minisculilate 'immmm!

Grimbledung intoned as he slashed his wand at his partner.

It was the trailing 'm' that determined the size. Minisculate spells were notoriously difficult to manage. In a flash, his partner disappeared. Grimbledung aimed his wand at the seat of the chair and squinted. There in the middle of it was a small figure, not bigger than a tick. It was jumping up and down. There were angry squeaks coming from it. *Very angry squeaks.* Grimbledung levitated it onto the table. Quickly he sat on the table.

Minisculate meeee!

In a flash, he shrunk down. He looked over at his partner. He was still jumping up and down. Now at least, the squeaks were understandable…

"WHAT IN THE LANDS HAVE YOU DONE TO ME YOU CRAZY GNOME?" Shouted Drimblerod between hops.

Grimbledung stood and brushed himself off, "I said I was giving you a tour, didn't I?" Once again, he was confused. "Why are you upset?"

"WHY AM I THE SIZE OF A RAT TURD!?!"[5] He had stopped jumping.

"How else can I give you a tour?" Said Grimbledung as he motioned to the model, which was now -to them- full size. Or at least mostly full size. It wasn't *exactly* to scale. As you may have heard, *Minisculate* spells are notoriously difficult to calibrate. Grimbledung didn't know it but one less trailing 'm' and 'e' would have done it perfectly.

"Why… what?" Said Drimblerod as he looked around. "That…"

"Drimblerod honestly; get a hold of yourself. You really are starting to sound like me." Grimbledung walked over to the door. It was slightly taller than a normal door, and the width seemed almost right. Almost. He turned the knob and opened it. "Let me show you what I did."

Drimblerod looked at the model. It was a two-story affair with windows on both floors. It had a tiled roof and a nicely stucco'ed exterior painted a dark grey. There were stars painted in bright yellow here and there. The cross timbers were left their original wood color, although they did appear to be oiled. "Say, that looks pretty good." He said. The shock of being Minisculated had started to wear off.

"The Moon'll go back over the door, of course," he pointed above the door, then gestured inside. "Take a look." Grimbledung stood to the side of the door and motioned for his partner to enter.

Drimblerod stepped up into the model (it wasn't integrated into the table, after all) onto wood planked floors. The ceiling was the exposed beams that supported the upper floor. The detail was astonishing. Rightly so, Drimblerod was agog.

"So…" said Grimbledung as he began the tour, "we'll use our Door instead of a traditional door of course, but he wasn't interested in being part of the model so I had to make due." Grimbledung swung the door shut. It closed smoothly and clicked shut.

Drimblerod gaped.

Grimbledung moved across the floor to the counter. It was a long "L" that ran across the two back walls of the sho… model. Both ends were set off from the wall, and there was another gap where the two legs of the 'L' met so that one could exit from behind the counter without having to walk completely around it. "I think we should have the counter set up so we can keep an eye on all the merchandise at once, so if we are worried about some thievery we can move around the counter to keep an eye on them."

"So we don't raise their suspicions" said Drimblerod. He was finally recovering from being inside a fully functional model, "Good idea."

Grimbledung shook his head. "Raise suspicions? No." He moved behind the counter and squatted down. "This provides cover." He raised his arm and laid it on the glass top. He aimed his wand in a sweeping motion around the shop. "You can blast anyone from back here and if they move around, you can scoot around to keep them in your sights." He stood up and sheathed his wand in his sleeve.

Drimblerod moved around the counter beside his partner. The glass top was smooth and clean. He looked inside it- there were little brackets to hold individual wands. The detail was amazing.

"Lookit this," said Grimbledung as he gestured around the back of the counter. There were evenly spaced pegs, "So you're never too far away from a Dispel! wand." Grimbledung then moved around to the front of the counter.

Drimblerod moved along the shelves that were built into the wall. It looked as if the sho… model could accommodate almost twice as many wands as the previous one could. "You know, Grim, it looks like this sho… model could accommodate almost twice as many wands as the previous one could." He stepped back and tried to take it all in. "I am agog."

"Want to see the upstairs? I think that really turned out well," suggested Grimbledung.

"Wait a grain of sand. The *upstairs* turned out better than this?" The shock of being Minisculated had worn off but the Agogness seemed to be taking up residence. Permanent residence. "Well, I'm dashed."

Dashed was visiting Agog. Obviously.

Grimbledung looked confused. "Well, yeah. This is just the front of the store. I spent more time upstairs on the living areas."

"Area*SSS*? There's more than one up there?" Drimblerod gestured at the ceiling.

Grimbledung, still confused, moved to the stairs, "Yeah?" He moved up the stairs, "Come tell me what you think." He paused and considered a thought, "Of course, we can always change things up if you want."

Drimblerod nodded, "That's true I suppose. It's much easier to work on a model before building the actual place. Good idea, Grim."

Grimbledung looked down at his partner from midway up the stairs, "What? That doesn't make any sense."

Drimblerod didn't take the bait, "Let's go check it out." He moved to follow his partner up the stairs.

Grimbledung jogged up the stairs and turned to face his partner. "So…" he started his spiel, "when you come up the stairs, you enter into the dining and living area." He spread his arms out wide, "And since this is where people spend most of their time, it's the largest of the areas." He kept his arms held out as Drimblerod came up the stairs.

Drimblerod finished climbing the stairs and entered into a large room as wide as the store. To the side of the staircase was a large square table. It could easily seat eight. Even though none of the chairs matched, they all went well together nicely. Above the middle of the table, a large, six armed, wrought iron, chandelier hung. At the end of each arm was a large, glowing Glowshroom. On the far side of the room, three doors were set in the wall… *Glowshrooms??*

"Where'd you get Glowshrooms?" Asked Drimblerod. "Those things are absurdly hard to find, *and* to keep growing." A larger cousin of the Portobello mushroom, Glowshrooms luminesced while they were healthy and growing. Once picked, they dimmed within days if they were not stored and transported under very specific conditions. Growing and maintaining Glowshrooms was an art. Because of this, transporting them was tricky business. Tricky business being a euphemism for 'absurdly expensive and highly monopolized'. To have *six* healthy growing Glowshrooms was an extravagance. Even for a model. "Those things must have cost a fortune."

Grimbledung looked up at the fungi. "This guy came rushing down the road with a cartload of them. I offered him a couple of Incinerator Wands for some and he went for it."

"You've bought Glowshrooms black-market?" Drimblerod shook his head. "*That's* dangerous, Grim. Those things are protected."

"Protected? You mean like they're almost extinct? I'd never heard of them before that guy wandered by and showed them to me." He looked up at the glowing mushrooms again.

Drimblerod shook his head, "No, protected as in *Protected.* They're on the Endangering Species List." Drim had been to an ESL class when he was younger. He had signed up for the class expecting something completely different. Instead he learned about Glowshrooms, Water-Babies and several other highly regulated, highly profitable markets. "They're protected by the Dwarves because they're the ones that grow them and they take it personally if anyone tries to muscle in on their action. Dealing in them *endangers* you."

"Really? The guy seemed so nice about it." He thought back to his interaction with the cloaked figure driving the wagon - the unmarked wagon- full of dirt and Glowshrooms. Underneath a heavy tarp marked 'Plane ol' Rocks fer Sale. Nothin mor too see'. "He was kind of in a hurry, now that I think about it."

"It's a good thing he wasn't an undercover ESL agent. Those guys make the Magicians Guild Enforcers seem like a little tweeting bird chirping in a meadow. Or a wreath of pretty flowers." He considered that for a moment. "A wreath of pretty flowers that smell bad." He shuddered as he thought back to the ESL instructor that had, at one point, actually eaten one of the students who had fallen asleep. It hadn't even broken his train of thought as he turned the dozing Elf into a carrot and munched on him as he spoke about the Spicy Arrakis Guild and why the saying 'The Spice is Death' wasn't just a catchy slogan.

"Well, anyways, he said those things should last a good fifty years as long as we water them every few days. So, on with the tour!" Grimbledung smiled as he once again spread his arms out wide, "So, this is the living area with a lounging space, and dining space, and food preparation area, and back door that leads to the outhouse…" he gestured over his shoulder to a door inset in the far wall, "…and…"

"Wait a grain of sand," interrupted Drimblerod, "you have a *second story* outhouse?" That would be a feat- even with a model.

Grimbledung grinned, "That will be at the end of the tour. First you need to see the bedrooms." He moved to a door on the far side of the room.

"Bedroom*SSS*?" Asked Drimblerod. "As in there's more than one?" He almost hopped back and forth. Almost. Maybe Grim's condition was contagious! "This I'd like to see."

Grimbledung moved to one of the two doors that led in opposite directions from the back of the large room. "So, they're both the same," he said as he opened a door and stepped in. It was a small room but the

furniture was placed so that the space was used well; it could have easily felt claustrophobic otherwise. He opened his arms out wide and turned to face the door. Drimblerod tentatively stepped into the room. "So, we have a good size bed, and a closet, and a chair to sit in, and a table to put stuff on, and a window there to let in breezes, and another window there to let them out." As he mentioned an item in the room he pointed with one or the other hand, always bringing them back up to gesture to the entire room before naming another item. "And a carpet so that when it's winter your feet don't get cold. Then you flip it over in the summertime to the smooth side so it's comfy then too."

"And the other room is exactly like this one?"

Grimbledung blinked at his partner. "Well no, not exactly of course."

"But you said they were the same."

"Right."

"But not exactly."

"Right."

"So, what's different?"

"Nothing."

Drimblerod exhaled. "OK, Grim. You can't have it both ways. Either they are the same..."

"Yes."

"...or they're not…"

"They are."

"…but then you say they aren't exactly the same."

"They aren't."

Drimblerod squinted at his partner. Without saying another word, he exited the room and went to what was ostensibly the other bedroom door. He opened it and looked inside. It was the same as the other room. Exactly. "It's the same as the other room, Grim."

"That's what I've been saying!" Said Grimbledung as he hopped back and forth. "Why are you trying to ruin the mood?"

Drimblerod stared at his partner for a long moment. "But…," he began. Then he paused again, reconsidered his line of questioning, then changed it. "How are the rooms not the same?" He asked flatly.

Grimbledung looked from one room, to the other, and back again. "That one is on that side of the building," he pointed to the room that they had just left, "and this one is on this side of the building." He pointed down at the floor in the room they currently occupied, "Of course." He thought for a moment, "I guess I could have used a ***SHIFT*** spell to put them in the same space and made them double the size they are now, but that would have taken a bit of extra Magiking. I only had a day to put the finishing touches on the place, you know."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Right. Different but the same. Got it, Grim." He turned and looked around the -identical- room. "I have to say, Grim, this is an impressive setup. You really put a lot of thought into this. I'm surprised you were able to put all this together in one evening."

Grimbledung shuffled his feet and suddenly took an interest in the ceiling.

It was not a good sign.

"Grim…" began Drimblerod. Now his partner was intent on inspecting one of the two windows. "Did you make this shop all by yourself?"

Now the bedside table engrossed Grimbledung.

"Grim!" A thought dawned on him. A disturbing one. "Where'd you get this shop?"

"This is a really nice table you know." Grimbledung sat at the table. "Solid wood you know." He leaned in close to examine the grain.

Drimblerod moved to the table and sat across from his partner. "Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire.[6] Where did this shop come from?"

"I think it's pegged together. Not a nail in it." He looked at Drimblerod, "That's a sign of workmanship, you know." He sat back in the chair and exhaled. "Very nice indeed, you know."

"*I know*." Drimblerod stared at his partner. "Shop. Where did it come from?" Another, more disturbing thought dawned on him. "Is it stolen?"

Grimbledung leaned back and balanced on the back two legs of the chair, "Stolen? I'm offended. Stolen. Really."

"Did you *pay* for it?"



Once again, Grimbledung developed a keen interest in the ceiling. "Just look at that ceiling. Those are mortise and tenon joints up there," he remarked, "master craftsmanship, that."

"GRIM! WHERE DID THIS SHOP COME FROM?!" Shouted Drimblerod.

Grimbledung flailed as he almost lost his balance. He flopped his chair back on all legs, "Imightatradedglowshroomsforit" he mumbled softly.

"What?"

"Imightatradedglowshroomsforit," he said again, only a little louder.

"Grim…" warned Drimblerod.

Grimbledung sighed loudly. "I might'a traded Glowshrooms for it."

Now Drimblerod leaned back in his chair. "GRIM! You're going to get yourself killed p*ermanently*. How many Glowshrooms did you trade? Who did you trade the Glowshrooms with?" Buying items on the ESL list was hazardous to one's health; actually using them for barter after buying them was like asking to clean a hungry Dragon's teeth. Drimblerod was aghast. Agog, appalled with the whole affair, packed up and left.

"This is a really nice room." Said Grimbledung, "I like this one better than the other. Can I have this room?"

"Grim. Who did you trade the Glowshrooms to? Is this someone who can identify you? Or us even?"

Grimbledung pondered the thought for a moment. "Well, I told him that I needed a new Wand Shop because our other one in Aution burned down. I blamed the Halflings for the fire." He grinned mischievously, "I think he bought it too." He thought some more, "And let's see. I told him that the shop was called Second Hand Sorcery so he could add it to the front. I might have mentioned that my name was Grimbledung. Oh, maybe I told him that the two of us were partners."

Drimblerod had been leaning back farther and farther in his chair as Grimbledung spoke.

"I might have mentioned that your name was Drimblerod and that we were going to set up our shop next to Julie's school of magic. But that's about it so I can't see how this could come back to bite us."

Finally reaching the tipping point (both figuratively and literally) Drimblerod crashed back onto the floor. To the chair's tribute, it did not break. Still lying on his back, he flailed around. "That's it? You didn't give him our address?"

"Don't be silly." Tut-tutted Grimbledung, "we don't have one of those yet."

Drimblerod rolled to his feet and righted the chair. He slammed it back in place at the table. "You're going to be the death of me, you daft

Gnome!" (He didn't know it, but he was right. Surprisingly, not for a long, long while though.[7]) "So, now there's someone out there that you traded wands to, to get Glowshrooms, and someone else you traded Glowshrooms to, to get this place. Both of which know exactly who you are. This won't work out well," he finished worriedly. "There's *no way* this will work out well." (Actually, surprisingly, it wouldn't cause even a minor inconvenience.)

"Drim, they both promised not to tell." Grimbledung stood from the table and slid his chair (more gently) back against the table. "We'll be fine. Don't worry." He smiled, "So want to see the outhouse? It's my favorite part!"

"I suppose so. There's not much we can do about it anyway." He let out a sigh. "Let's see the outhouse."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "You're going to love it!" He continued to hop as he exited the room and made his way to the door. It was centered on the far wall, in between the two bedrooms. It was a good location.

"Still, an outhouse on the second floor…"

Grim shook his head, "That would have taken a bit longer. I only had one night you know."

"But you didn't do…" began Drimblerod, then he shrugged in vain. "…so how does it work then if it's not on the second floor?" Asked Drimblerod. His partner was still hopping back and forth.

"You didn't get another Abyssmal Box, did you?" He shuddered. That would be yet another dealing that would probably cause issues later on.

Grimbledung shook his head, "Not at all. This is even better." He stopped hopping and spread his arms out wide. He was back in tour-guide mode. "Yes, yes, the upstairs is very nice indeed with its separate sleeping quarters and centrally located living space. But what happens friends, when it's the middle of the night and you're tucked in bed? Tucked in snug and warm and nature comes calling. What then friends? Oh yes, it's the middle of the night and you want to go to the outhouse. You *need* to go to the outhouse. And it's dark. And raining. Do you go down the stairs, out the front door, around the building, then around back to the alley? Back to the alley for your personal ablutions? Do you friends? Who among you would take that circuitous route? Who?" He

looked all around Drimblerod as if there were a large group standing there. "You in the front row perhaps?" He pointed at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod just stared at his partner. He knew there was no use even trying to answer; the spiel would continue no matter what.

"No!" continued Grimbledung as he clapped his hands once, then waved them over his head. After a moment, he pointed at his partner as he gestured at the door, "No, you do not, friends! Why, you come here. Right here." He pointed at the door with both hands. With a flourish, he opened the door while still pointing with his other hand. Inside was a closet-sized room. There was a Glowshroom on a sconce on one side.

Another Glowshroom!

Down the middle of the room was a brass pole. "Tada!"

"I don't get it," said Drimblerod, honestly.

"It's a pole!" He spread his arms out and moved them up and down in front of the pole as if he were caressing it. His fingers were wiggling.

"Right. A pole. How's it work?"

Grimbledung dropped his arms to his side. "How does it work?" He looked from the pole to Drimblerod and back. Twice. "Like this." He reached out and took the pole in both hands, swinging his legs out, he wrapped them around the pole and promptly slid from sight. "Tada!" he yelled up the shaft that led to the first floor. "You slide down it to get around back. Come on! You gotta try this pole!"

Drimblerod peered into the closet at the **PO**le t**O P**ersonal **A**blutions, setup (since he had no other word for it). Below he could see Grimbledung peering up at him. He was standing in another room, head poked into the POOPA. It appeared that the coast was clear. "Here goes nothing, I suppose," he remarked as he too took the pole in his hands, swung his legs out to it and slid down. There were several pillows at the bottom to ensure a soft landing. He stepped out of the POOPA and into the backroom of the wand shop proper. It appeared to be a workroom. "Well, that was fun, but now I still need to go to the outhouse."

Grimbledung spread his arms out wide. Now it was getting annoying. "So, now you've slid down the pole to the downstairs, quick and easy. Now, to use the outhouse.." he paused slightly (only two ellipses) as he moved to the side to reveal another door. "You merely go

out here." Once again, he moved his hands around the door as if caressing it. His fingers wiggled furiously. "And you're there." With a flourish, he opened the door that led to the outhouse twenty feet away (in compliance with typical town ordinances). An awning connected the building to the outhouse. Below, wood planking allowed safe, dry passage. "Tada!"

Drimblerod looked from the outhouse back to the pole. "How do you get back up?"

"Either shimmy up the pole or go up the stairs. At that point, you've gone to the bathroom so there's no hurry. Right?"

"I suppose not," Drimblerod considered it. "This is a handy set up. Especially on stormy nights."

"Exactly!" agreed Grimbledung, "Why I remember this one time…" His eyes glazed over as he pictured it in his mind, "It was a dark and stormy night. The rain? It was falling in torrents…"

"Let's not start *that* story," interrupted Drimblerod, "with a beginning like that, I am afraid to hear it out." He looked at his partner, "I have to say Grim; you've outdone yourself this time. This is really great." He paused for a moment, then moved into the workroom and looked around. It was well appointed. "But…" He looked around again, "This is a lot of work for a model. *A lot of work*. I'm sure we can get someone to build it for us, but this place will take months to do and cost a fortune."

Grimbledung shook his head, "What are you talking about? It's already done." He gestured around the room, then at the ceiling. "It's all done, see?"

"Well sure, but we can't just *Minisculate* all our customers and work off a tabletop." He considered the thought, "Well, I suppose we could…"

Grimbledung shook his head again as he gestured to the front of the shop, "No, no. All we need is a place to put it and then we just *ContraMinisculate* the entire place. Easy potatoesy (Gnomes typically don't like peas). We just need Julie to say where we can set up shop." He chuckled at his pun.[8]

Drimblerod was back to being Agog. "Wow, Grim. That's some setup." He looked around the main selling area. A tear came to his eye. "Some setup."

Grimbledung slapped his partner on the back. "Now don't go getting all mushy on me. Let's go get some breakfast and then we can ask Big Julie where she wants Yea Olde Wand-ee Shop to be. Hopefully near Nulu's. Say, I'm famished!"

"Yeah, partner," said Drimblerod. "Let's go. Things are looking up. Really up." He smiled. "I can't see how this could go wrong," he added accidentally.

From the ruined ashes of Aution, Fate glanced over at Drimblerod. She (Fate's feminine, in case you didn't know) was still hanging around the burned-out ruins of Aution until things picked up. If all went well, Fate was hoping to have plenty of opportunity to dole out some good old fashioned Karma in the upcoming epic battle. (Coming soon!). But, at the moment, things were quiet. Fate was looking for something to pass the time. An opportunity presented itself…

"Right? Let's go get *ContraMinisculated* ourselves and get some food! To the edge of the table!" he commanded as he pointed out the front door like a valiant explorer, "Onward!"

Together, the Gnomes exited the Shop and made their way to the doorway and through it. After they were a few paces away from it, Drimblerod turned to look to take in the entire structure. "It's sure some setup" he said again.

Grimbledung looked over his shoulder as he continued to the edge of the table, "Right? And you were worried. Shame on you, Drim," he said.

It was then that two things happened at once. In what seemed to be slow motion:

Oh- first Fate smiled.

On with the events:

1- As Grimbledung turned to look at the approaching drop off of the table, his foot caught on a leading edge of a board. He pitched forward and extended his arms to break his fall, letting go of his wand (lest he break it).

2- Drimblerod turned to look at his partner as he tripped -near the edge of table. He focused intently on the wand as it left Grimbledung's hand. Unconsciously extrapolating vectors, he realized that its arc would take it beyond the edge of the table. Unable to do anything else, he shouted (in slow motion) "NOOOOOoooooo!"

It did not help.

1a. Grimbledung broke his fall safely as he put his hands out. "That was close," he remarked to no one in particular as he returned to normal speed. He moved to a sitting position and turned to look at his partner. "That could have been bad, right?"

3. Unknow to either Gnome (that's why it's a '3') the wand continued on its arc over the table edge, bounced off the seat of the chair and clattered to the floor, in what (to their present scale) was over 500 feet down[9].

"NOOOOOoooooo!" repeated Drimblerod in slow motion.

"What?"

"No, no, no, no, no!" Said Drimblerod as he skipped right to fast motion. "NO!" He scampered to the edge of the table, got on all fours and peered over. The wand was nowhere in sight. "NO!"

"What? Don't worry, I'm fine," assured Grimbledung.

"You're fine? YOU'RE FINE?? What about the wand, you crazy Gnome. YOUR WAND! It went over the edge!" He glowered at his partner then peered over the edge again, "And I can't see it. It must have bounced to the floor."

"I can't imagine that's a good thing," remarked Grimbledung, "I hope it didn't break when it hit."

"Not good? We're stuck here. *Stuck*. Since it was your wand that *Minisculated* us we can't use mine to unshrink us!"

"Don't worry," comforted Grimbledung, "I'm sure someone will notice we're missing right away and come looking for us. Someone will be here by mid-morning. Just you watch."

Fate cackled.

TWO DAYS LATER

"So *that's* where you've been." Rat chuckled. There was a wry grin on his face. He could not have kept it from there even if he wanted to. Presently, getting rid of it was the last thing on his mind, "I was going to bring it up a couple of days ago, but then I found a nice, comfy spot for a nap and it slipped my mind."

"FOR TWO DAYS?"

"It was really comfy."

"GET GRIM'S WAND!" Shouted Drimblerod.

"Calm down, you little tiny speck of a Gnome, or we'll see if you really *are* the size of a Rat Turd."[10] Rat turned and hopped from the table top, "I had a big breakfast you know," he said as he scanned the floor from his vantage point. "Success! There it is!" He hopped down and gingerly took the wand in his teeth.

"Get that wand up here, Rat!" commanded Drimblerod.

"I said calm down," warned Rat as he held the wand like a tiny toothpick in the corner of his mouth. "You can either have it now in its present state, or in about eight hours, along with my hearty breakfast. I *could* use a little more fiber in my diet, you know."

"Rat! I'm sorry, please give me the wand," said Drimblerod apologetically, "It's just that I haven't eaten in two days. I'm a little testy. And I want to get away from Grimbledung for a little while."

"Where is that unstable Gnome, by the way?" Asked Rat worried, "is he okay?" He scanned the table and noticed he wasn't in sight. "He's coming too, right?"

Drimblerod nodded, "Yeah, yeah. He's just been hiding out up in his room." He paused and smiled, "I may have threatened to *Minisculate* him with my wand, on top of his *Minisculate* so he'd be too small to ever be found and he'd spend the rest of his days hunting dust bunnies to survive."

Rat dropped the wand on the tabletop. "Wow, you *are* testy when you're hungry." He grinned. "So, let's get you two all fixed up and we'll go tell your tale of hunger to the Gnoll brothers. I'm sure they can whip something up to make up for two days of not eating."

Drimblerod picked up the wand, "Sounds good to me. Then we'll see where Julie wants us to put our shop." He turned and looked at the model. "GRIM! Get out here. We're leaving!"

Seven
Wherein Second Hand Sorcery is Reestablished!

Drimblerod bellied up to the table in the cafeteria. "Ahh, some food. Real, honest to goodness food." He gripped his stomach and groaned, "My belly!" Startled, he gripped his head with both hands, "Delberger's Hand, I'm *really* beginning to sound like you."

Grimbledung beamed. "Isn't that great! Now we can really start having meaningful conversations!"

Drimblerod kicked his partner under the table. "Keep quiet you! Not another word until the meal is done." He followed up the kick with a deadly stare that hit almost as hard.

Grimbledung gulped. And kept quiet.

"Don't fret, Master Drimblerod," assured Klank as he sidled up to the table, large tray over his head, "Klank'll get you back in your proper mood." He smiled widely, tongue hanging out, "I'll just put some food down your gullet." He lowered the tray down on the table between the Gnomes. It was covered with the rib cage of some sort of mid-sized animal. The meat was smoldering and falling off the bones. Onto steamed radishes, turnips, and red field onions.

A single tear rolled down Drimblerod's cheek, down his chin and onto his lap.

Grimbledung just drooled. The route was the same except it started at his chin.

"Eat up, Gents," said Klank as he slid two knives onto the table, "It should go without saying that what goes down should stay down, so pace yourselves. Regurgitatin' is grounds for expulsion." He picked up a piece of the slow-roasted meat. "It'd be a shame to have this fine animal who gallantly gave its life to become such a feast to go to waste." He popped the morsel into his mouth and licked his lips. "Bonk's done himself prrroud." With that he turned and loped off.

The two Gnomes alternated between mouthfuls of meat and vegetables, grunting and nodding as they ate. Finally, when only bits of meat remained, Drimblerod sat back in his chair and let out a contented sigh.

Grimbledung used the last of a honey-roll (delivered by Bash to grunts of joy from Drimblerod) to corral the stray bits of meat into a tidy pile. "Me too," he agreed as he scooped up the last of the meat and ate it. "Me too."

Drimblerod sighed again. "Sorry I snapped at you. I get kind of testy when I go two days without food."

"You threatened to beat me to death with my own leg."

"Well…" began Drimblerod.

"…after you yanked it off."

"In my defense…"

"So you could then cook and eat it."

"…it's not like I followed through with the offer, right?"

Grimbledung nodded. "That's true, I suppose. And I suppose I *was* probably a little responsible for the entire situation."

"A little bit responsible?" Drimblerod gaped at his partner.

Grimbledung grinned. "Maybe I was perhaps moderately entirely responsible for the little situation."

Drimblerod shook his head, exasperated. "You're hopeless."

"I am really and truly sorry, Drim," began Grimbledung honestly, "I was really trying to help and I was really excited that I had gotten the shop replaced without it costing a fortune."

"Well, I have to tell you, your model of our business is really hard to beat."

Grimbledung clapped, "So does that mean we can finally put it someplace?" He bounced on his butt in his chair. "Please, please, please!"

Drimblerod stood up, "Fine, let's go before your head pops right off your neck." He moved to the door of the cafeteria. "Establishing the shop again, how bad could it be?"

Grimbledung jumped from his chair and burst into song:

Hey Drim, we won't make it bad.
We'll take a small shop and make it bigger.

Remember to keep your toes all clear,
Then we can start, to make it big-ger.

"How's about we go set up shop?" Suggested Drimblerod. "Before a second verse bubbles up out of you."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth as he moved to the door. "I'll go fetch the model and meet you out front." When he got to the door he paused for a moment. He then turned around and bellowed, "Thanks you wonderful Gnolls!" He was rewarded with several barks in reply. With a smile, he turned and left the cafeteria, singing as he went:

Hey Drim, don't be afraid
The Shop were made, so, I'll go out and get it

The minute you pick a spot in the sun,
then we can begin to make it bigg-er…

"Gads, Grim. I'll meet you out front," Drimblerod said as he shoved his partner out the door, "Meet you there." He shook his head, "What a loon." He then paused and also turned into the cafeteria and with a smile shouted, "Thanks you wonderful Gnolls!" With that, he also left the cafeteria and began walking down the street. As he went, he heard a third verse begin to escape his partner as he rounded the corner of the windmill towards the dormitories.

Drimblerod inhaled and exhaled deeply as he looked out at the streets. There was -much to his surprise- actual foot traffic. A lot had

happened during the two days they were stuck on the tabletop. He watched as people and wagons went by. Several of the wagons were loaded with what looked like the occupant's worldly possessions. Others had building supplies in them; a great many people had arrived in hopes of rebuilding their lives. Drimblerod shuddered as he thought of their reaction if they knew the culprit for their recent upheaval was so near. He moved to the street, having to look both ways to avoid wagons and stood in the middle of it.

"Now, where to put you," he said to no one. Drimblerod looked up and down the street. Traffic seemed to be moving fairly consistently from the far end of town where Julie's school was to the other where a saw mill had been set at the town's well. Several side streets were taking shape as businesses opened- a livery stable, clothier, and even a laundry service seemed already open for business. A cobbler and milliner were rapidly being built as well. For some odd reason, they were close to each other but not adjoined; there was now a 'blank space' on Main Street. Drimblerod made a mental note to get with Big Julie about forming a Board of Commissioners; boom towns invariably became a hodgepodge of streets and businesses as people set up wherever they wanted. Some semblance of order needed to be maintained if Julesville was to become a good and proper town. Or someday even a city!

Sidestepping a wagon that seemed to be almost driving on the wrong side of the road, Drimblerod moved to a largish open area. *Perfect for the Shop*, he mused as he stood in the middle of the space.

"Lookin' to build 'ere?" Said a strangely familiar voice from behind him.

Drimblerod surveyed the space, trying to decide on which side the front door should go- he didn't bother to turn around. "In a manner of speaking, I suppose. We're going to put our wand shop here."

"Well, that's goin' t'cost you, pal," said the voice as a hand lay on his shoulder, "prime spot, this is. *Prime*."

Drimblerod turned to look at the hand on his shoulder, "Prime isn't the word I'd use," he began as he turned, " 'free for the taking' is more the word I was thinking of…" Drimblerod stopped in mid-sentence and gaped at the Gnome beside him. "YOU!"

Webber (The Very Last Bit of Chapter Thirty-Six, previous book) returned the gape. "YOU!"

Drimblerod shrugged from under Webber's hand and in a flash, drew his wand, "Don't think for a moment that I won't blast you right here and now!"

Webber backed up from Drimblerod, "Settle down, settle down. Wec'n resolve this w'out any blastin's, I'm sure."

Drimblerod squinted at the Gnome, "The way *that* will happen is if you get out of town before I tell Big Julie what you're up to." He squinted his eyes.

"Tell you what, I'll sell you this plot f' 'alf price. 'Ow's that sound?"

"*Half price?* IT'S NOT YOURS TO SELL!!" Drimblerod fumed. "You can't sell things that don't belong to you!"

Webber smirked. "People do it all the time. It's called Realty. 'Cause in reality, you don' own it."

"That's *not* what that means![11] Just wait until Big Julie hears you're selling land in *her* town."

"Fine. You drive a 'ard bargain. How's about ten silver. That's a steal for this property. Why just earlier t'day I sold the spot across the way for three times…"

In a flash, Webber was gone. Only an as-yet-undrawn wand clattered to the ground.

Drimblerod stumbled back. "What in the lands!"

Grimbledung walked up to his partner, Shop model under his arm. In the other was his wand. "That'll fix that Gnome once and for all."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Please, please tell me you didn't send him to that same place in the desert."

"Why?"

"Because, I keep telling you. Every time you send someone there, it gives those Magician Guild Enforcers another chance to escape."

Fate smiled.

"I haven't sent anything helpful." He giggled, "Remember when I sent that almost- dead, flea infested Shambler there? That was a good one. I wonder what they did with it." He giggled again.

"I'm telling you Grim. You're going to get those two coming after us if you keep sending random things there. Those two may seem to be idiots, but they might just be conniving idiots that can figure a way out."

"Remember that swarm of biting Shambler Flies I sent?" Grimbledung cackled.

"Grim, let's not ruin the momentous occasion of reestablishing Second Hand Sorcery. Just put the model down over there," he pointed at the middle of the open lot (since the model would expand evenly in all directions), "and put the door facing the main street."

Grimbledung nodded, "That sounds great, Drim." He smiled again. "And I'll not send anything else to the desert. No matter how tempting."

Drimblerod nodded, "Thanks. There's no sense tempting Fate."

Of course, it was too late for that. Way too late; events were already in motion. With Fate's hand guiding said events on a collision course.

Fate grinned.

"OK, Grim," Drimblerod stepped to the edge of the street, "let 'er rip!"

Grimbledung moved his wand in a large circle to encompass the entire area, then pointed it at the model and intoned in a loud voice:

ContraMinisculilate'emmm!

In a flash, the model began to grow quickly and steadily in all directions. Thanks to the correct number of consonants, to the perfect size.

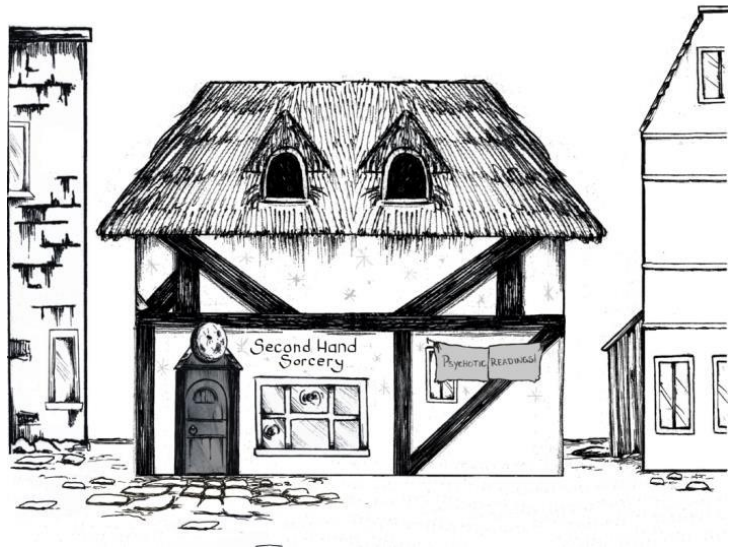
Once the shop stopped growing, Grimbledung smiled at his partner, "After you."

Drimblerod shook his head, "No, no. After *you*." He motioned toward the door.

Grimbledung skipped to the front door. "We need to get Door mounted here to finish the place off." He looked up, "And get that old Moon back in position."

"That and do some grocery shopping," suggested Drimblerod, "I don't know if we can keep crashing the Cafeteria,"

Arm in arm, the two Gnomes entered their newly established shop.



Meanwhile

Corporal Gigantus punched the Private squarely between the eyes. He promptly fell in a heap. Just as he had done the past two times, he took an eight-count before standing. According to the Uniform Code of Halfling Justice: "A subordinate, if still conscious, must stand to allow his or her superior further opportunities to strike them"[12]. The eight-count tactic was advice his father had given him when he left for the Army:

"Sonny, when'ya git whalloped, take a tic an' count to eight before you stand. Tha' does two things," his Pappy used to say. Between beatings. "Like I said, t'does two things," his Pappy explained, "first, it lets you clear your head so you're able to answer questions. Secondly, it makes your superior feel good 'cause they thinking they hits 'ard if y'have a hard time gettin' back up. That, Sonny, is just bein' polite. And lastly, (Pappy was hit in the head a lot) it lets you decide if you want to get 'it again or just run your super'r through an' take 'is position."

Words to live by.

Presently, the Private figured he would take two more slugs, three tops, before he became the new Corporal of his squad. Slowly -after his eight-count- he got to his feet.

Inside, Corporal Gigantus beamed. He was hitting hard enough to keep his subordinate down for a full eight seconds. Consistently! *The Dragon blood enemas were working*! "Are you sure it was the same Gnome we met outside of town?"

"Yep," answered the Halfling for the third time. "Sure was."

Finally satisfied, Corporal Gigantus nodded at him. "Fine, now get back to weapons maintenance!"

Dutifully, the Halfling trotted off.

Corporal Colossus looked through his field glasses at the town that would eventually become Julesville. It was abuzz with activity. Several buildings were completed and several more were in various stages of construction. *One two-story building even seemed to have appeared in the time he had lowered his field glasses when he looked back to where Gigantus was questioning a Private!* Very strange, that. The building appearing -*not* the Private questioning, obviously. Colossus panned the field glasses up and down what he assumed was where the main street was going to be, as well as several side streets. With what seemed to be little forethought, the town was growing away from the absurdly large windmill and its several out-buildings. The School of Magic, a local had told him a few months ago. Gigantus had promptly enrolled his son to provide information from the inside. Main Street seemed to end at the school. It was very convenient.

As a place to start a fire.

"We really need to get in there and see what's happening," he said to no one in particular. Particularly because no one was around. *Maybe we can send in just a couple of unarmed troops so no one gets suspicious*. He would pitch that to Gigantus. Even thought they were the same rank, he realized that Corporal Gigantus was in charge; he had been a Corporal longer. Time in Rank had its privileges, after all. He made his way back to the center of the vale, which had become their impromptu Command Post. "Hey, Gigantus," he said to his cohort, "com'ere, will you?"

Since the debacle of failing to burn Aution down, the two squads had regrouped in a small vale near the town as the Corporals decided their next move. Telling the Lord High Priest of Halflings was out. The current plan involved impaling the Gnome that caused the aforementioned debacle. That Gnome being Grimbledung.

Gigantus turned and walked over to his fellow Corporal, "What?" He asked flatly. He was still invigorated with the thought of how powerful his blows were.

"I'm not too sure about the plan."

"What part?" Asked Gigantus. "You helped make it, I seem to recall."

Corporal Colossus shook his head, "No, no, the overall plan I like. This…this use of spies to see what's happening in the new town over at the School of Magic. Hired spies always cause troubles."

"Well, we can't very well go marching into town. A bunch of Halflings showing up would raise everyone's suspicions. We need spies and…"

"I agree," interrupted Colossus, "so how about we get two volunteers to disarm and go in to look around all casual like?"

"Oh? Two unarmed volunteers? And who would disarm them?"

Colossus had considered that, "Well, I figured it would be tough to get two soldiers to *willingly* disarm, but maybe we could explain it real well." With Halfling soldiers -especially ones on an Operation – dismemberment was often the only route to disarmament.

Corporal Gigantus shook his head, "No, no. That would be a really tough sell, and we're down to fifteen troops already." He glanced at his fellow corporal, "Besides, I have already hired the spies."

Colossus grimaced, "I hate spies. Sneaking around, hiding in shadows. It's not very sportsmanlike."

"Well then your problems are solved. Those aren't the kind of spies I hired."

"Do you think… what? Did you recruit one of the locals that can move around freely then?" He rubbed his chin. "That may work."

Gigantus smirked, "Not exactly, Col. I hired the Dieu Brothers."

Corporal Colossus took a step back, as if his fellow Corporal's dangerous decision-making was contagious, "The *Dieu Brothers*? Are you insane? Those guys are ruthless!" Coming from a Halfling, that meant something. "How many of them?"

Corporal Gigantus chuckled, "Relax or your head'll pop. Just two," he finished reassuringly.

In all actuality, they weren't really brothers; they just all looked eerily alike. They weren't even remotely related, except for occasional instances. They were more like a guild than anything else, but 'Dieu Guild' didn't sound as menacing. The Dieu Brothers were renowned for their ability to reconnoiter even the most hostile territories. As spies, they were famous. Normally 'famous spies' would be an oxymoron, and it would have been in this case had the Dieu Brothers not also been *in*famous for being insanely, absurdly bloodthirsty, spies. When they showed up, everyone -Humans, Elves, Orcs, Trolls… *GIANTS*- all gave them a wide berth and hoped they would leave quickly. Because of this they did not use the typical spy sneakery (they openly, mercilessly, scoffed at the Dwarves and their Under Dem Schutz Der Dunkleheit antics); they moved in the open. In broad daylight. And deathly silent.

They were Mimes.

Corporal Colossus blanched. Reflexively his hand went to his sword, "Well, I suppose if you know what you're doing…" He paused. "The Dieu Brothers." He paused again. "We need to prep the troops."

Gigantus nodded, "That's a good idea. They should be getting here soon. I sent for them yesterday."

"Yesterday? Then we *really* need to brief the troops!" Colossus' hand tightened on his hilt, "We can't afford to lose any more soldiers!"

It was already too late.

The Corporals entered the clearing they had made in the center of the vale- the impromptu Command Post (mentioned earlier) and lounging area. Several dead Halflings were strewn about. In various places. In various pieces. Four more Halflings had their weapons drawn and were spread out in front of two Mimes.

They were dressed identically in horizontally striped (black and white) tight-fitting shirts and tight pants (which seemed too short) and low black shoes, their socks clearly visible. A crisp red bowtie and the red socks were the only deviation from the black-white color scheme. Even their faces were painted white, with a black border around them. A black wool beret topped each Mime. In any other instance, the entire ensemble would have been regarded as completely absurd and open to -justifiably- constant and severe ridicule. In the case of Dieu Brothers, that would have been a lethal mistake.

One Mime seemed to be leaning on a nonexistent bar. The other was seated in a nonexistent chair. Apparently, they were taking a little break between melees.

"Stand down!" Corporal Gigantus ordered. "They're on *our* side!"

The 'seated' Mime looked at Gigantus; he tilted his hand back and forth in a 'more or less' gesture.

The Halflings obediently sheathed their weapons, knuckles still white as they gripped their hilts, ready for action. Slowly, they backed away.

"Sorry about that, gentlemen," began Gigantus, as he approached (also) slowly. "A miscommunication on my part."

The seated Mime stood, dusted himself off and shrugged.

Corporal Gigantus turned, "Col, these…" Corporal Colossus was still at the edge of the clearing. "Corporal Colossus! Come meet our guests," he snapped in an official voice. "You're going to offend them," he added nervously.

Colossus approached warily, "Sorry about that," he said when he was beside his compatriot. "How do you do?" He asked.

One Mime gestured as if he were violently stabbing someone. Repeatedly. The other knotted an invisible rope, tossed it over a nonexistent branch, slipped the notional noose over his head and tugged ostensibly on the end of the rope. Disturbingly, he seemed to sway as he stood on his tiptoes.

"Not *what* do you do. *How* do you do." Colossus said in a shaky voice.

The two mimes returned to their original positions. One shrugged. The other went to finishing his 'drink'.

Corporal Gigantus cleared his throat- his stomach felt like it was in it. "Colossus, let me introduce you to Mon and Ton. The Dieu Brothers."

The seated one -Mon- held up two fingers.

"Ahh, *two* of the Dieu Brothers, that is," Gigantus corrected himself. No one really knew how many of them there actually were. The consensus was 'hopefully not many'. In reality there were one-hundred-fifty-three of them, spread out between the original group (of ten) and fifteen franchises. Business was booming. They were hard times, after all, and reliably ruthless spies were a hot commodity.

Ton nodded. He gestured toward the growing town. " ?"

Corporal Colossus nodded, "Yes, Mister Ton, that's the place."

Ton brought up his thumb and forefinger, held close together.

"Sorry. Yes Ton, that's the place."

Ton nodded approvingly.

"So, we want to know what sort of people are moving into town" began Colossus.

Mon nodded.

"Soldiers, Men at Arms, Brute Squad, you know- anyone who could put up a fight," he continued.

Mon stared at him.

"Any weapons stores, hideouts, and beasts that can be used for mounted attacks," continued Colossus, completely oblivious to the danger of telling a Dieu Brother how to do their job.

Mon squinted at him.

"The general attitude, avenues of escape. Any possible locations for snipers"

Mon stood.

"Ahh…" said Colossus as he became 'livious'.

Corporal Gigantus moved close to his cohort, "He meant no insult, Mon," he nodded his head toward the other Corporal, "He's a *new* Corporal."

Mon's eyes widened.

"Still growing into his stripes, so to speak."

Mon laughed silently, hands on his belly. He then motioned like he was rocking a newborn in his arms. He was still silently chuckling.

"Yeah, that's about the size of it," said Gigantus. He also chuckled as Colossus grew red.

Suddenly, Mon's smile disappeared and he squinted at Colossus. He stopped making motions like he was rocking a baby, but oddly, he still continued to 'hold' it. He narrowed his eyes even further. Mon motioned as if he were breaking the 'child' over his knee like one would a stick. He tossed the 'ends' in opposite directions.

"Errr…" Was all Colossus could manage.

Gigantus was not far behind. "Ahhh…" He said.

Ton stopped leaning on the 'bar' and moved beside Mon- who was still squinting. " ?"

"Yes, I suppose that's about the size of it," said Gigantus. "We appreciate your professional bloodlust and discreetness in this matter."

Disturbingly, Mon took a towel from off the bar and wiped his hands with it. While he did so, he nodded.

Ton also nodded.

"Yes, thanks very much," said Corporal Colossus. He was ready for the meeting to end. REALLY ready. "See you soon," he added as he motioned them toward the town. Then he regretted it.

Mon's eyes grew large. He held up his hands in a question.

"Well, to hear your report, of course," offered Gigantus. He knew he was treading on thin ice, "Of information on the town." A thought occurred to him, "Oh! And we want to know about a certain Gnome."

" ?"

"Yes, Mon," began Colossus, "there's this Gnome in town who we want really most sincerely dead. His name is Grimbledung. He's an idiot."

The Mimes rubbed their hands together.

"But. But we want to be the ones to do it, if that's all right with you," added Gigantus quickly.

The Mimes shrugged noncommittally.

"We've already found out he's working with another Gnome in some stupid wand shop."

Ton nodded. " ?"

"The other Gnome? His name is Drimblerod."

Mon casually crossed his arms and took to leaning on a wall that wasn't there.

Ton gestured for the Corporal to continue.

As Mon leaned on the 'wall' he fingered the secret flap under his arm. Inside was his trusty Assassin Wand. It had saved him several times. He nodded as the Corporal babbled on about being wronged in some way or another.

"…. and they kept us from the glorious razing of the town. So, we really want them dead. Both of them. Especially the stupid one," finished Colossus.

Ton glanced at Mon then he placed his hands together, fingers spread, palms touching. He wrapped his middle fingers around each other and twisted his hands so they were now facing away from each

other. As he waggled his middle fingers, they seemed to stick out the palms of the opposite hands.

Neither Halfling had any idea what it meant, so they ignored the gesture.

Mon nodded grimly; Ton also remembered the incident with the two-headed Hydra which would have ended with the both of them dead, had it not been for Mon's newly-acquired Assassin Wand. The Mimes had been visiting a couple of Gremlins to get paid for a recent 'job' when a Gnome had interrupted the meeting. He had seemed oblivious to the inherent danger of directly interacting with Mimes, and even more strangely, seemed to enjoy the company of the Gremlins. And they, his. Very odd. After several minutes of small talk, he dropped off a tray of Gnollish Dark Roast® coffee and Pickled Elves Toes, then went back to tending his store. As the Dieu brothers were leaving, the Gnome had tossed the wand to them. 'Any friend of the Gremlins is a friend of mine' he had said in a most friendly, un-intimidated manner. He had been an unusual Gnome, that Drimblerod Axebreath. Unusual, but also, it turned out, a real lifesaver.

"Once you find these two Gnomes. Let us know where they are so we can make them pay."

"Make them pay with lethal currency," agreed Gigantus.

Mon stood straight and nodded. He pointed where Colossus had gestured earlier.

"Sure, we'll talk on the way out. Of course," agreed Colossus.

The four moved through the trees in the direction of Julesville, "We really appreciate your assistance with this little problem of ours," said Gigantus.

The two Mimes stopped. Ton peered quizzically at Gigantus.

Mon rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. Angrily.

Colossus stepped between them and Gigantus, "Right, right. You'll definitely be paid for your efforts. He was just thanking you *above and beyond* the agreed payment."

" , ' ? '
!"

Gigantus blanched, "Well, there's no cause for *that* kind of language, I'm sure."

"I assure you Mon, you'll get paid. The Halfling Empire *always* pays its debts," Colossus lied. More angrily that he should have. "We're not a bunch of deadbeat Lannisters."

Mon nodded at one, then the other Halfling. Whether he turned the Gnomes over to the Halflings or not, was still up in the air. The reconnoitering however, came at a price. A set price. Since he felt Drimblerod was a helpful ally, if it came down to it, *he* would be the one to kill him, after all, it would be bad form to let someone else kill one's friends. He nodded again, this time at Ton.

"Well then, now that *that's* settled. We wish you absurdly overwhelming success," said Colossus hurriedly.

With that, the Dieu Brothers set off in the direction of Julesville. They leaned against an apparently wicked headwind that the Corporals couldn't feel, and trudged off. Within a few paces, they encountered a wall of some sort. They maneuvered around it and continued down the hill.

"That went well," said Colossus. He watched the two Mimes moving off, "I think."

"We're not dead, so as far as dealing with the Dieu Brothers, that's a success."

"What happens if those two characters don't come back? I have a bad feeling about this… whole plan," said Colossus.

Gigantus looked down the hill at the two mimes. They were now using a rope to pull themselves along. "They'll work out. Trust me."

"And if they don't?" Frowned Colossus, "We have no other way to get information from the town and we'll have to assault it blind. Those two are our only hope."

Gigantus gazed at the shrinking pair. His voice was gravelly, "No. There is another."

"What?"

Gigantus shook his head as if to clear it, "Let's go get the troops ready. This won't take long."

The two Halfling Corporals turned to reenter the woods. Confident their plan was about to unfurl.

In the time it took them to walk three paces towards the Command Post, Colossus' fears were realized; they had been betrayed by the Mimes. At least these two anyway. At least for right now. More would follow in Mon and Ton's footsteps. They were, after all, two of the original founders of the Dieu Brothers, and by far, the most ruthless of them all.

Them's the breaks.

Eight
Wherein The Aution Advertisements Attract the Attention of Pozzuoli - among others

Nulu looked up and down what was going to be the main street of Julesville. The Livery Stable, Bank, Barber Shop, and Grocers were up and running. *So is the wand shop*, she scowled at herself. *For the past week*. She really wanted her bar and restaurant to be on the main drag and if she didn't get moving, the entire street would be full. She just needed room for a bar and restaurant. She paused for a moment, *and* her inn. Nulu leaned on a lamp post. *When had <u>those</u> been installed*? A large covered wagon rolled by. A youngish-looking human male was at the reins with a youngish female beside him. "Pardon me," he paused and considered his choice of words for a moment.

Nulu raised an eyebrow.

"Mistress Troll," he continued (almost correctly), "could you direct us to the inn?" He looked around the growing town, "If there is one, that is."

Nulu frowned.

The man leaned back in the wagon and tightened his grip on the reins. His wife's eyes grew large. "Sorry if I've offended you, we're just looking for a place to stay for the night," he offered nervously.

Nulu shook her head, "No, no, it's nothing you said," she began as she forced a smile. "It's just that I was going to open an inn in town and you've just reminded me that I need to get going at it." The man visibly relaxed. "I ran the Stumbling Drunk in Aution so I thought I'd expand from a bar and restaurant to a bar and restaurant and inn."

The woman perked up, "That was you? You had great scones. I'd keep those on the menu."

"Thanks, I am hoping to, once I corral my cooks and get them back to work. They all took to the six winds when the town went up." She frowned again.

"So… Mistress Troll," began the man again, "or is it Miss Trolless?" He paused again.

"Trolless or Miss Trolless work. I prefer Trolless because it's less of a mouthful. Or 'Nulu' which is even easier to say," said Nulu, this time with a genuine smile.

The man nodded, "So Nulu, since you're not up and running, where can we bed down for the night?"

Inside, Nulu scowled again. Grimbledung with all his craziness and antics had created the *only* place she knew of with room to spare. While waiting for the wand business to pick up, the two Gnomes had been letting out space in the Second Hand Wand Shop to travelers. It was revenue that was not making it to *her* pockets. "Well, I know that the Gnomes who run the wand shop have a room or two they are renting out for short periods. You should try them." She pointed further down the street a little ways. "It's the one with the moon hanging out front. Second Hand Sorcery is the name of the place. Tell them Nulu sent you."

"See, Edward? I told you things were going to work out."

The man nodded to his wife, then to the Trolless, "Thanks very much, Nulu and good luck getting up and running."

The woman smiled and waved. "Scones," she reminded, as the wagon moved off.

"Delberger's Hand, I need to get up and running," Nulu scowled to no one in particular. She stepped into the street and looked up and down it. There was a bit of open space, even on what would be the main street. Of course, that wouldn't last for long. "Time for a land grab," she said aloud as she moved down the center of the road. Wagons moved outward to give her room. When she reached the Second Hand Wand Shop, she stopped and looked across the street. There was a large vacant lot there. She sighed. *How close is too close? S*he thought. *There'll be snacks to send over and if I'm too far, I'll have to walk farther. Plus, I can keep an eye on them from here.* With another sigh, she stepped toward the vacant lot. Into the path of a wagon. Quickly, she reached up and took the harness of the beast pulling the cart. With a downward pull, the Shambler came to an abrupt stop. The cart followed suit immediately after.

"Youa let a-go my Shambler!" came a familiar voice. A *very* familiar voice.

Nulu peered out from behind the beast's head at the front of the wagon.

"Nulu! It's ayou!" Said Pozzuoli. The accent dropped off immediately, "So you're setting up in town too, I see." He narrowed his eyes, "Anyone else from Aution around that you know?"

Nulu's stomach leaped into her throat. Quickly she moved to the side of the wagon *away* from the Second Hand Wand Shop. "Pozzuoli! I'm glad you made it out in one piece!" Stalling for time, "Mamma Pozzuoli, how nice to see you too!"

Pozzuoli's eyes narrowed even further, "Nulu…"

Nulu panicked. An option came to mind "Say, Pozzuoli, I'm setting up shop right here," she pointed quickly at the vacant lot, hoping he wouldn't look behind him. Now *she* squinted, "How's my credit?"

Pozzuoli switched gears into 'business mode' as he hopped out of the wagon to stand in front of Nulu. Nulu shifted around so his back was to the wand shop. "You're asking how your credit is with *me?* That's not even a question that needs to be asked." He feigned offense, "why-a you give Pozzuoli the hard time" he asked in his heavy accent. He reached way up and slapped Nulu's cheek (she leaned down to help receive the genuine gesture). "So, you're getting the tavern?"

"Well yes. For starters, anyway. I was thinking of building on this nice big lot". She put her arm around Pozzuoli and led him to the lot, still keeping his back to Second Hand Sorcery. "It's a good location, I think. Lots of foot traffic and near the center of town..." She caught herself before she sold Pozzuoli on a spot nearby. "If only it were nearer the business district," she added hopefully.

Pozzuoli examined the lot, "That's kind of big for just a tavern." He raised an eyebrow, "You expanding?"

Nulu nodded, "Big Julie suggested adding an inn. I think it's a good fit with a bar and restaurant."

"What you going to name it?"

"Well, I heard of this one place called the Regal Beagle. Catchy name, I think."

"Sounds fancy."

"It was," nodded Nulu, "but it didn't have a sign and I'm not sure how I'd make a sign that let people know it was a place to drink, eat, *and sleep*." She stuck out her tongue. "It's the only thing that comes to mind. Except for my old name."

"Stumbling Drunk isn't a good name for an inn." Pozzuoli snickered, "Sleeping Drunk maybe. You could even get a sign made with a guy passed out on a bed!" He elbowed Nulu, "Right?" He snapped his fingers. "Hey, go completely in the opposite direction and call it Furley's!"

"Furley's?"

"Yes, then you can put whatever you want on the sign." He smiled helpfully.

Nulu shook her head. "I'll think of something catchy and that will work on a sign. Maybe I'll have two signs, one for the eating part and one for the sleeping part." She mulled it over in her head. "So, howsabout the credit?" She said in Pozzuoli's accent.

Pozzuoli nodded, "I'm sure we can work something out to get you outfitted." He walked back to the wagon, "And then maybe you'll answer my question about… *other people from Aution that may be here*." His eyes narrowed again.

"Now Pozzuoli, what do you think about 'forgive and forget' as a way of life?"

"That may work for some," he reverted into his heavy accent, "but for the Mamma, it a-no work so good. Right Mamma?"

To emphasize the point, Mamma Consigliore leaned forward, looked over at Nulu, and shook her head solemnly.

"See?"

"Well, just try to keep a level head," Nulu pleaded. "One destroyed town is enough."

Pozzuoli smirked at Nulu, "Don't worry. This destruction will be much more… focused."

Mamma Consigliore nodded again, "S'right."

"Thata Mamma, she sure is a feisty!" Chuckled Pozzuoli as he climbed back on the wagon. "Say, how about Prancing Vagabond?" He suggested, "or how about 'Swoop Inn and Drink?"

"How'd you put that on a sign?"

Pozzuoli pursed his lips.

Nulu frowned. It seemed that every person she spoke to had an idea for a name. Never a *good* idea- just an idea.

"How about 'The Lively Stables' since people can sleep there too?"

Nulu opened her mouth to complain and then stopped herself. "That last one's not bad." She lied as she tilted her hand back and forth, "That may be in the running, Pozz."

Pozzuoli smiled as he picked up the reins. "Andiamo! Let's go." He snapped the reins at his Shambler. "We need to get set up so we have credit to offer our best customer." His eyes narrowed again. It was becoming a disturbing habit, "So she'll give us a straight answer."

"Sure thing Pozz!" said Nulu as she waved, "Get set up and then we'll talk." She shuddered as the wagon pulled away, revealing Second Hand Sorcery directly behind it. *That was close.*

After not only a dozen paces, the wagon came to an abrupt stop. Nulu's stomach returned to her throat. When Pozzuoli hopped out of it, Nulu's stomach did a little jig. When Pozzuoli glanced up at the hovering Moon in front of Second Hand Sorcery for a long moment, it seemed her intestines joined in the dance. When he peered into the dark window of the shop, it escalated into a full-blow innard-hoedown. Slowly Pozzuoli turned and looked at Nulu. The stare of a full-grown Black Dragon would have been more pleasant. Without another word, he returned to his wagon and hopped up onto it.

To make matters worse, Mamma Consigliore leaned out from the front of the wagon, looked back, and shook her head at Nulu as they drove off.

In one gulp, the First Annual Nulu Guts-Hoedown ended. "I need a drink," she said to no one in particular. When Nulu remembered *she* was supposed to be the barkeep in town, she made a grimace that made several passersby move to the opposite side of the street. At that moment, a Human carrying a shovel walked past (he hadn't seen her grimace). "Say there," Nulu said to the man, "you a carpenter?"

The man looked from his shovel to Nulu. "Not 'xactly. Outhouse digger." The man waggled the shovel. "Can't's really hammer nails w'this thing, y's'know."

Nulu exhaled. "Right ne…"

"Err cut wood," interrupted the man as he now took the shovel off his shoulder and pretended to use it like a saw.

"*Right*. Well, I'm in the need of getting a building put up. It's going to need an outhouse at some point as well. Where're the day-laborers hanging out?" Invariably when a new town was established, or an old town experienced a large fire, carpenters, bricklayers, smithies, and various other hand-workers would show up on the scene. And, there was usually one place -and one person- who handled the workers.

The shovel-wielding human gestured towards the end of town with his shovel. "They's at's the Sawmill 'course. But I'm a freelancer. Cut out the middleman and save some coinage." He smiled widely, "That's what m' Pappy used t'say. Cut out the middle man! T'was sore proud I took up the family business," he winked at Nulu. "Cuttin' out's the middleman, that is."

"Really? That worked out for him?" Asked Nulu. Freelancers lasted as long as they didn't cut into the profits of unions or guilds. At that point, they either were forced to join up, or were sent packing. Or worse.

The man shrugged, "Yep, 'is entire life." He smiled as he thought back on his father, "I 'member when he took ill…" he looked at Nulu, "T'was sore proud I's followed up in 'is footsteps. That was the end of 'im, that were."

Suddenly (inexplicably) interested, Nulu asked, "Sore proud? What does that even mean?"

"Well… 'e took ill and asked me t' help 'im out." He smiled, "So's I called f'the undertaker"

"Undertaker? Why didn't you call for the doctor?" Nulu gaped at the man.

"Well'p, I done's like m'Pappy always said; I cut out the middle man!" He beamed. "Course, 'e was a little sore with me."

Nulu shook her head. "I know how he felt. I'm *sore*-ry I asked you."

"Pappy said th'same thing t'me." He cackled. "So, where you want the 'ole to be?" Asked the man, businesslike. "Regular four'per family 'ole, that'll takes two days to dig. Business like's a bar 'ole, that's four days."

"How about a bar, restaurant, and inn. All in one place?"

"That's'll[13] take a week." The man leaned on his shovel, "and cost ya' a five silver."

Nulu blinked at the man, "Really? That's pretty reasonable."

The man winked at Nulu, "That's cause you're *cuttin' out the middle man*."

Nulu nodded. "Sounds good. Come by next week and I should have an idea of where it should go."

The man stuck out his hand and Nulu slapped it. "An' payment is 'alf at start, 'alf at finish." Nulu responded by putting out her hand. The man slapped it in return. "See's ya next week. Missy." With that the man turned and continued up the street, shovel over his shoulder as advertisement.

I hope he lasts until next week, Nulu thought. "So, the Sawmill then," she said aloud as she began walking towards the end of town. As she went, she passed Garibaldis. He waved to her.

Nine
A Man Called Pinkie
To his face even

Nulu entered the fenced in area that marked the Sawmill. There were several groups of workers hanging about, lounging on large stacks of wood, and in some cases, under them. She walked over to a group that obviously consisted of carpenters. They were sitting under the shade of a hastily (yet well built) shed that had integrated benches. Several sat in wooden chairs of various designs. It was comfortable advertising. "Hello boys," she began, "I need some work done."

Most of the group ignored her. One Human male looked up, "Need some shutters fixed? Door rehung?" He said in a bored voice. He didn't even sit up straight as he said it, paunch hanging over his work belt. His seat was a plain, three-board bench that swayed dangerously.

Nulu narrowed her eyes at the man and took a step towards him. A menacing step. He immediately sat a little straighter. The paunch was still there. "Are you the foreman?" She asked flatly.

"No?" He said meekly.

"Then shut up," said Nulu tersely, "I won't even hire you to *sweep up* after my job is done if I hear your voice again." Even being a full-blooded Trolless, Nulu was routinely treated like a helpless little female when it came to manual labor. She was, truthfully, completely ignorant when it came to carpentry, but that's why she was a business owner; so she could *hire* people to do manual labor for her.

The man nodded with a blush.

"So, who's in charge then?"

"What you looking to have done?" Asked another of the humans from an elaborate wooden recliner. He pulled a lever to make the foot rest retract and the seat back to move upright before he stood. This one was tall- above average for a Human- tall and ruggedly built. Obviously, he had been a laborer for quite a while, and ostensibly knew what he was doing.

"You gonna make a crack too?" Nulu narrowed her eyes and flexed her fists.

"Now, now, Miss," began the Human amicably, "it's just that depending on what you need will decide who you need to talk to," he explained. "If it *is* just hanging some doors or such, we can do that ourselves and save you some money. If it's a bigger job like roofing or putting up a wall, then the foreman would want to know about it."

"Why is that?"

The Human shrugged his muscled shoulders, "The Foreman lets us work as Black Legs for the smaller stuff, and we let him handle the bigger stuff."

Nulu nodded, "Sounds reasonable."

He gave a genuine smile, "I'm Pinkie, by the way." He gestured to a barrel, "So, what are you looking to have done?"

Nulu walked over and sat on the barrel. To her pleasure, it didn't even squeak when she did so. *A thanks to the Coopers Guild when I see them*, she thought. "Well, in Aution, I ran the Stumbling Drunk…"

"You made some great tarts," interrupted the first Human. His eyes got wide as he realized he had broken the 'don't want to hear your voice again rule'. They *were* good tarts, after all.

Nulu smiled at the man, "Thanks. But since that place burned to a crisp along with most all of Aution, I'm setting up shop here."

"I'd been to the Stumbling Drunk. That was a big place. You looking for the same size establishment here?" Pinkie asked.

Nulu could almost see the gold coins in Pinkie's eyes, "Actually, I wanted to add an inn to it. Nothing too big, maybe ten rooms and a couple of suites for the high rollers."

Pinkie nodded. Now Nulu could hear the gold coins rattling around in his head. "That's a big place you're looking at." Pinkie stood. "Say, let me take you to the Foreman, this is definitely a job that he handles."

Confused, Nulu frowned. "He's not here?"

"Nope. Keeps to himself. Follow me, Miss. I'll take you to the Foreman. He don't like it when we try to do bigger jobs on our own,

does he?" He asked the group of carpenters. Heads shook all around. One even shuddered nervously.

Nulu stood up. "OK then, I'd hate to cause trouble for you fellows." She gestured with her hand, "Lead the way, Pinkie."

Pinkie nodded and began to walk towards the saw mill. "Sorry about that. There's rules you know."

Nulu nodded. "Sure, sure. So… I have to ask. Why do they call you Pinkie?"

Pinkie smiled as he held up one of his hands- it had four fingers. "You can always tell a carpenter by the number of fingers he has."

Nulu laughed, "I see, so is that a badge of honor, or shame?"

"It happens. You get working too quick, skip using a push stick at the saw mill and the next thing you know…"

"People are calling you Pinkie."

Pinkie nodded as he gestured for Nulu to enter the saw mill ahead of him. "Or Leftie. After you Miss."

"Please call me Nulu. Miss makes me feel like I'm ten."

Pinkie chuckled, "Right. Step inside Nulu, and the foreman will get you up and running in no time."

Nulu entered the saw mill. It was empty of workers at the moment. A large steel blade hung from the ceiling, to and through a table set in the middle of the room. The table ran the length of the building. Ostensibly, a log twenty feet long could lay on the table to be cut by the blade thanks to the holes in the walls at the end of the table. The top end of the blade had a long pivot arm that led to a large wheel where it was connected to an offset peg. That wheel was connected by a belt to an even larger wheel that was mounted horizontally, the thick leather belt twisting tautly between them. That wheel in turn had a belt connecting it to a large -familiar looking- affair that might, at one time been used by two beasts of burden to turn a gristmill. "What in the lands is that?" Nulu asked as she appraised the (very accurately) afore-described machine. "I've never seen anything like it."

"That is a revolution in saw mills! This guy named Römische. Römische Sägemühle came up with it. He was going to have a

waterwheel attached to it, but since there aren't any fast-moving rivers around here, he uses Oxen[14]."

"Oxen?" Nulu raised a skeptical eyebrow, "You're just making that up."

"It's a real beast. So I'm told, anyway."

Nulu's eyebrow remained raised.

Pinkie raised his hands in defeat, "That's all I know, honest." With a smile, he moved next to a stool. "So, what can I help you with, Nulu."

Nulu looked at Pinkie. "You can start by getting me the foreman."

Pinkie smiled at Nulu. Greedily.

Nulu squirmed. He was -by Human standards- attractive, but still *Human*. "Listen buddy. I'm just interested in having some building work done. That's it."

Pinkie laughed loudly. "Really? Do tell." He gave a mischievous wink.

Nulu's squirming continued. "Really."

The man became serious, "I'm sorry for the wink, Nulu. I couldn't resist with your reaction. I'm the foreman." He held up his four-fingered hand, "Carpenter's Honor."

Nulu squinted at Pinkie, "Really? It's all an act then?"

Pinkie shook his head, "No, no. It's all real. I *am* a carpenter and I do do odd jobs with the guys. But when there's a big job to be done, it goes through the foreman. It was all on the up and up just like I said."

"But *you're* the foreman."

Pinkie nodded. "Someone's got to be in charge, right? It might as well be someone who actually knows something about construction. I draw up the plans and present them to the guys as if I got them from the foreman, then I give people suggestions that the foreman told me the night before. Things like that."

"And no one questions not ever seeing the foreman?"

"The pay's good, so what's to question? Have a seat, Nulu." He motioned towards another stool.

Nulu sat on the stool. It creaked angrily. "Not as cordial at the barrel," she remarked.

"I made the barrel. All I can do is apologize for the stool." Pinkie sat down on another stool. It creaked and complained as well. He laughed again, "Hey… it's not just you!"

Nulu looked at the man in front of her. He was a good bit above average in height and well built. Although not her type by any means, she recognized that to Human females, Pinkie would be considered absurdly attractive. If she remembered, she would mention him to Big Julie the next time they talked. At the game tonight possibly. Being a foreman for a construction company may actually put him in the running. *Big Julie and Pinkie? What a name combination!* Without realizing it, Nulu chuckled.

Pinkie squirmed on his stool. It responded by squeaking angrily. "Hey, your chair's not much quieter, you know."

"What? Oh, no, it's not that. I just thought of something funny. Please let's move on to business." Nulu smiled what she hoped (for a Trolless anyway) was an amicable smile.

Pinkie smiled a wide genuine smile back with evenly-spaced, none-missing, white teeth.

I'll definitely mention this fellow to Julie.

"So, you want a restaurant and bar the same size as the Stumbling Drunk and an inn on the second floor?" He stopped as his gaze moved up to the ceiling as he imagined himself inside the Stumbling Drunk. "That's a tall order."

Nulu nodded, "Well, that's about the size of it. Ten, maybe twelve rooms, like I said. Can you handle that size building?"

Pinkie lowered his eyes from the ceiling back to Nulu. He nodded confidently, "Sure, sure. So, are you going to want to have a place to park wagons, or are you going to depend on the livery stable to put them up for you?"

Nulu considered that for a moment. "I hadn't thought of that. Which do you think is better?"

"Well they both have their ups and downs." He raised his hands and ticked off on his fingers, "With your own livery you'll need more

space to put them up yourselves, someone to mind the animals, extra feed for them too, plus have to deal with any thievery issues."

"Good thing there aren't *five* issues," Nulu laughed.

"Then I'd have used the other hand," said Pinkie. "Like this…" he swapped positions with his hands. "One less building to have built, less space means less taxes if they're based on land size, no extra employees to feed and care for the animals, no issues with thievery, and you can make a deal with the livery stables to give your customers a discount which always sounds better than 'it's included'." Pinkie winked, "When people hear they're getting a discount, they're happier than when they just get one without realizing it. Even if it actually costs them more in the end."

"Wow, so you've done this before, I gather."

Pinkie raised his hand with the missing finger, "You don't get to be like *this* as a beginner, you know."

"You know honestly, I'd think it would be the beginners who would be losing the fingers."

Pinkie shook his head, "Well, most folks think that. But when you're starting out you're *really* cautious and not allowed to use dangerous equipment. It's when you've been doing something a while that you're considered experienced enough to use the really dangerous equipment," he gestured towards the massive saw behind him. "And you get sloppy and forget simple safety precautions that are hammered into your head when you're just starting out. When you make mistakes as a beginner…" he paused as he raised an eyebrow.

"Yes?"

"They call you 'lefty'" he said with a big grin, "and you go find a new line of work. Tending bar perhaps."

"I see." Nulu nodded, "I suppose that makes sense." She eyed Pinkie, "So in your wide range of experience, what do you figure a job like this would cost and how long will it take for you and your crew to get it built?"

"Once I draw up the plans?" Pinkie thought for a long moment, "I suppose we could get it built in a month if I can get a full crew on it. And I'm sure I can get a full crew on it."

Nulu leaned back on her stool, "And you save the best for last." She cringed. "And the cost?"

Pinkie looked Nulu in the eye, "Without cutting corners so the place doesn't fall over when some windstorm blows through. Start to finish. From no doors to doors open for business. I can build the whole place for three hundred."

Nulu leaned back even farther on her stool. It creaked angrily at her. When she took ownership of the Stumbling Drunk it was because the owner had died and the sons hadn't wanted to deal with running their father's business -only drinking away the profit in selling it. She had gotten the entire building for fifty gold coins and had paid that off after the first year. This was a six-year investment. "Three hundred?"

Pinkie leaned forward on his stool, "Now I know that sounds like a lot of money, but…"

"That doesn't just *sound* like a lot of money; it *is* a lot of money," interjected Nulu. She sourly thought back to her funds in the Aution Bank; they would have covered the building costs with over half that still left over.

Pinkie raised his hand plaintively, "…I know you're comparing it to what the Stumbling Drunk cost you. Keep in mind that that building had been around for about thirty years before you showed up and it didn't have an entire inn attached to it. If it's not too personal, what'd it take you to pay off the Stumbling Drunk?"

"It took a year to pay off the fifty gold."

"I can almost guarantee you that you'll do the same with this venture."

Nulu raised an eyebrow, "Almost guaranteeing and guaranteeing are like Gnomes and Halflings. Close but not really the same."

Pinkie grinned at Nulu, "That's true but I've been doing this for a while and the only way you could *not* make three hundred profit with a restaurant, bar, and inn in a boom town is by not having any sort of business sense at all." He raised an eyebrow, "And somehow I don't think that's your style."

Nulu shook her head, "Well, you say that, but remember I have to outfit the place too. Dishes, mugs, chairs, tables, beds, closets. There's a pretty good list, you know."

Pinkie shook his head. "You weren't listening. I said 'start to finish. No doors to doors open for business'. I bring in a crew, get to work. When we're done, they leave. You show up, turn your key in the door, and flip the sign that says 'open'."

"Who do you…"

Pinkie raised a hand to hush Nulu, "I have a friend who knows a guy who has a cousin who owes him a favor..."

Nulu raised her own hand, "Stop right there. Talking like that, I know *exactly* who you know."

"Really?"

"Yep. And if you ask Pozzuoli, he'll tell you my credit is good every day of the week including Grunsday."

Pinkie stood up, Nulu close behind him. "I guess the only thing left to say is…"

"Deal?"

"Deal."

Nulu stuck out her hand and Pinkie took it in his and shook it.

Humans.

"Deal," said Pinkie.

"Oh wait!" Nulu said realizing a mistake, "I already contracted for the outhouse."

"Strange guy with a shovel on his shoulder?"

Nulu nodded.

"He works for me. Sending business here. Don't worry, I have Mister No-Middle-Man covered."

I'll definitely mention Pinkie to Julie, thought Nulu. "Then I'll leave you to your work, Pinkie." She stopped and considered something for a moment. "Say, are you by any chance interested in the game that's going on tonight? I hear it's the Arson Miners playing Jule United."

"Elves and Humans? That should be a good matchup," he scrunched up his face. "The last game I went to, was Cool Springs

United playing the Bee Bees. Some nut in the stands started a brawl and it went downhill from there. Some of those fans are out of control."

"Ahh. Yeah, that... that's what I heard." Fortunately, as a Trolless, she did not blush. But she did stammer. "I… I… I wasn't there," she finished quickly as she tried to compose herself. "Maybe I'll see you at the game." She smiled what she hoped was an amicable smile.

As it turned out, it was.

"Mayhap." Pinkie smiled back as he gestured to the door. "I do have some plans to draw up."

As Nulu moved to it, Pinkie quickly scooted around to open the door for her. *Big Julie's definitely getting pointed in his guy's direction*, she thought. "Thanks," she said out loud as she turned and winked at him. "And don't worry; your secret is safe with me."

Pinkie nodded back. "I appreciate it, but with a big job like this, I'll need to keep on top of the whole operation. It'll be hard to stay incognito." He smiled, "This can be my coming out project". He added a long wink of his own, "Thanks for the offer though." With a wave, Pinkie turned toward the still-lounging workers.

Thirty days and I'm back in business. Nulu inhaled and exhaled deeply. "Very nice."

"OK guys, we've got a big job lined up so go spread the word we need a full crew. But first there's something you need to know..." Nulu heard Pinkie tell the workers.

Ten
Wherein Pozzuoli Sets Up Shop
While Grimbledung is Unconscious

Drimblerod, Grimbledung, Nulu and Rat sat in the stands as the players took to the field.

"At least this time these teams are a little more evenly matched. Elves and Humans, that's not so bad," said Grimbledung.

"It's not the match on the field I'm worried about." Nulu chuckled.

"As long as those Elves can stay clean long enough to play an entire game, I think they may be able to win the match."

"Leave those Elves alone, Grim," scolded Drimblerod, "I'd like to see the game all the way through this time." He snickered. "If only to see those Elves get dirty."

"In any case, I think it will be a good game," offered Grimbledung, "I really enjoy watching these things you know."

"As I remember it, you two spent more time fighting than watching the last game. So, how about you two try behaving yourselves this time?"

"I agree," said Rat as he looked around, "these stands are full to capacity. Too much jostling will bring the whole affair down."

Just then a heavy hand tapped Grimbledung on the shoulder from behind. Roughly.

Grimbledung turned around in his seat to look. Way up.

"I look up dense," said a familiar-looking Orc. Angrily. Grimbledung's field of vision filled with a rapidly approaching Orc fist. It was replaced by stars. Then blackness.

TWO DAYS LATER

"Orcs!" Said Grimbledung in a panic as he sat up in bed. He flailed around for a moment before he realized he was alone in his room. "Hey! What gives?" He said to no one. Since he was alone. In his room. "I wonder what I missed?" He said as he turned and sat on the edge of the bed. "Hopefully, nothing *too* important." With a shrug, he hopped off the bed and got dressed. His stomach growled angrily at him. "Okay, okay. We'll get something to eat. Then we'll go find Rat."

His stomach didn't answer. Even after he patted it; that would be just absurd. Leading with his nose, Grimbledung left the room in search of a meal.[15]

Eleven
Wherein Grimbledung Goes on a Mini-Adventure
And Rat's Along for the Ride

Grimbledung snuck up on Rat. He was sleeping soundly. As usual. He could have easily announced his approach by clearing his throat but that would have taken the fun out of waking his long-time companion. As a matter of habit (it was how his Mother woke him up) he routinely snuck up on sleeping individuals just so he could wake them in some loud, obnoxious manner.

Just like Mom used to do.

He enjoyed the varied reactions he got. Rat invariably fell off whatever he was sleeping on. Currently, he was asleep atop the head of the left Gargoyle guarding the entrance of the Windmill. The Gargoyle was looking off to its right, towards town. Grimbledung never actually saw either of the Gargoyles move, but since they were never in the same position twice, he was sure they *had* to move. He just hadn't caught them doing it. Yet! Presently, however, there were more pressing issues…

Rat snored peacefully. Contentedly.

Grimbledung stood on his toes, as close to Rat at he could get without climbing on the Gargoyle. "RAT! Wake up!"

As usual, Rat flipped over frantically and, since he was balanced on the Gargoyles head, fell off. Grimbledung raised his hands in triumph and did a quick jig. When he looked down, Rat was sitting on the Gargoyle's outstretched claw. Grimbledung frowned. When he had approached the Gargoyle, he was *sure* it was standing with all four paws firmly planted on its pedestal. Now, its right claw was turned up across its body, holding the still groggy Rat. Grimbledung frowned; had he watched Rat instead of doing a jig, he would have *seen* the Gargoyle move. Or Rat would have fallen to the ground. Either would have been great.

"I swear, Grimbledung, you need to stop doing that. Someone's going to get killed with you doing that."

"But Rat, you're immortal."

Rat fixed his good eye on Grimbledung. It narrowed menacingly, "Oh, I didn't mean me."

Grimbledung gulped. "Sorry, Rat." He raised his hand solemnly. "I promise not to wake you again for the rest of the day."

Rat's eye widened; he had two naps and an as of yet unscheduled snooze planned. "The rest of the day? I'm going to hold you to that, you know."

Grimbledung nodded, "Sounds good to me."

Rat shook his fur and stretched. "Now why did you wake me up?"

"We're going on a min-adventure!"

"A mini-adventure?" Rat shook his fur again. "Wasn't getting knocked out for two days a good enough adventure?"

"Two days? Wow. That Orc must'a really been upset."

Rat smirked, "As much as Orcs normally are, I suppose. You missed a good game by the way."

"Elves won?"

Rat shook his head, "Humans. Twenty-two to eighteen. It was a good game. The Elves missed a try as time ran out." Finally awake, Rat turned to look at Grimbledung, "Wait, did you say a mini-adventure?"

Grimbledung nodded anxiously. "Yes!"

Rat shook his fur. Mini-adventures with Grimbledung usually ended up with them running from the authorities or angry groups of people. Sometimes both. "Who will we be running from this time?"

Grimbledung shook his head, "We won't be doing any running, you paranoid old rat. We're going to use sneakery!"

Rat stretched again. "Sneakery? Sounds like we're going to be running at some point."

"Have I ever steered you wrong?" Asked Grimbledung.

Rat sat back down. "There's not enough time left in the week for me to answer *that* question."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Come on Rat! Get ready so we can go."

Rat blinked at his Gnome friend (really, they are friends), "What's to get ready? I'm a Rat, remember. I don't brush my teeth and poop wherever I happen to be. What's to get ready?"

"Are you ready now?" Asked Grimbledung.

Rat stood again. "Of course not. I haven't had breakfast." He squinted at Grimbledung, "And that's when you can tell me what sort of trouble you're going to get poor old Rat into."

"I thought of that already, Rat." Grimbledung smiled broadly. "I have a basket in the wagon."

"Now there's a wagon?"

"I never said there *wasn't*." Grimbledung turned and looked at the wagon he had borrowed from Big Julie. It was a two-wheeled wagon that seemed to have its best days behind it. "It's a nice small one so it will be easy to pull and everything." When he looked back, Rat was back on top of the Gargoyle's head and it was standing on all four clawed feet. "Hey!" he complained.

"What's gotten into you now?" Asked Rat as he licked his paw and rubbed it on his ear. Decades ago, Rat had realized that cats were onto something with their self-bathing routine and he had picked up the habit. Not only was it a better way to stay clean that actually dipping into water (which sometimes seemed to be dirtier than he was), it also seemed to disturb customers when they saw a rat grooming itself like a cat. On more than one occasion he had 'meowed' at people to complete the effect. "This doesn't sound like a well-thought out plan."

"Sure it is! I thought about it all the way over here." He hopped back and forth again, "So let's get going before it gets too light." He paused worriedly, "And people start to wake up."

"What people?" Asked Rat warily. He narrowed his good eye.

Grimbledung waved a hand dismissively, "Oh you know, people. Just people. Like 'people will talk' people. 'People will buy anything' people. Not any one in particular." He paused and considered that. "Or some other indeterminate number of citizens."

"Citizens? Now there are citizens."

"Well, most people are."

Rat shook his head. "You're going to be the death of me, you know that?" Rat didn't know it but he was correct. It wouldn't be for years and years however. Right about the same time of Drimblerod's demise…

"Pushaw, Rat. You're immortal, remember?" Grimbledung thought back to his original incantation. "Or at least while I'm still alive I suppose. But I'm going to be around for a long time yet, so you don't have anything to worry about." We might as well say it here- he goes about the same time as Drimblerod and Rat. It's a convoluted misunderstanding between them, a Dragon, and one *very* angry Pixie. But don't worry, that won't happen for a long time (see footnote 4). Grimbledung walked to the front of the wagon and picked up the harness, "So, what do you say, Rat? Want to go have a mini-adventure?"

"Do I have a choice?" Rat asked as he laid back and licked off a hind leg.

Grimbledung's demeanor changed in a flash. "No!" he said with the rage of a Tolkien of Orcs[16]. Involuntarily, the Gargoyle flinched. In his rage, Grimbledung didn't notice. Then an instant later, he was jovial again. "So what do you say?"

"What have I got to break my fast," Rat asked as he prepared to hop off the Gargoyle.

Who now seemed to be facing the wagon! "I got a bunch of dried fruit, nuts, and some bits of chocolates for a little sweetness, then I mixed it all together," said Grimbledung with a proud smile. "It's my own concoction."

"What? Who's ever heard of putting those things together? Why would you even do that?"

"Well, I figured that while you're walking, you need something you can eat as a snack without getting all dirty or needing hands, but you'd want it to be filling. I made some extra for me to eat while we're on the trail." He smiled again, "I mixed it up myself."

"An easy to carry, mixed up snack to eat on the trail? That's an interesting concept. What do you call it?"

"I didn't come up with a *name* for it," Grimbledung stared at Rat, "I just mixed it up."

Rat stood, "Well, if it's a good snack to eat while walking, you might be able to sell bags of it to travelers and hikers in the shop. Then you'd want a catchy name for it." He judged the distance to the ground from the head of the Gargoyle. It was almost ten feet. He scampered down the Gargoyle's neck to its shoulder and down its back to the ground. Immortal and invulnerable were two completely different things.

"That's a good idea, Rat," said Grimbledung, "I didn't think about that. What should we call it?" He thought for a moment. "It's a snack that you can eat while on a trail that's made up of mixed ingredients." He drew his wand as Rat approached. "How about Mixed Trails?"

"That's catchy and good traveler's humor," said Rat as he moved under the harness. "That could work."

Grimbledung hacked his wand at Rat[17]:

Rodentus Grigo!

Transmutis completes
Shambli Verdes!

intoned Grimbledung.

"So, I put your," he paused and smiled, "Mixed Trails in a feedbag so you could eat as we go, if that's alright."

"I don't have a choice in the matter do I?"

"Well, I could see about adding a couple of rat arms and claws out of your neck so you could feed yourself, if you want."

RatShambler stuck out his tongue, "That would make me lose my appetite."

Grimbledung nodded. "Either way works for me. I'd be behind you so I wouldn't see the creepy thin arms and hands sticking out of your neck, putting food in your mouth."

"*PLEASE* stop talking about arms coming out of my neck," pleaded RatShambler. "Just hang the bag on."

Grimbledung nodded and hung the feedbag over RatShambler's head. "There we go. We're off!" he said as he skipped to the wagon and clambered on. "Here! We! Go!"

RatShambler began walking, then stopped. He picked his head up out of the feedbag and glanced back. "You have to tell me where we're going so I know which direction to head towards."

"Errrr..," began Grimbledung hesitantly, "just head towards Aution for a little while."

"Towards?"

"Well, in that general direction." He waved his hand in a broad arc.

"How general?"

"Mostly at it."

"We're going to Aution? Why are we going to Aution, Grim? Do you want to see if they can actually hoist a Shambler up onto a Gallows?"

"Don't worry, I have it all worked out. We are going to get Drimblerod's Abysmal Box. Those things are hard to come by you know."

"That's what I've heard," agreed Rat.

"We're going to sneak into town while most people are still asleep, get into the old Shop, grab the box, and then walk right out of town. Easy Radishy."

"I don't see this working out well, I want you to know that ahead of time. But, out of a morbid sense of curiosity I want to see how this pans out."

"You won't be sorry, Rat!"

"Oh, I think I will."

"So…" Grimbledung took the reins and snapped them, "let's go Rat! We're in a race to success!"

"Or Death. I think they're neck and neck at the moment…"

"Why do you always have to be a tankard half empty kind of Rat?"

"Half empty? We're sneaking into a town that you burned to the ground *very* recently, riding on a RatShambler wanted by the Sherriff for murder. An unstable *wolf* Sheriff. To retrieve an Abyssmal Hole that if the box containing it has burned up, will suck *us* into oblivion if we even try to pick it up. And then get out of town with it, if we can even move it safely. A town that you burned to the ground. Did I mention that part, because it's important you know." RatShambler squinted at Grimbledung but did not give him a chance to answer, "Our tankard is half empty? We don't even HAVE a tankard to lament that it's half empty. WE don't even have a table to put the tankard on. And that's the bright side of things!"

"Well sure, if you say it that way, it sounds bleak," countered Grimbledung, "but we have the element of surprise!"

"Yeah, that we do. I'm surprised you even convinced me to come along." RatShambler picked up the pace. "Do you even have a plan on how we're going to get that box out of town without being seen?"

Grimbledung leaned back on the seat. "Don't you worry; I have it all planned out. We sneak into town using Dwarfish sneakery so no one sees us. I think it's called Unter dem schutz der Dunkleheit. And then use the same sneakery to get out. It works for Dwarves all the time."

"But we're not Dwarves. I'm not even close to being a Dwarf. At least you're close to the right size. Do you even speak Dwarfish? What does that oonter shoots thing even mean?"

"It's some kind of sneakery Dwarves use at night," assured Grimbledung. "They're really good at it."

"BUT WE'RE NOT DWARVES!" He paused and considered for a moment, "AND IT'S NOT DARK!"

"Don't worry, Rat. I have it all worked out," repeated Grimbledung.

They continued in silence while RatShambler ate what he hoped wasn't his last meal.

Finally, they reached the outskirts of town. The smell of smoke was still present. An occasional wisp could be seen rising from a charred wall or exposed beam. Only bits and pieces of buildings stuck up out of the ground like so many blackened ribs of some giant creature.

Occasionally, there was a shop or house that seemed to have been spared the inferno that had occurred. Very occasionally.

As they went, people were piling rubble alongside what had been the bustling streets of Aution. Some gave RatShambler a second look. Most kept their eyes either on their grim task, or down on the ground. The town of Aution had been devastated and its citizen's spirit along with it.

"Grim, I really think you need to change me back into a Rat. Someone's liable to recognize me and then we'll really be in trouble."

Grimbledung, noticing the odd citizen giving them long glances, hopped down from the wagon. "I think you're right. If we need to hightail it out of here, I can always change you back." Grimbledung drew his wand from his sleeve and slashed it at RatShambler. In a flash, Rat was back. "This is why I got a small wagon" explained Grimbledung as he picked up the tongue and began to pull it along. "Let's get moving," he said

"Hold on a sec!" Said Rat excitedly.

Grimbledung stopped and looked around, "What? What?"

Rat turned and hopped onto the wagon, "This is indeed a *rare* occasion!" he moved to the front seat and sat down. "Onward you maniacal Gnome, onward!" He pointed a claw in the direction of the shop.

Ignoring the baiting, Grimbledung looked around, "I think we're over near Alms Street. That means we need to turn left at some point."

Rat shook his head, "Alms Street? Are you sure? I thought we were over near Market Street on the other side of town."

"This looks like Alms Street."

"*This*," said Rat as he gestured around him, "looks like the insides of a fireplace. When we left town the last time to go to Big Julie's, I remember distinctly that we left town through the market district. That's the southern part of town."

"I don't think so, Rat," countered Grimbledung, "I'm pretty sure we went out on Alms street on the eastern part of town. We should go left the first chance we get."

Rat shook his fur angrily. "Listen, by the time we got to the edge of town, you were complaining about being hungry and were already looking at clouds. I was the one with my eye on the road. We need to go north to the Main Square, then left. If we go left now, we'll…"

"You listen, Rat," interrupted Grimbledung, "I have this all planned out and we're going left at the next intersection. That will take us a couple of blocks away from our shop, then we'll zig and zag through the Alleys right to it. Easy-turnipsy."(Another favorite). With that, Grimbledung turned left and started down a smaller road. It too was flanked by husks of buildings. "See? That's the old Tailor Shop," he said as he pointed at a blacked pile of wood.

"That hunk of charcoal that doesn't look like anything at all. It could be the Mayor's Office for all we know," snapped Rat. "We're going the wrong way." Rat looked around; more often now, they were garnering longer stares from people. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"You always say that Mister Tankard Half-Empty," tut-tutted Grimbledung. "OK, now we go right a couple of blocks, then left a couple of blocks, then we'll come right up on Pazoolie's old shop."

Rat let out an exasperated sigh. He met another shop keeper's eye who squinted at him. The number of talking rats in town were single digits. Actually, one single digit. There was no way he wouldn't be recognized- especially with his blind eye and half of a tail. As far as rats were concerned, he was distinctive even without the added oddness of being able to talk. Rat hopped off the seat and scampered down the tongue of the wagon and onto Grimbledung's shoulder. He dropped his voice to a whisper, "No, if we go right then left, we'll end up at…"

"Rat, why are you whispering?" Interrupted Grimbledung again.

"Because people are staring at us. I think people recognize a half blind, half-tailed, talking rat. There was only one in town and he slept at the shop that was owned by the Gnome who burned down the town," Rat rasped. "Did I mention I had a bad feeling about this? Maybe we should just get another Abyssmal Hole."

"Rat! You're tickling my ear, stop that!" giggled Grimbledung. "What's gotten into you?" Grimbledung turned right down an alley way that was flanked by cracked and burned buildings. "See? These are the Assay and Mine Guild buildings. Then we go left here." Grimbledung pointed as he turned left at the corner of the building. "And right there is the…"

"Sheriff's Office," finished Rat.

"Sheriff's Office," agreed Grimbledung. "Say, I think we were on the wrong street back there." Grimbledung stopped to assess the damage to the Jailhouse. It was mostly still intact since it was made of stone reinforced with iron. Only the roof, window frames, and door frames were missing. "Wow, that's a mess." He stepped forward to get a better view into the building. "There's not much left inside but at least the walls are still up."

A figure carrying a pile of wood came out of the building. Its entire upper torso was obscured by what seemed to be a very heavy load of blackened wood. The legs of the figure were visible however. They were fur covered.

Rat bit Grimbledung's ear. "Get us out of here!" he snarled.

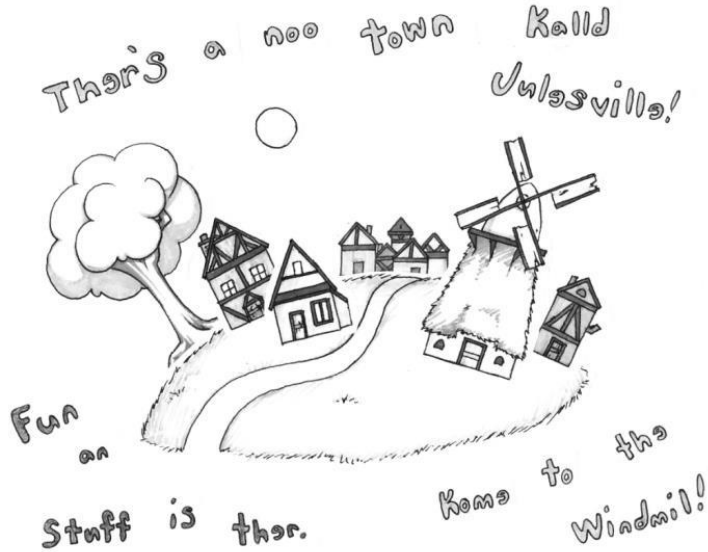
Grimbledung yelped at the bite, but quickly did a right-face and shuffled (at top Gnome speed) away from the Jailhouse.

Akita grimly dropped the pile of wood alongside the street. It was his fifth load. At least twice that many still to go, he mused. He scowled as he surveyed the carnage before him. Rebuilding the town was in all practicality, not feasible; there was just too much rubble to try to build around and without a working government to organize refuse-wagon trains out of town, people were merely keeping themselves busy by piling up the remains of town. The best course of action would be to harvest all the useable building materials and rebuild the town nearby. Aution was dead. He was now a sheriff of a dead town. *That* arrangement did *not* pay the bills. Or fill tankards with cold alcoholic drinks. He frowned again. As he surveyed the area, he caught a glimpse of a scuttling Gnome. *Odd.* He squinted at what could have been a rat sitting on the Gnome's shoulder as the form turned a corner out of sight. *Very odd.* Maybe it was a scarf. Or long hair. *Or maybe a rat!* Akita bared his fangs and raised his head. He stuck his snout in the air and inhaled deeply. Burned wood. Smoldering hay. Someone was making ham and eggs. Coffee too. And a whiff of… Grimbledung?

Akita's eyes narrowed. He lowered his nose to knee-level and inhaled again. Lower to the ground, there were less drafts to push scents around. Ham and eggs more than anything else. He took a step forward and raised his nose high in the air and took a deep breath. Still charred wood, and unfortunately flesh. There was another scent on the air however. Something more familiar intermixed with the smoke. Gnome?

Head still raised, he let out a long howl. An angry one. He turned to back into his office to get his vest. He skidded to a halt. Someone had hung a sign on a blackened wall of his building. "Julesville?" He shook his head. "Anyone with half a mind could'a come up with a better name than that."

He shook his head at the poorly made (and spelled) sign as he moved to retrieve his vest. Snatching it off the lone remaining chair in his office, he jerked it on. Making sure his badge was securely fastened, he exited his former office. Akita was in the market for a new job, and more importantly, revenge. *Ten years* of establishing himself as the sheriff up in smoke. Literally. And ten years of savings melted into a pile of slag. A growl formed at the back of his throat. *Ten years.* Something tickled his nose. Absently he rubbed it. *Rat?!*



"Do you think he spotted us?" Asked Grimbledung as he puffed, "I don't think he spott…" Grimbledung was cut off by a long howl. An angry one. "Uh oh. I think he may have spotted us."

"Do you think?" Snarled Rat, "I *told* you we were going the wrong way! Why don't you listen to me when I say things?"

"OK, Rat. I'm listening now," huffed Grimbledung. He was still running at full speed. Almost every citizen took notice of the pair now. A walking Gnome wasn't unusual at all. A walking Gnome with a rat on his shoulder was, again, (oddly enough) not *that* unusual. Conversely, *any* sort of Gnome running was unusual. Unless there was serious trouble, Gnomes just didn't run. Adding a rat into the mix, was downright strange. "What do you think we should do? Go left or right? The shop is to the left, right?"

"You still want to try to get to the shop? Akita's on our trail and you want to find the shop? You crazy Gnome. That wolf is going to kill us." Rat considered that for a moment. "Actually, he's just going to kill you. I'm just some rat who can hide under most anything."

"You're abandoning me? After all we've been through?" Wailed the puffing Gnome.

"No, no. I'm just saying that… Turn left here! … that if Akita asks which way the Gnome went, people will be able to tell them. You need to look less like a Gnome right now."

Grimbledung wobbled around a building, turning left as he was told. "Say," he puffed. "this main road ?" There was not enough breath in him for complete sentences- verbs were always the first to go.

"Yes, turn right. The shop is up on the right a couple of blocks," agreed Rat. "Are you listening to me? You need a disguise and fast! When word gets out that Akita's looking for a Gnome. THE Gnome that burned down the town, there'll be a mob after us!"

Grimbledung pushed on. His lungs were burning but still he forced himself to keep up his breakneck (to scale that is) pace. As far as a full-grown Human was concerned, Grimbledung was moving at a slow trot. In Gnome-speed terms, he was flying! "Almost there!" Another howl pealed through the air. As far as Grimbledung could tell, it didn't sound closer. "Don't think found trail," he managed to say. "There!" Grimbledung triumphantly pointed to the scorched front of the shop. He let go of the wagon tongue and ducked into the shop with Rat close behind. Grimbledung bent over and put his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. "Here. Here."

Rat jumped off Grimbledung's shoulder. "We need to get out of *here here*."

"Safe now," gasped Grimbledung. He now had his hands interlaced over his head as he paced back and forth. "Safe."

Rat turned to look at the Gnome, "You loon! Where do you think is the first place that Akita will look for us? He's coming straight to the shop! Where else would we be going? *We need to get out of here!"*

Grimbledung finally caught his breath. Mostly. "First box. Then out." He moved to where the backroom of the shop was. "Help me look, Rat!" Grimbledung began kicking beams and rubble out of the way. "It has to be here someplace."

Rat moved past Grimbledung and began to crawl under the rubble instead of moving it. After a few moments, he emerged. "It's here under this piece of roof. It fell across the hole instead of in it so it blocked other stuff from getting sucked in." He peeked his head back under the sheet of wood, "The box is mostly still there but it's in bad shape," he cautioned. "Careful when you flip this wood off it." He moved off the piece of roofing as another howl floated into the room. This one was definitely closer.

Grimbledung grabbed the sheet of wood and dragged it to the side. Underneath, the swirling vortex that was the Abyssmal Hole turned as if nothing had happened. The box surrounding the hole was charred and one of the side boards was loose, but overall, it was intact. The enchanted box kept the hole from floating off and also provided handles to grab onto while moving it. Otherwise all sides - top and bottom - would suck in anything that came in contact with it. The lid that normally fit over the top was missing. "Where's the lid?" Exclaimed Grimbledung, "We need the lid!" Frantically he began to kick more rubble about as he searched. "WHERE IS IT?"

"There's no time, Grim!"

"I'm not leaving the box!"

Rat looked around the room. "Just make a new one. Cut a board down and stick it on top. I'll look for some rope."

"Good idea, Rat!" cheered Grimbledung as he flourished his wand. Aiming at the large sheet that had covered the box he directed a fine stream of molten lava at the wood, cutting it in a mostly straight line. Soon he had a fairly square piece of wood that would fit over the Abyssmal Box. "Rat!" he called as he placed the wood over the box top.

Rat came scurrying back, dragging the end of a length of rope. "I found it in the alley!" He panted, "I don't know how long it is, so I just dragged the end here. Cut what you need."

Hand over hand, Grimbledung hauled the rope in. Soon he had a large amount of rope at his feet.

"Grim! That's more than enough! How much rope do you need?"

"Well, you can never have enough rope," said Grimbledung with a sly wink. "Handy stuff, that."

"Handy to hang us with! You're as daft as a Badger!" Screamed Rat, "Let's get going!"

Grimbledung wrapped the rope around the box a dozen times (still not wanting to cut it) and finally tucked the loose end into the mass. "There!" he said triumphantly. He raised his hands above his head and posed, "Time!" he said to no one in particular.

Rat just stared at him, "Just a moment ago I think I just insulted all of Badgerdom, comparing you to them."

Grimbledung ignored Rat and removed a bag from his waist and dropped it on the ground. As he did, he spread the mouth of the bag open. With a grunt, he picked up the box and hobbled over to the bag.

"Grim, make sure the edges of the bag stay out from under the box. If you fold a bag of holding back on itself, bad things can happen," warned Rat.

Grimbledung grunted in response. With great effort, he leaned over the bag and dropped it onto the mouth of the bag. It disappeared as it fell in. "Success!" cheered Grimbledung. He grabbed the drawstring at the top of the Bag of Holding, cinched it tight and picked it up. There was barely any bulge in the bag.

"Let's go!" pleaded Rat.

Just then another howl ripped through the air. This one seemed to be just outside the Shop!

Twelve
Wherein Pozzuoli Sets Up Shop[18]

"We need a nice place that's near the center of town, Mamma. What do you think?" Pozzuoli asked his wife of two centuries. And counting.

Being a woman of few words (how else did they stay married for two centuries??), she nodded in return.

Pozzuoli scanned up and down the main street of town. Nulu's place seemed to be going in just up the street. That was good to know. Pozzuoli wanted to be close to the rambunctious crowd from the local tavern (whatever the Trolless ended up calling it) but not *too* close. *To raise suspicions*, he thought. "How's about over there?" Pozzuoli pointed a block down the road, away from Nulu's establishment, "Between the milliner and the cobbler?" There was a broad alleyway created by the two buildings. Inexplicably instead of lowering their costs by sharing a wall, they had opted to build their own free-standing businesses. All that was left was to add a pitched roof in between them and a shop would quickly and neatly materialize between them. Possibly in two days if three or four workers and the appropriate lumber were secured. Pozzuoli smirked, "We can call our shop 'Everything In Between'."

Mamma Consigliore pursed her lips at the pun. She looked up and down the street, eyes narrowing at Nulu's establishment. Suspiciously. It *was* a little too close to the tempting night life that the Trolless' business would create. Mamma had, after all, been married for over two centuries; it was a universal constant that women developed mindreading around the fifteenth decade of marriage. That's why most races didn't live that long. Or at least the male members of said race don't. In any case, after a moment's consideration she answered simply: "S'okay."

Pozzuoli clapped his hands, "Then it's settled. Now we just need to get some workers and some lumber." He looked up and down the street at the copious foot and wheeled traffic. "And stake our claim to that prime spot." He took the reins and maneuvered down the street and

turned right, directly between the two shops. Within seconds, he had acquired sufficient space to operate.

Pozzuoli hopped out of the wagon and began to unhitch Andiamo, their Shambler.

Mamma Consigliore clambered out of the wagon as well and went to inspect what would become the rear of the shop. "S'nice back here."

"You know, Mamma, we could actually set up shop out of the wagon while we're getting our roof put on." He looked around the street before him, "We'll do all right here." Pozzuoli turned to look at the empty space between the buildings. "Kinda like Second Hand Sorcery was in Aution." He narrowed his eyes, "I'll have to ask Drimblerod how he made his shop wider in that little alley." He raised an eyebrow at his spouse. "In case we need to expand."

She raised one back.

"Yes, Mamma, right before we kill him," he assured her. He looked back at the vacant space, "Maybe two days and we'll be back in business. Rain or shine."

As events would unfold (behind the scenes as it were), it would take a grand total of three days for Everything In Between to have its grand opening. And (they would happen front and center), only a little past that for him to dole out half of his wife's plans for revenge. "What do you say to that?" He asked.

Mamma Consigliore looked back at her husband. "S'okay," she said back. "What you want for dinner?" She let go of Andiamo who promptly began to clear away stray weeds.

Pozzuoli walked to where the front of the store would be. "I don'no. Wanna see what the town has to offer?" He looked appraisingly at his wife. "Maybe we'll find a good place to eat."

Mamma moved to stand beside her husband. She looked up and down the street. She pursed her lips. Restaurants seemed to be in short supply. Only two were evident: there was the Braziered Bear in one direction, and the Ensorcelled Monkey in the other. If one could believe the signs (and one tended to), items at the Braziered Bear were burned thoroughly while onlookers cheered. Oddly, there were no undergarments present on the sign. Apparently 'Braziered' meant something different in this part of the Lands. In the other, it seemed that the cooks may have been large, inebriated apes. Or perhaps, they

were one of the dishes. Neither seemed appetizing. For an eating establishment that is. Truth be told, the choice between inebriated ape-chefs and inebriated ape-dishes seemed like a lose-lose situation.

"I'm leaning toward the Braziered Bear," offered Pozzuoli.[19]

Mamma nodded. "Any meal I don' cook is a good meal."

Pozzuoli gestured at the Ensorcelled Monkey. "You say that now…"

Mamma gave him a playful shove toward the Braziered Bear. "S'okay. We try the bear."

Pozzuoli nodded. "Andiamo, watch the shop. Don't let anyone come in here."

Andiamo continued to eat weeds.

Pozzuoli frowned. "Why can't you be like that other Shambler I used to see in Aution? He walked around, took care of those Gnomes' business, never seemed to be confused."

Andiamo continued to eat weeds.

Pozzuoli frowned at his Shambler. He had had him for years and all he really did was pull the wagon. *Maybe I got a defective Shambler?* He walked to his Shambler and looked him in the eyes. They were vacant. "Maybe I'll ask the Gnomes what they did to make their Shambler so smart. What you think of that?" He asked.

Andiamo returned to eating weeds.

He slapped his animal's shank, "Stupid Shambler." He looked at his wife. "I think he does it on purpose. I'll have to ask those Gnomes."

Mamma raised an eyebrow at her husband.

Pozzuoli nodded, "Yes, yes; right before I kill them."

Mamma nodded and offered the crook of her arm to her husband. "S'okay. Let's eat."

Pozzuoli took his wife's arm in his and stepped out onto the street. "Hold on a second Mamma," he said as he shrugged out of her arm and turned to face his wagon. "This *is* a boom town." He drew his wand and considered for a moment.

He intoned.

With a flourish, he waved his wand from the milliner on the left to the cobbler shop on the right.

"S'nice," said Mamma. She always appreciated her husband's short incantations; no silly rhymes, and more often than not, lethal.

A gold colored haze spread between the two buildings, penning the Shambler inside. Oblivious, he continued to eat. Pozzuoli kicked a rock at the golden haze. When it hit, it stuck for a moment, sizzled loudly, then dropped to the ground, visibly charred. If it had feelings, it would have been quite upset at the painful amount of magical *What's This* that had just coursed through it. As it was, it just lay there red faced and smoldering. Metamorphically speaking.[20]

Pozzuoli smiled as he sheathed his wand and took his wife's arm again. "Let's eat. Tomorrow we'll locate some lumber and strong backs. Then we'll have a roof raising."

With that, the two moved down the street towards the Braziered Bear eatery. For what turned out to be a delicious -yet rapidly prepared- meal of round hunks of roasted meat served on bread, fried strips of potatoes, and soft (on purpose!) iced cream for dessert.

Thirteen
Wherein Grimbledung and Rat Race Out of the Ruins of Aution

Grimbledung squinted at Rat, "Did you just compare me to a badger? Bad form, that."

"Let's go!" pleaded Rat.

Another howl ripped through the air. It sounded as if Akita was just outside the Shop!

'*Out the back'*, Grimbledung mouthed silently to Rat. He started to point to make sure Rat understood, but before he got his arm raised, Rat was already scampering towards the back of the shop. As quietly as possible, Grimbledung followed close behind.

When they got outside, Grimbledung picked up Rat and placed him on his shoulder. "*What're we going to do? We'll never outrun him!"* Rat snarled in Grimbledung's ear.

This time it didn't tickle in the slightest. *'Wagon'*, mouthed Grimbledung as he pointed to the front of the shop.

Rat nodded in approval. "*Can you levitate us over the shop to it?"* Rat whispered as he pointed upward.

Grimbledung shrugged. 'It's worth a shot to try I suppose', he mouthed. 'If nothing else we might be able to hide out on the roof until Akita leaves and we can go to the wagon then'. He gave a sly wink and continued to mouth, 'This is going to be tricky getting away. But if levitating doesn't work, I say we use our Dwarfish sneakery of Unter dem schutz der Dunkleheit to get past that stupid Constable'.

Rat stared at the Gnome. "What the *bloody hell* did you just say?"

Grimbledung hopped back and forth angrily and drew his wand. He held it at arm's length and cocked his wrist to aim it back at himself and Rat and waggled it

Upwards upwards
and aways!

he intoned (quietly)

The two began to rise hesitantly off the ground. With several fits and starts, they gained altitude and approached the charred roof of the shop.

"Are you trying to get us killed? Can't you keep your hand steady?" Hissed Rat. He narrowed his eye, "And don't you dare just mouth at me."

"*I'm doing the best I can. It's hard to aim at yourself you know! Now let me concentrate!*" Grimbledung closed one of his eyes to help him aim his wand at himself. Their ascent steadied. Soon they were even with the roof, with a slight flick, they moved over the roof of the shop.

Rat was looking down and saw Constable Akita exit the back of the shop and look up and down the alleyway. Just as he started to look up, he and Grimbledung passed over the roof of the shop. "*Great job, Grim*," whispered Rat, "*now move us to the front of the shop and we can figure out what we'll do from there*."

Grimbledung nodded as he concentrated. With one eye closed, he was able to better judge where his wand was pointed and they moved quickly to the front wall of the shop. With only a slight bump, they touched down. Grimbledung raised his arms over his head in triumph. Rat pinched his lips together before he could let out a victory cheer. He nodded at Rat to show he was in control of his vocal cords.

The two of them stood still for a moment, listening for Akita. A shudder ran through the building below the pair.

Rat hopped down onto the charred roof. It cracked as he landed and he heard bits of the ceiling below him fall to the floor farther down. Rat pointed down at the wagon.

Grimbledung nodded back. '*Now?*' he mouthed.

Rat shook his head. He held his claws close together then spread them out wide, then up.

Grimbledung blinked at Rat.

Rat repeated the motion.

Grimbledung blinked at Rat.

Rat flailed his arms. "Make me a Shambler THEN levitate me down to save time." he rasped.

Grimbledung winked at Rat. With a quick incantation, Rat became RatShambler. Several more bits of the ceiling dropped onto the floor as his weight suddenly increased. "Shhh!" Said Grimbledung.

RatShambler raised a furry eyebrow at the Gnome.

"*Ready?" A*sked Grimbledung as he raised his wand again.

RatShambler peered over the side of the shop. There was no way to tell where Akita was. Another bit of ceiling below him fell to the floor. Waiting wasn't an option. He nodded furiously at his partner.

A thought came to Grimbledung. He moved beside RatShambler and hugged him around the neck. Holding the wand out at arm's length, he closed one eye and levitated the two of them off the rooftop. Several pieces of ceiling dropped onto the floor as they lifted off. Almost as steadily as before, the two lowered to the ground next to the small wagon. In a flash Grimbledung lashed RatShambler to it and hopped in the back. Without being coaxed, RatShambler bounded into motion. Within six paces, he was at a full gallop.

A howl pealed through the air behind them. An angry one.

Grimbledung took the reins in his hands, "So the way I figure it, we need to head west to get out of town…"

RatShambler veered to the side and purposely hit a timber lying in the road. As the wagon bounced over it, Grimbledung was thrown to the floor and almost out of the wagon.

"How about you navigate and I'll keep an eye out for Akita?"

RatShambler continued to look forward. He was concentrating on the shortest way out of town. And breathing.

After several minutes, RatShambler began to slow.

"What's wrong, Rat?"

"Getting tired! Old you know," RatShambler said between gallops.

"I've got you!" Said Grimbledung as he drew his wand.

RatShambler hazarded a glance back at the Gnome. His eye got large. "What you planning?" He panted.

Grimbledung laid his arm on the front of the jostling wagon to steady his aim.

Strength of Giants!

he intoned.

RatShambler continued at his current pace. The wagon did feel lighter, that much was certain, but his speed was unchanged. He looked back at Grimbledung as he panted, "Not any faster."

Grimbledung smiled. "Giants aren't fast; they're strong," he said as he ducked down into the wagon.

RatShambler shook his head as he continued to weave around debris and fallen buildings. Realization washed over him. He turned sharply. In the exact direction of Julesville. A building loomed before him. RatShambler grinned wide as he lowered his head and plowed into the building. The wall exploded as he rammed through it. The interior walls as well. And the wall on the other side.

Building after burned-out building, RatShambler plowed through town heading directly toward Julesville. "We're making good time!" RatShambler called over his shoulder as he adjusted his route slightly to hit a still-standing stone wall. It exploded in all directions as he plowed through it. "Hah!" he cheered.

Grimbledung cowered in the wagon as yet another shower of debris -this time rocks!- fell on him. The wagon creaked and groaned from the abuse; there was no spell assisting *it* in weathering the abuse it was receiving. 'Giant Strength' *seemed* like a good idea at the time, but now it looked like he would need to borrow a Frost Wand from the inventory to ice down all his bumps and bruises. "Gah!" a board hit him on the back. *At least it wasn't a rock*, he thought grimly as a frying pan bounced off his head. "GAH!" Grimbledung gathered his courage and

then got to his knees to see what might be pounding his poor Gnome body next. To his relief, they had emerged into an alleyway, charred buildings on both sides. It was so narrow that sparks flew as they bounced back and forth, alternatively rubbing the buildings, adding to the abuse the poor little wagon had already received. One of the wheels wobbled dangerously. The other was now missing several spokes and was no longer round. *Big Julie is definitely not going to be pleased when she sees her wagon,* thought Grimbledung, *especially when she finds out we borrowed it.* Ahead an intersection loomed. Past that, two buildings had burned and collapsed on each other completely blocking the path. Grimbledung instantly recognized them as the Potter and Cutler shops. At least those two were the last large buildings before town petered out… *CUTLER Shop?!* "Don't go between them!" he shouted over the din at RatShambler, "Are you crazy?"

RatShambler looked back at Grimbledung, *Did he just say what I thought he said?* "Go between them? Are you crazy?" He shouted over his shoulder. With a shrug, he lowered his head and picked up his pace.

The alleyway stretched out ahead and behind Grimbledung as his eyes got large. Time seemed to slow. Directly in their path was a building full of clay pots that would soon be smashed into sharp shards of clay, AND a building full of knives, hatchets, and any other number of pointed instruments. Grimbledung cowered down in the wagon, trying to make himself as small a target as possible.

It didn't help.

Fourteen
Wherein Constable Akita
Decides to go to Julesville

Akita stopped just outside the burned-out mess that used to be Second Hand Sorcery. He perked up an ear and listened intently. *Grimbledung!*

'Did you just compare me to a badger?' Akita heard the maniacal Gnome say. There was shuffling which may or may not have been a bag being dropped to the ground and moved around. *Odd.*

Akita took a step towards the voices but kept close to the wall so as to not be seen. *That's Rat!* Akita scowled; now all that was missing was Drimblerod. The rat was discussing the ramifications of folding a bag of holding back on itself…

Shuffling feet? Akita continued listening in on the conversation. Something was successful.

They were leaving! He lowered his eyes and squinted at the wall. As the old Orcish proverb said, 'Revenge was a dish best served hot. And in heaping servings.' Akita raised his head and let loose a long howl.

Akita listened again. *Nothing.* Very strange. And annoying. He closed his eyes and perked both his ears up. Still nothing. He planned on surprising them so that Grimbledung wasn't able to use his wand for some infernal magical escape. Stealthily he crept along the wall, crouched low under the shattered window. Even the door was missing. *He seemed like an amicable door, I can see why they didn't leave it behind,* thought Akita as he stood alongside the doorframe. He reached into a hidden pocket in his tunic and produced a small silver-embossed bottle. He upended it then righted it again, mixing the milky contents. Quickly he unscrewed the top and withdrew a crystal dropper. On the end of it was a single glowing drop. He lifted it to his mouth and placed the drop on his tongue. Instantly the glow in his eyes doubled. With a smirk, he closed the bottle and returned it to its secret pouch. He narrowed his glowing eyes and bared his teeth- if nothing else, his sudden -and now very frightening- appearance should afford him the initiative. With a

fluid motion, he turned and growled as he stepped into the doorway, hunched over, claws at the ready.

The room was empty.

Akita stood upright and perked an ear.

Nothing.

Akita's blood boiled. He turned and looked around. The Gnome's rickety small wagon was still out front. Turning back to the shop he drew in a deep breath through his nose. *Grimbledung and Rat, you are still here!* He dropped on all fours and sniffed the ground as he moved through the room tracking them. At one point both stood at one spot. Grimbledung moved away then back again. Then both moved to the back door. Akita stood up and looked around the room with glowing eyes.

If they *were* invisible, his potion would have allowed him to spot them easily. The glowing was just a pleasant side effect. As the Constable of a rough and tumble town like Aution, it was important to always keep an eye on the dozens of invisible persons creeping about at any given time. The money he could have made blackmailing individuals as they snuck into and out of other people's houses was staggering! He did a slow pan of the room, hoping to find them cowering behind an invisibility cloak, blanket, or, as he had often seen- teapot.

Nothing.

Akita dropped to all fours and followed the scent to the back door. It ended there. Strange. He stepped into the alleyway and looked right then left. There was not a soul in sight. Well, there *was* an invisible Human scurrying down the street, arms loaded with random articles. But as far as a certain rat and Gnome?

Nothing!

A strange thought occurred to Akita. He craned his neck and looked upward. *Was that someone up on the roof?* Absurd. The two miscreants had given him the slip. In frustration, Akita punched the doorway of the shop. The entire building creaked. A stray bit of ceiling dropped to the ground right beside him. Cautiously, Akita stepped into the alley and examined the building. Another bit of ceiling fell. *This whole*

place is on the verge of collapsing. Just like the rest of the town. Just like my career as a Constable!

Another bit of ceiling fell. This time the piece was near the center of the shop. *Strange.* Akita stepped further into the alley and took a deep breath. Burnt wood, hay, and stone filled his nostrils. But no rats or Gnomes. Akita dropped to all fours and did a circuit of the alley in front of the door.

Nothing.

Akita heard a rather large piece of ceiling drop inside. This time it was near the front door. *Near the front door?* He raised his head and took another deep breath. There was some of Grimbledung in the air, but high up. Strange. He completed another circuit of the area, nose in the air.

Nothing!

Akita returned to the doorway, sullen. He glanced into the shop. It was empty. Even the wagon was missing now. *EVEN THE WAGON WAS MISSING!* In a flash, Akita bounded through the shop and skidded to a stop past the front door. The wagon was gone. He let out a long, angry howl and scanned the area. Wagon tracks were clearly visible on the soot-covered ground. Akita took to all fours and began to follow them. At one point, they seemed to veer to deliberately hit a large burned timber house. *Grimbledung's gotta be steering.* The wagon tracks then seemed to veer sharply to the right. Akita stood up and looked where they went. They ended at a building. There was a large hole where the tracks went.

How do you crash into a building in broad daylight? Quietly, Akita walked over to the side hole and examined it. He peered inside. The wagon wasn't there. He took a step back and to the left, centering himself on the hole. It seemed to go straight through the building. He was able to see building after building with holes through them- all neatly in a row. Akita took another step back. It was an almost perfect straight line. Out of town. Akita squinted his glowing eyes. Straight to Big Julie's School of Magic. Where there was a large windmill. Julesville? Akita smiled. *A brand-new town*, he thought, *and probably completely lacking in the Constable department*. "Well, I can fix that," he said aloud as he turned and headed for the ruins of the Constabulary for what would be the last time. "By tomorrow, I'll be set up and living large," he said casually to another invisible looter as he passed him. The startled looter dropped his wares and ran off, teapot in hand.

RatShambler came tearing into Julesville at top speed. After the *GiantStrength* spell had worn off- fortunately after the last of Aution was behind them, RatShambler had convinced Grimbledung that getting back before dark was the safest thing to do. After all, Constable Akita *had* to be on their trail. In a panic, Grimbledung had agreed and had cast *Gazzelitis* on him. Needless to say, the trip back took less than half the time.

"Drim! Drim!" Shouted Grimbledung as he entered the shop. He was battered and bruised, and in several places, bloodied. "Where are you?"

"Grimbledung. I'm right here," said Drimblerod from behind the counter, "it's not *that* big of a shop." He looked at his partner, "What have you been up to?" He narrowed his eyes, "Have another run in with some Halflings?"

Grimbledung ignored his partner's taunting, "Good there you are! Have I got a surprise for you!"

RatShambler walked into the shop (it really was a small wagon), "Before he gets too far gone in his story telling, I just want you to know that the thanks go all to me."

"Shush, Rat!" Said Grimbledung, "I haven't even gotten to that part yet." He turned to face Drimblerod again, "So this morning after I woke up, I thought I should do something really helpful and worthwhile…"

"Yes?" Coaxed Drimblerod. He moved to one of the stools. "Is this a sitting down story?"

Grimbledung nodded furiously, "Definitely! Maybe even a send out for a meal story!"

"For Delberger's Hand, we snuck back into Aution and brought back the Abyssmal Box," said RatShambler flatly.

Grimbledung flailed his arms, "I wasn't to that part yet!"

"You brought back the box? That's great!"

"Thanks," said RatShambler, "I did most all the work."

Drimblerod nodded.

Grimbledung flailed.

"And since I'm spent from a day of running around, I think I'll go see what's shaking behind the Ensorcelled Monkey. Maybe I can get a good snack before bedding down for the night."

"Sounds like a good idea. I was interested in seeing what their menu was. Their sign is kind of confusing…"

Grimbledung flopped to the ground. The flailing did not stop.

Drimblerod ignored him; it wasn't the first time it had happened. Sometimes Grimbledung did it just to break up the monotony. "… wanna go inside and have a meal and you can tell me all about the trip?"

RatShambler shook his fur, "Sure, sure. I just need to get out of this wagon, and back to being a Rat then I'm ready to go."

"BUT I WANNA TELL MY STORY!" Grimbledung wailed from the ground. While flailing.

Drimblerod laughed, "We're just teasing you Grim. Why don't you come along and we'll have a great chat over dinner?"

Grimbledung sat up, "Really?" His flailing had slowed but not stopped completely.

RatShambler nodded, "Change me back and we can head out. I'm famished you know."

"You? What'd you do? I'm the one that should be famished," countered Grimbledung.

"All you did was ride in the wagon!" Said RatShambler as he stuck out his tongue. "An ensorcelled Monkey could have done that!"

Drimblerod moved between the two. "All right you two. Let's go get a meal and run this story from start to finish. How's that sound?"

Grimbledung stood up and drew his wand. "As long as Rat doesn't interrupt me." He hacked his wand at RatShambler and in a flash, he was back to just Rat.

"Me interrupt? Once I get to eating, you can do all the talking."

"Really?"

Rat nodded, "As long as you carry me to eat. I have done a lot of running today. I was a key part of the entire operation, after all. Key."

Grimbledung nodded, "Deal." He picked up Rat and placed him on his shoulder.

Drimblerod corralled them towards Door, "Fine then, no more bickering. I'd hate to get thrown out of that place if it turns out to be someplace decent to eat."

The trio left the shop and walked to the Ensorcelled Monkey.

It turned out to be the worst meal they had had in months- apparently drunken apes were not only the cooks, they were also the greeters. And servers. And, unfortunately, ingredients in several of the dishes.

Fifteen
Wherein the Dieu Brothers Arrive in Town

Grimbledung sat in front of the shop. It had been a quiet morning. "What a quiet morning." He lamented to no one in particular. There were people in the street, but since most of them were former Autionians, they were well aware of the 'don't engage Grimbledung in conversation or you'll be stuck for a good hour' rule, so they tried furiously to ignore him, or at least to not stop walking when he talked to them.

"It's a real quiet morning," he tried again to a passerby. "It reminds me of the time…"

"Me too," said the Dwarf amicably (there was no need to be rude about it). Though he didn't break stride.

"… when we were sitting under a tree…" Grimbledung said to a woman walking with her child.

"What tree?" Asked the child. He hadn't been taught the 'don't engage Grimbledung in conversation or you'll be stuck for a good hour' rule. He *was* up to speed on 'look both ways', and 'don't put anything in your mouth bigger than your head', so he wasn't completely helpless. The mother didn't release her grip on her son as she continued to walk. "What tree?" He said again as he skidded away.

"… it was by the dump and there were…" Grimbledung said to another pedestrian. This time an Elf.

The Elf raised a perfect eyebrow in his direction. He scrunched up his face. Just because dumps existed, didn't mean that Elves had to recognize their presence.

"Hrmmm," said Grimbledung.

A child ran by. Quickly.

Odd.

An adult followed close behind.

Then another.

Parents chasing a wayward child?

Then another. Adult, that is.

Several more citizens ran by, one was looking over his shoulder as he ran.

Strange.

As another group approached, Grimbledung leaned forward in his chair, "Excusemebutwhatareyoupeoplerunningfor?" He said quickly.

The group ignored him as they went.

Strangely odd.

There was now a fairly steady stream of people moving from the western side of town to the eastern side of town. Quickly and nervously.

Grimbledung looked down the street in the direction the people had come from. He expected to see a Hill Troll or Mountain Ogre approaching. What he saw was far, far worse. He fell out of his chair.



Mon and Ton walked slowly down the middle of the street. The exact middle of the street. People scattered in all directions as they approached. The two Mimes never wavered in their arrow-straight route through town. A small crowd was ahead of them, seemingly being herded along. Neither Mon not Ton paid them any attention. They were both looking to the shops along the main road. Looking for one shop in particular.

Grimbledung stood up and moved against the wall of the wand shop. "DRIM!" he shouted into it. "GET OUT HERE!" He flattened himself against the wall, hoping he blended in enough to be spared.

The two Mimes continued their walk down the street.

"What's wrong now?" Called Drimblerod. "The last I heard it was a quiet morning!"

"IT WAS!"

One of the Mimes looked in Grimbledung's direction. He squinted his eyes and then looked over Grimbledung's head.

Grimbledung pressed himself harder against the wall, "Drim!" he hissed through a frozen face.

The Mime stopped walking and continued to stare in his direction. The second Mime only went another step before he also stopped. He turned and looked at his partner. The first Mime pointed. At Grimbledung.

In what seemed like slow motion, the other Mime followed his partner's point to where it ended. At Grimbledung.

"*Drim!*" Grimbledung hissed again. Beads of sweat now formed on his face as he pressed against the building with all his might. He heard Door latch itself shut.

The other Mime now squinted as well. He turned and looked at his partner. They both nodded. Grimbledung's stomach fell to his knees. Both of them. Knees that is. The two Mimes altered their path and were now walking straight towards Grimbledung.

"DRIMBLEROD … AXEBREATH!" Screeched Grimbledung as his knees gave out and he slumped to the ground. Death was imminent. And it rode on the shoulders of two pale-faced Mimes!

Drimblerod was sorting wands at the counter when he heard his partner call his name. "What's wrong now? The last I heard it was a quiet morning! Talk to the passersby." Then he snickered, "Not that they'll stop long enough to talk to the crazy Gnome. Unless they have an hour to burn."

"Drim!" came a hiss from the front of the shop.

Drimblerod slammed his hands on the counter, "Julie's hand!" He said, then he frowned. "That just doesn't carry the same weight at all. Delberger's Hand, what's wrong out there?" He started putting the wands quickly in their holders. He *was* organizing them by price so that the more expensive ones were closer to the customers. It was a marketing ploy he had seen in a butcher shop. *It may work for wands too*, he had thought when the butcher explained the system to him

"Drimblerod … Axebreath!" came from outside.[21]

"Fine, fine. I'm coming," Drimblerod said exasperated. He shook his head, "Mayhap it's time to send that Gnome on another sweep of the countryside to look for wands. *That* was a nice quiet day and nothing bad came of it." Drimblerod moved to the door. It unlatched for him. "What's gotten into you? Grim got you spooked as well?"

The door rattled nervously.

Drimblerod paused with his hand above the door handle. Even Door was nervous? He reached for his sheath and drew his wand. "Lock behind me," he said as he pushed down on the handle and pulled the door open.

"Drimmm," sobbed Grimbledung as he sat on the ground. The two Mimes were almost upon him. "What a way for a Gnome to go," he lamented.

" ?" asked Ton.

"What?" Asked Grimbledung as he sat up, confused.

" ?" Mon tried.

Grimbledung sniffed. "Sorry, Mister Mime, I didn't get that either. If you're going to kill me, you might as well just go ahead and do it." Grimbledung squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm ready, I suppose. Just please don't take my pants when I'm dead. I hate that."

Mon reached down and patted the sad, strange Gnome on the head. " ?" He asked Ton.

Ton shrugged. He had no clue either.

Drimblerod opened Door and stepped out onto the sidewalk, wand at the ready. He turned and saw his partner slouched on the floor, sobbing. Two Mimes were standing over him. His belly flopped down to *his* knees. Then he recognized them. "Ton! Mon!" he said.

Ton looked over at Drimblerod, smiled and waved.

"It's good to see you two again," said Drimblerod, relieved that the two Mimes remembered him. Their interaction was short and during the entire time, Drimblerod was petrified. Among Gremlins, he was untouchable. Mimes were a completely different story all together.[22]

Mon straightened. He also smiled and waved. In a move that was almost too quick to see, he reached into a hidden flap in his sleeve and produced an Assassin Wand.

Drimblerod's stomach lurched.

Grimbledung thrashed on the ground. "Wand!" he yelled as he tried to scramble to his feet, "Lookout! Mad Mime! MAD MIME!"

Ton turned to look around. He raised his hands in a shrug to Grimbledung, " ?"

Mon waggled the wand back and forth at Drimblerod and winked.

A sigh of relief escaped Drimblerod that pulled his stomach back into place. "It helped you out?" He asked hopefully.

Mom nodded vigorously. Sheathing the wand with the same speed, he closed the gap between him and Drimblerod and hugged him.

"Well, I'm glad it came in useful. Handy things, Assassin Wands," he offered.

Grimbledung looked back and forth between the Mime standing over him, and the other which seemed to be hugging his partner. The one above him offered his hand to him. Grimbledung took it and was pulled to his feet. "Thanks?" He said.

Ton smiled, produced a nonexistent brush and proceeded to clean off Grimbledung's shoulders. He then bent over and kissed him on the cheek. Grimbledung's eyes got large. Ton kissed him on the other cheek.

"Well, that's a fine how-do-you-do," said Grimbledung. Because it was.

Ton nodded. He looked out at the street. People were still running this way and that. He pointed to the door of the shop.

Grimbledung nodded, "Yeah, maybe we should get off the street. People are in a panic because of you two."

Ton raised his hands plaintively, then made a halo over his head with his fingers.

Grimbledung raised an eyebrow at him, "Really? THAT'S the story you're going to use? Listen pal, *I'm* the crazy one in town. There's not enough room for two of us." He waggled his ears.

Mon released Drimblerod and smiled at him.

"Maybe we should go inside? Have a drink?"

Mon nodded.

Drimblerod considered for a moment, "You do know I don't have any Gremlins here at the moment, right?"

Mon nodded.

"So you're here to see us?"

Mon nodded again and pointed at Drimblerod.

"All right then." He turned toward Door. "Let us in Door. We're just going in to talk."

Door nervously unlocked and rattled open.

"After you, gentlemen."

Ton elbowed Grimbledung and nodded at Drimblerod.

"It's just an expression."

Ton shrugged, put his arm around Grimbledung and led him into the shop.

It had been a *very* angry Hydra.

Door latched behind them. "Let's stay locked up for now, Door," said Grimbledung.

Door obliged.

"Why don't we go upstairs? We can sit and talk up there," offered Drimblerod as he motioned to the stairs. With him leading the way, and Grimbledung bringing up the rear, the four moved to the large table upstairs.

Mon stared at the Glowshroom light. He held up six fingers, then waggled one of them at Drimblerod.

"That was Grimbledung's doing. There's more of them around the place."

Mon shuddered.

"I told you they were dangerous to have around," Drimblerod said to his partner. "Now do you believe me?"

Grimbledung gulped.

"Please have a seat," said Drimblerod. "On a chair," he added as he pointed. At their last meeting, Ton had sat the entire time in a spot that didn't have a chair. It was very disconcerting.

The two Mimes nodded and sat. On chairs.

"Listen you two, I need to get one thing out before anything else," began Drimblerod.

The two Mimes leaned forward.

"Honest to the gods, I can't understand a word you two say. I know the Gremlins could, but I didn't get a thing while you were talking to them. I think they're telepathic or something."

The two Mimes leaned back. One frowned.

" !" said Ton.

Neither Gnome reacted to the curse.

"This may be a really hard conversation," said Drimblerod apologetically.

Ton snapped his fingers and jumped to his feet.

He held up three fingers.

"Ten?" Offered Grimbledung.

Ton stared at him. He shook his three fingers at Grimbledung.

"Three words?" Guessed Drimblerod.

Ton snapped and pointed at him. He held up one finger.

"OK, first word."

"Cat!" offered Grimbledung. "Five cats is called a clowder!"

Ton stared at him.

Mon slapped him on the back of the head.

"Thanks, Mon," said Drimblerod. "Grim, you have to pay attention to the clues they give to figure out the word or phrase. Don't just call out the first thing that pops into your head." He shook his head. "*Clowder*?" He said, glaring.[23]

Ton held his hand near his waist.

"Small" said Drimblerod.

Ton motioned for Grimbledung to move closer to him.

"Halfway there!" Said Grimbledung.

Mon started to slap Grimbledung again, then reconsidered. It was, in all actuality, a good guess.

"No, Grim. In the game of charades, that means 'close' as in, that's close to the word he wants us to guess, so keep guessing similar words."

Mon nodded.

Ton held his hand up to his head, then moved it to his waist.

"Half!"

Everyone gaped at Grimbledung.

Ton motioned again. He pointed at Mon, then Grimbledung and back again. He did this twice.

"Gnomes!"

Ton shook his head.

Drimblerod sat back in his chair. "I think I'll just let Grim do the guessing, he seems to be an idiot savant at charades." He smiled, "Of course, with everything else, the 'savant' part doesn't come into play."

Grimbledung clapped. "This is fun! They should play this after dinner parties." He looked at Ton, "Dwarf!"

Ton shook his head.

"Halfling!"

Ton nodded. He held up two fingers.

"Ten! Ten frogs together is called a Knot!"

Everyone gaped at Grimbledung.

"Second word, Grim."

Grimbledung nodded meekly. "I'm right about the Frogs, though."

Ton drew a dagger (a real one this time) from a cleverly concealed belt sheath. He repeatedly stabbed it.

"I'm sorry about the frogs, really I am," said Grimbledung as he moved his chair away from Ton.

Ton shook his head. He stabbed the dagger again, this time *not* in the direction of the table.

"Stabbing?"

Ton repeated the motion.

"Mutilate? Assassinate? Kill?"

Ton snapped and pointed at Grimbledung.

"Halflings Kill! Whoo hoo this is fun!" Grimbledung bounced in his chair.

Ton held up three fingers.

"Ten! Ten lizards is called a lounge!"

Drimblerod tilted his head at Mon, who promptly slapped the back of Grimbledung's head.

Grimbledung cackled. "It was worth it." He smiled at Ton. "Last word, right?"

Ton nodded. He pointed at Grimbledung. With the dagger.

"Errr.. behind me?"

Ton shook his head. He made repeated stabbing motions at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung leaned back in his chair. Drimblerod leaned forward. "The Halflings want to kill me?" Grimbledung leaned back in his chair, "Which Halflings?" He thought back to what seemed like a friendly encounter with a group of traveling, camping, *curious* Halflings very recently. "Where?"

Ton spread his arms out wide.

"*All* of them?" Grimbledung's chair lost its balance and toppled backward. Grimbledung flailed on the ground. "All Halflings everywhere!"

"So why are you two telling us?" Asked Drimblerod. "Were you just in the neighborhood?"

Mon shook his head. In a move almost too quick to see, he had a (real) dagger in his hand as well. He pointed at his partner and himself, then at the Gnomes. Then drew the dagger across his throat.

Drimblerod's chair toppled over as he scampered out of it. "Gah!" he said in a panic.

Mon looked down at the flailing Gnomes, then at the dagger in his hand. Realization crept across his face, then a large smile. Quickly he sheathed the dagger and shook his head.

"You're not here to kill us then?" Tried Drimblerod as he stood back up. If he were going to die, it might as well be while standing.

Grimbledung opted for the 'as close to the ground as possible so the fall didn't hurt on top of everything else that was about to go horribly wrong' plan. He crawled under the table.

Ton smiled as he put his dagger away as well. He bent over and looked under the table. He shook his head and offered his hand to Grimbledung. Hesitantly, the Gnome took it and the Mime pulled him from under the table. Ton righted his chair and offered it to Grimbledung.

Ton sat down across from the two now-seated, still-nervous Gnomes. He laid his hands flat on the table and sighed. He looked at his partner, " , ' ."

Mon nodded at Ton, then smiled at the Gnomes. He held up his hands and showed that they were empty.

"Are you going to do a trick?" Said Grimbledung, suddenly excited. "Neat!"

Mon stared at the Gnome.

"Charades is over, we're back to just plain old idiot," offered Drimblerod.

Mon shrugged. In what was again, almost faster than the eye could see, he drew his Assassin Wand.

"Oohh! Oohh! A Stealth of Assassins!"

Mon blinked at Grimbledung.

"That's the general consensus."

Mon placed the wand on the table. He pointed at it, then Drimblerod, then back at the wand. He then placed his hands together, fingers splayed out and touching. He moved his middle fingers in opposite directions so they interlocked. Twisting his hands, he waggled his middle fingers, which now seemed to be sticking out his palms.

"The Assassin Wand Drimblerod gave you helped you kill a two-headed Hydra!"

Everyone gaped at Grimbledung.

"Honestly, it's just absurd that you can do that," said Drimblerod.

Mon and Ton nodded in agreement with Drimblerod.

"It's a gift, I suppose," began Grimbledung. "Why I remember one time in the last Pixie Uprising when this bullfrog came up to me and…" He flailed his arms, "Wait a grain of sand! There's Halflings everywhere wanting me dead! What're we going to do about that?"

Mon shrugged. He pulled his dagger out and laid it on the table.

Ton did the same.

"Casting your lot in with ours? That may not be the best decision you could make, but we appreciate any help we can get."

Downstairs, they heard the door slam open. Pounding on the stairs announced a large, fast-moving interloper. Maybe two.

Mon and Ton stood up. They left their daggers on the table to ensure there were no misunderstandings. Mimes, after all, had a certain reputation.

Nulu came bounding up the stairs and into the seating area. She was wielding a large and -if the dirt covered roots were any indication - recently uprooted sapling. "Stay away from my friends!" She snarled as she raised the tree over her head.

Mon and Ton both took a step back from Nulu.

Ton seemed to be smiling.

Mon's was more a smirk.

"I'm warning you!" Nulu noticed the daggers on the table. "That … if …" Nulu also noticed that both Grimbledung and Drimblerod were both seated calmly at said table. "Do … anything?" She tried.

Mon leaned against the wall. There really was a wall there. It was a most unthreatening stance.

Ton sat down. In a chair that didn't seem to exist. It wasn't threatening per-say, but it *was* disturbing.

"So…" Nulu lowered the tree. "They're on our side," she tried. "They're just here for a visit. They're long lost relatives." She frowned. "What? What is the absurd story that brings these two ruthless killers…"

Ton flinched and looked offended. He raised his hands plaintively.

Nulu ignored the gesture; she knew well and good what Mimes were capable of. "… in here where they should be killing you, but it will turn out that they are actually brush salesmen, or something else just as ludicrous."

"Drimblerod gave them an Assassin Wand a while ago that they used to save their lives against a two-headed Hydra and even though the Halflings sent them here to kill me, they are willing to help because Drim gave them an Assassin Wand that they used against a two-headed Hydra that would have killed them so they owe their lives to Drimblerod so now they're here to help or at least not kill us," explained Grimbledung.

Nulu let go of the tree. It fell with a hearty *thud*. "Of course. What other explanation could there be?"

Ton nodded as he smiled. He brought his hands together and rocked an unseen baby.

"Right, as innocent as newborns. That's a good one." Nulu moved to the table and sat down. "So. Dead Hydra. Helpful Assassin Wand. Friendly Mimes. That about sums it up?"

Mon nodded, then glanced at Drimblerod. He nodded toward Nulu with a perturbed look.

Drimblerod startled. "Oh, sorry. Mon Dieu, this is Nulu. Nulu Bentknees. Nulu, this is Mon."

Mon took Nulu's hand in his and kissed the back of it.

"Right."

"That over there," continued Drimblerod, "is Ton. Ton Dieu."

Ton stood and gave a small, yet courteous bow, then sat back down again. A job description that included 'ruthless killers' and 'hired assassins' did not also include 'not courteous'.

"So, two of the Dieu Brothers are in the shop. *Actual* Dieu Brothers, and they're here to be helpful. I'm flabbergasted."

Ton motioned as if he were drinking something then he did a little jig from the waist up.

"Oh, of course, how silly of me. And to have a good time while they're helpful." Nulu pulled out the chair and sat. "What else, really."

Ton toasted her with his 'glass'.

Grimbledung smiled. "Now that we're all introduced and friendly like. What are we going to do about this Halfling problem? You wanna go whack a few with your Trollish Shillelagh?"

Nulu smirked, "Well, it was the best I could come up with. It was either that or a really large rock I passed, but rocks are kind of one-time-use weapons."

"No, I think you made the right choice. An *entire* tree as a weapon makes a certain kind of statement." Drimblerod laughed. "You should keep it."

" ." said Ton.

Mon chuckled as he nodded in agreement.

"Well, not everyone can impose with reputation alone, you know," answered Nulu with a smile.

Now it was the Gnomes who were flabbergasted.

“ ? , .”

“I agree, Ton. I think we need to go see Big Julie and let her know what’s going on, and see what she wants to do about it. It’s pretty much her town so if it’s going to get burned to the ground by Halflings, she should at least know ahead of time,” said Nulu as she stood.

As she stood, so did Mon and Ton. After all, manners *were* manners.

Mon glanced down at the Gnomes, disapprovingly.

Ton shoved Grimbledung who quickly got to his feet.

Drimblerod did so right after his partner.

“OK, gentlemen, let’s go see big Julie.”

Ton elbowed Grimbledung and nodded at Nulu as he moved past.

“It’s just an expression,” Grimbledung said again, this time however he wasn’t as sure.

Sixteen
Wherein Big Julie is Elected First Mayoress of Julesville

Nulu stood on a large box at one end of the dueling stables. Every available chair had been moved into the large building. Benches were lined up beyond those on what was usually the dancing area. Every seat was filled. People stood on the sides as well as in the empty spaces above on the second floor. Almost everyone in the town was present- several thieves had chosen a different pastime for the afternoon.

The meeting had not officially started yet so people were openly discussing current events. It was deafening.

"I call this emergency meeting of Julesville citizenry to order!" Nulu bellowed. No one heard her. She frowned and tried again. "Can I get everyone's attention?!" The cacophony continued.

Akita moved beside Nulu. "Lemmie give it a go," he said. He jumped halfway up one of the beams holding the second floor in place. Many people turned to look at him. He squinted his glowing eyes and let out a long howl. When he stopped, everyone was quiet. "Nulu's got somethin' to say, so please give 'er your attention!" Inside he was a little let down that he didn't get the chance to roll any of his r's. His ears perked up, "I'll be arrrrround later if you've got grrrrripes." Feeling better, he dropped off the beam. "They're all yers, Nulu. I'll hang around to make sure this thing kicks off right, then I'm goin' out to keep an eye on the town." He winked at her, "There's a couple of four people not here."

"Thanks Akita," said Nulu. She reached out and took Akita's arm as he began to leave, "And be careful out there. I've heard from two different people that they've seen Meerkats in town."

Akita's glowing eyes narrowed. "Meerkats? Those Hafllin's will try anything." Akita licked his lips, starting at one side of his mouth, across his nose, and all the way to the other. He let his tongue hang out. " 'Course that's just an old wives' tale, Nulu. Meerkats can't harm the likes of me. Even so, I appreciate it." He dropped to all fours and loped to

the right side of the large doors that had been rolled back. He stood and leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed, glowing eyes squinting.

Nulu turned to face the crowd. "Thanks all for coming. I've called everyone here for important business."

"When're we getting' attacked and what're we gonna do about it?" Someone from the middle of the crowd shouted. A murmur spread from that spot in all directions.

"Keep it down people. Let me say what I want to say, and if you have anything to say, stand up so we can recognize you. Otherwise everyone'll be talking over everyone else and nothing'll get done!" Nulu shouted over the growing noise. Fortunately, it died down.

The man stood. "Sorry about that." He sat down.

Nulu gave the man's direction a double-take. "All right then. So..." She paused and cleared her throat. "So everyone knows that there's an impending invasion. I have heard that the soldiers at Prost Garrison and Frank's Keep are all preparing for the invasion. Prost has increased its sentries as well as scouting missions on the other side of the Anti-Ogre Wall to try to determine the size and location of the approaching Army…"

A Dwarf stood on his chair over to one side and waved his arms. Nulu exhaled. Even in this orderly fashion, constant interruptions would keep progress at a standstill. "Yes, sir Dwarf" she called.

"So it's Ogres that are attacking then?" The Dwarf sat back down.

Nulu looked where the Dwarf was seated. "I haven't heard otherwise. I mean, who else would be attacking if it's not the Ogres?" A murmur started up. Nulu raised her hands to quell it. "Now, I have heard on good authority that there may be others helping in the invasion. As a matter of fact, two very helpful Mimes brought to our attention that there is a band of Halflings with their eye on Julesville." Another murmur started up. Ogres were scary enough to deal with. Ogres *and* Halflings working together was downright unnerving.

"But, after speaking with the two Mimes, who are in attendance," she nodded at Mon and Ton, "I think we need to have a vote." A murmur started up again. She raised her hands. Everyone quieted down, though not as quickly as the previous time. With an inner sigh, she lamented that she had left her newly polished, twelve-foot Shillelagh

behind. When she carried it with her around town, it was the perfect attention-getter.

"One thing we need to have is a single point of contact for any negotiations. If we try to deal with the Halflings as a rabble we'll all get impaled! I think we should have an emergency vote to see who should be mayor at least until this crisis is over. Then we can have good and proper elections." She paused and inwardly tensed up. "So, I nominate Julie as sole candidate."

"But what if someone else wants to run against you, Julie?" Asked one of the participants. He had moved to stand after he had asked his question. Bad form, that. To make matters worse, the murmur started up again.

Grimbledung leered, "Oooh yeah! I wanna do that too!"

Drimblerod slapped Grimbledung's ear, "He said run against! *Run*."

Grimbledung frowned.

At the large door, Akita clambered several feet up the doorjamb. A growl started deep in his throat. As it came upward, the hairs on his neck and shoulders stood on end. Swinging a flaming Morningstar over his head would have less of an effect. "That's not an option at this juncture." *Once again, no r's.* He growled again instead.

"It was just a question. I weren't plannin' on it," said the man as he meekly sat down.

A pall fell over the room.

"So anyone vote for her to be in charge until this situation is over with?" Nulu tried again. "Then once the crisis is done, anyone who wants to run for mayor." She paused and smiled, "Or mayoress, is more than welcome to. Good and proper elections after the crisis."

Murmurings started here and there and quiet discussions started. Several people looked over at Akita. He had not moved from his position; his feet were dug into the wood as well as one muscular arm. The other hung free, claws dangling ominously. He looked ready to spring at anyone and everyone.

"Come on folks, it's just until this is all over then we'll have actual elections. Right now, we've got bigger issues to deal with," pleaded Nulu. It had been discussed earlier that having someone else nominate

Big Julie would go over better than having her nominate herself. It was because of this that she sat quietly, albeit front and center, at the meeting.

"Ya gotta my vote, Senora Julie," said Pozzuoli as he stood on his chair- it seemed to be the preferred method of the Dwarves in attendance. "You're a stand-up woman, and iffa you say you-a have 'lections when this all over, then I believe you."

Several people nodded in agreement.

"Mine too," said Akita from his perch. Of doom.

More people nodded in agreement- the endorsements pushing them into the 'yea' column.

"So let's have a show of hands," suggested Nulu. "Who's for Julie as mayor."

All hands rose more or less in unison.

"Anyone against?"

"Wanna be against Julie?" Asked Grimbledung for clarification. Hand poised to go up.

Drimblerod slapped his ear.

"Then it's unanimous," offered Nulu. "Julie is the first duly elected mayor of Julesville."

Big Julie stood. "OK, as my first official decree…" more than most of the citizen's eyes grew large in anticipation. "… since there seems to be a tradition of it, I firmly and solemnly declare that there will NOT be any curses created using any of my body parts! If you must, continue to use Delberger's Hand, or Sheeba's Teats. *None* of my body parts will be incorporated into any sort of curse. None."

Several citizens looked crestfallen. With Julie's endowments, any number of highly effective curses could have been made at a moment's notice.

"Can I be vice president?" Asked Grimbledung loudly, "Can I? Can I?"

"Grimbledung, you daft Gnome," said Nulu, "there's no vice president when the leader is a mayor."

"Can I be vice mayor? Can I? Can I?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "There is no such thing as a vice mayor."

"But I wanna be vice something!"

"With you it always has to do with Vice, doesn't it?" Said Drimblerod.

"You could be town Jester," suggested Rat.

Grimbledung considered that for a moment. "I don't know. Those lances look pretty long. I don't know if I could hold one up while riding a Shambler."

"Trust me, you're perfect for the position," said Rat.

Grimbledung beamed, "All right then! Town Jouster! Do I get a uniform and a hat?"

"Oh, there's a hat. It even has little bells on the end. You'll love it."

"Whoo hoo! Town Jouster!" Said Grimbledung as he hopped up and down. "Is it unanimous?" He looked out at the crowd.

They gaped at him.

"Sure?" Said someone near the middle of the indoor seats.

"Whoo hoo! I get a hat!" cheered Grimbledung.

"Fine. Now that we've elected me as Mayor" said Julie, "and of course, a Town *Jouster*…" several snickers popped up in the crowd. "What's our next plan of action, Nulu?"

Nulu thought for a moment. "Well, we need to come up with some sort of militia. If we don't put up some sort of fight, they'll run roughshod over the town. If we get lucky at all, we might even repel an attack if these Halflings do try to invade. There aren't all that many of them."

"What do we have?" Said an Elf from the far left of the crowd as he stood. "A few dozen fighters with swords and spears?"

Several of the crowd nodded in approval.

"But that's all they'll have as well," argued Nulu.

"But they're *Halflings*," continued the Elf. "They have crazy on their side. We don't have crazy."

More of the crowd nodded.

"But I get a hat! Whoo hoo!" offered Grimbledung.

"Well," conceded the Elf, "we do have a little crazy on our side, I suppose."

Nulu nodded, "And we need to take stock of what we have. Some organization can go a long way in a crisis situation."

"I agree completely," said Palmerlee Greggs, "the last thing I want to have to do is to move the Mora Tau again. I just got here and it's a real hassle you know. Especially since half of it is underground."

Several citizens looked at Palmerlee in surprise; they weren't even aware that the Mora Tau had moved to town. Broad smiles could be seen here and there- the nightlife of Julesville had just gotten a nudge in the right direction.

"Well, I really think we need to get some hard numbers down on the people who are able and willing to fight if the need arises," said Julie in support of Nulu.

Drimblerod, taking a cue from the Dwarves, stood on his chair, "In my experience the difference between *able* and *willing* volunteers are two completely different categories when a battle's in full swing."

A large number of citizens nodded in approval. They occupied the 'able' category but didn't want to even make eye contact with the 'willing' one.

"Well, we need to get those two groups together or all this work we've put into Julesville will get trampled to dust in less than a week," said Nulu. "It's only a matter of time before those Halflings decide to come down to take matters in their own hands. Does anyone know where they're camped?"

Murmuring started up in the room as discussions broke out here and there.

Grimbledung raised his hand.

"You don't have to raise your hand to speak, Grim," said Big Julie, "just hop up on your seat so everyone can see you."

Grimbledung nodded. He hopped onto his chair. Then hopped up and down. Then he waved his arms.

"Yes, Grimbledung," Nulu said finally.

"Maybe we could ask those Halflings camping out up in the vale over by the Ruined Keep"

"What? What Halflings are up there?" Asked Julie.

"Campers!" Said the Gnome, "I was with them the better part of the morning a couple of days ago."

"What?" Asked Nulu.

"I was out looking for some wands and I came across them. They seemed a little surprised to see me until I told them I was from town. Then they were very sociable."

Nulu's eyes got large, "You didn't tell them who you were, did you?"

Grimbledung shook his head, "That never came up in conversation."

Julie paled, "I guess I'll ask the question, then." She cringed, "What did come up in conversation?"

"They wanted to know about the town, that's all."

Now Nulu cringed, "And did you tell them anything?"

"Well, not at first, but then they offered me a copper coin to tell them what the big windmill was." He winked. "I knew that one right away. That was an easy copper!"

"What?" Said Nulu, more agitated this time.

"Sure! Then they asked how many people there were in town. And who had weapons. And who would be willing to join their side…"

Nulu staggered backward.

"… and how many skilled longbow men there were in the town. And who owned crossbows. And how many…"

"Fine," said Nulu as she flailed her arms. "What were you thinking telling them all that important information?"

"They seemed very sociable at the time," offered Grimbledung. "And I made eight copper coins just for chatting. No one's ever paid me to talk before you know. I do believe that makes me a professional talker."

Nulu's grimace turned to rage as she took a step toward Grimbledung, "I'm… I'm…." she stammered as she flexed her hands.

"Wait a second," said Drimblerod as he stepped in front of Nulu. "You're not asking the right questions, I don't think. Something's not right."

"Exactly!" fumed Nulu, "and it's your daft partner!"

Several in the crowd nodded angrily.

Drimblerod shook his head, "No, that's not it." He smiled, "At least not this time anyway." He put a hand on Nulu. "Watch." He turned to his partner, "Hey Grim."

"Yes?" Said Grimbledung. "Am I getting my hat soon?"

"Soon," said Drimblerod. "But first. How many people are in this room?" He winked at Nulu.

Grimbledung turned and surveyed the room. It held over two hundred, not counting the ones seated outside, or in the rafters. It was a large room. "I'd say twenty."

Nulu's eyes got large. Again.

"Great, great," said Drimblerod, "and how many buildings do you think are in town about now?"

Grimbledung tapped his finger on his chin, hoping it looked intellectual. "Completely built, or just in the process?"

Drimblerod shrugged, "In toto. Completely built, partially built, anything that looks like the start of a building."

"Counting outhouses?"

"Sure."

"Twenty!"

Drimblerod tilted his head towards at Nulu. "Are you still upset?"

Nulu looked from one Gnome to the other and back again. "Well…in principle, I suppose."

"Say, do I get a copper coin for answering those questions right? This could turn into a full-time job for me if this keeps up." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"Grim," began Nulu slowly, "you know that the Halflings are planning on burning Julesville to the ground, and they're upset about Aution burning to the ground before they got a chance to do it?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Yep. I heard the two quiet fellows say that."

Nulu took another step towards Grimbledung, "Then why were you talking to the Halflings in the vale?"

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively, "They're not invaders. They're campers. They told me so."

"Did they have weapons with them?"

"Well sure, but these are dangerous times."

"Did they have tents?"

"Uhmm, no."

"Did they have a roaring campfire?"

"Nope. Say, now that you mention it…"

"Yes?" coaxed Nulu.

"…they were sharpening up a bunch of thick poles. Hey, maybe they were getting ready to set up their tents!"

Several of the citizens near Grimbledung stood quickly. And angrily.

"Settle down, everyone just settle down," began Julie. "We'll get this all sorted out and everything will be fine."

They did and it was.

Temporarily anyway.

Seventeen
Double Crossed by Mimes!
(or the Rise and Fall of Private Magnificence)

"The Mimes have double-crossed us!" howled Corporal Gigantus, "*US*!"

Corporal Colossus nodded, "It's a sad day when you can't trust some bloodthirsty thugs to follow through on an agreed upon plan."

"I say we kill those stinking Mimes the first chance we get!" Shouted one of the Halfling privates, "That'll show them you don't cross the mighty Halflings!" A cheer went up from the rest of the troops. Emboldened, the Private continued as he moved to the front of the group, "And then we stop this Dwarfish sneakery and march straight into that disgrace of a town and kill anyone who gets in our way!" Another cheer went up. This time the Halfling privates all thrust their swords in the air. "Who's with me?" He asked mightily.

Corporal Colossus walked over to the outspoken Private, "What's yer name, Private?" He asked amicably.

The Private, his sword now raised in anticipation of another rousing Halfling triumph turned to face Colossus. "Ahh, Corporal," he began, all of a sudden unsure of himself. "I'm Private Third Class Sequoia Magnificence." The Privates behind him gave a cheer. Their would-be leader had a name! Even more sure of himself, the Private brought his sword down and across his chest in a salute, "Ready to serve the Lord High Priest of Halflings viciously and audaciously, Corporal!" Snappily, he brought the sword down to his side. It made a 'swish' sound as it did.

Corporal Colossus nodded at the Private. "I see. I see," Corporal Colossus put his hands behind his back and moved to the side of Private Magnificence. "And you're willing to lead this cantankerous and vile band of Halfling murderous dogs?" He apprised the group of Halflings. They had dropped to twelve after the Mime incident, but then eight Halflings from Aution had found the group and enlisted- Nulu's former waiter being one of them. They had, unfortunately, lost one in a direct

violation of the 'no impaling' order. It happens. "Lead them into glorious battle?" He moved a little farther from the Private and appraised the troops. They formed into two squads, expecting to be part of a Change of Command ceremony. The ceremonies were always exciting to watch. Especially if one was in the 'splash zone' as it was called.

Private Magnificence puffed out his chest, "Yes Corporal. I can lead them to glorious, bloody, victory." He moved beside the Corporal and appraised the troops. "Oh yes, there will be impalings galore." He paused for effect, "and more."

In response, the troops raised their weapons in anticipation. Several cheered "Huzzah!"

"Fall in!" barked the Corporal. Instantly, the Halflings stood rock-still. "Open… Ranks!" he commanded. Dutifully the front rank took a step forward, the rear one a step backward. "Private?" He offered as he dropped his hands to his side casually. In his left (for the most part Halflings were *all* left-handed), he held a well-worn blackjack. "Just routine," he said casually.

Without looking, the Private nodded and took a step forward to begin the inspection. Corporal Colossus raised the lodestone-filled blackjack over his head and brought it crashing down on the Private's head like a barrel of rocks. Since it was filled with lodestones, it had the same force. The Private's head developed a large dent. He fell to the ground like the aforementioned barrel of rocks.

Corporal Colossus bent over and picked up the Private's sword. He hefted it to get a feel for its weight. "Thanks for the fine sword, *Private*," he said to the corpse. He looked up at the Halflings. They all stood rock still. "It looks like meat's back on the menu, boys!" he snarled.

"I didn't know meat was even *off* the menu," remarked a Private in the front row, on the end. He peered at the now-dead soldier. "Was there a memorandum I missed?"

Casually, Corporal Colossus flipped the sword in his hand so he was holding it by the blade. Without even looking directly at him, he heaved the sword at the outspoken Private. It really didn't matter *who* he hit with it. Fortunately for the other nearby Halflings, it hit the aforementioned Private's helmet. With a resounding 'KONNG', he also fell like a barrel of rocks. "Anyone else have a comment?" He sneered to make sure no one did.

No one else questioned the menu. Meat or otherwise.

Corporal Gigantus approached his fellow Corporal. "Ahh, Col, you really need to take it easy on that soldier. You liable to kill him one of these times and you *know* who he's related to, right? Besides, are we going to have enough to take the town and get rid of the Gnome?"

Corporal Colossus continued to look at the troops -who still hadn't moved a muscle- "Eighteen is plenty." He glanced over his shoulder at his fellow Corporal, "In fact, I could do it with an even seventeen," he added ominously. "Want to inspect the troops?"

Corporal Gigantus smirked, "Not alone I don't. Lead the way, Corporal," he gestured to the still-waiting troops as he moved to the side with the blackjack so there was less room for a windup. "After you."

As Colossus stepped over the defunct soldier, an object in Gigantus' vest vibrated. He reached into his pocket…

Eighteen
Wherein Drimblerod Is Smitten!
(the good kind of smitten)

The Gnomes sat upstairs in the living area of their shop, above the wand selling section.

"You know; besides lunch, dinner, supper, and snacks, breakfast is the most important meal of the day," commented Grimbledung as they both sat down at the table.

Rat already had half a scone in his mouth so he just nodded.

"Hungry?" Asked Drimblerod, "Those constant naps do take a toll, don't they."

Rat continued to chew as he reached for his cup.

"All that warm sun beating down on you as you snore. All day long. It must be a horrible existence."

Rat gave Drimblerod a glance as he sipped his coffee then went back to work on the scone. He would banter and bicker later; now Rat was concentrating on his scones and the first brew of Gnollish Dark Blend® coffee he had had in weeks. It was fortunate that the Gremlins had continued their original arrangement with Drimblerod. Oftentimes, when a Gremlin terminated a business arrangement, it was *terminated*. And with extreme, gruesome prejudice.

Downstairs, the bell above the front door jingled. Grimbledung frowned, "I know I told that stupid door that we were breaking our fast. I mean, it *saw* Nulu bring in the food, right?" He let out an exasperated sigh. "I'll go shoo them off and make sure it's locked this time." Meal time overrode any profit-making tendencies the Gnomes had. Grimbledung turned and went through the door to the POOPA (as it was now referred to) and slid down the pole- it was his preferred means of going to the first floor. He ducked under the curtain between the backroom/workshop and the front of the store and was greeted by two Half-Orcs. One looked familiar. The other was probably from the same

litter. Its brother perhaps? A lantern went off in Grimbledung's head. "Pike, nice to see you again. It's been a while," he said cheerily. Shooing Half-Orcs was dangerous business; teatime may override profits but self-preservation was at the top of the list. Especially when two Orcs were in the mix. "What brings you around?" A*t tea time*, he thought to himself.

"Hullo," began Pike. "You tell Pike come back with mate sometime." He smiled with sharp, jagged teeth. "This her." He jabbed a thick thumb at the female. Just his pointed *thumbnail* was longer than the entire of Grimbledung's thumb.

Female? Suddenly, ~~a many-legged~~ a many-*hairy*-legged creature ran up Grimbledung's spine- he was overtaken by the Heebie-Jeebies. "Gah!" came out before he could stop it. "Nice to meet you," followed (fortunately) close behind. Apparently not in control of his senses he heard himself continue, "Want to join us upstairs for tea?"

"Sure?" Offered the Female. She had never been invited for tea. Or anywhere for that matter- Half-Orcs were notorious crashers. That was probably why no one bothered to invite them; they showed up no matter what. It was a waste of an invitation to even bother sending one. Besides, they never RSVP'd if you *did* send them one. The many-hairy-legged creature continued up Grimbledung's spine, into his ear and somehow made it to his belly. *Tea with a couple of Half-Orcs. Drimblerod would not be pleased.* Grimbledung cringed at the thought of the inevitable whacks his ears would receive today. He might as well make it worthwhile, he mused, "Come on up. You can sit next to Drim, Missus Pike, he's always interested in having a conversation during his breakfast."

A veeeerrry long hour later, hand sore from repeatedly whacking his partner's ear, Drimblerod flipped the sign on the shop with a satisfied smile. Things were beginning to look up: business had finally started to pick up- the number of people moving into Julesville was staying constant, and even more significant, the Adventurers' Route seemed to have shifted from the ruins of Aution to Julesville. Even Constable Akita seemed to have settled well... After the initial shock (and howls of rage) of learning that he had just experienced a substantial pay cut.

Drimblerod heard his partner noisily going through his morning routine upstairs- even Grimbledung seemed to have evened-out. Except for the occasional howls of rage, that is. He looked up at the ceiling.

"Grim! Get finished and get down here!" A stomping from above let him know there was a *slight* chance now that Grimbledung would be coming down in the next few minutes. Apparently, Pixie parts in his head -or lack thereof- did not affect Grimbledung's procrastination.

For the next few minutes, Drimblerod shuffled around the wands in their cases- it helped create the appearance that their inventory changed daily.

Finally, Grimbledung came clomping down the stairs- something he seemed able to do even barefooted. It was a gift. "Fine then, Drim. What's the rush?"

Drimblerod raised his hands plaintively, "Oh nothing really…"

Grimbledung slowed his decent (but not the clomping).

"IT'S JUST A LITTLE THING CALLED OPERATING HOURS!" Screamed Drimblerod as his plaintive hands became fists of fury.

Grimbledung lost his footing and tripped down the last two stairs. "Gah!" Was all he managed to say – he was too busy keeping his feet under him.

"I've got to get a bundle of wands over to Big Julie. There's a new semester starting and I really want to make a good impression with her." He turned and moved to the stairs, "So watch the shop while I get ready so we can actually *stay* in business." This time Drimblerod clomped his way up the stairs.

Not as loud as my clomping. Grimbledung beamed.

The bell above Door sounded as Nulu opened it. "Mornin, gents," said Nulu with a smile. She looked around the shop and saw that Drimblerod was missing, "You too Grim." She chuckled. That joke never got old. At least to Nulu.

"Morning again, Nulu," said Grimbledung. "You're back early."

"I'm going to be busy at my worksite later this morning so I thought I'd bring the afternoon snacks by on my way."

Grimbledung leaned forward on the counter, "Drim's off getting ready to run some errands or something. And Rat went to get the wheel on the cart fixed. Or something." He thought for a moment. Nothing came to mind, "Actually, now that I think about it, I don't think

Drimblerod mentioned *where* he was going." A frown came to his face, "He better not be planning on going out carousing without me."

Nulu chuckled again as she slid a tray onto the counter, "Carousing this early in the morning? Usually when you two are out carousing early in the morning, the moon is still out." She smiled, "Now that the sun is up, all the respectable people are out, so there's no one worth carousing with."

Grimbledung smirked at Nulu, "At least outside there isn't. In here, carousing time is any time." The smirk turned into a leer. "*And we're alone*."

Nulu raised her hands up and flexed her fingers. "You'd have to wrestle me for it."

Now Grimbledung's tongue hung out, "Really?" He cracked his knuckles, "If you insist!"

Now Nulu cracked *her* knuckles, "You really think you'd have a chance." She narrowed her eyes.

Grimbledung considered that for a moment, then leered again, "If I lost in a wrestling match to you, I have a funny idea that I'd think I still won."

Nulu laughed as she picked up a muffin, "I suppose you would." She popped it in her mouth as Grimbledung looked over the tray, then selected a morsel for himself. He still hadn't stopped smiling. "So what is the story with you and large women? You daft Gnome!" Said Nulu as she shook her head. "You really are trying to wrestle above your weight class." She smirked, "Literally."

Grimbledung thought for a moment. "It all started, I suppose when I was just a youngling." He put down the muffin and got a far-off look in his eyes, "I wasn't much older than twelveteen. My Dad was going to a new job in Cool Springs and we went by way of the Dwarf Encampments…"

"Past the Cliffs of Doom?" Asked Nulu.

Grimbledung nodded, "… past the Cliffs of Doom. I was on lookout for Orcs when we crossed them and I remember leaning over the side of the wagon as we went. And it was a really windy road, right along the cliffs." Grimbledung smiled as he thought back, "Really winding and… curvy. And the cliffs were right there. All curvy and exciting." Grimbledung let out a long breath, "And ever since then,

curves have excited me." He raised an eyebrow at Nulu. "Did I mention everyone's out of the shop?" He lied.

"It's never going to happen, Grim."

Grimbledung nodded solemnly, "A Gnome can dream," he picked up the muffin again, "a Gnome can dream," he finished as he popped it into his mouth.

Nulu laughed at Grimbledung, "That they can. Well, I need to get back over to keep an eye on the workers. I gotta decide between tables or tables and booths. It's a tough one. Plus, I need to make sure the upstairs rooms are laid out like I want them."

Grimbledung smiled, "Don't worry, we'll keep putting people up until you get back up and running." Grimbledung winked at Nulu, "Maybe we can start serving drinks too."

"On that note, I'll go make sure those workers are at full speed." She picked up a muffin and toasted Grimbledung with it, then she turned and walked out.

"See you later, Nulu." Grimbledung called as the door opened and she walked out. As she did, Drimblerod came down the stairs.

"There better be some muffins left for later when I get back. You *just* had breakfast you know," Drimblerod warned as he came down the stairs. He was carrying a burlap sack over his shoulder, "I am ready for a successful venture."

As Drimblerod reached the bottom of the stairs, the bell over Door jingled again. Drimblerod glanced over to see who had entered. He froze on the second to last step and gawked.

"You okay, Drim?" Asked Grimbledung. His partner didn't move a muscle.

Grimbledung looked over to where his partner was gawking. He saw a Gnome. He turned to his partner, who was still gawking. To be sure, he looked at the customer again. Odd. It was just a regular, female Gnome. Good looking in a slim, athletic sort of way- if one went for that 'could use a few dozen sandwiches' look. She seemed to have just closed some sort of round, wooden container. A makeup carrier from what he remembered from a previous wife.

"Bah, bah, bah," said Drimblerod as he stumbled down to the counter, still gawking at the Gnomess.



Grimbledung in a role reversal of epic proportions walked over and slapped his partner's ear, "Snap out of it! I'll get the wands for Julie, *you* deal with the customer." He turned and went into the back room.

Drimblerod was speechless. Words, mere words from a lowly Gnome would taint the air surrounding this beauty. Short and sleek, with pointed (perky!) ears, and eyes the color of the Nearly Green Bog, the Gnomess stood waiting just inside Door. She seemed to look past Drimblerod. An exotic far off gaze. Suddenly she seemed to realize the existence of Drimblerod and looked at him.

Butterflies burst into existence in Drimblerod's stomach, warm honey filled his chest. "Why there, hello," he said. Drimblerod panicked. His brain no longer seemed to work! "Want something?" He was losing his words! Her beauty was overpowering his extensive vocabulary! Drimblerod tried a safe -nonverbal- smile.

The Gnomess blinked at the toothy grimace. "Are you all right?" She asked in a voice that sounded like hand carved Wood Elves' wind chimes on a mid-spring day.

Her words washed over Drimblerod like the warm waves of the Great Salt Lake. As they ran off him, they took more words as well as the last shreds of cognitive reasoning. He fell back to all he had left; "Bah, bah, bah," he said. Then an epiphany struck. "Hah!" he finished triumphantly.

Once again, the Gnomess took to looking past Drimblerod at the curtain behind him. "Do you speak? Anything?" A smile (like the warm rays of a late summer afternoon) came to her, "Does that other delicious looking Gnome work here?"

Panic exploded through Drimblerod, *Delicious*? His newfound goddess called Grimbledung delicious? "Bah!" he said – louder than he wanted. Sheer panic brought his words back in a rush. "I'm the owner of this establishment. He's just a stock-gnome." He lied in a harsh whisper to her, "I got him from the Leper Salt Mines. The one where they are all eunuchs. And lepers. Leper eunuch salt miners. I know I don't have to tell you they're the worst kind." He nodded knowingly.

"Kind of what?"

"Anything." Drimblerod assured her.

The Gnomess raised a gorgeous eyebrow in Drimblerod's direction. "Really," she said flatly.

"Sure!" Drimblerod lied again, "And he was raised by Orcs so he doesn't bathe much either. He lives in the outhouse out back." He lowered his voice even more, "I'm the owner."

"Really," she said again (flatly) just as Grimbledung came through the curtain carrying a large box. She raised the other eyebrow this time. Apparently, she was ambidextrous.

Most goddesses were.

"Listen Drimblerod, now that you're through mucking about all morning with that Half-Orc, there's work to do." He put the box on the counter and glanced at the customer. *Some scrawny Gnomess wanting a wand to make soup probably*. With a shrug, he returned his gaze to Drimblerod. "Do I have to remind you that the Semester's starting and we need to get these wands to Big Julie? Bad form to start our relationship by being late with our first delivery of wands." He tut-tutted even though he had no idea what a Semester was.

"Whaaa?" Said Drimblerod, agog.

Grimbledung nodded at his partner. "I've been thinking. We should take the wagon and turn it into a mobile wand shop. Fix it up all flashy. I think the kids would love to see the Second Hand Wand Wagon comin' down the street. Comin' down the street like that, it would build excitement and maybe give us some impulse buys." He winked at his partner, "Plus we could put some of Nulu's muffins and sweets on it. I'm sure the kids would buy them up too."

Drimblerod stared at his partner. If there were a time for a moment of reason and sanity out of his partner, *now was not it!!* "Gah!" he said. "Buh!" He added for good measure.

Grimbledung blinked at his normally well-spoken partner, "Are you feeling alright? Maybe you should lay down for a little bit. Close the shop while I drop off the wands, something like that."

Drimblerod flailed his arms.

"Should I come back," asked the Gnomess, "or perhaps let this other…" She smiled hungrily, "Well-spoken Gnome deal with me."

Deal with him? Drimblerod's mind raced. "Huh!" his mind shouted. Out loud. *Calm down*, his mind told him, *just take a breath and send your conniving partner on his way. He's trying to steal your goddess! That's what he's trying to do. So snap out of it and get control of this situation!* Drimblerod nodded.

"Who are you nodding at?" Asked Grimbledung. "Me or her?"

Drimblerod narrowed his eyes at his partner, "I know what you're doing." He pointed at the door, "Just go." He seethed.

Grimbledung shrugged at his unstable acting partner, "That's what I've been trying to do all along, partner. I think you need a rest or something." He picked up the box and much to Drimblerod's amazement, without so much as a glance at the Gnomess, exited the

shop. And, much to his horror, *she* turned and watched Grimbledung leave. Actually, it was more of a leer than a look.

Now you have her alone, your goddess. Now you can finally tell her what she needs to hear so that she understands. Understands what you have to offer such a goddess as her, Drimblerod's mind explained to him. He nodded again.

The Gnomess stared at the unusual, nodding Gnome in front of her. She could tell that he was on the verge of saying something. Maybe.

Drimblerod realized he was just staring at the Gnomess as he had a discussion with his mind. "Gah!" he said.

The Gnomess now raised both eyebrows, "Yes. We've established that. Maybe I'll come back when the other Gnome is here. What's his name?" She asked.

"Grimbledung," Drimblerod heard himself say without realizing it, "but I am sure that I can help you with what you need."

The Gnomess turned and looked (*longingly?)* at the now closed shop door. "No, I don't think so. I think I'll just come back later." She paused for a long moment. "Grimbledung."

Drimblerod hurried from behind the counter and got between the Gnomess and the door, "Wait," he begged, "I'm sure I can help you."

The Gnomess narrowed her eyes at Drimblerod, "You *really* need to move out of my way…"

"Drimblerod" offered Drimblerod.

"…Drimblerod."

Behind him, the bell over the door jingled. The Gnomess looked up expectedly at the door as it opened. To her displeasure a large rat entered the shop. She frowned.

Even that was cute!

"So," said Rat, "I'm stuffed and in need of a nap."

"Not *now* Rat!" Said Drimblerod a little louder than he wanted to.

Rat looked at Drimblerod then at the Gnomess standing in front of him. A smile crept across his face. He gave a wink with his milky eye, "Riiiight. I'll just hop over to Julies and see if the Gnoll brothers have dropped any scraps." The smile turned into a smirk, "If you need more

time, just hang a scarf on Door. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge and all that…" Having stirred the pot, he turned and exited the shop.

The Gnomess narrowed her eyes even further at Drimblerod, "I really think it's time I left." She took a step forward.

Drimblerod took a step backward, "So, Miss…, ahh, Miss…" be began hopefully.

"Chéri. Chéri Belladonna," offered the Gnomess. Normally she wouldn't have given her name but since she was planning on killing both of the Gnomes in the very very near future, it really didn't matter if they knew it.

"Miss Belladonna, what can I do for you today?" Finished Drimblerod as he thanked his mind for finally coming back to work.

"Not a thing. Not a single thing," Chéri said flatly.

"But…" began Drimblerod helplessly.

Chéri shook her head as she stepped around Drimblerod, "I'll come back later."

When Grimbledung is here! wailed Drimblerod's mind, *WHEN GRIMBLEDUNG IS HEEEEERE!* Drimblerod frantically shook his head. He watched helplessly as Chéri -Gnomess Goddess- moved to Door. She gave Door a curt nod. Obediently, it opened and she left. Door closed solemnly. Even it realized the depths of agony that would soon envelop Drimblerod.

"Nooooo!" Drimblerod wailed as he fell to his knees as the deep, deep depths of agony enveloped him.

Just like Door thought they would.

Chéri stepped out onto the street and looked left and right. There weren't very many pedestrians around. She reached into her satchel and pulled out a small makeup compact. Opening it, she looked left and right again, then blew on the mirror.

Within moments, Gigantus' face appeared. "Have you captured him yet?"

"No," Chéri answered angrily. "There were… complications."

"Complications? We don't pay you for complications. Didn't the spell work?"

"No, you dolt, *the spell didn't work*," she frowned at the mirror. "You aimed it at the wrong Gnome. Now his stupid partner is ogling me left and right and Grimbledung doesn't even know I exist! There must have been some mistake on your end."

"What? That's impossible!" Gigantus fumed. "There has to be some mistake on *your* end. Some sort of accident *you* concocted to not have to accomplish this mission." He scrunched up his face, "And don't think I don't know why you didn't want to cozy up with that particular Gnome."

Chéri's Nearly-Green-Bog-colored eyes dropped two shades to almost steel-grey, "Are you accusing me of mishandling a job? I got the target identified properly. But Grimbledung doesn't even know I exist and Drimblerod's panting like some lovesick puppy. The mistake is on *your* head."

Gigantus' eyes grew large as he heard the change from 'end' to 'head'. "Are you threatening me? You were paid to do a job. As far as the Halfling Empire is concerned, how it is done is *your* problem."

Chéri laughed out loud. "Threatening you? No, you pathetic Halfling. If I were threatening you, I'd say '*I'm going to kill you*'." She narrowed her smoldering steel-grey eyes, "Then I'd follow up on the threat by killing you before the sun set on the day I said it." Somehow her eyes darkened even more, "When I want to make 'accidents' happen. They happen."

Gigantus' image seemed to get a little smaller as he held the mirror at arm's length.

"But first…" continued Chéri, "I'm going to get your Gnome issue wrapped up. *Even with you mucking up the Enchantment.*"

"Just get the job done Miss Belladonna, and you'll be rewarded handsomely," said Gigantus in what he hoped sounded business like, and more importantly, non-confrontational.

Without responding, Chéri snapped closed the compact. Then Chéri Belladonna -paid assassin, ruthless killer with heart of ice, and all around not very nice Gnomess- looked left and right along the street. No one had noticed her conversation. "I'll get you Grimbledung. You and your little Gnome friend too." She said to no one in particular as

she stalked down the side of the street. She would need a place to stay while she worked out how she would bundle up Grimbledung and deliver him to the Halfling Corporal for public torture, tormenting, and impaling all the while avoiding Drimblerod's magically influenced advances. She was looking forward to the event with Grimbledung; she had been promised there would be a bar-b-cue. And she wanted to get back to what would be the reward *she* enjoyed the most; the welcoming arms of Colossus. Dear Colossus. If it weren't for the fact that Gigantus was responsible for Colossus' promotion, she'd have cut him down weeks ago- when he first approached her about her current mission. In accordance with the Uniform Code of Halfling Justice, Gigantus could at a moment's notice, revoke his promotion of Colossus. Dear Colossus. *However*, she mused, *if Gigantus turned up dead, only the Lord High Priest could demote Colossus. And what would he care about one lowly corporal?*

Chéri came to an intersection. Buildings were going up here and there. None of them looked like an Inn. There was however, a conveniently placed bench on the boardwalk- she sat on it to decide her next course of action. She looked at the passers-by. People moved here and there going about their (non-assassinating) daily tasks. "Pathetic," she said out loud, "how boring a day. A week. A life." Then a young couple caught her eye. Hand in hand they came towards her, lost in conversation, lost in each other. She thought back to a similar time from her not too distant past…

Chéri walked along the sidewalk, familiar warm hand in hers. No words were spoken; it wasn't required with such close company.

"What'cha thinkin', Buttons?"

The fact that he even *had* a pet name for her spoke volumes about their relationship. That he used it in public added several addendums to each of those volumes. Chéri shrugged, "No one's following us at the moment. I haven't seen any place that would work for a sniper nest. That human coming towards us. He's armed and knows how to use the Dirk he's wearing…"

"Yeah?" Replied her companion, coaxing her on.

"Yeppers. But I could still kill him if I wanted," she said matter-of-factly.

"And that's why you mean so much to me."

Chéri smiled, all aglow inside. That was as close to the word 'love' he would ever get. Hand-holding in public was already absurdly overboard. As far as Halflings were concerned, Colossus was a hopeless romantic.

"So you wanna kill him together?" Colossus asked amicably.

A true hopeless romantic. Chéri bumped her shoulder into his. "Walking is just fine."

Chéri startled as her handbag vibrated. Reaching inside, she withdrew a wooden compact. She opened it and gently blew on the mirror, "Yes?" She said testily. As the swirls coalesced into Colossus' face, her mood lightened, "Yes?" She said again.

"So, how are things going out there?"

Chéri's face soured again. "Well the Enchantment misfired and Grimbledung's partner is now panting after me and Grimbledung doesn't even notice me."

"Doesn't even notice you?" Colossus said incredulously, "That's hard to imagine."

Chéri smiled at the compliment, "Well, I think tomorrow I'll come back and lure Drimblerod out for an evening walk and have him bring Grimbledung with us so you get them both at once."

"You devious wench."

Chéri smiled again. "You're just trying to make me miss you, aren't you?"

Colossus quickly looked around, then smiled mischievously. He lowered his voice "Maybe, *Buttons."*

Hopeless Romantic, thought Chéri "Well, it's working because I do miss you, dear Colossus and I'll see you tomorrow evening."

"Sounds good." Another smile came to Colossus' face, "See you then, *dearest*."

"Dearest?" Chéri gaped.

Colossus stuck out his tongue and closed his mirror.

Chéri's face darkened. "Tomorrow then." She looked towards Second Hand Sorcery, "Your doom is nigh, Gnomes. Nigh." In one fluid motion, she got to her feet, hands at the ready. *Time to bed down. Alone unfortunately.* She put her hands behind her back as she walked off in search of a room for the night.

She ended up in the livery stables, thanks to Second Hand Sorcery having the only available room.

Oh the pain you will suffer, Grimbledung! was her last thought as she fell asleep in a drafty hay loft later that evening.

Nineteen
How to Annoy a Halfling in One Easy misStep

The Gnomes sat upstairs in the living area of their shop. Again. It was a different morning but the same spot.

"You want me to go open up the shop while you finish getting ready, Drim?"

Drimblerod put his napkin down, "That'd be great. I'll not be but a little behind you."

Grimbledung blinked at his partner.

"He'll be down when he's good and ready," translated Rat. "Now go make yourself useful till he arrives."

Grimbledung frowned. "Wow, it sounds so much nicer when *he* says it". Grimbledung stood up. "Take care of the plates will you, Rat?" Without waiting for any excuse, he quickly bounded down the stairs.

"Do the dishes, you lazy Rat!" Drimblerod giggled, "How's *that* translation?"

Rat squinted at the Gnome with his good eye. There was not much he could say. After all, that was a fairly accurate translation.

"You coming downstairs later, Rat?" Asked Drimblerod as he moved from the table.

"Probably." Rat moved to gather the plates. "I'm hoping to take a nap out on the bench in front of the shop later this morning. That's a really good place for a bench. Right out front."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Well, we had you in mind when we put it there."

"Really?"

Now Drimblerod squinted at Rat. "No," he said as he opened the door to the POOPA. Without another word, he reached out and grabbed the pole. He swung his legs out and grabbed hold and promptly slid out of sight. Thanks to a recently added spring-loaded hinge, the door swung slowly shut.

"Bah!" complained Rat to the now-empty room as he hefted the plates and made his way to the washbasin.

Grimbledung moved down the stairs and to the large window at the front of the Shop. He leaned left and right as he peered out it. There was already a good amount of foot traffic. "This should be a nice, eventful day," he said cheerily.

Fate glanced over at him from South Jute.

"Friendly folks going to and fro. Nicely nice events today." Grimbledung waved at a passerby as he flipped the sign that read

WE R CLOSED!

Unles yoo need a plase to stae.

then juhst nock reel lowd.

If yoo need a wand **WE R CLOSED**!

Unles yoo hav alot ov monay to spend.

No reefunds for aneetheng.

The passerby waved back amicably, but didn't make eye contact.

Grimbledung smiled back anyway. "Open for business! Let the profits flow!"

Drimblerod pushed his way past the curtain. "I agree. We could sure use some profits right about now."

"What do you mean? Business has been going pretty well I thought."

"Sure, but with a war brewing, we're going to have a really long dry spell, so we need to build up a reserve to make it through to the other side."

Grimbledung sat on one of the stools behind the counter. "I don't understand. I thought that when there was trouble brewing, people bought wands."

Drimblerod nodded, "That is true, they do. But that's only *while* trouble is brewing. Once the trouble arrives, people are too busy trying to survive to go out and do any actual shopping."

"What about the people that wait until the last minute? We can raise our prices since they waited too late, right? Then we'd make even more profit."

"There's no profit in the people who waited until it was too late. They aren't shoppers."

"Not shoppers? What are they, then?"

"Looters."

Grimbledung blanched. "That doesn't sound very good. What do we do about them?"

"Well, you see," began Drimblerod, "I have this theory about warning shots…" The bell above Door jingled, interrupting him.

Grimbledung turned to greet what could have potentially been their first customer of the day. It turned out it wasn't. "Bah, it's you." Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Again even."

Drimblerod turned to look where his partner was casting an early-morning aspersion. He was greeted by a goddess! "Ahhh, it's you," he said dreamily. *Now is our chance! Get rid of Grimbledung* his mind commanded him. Obediently, he turned to his partner, "Say Grim, you

wanna go out into the streets and see what sort of trouble you can get into?"

Grimbledung stared wide-eyed at his partner, "Do I!?"

Drimblerod nodded, "Yes."

"DO I?!"

"Yes."

Chéri looked from Gnome to Gnome, sour look on her face. "Is this going to take long?"

Grimbledung crouched down low then leapt high (for a Gnome that is). When he reached the apex of his flight, he shot his hands in the air, "Whoo hoo!"

"All right, Grim. Go see what sort of antics you can get involved in, but try not to get arrested or anything," warned Drimblerod.

"But I was hoping to visit with the two of you together." The sour look still hadn't left her face.

Drimblerod gazed at the Gnomess, "Fine, fine. We can do that." He turned to look at his partner, "You have half an hour."

"Whoo hoo! I better get started then!" Grimbledung bolted towards Door. Out of self-preservation it opened quickly as the Gnome ran out of the shop and into the streets.

Drimblerod smiled hungrily at the Gnomess. "Alone at last."

Chéri thought for a moment then changed her tactic. Her sour face was replaced by a pouty one. A deliciously enchanting pouty one. "But I thought *we* could all spend some time together," she said in a matching pouty voice. Her stomach roiled as she did it.

"Sure, sure we can do that. But first we can spend a little time getting to know each other." Drimblerod leered. "I'm Drimblerod. Drimblerod Axebreath. I'm the proprietor of this establishment."

Chéri blinked at him. "Yes. We met yesterday. I remember all that." She exhaled slowly. "Got any new material?"

Inside Drimblerod panicked. *Think of something you fool* his mind shouted at him, *You only have half an hour to win her heart!* Drimblerod nodded furiously.

"Oh, Lord H. Priest, let's not start *that* again."

Drimblerod blinked at the Gnomess. It was a *very* Halfling-ish curse for a Gnome to make. Goddess or otherwise. "What?"

Chéri silently cursed herself for the mistake. "What I meant was, 'I'm glad we have some time alone, Drimblerod' but it came out wrong I guess. You get me all flustered inside," she lied wildly.

Don't upset her, warned his mind. "I didn't mean to upset you," he said worriedly, "Did I?"

Chéri smiled sweetly at Drimblerod, "No, silly. How could I ever get upset with the likes of you?" The acid in her stomach gurgled.

Drimblerod let out a relieved sigh. "Well, that's good to hear." He then paused and considered his next move. Nothing came to mind. *Drat!* "So. What ya wanna do?"

Chéri looked around the shop. "How about a tour while your partner's out?" A*way from these windows and potential witnesses.*

"Sure, sure! That's a grand idea. Let's start upstairs." Drimblerod motioned towards the stairs.

"Why not down here?"

DRAT! "Well, you know, most tours start at the top of places and work their way down, so you're not tired by the time you get to the end, and then you don't have to walk past everything in the place you saw on the way up on the way back down, so it really saves a lot of time to just start at the top of the place and work down as long as you try not to notice stuff on the way up so it's interesting on the way down." *Smooooth!*

Chéri raised a gorgeous eyebrow at the Gnome. "Well, how can one argue with that logic?" The bile in her stomach moved up to her throat. "Lead the way, Drimblerod."

Drimblerod's heart fluttered every time she said his name. "Up we go then." He motioned toward the stairs again, "Goddesses first," he said. *WHAT DID YOU CALL HER?*

Chéri giggled at Drimblerod as she moved to the stairs. "You first since you're giving the tour, if you please." She now had an acidic taste in her mouth.

Drimblerod nodded furiously. "Follow me."

The pair walked up the stairs slowly. "So a two-story wand shop," Chéri said, "up instead of out?"

"Well, technically our last shop went back instead of out or up. Grimbledung came up with this design and it seems to work pretty well." *Don't mention his name!* Drimblerod reached the top of the stairs and turned to wait for Chéri to finish climbing as well. "This here is the eating and meeting area."

"Glowshrooms? Those are hard to come by."

"More of Grimbledung's doing," admitted Drimblerod. *Stop mentioning Grimbledung!* "But they do work out nicely. And all we have to do is water them." He smiled what he hoped was an endearing smile. He waggled his ears.

Chéri now felt like she needed to gargle something minty. "Right. What's next?"

"Welloverthereisgrimbledung'sroombutthereisnothingtoseeinthere." He pointed quickly as he moved to the other side of the room. "And this is *my* room," he said as he opened the door. Invitingly.

"I see. Two bedrooms then."

"Well, we're close but not *that* close," offered Drimblerod. "Young and carefree Gnomes…"

"Young?"

Drimblerod pressed on, "Sowing our wild oats and such."

"You have oats?"

"Well, occasionally. We're more roasted beast and bread kind of eaters, Grimbledung and I." *STOP SAYING HIS NAME!*

Chéri raised an eyebrow at him. She wasn't sure what to reply. Or if she wanted to reply. Or if she just wanted to kill him where he stood. Currently 'kill' was moving to the top of the list. Rapidly.

The bell above Door jingled. Much to Chéri's relief. "Has it been half an hour? Time sure flies." *When you're contemplating murder.*

"It's me, Drim!" Grimbledung called from below. "I'll be in the backroom. Working on…something."

Drimblerod shook his head. "That's never a good sign." He brightened up. "Say you want to try my pole?"

Chéri smacked her lips. 'Kill' now had the lead by a large margin. Several smoots, in fact. "What?"

Realization sprang onto Drimblerod's face. "Gah! No, no!" He quickly moved to the POOPA door and opened it. He gestured frantically at the pole. "This pole! *This pole!*"

Chéri walked over and peered into what she thought was a closet. "A shaft?"

Drimblerod nodded. "It's a quick route to the outhouse out back. Wanna try it?"

Chéri looked around inside the shaft. "More Glowshrooms, I see. You two like to live on the edge."

Drimblerod waved at her dismissively, "We laugh at danger. Life on the edge is the life for us." With what he hoped was a debonair flair, he reached out and grabbed the pole. He swung his legs out and held tight. "See you at the bottom." He slid out of sight, in what was actually quite swashbuckling.

Chéri stood in the empty room. She reached into her handbag and pulled out a small vial. *This time, I'll get both those fools to follow me*, she thought as she dabbed the Elixir of Enchantment on her neck and wrists. She stoppered the vial and dropped it back in her purse. She glanced down into her purse. A thought came to her. An evil one. Reaching in, she pulled out an Assassin's Wand. It was jet black, and wrapped with black leather. She quickly tucked it into a hidden pouch at the small of her back. *Either they go on a walk to the forest with me of their own will, or they march there with my wand in their backs.* Forcing a smile on her face, she reached out and grabbed the pole and slid down.

Drimblerod was waiting at the bottom with a broad smile on his face. "Neat, huh?"

Chéri nodded, "Actually, yes," she said honestly. She looked around the room. "Workroom then?" Grimbledung was at what appeared to be a workbench, hunched over a box.

"So this is where we clean up wands and do any repairs that they need as well. We also do some imbuing as well." He smiled proudly. "We're a full-service wand shop, you know."

Grimbledung looked over and nodded. "Yep!"

Finally noticing his partner, Drimblerod scowled at him. "Well Grim, how'd it go? Well, I assume, *since you're back so early!"*

Grimbledung nodded furiously, "It went great!"

Drimblerod ignored his partner's response and turned to the Gnomess, "We also test wands back here as well." He lowered his voice in what he hoped was an ominous tone, "We get some dubious wands on occasion. Dangerous things, those."

Chéri nodded and lied, "Oh, I don't like danger. At all."

Drimblerod beamed, "Don't worry, I'll keep you safe from the likes of those around here." He struck a heroic pose. *Stop that! You're acting like Grimbledung! Gah! Now you've got me saying his name!* "Sorry!" he said to no one in particular.

"What?" Asked Chéri.

"Wanna see what I got? Wanna see what I got?" Grimbledung asked excitedly. He had taken to bouncing on his stool.

"In a minute. I'm still giving a tour to our guest," tut-tutted Drimblerod. "As I was saying. We test wands." He motioned towards Dummy. "This is our special, very rare, enchanted wand tester."

Dummy sprang to attention and bowed deeply. He then waved furiously. He didn't get to see guests very often.

"How does he test wands?" Chéri asked genuinely interested. It was a most unusual arrangement; something that might be of benefit to the Halfling forces. Or at least *her* Halfling.

"Wanna see now?" Asked Grimbledung. He stood up on the footrests of his stool, box still in his hands.

"NOT NOW!" Drimblerod took a deep, slow breath to regain his composure. "Our testing dummy takes the wands we give him and he waves them at this." Drimblerod popped opened the lid of the Abyssmal Box, then moved back beside Dummy.

"Wow, you two are full of surprises. First Glowshrooms. Then an enchanted jousting dummy, now an Abyssmal Box." Chéri said. *Well, at least two of those things the Halflings would really like to have.*

"Want me to show you how it works?" Offered Grimbledung as he moved forward hurriedly, box still in his hand.

"I'm giving the tour, Grim," snapped Drimblerod as he turned to fetch a wand from the bin beside Dummy.

"Well, can I at least tell you what I have in the box?" He whined.

Drimblerod stopped and exhaled angrily. He turned to face his partner, "Fine, Grim. What's in the box?"

"Marbles!"

"Marbles?"

"Magic Marbles!"

"Magic marbles, Grim? How'd you get magic marbles?"

"I traded a wand for them!"

"Traded a wand for magic marbles? What're we going to do with magic marbles?"

"I have a bad feeling about them…" Offered Chéri, "Magic Marbles are notoriously unstable and prone to unforeseen misfires."

Drimblerod nodded at her. "That's usually the case with *him* as well." He turned to face his partner, "Tell me, what are we going to do with magic marbles?"

"Why, we'll sell them of course! We can put them in a glass jar on the counter and sell them two for a copper." He winked slyly, "Isn't that great?"

"I can't imagine folk buying magic marbles," said Drimblerod.

"I'd like a Magic Marble," offered Chéri. If nothing else, it would end the inane banter.

"Ooohh! See? She wants one!" Grimbledung moved forward excitedly with his box of marbles. "You have'ta take two because I can't break a copper coin."

"Let me show her how the Abyssmal Box works first," said Drimblerod as he turned to fetch an unsorted wand from the bin. Drimblerod retrieved a water wand from the bin and turned to look at the Abyssmal box. Time seemed to slow as he did so. Grimbledung

seemed to be approaching from one direction, Chéri from another. Neither was looking at the other; they both had their eyes on Drimblerod.

Grimbledung stumbled and he lost his grip on his box. Marbles went flying. "Wooopppssssss," he said in slow motion.

Chéri turned to look at Grimbledung, "Wwwwhhhhaaaatt?" She was now looking at him instead of the falling marbles.

Drimblerod gaped as Chéri stepped on several of the now clattering (in slow motion) marbles, losing her balance. She flung her arms out to the side to try to regain her footing.

The Magic Marbles would have no part in it.

"Looook ooooooouuuuuttt!" said Grimbledung as he reached for Chéri. She was now upended and falling towards the Abyssmal Box. She let go of her handbag as she tried to grab the sides of the box. She missed entirely and disappeared up to her waist in the swirling colors.

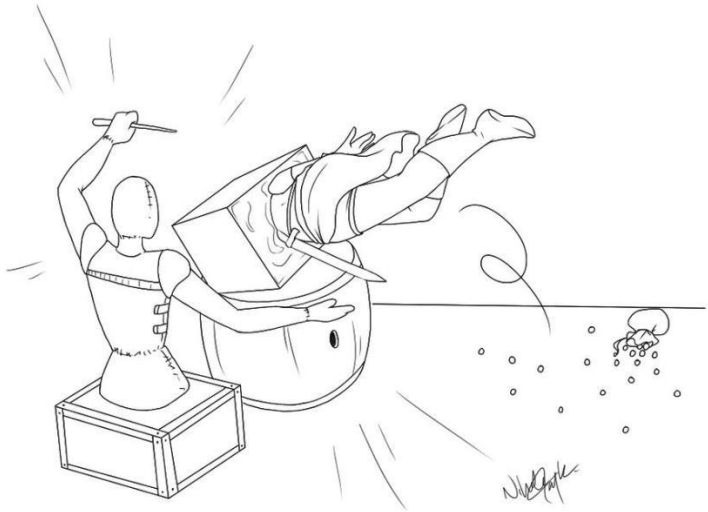
"Noooooooo!" Said Drimblerod, completely out of range to do anything as the world suddenly jumped to normal speed.

Grimbledung stumbled forward and grabbed one of Chéri's feet before it disappeared. "Gotcha!" he proclaimed. "Whoo hoo!"

"Don't let go Grim!" Drimblerod begged, "DON'T LET GO!" He hurried forward to try to help.

"No worries, partner," said Grimbledung. "Let me get my footing and I'll heave the old girl back in." He moved his feet to get a better angle on his tug. Right onto several marbles. "Gah!" he said as his feet scooted out from under him. Instinctively, he put his hands out to break his fall.

Chéri's foot disappeared just as he landed on the ground.



Grimbledung looked up at the Abyssmal Box. There was no indication of anything having transpired; the colors swirled downward as they always did. "Wooopsie," he offered.

"WOOOPSIE?" Drimblerod stumbled back and sat hard. "You kill the love of my life and all you can say is 'wooopsie'?"

Grimbledung sat up. "Well, she's probably not dead. Here let me take a look. Maybe she's stuck just inside the box." He stood up and moved to the box.

"Wait, is that safe?"

Grimbledung shrugged, "Sure, I do it all the time." Taking a firm hold on both sides, he plunged his head into the box.

As his head moved through the swirling colors, he heard sounds of breaking glass, tearing fabric, erupting volcanoes. A cacophony of sounds. Abruptly, they all stopped and his head was in cool clear air. There was even a pleasant breeze. He looked around cautiously. Far, far below was a familiar, primitive looking city. Chéri was nowhere in sight. He looked down at the city. The angle seemed wrong for some reason. He looked at it intently. It was backwards from before! Moving the box from Aution to Julesville had made his vantage point move as well! Interesting. As he looked at the village, it seemed to be shrinking. Then it expanded considerably. Flames erupted here and there. Other parts simply disappeared. Others appeared seemingly out of nowhere. The

central core seemed to be the only part that remained intact. "GET TO WORK YOU LAZY OAFS!" he bellowed down at them. He waggled his ears for good measure.

Grimbledung pulled his head past the breaking glass, tearing fabric, and volcano sounds. "Nope," he said flatly. "The good news is that there's a nice city down there so there's people she can talk to." He considered that for a moment. "If she survives the fall, that is."

Drimblerod was lying flat on the floor, staring at the ceiling. "Gone. My goddess is gone."

"Wow, I am really sorry about that Drimblerod, really I am," said Grimbledung. Sorrowfully[24].

"Really? You're sorry?" Replied Drimblerod incredulously. He sat up angrily.

"Yeah, yeah, I feel just terrible about this whole event."

"I find that hard to believe."

"No really, Drim. I felt terrible about it."

Drimblerod stared at his partner. "*Felt* terrible about it? Not *feel* terrible?"

"What's the difference?"

Drimblerod exhaled angrily. "Well, with the first you felt terrible about it but now you don't. And the other one is you still feel bad about destroying what was to be the love of my life throughout the rest of my days. There's a subtle difference."

Grimbledung considered that for a moment, "Well, I suppose it's that first one."

"Felt."

"Yeah. I really, really felt terrible about it. Just horrible blackness inside. Dwelling in darkness. Then it just went away."

"It went away? A dwelling in darkness and a big blackness and then what? It just got all filled up? In just a few moments?"

"Well, there's no sense pining about the past, you know."

Drimblerod moved back to the workbench. He was still shaking, "Wow, to live a life without remorse…"

"Well, that might be a little much. I don't think I'm remorseless."

Drimblerod stared (again) at his partner, "Wait a grain of sand. You don't feel bad about it, but you're not remorseless?"

"Yeah!"

"I don't see how you can be both of those at the same time."

"Well sure, that's exactly how I am!"

Drimblerod leaned back on the workbench. This was becoming a 'day-long' conversation all of a sudden. "Grim, do you even know what remorseless means?"

"Sure, sure! It means… Ahh, let's see… It means I don't own an eel!"

"That's really a reach, Grim. That would be 'remora-less'. And you've always been remora-less as far as I know."

"No, no! I had one this one time."

Drimblerod shook his head in exasperation, "Ok, I'll go down this rabbit hole. How did you have a remora one time?"

"I had one with scallions and some really good corn pudding. I really liked it a lot." Grimbledung sighed longingly, "I really miss good seafood. We should take a trip out to the Great Salty Ocean.[25] They have great seafood there."

"You're impossible." Drimblerod looked again at the Abyssmal Box longingly. There *was* the chance that the passage through the box and subsequent plummet to the city below wasn't lethal, and he may yet see his Gnomess goddess again. He sighed longingly. "Maybe someday."[26]

Grimbledung ignored his partner's lamentations, "Yeah, that's me impossibly eel-less."

Drimblerod frowned at him. "I'm glad you're taking this so well."

Grimbledung shrugged, "That's the kind of Gnome I am, I suppose."

Drimblerod dusted himself off. "Well, I'm going into town. Maybe get a haircut or something."

"Ooohh! Are we going out on the town?" Grimbledung hopped back and forth.

"No, Grim. Getting cleaned up doesn't have to mean we're going out on the town again. Sometimes it's just personal hygiene for the sake of personal hygiene."

Grimbledung looked down at the floor, dejected. "Does that mean we're not going out on the town?" He asked meekly.

"No, no. We are going out on the town. *YOU'RE* going to try to drown my sorrows. I just wanted to point out that one didn't have to wait for a night out to conduct personal hygiene, that's all."

Grimbledung became angry, "Are you saying I don't stay cleaned up like I should? *That I'm a dirty, nasty Gnome?"* He clenched his fists.

"No. I was just saying that it's sometimes… it's good to… not wait…. Thraksday for baths…" He sighed longingly. "I'm just making conversation," he finished dejectedly. "Chéri has me…" he couldn't finish. Tears welled up in his eyes. He cleared his throat. "So you're taking me out on the town!"

Grimbledung nodded. "I'm really sorry about your girlfriend. It really was an accident."

Drimblerod nodded. "I know," he said quietly.

"We're okay then? You and me?"

"I suppose."

"That's good to hear. I'm glad we're great again."

"Great may be a strong word, Grim. Let's stick with fine."

Grimbledung perked up, "Say! I have an idea. How about we try to find some clues about her and that may help us locate her if she's …" he considered his next word carefully. "Not dead."

"How are we going to do that?"

"She dropped her purse as she tried to grab hold of the sides of the Abyssmal Box to keep herself from being sucked in, of course." Grimbledung bent down and picked up Chéri's purse. "Maybe this has

some clues that might help us." Grimbledung winked slyly, "Maybe she has cute next of kin that's now on the rebound."

Drimblerod scowled at his partner.

"Or maybe we can learn some secret about female kind that will give us a leg up when we're talking to them. They are pretty mysterious you know."

Drimblerod shook his head, "Looking in a female's purse? I don't know Grim. That has to violate some sort of secrecy law or something. There's got to be shadowy things in a female's purse."

"Well, it's the only thing we have to go on," his partner replied as he opened and began to dig through the handbag. "Let's see what we have here…."

Drimblerod moved next to his partner and peered over his shoulder.

"Old receipts from places. Pieces of tissue paper. One used. A Charcoal stick. Some lipstick, too." Grimbledung glanced at Drimblerod, "This isn't all that mysterious. It's more like females are packrats and purses allow them to carry around some of their packrattery with them." He turned and continued to rummage. "A comb. A hair pin. Two hair pins. A vial of something. Ohh! A makeup thingy!" Grimbledung brandished a round, wooden compact. "I've seen females use these things before." He handed the purse to his partner. "They're neat."

"You're going to break it."

Grimbledung opened the compact and took out a fur-covered ball. He patted it in the powder and tapped it around his face. "Oohh! Now we'll have a great night on the town! Now that I'm all pretty!" He hopped back and forth.

"I don't think that's for us males to use," offered Drimblerod.

"No, no, this works great! It makes your skin feel all nice and soft!" He applied more to his face. "Ooohhh!" He looked down at the mirror in the compact. It was lightly dusted with makeup. Holding it up to his face, he carefully blew it off. Unexpectedly, the mirror went black. "Ahh, Drim?"

Drimblerod looked up at his partner. He had the small vial and was sniffing its contents. "Lovely. Ahh, my Chéri." he said longingly.

"Drim!" Said Grimbledung as a swirl started at the outer edges of the mirror and worked its way in.

Drimblerod moved beside his partner again as the swirl coalesced into a forest scene.

"Just a moment, Buttons," said a voice quickly and quietly. *A Halfling sounding voice!*

"What is going on?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Shush," whispered Drimblerod. "That's some peculiar magic." He leaned in close to better see the woodland scene.

There were muffled voices out of view. Angry voices.

"Don't worry, she'll get that stupid Gnome to follow her here," a voice said.

More angry murmurings replied.

"Yes, and *that* will get Grimbledung out here because those two are always together."

Drimblerod and Grimbledung exchanged wide-eyed glances. They both returned to view the magic mirror.

"Just give me a moment to talk to Chéri to see what the status is of her mission," the voice said angrily. A smiling Halfling's face filled the mirror, "How is the enchantment working dear…" he began. When he saw the Gnomes the smile fell from his face. "Where's Chéri?" He asked angrily.

"Well, you see. There was this accident…" began Grimbledung. "And I just want to say here and now that it wasn't my fault."

"What?!"

"Well, maybe a little at the beginning. But I did try to save her there near the end so that's got to count for something. Say, you're not next of kin, are you?"

"WHAT?!"

"But there's a very good chance that she might not be…"

Drimblerod shoved his partner, "Turn it off! Turn it off, Grimbledung!"

"GRIMBLEDUNG!" bellowed the Halfling. "What have you done with my Chéri?"

"*Your* Chéri?" Drimblerod said, suddenly jealous. Insanely jealous (the enchantment was still in full effect since Chéri wasn't actually dead.) "What do you mean *your* Chéri"

"Wait. *Buttons?*" Grimbledung giggled.

The Halfling roared in anger. "I will kill you completely and utterly if you did something to her!"

Grimbledung smiled at his partner, "Oh, then you're fine, Drim! I was the one that knocked her into the Abyssmal Box."

"*WHAT*?!"

"Turn it off Grim! TURN IT OFF!" Drimblerod flailed his arms.

"Wait until I get…" began the Halfling ominously.

Grimbledung quickly snapped shut the compact. He looked at his partner, "Well, that could have gone better, I must say." He frowned. "You know, I would have thought he'd have been a little happier to know what happened to his Buttons. Some Halflings." He giggled again. "Buttons."

"Wait a grain of sand! She was sent here to kill us."

"Well, all I'm saying is that it could have gone better, that's all."

"Anything could have gone better than that." Drimblerod staggered back against the workbench. "Anything."

"Would it help if I said I was sorry I knocked your girlfriend into the Abyssmal Box again?"

"She wasn't my girlfriend, Grim. She enchanted me to try to lure us away to the Halfling encampment so they could kill us. That's a real damper on our relationship."

"Well, I know she meant a lot to you."

"Because she enchanted me! Otherwise I don't think…" he considered that for a moment, "No, I think I'd have still been interested in her." He shrugged.

"What do you think we should do?" Asked Grimbledung. "That Halfling really looked angry. More angry than Halflings normally look." He paused and thought for a moment, "I hope that doesn't come back to bite us at some point."

"Listen, in the short time we've known each other *every single time* something like this happens, it comes back to bite us. Why do you even say things like that? All you're doing is tempting Fate."

"Well, I always hope that it will be the first time it doesn't cause us grief later on. That's what I keep hoping for. It's good to keep a positive attitude."

"Well, I'm *positive* this incident is going to come back and cause us no end of grief sometime later."

"Oh pushaw, partner," assured Grimbledung. He waved his hand dismissively. "This day is going to get better, just like the rest of the week. You just wait and see." He smiled.

Drimblerod sighed. "Well, while I'm out getting a haircut, I'll stop by and let Big Julie know what happened. And I'll give her the compact. Maybe she can use it to our advantage somehow. Maybe there is a bright side in this somewhere."

"Fine, partner. You go get a haircut and I'll tend the store by myself while you're away."

Drimblerod shuddered, "Don't remind me. I'm already having a frazzled morning." The bell over Door jingled. "Customers. At least that means things are looking up, I suppose." Drimblerod moved to the curtain, "Let's go see who wants to buy something, then I'll head out." He pushed past the curtain.

Pozzuoli was standing in the middle of the shop. He had a smoldering wand in his hand.

"Bah, bah, bah!" Said Drimblerod as his innards went to jelly. "Grimbledung's not here, Mister Pozzuoli!" he said loudly. "Not here at all!" He moved behind the counter.

For cover.

It was a futile move.

Twenty
The Curious Case of Chéri 'Buttons' Belladonna

Chéri turned to look at Grimbledung, "What?" She asked. The banter between the two was giving her a headache. She moved forward in hopes to end the entire situation, and hopefully suggest a nice walk in the fresh air of the vale. A certain Halfling-occupied vale.

Chéri's feet slipped from under her as she moved forward. *Those stupid marbles!* She thought as she struck out her arms to try to regain her balance.

The Magic Marbles were having no part in it.

Alarmingly, her field of vision was filled by the swirling colors of the Abyssmal Box. SHE WAS FALLING DIRECTLY AT IT!

Chéri let go of her purse and tried to put her arms out to grab the edges of the box. *There's no telling where this thing leads to!* Another marble skidded out from under her feet, making her glance down. As she did so, both of her hands missed the edge of the box as she virtually did a forward dive into it.

'Look out', she heard Grimbledung say as her head plunged into the box. The sounds of breaking glass, tearing fabric, and even an erupting volcano assaulted her ears. It was deafening! As quickly as it started, the sounds stopped and she was looking down at a city far below. Her shoulders popped into existence, then her arms. Chéri jerked to a halt, hanging in mid-air. She looked down at her feet. They weren't there. From the knees down, her legs just disappeared into thin air. Even so –and it felt like it was a thousand leagues away- she could feel someone had a firm grasp on one of her ankles. *Thank the High Priest!* Apparently, one of those unstable Gnomes had managed to grab her before she fell all the way in! *At least they did something right*, she thought sourly.

Chéri tried to relax as she waited for them to pull her back. "I'm just going to have to kill them outright," she said to no one in particular. Particularly because she was several hundred feet above anyone that

could hear her. Chéri looked down. Below her was what looked like a small-ish village. The buildings appeared to be primitive and in no apparent order. As she looked, several sprung into existence.

Strange.

In another part of the village, a bright light flashed as if a fire had erupted from nowhere. In another instant, it was gone. Blackened husks of buildings remained. Again, this lasted for only a few moments as new shoddily-build buildings popped into existence over the charred ground.

Very Strange.

The grip on her foot seemed as tight as it did when she had fallen through the Abyssmal Box. That was several minutes ago. Chéri turned and shouted at her nonexistent feet, "Any time you want to pull me back would be fine by me!"

Annoyingly Strange.

Quickly, it began to get dark. Too quickly. She looked over and the sun seemed to be streaking for its resting place beyond the horizon. "What is going on?" She shouted at the top of her lungs. "PULL ME BACK!"

Very Annoyingly Strange.

Chéri relaxed and went limp. There was nothing to do but wait. But wait for what? What could be so important that would have either of those Gnomes hang on to her ankle for so long without pulling her back in? Were they on to her? Was she stuck like this, with only a phantom *feeling* of someone holding her leg, when in all actuality, there was no one there at all?

Frighteningly Strange.

A glow surrounded Chéri as the new sun popped out from behind the horizon where it had been waiting. She watched it streak across the sky as the day progressed. Within what should have been half an hour, the day was over and she was once again surrounded by darkness.

Absurdly Frighteningly Strange! Perhaps the box affects how time passed? She thought at one point.

After the fifth iteration of the 'day' passing, around the time the sun was directly overhead, the grip on Chéri's leg unexpectedly loosened and she plummeted into open air.

Caught unaware, Chéri tumbled through the air as she gained speed. "I'M GOING TO KILL THEM!" She shouted to the heavens and the earth alternatively as she tumbled. Instinctively, she stuck out her arms and spread her legs to stabilize her decent. Being an assassin meant that on several occasions she had to move to second, third, and sometimes higher floors to gain access to her intended victim. After all, something as simple as a three-hundred-foot tower should *never* be an unsurpassable obstacle to an assassin.

A thought came to Chéri as the wind whistled by her ears. She reached to the small of her back and retrieved her Assassin Wand. "Well, let's see if this helps any," she said to the faster and faster rushing wind. She aimed the wand straight down and let loose with a barrage of pinkish-purple colored energy. The blast of energy shot from her toward the ground and struck with the sound like a muffled thunderclap. Dirt kicked up in a ring around where the blast had hit.

Having used her Assassin Wand on many occasions, Chéri was well aware of the amount of recoil it produced when used at full strength. At one point, her trusty wand had almost made her lose her balance when, while moving sideways quickly, she had let loose a particularly powerful blast at a body guard that had surprised her while 'plying her trade'.

Chéri kept up the barrage of energy as she fell. Flames erupted around where the blast met the ground. But, to her relief, the sound of the wind whistling past her ears dropped a level and the ground seemed to be approaching less quickly. Chéri concentrated hard on her wand. It was now beginning to get hot in her hands. The magical blast lost its pink tinting, becoming a deep, lethal blast of purple energy. Tinges of red were now visible in it here and there. It was overheating. The alternative was, in this case, *not* an alternative so she kept the blast going.

She could see figures moving this way and that below her, scurrying below her. They seemed the size of ants, but were rapidly increasing in size. Quickly, they were the size of small rodents. Chéri's decent slowed even more. She was now able to make out faces of individuals as they looked up and pointed as they ran about. Finally, almost at building-top level, Chéri's decent had slowed to that of a jump from a second-story window. Well less than lethal as far as speed was concerned. Still, she kept the blast going; there was no sense in risking a twisted ankle with such a grand entrance! When she was a mere single-story height above the ground, she cut off the blast. Landing in a molten pile of magic would definitely *not* make for a grand entrance. With the wand off, she picked up speed quickly, but being so close to the ground, it was not enough to cause any damage.

Chéri flexed her knees in anticipation of impact. She landed heavily on her feet, rolled onto her knees, then thigh, then back. Continuing her momentum, she tucked her feet under her and popped to her feet, wand at the ready. Chéri looked around at the locals who seemed to be peering from inside windows and around corners at her. All had an alarmed, terrified look. Rightfully so; she *had* just fallen from the sky on a bolt of purple magic.

The buildings looked like quickly thrown together shacks and none were over two stories tall. With how poorly they were constructed, this was probably out of self-preservation. Some buildings seemed to be lashed together as if nails were somehow a rare commodity. "Don't these people know what nails are?" She remarked.

The locals had endured years of random falling object- branches, buckets of water (sometimes still in a bucket), and on several occasions even small animals falling from the heavens. It was something they had learned to deal with. Lately, they had been seeing flashes of light across the skies- much better than falling objects, it had been decided. They all assumed the gods were angry with them and flung random objects to show their displeasure.

A contingent of five locals finally approached Chéri. They looked, much like their buildings; haggard and downtrodden. Humans in appearance, they shuffled towards her. Since she was a Gnome, they *were* taller than her, but not by much. They were also not much heavier. They seemed to not eat much more than dirt. Not that the town had a shortage of dirt; everything in the town seemed to have a coating of it. *Maybe there's a famine going on*, she thought as they approached. "If this is the best they've got around here, in six months I'll be running this town," she said aloud. With their appearance, even *telling* them her plan wouldn't keep it from happening.

The human at the front of the contingent stopped several feet from Chéri. He appeared as nervous as the four that accompanied him. He stared at Chéri for a long moment, then squinted. He looked up in the heavens and then back at her. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Whay areyay youyay? Areyay youyay oneyay ofyay ethay angryyay odsgay owhay ashay omecay erehay otay akemay ingsthay etterbay?"

Chéri didn't understand a word of it. "I didn't understand a word of that. Sorry." Deciding they weren't a threat to her (or at least not as much of a threat as she was to them), she sheathed her wand.

The contingent looked at her expectedly.

Chéri sighed. A thought came to her. She raised her hands above her head and stuck up her fingers to signify feathers- the universally understood sign of someone in charge.

The contingent looked at her expectedly.

Chéri frowned and made a circle over her head, signifying a crown- another universally understood sign of someone in charge.

The contingent looked at her expectedly.

Chéri frowned again. "Nothing? What's wrong with you people? Once I subjugate you, you're all going to learn Gnomish *and* Common." she said angrily. Looking around, she spied a -dirt covered- box. She moved to it, flipped it over (dumping out more dirt) and then stood on it. She thumped her chest. *They had to know that meant someone who was in charge!*

The contingent clapped heartily and chanted, "Ohh ohh ohh!"

Chéri got down from the box. "Well, that's progress anyway." She approached the group. "Something to eat and drink?" She asked. She rubbed her belly and tilted her hand toward her mouth. *They had to know that*!

"Uuresay eway ancay eatyay andyay inkdray omethingsay!" replied the leader of the group. He gestured toward a ramshackle building. "Ooohh! Ooohh!" he said as the group moved toward it.

Shaking her head, Chéri fell in step behind the shuffling group. "This is just ridiculous. I'm going to kill that Grimbledung," she scowled.

The group slid to a halt. The leader turned and looked at her, terror in his eyes. "Grimbledung?!"

Chéri nodded.

The man pointed at the heavens as the others cowered. Grimbledung personified the typical faceless god in the heavens who tormented their subjects with no rhyme or reason besides wanting to torment them. Technically, Grimbledung was more a *bodiless* god as opposed to faceless, but the effect was the same. For what had been decades, the Great Grimbledung Head had been tormenting the villagers. Dropping hot soup, heavy objects and even rotten eggs. They were peculiar objects, but they had decided early on that they had acquired a peculiar god. Peculiar and angry. At times, he would appear

himself- a disembodied head that would shout torments down at them for hours, *sometimes days* on end.

Chéri nodded, "Grimbledung" she pulled her finger across her neck to signify her plan to kill him.

"Oooohh!" lamented the man at the reference to the Great Grimbledung Head. He shuddered as he apparently realized the one in front of him *was in the same predicament!* "OOOHHH!" he said as he cowered along with the others.

Chéri stood as the humans cowered and groveled. "He's got you spooked, huh?" She said, not expecting them to understand a word she said. Which was good because, actually, they did[27]. She moved to the front of the cowering contingent and reached down. Gently, she took the arm of the leader and lifted him to his feet. She gestured again for food and drink. "Get me something to drink or I'll kill you," she said in a pleasant voice.

"Esyay! Ybay allyay eansmay!" the man answered as he motioned for the group to rise. In what was still spirit-broken shuffling but slightly faster, they moved to what was ostensibly was a restaurant. A dirt covered one.

Once inside, they all sat at a large round, dirt-covered table. "Ooohh!" commanded the leader to what seemed to be the serving wench. With a puff of dirt, she was off to gather edibles.

"Rolling Foothills? Foreboding Forest?" Chéri tried.

The man stared at her.

"Aution? Great Salt River? Cliffs of Doom?"

With each, Chéri was greeted by blank stare.

A wry smile came to her. "Grimbledung!"

The men all cowered at the table. One even got under it.

Chéri chuckled, "Just kidding guys. Don't worry though, that crazy Gnome will get his comeuppance when I get back. I can't be that far away." In the grand scheme of things, she actually wasn't. In the Gnome scheme of things, it was more than quite a hike to get from her current location to his. In terms of distance, it was one and one half Quests.

The serving wench returned with a (dirt covered) serving tray. On it were several smallish eggs as well as cups of a dark liquid.

"Eggs and mud. Honestly, it's better than I was expecting. At least I get to peel my own egg," remarked Chéri.

The group ate in mostly silence- one egg and one cup-o-mud each. The meal was punctuated by Chéri mentioning another location familiar to her. The men only shook their heads in silence. One of the men brightened up. He pointed to the ceiling "Grimbledung?" Then to Chéri and made kissing sounds. He did this twice.

"I think I'm going to be sick." She stuck out her tongue.

The men all nodded and smiled. The leader made kissing sounds again.

An idea came to Chéri. "Ohhh! Grimbledung!" She too made kissing sounds. The egg threatened to make a reappearance, riding on a wave of mud. "Oh, the pain he will endure," she said with a smile on her face. "The great gobs of pain that will be heaped upon him."

More kissing sounds from the men, and to her horror, the serving wench rewarded her with a grimy smile.

"So, Grimbledung?" She raised her hands questioningly.

The men all pointed at the ceiling. The serving wench nodded nervously.

Chéri shook her head. "No. I have to walk." She thought for a moment. While hanging above the town, she noticed that there was a road leading away from the village. Someone had to have put it in because it went somewhere, or they (whoever they were) wouldn't have bothered to build it. No one in their right mind would have built a road *to* this dirt encrusted village. Unless of course, this was the end of the line for ill-spoken, dim-witted, dirty people in this particular part of the lands. She scowled as she put two fingers on the table and made them walk along it. Her fingers left clean footprints as they went. "Say! I got it!" She picked up the glasses and handed them back to the serving wench then leaned forward over the table.

"Great Ogre Wall," she said as she drew a waving line. "What's left of Aution" she said as she drew a circle. Below that she cleaned off a wide swath of dirt, "Great Salty River."

The man looked from the table to her. "Atthay ookslay ikelay ayay apmay," he remarked. Because it did. Because it was.

Chéri continued to add features to the table-cum-map. "And this is Picistan…"

"Icistan Pay?" Said the leader hesitantly.

Chéri looked at him. "Picistan?" She pointed to the cleaned area representing that particular kingdom. "Icistan Pay?" She shook her head. "I'll suck start my crossbow if I end up learning your language."

The man nodded furiously. "Icistan Pay!"

"Where?" Asked Chéri as she raised her hand questioning.

The man blinked at her, then he pointed at the map. "Ere hay."

"Yes, I know that's where I put it on the map but…" Chéri stood. She spread her arms wide to encompass the entire building. "Where?" Then she pointed at the map. After three iterations, the understanding crept (slowly) across the leader's face.

"Ooohhh! Orcuslatinuspay?"

Chéri nodded, "Yes, where is… Orcuslatinuspay?" She gestured to the entire table. "What a horrible name for a town. Even one like this."

The man stood and looked down on the map. He frowned. "Youryay apmay isyay otnay otay alescay." Because it wasn't. He gazed down on it for a long moment then snapped his fingers. He walked to the far side of the restaurant "south" as it were, over five tables away. Triumphantly he jabbed his finger at the table. "Orcuslatinuspay!"

Chéri staggered back into her chair. "What? That's like a thousand leagues!"

"Orcuslatinuspay," assured the man as he tapped the table top.

Chéri put her head in her hands for a moment. Then she nodded. "Fine then, that's where I have to go." She got up and moved to the man's table. She placed her fingers on the table and 'walked' them towards Julesville on the other table.

"Atthay say ayay ellhay ofyay ayay onglay ayway," said the man.

Chéri shrugged "Well, that's where I need to go." She pointed at the other table. *Hopefully, they'll offer some sort of rations and an animal to ride*,

she thought as she moved slowly (purposely) to the door. "See you later." She waved.

The man held up his hands. "Ooohh ooohhh!" he declared. He moved to the table and bent over it. A hushed discussion ensued.

"You know, I don't understand a word you're saying so you really don't need to whisper," Chéri reminded them. "You dolts."

The man stood and squinted at her. He then returned to the hushed conversation. After a few moments, he stood upright again. He held a finger up at Chéri.

"Wait, huh?" She pointed at her feet and nodded.

The man ran to the back of the restaurant, kicking up dirt as he went.

From the kitchen erupted a cacophony of pans and dishes being thrown about. Yelling could be heard from the man and a woman. Angry yelling. After several (uncomfortable for Chéri) minutes of 'kitchen rage', the man came back with a large, dirty backpack.

Bits of dirt fell from it as he handed it to Cherí.

"Orfay youyay."

Chéri cringed as she slipped it on her back. "Now I need a bath. Thanks." She smiled what he hoped looked like an earnest smile at her filthy benefactors. In reality, she would have loved to have killed them all.

The man smiled back with dirt-encrusted teeth. He whispered, "*Grimbledung*" and surreptitiously pointed upward. He then winked.

"Trying to earn some points, are we?" She nodded and patted the man on the shoulder. Dirt flaked off the man. "Don't you worry Mister Dirt, *Grimbledung* won't be pestering you too much longer."

The man breathed a sigh of relief. With a wary glance upward, he ushered Chéri to the door. It was just a little quicker than what would have been polite.

"I'm goin', I'm goin'," protested Chéri. "Quit shoving!"

As she exited the restaurant, she saw that the rest of the village had gathered to see her off. She waved at them. They smiled dirt-encrusted smiles back.

Chéri shook her head as she headed out of the village. *North. A long way north*', she thought as she began her journey. With the entire village following behind her. When she reached the edge of the village, she turned again. She waved and unable to stop herself she pointed at the sky "Grimbledung!"

The entire village ducked and looked upward.

"That would never get old." Chéri laughed as she turned and started walking on the side of the road.

Along with the rest of the village, the leader waved at her back as she departed. "I can't believe she bought it," he said to the man next to him. The villagers behind him chuckled.

"Well, it's not as far as you said, but it's still a pretty long walk," the other responded.

"Well, she'll never make it. If bandits don't get her, the Pics are sure to," remarked the Chief. "Either way, we'll never see her again."

"Atthay isyay oodgay otay earhay," said the other man, to the hearty laughs of the villagers as they all turned to return to their humdrum lives.

Chéri continued to walk northward.

None of the bandits she encountered caused her any trouble.

The Pics were another story entirely.[28]

Orrysay.

Twenty-One
Wherein Grimbledung Is Smitten!
(with him, of course, the bad kind of smitten)

Pozzuoli was standing in the middle of the shop holding a smoldering wand. Still.

"Bah, bah, bah!" Said Drimblerod as his innards went to jelly. "Grimbledung's not here, Mister Pozzuoli!" he said loudly. "Not here at all." He moved behind the counter. For cover.

Akita half-prowled, half-patrolled the main street of Julesville. Since Big Julie hired him as Constable Pro-Tem, *with a serious cut in pay*, he had been trying to be as visible as possible to the populace. Much to his displeasure, he had been informed his employment was only temporary until the crisis was over and a normal election could take place. There was always the chance that some loon would try to run against him.

"Morrrrnin, Ma'am," he said to a passing Human female. Greasing the palms of would-be voters with cordiality never hurt.

She gulped as she quickened her pace. Not a former Autonian, she was not used to werewolves walking the streets in broad daylight. Friendly or otherwise.

Akita shrugged as he continued. "A little bit at a time, I suppose." He scanned the street, hoping for some sort of commotion that he could deal with to provide a proper display of his constabulary skills. "It's just too quiet around here." He frowned. Just then he saw Pozzuoli step quickly into Second Hand Sorcery. *Was that a wand in his hand?* Akita dropped to all fours and quickly loped towards the wand shop. *A lethal showdown delivered from the end of a wand wasn't what I was hoping for* he thought as he picked up speed. Several pedestrians moved out of the Constable's way as he tore toward the wand shop, hoping to make it there in time.

He wouldn't.

Pozzuoli was still standing in the middle of the shop, still holding a smoldering wand.

He glanced impatiently upward.

"Hey-a I wanna talk to you-a two boys 'bout somethin'," said Pozzuoli. Finally.

"Aba, aba, aba," offered Drimblerod. "Grim's not here MISTER POZZUOLI!" Hoping his friend caught on to the hint.

He wouldn't.

"He went out and won't be back for at least a month, I think." Drimblerod tried.

Grimbledung pushed past the curtain, compact still in his hand, "I hope Big Julie will be able to figure this thing out. I don't see how this could get any worse…" Grimbledung looked up and spotted Pozzuoli. Standing in the middle of the shop. And the smoking wand. "Aba, aba, aba…" he said.

"Hey, I wanna talk to you-a two," said Pozzuoli as he gestured with the wand. Its tip left a trail of blue smoke as he moved it.

"Waaaa, waaaa, waaaa," said Grimbledung, unhelpfully. Then in a moment of coherence, he moved to the counter and ducked down, resting his chin on it, in hopes of protecting his vital organs.

It wouldn't.

"What he said," said Drimblerod.

"Listen, I just wanna have one thing out." He gestured again with the wand. The smoke was thicker now and had hints of purple in it.

"Lookout! The crazy Dwarf's armed! Mad Dwarf! Mad Dwarf!" warned Grimbledung from his hiding spot.

"Of course I'm-a armed. I gotta two of them." Pozzuoli raised his arms to his sides. "You-a crazy Gnome."

"No, no Mister Pozzuoli. He means you have a weapon," said Drimblerod as he slowly moved his hand towards his wand, trying to keep the conversation going until he had *his* wand out to even the dueling field.

"I a-know he means the wand. I make-a little joke! I lighten the mood," Pozzuoli said as he waved the wand again. The smoke was now more purple than blue.

"Uhhmm, Mister Pozzuoli," began Drimblerod, "if you're trying to make the mood lighter, why are you waving that fully charged and ready to go off, wand around?"

"Oh, I a-found this wand in my shop and I was-a hoping you could-a tell me who it belongs to. Maybe there's a reward, no?"

"I see," said Drimblerod, relaxing slightly. "Is that all you're here for then?"

"Well, that-a, and maybe we can talk about the losing of my-a shop. Mamma, she not too happy about-a that. But first we do business," his eyes narrowed, "then we do a-personal."

"We'll do our best to help, Mister Pozzuoli," said Drimblerod, hoping to gain some points in their favor by being helpful. His hand inched closer to his wand sheath.

Grimbledung was frozen in place, watching the conversation from (almost) complete cover, chin still resting on the counter. He wasn't expecting any points.

"So, what's the wand do?" Asked Drimblerod amicably as he moved from behind the counter, hoping it wasn't all a ruse to get him from behind his cover. His hand was now on the hilt of his wand.

"I don't a-know. It was a-smoking when I picked it up so it a-mighta be charged with something." As he spoke, he moved the wand upward for Drimblerod to look at it. "She is strange, no?"

"Open up!" a voice growled from outside the shop. Door obliged as Akita came charging into the shop at full speed. "Nobody move!" he snarled.

Startled by the Constable's entrance, Pozzuoli flinched.

A purple arc shot out of the wand. And hit Grimbledung squarely between the eyes. "Gah!" he screeched as he fell backward.

Stiff as a board.

And just as dead.

"Oh a-no," lamented Pozzuoli, "that-a was the accidente"

Drimblerod and Akita stared at the Dwarf.

"No, a-really! I dinna really wanna him a-dead." He paused and considered his near-future. "With so many witnesses, would-a anyone commit the murder?" He looked around the room. No one seemed to be giving him the benefit of the doubt. "Constabulatore, do you think-a that will-a stand up in-a court?"

"About as well as Grimbledung would right now," remarked Akita.

"Oh. Mamma."

"You killed him you stupid Dwarf!" Yelled Drimblerod.

"He I was-a not aiming for! The puppy. He-a come in and startle me!"

"I've told you… Don't. Call. Me. A. Puppy."

"I'm a sorry, Constabulatore. You are a really cute you know." He reached up and patted Akita's cheek. Then scratched behind his ear.

Without realizing it, Akita's foot began to thump. *Then* he realized it. "Hey now! I'm on official business here. You don't just scratch a guy's ear like that. In public."

"I'm-a sorry. I was-a trying to lighten the mood."

"Yeah, we saw what happened the *last* time you tried that. Old Grim got a stiff as a board," said Drimblerod.

Akita peered behind the counter at Grimbledung. "So can ya fix him?" He eyed Pozzuoli.

"How-a I fix him? I don't know what this-a wand does. That's-a why I come here. You boys know wands." He waved the wand across the shop. Purple tendrils leaked out of it.

Both Akita and Drimblerod ducked.

"Stop doin that!" ordered Akita.

Drimblerod stared at the Dwarf angrily. "Know wands? Sure we know wands. Let me take a stab in the dark here. *That thing is dangerous and you shouldn't be waving it around!*" He finished at the top of his lungs.

"You make-a the joke!"

"Yeah, Pozzuoli. I make-a the joke. My friend is dead here you know."

Akita peered over the counter at the dead Gnome again. "Well, I suppose I got a plan for him. But yerrrr gonna need to remain calm." He eyed Drimblerod, "Got it?"

Drimblerod sighed. "All right. So what's your plan *this* time?"

"We search his pockets for loose change," Akita deadpanned.

"No!" Pozzuoli guffawed. "Akita now you make-a the joke!"

Akita let his tongue hang out. "Right?"

"Real funny you two. I'm starting to lose my patience here. *What are you going to do about Grimbledung?*"

Akita shrugged, "Well I could send 'im back to Prost Garrrrison. They're obliged to fix anyone that shows up. Even unannounced."

Drimblerod shook his head, "Yeah, and conscript them for a decade is what I hear."

Akita raised an eyebrow, "They sure didn't stick to that rule the last time, now did they?"

Drimblerod thought about that for a moment, "I suppose not. But what are the odds they won't hold onto him this time?"

"Him?" Akita looked over the counter at Grimbledung, "Somehow I don't see that happenin'."

Drimblerod moved over and peered over the counter alongside the constable. "I suppose you're right. And that's not but a two-day's ride. I suppose by the time I get there, they'll be ready to let him loose. So, if you send him there now, I can head out tomorrow morning and arrive about on time."

Akita nodded, "Three days'll probably be just enough time. That's about the longest I imagine anyone can really tolerate up close and personal contact with that crazy Gnome." He smirked.

"Hey now Akita, that's my friend you're talking… about... Well, all right. Three days straight is a long time."

"So, I'm-a not in a-trouble. That-a good to hear!" Pozzuoli turned to leave the shop. In a flash, Akita bounded over and placed his arm around the Dwarf. "Not so fast there. You *did* kill someone in town."

"Not-a permanently! And not-a on purpose! And it's-a temporary!"

"Just because it wasn't on purrrrpose don't mean you get away with murder in this town, you know."

"But-a you say you fix the Grimbledung!" Pozzuoli began to panic.

"Well, we'll *see* if they fix him," began Akita, "how's this for a deal. If they fix him, then we'll keep this quiet. 'Course yer gonna have to deal with an angry Grimbledung for killin' him. But if they can't, then I'm holdin' you responsible."

"Then what?"

"Well, we'll trrry ya for murder, find you guilty, then hang ya."

Pozzuoli blanched. "Well, s'allright. At least it sound like-a I get a fair trial. But just give me a little head start before trying-a me." He flinched, "I-a mean advance warning to get the affairs in order!"

"Yer not gettin' any sort of head start outta me. My pay's already too low."

"Don' you-a worry, Constabulatore. I wonn-a leave you out to dry." Pozzuoli reassured Akita. Then he winked at him. It didn't help.

Akita drew his twisted unicorn horn wand. "I know I'm prolly going to regret this, but here goes." He aimed his wand at Grimbledung and barked an incantation. In a flash of blue light, the Gnome was gone. Only his wand remained.

Drimblerod picked up his partner's wand. "I don't understand why you just can't send his wand with him."

"It's the way the enchantment works. Pretty standard for lawmen and recruiters. It don't work on just dead folks you know. That way when I get into a scrap and send someone away, I keep whatever weapons they have on them. Wands, swords, anything sharp. If they was causing trouble, they have'ta come back unarmed and in more of a mood to talk. In this parrrrtucilar case, it'll ensure that someone at Prost Garrison don't help themselves to his wand. And if yer able to hand him back his wand, it might lighten his mood which might work out better for old Pozz, here."

"You-a not so bad, Contabulatore Akita," said Pozzuoli as he smiled at him.

Akita growled. "Don't go spreading that around. I got a reputation to uphold. And pay to get raised." He turned to leave the shop. "Do I have'ta tell you two to behave yourselves?"

"No, no, we-a got that!" assured Pozzuoli.

"What I don't understand is why someone would leave a fully charged wand lying around." Drimblerod shook his head. "I mean you don't prep and charge those things with *What's This* unless you're going to use it right then. No one carries a loaded wand around. So how did that even happen?"

Akita growled, "That's the fourth wand that's been found in town the same way." He squinted at Pozzuoli, "But the first time someone's been kilt by one."

Pozzuoli took an interest in his shoes.

"*Fourth one?* What is going on with these people?"

"I don't think it's a matter of people in town doin' in," said Akita. "It's more a matter of Halfling mischief. I suspect they're sneakin' into town at night and leaving them around for people to pick up and have the thing go off." He shrugged, "Fortunately, Grimbledung's the only one that's been injured by them."

Drimblerod nodded. "It's like the old saying 'if a tree falls in the forest, and no one's around to hear it, it still hits Grimbledung."

"Well, somethin' needs to be done about our Halfling problem. I'm not gonna go around chasin' wands all the live long day."

"Yeah, that'd be a lot of work, wouldn't it, Constable?" Drimblerod eyed him.

"Don't start with me, Drimblerod," warned Akita, "I've enough trouble to deal with *at a reduced pay*."

Drimblerod nodded. "Right. Well, thanks for your help with this, Akita. I really appreciate it." He smiled weakly.

"Me-a too. You a very understanding and a real nice…"

"Don't you say it…"

"No! I was-a not going to say 'puppy'. I was-a going to say Constabulatore." Pozzuoli's smile gave a different story. "Why you give-a the Pozzuoli the hard time?"

Akita shook his head. The shake ran down his back to the end of his tail. "Well, I better go'n see what else in happenin' in town. If there's one wand here, there're other ones someplace else." He turned to face the two, "But in the meanwhile, spread the word t'not pick up any wand that you didn't put down yourself."

"That's a good idea, Akita. Maybe we should make a sign."

Akita's glowing yellow eyes got large, "Another sign?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "No, no. A plain wood sign that you nail to a post. That kind of sign. Not the other kind of sign…"

"That helped burn down the town?"

"Yeah."

"Hey! That-a sign set my store on fire!"

"Right, that's not the kind of sign we're making. I was talking about the regular wood kind."

"Good. Stick with that," ordered Akita. With that, he turned and loped out of the store.

"I'm a-going home to Mamma," said Pozzuoli. "She'll-a be a-happy when I tell her I killed Grimbledung."

Drimblerod gaped at him.

"I just won't mention the accidente part," he finished quickly.

Drimblerod shook his head at the Dwarf, "Well, I'm glad we can help make your home life a little more enjoyable."

"We will-a call it even then." Pozzuoli wiped his brow, "That's a lotta excitement for one day."

"It's business as usual at Second Hand Sorcery."

He followed Pozzuoli to the door and after the Dwarf had left, he flipped the sign to 'closed'.

"Now for a day's peace and quiet," said Drimblerod. He looked down at the wand Pozzuoli had handed him. "Well, at least we're up an Assassin Wand, that's something."

Twenty-Two
Wherein Big Julie Visits Nulu's Work Site

Big Julie walked down the street of the town. Her town. It bustled. Bustled! She beamed at a passerby, "Good morning to you."

"Mornin' Mayoress," came the reply.

Big Julie bubbled with joy. *Mayoress. It had a nice ring to it*, she thought as she continued towards Nulu's business. Or, more precisely, where it would eventually be. At the moment, it was a large wooden skeleton with about three dozen workers scampering over it. It gave the appearance of ants doing their work on a large animal, but instead of removing parts, these workers were busy hammering boards into place, laying flooring, installing windows, and even the roof. It was quite an operation.

Nulu had mentioned that she had come across the best foreman she had ever encountered. Skilled at carpentry himself, he could also motivate his workers to keep busy. She had also mentioned that he wasn't hard on the eyes either. That was the main reason Julie had come up with an excuse to visit Nulu at her rapidly forming establishment. The town *was* bustling, but *not* with eligible bachelors. *He was supposed to be at the game, but he apparently didn't make it. Unreliable? That's not a good start*, she thought sourly.

Julie approached the worksite and appraised the action. Everyone seemed to be actively engaged in a task. Friendly conversations were also in full swing throughout the site- showing that the foreman was able to motivate his workers and still keep their morale up. An obligatory catcall whistled down from the roof at Julie. *Typical.* She looked up at the Dwarf and frowned. "You fall off from there and I'm not going to catch you!" She called up.

The Dwarf grinned down at her then returned to his hammering.

A lanky worker walked by and Julie reached out to tap him on the shoulder. "Where's the Foreman?" She asked.

The man pointed to what would be the main entrance to the building, "In there doin' foreman stuff," he answered without even breaking stride.

Julie looked at the double-door entrance to the bar, restaurant, and inn. *I wonder if Nulu's come up with a name yet*. A large Human filled the doorless opening. As he stepped into it, he turned and examined the doorframe, running his hand up and down it. Julie spotted a proud smile on his face as he turned and looked up the wall, his back to Julie.

This worker was tall- above average for a Human- tall *and* ruggedly built. Julie looked him over. *Ruggedly* built. With muscles all in the right places and long blonde hair. It was tied up in a standard carpenter's pony tail, but Julie could imagine it down and flowing across his rounded, muscular shoulders as he rode a great steed along a beach. Hooves pounding on the soft sand as waves crashed into the front of the mount, sending a spray of water to dance across the man's well chiseled, tanned chest … *Snap out of it! He's a day laborer!* Julie regained her composure and frowned as she approached him.

She tapped him on the shoulder, "Excuse me, where's the Foreman?" She asked the Human. He was taller than her by two inches. *If only you were management*.

The Human continued to look up the wall. Annoyingly, he moved closer to the doorframe and laid his cheek against it as he sighted up the wall. "Shhhh," he said softly.

Julie tapped him on the shoulder again, "Hey there pal…"

"Shhhhh. Just…. Shhhhh."

Big Julie raised an eyebrow at the laborer. He did not notice because he was still looking up the wall, resting his cheek on the doorframe, as if he were using it to aim at the sky. She tapped him on the shoulder. A little more roughly. "You know, it's not polite to keep a lady waiting."

"Now, now, Miss," began the Human, "it's also not polite to bother an artist while he's working." He still hadn't looked at her. He spread his arms out and grasped both sides of the doorframe. Even though it was a double door. His muscled back formed a large "V." Again, he leaned in and looked up the wall.

Big Julie cleared her throat. "How about keeping the Mayoress waiting? Does that make any difference?"

Lost in thought, or perhaps measurements, the worker muttered, "Can I help you?"

"That's better." Julie nodded again. Annoyingly, still to the man's back. "I'm looking for the foreman. If you point me in his direction, I'll let you get back to your wall gazing craziness."

"You know, Missus Mayor," said the man as he moved back and forth along the doorway, still looking upward, "a misaligned wall above a double door will cause the doors to stick. Single doors, you can get away with a little alignment issues. Above double doors, you get doors that are sticky. Or don't shut at all. Or don't open at all. Or let in a wicked draft in the winter. None of those make for good references." He turned to look at Julie. Surprise came to his face when he saw they were almost eye-to-eye. It changed to a mischievous smile almost immediately after. "And as the foreman, I'm really interested in good references."

"Foreman?" Big Julie's stomach did a little flip as she looked at evenly spaced, white teeth. *With none missing!*

He leaned on the side of the doorframe amicably. His muscles rippled from his forearms to his shoulder and down his side to a narrow waist. He wore a well-worn leather work-tunic with pockets and loops sewn into it over knee-length leather breaches that were slung low.

No-- they were slung looooww!

They bulged at the thighs where his muscles fought for their freedom. Since the work-tunic was full of nails, screws and even a large hammer, the lack of a waist-cinch made it hang loosely on his shoulders, and as he leaned, it fell in, revealing bulging knots of muscles long his side. Lots of them. Ostensibly, there was a matching set on the other side still under the tunic. Just waiting to be ogled. They all led to a flat, *tanned* belly above the aforementioned low-slung breeches. Julie forced her eyes back to his grey-like-the-sea-after-a-storm eyes.

!

Apparently, the fine specimen of manhood standing before her was still speaking: "…so it's important that any variances in the wall get addressed now, because once the floors are all tied in to the walls, it's really hard to get shims in there to fix it." The man crossed his arms, his biceps bulged as he did so.

!!

Big Julie fought furiously to maintain eye contact as the man spoke. *Was he still speaking?*

A tick developed in the man's shoulder as he leaned back on the doorframe with his well-tanned and rounded shoulder.

FOCUS!

She looked back at his face and concentrated.

"… and the same holds true for the roof beams when they get installed. See?"

Big Julie nodded even though she had no idea what the man had just said. "Sure. That makes perfect sense."

The man smiled again at Big Julie. "So what'd you want to see me about, Missus Mayor?"

"Miss," Big Julie said to him quickly. Almost too quickly.

"Miss Mayor," the man corrected himself amicably.

Big Julie blinked. 'Because Nulu said you were hot' - even though it was the truth, wasn't going to work. "Errr, because I was looking for Nulu?" She lied.

The man nodded. "Well, that makes sense, I suppose." He gestured with a well-muscled arm into the building, "She's in what will be the dining area of the restaurant trying to decide if there should be just tables, or tables and booths." He leaned in close and gave Julie a sly wink.

She startled at him as butterflies popped into existence in her belly. *What are you thirteen?*

"Push her towards some booths. I make some great looking booths."

And babies too, I'd bet! "I'll see what I can do, Mister…" she tried.

"Pinkie. Just Pinkie," the man replied. Another grin came to his face.

Big Julie blinked at the large man, "Pinkie? Really?" *I hope that's not a nickname because…*

He held up his four-fingered hand and waggled his fingers. "That's what they call me."

!!! Whoo hoo! "I see. Well, nice to meet you, *Pinkie*."

"See you around, *Miss* Mayor," he said cordially, "maybe we can have a drink once I get this place done up." He was still standing close to her. It wasn't uncomfortably close. It was, actually, the exact opposite of uncomfortable.

Unable to speak, Big Julie nodded and -unable to stop herself- giddily went into the building.

Nulu was seated at one of the two tables in the dining area. One was a larger table, able to seat probably eight, the other a smaller one for four diners. Pinkie had suggested she push the two tables around to get a feel for how many of each she wanted. If the tracks in the sawdust were any indication, the tables had occupied nearly every space in the room. She seemed lost in thought.

"Pinkie said you needed some booths in here," said Julie, breaking Nulu's concentration.

Nulu smiled past her tusks at Julie, "So you're on Pinkie's side on the booth issue?"

Julie moved and sat at the table, "Side? I'd be on his front if I had *my* way." She leveled her eyes at her friend, "Lady, I'd be on his side if he wanted to just leave this room empty and make people stand and hold their plates while they ate."

"I expected as much." Nulu laughed at her friend, "So…"

"Yeah," she said dreamily, "so..."

Nulu shoved Julie, "No, I mean 'so we should have booths', not 'so Pinkie is a big slab of manhood.' "

"I say yes to both."

"Did you just come here to ogle my foreman?" Nulu teased.

Big Julie tilted her hand back and forth. "Half and half. Drimblerod and Grimbledung were visited by an assassin sent by the Halflings."

"Are they okay?" Nulu leaned forward worried.

Big Julie shrugged, "*They* are. I kind of feel sorry for the poor assassin gal the Halflings sent to deal with Grimbledung's antics. Honestly, she really didn't stand a chance."

"What happened?"

"What else? She was getting ready to kill them and Grimbledung spilled a box of Magic Marbles on the ground and she slipped on them and fell into their Abyssmal Box."

"Of course she did." Nulu shook her head. "I say we just send that insane Gnome to the Halfling camp and within ten minutes they'd all be dead or retreating."

"Well," began Julie hesitantly, "there's one minor problem with that…"

Nulu raised an eyebrow.

"He's dead again."

"Of course he is." She thought for a moment, "Wait. You said the assassin fell into the Abyssmal Box. Who killed Grimbledung?"

"Pozzuoli, this time."

"Was it an accident?"

"He *said* it was, and Akita and Drimblerod back him up."

Nulu paled, "Is he *dead* dead?"

Big Julie shook her head, "No, Akita sent him to Prost Garrison. They're required to revive anyone who could possibly be used as a conscript."

"They don't stand a chance."

Big Julie nodded solemnly.

"So with this whole Grimbledung is dead, vicious Assassins, mysterious killer wands scattered about, and the impending invasion by the Halfling Empire, I have one question."

"With all that happening, just one?" Nulu squinted at Julie, "What's that?"

"When are you going to get this place finished so Pinkie can buy me a drink?"

Twenty-Three
Wherein Grimbledung Arrives and Departs from Prost Garrison All in One Chapter
(Much to the relief of the Garrison Commander)

It was a quiet day at Prost Garrison.

It wouldn't last…

"Doc Marone," said the intern nervously, "there seems to be a situation out here." The intern was peering out the window at the weathered platform that had been established as an unofficial landing point for the *Evacuata Corpsus Delicti* spell. Several bells had been attached to strings crisscrossing the platform to alert others of the arrival of a body. It had been widely advertised that Prost Garrison was in the need of conscripts and would accept any and all bodies for immediate revival and subsequent conscription. Because of this, a wide variety of corpses, in various states of death - disemboweled, dismembered, and decaying (the three D's to morticians) arrived. For the most part, the Garrison doctor was able to patch the remains back together again and conscript them into service. Sometimes however, it took several people to get a "workable soldier." It could never be said that Doc Marone was not good at his job.

"What's the situation Corpsman?" Asked the doctor as he looked up from the latest NEWS parchment…

<REMINDER PARAGRAPH>

The main parchment that relayed the daily activities of The Region was the venerable NESW ("all the news from the North, East, South, and West that's fit to print, and some that isn't."). Its main competition was the reverse order NWSE Parchment. Not as old, but still a decent read, it did well overall. The latest addition to the Parchment market was the Daily NEWS, but since that didn't make sense directionally, the people who read it were considered loons. Or radicals. Or both.[29]

</REMINDER PARAGRAPH>

We return you to the story already in progress…

"… and that's why I won't deal with Hobgoblins again." The doctor shook his head, "Or is it another pile of ashes? I can't do much with ashes besides grow award winning roses." He returned to reading his parchment.

"That's not it, Doc. It's an actual body." The Corpsman alternated between looking out the window and looking at the doctor, "But I don't think you're going to like it." He paused for a moment and considered his courses of action. None seemed better than the other so he went with the first, "Want me to bring him in?"

The doctor snapped the parchment. He still hadn't looked up from it. "Fine, fine. Bring it in and I'll see what I can do."

With a shrug, the corpsman went outside and hefted the Gnome's lifeless body over his shoulder. It was still warm. "It's still warm, Doc," he called into the infirmary/mortuary, "that's one thing at least." He reentered the shop, carrying Grimbledung over his shoulder, feet first.

"That's one thing all right," agreed the doctor. For the past few weeks, there had been a rash of very cold, very dead, already decomposing bodies delivered to the platform. Just the smell alone had alerted everyone in the Garrison that a body had arrived. These, the Doctor had turned into Zombie Scouts and sent over the wall to try to determine the intent and identity of the attacking army. None had ever returned. If nothing else, he hoped it gave the soon-to-be invading force the creeping heebies. He did not know it, but it didn't even raise eyebrows[30]. "At least we won't need nose plugs." He folded the parchment and moved to the treatment/ autopsy/ embalming/ zombification table as his corpsman got there.

The corpsman deftly positioned the body's feet at the foot of the table and in one smooth motion, ducked and pushed the body off his shoulder. It obediently flopped down and landed squarely in the middle of the table. It only reached halfway up it.

"Ahh, a wee person. We could use one of these in the storeroom," said the Doctor as he began to examine the body. When he reached the head, he gasped. "Not HIM again!" The doctor took a step back, "What rotten luck. This sure didn't work out the last time, did it!" He moved closer and peered at Grimbledung's face.

"Maybe he's turned a new leaf?" Offered the Corpsman.

At that moment, the *very* recently deceased body of Grimbledung relaxed and the room filled with the noxious odor produced when food is digested. In Grimbledung's case, a lot of food. A lot of spicy food.

The smell was overwhelming.

"Duncan MacDougall's Soul, this is one foul Gnome!" Exclaimed the doctor as he reached for the nose plugs, "Open a window Corpsman before the fumes overtake us." He stuck out his tongue. "What's he been eating- Orc Butts?"

The Corpsman opened both windows in the small building then returned to the table. "So," began the Corpsman, "want me to get the Death Head Moth Cocoons® to bring him back? Not that I'm looking forward to it." He stuck out his tongue, then remembered the foul gasses floating around the room and quickly pulled it back in. The taste in his mouth made him sorry he did.

Doctor Marone examined the corpse. "I don't think that's going to work. Last time he was run over by a wagon or something so the Cocoons could revive him. This time he's been Magiked to death. This will take something more powerful." He thought for a moment.

"The Bellows of Life™?" Suggested the Corpsman.

The Doctor continued to stare at the Gnome.

"How about the Elixir of Revivification?" (it's the generic version so it's not copyrighted).

"Good suggestions, Corpsman, but I think we need to use the Enema of Reanimation®."

"Please Doc, anything but that…" began the Corpsman as he backed away from the table. "Something…*Anything* else."

The doctor shook his head, "With how this Gnome died, that's the only way I can see to bring him back."

"We could just leave him like he is," suggested the Corpsman meekly.

The Doctor turned and stared at the man. "Did I hear you right? You want to *let* this Gnome stay dead? In case you've forgotten, there's

an impending invasion and we're desperately low on soldiers." He shook his head, "And above that, we have a duty to take care of him."

The Corpsman shuffled his feet. "Listen, I'm new at this Doc and I'm sure that the Hypocritical Oath…"

"That's *Hippocratic* Oath. Politicians take the Hypocritical Oath," corrected the doctor.

"… Hippocratic Oath," continued the Corpsman without missing a beat, "but there has to be a loophole there somewhere, right?"

The doctor shook his head. He looked at the Gnome as he went through the oath in his head, hoping a loophole would jump out at him. None did. "There isn't. Besides, if word got out that we didn't revive a body, then people would stop sending them here. For many, this is the only chance they have at getting back a loved one after their conscription. We've gotten a hundred abled bodied fighters out of this deal and we're not going to screw it up now, and *you're* going to assist *Corpsman*. Unless *you'd* rather just go work the front lines as a scout in his place." The doctor narrowed his eyes. "Your choice."

The corpsman looked from the doctor to Grimbledung's body and back. Twice. Then again for good measure. "Fine Doc, let's get this over with." He gave an involuntary shudder. He had only heard of this procedure and that alone was enough to make him lose his lunch. Normally, losing one's lunch was not something to be embarrassed about while undergoing the rigorous three-day Corpsman Certification Course, but the procedure was explained to his class at Triple C (as the school was known) early in the morning!

"Good Lad," said the doctor as he took a professional tone. "Fetch the Enema of Reanimation®."

The Corpsman went to a closed cabinet and pulled open the doors. They creaked open from lack of use; this was a method of last resort. Gingerly, he picked up the bladder and tube in one hand, and a large glass jar of purplish liquid in the other. He returned to the counter and placed both at Grimbledung's feet. Hesitantly, he looked at the Doctor. In his mind, he was weighing the benefits between staying in the room and being sent to the other side of the Anti-Ogre Wall as a scout. The two scenarios seemed to be about equal. And to make matters worse, he had had a *very* large breakfast. "Ready when you are, Doctor," he heard his voice say.

"Excellent, Corpsman. Let's start the procedure then," said Doctor Marone. "Are you familiar with this procedure, or do you want me to talk you through it?"

"Talk me through it, Doc" answered the Corpsman. A sheen of sweat was visible on him now. "If nothing else, hearing your voice might get me through." He paused for a moment and took two deep breaths. Then a third. Then a fourth. "OK, Doctor," he said as he also took a professional tone, "let's regain this Gnome's life."

The doctor nodded at his young Corpsman. Some day he would make a great physician, he was sure of it. Today, he just needed to follow instructions. "Fine now, Corpsman, I'll talk you through it."

With a nod from the doctor, the procedure began…

"All right, then help with getting his clothes off and roll him over while I'm trying to get this potion mixed and heated up so it's at full potency."

"Why can't I get the potion together and you be the one that takes off his trousers? Seems I'd learn more if I were the one doing the actual mixing of potions, right Doc?" The Corpsman smiled hopefully.

"I didn't go to medical school for six weeks to be panting Gnomes, Corpsman. I suggest *you* spend the time and money in medical school if you don't want to be the disrober of patients."

"Fine, Doc. Fine."

By the time the Corpsman had Grimbledung's trousers off, the doctor had the potion mixed and heated properly. "Ready," he said. "Let's begin."

NOTE: The following scene has been redacted for the sake of good taste.

"Take that hose and get as [redacted] that Gnome's [redacted] but don't put so much so we can't get the bag on it. I need a little working space."

The Corpsman nodded as he began the disturbing task [redacted] to ensure that it wouldn't [redacted] anywhere important. Then he quickly snaked the [redacted]. "How's that?"

"Fine. Now [redacted] nothing [redacted] force the [redacted] in. You know, [redacted], this is an [redacted] not an entrance so this might get messy."

"Might? Isn't it already messy?" The Corpsman stuck out his tongue. Between [redacted] and [redacted] flatulence, he was ready to take a long, hot shower with plenty of lye.

Doctor Marone chuckled, "Relax. Are you ready?"

"Ready."

"OK, I'll start with [redacted] no kinks in the hose. I'd hate to have a blow [redacted] gently [redacted] ween his hands. "A little at a time." He peered over the Corpsman's shoulder. "You're doing fine there. Careful though, it looks like [redacted] let that get [redacted] from you, otherwise..."

Suddenly a large [redacted] of [redacted] escaped [redacted] as [redacted] filled with the [redacted] elixir. [redacted]e ensuing [redacted] sprayed the [redacted] the Corpsman.

"Gross! [redacted] in my mouth."

"Well stop [redacted] happen again," chuckled the Doctor as he took a step back to keep away from any more eruptions.

"How much longer [redacted]? Can I let go now?"

"Not if [redacted] out. Messy business that. And smelly too."

"The smell reminds [redacted] visit my Grandmother and when we got there, she had been [redacted] almost a week. It took [redacted] [redacted]ek to get the smell out of the carpet. We just [redacted]hat was [redacted] the house."

"My condolences."

"Thanks Doc." The Corpsman turned his head cautiously to make sure he was facing away from Grimbledung when he spoke. "She was

my favorite grandmother, out of the three." He looked down at the Gnome. "How long until we know if this worked?"

"Oh, it will work. We just might have to do it twice. Check with a pulse with your other hand to see if we got him back."

The Corpsman reached around with his free hand and felt Grimbledung's neck. "Got it Doc! I have a pulse, Doc!" Said the Corpsman as he wiped his brow, "*I have a pulse!"* He looked down at the soiled rag that he just used to wipe his face with, "And I think I'm going to go take a shower now."

"Fine, fine," said Doc Marone, "I'll keep an eye on our patient." He looked down at the now-breathing Gnome on the table, "And get him out of here as quickly as possible."

The Corpsman nodded and quickly left the room. Being around the Gnome was at the top of the list of things he did not want to have to do.

With a sigh, the Doctor returned to his chair and unrolled his parchment, "Where were we?" He squinted at the print, "Ahh, yes, Sandworms. Fact or fiction."[31]

After only a few moments (the Enema of Reanimation® was as effective as it was messy), Grimbledung stirred.

"Gah! Pozzuoli!" Grimbledung shrieked as he flailed.

"Sit still…" began Doctor Marone.

Grimbledung fell off the table and landed in a heap. "Pozzuoli!" he shouted again.

"Relax, Mister Gnome," said the doctor soothingly as he stood, "you're at Prost Garrison. Whoever killed you..." He considered for a moment, "This time… isn't around."

Grimbledung sat up. His arms flopped uselessly at his sides. "Prost Garrison? Really? How long have I been here, Doc?"

The doctor rolled up his parchment but didn't put it down. It was a feeble weapon, but better than nothing. "Not but a few moments. We revived you right away."

Grimbledung's arms shuddered at his sides. "Is that normal?" He asked nervously.

The doctor nodded, "Usually there's some convulsing when limbs return to life, yes."

Grimbledung's legs began to thrash around all on their own.

"Doc!"

"Give it a second or two," assured the doctor. "You'll be fine."

True to his prognosis, the shaking and twitching began to rapidly slow. Within moments it stopped completely. Grimbledung hopped to his feet. "Doc! You're a miracle worker. Give me a hug." Grimbledung moved forward, arms held wide.

Doc Marone stuck out the rolled parchment and planted it against Grimbledung's chest. "Uhm, what you need right now is a bath, not hugs."

"Really?"

"Really."

Grimbledung peered down and smelled himself. His naked-from-the-waist-down self. "Hey! What kind of operation you running here!?" Grimbledung quickly moved behind the counter. Much to the doctor's relief.

"Relax, I'm a doctor. There's nothing I haven't seen. It was part of the revival process. Your clothes are over there," he pointed with the parchment. "Next to that bucket of water." He pointed at it with the parchment. It was becoming more and more handy as time went on! "Why don't you put your breeches on." He half suggested, half ordered. "But first you should rinse off with that bucket." There was no suggesting at that point.

Grimbledung moved to the bucket. He picked it up and dumped it over his head. The water splashed down and formed a puddle at his feet.

"Outside would have been better."

"Sorry Doc." Grimbledung looked down at the murky puddle at his feet. He stepped out of it and picked up his breeches. "Are you going to conscript me now?" He raised his eyebrows in anticipation.

Doctor Marone shook his head, "I don't think we're going to conscript you."

"So, we're even then?"

The doctor once again brought up the rolled parchment, "Well, we're not charging you this time…" he waved it menacingly at Grimbledung, "but if this becomes a habit, we're going to start charging you a… *a gold coin* each and every time we bring you back to life."

"I guess that sounds reasonable."

"Why don't you just stop getting killed? That would sound reasonable."

"Hey Doc, it's not MY fault. I just mind my own business. Just trying to get along in life, you know? Don't do nothing to nobody is my motto. And the next thing you know, *POW*, I end up here. I don't know what's going on, but I can tell you it can't be me."

The doctor shook his head, "I think you need to reconsider some of your life-choices…"

"I don't see how it could be my fault. I'm calm and even tempered. Never a harsh word for anyone…" interrupted Grimbledung.

"That I find hard to believe," the doctor interrupted Grimbledung's interruption.

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Well, in any case, when's the next wagon to town?"

"There is no 'wagon to town' " said the doctor, "you know there's a war brewing. We can't afford to just send wagons helter skelter around the countryside."

Grimbledung frowned, "So how'my supposed to get back?"

"There's always walking." The doctor shook the parchment at Grimbledung again, "You are after all, *fit and alive* now." He moved forward and poked him in the chest with it, "At no cost to you, need I remind you. The least you can do is just go."

"Go?"

"Away."

"What if I hung out for a couple of days? Would there be a wagon going then? Some Golem supply train or something? There's always a need for clay pots and table legs with Golems around."

Doc Marone shook the parchment nervously, "No, I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

Doc Marone moved back to the table, "I'll be honest with you Mister Gnome. You creep out the Golems."

Grimbledung blinked at him, "What?"

"The last time you were here, they took a vote. It was unanimous."

"Yeah?"

"You give them the creeping willies."

Grimbledung's shoulders sagged, "Well, that's a hard pill to swallow. Not even the Golems want me around. You know, maybe I *do* need to change what I'm doing."

"Take a look at those life choices I mentioned earlier," suggested the doctor.

Grimbledung brightened up, "Can I talk to them? Maybe work things out so they'll carry me to town? It's never good to have Golems upset with you."

"Oh, no, they're not upset. Not upset at all. Just creeped out. And I'm sure they would feel better... we'd *all* feel better if you were on your way." The doctor sat back down at the table and unrolled his parchment, hoping that would be enough to get the Gnome moving in the right direction- out of the Garrison.

It wasn't.

"Well, I guess I'll head out then, Doc. Say, do I get a bag or something before I go?"

"What now? You want a loot bag in addition to being revived *at no cost*? Good grief!"

"Well, it's a long way and all and maybe a small snack and something to drink would be nice since it's a long way and seeing as how I'm going to have to walk it because I can't get a ride so I'll probably get a little hungry and you can't eat something without a drink because you can choke and that would really be bad since it's a long way

and I'd probably end up dead and back here so all that walking would have been a waste and I'd have to start all over again and then …"

"Fine, fine! I'll go get you something!" He dropped his parchment on the table and stalked towards the door. "You know, you could put *on* your breeches instead of just *holding* them while I'm away." With that, he opened the door and moved out quickly.

"Put on your breeches" mimicked Grimbledung as he put on his breeches, "instead of holding them said Mister I've seen everything." Grimbledung looked around the room. "Two-day trip, huh?" His eyes narrowed.

The doctor returned as Grimbledung was lacing up his breeches. "That was quick."

"When I said this was the only thing keeping you around here, things really moved along."

Grimbledung frowned, "I thought doctors were supposed to have a bedside manner."

"Yeah, mine's bad. Nowhere does it say a *good* bedside manner." The doctor shoved the backpack at Grimbledung, "Well, off you go." He opened the door to emphasize the point. "You got some bread, some cheese, and a skin of water."

"Water?" Began Grimbledung as the doctor shoved him out the door.

"You're lucky you're getting anything with how you behaved the last time you were here. You're lucky they don't ride you out on a rail."

"Would the rail take me all the way to Julesville?" Grimbledung asked hopefully.

"No, only to the outskirts of the Garrison, just inside arrow range. Then it would be stuck in the ground with you tied to it." The doctor narrowed his eyes menacingly. "Within arrow range."

"Well, I'm dashed!"

The doctor closed the door. Loudly. He returned to the table and sat down roughly. "Some people," he remarked. He reached for his parchment. It wasn't there. His eyes narrowed, "That *Gnome*."

"Some people," complained Grimbledung to a passerby. The passerby quickened his pace. "Some people." Grimbledung said again as he waved the parchment at him before stashing it in the pack. Sulking, he left the Garrison. Once outside, he moved to the middle of the road and began walking south.

After only a half an hour he took the backpack off his back. He opened it and began to sing

Got me a neat bag

It's got stuff in it too.

Bread and water and cheese

that I hope isn't bleu!

He pulled out one of the rolls. It was burned. On all sides. Undaunted he continued his song as he rifled through the bag

Not moldy bread that's charred on all sides?

Cheese that smells like its asiago!

With water to wash it down, I can tell my mood not going to improve

But at least I'll not starve, all empty on the inside… sss

Grimbledung scowled, "How do you burn bread on *all* sides?" He howled at the distant Prost Garrison, "HOW?" He examined the bread. "What? Do you burn the bottom, then carefully turn to get the top, then prop it up on its sides to do them too?" Without realizing it, he had described the baking process perfectly. Grimbledung waved a blackened and charred roll at the garrison as he dropped to his knees, "You maniacs burned it all up, damn you! Damn you all at Prost Garrison!" He blinked away tears of rage. With a shrug, he took a bite of the roll. The charred-ness was only the outer layer; the inside was soft and brown. He glowered at the garrison, "I still don't like you people," he

said as he stood. "You'll never have *me* come by to foist burned rolls on again!" he threatened. "Ever!"

It was an empty threat- he would be back much sooner than he expected. Or they expected, for that matter.



Grimbledung sighed as he trudged along the road. "Ohh! A headless orc riding a unicorn!" he said to no one in particular as he gazed up at the sky.

"It's going to be a long and boring two days," he lamented.

He was correct… On both counts.

Twenty-Four
Wherein Big Julie Worries About Her Town
Rightfully So

Big Julie walked down the main street of the town. The citizens were tense- she could see it on their faces as they passed. Some nodded wordlessly as they passed by, others just stared at the ground. They all knew the Halflings were nearby and planning to take the town. That was the word on the street anyway. Not rumors by any means- several people had been accosted and questioned by the Halflings. Unfortunately, not all had returned. Of the few who made it back from their harrowing encounter in the Vale, the news spread quickly; the Halflings were coming.

Big Julie was half hoping for the attack to come soon- if nothing else so that she wouldn't have to deal with any more Booby Wands as they were now being called, that had been ratcheting up the tension as tight as a drum ever since Grimbledung had been killed by one. *Fortunate* Grimbledung. Luckily, he had just been killed by the wand. True, several others had also lost their lives as well, but two poor people had been completely obliterated. There was no coming back from *that* sort of magic. On top of that, two stores had been flooded when Water Wands had gone off unexpectedly. One was merely flooded out, water-logged goods strewn about the street. The other was split open like a cardboard box after it filled with water. A tidal wave had run down the street, much to the joy of the local youths. Adults however, found no humor in it.

The town wasn't even old enough to need a good cleaning! Julie thought sourly. Now it wouldn't last long enough to even make it to being called grungy. The best option was to hunker down and wait for the King to send Royal Troops to liberate the town, or even possibly the local Dragon Brigade (local 1753). Not that either were liable to help. She stopped in the middle of the street and looked around. It wouldn't be long now.

"Yer gonna get run over Mayoress," tut-tutted a wagon driver as he moved by slowly, "standin' in the street like that. 'member you've got a

reelection to run when this is over," he said reassuringly as he continued down the street.

"Thanks," she replied. With a sigh, she turned towards Nulu's worksite. It'll be nice to only have to worry about an election campaign instead of a Halfling campaign. Maybe a visit with Pinkie would lift her spirits. Someone is bound to come to our help, she mused.

She was correct… On both counts.

Twenty-Five.Oh
Julesville Occupied!
First Off

Drimblerod woke up from a sound, uninterrupted sleep. He sat up in bed and smiled. Not once was his slumber interrupted by loud shouts or thumping that often came from Grimbledung's room. His sanity seemed to be nearly back but he still seemed to have issues in his dreams. Loud issues. "Rat, time to get up," he said.

Rat stretched from atop a box. Being a rat, he slept wherever (and whenever he wanted). "What a quiet night that was. Makes me want to sleep in."

"Today's the day we need to go get Grimbledung you know."

"Do we have to? It's been so quiet lately. There've been no ranting, no temper tantrums, no absurd songs," he ticked off on his claw, "and plenty of extra food to go around. You sure we can't just leave him with Prost Garrison?"

"No, we need to go get him, and you know it. Leaving him wouldn't be the proper thing to do."

"Proper for who?"

"Prost Garrison of course. They'd never stand a chance in this war with him up there; they have a Halfling invasion to repel. The last thing they need is Grimbledung's crazy antics to distract them. Why, if we left him there, we'd all be speaking Halfling within the year."

Rat stuck out his tongue. "I didn't look at it that way." He smirked. "Fine, we'll go get the little bucketful of crazy. But can we do it after breakfast?"

"I suppose so," agreed Drimblerod as he got up. "You listen for Nulu while I run out back for a short spell," he said as he stepped out of his bedroom toward the POOPA door.

Rat grinned as he scampered to get the cups and saucers. "Ahh, breakfast. Besides brunch, lunch, afternoon tea, supper, and dinner, it's the most important meal of the day," he explained to no one in particular.

Just as he got the last of the utensils on the table, he heard the bell jingle downstairs. He bolted down the stairs to meet Nulu. "Grim," he shouted as he bolted down the stairs, "Grimbledung get ou… Drimblerod get out here" he corrected himself.

Nulu slid a tray onto the counter, "Today's the day, huh?"

Rat slid to a stop then jumped onto the counter. "I suppose." He smiled at Nulu, "Say, you wanna come up and eat. It'll be nice and quiet so you don't have to rush off."

Nulu laughed. "Grimbledung doesn't scare me that much that I don't come up for breakfast, you silly Rat. I have to keep an eye on my construction site and the workers show up at breakfast time so I drop the tray off on my way there," she explained.

"From what I hear, you have the best foreman in a week's walk. What do *you* have to keep an eye out for?"

"Poachers."

"Someone's stealing materials from your worksite?"

She shook her head, "The foreman."

"Who's going to steal your foreman from your jobsite?" Rat shook his head, "It seems to me that any foreman worth his weight in sawdust wouldn't be lured away." He thought for a moment, "Wait. The same poachers come back day after day?"

Nulu nodded. "Yep."

"I would think that someone of your…" he paused to consider his words carefully.

Nulu raised an eyebrow at him as a warning.

"… your stature in the community would be able to ward off any poachers trying to steal your foreman away."

"Woo."

"Woo? Poachers are *wooing* your foreman?"

"Poacher. Singular."

Rat twitched his whiskers. "What are you talking about? What poacher could ever give *you* a run for your money? Or foreman?"

She shook her head, "A poacher that looks like Big Julie and carrying a basket full of treats made by the Gnoll brothers. And looks like Big Julie. It's a triple threat."

Rat shook his head, "So there's no honor among females when it comes to brawny carpenters then?"

"None at all." She wiped her hands on her smock, "In her defense, if he were a Troll, I'd be bringing *him* this tray of food instead of you. So I need to get out there and keep those workers on their tasks while he's having a lovely little morning picnic." She scrunched up her face, "I should dock his pay."

"Well, I'm dashed. You'd let a strapping, well spoken, business owner Troll come between you, me and my breakfast?"

Nulu laughed as she turned to leave, "For that kind of male, I'd serve you on a stick *as* breakfast."

"I'm dashed!" Rat called after her.

"Delberger's Hand, Rat, you're beginning to sound like Grimbledung. What are you shouting you're dashed about?"

"Females are unstable."

Drimblerod picked up the tray, "You're over a hundred years old and you just made that discovery? Now I'm dashed." He moved to the stairs, "Let's eat, then go get Grimbledung."

Twenty-Five.One
Julesville Occupied!
The Day Before

Corporal Colossus fumed. They marched past the ruins of Aution in silence- all nineteen Halflings. "Take a good look!" he called to the Halflings, "We're going to avenge our lost chance at razing that town! So keep the pace up!"

The Halflings raised their swords and cheered as they went.

"Hey, Col," began Gigantus, "I know you're upset and want to lay waste to those two Gnomes but this isn't the way to go about it."

"What? Are you suggesting that we don't flatten that entire town on top of those two Gnomes?"

Gigantus shook his head, "No, no. Not at all. The problem is that we're going to get there too late in the day."

"So?"

"Well, first off we're down to nineteen of us which isn't as many as we should have for a town that size."

"We're not stopping until reinforcements show up," scowled Colossus. "We're more than a match for that town. You going soft on me?"

Gigantus grabbed his fellow Corporal by the arm, bringing him to a standstill, "Now listen good, *Corporal*. Don't forget who's in charge of this operation. I know your woman was killed by those Gnomes but you're not going to louse up my operation because you're all sad inside."

Colossus glowered at Gigantus, "You better get to your point quick, because we've got some place to be."

Gigantus exhaled, then said calmly, "Listen, Col; you're just not thinking straight." He pointed in the direction of the town, "So when do

you figure we're going to get there to exact your revenge, esteemed Corporal?"

Colossus looked from his partner toward Julesville. "I'd say in another four hours if we keep this pace."

"Right. And by then you'll have maybe two hours of daylight to get your occupation set up with a bunch of march-weary troops."

Colossus looked in the direction of the town again then back at Gigantus, "So?"

"That's plenty of time if we had twice as many soldiers. What we're going to do is get there with those march-weary troops who are then going to be up all night dealing with locals that aren't pleased we're there, so they won't get any rest so the next day will be even tougher. And that's not counting losing any of them during the night while we deal with rabble rousers on their own turf, at night." He put his hand on the other's shoulder. "With what we have, we should stop in a couple of hours so we're close but not that close. That way we can march in there tomorrow morning and have the whole day to get set up. Both the day and us, nice and fresh."

Colossus frowned. *Another day.* "Fine. You've made your point," he conceded to Gigantus. He then turned to the soldiers who had stopped to watch the exchange. "In case you didn't hear, we've got about two hours of hard marching ahead of us then a good night's sleep. *Tomorrow* we'll be dealing with that town."

"Huzzah!" cheered several of the Halflings.

"That'll be fine by me," snarled Colossus. "Forward!" He pointed with his sword as the Halflings picked up their pace.

Twenty-Five.Two
Julesville Occupied!

The next morning, or actually, back to First Off

Drimblerod and Rat sat and ate in silence.

"You know," began Rat between bites, "breakfast is a little quiet without Grim around."

Drimblerod nodded. "Wanna go get him?"

Rat surveyed the still-uneaten food on the table, "What'll we do with all this food? We can't waste it."

"We'll pack it as a snack for the trip," suggested Drimblerod.

Rat nodded, "That sounds better than those mixed trails Grim had me eating when we went for the Abyssmal Box."

"Mixed trails?"

Rat shook his fur, "It was this absurd concoction of nuts, berries, and bits of sweets that he mixed together in a bag to eat while walking around. He called it Mixed Trails. It'll never catch on. I was only humoring him by eating it."

"I thought eating was serious business with you," teased Drimblerod. "Humoring?"

"You know what I mean."

"Mixed Trails? The name is kind of catchy. We could market it to adventurers with a name like that."

"Don't you get hooked on it," warned Rat, "if anything it's addictive stuff and you end up eating too much of it."

"It had you thinking you ate too much? Now I know I gotta try some."

"Fine, fine. Grim can whip some up for you." Rat shook his fur. "If you get the wagon, I'll put this stuff in a basket," offered Rat, "so we can go get some crazy wrapped in a Grimbledung skin suit."

"On *that note*, I'll go get the wagon." Drimblerod went to the stairs.

"Remember the little wagon is still broken so we need to take the big one," reminded Rat.

Drimblerod shook his head as he went down the stairs. "That will slow us down." He left the shop and moved to the side of it. Along the side of the building was their wagon- Grimbledung's previous wand shop. There was a faint glow between it and the side of the building. Even though the town was still small and everyone knew each other, the temptation of a full-sized wagon still required some magic to ensure it remained in place overnight. A handy spell kept it firmly attached to the side of the building. The Gnomes had decided that if someone strong enough to pull the wagon and the half of the building it was locked to, away during the night, who were they to say otherwise?

Drimblerod drew his wand and aimed it at the wagon

Boom Un Shack a Laka!

Boom Un Shak a Laka

BOOM!

he intoned as he moved the wand back and forth between the wagon and the shop.

Obediently, the haze dissipated.

With several tugs, he pulled the wagon to the front of the shop. Rat came out of the door backwards just as he got there. He was dragging a large basket by his teeth as he went.

"Okay Rat, now for another couple of nice, quiet days on the road," said Drimblerod, "it's just what we need before getting Grimbledung back."

Two humans ran past.

Drimblerod glanced at them as they went.

They were followed by three other townsfolk. Then several more.

"I have got to stop saying things like that," muttered Drimblerod. As a passerby ran past, Drimblerod tapped him, "What's the rush?" He called after the Elf.

The Elf never broke stride. "Halflings!" he called over his shoulder.

"You really have got to stop saying things like that," scolded Rat.

"Drim!" Nulu called from across the street, "Get over here! We've got trouble!" She still seemed to be carrying the uprooted tree. She motioned for him urgently with it. Several passersby ducked as she swung it around. Forgetting the wagon, both he and Rat scampered across the street, dodging fleeing townsfolk as they went. "The Halflings are here! We need to find Big Julie and Akita and quick!"

"What'r we going to do about getting Grimbledung back? Rat and I were heading out to get him." Drimblerod shook his head, "We can't just leave him up at Prost Garrison."

Nulu stared at Drimblerod. "So what was your plan?"

"Well, Rat and I were going to head to Prost Garrison and get Grim, of course."

"With the wagon?"

"Yeah."

"Who's going to be pulling the wagon, if you don't mind me asking?"

Drimblerod looked from Rat to the wagon and back again. "Oh; right." Then he looked at Nulu. "Well, nuts."

"Exactly. He's going to have to find his own way back," said Nulu, "we've got bigger problems with these Halflings rolling into town."

"I hope he can find his way back on his own," said Drimblerod as he sidestepped to avoid being hit by a Dwarf running past.

Nulu looked down at Drimblerod, "How hard can it be? There's one road that runs from there to here. And it starts there at the Anti-Ogre Wall. You just get on the road and head south. There's no way you can get lost!"

"There's no way you or I could get lost, but remember we're talking about Grimbledung."

"Well, the odds are in his favor he can find his way back."

Drimblerod shrugged. "If you say so. I'd just feel better if we went and got him, that's all."

Nulu smiled. "I'm sure the guards up there would feel better if we went and got him as well." She laughed. "From what I hear, even the Golems up there were shook up the last time he was there. They even had to decommission one of them."

"Really?"

Nulu nodded. "Yeah. I don't expect they'll keep him around too long seeing as how they're preparing for the invasion. They can't leave it all up to Frank's Keep"[32]

"Fine. Let's see what the situation is here. If we can drum up some sort of Brute Squad, then maybe I can head north and at least meet him halfway."

Nulu nodded at her friend, "That sounds like a plan."

The three moved off in search of Big Julie and Akita.

Twenty-Five.Three
Julesville Occupied!

At that very moment

"So, the plan is," Gigantus said to the marching Halflings, "to make sure no one leaves, and no one gets out."

"Why's that?" Asked Colossus. "What do we care if people leave?"

Gigantus raised an eyebrow at his fellow Corporal.

Colossus shook his head, "No, no. I don't have a problem with the order. This is my first occupation and I'm just curious. The less people in town, the less we have to worry about, right?"

Now Gigantus shook his head, "You're looking at it the wrong way," he explained. "The way it works is you want to keep everyone in town because if people are able to successfully leave, we'll find ourselves occupying a ghost town."

"Wouldn't that make for a nice and simple occupation?"

"Sure, but for starters, that'd mean we'd have to cook our own food."

"Cook our own food?"

Gigantus nodded. "Right, you see right now, we can barge into any restaurant. For example, that place with the monkeys on the sign."

"I'm not too sure of that place."

"Me neither," agreed Gigantus, "but just for instance, if we go in there while we're running the town, we get to eat for free…"

Colossus stuck out his tongue.

Gigantus ignored him, "… and we don't have to clean up our plates or do our own cooking. Same with wherever we go to sleep."

"You know, from what I hear, I don't even know if they clean their plates in there."

Gigantus squirmed, "Fine. We'll send over a couple of Privates to eat there first to see what it's like."

Colossus shook his head, "We could get brought up on charges for that. But I get your point; keep the citizens in town to do our bidding." He thought for a moment, "So why don't we want people showing up? That'd mean more people to serve us, right?"

"Oh no, that's not what happens. Word gets out that there's occupiers in a town and then mercenaries show up to try to make some money getting rid of them. We'd wake up one morning and find ourselves up to our necks in mercenaries. Or up to our necks in dirt *because* of mercenaries."

"But if they kill us, they have to know that the Lord High Priest will wipe out the town, right?"

Gigantus shrugged, "If they're thinking that far out. Keep in mind that even though it may be hazardous to their health, short-sighted, riled up locals would be hazardous to *our* health."

Colossus nodded. "I didn't look at it that way. So no one in or out."

"Right." Gigantus turned and looked at the other Halflings, "Everyone got that?"

They all nodded in response. Except for the one Halfling who was gazing at the sky as he walked.

Within half an hour, the Halflings marched into town. Colossus looked at the sun. It was very low in the sky still. The whole day was before them. He turned and nodded knowingly to Gigantus. Gigantus returned the nod.

"Give me three groups!" commanded Gigantus. "One goes to the windmill, one with me and Colossus, and another to the far side of town! No one goes in or out without approval!" After only a moment's thought, he pointed at a Halfling that was looking up at the sky, "You come with me, dimwit!"

The Halfling smiled at Gigantus. He hadn't been paying the slightest bit of attention.

Obediently, the rest of the men split up and made their way to their assigned locations. Setting up an occupation was no time for free thinking. 'Discharged from service with extreme prejudice' was always a possibility in the Halfling Army- even more so when an Operation was going on.

"Colossus, let's go find the Mayor to make sure there are no misunderstandings," said Corporal Gigantus. He drew his sword as they moved to the center of town, in search for the Mayor.

Big Julie pointed down the street, "There she is, Akita. And she's got Drimblerod with her."

Akita nodded. "We need to get a plan together before things get out of control," he said as several people rushed past them. "Or more out of control." Akita shook his head, "I'll get their attention." He tilted his head back and let out a long howl.

Nulu heard Akita's howl and turned to look down the street. "Drim, there's Julie and Akita!" She waved at them. "Maybe they have a handle on the situation."

In short order, the two groups met in front of the butcher shop.

"Nice tree," said Julie with a smile, "that's a good signature weapon. It relays just the right message."

Nulu hefted the eight-foot tall sapling off her shoulder and leaned on it like a staff. The end now appeared to have been sharpened into a point and a sheet of metal had been hammered around it. The point now gleamed in the sun as it ended in a disturbingly sharp point. "It is definitely a good attention-getter." She looked at it appraisingly. "So, what's the situation?" She asked.

"The Halflings are here and are spreading out to take control of the town," explained Big Julie, "and I imagine they are looking for me since I'm the Mayor."

Akita nodded, "That's prolly right. They want to make sure there's no trouble so they'll keep the government and leaders in line from the get-go."

"So how long do we have to put up with them before the King sends help?" Asked Drimblerod. "What; two, three days?"

Julie shuffled her feet.

"A week?"

"Drim, you know we're a new town, right?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with anything?"

"Well," began Julie, "the King has a kingdom to run and to do that he needs money. Money that he collects as taxes that he levies against his subjects…"

"Julie, I don't need a civics lesson right now," interrupted Drimblerod, "What I want to know is how long we will have to be subjected to this Halfling occupancy?"

Julie stared hard at Drimblerod. "The King's probably not going to send troops because we haven't paid any taxes."

"Haven't paid any taxes?" Drimblerod flailed his arms. "You've not paid our taxes??"

Julie frowned at Drimblerod, "Hey, I haven't even *collected* our taxes. Have *you* paid any taxes since you set up shop?"

Drimblerod opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

"Wait a second there, Julie. If you've not collected taxes, who's payin' my salary?" Asked Akita. "What little there is of it," he added sourly.

Julie shuffled her feet again. "I'm paying them out of pocket while the coffers are empty."

"I don't feel good about that; you payin' me outta pocket."

"Want me to stop?"

Akita smirked, "I don't feel *that* bad about it. But ya know, if you're short on coins, you tell me. You don't just pay me outta pocket."

Julie shook her head, "Oh no, *I'm* not short of money. I'm loaded. It's the *town* that has no funds."

"Yerrrr loaded? Then why'd I take a pay cut?" He squinted his glowing eyes at her mischievously.

"THIS IS NOT THE TIME!" Nulu howled. "We're not going to be around long enough for the King to even know there was a town here if we don't get our act together!" She looked at the group. "Rat. You go see what you can find out about the number of Halflings in town and where they are setting up their field posts. Drimblerod, you and Julie need to come with me and Akita to confront the leader of the Halflings. If we show them any sort of weakness or conf…" she stopped and stared at Rat. "Rat! Go see what you can find out about the number of Halflings!"

Rat startled, "Sorry! I thought I needed to hear the rest of this as well! Sorry!" With that, Rat hopped off Drimblerod's shoulder and scampered away between the feet of the also-scampering townsfolk.

Nulu took a deep breath. "All right. If we show them any sort of weakness or confusion, that will let them know that they can just walk all over us. If we can keep them on the defensive, we should be fine."

A passerby ran right between the group. Nulu reached out and grabbed the man by the collar. "Hey you!" She said.

"Edward," said the man.

"Edward. Quit running around like a Brownie at a Giants' convention."

"It seemed like the thing to do at the time."

Nulu grabbed the man and turned him to face her directly. "OK, listen up because this is important. Life-saving important."

The man gulped.

"Halflings are like wild animals. They chase down and attack things that run from them. The best way to get killed right now is to be running. Walk calmly and quietly where you need to go is what you must do, got it?"

The man gulped again. "I had no idea."

Nulu nodded at the man, "Not many people realize that, so spread the word. Walk calmly and quietly." She let go of the man.

He took a deep, nervous breath then turned and walked away fairly slowly and almost calmly. As he went, he moved close to another and whispered furiously into his ear. With mutual nods, they both parted ways, walking sort of slowly, and slightly calmly.

"I never knew that about Halflings," commented Julie.

"It's not the least bit true. However, if we can keep people from being in a state of panic, we may very possibly last the week."

Rat bolted back to the group. "Nineteen," he said breathlessly. "There's nineteen of them in all. I'll find out where they're setting up shop. I just thought you'd like that bit of information sooner rather than later." With that, he ran off again.

Akita growled, "Listen Nulu, I apprrrreciate you tryin't keep people calm and all but I'm just not gonna do it. So there're nineteen of them. I know that I can take a good five or six. You can handle that much as well. If Drimblerod's wand, and Julie and her new beau can handle the last four or so, then this occupation is over before it starts."

Nulu shook her head. "Just because *we* might not have a King backing us, doesn't mean *they* don't." She frowned. "Sure, we can get rid of these runts without any real trouble. But once the Lord High Priest of the Halfling Empire finds out, we'll have nineteen *dozen* Halflings rolling through here." She shook her head again, "No, we need to deal with them without raising any suspicions."

"That's gonna get on my nerves."

"Well, Akita, that's the best we can do right now. I've dealt with Halflings before and they're nothing but trouble. Well, let's go find their leader and try to see who's who in the zoo." Nulu turned and scanned the street. She still had not spotted any Halflings, but with just over a handful of them in town, the odds were against her.

"Well, let's go then," said Akita as he set out, "we know they'rrre comin' from the Vale so they'll be on the north end of town. We should go there first. Still, I'd feel better just wiping the streets with them." He scowled.

"Well we can't do that. Besides," Julie looked around, "there's no volunteers to be had." Every person was furiously avoiding eye contact with her or the Constable- the two people who could deputize anyone that even seemed remotely useful.

"That's rrrrediculus that I can't get a group together to get rid of nineteen measly Halflings" He looked around the street. There were almost half again as many as that moving about the streets invisible. He eyed one that had stopped close by to listen in on them. "There's plenty of able bodies around. I'm sure I can just manditorrrrily deputize who I need to," he said in the direction of the Elf standing beside him holding a Tea Pot of Invisibility.



The Elf's eyes got large as he quickly moved off. The word on the street was that Akita could see through invisibility spells, charms, and clothing. Even the Tea Pots! But since he had never actually confronted anyone directly, everyone clung to the hope that it wasn't true in their particular case.

The four of them moved down the center of the street, spreading the lie of walking calmly and quietly as they went…

Twenty-Five. Four
Julesville Occupied!

A Little Later

Julie, Nulu, Drimblerod, and Akita continued down the main street of Julesville. Finally, ahead of them they spotted a group of Halflings. Two were hammering boards together into what looked like a large, albeit low to the ground, bar.

Rat came barreling at the group from a side street. Without breaking stride, he leapt for -and landed on- Drimblerod's shoulder. He grabbed Drimblerod's ear to stop his forward momentum. "OK," he panted, "Ok. Got some information."

The group stopped in the middle of the street to look at Rat. "What'd you find out?" Asked Akita.

"There's nineteen of them set up in three groups. This one at this end of town," he pointed at the group a mere 100 feet from them, "one at the other end of town heading south, and one that seems to be wandering around shoving people and being a general nuisance."

"So much for getting' them in one place and killin' them all."

"Right Akita, I thought about that as well, but we'd never be able to get them all in one place to be sure no one got away," agreed Rat.

"Thanks Rat," said Julie. "Well, we might as well go over to see what they have to say."

"They settin' up a little bar in the middle of the street?" Asked Akita as he watched the Halflings work.

"If they're here to serve drinks, maybe they're not all bad," offered Drimblerod, "I could use a drink."

Nulu shook her head, "That's a command post. And probably where they'll be gathering their taxes of money, goods, and anything else that comes to mind. That's standard for a Halfling occupation."

"I hope this works out," said Drimblerod as he moved to the rear of the group, "I'll let you do all the talking."

"You know, I can't believe I'm saying it, but I wish Grimbledung were here," said Rat from Drimblerod's shoulder.

The three gaped at him. "Really?" Nulu chuckled, "I'm going to tell him you said that, you know."

"Well, it's true. If Grimbledung were here, his antics might have kept these Halflings on their heels long enough for us to come up with a decent plan. As it stands right now, they're dealing with a bunch of sane people that aren't going to do anything crazy or out of the ordinary."

Akita bent down and picked up a fist-sized stone. "Like this?" He squinted at the distant Halflings, reared back and heaved the rock in their direction with a grunt. The rock appeared to fly in an almost flat trajectory[33] and struck a Halfling in the head, hitting with such force that the Halfling flew head over heels when it struck him. And audible 'gong' was heard as the rock his hit helmet. After it struck, Akita snickered. "I may make that my new hobby." The group looked anxiously as the Halfling lay motionless on the ground. "Eighteen?" Offered Akita. The Halfling stirred and with the help of his compatriots, got to his feet- shakily. "Bah. Nineteen it is," concluded Akita.

"No more antics. Crazy or otherwise," warned Julie, "let's go talk to them." As they began walking toward the Halflings she turned to Akita, "That was a real nice throw."

"Keep the antics down but we need to be abrasive and combative with them," warned Nulu, "if we sound like pushovers, we're doomed."

"See? That's Grimbledung all day long," lamented Rat.

As the group approached, several of the Halflings stopped their hammering to watch- thanks to Nulu's absurdly dangerous looking tree-cum-weapon and what appeared to be a werewolf in the group. "Who's in charge here?" Asked Julie tersely as Nulu once again took to leaning on her tree. Akita just squinted at them with glowing eyes.

Twenty-Five.Five
Julesville Occupied!
Martial Law

"We declare martial law in the name of the Great Halfling Empire!" declared one of the Halflings. Of the Great Halfling Empire.

"Yeah, yeah, that much we know," said Julie sourly. "What else you got?" She rested her hand on the hilt of her wickedly curved falchion. It was easily as long as the Halfling. For a moment, she considered just splitting the Halfling from top to bottom with one stroke. Even though she felt it would mean certain doom to the town, it would make her feel infinitely better.

Ironically, her doing so would not have raised even an eyebrow. The 'partitioning' of the Halfling would have just been an annotation in the 'acceptable losses' part of the Weekly Occupation Overview Transcript (WOOT!) provided to the Lord High Priest. Chutzpa, remember?

The Halfling squinted his eyes, "You all better all behave yourselves." The last part he directed at Akita. Although 'Trolless wielding a tree' was formidable, 'Werewolf' trumped her easily; after all, being attacked by a tree wasn't contagious.

"See?" Said Rat, "Grimbledung could have done all sorts of things with that one sentence. We'd have been stuck here for fifteen minutes and this group would be confused the rest of the day."

"Silence rat!" commanded one of the Halflings as he waved his hammer, "we don't negotiate with common *rodents*!"

"Common rodents? *Common rodents?* Listen pal, you and your ilk may have marched into town just now and you may *think* you run things, but keep this in mind..." Rat narrowed his good eye at the Halfling as he stood on his hind legs. From his perch on Drimblerod, he was now looking down at the Halfling, "I'm no common rodent. I'm the *King* of Rodents. And unless you want to find yourselves at the center of a rat and flea infestation like the Lands has never seen before," bluffed Rat, "you'll do well to keep that tongue behind your teeth. You push *me*

the wrong way, and you and your Lord High Priest'll have rats and fleas up to your ears!"

"Grim would be proud," commented Nulu.

Ignoring the entire exchange, Julie pressed on, "You never answered my question, Halfling. Who's in charge here? Is it you?" She gripped the hilt of her wickedly curved falchion and slid it a fraction of an inch out of its hilt.

The Halfling looked up at Big Julie, "I'm in charge of this outpost." He puffed up his chest.

"Who's in charge *overall*. I'm not going to waste my time with some underling in charge of some hastily hammered together heap." Her falchion came out another inch. "Find me who's in charge and be snappy about it."

The Halflings looked at each other nervously. Belligerent locals hadn't been discussed in the early morning, pre-invasion meeting. New to the Army, they were under the impression that townsfolk were overcome with fear when the Army of the Lord High Priest of Halflings showed up. That's what the recruiters had told them anyway. At no time were huge, falchion-wielding humans, Trolls, Rat Kings, *or werewolves* discussed! "Get one of the corporals," commanded the Private. Then he remembered one of the orders from the morning pre-invasion meeting. "Who has something to donate to the Great Halfling Empire?" He pointed to the still under construction bar, "Just place it on the bar."

The group stared at the Halfling. "How about I donate your head," offered Drimblerod, "you don't seem to be using it at the moment."

Nulu looked down at Drimblerod, "It's like you're channeling him." She smirked, "It's eerie."

"So, nothing to donate then?" Tried the Halfling. The orders had been explicit. "We'll accept most anything. Currency is preferred though."

"Your name isn't Sixtoes by any chance, is it?"

The Halfling glowered at Drimblerod, "Silence Gnome!" He waved his hammer around.

"Seems like they have their own special brand of craziness with them."

The Halfling ignored Drimblerod's baiting. He looked past the group- behind them- "Ahh! Now you'll get it. The Corporals are here." He squinted his eyes menacingly.

The group turned around to face the approaching contingent of Halflings, "All right Drimblerod," began Julie, "let's not push this group until we see what they're all about."

"I'm telling ya," snarled Akita, "now we got over half of them in one place. Let's just get rid of them." He hunched down and placed his front paws barely on the ground as if he were ready to start a sprint. Seemingly coiled to spring, a tendril of drool began to hang down from his mouth. He let it.

Drimblerod shuddered, "Gads you've got *me* nervous and I'm on your side!"

The approaching Halfling slowed. Akita became the center of their attention.

"Let's see what they think of this." Nulu shifted the tree to where the point was down and the tightly gnarled cluster of dirt-encrusted roots were now skyward. The tree had gone from being a single-target-poking spear to a multi-target-crushing mace. "Love my Shillelagh," she said. Even though it was not exactly shillelagh-shaped, she had adopted Grimbledung's description for her uprooted tree.

As Akita and Nulu fought for the Halflings nervous attention, their approach slowed even more. Not wanting to be left out, Drimblerod drew his wand. To his annoyance, the Halflings didn't seem to notice.

Within two moments, the two groups faced each other. "Which of you is in charge of this rabble?" Asked Julie.

Colossus and Gigantus exchanged glances.

"Want to start with an easier question?" Offered Drimblerod quickly, "who's the highest-ranking Shorter[34] here?" He grinned. It wasn't often that a Gnome got to use that particular insult.

"What? I can't hear you over my stripes," sneered the Corporal Gigantus as he pointed to his two chevrons.

"So corporal…" Began Julie

"Gigantus" offered Corporal Gigantus.

Even though Halfling naming conventions were well known among all the races, it still brought chuckles when heard.

Drimblerod chuckled.

See?

"So, Corporal Gigantus," continued Julie quickly, lest Drimblerod's chuckle lead to an all-out brawl that would fit nicely into Akita's plan for ending the occupation. "What are your intentions with my town?"

"Mayor…?"

"Julie" offered Big Julie. There was no sense in getting a chuckle from the Halflings by using the 'Big' part of her name. That chuckle could lead to *her* bringing Akita's plan for the end of the occupation to fruition.

"Mayoress Julie," continued Gigantus formally yet still condescendingly, "we are here as representatives of the Lord High Priest of the Great Halfling Empire." He stopped to let that sink in. The motley crew before him didn't seem to let it. He pushed on, "This town is to be the forward operating base for the lead contingent of the Army of the Lord High Priest of Halflings, and we're here to occupy this town until such time as the Lord High Priest decides we don't need to anymore."

"That was a mouthful. Then you'll leave?" Asked Drimblerod hopefully.

One of the Halflings behind the Corporal had been staring up at the skies. He looked at Drimblerod, "That or burn it to the ground," he offered. He drew a sharp glance from Corporal Gigantus. The Halfling sneered at Julie (even though he had answered Drimblerod) and didn't notice the silent rebuke.

Big Julie squinted at the Halfling "So what incentive do we have to go along with this occupation then?" She asked as she snapped her falchion loudly back into its sheath. Akita's plan was beginning to look better and better.

Emboldened by being addressed by the mayor, Private Cavernous snickered at the woman, "If you resist, you'll just die running away!"

"That doesn't even make sense," said Julie, confused.

"No, it doesn't," agreed Corporal Gigantus as he turned to face the private. "The saying is 'if you run, you'll just die tired', but it doesn't apply in this case, you dimwit."

Private Cavernous had joined the Great Army of the Lord High Priest as soon as he was eligible. "I figured I'd join before I got drafted!" He had told the recruiter. Even though there was no draft going on. Or had been. Ever. The recruiter (as with all recruiters, was a notorious teller of untruths and advantage-taker of the ill-informed[35]) nodded knowingly at the potential recruit. "Good plan, good plan," he had ~~lied to~~ *assured* the young recruit. Born of dimwitted parents and immediately named Cavernous because it sounded large, little Cavernous had spent his youth being homeschooled. By dimwitted parents. Ironically because of this, Cavernous was probably the only properly-named Halfling in the entire of the Kingdom; his head was literally almost completely empty. Cavernous.

"Haven't I told you not to talk?" Asked Gigantus angrily.

"What, lately?"

"Shut UP!"

"What, now?"

The other Halflings shook their heads. They had heard the same exchange many times during the past month. Several times just today, in fact.

"I swear, if you weren't related to the Lord High Priest as a third cousin twice removed[36]…" He raised his hand and slapped Private Cavernous across the face, "Not another word until after lunch!" He had learned (unfortunately) that long-term orders had no chance of being followed as Cavernous would invariably forget them. On average, he had about three hours before his orders were lost in the cavernous mind of Cavernous.

"Want us to come back once you're done with your lover's quarrel?"

Corporal Gigantus spun on Nulu, "Shaddap you *Troll*!"

Nulu pulled the sharpened end of her Shillelagh out of the ground with a tug. "Those are gonna be the last words you say, *Shorter*."

"Lemmie bite his head off," said Akita as he ran his tongue from one side of his mouth, across his nose, and to the other side. He let it hang out once it got there. To add to the effect, he straightened upright. Completely. He towered over everyone except Julie and Nulu. And they only had him by a little. Even so, they didn't have claws. Or glowing yellow eyes. Or were possibly contagious. Taking all factors into account, he had them by a good foot when it came to sheer intimidation.

The entire group of Halflings took a step back. "Hold on a moment," said another Halfling.

Nulu noticed he also had a set of chevrons on his collar. "Yeah?" She growled at him, "what do you have to say for yourself, Corporal?" She tightened her grip on her Shillelagh.

"Calm down. We are here to hold the town until the Lord High Priest arrives," lied Colossus. "And at that point you will be able to meet with him to discuss the future of this town as part of the Great Halfling Empire." Emboldened by his lie, he pressed on, "So we're not looking for trouble. We just want to make sure the local populace goes about their regular, normal business until then."

Nulu eyed the Halfling who had spouted what sounded like the most amount of lies in a single breath she had ever heard. "Who are you?"

"Corporal Colossus," said Corporal Colossus. "And you are?"

"I'm Nulu. Owner and operator of the Duck Inn and Dine. The bar, restaurant and inn for this town. Among other things."

"The only one?" Asked Gigantus genuinely surprised, "really?"

"Well, we're a new town. Still expanding, remember?" Said Julie defensively.

"Well, we're going to need a place to stay, so your place is going to be it," said Corporal Colossus.

"I don't recommend it."

"You don't recommend your own place? Why in the lands not?"

"It's still under construction. You might as well sleep under the stars," Nulu said. "New town, remember? The roof's not even on yet and you'd be sleeping on dirt." Casually, she stuck the pointed end of her weapon back onto the hard-packed ground and leaned on it. It was so sharp it sank in several inches quickly and easily.

The Halflings took another step back.

"Sorry we don't have a place for you Gents to stay," said Julie amicably, "It's a shame, really."

Nulu nodded solemnly as Julie lamented.

"So do you need help finding your way out of town?" Julie smiled hopefully.

Drimblerod nodded, "It's easy, really. Just head in any direction and keep walking."

Akita chuckled as he crouched back down. He had been straining to stand as tall as possible. The last thing he needed was a back spasm in front of a bunch of Halflings. *That* would be hard to live down.

Corporal Gigantus narrowed his eyes, "Sorry to break it to you Gals but we're gonna be here for a while so you might as well get used to it. Go about your business and we'll go about ours."

Big Julie shook her head, "And never the twain shall meet, would be too much to ask for."

"Watch your mouth in mixed company!" interjected Cavernous. All eyes turned to him. Realization came to him and he quickly covered his mouth; it wasn't lunchtime yet.

"*Twain* is not a curse word, you dimwit!" Said Gigantus as he once again slapped Cavernous across the head. "And the one who said it *is* mixed company!" He slapped him again for good measure. He shook his head. "How embarrassing."

Julie chuckled, "Don't worry about it Corporal, we've got one of them too."

"Alrrrrright then, go about yer business," said Akita, "but interfere with the law around here and you're gonna have issues."

"Issues with the law? We're declaring Martial Law, wolf. There's no issues to discuss."

"Well, that all depends on how amenable the Constable will be to yer trying to take over his rrrracket."

"All right. You people keep to yourselves, and I'll keep my people to themselves," said Big Julie as she turned to leave. "You coming, Constable?" She asked. "Let's go Drim."

Akita nodded, "Yeah, Let's go." He squinted at the Halflings.

They all took a step backward.

Unable to restrain himself Akita added, "Deputy?"

Nulu turned to look at Akita. His eyes seemed to be smiling. "Right away, Constable," she said as she pulled her weapon from the ground. "Right behind you as always."

One of the Halflings dropped their hammer.

Then another.

The three walked away from the group of Halflings, "Whatever you do, do not look back," said Nulu. "I think we got them shook up. Let's regroup at Julie's place and see if Rat has any more news."

Corporal Colossus turned to look at his fellow Corporal, "A werewolf *and* a Trolless? What kind of lawlessness does this town have to need that kind of muscle?"

Gigantus shrugged, "Maybe they're pushovers. Either way we're to hold here until we hear from the Lord High Priest." He turned and faced the Halflings standing at the collection bar, "And we're going to run this like any other occupation," he said angrily. "Pick up that hammer!" he snarled, "before I use it on your head!"

Quickly the Halfling retrieved his hammer, "Yes Corporal Gigantus, whatever you say." He swapped the hammer to his other hand and rendered a quick salute.

Gigantus returned it. "Fine, fine. Just collect what you can." He smiled. "Because once we burn this place to the ground, we're not gonna go rooting through the ashes looking for loot."

The other Halflings returned his smile. "Yes, Corporal!" they all said in unison.

Corporal Gigantus turned to address the other Halflings. "And you will all ensure that no one leaves *or* comes into town. The last thing I want to do is wake up and find the entire place is empty of citizens, *or worse* full of mercenaries. *No one in or out. At all."*

"Yes, Corporal!" the Halflings all said. Martial Law came with a certain set of rules the citizenry had to follow; looters were shot on sight, no one out on the streets after curfew, and everyone followed every order given to them or they were treated like looters. In the Great Army of the Lord High Priest of Halflings, those rules applied just as much to the occupy-ers as they did to the occupy-ees. Except for the looting of course; that was considered a perk of being the occupy-ers.

Twenty-Six
Wherein the Grand Opening of the Duck Inn and Dine Occurs

(For a little change of pace from doom and gloom)

There was a pattering of small feet just outside the door. Lots of them! Nulu startled awake and bolted upright. '*Halflings*!' she thought frantically. Immediately, she remembered where she was and lay back down to allow her heart to slow.

After only a minute -she had almost become accustomed to this particular way of waking- she sat up and swung her legs off the bed. It was, as far as beds go, very comfortable. Just a bit short.

Nulu stretched as she stood and slipped her feet into furry slippers. "Last day," she said giddily to the well apportioned, yet small room. "Last day here." With a smile she slipped on a long housecoat - *that* was a worthwhile purchase!- and padded to the door.

As Nulu lifted the latch with one hand, she grabbed her toiletries case with the other. The door swung open as she also retrieved her towel. Thanks to several times before, she cautiously peered out into the hallway.

The coast was clear!

Quickly, Nulu moved out of her room and latched the door shut behind her. "A last shower and I'm off," she said to the empty hall as she began to move towards the bathing room.

"Make way! Potty emergency!" Said a voice behind her as she heard other feet clomping towards her.

Quickly she pressed her back against the wall of the hallway as a small Elf scurried by. "How young *are* some of these kids?" Nulu said as she shook her head.

"The Elves are the youngest ones here," said a Dwarfling as he sidled up beside Nulu, "if they show any sort of magical potential that is." He looked up at Nulu. Way up.

She looked down at the youth. Way down.

"Nice robe," he said flatly.

"It's my last day here," she said in a very relieved tone. "*Last day"* Her look became a glower, "How's about we make it a quiet one before I toss you down the hallway." She narrowed her eyes. "Again."

"Glad you stopped by, Miss Nulu!" The Dwarfling scampered away from Nulu, "Don't be a stranger!" he called over his shoulder as he moved down the hall towards the male baths room.

Nulu shook her head as she too moved in the same direction. "No kids. Not for years," she said to a passing Human youth.

The Human nodded approvingly, "Sounds good to me, Miss Nulu."

After moving to town, Nulu had spent the night sleeping under the stars. She watched the full moon settle for the evening as the stars wandered above her. Content, she was sure she could easily just camp out until her new business was built. After meeting Pinkie, she was sure it would be done on time. Less than a month of relaxing, carefree camping to settle her nerves; just what the doctor ordered! On the fifth day, she woke early that morning to a breezy, cloud filled red sky. '*How pretty*', she had remarked. Right before the storm unleashed its fury. ~~After gathering the remaining articles she owned in the entire lands.~~ After gathering the completely soaked remaining articles she owned in the entire lands that hadn't floated off, she slogged her way to town and into the cafeteria. Crash immediately served her some hot cocoa.

Maybe it was Rush.

In any case, after one of the Gnoll brothers served her cocoa, Julie spotted her and had insisted on Nulu staying in the dormitories in a nice, comfortable bed.

That was too short.

Nulu turned the corner and pushed the swinging door to the girls bathing room open. There at the sink nearest the window was the self-same small Elf girl. "Aren't you a little old for a potty emergency?" Nulu asked.

The Elfling looked over at Nulu and shrugged. "This is my favorite sink."

"That's your emergency?"

"*This is my favorite sink*." The little Elfling narrowed smoldering eyes at Nulu.

Nulu blinked back at her. "Not for years, I tell you. *Years*." With a sigh, she went about her morning routine. At the sinks that she had to get on her knees to use.

Nulu exited the dormitories onto the main street. Breakfast would wait. Nulu inhaled deeply. "You smell that?" She asked a passerby. She smiled at the man dressed in a bright red shirt and leather breaches and boots.

The passerby looked up at Nulu defensively, "It warn't me!"

"No, no. That's the smell of sole proprietorship." She breathed in again. "It smells great."

"If you say so, Miss Trolless," said Edward. He had long given up trying to figure out the events unfolding around him. "All I'm trying to do is mind my own business and live a quiet life."

Nulu chuckled at the man. "Here?"

Edward shook his head, "Yeah, it's not working out so well." He considered that for a moment, "But I'm still doing better'n most."

"Yeah?"

"I've yet to be hassl'd on the street, or have to make a trip to the Anti-Ogre Wall." He smiled hopefully, "Or to be killed."

"Well, here's hoping, Mister red shirt" Nulu waved to the strange man and headed toward the Duck Inn and Dine. Her Duck Inn and Dine.

Edward nodded at the back of the departing Trolless. If memory served him correctly, this was the Trolless that was often in the middle of whatever dire circumstance had happened to those two Gnomes. He shuddered as he hoped none of their ill-fortune had rubbed off on him. "Keep to yourself, Ed," he said to no one in particular. He smoothed out his lucky red shirt as he made his way to *his* office; the newly opened bank. Edward was the new security officer there and he felt that red was a nice, safe color to wear for security work.[37]

Nulu practically floated along the sidewalk as she made her way to the corner and turned left. Not even a lousy Halfling occupation could dampen her mood. There! There, on the next corner it sat. The Duck Inn and Dine. Her Duck Inn and Dine. Not caring who saw, she skipped the rest of the block to the darkly stained double doors. She clapped her hands together before knocking loudly. "Hello? Anyone home?" She called.

After a long, tortuous minute, the latch of the door began to clatter. Then it stopped.

Silence greeted Nulu.

"Who is it?" Called an absurdly high falsetto voice from inside.

Nulu beamed. "It's Nulu Bentknees. Owner and Operator of the Duck Inn and Dine."

The clattering started anew then the door pulled inward. "Well, why didn't you say so?" Asked Pinkie as she stepped into view. "You're running a little late, I think." He winked at the glowing Trolless.

"Well, there were some problems at the baths in the dormitories."

"That's one sentence you'll never have to say again," said Pinkie as he stepped onto the sidewalk and held out a large iron ring. On it hung six large iron keys. "The only time you'll have to share a bath," he raised an eyebrow, "is if you invite someone in with you."

Nulu snatched the keys from Pinkie's hand and kissed them. Then she kissed Pinkie.

"Well now. That's a fine how do you do," Pinkie grinned at her, "and you haven't even gotten the tour yet. You want it now or later?"

Nulu shook her head, "I'm liable to jump out of my own hide if I wait any longer."

"Well then," Pinkie offered his elbow to Nulu, "let's get on with it."

Nulu stuck her arm through Pinkie's elbow. "Lead the way."

Pinkie looked down at their intertwined elbows then up at Nulu.

Nulu's looked at the man worriedly. "What's wrong?"

"You know, that *seemed* like a good idea, but I think I need my hands free for the tour." He waggled his eyebrows, "Not that having a lovely Trolless on my arm isn't a good way to start the morning."

"Stop that, you." Nulu shoved Pinkie, "Get on with the tour." She motioned into the building.

"Right then." Pinkie stepped in and gestured for Nulu. She stepped in as well but Pinkie didn't move further into the building. By not moving, he kept them now crowded into a small space near the double doors.

"Uhm, Pinkie?" She asked.

He waggled his eyebrows again. Nulu's eyes got large until his voice got serious. "This is why I need my hands." He gestured as he began, "Inside the door you'll notice there's rings above to hang a curtain in the winter. That way people coming in and out don't let in as much of a draft." He pointed at the brass loops mounted in the beam.

"I'd never have thought of that."

He stepped into the larger entry way. "The foyer is set up with a coat check for people that want it, as well as a place for people to get the mud off their feet." He gestured to a half door that seemed to lead into a deep closet. Beside it was a half barrel with a bristly brush mounted bristles-up beside it. Ostensibly, the barrel could be filled with water.

"Nice."

"To your left is the bar and restaurant, to the right is the inn." He pointed in both directions. "Which way first?"

"The bar, I suppose. Then we'll do the upstairs."

Pinkie nodded. He gestured at a deep red, wool curtain that was blocking the way. "So that smoke doesn't flow to the Inn, and to help keep out drafts and dust." He parted the curtains and motioned for Nulu to enter.

Nulu stepped through the curtain into the large dining area. Along the back wall was a long 'L' shaped bar. Behind it was a large mirror with a duck eating a meal at a table painted on it.

Nulu moved between the various sized tables. "Plenty of room." She nodded at the booths. "Those are some nice booths."

Pinkie nodded. "I told you I make nice looking booths." Once again, his voice took a serious tone. "You can seat fifty people in here if you put some at the bar. There's a side exit so that people can leave the bar without using the front door and disturbing the folks in the Inn. It only opens from the inside so you won't have to worry about people coming in that way."

"Nice."

Pinkie pointed at the back wall next to the bar. A lighter red curtain was hung over a doorway there. "That leads to the kitchen. I had the Gnoll Brothers outfit it so you should have everything you need, and then some."

Nulu turned to take it all in. "Nice."

"That's what I hear," said Pinkie with a chuckle. "To the inn then, M'Lady." Once again, he gestured toward the thick red curtain.

Back in the Foyer, Pinkie pointed at a wide set of stairs, "I made the stairs wide so it's easy to carry bags up it and there's a landing half way where it turns back on itself so you can even stop and rest if you want." He turned around and gestured at a wood counter, "And here is the front desk for the Inn. There's spots for all twelve keys, plus a space for notes if someone drops one off for a particular room. Nice and neat."

"Neat," agreed Nulu.

Pinkie pointed to the stairs, and being the gentleman that he was, he went first, "Follow me, if you please."

When the two reached the end of the first flight of stairs, Pinkie spread out his arms. "Plenty of room for guests to pass each other." He pointed at a long bench, "Or sit and chat while they catch their breath."

"Wow."

Pinkie took the stairs two at a time to the top. "And up here are the rooms. Twelve for guests like you asked." He pointed back in the direction towards the bar below. "The floor's double thick here with a space in between so it will help keep it quieter up there.

Nulu reached the top of the stairs and looked down the hallway. "Six per side then?"

Pinkie nodded.

Nulu looked behind Pinkie, "What's that door there? Linen closet?"

"Something like that." Pinkie smiled, "After you, Miss Proprietor." He lifted the latch of the door and pushed it open.

Nulu stepped into the room. The large room. She looked up. The ceiling went to the pitched roof. It was cavernous. To one side was a large bed. A *large* bed. "That's one large bed."

Pinkie nodded. "Well, I'm a big guy and I like to sleep diagonal. I figured you might give it a try too, so I made the bed extra wide. Either that or…"

"Or?"

"You can start seeing an Ogre."

Nulu shook her head. "Diagonal it is." Her room took up a corner of the overall building, affording her windows on two walls. The other wall, moving towards the inside of the building had two doors mounted in it.

"Closets?"

"Sort of." Pinkie moved over and opened one of the doors. "Closet, yes." He closed it and opened the other door, "Closet, no."

"What is it then?"

"It's something I picked up from the Elves. It's called an EnSuite."

"I've never heard of it? What's that?"

"Apparently, it's Elvish for 'indoor baths room'," said Pinkie as he gestured into the room. "Take a look."

"Indoor?" Nulu peeked into the room. It was also large. On one wall was a large, waist high (to her!) wash basin. There were two doors set in close to each other on one wall. Across from it was a hammered brass tub. "What in the lands? More doors?"

"One leads to the privy, the other to the sauna." He noticed Nulu staring at the tub. "Grimbledung said he could do laps in that thing when he helped me install it."

"Grimbledung helped?" Nulu gaped.

Pinkie nodded, "Well, until he got killed that is. Most everyone pitched in here and there when you weren't looking."

Nulu's eyes misted up. "Everyone?"

Pinkie put his arm around Nulu's waist. "Want to know the best part?"

"It gets better?"

He pointed upward. "There's a brass covered cistern on the roof and a pump on the ground floor. If the cistern's full of water, in the summer time, it gets nice and hot so you can take hot baths."

"That's amazing, Pinkie." A thought came to her. "So, what do you do in winter time?"

Pinkie shrugged. "You take the hot rocks out of the sauna and drop them into the tub." He pointed at a small door set beside the washbasin.

Nulu kissed Pinkie.

"Is there something I should know?" A voice interrupted the two.

Nulu jumped back. "Julie!" She blushed as much as a Trolless could. "I, ahh, got caught up in the moment."

Big Julie nodded at her friend, "Sure you did."

"No really!"

"Be honest, Nulu," Big Julie began with a smirk. "It's because he said you could take hot baths year 'round, isn't it."

"You know, that *is* it." Nulu said with a laugh. "That's a lot to tell a gal."

"I don't even have that luxury," Julie complained. She raised an eyebrow at Pinkie, "Yet."

"Well," began Pinkie, "I'll let you two ladies have some time to look around." He pointed downward, "You've got supplies showing up here in a little bit and I need to make sure that it all gets put where it needs to go. You're open for business starting tonight you know."

As he moved to try to get past the girls, Big Julie grabbed him by the shoulder, "Just a second, bub. Aren't you forgetting something?" She pulled him close and crowded him.

Pinkie blinked at Big Julie as he thought. "No, I think I covered everything."

"Really?" Julie narrowed her eyes, "I recall a certain gentleman telling a certain woman that he would buy her a drink when this place was done."

Pinkie flashed a wide smile, "Tonight. The place opens *tonight."*

Julie stuck out her lip. "Tonight?"

Pinkie waved his arms around, "Sure. It's more romantic than you know. Nighttime. The moon is out. Drinks are flowing. People are eating grapes *right off the bunch*."

"What?" She took a step back from Pinkie.

Pinkie stepped forward, now crowding her. "Oh, yes. It will be decadence galore." He winked. "And poetry."

"Oh my," said Nulu.

Julie pulled her lip back in. "Yes; oh my."

Pinkie leaned forward and smooched Julie loudly. "Lots of poetry."

With that he left the two grown women to giggle like school girls. Fortunately, after he was down the stairs.[38]

Twenty-Seven
Wherein Grimbledung Returns to Town and Encounters the Cordon

Grimbledung trudged down the center of the road. It had been almost two hours since he had eaten or drank anything. "I'm doomed!" he lamented to the sky. "Doomed clouds, doomed!"

The clouds continued to roll by. They had been hearing the same lamentations on and off for the better part of two days. They wanted nothing more than to roll someplace else. So, they did.

"Famished!" Grimbledung bewailed to a bush he walked past. "I'd eat you, but you're too far away, way over there. I barely have the energy to keep going," he explained over his shoulder as he continued his trudge. He spied a large rock with multicolored layers. "I'm thirsty too, you know," he moaned.

Unable to do anything else, the rock remained still.[39]

"Gloom, despair and agony on me!" Grimbledung wailed. "Where's that blasted town anyway?" He stopped and scanned the horizon. "Ahh!" Finally, there was a bulge where the brown dirt and green grass met a blue sky. It wasn't large, but it was there. "Ahhhh! Oh Julesville, I have missed you so!" Grimbledung stopped and wiped his brow. "Before nightfall I will be back in your arms, oh Julesville, my Julesville!"

Weakly, Grimbledung continued to trudge toward the bulge on the horizon, slowly it began to grow. "With only a scone left, my Julesville, since mighty Grimbledung struck out from Prost Garrison, I am coming." He moaned when he could see the outline of the windmill bulging above the rest of the town.

"Gah!" Grimbledung exclaimed. Now he could see clear sky squeezing between the buildings. *Closer now*! With a gasp, Grimbledung could make out the outline of the windmill's blades. "Struck out. Julesville. One scone." So gripped with emotion was the Gnome, he

tried to sing a song, but he was too weak. All that came out was a poem…[40]

The Outlook wasn't so brilliant for Grim th' Gnome that day:
His belly's empty, 'cept a scone, maybe four (plus two) -only one left he'd saved.
He'd eaten a Cannoli first, then after, the second just to be safe,
A sickly silence fell upon Grim as he walked along, no more ricotta to taste.

The sneer returned to Grim's lip, his teeth were clenched in hunger!
His feet pounded with cruel violence, tearing the trail asunder.
And now Grim holds the last Scone, and now eats it down!
Now his belly is shattered by the goodness of that Scone, nice and round.

Oh, somewhere in this flavored land, the sun shines bright.
There's a minstrel playing somewhere, and somewhere tarts are light,
And somewhere mugs are being toasted, filled with ale- chilled and stout.
But there is no joy just outside of Julesville-
the last of the Scones has run out.

Finally done with his poem (he skipped the middle ten verses[41]), Grimbledung looked again at the windmill. He was close enough to see the blades turning slowly, sun setting behind them. With every flash of light, he was a step closer to salvation. "With every flash of light I'm a step closer to salvation!" he affirmed.

He trudged some more. "Should have struck out with more food…" he lamented.

"Must hang on." A groan escaped Grimbledung's lips.

The bulge now had squared tops where buildings could be discerned!

"Must not eat last scone." Grimbledung whimpered.

Grimbledung's stomach growled furiously at him. "Must not eat…"

"GRRRRROWWWWLL!" responded his stomach.

In a panic, Grimbledung took several deep breaths. "Must. Get. Julesville. Struck out. Scones," he babbled.

His stomach would have none of it. Babbling was *not* filling. Unable to control himself any longer, he dropped to his knees and ripped the pack from his back. Hungrily he pulled the last remaining scone - the last remaining bit of food- from his pack. "My precious scone!" He held it up to the sky for a moment. Then shoved it into his mouth.

He fell onto his back and stared at the sky as he chewed. "Scone…" he moaned as he swallowed. Finally, he sat up. Then he stood and dusted himself off. "Must get to town." He grabbed his pack and continued to trudge.

It had been a long, hard two days for Grimbledung. At one point, he had even managed to get lost on the well-traveled, well-marked, only road to Julesville. He had however, made an important scientific discovery: while strapping two buzzards to one's feet did *not* provide enough lift to fly to one's destination, with the proper application of heat and borrowed spices from passing travelers, two buzzards did provide a good bit of food while traveling to said destination.

As he neared the edge of Julesville, he noticed a group of small-ish persons standing at the edge of the road. There were two of them. *Could there be a welcoming party?* He thought anxiously. "Scones!" he yelled, "fetch me some scones!" Feebly he waved his arms. His poem had sapped all but the last of his strength. "And mayhap something cool to drink," he added.

After another few minutes, Grimbledung was able to make out the figures by the road. Halflings. *Halflings?*

He kept his eyes on them as he staggered in their direction.

The Halflings did the same.

"Halt!" Said one of the Halflings, "Who goes there?"

"Grimbledung of course. Who else would go where I'm going?"

"Who are you?"

"Grimbledung. We just established that, remember? Who are you?"

"No one enters."

"Well Mister Enters, it's good to meet you. Can I call you Knowjuan?" Grimbledung moved to go past the Halflings.

"You can't come in."

"Why not Knowjuan?"

"Because that's the orders. No one goes further than this checkpoint," explained the Halfling on the right. AKA Knowjuan.

"But I need to go farther, not further," explained Grimbledung as he crowded the Halflings. The armed with pikes and wearing armor, Halflings. "Can't I go farther as long as I don't go further?"

"What?"

"I promise not to go any further. How's that Knowjuan?" Grimbledung moved to walk past the Halflings. They lowered their pikes to block his path.

"No one is allowed in or out of town. Corporal's orders," said the other Halfling.

"But that's you," said Grimbledung to Knowjuan.

"Who am I?"

"Knowjuan."

"No, I'm not. I'm someone."

"That's not what you said earlier."

Knowjuan scowled. "You can't come in."

"Why is that?"

"Because the town is under Martial Law," said the same Halfling. "So go someplace else."

"But I wanna go there," whined Grimbledung as he pointed at the town. "That's where I wanna go." He raised his hand plaintively, "I've already promised not to go further, if that helps any."

The confused Halfling looked at his partner for help.

The other Halfling took the lead. "Listen, Gnome. The town is locked down. No one in and no one out. No one gets past this cordon."

"What's a cordon?"

The Halfling thought for a moment. He had been told that they would be setting up a cordon, but what it was exactly hadn't been explained. He frowned at the strange Gnome, "It's this checkpoint, of course."

"Then why not call it a checkpoint? Is cordon Halfling for checkpoint? I don't speak Halfling you know, so calling it something in Halfling is just going to cause misunderstandings." He smiled. "Like this one."

"No one gets by! Corporal's orders!" declared Left Halfling.

"Cause the Corporal said so?"

"That's right. That's what orders are." The Halfling lifted his pike and pointed it at Grimbledung's chest. "So move along. There's nothing to see here."

"Well, that's just not true. I can see all *sorts* of things from here. What kind of game are you trying to pull, Mister Enters?"

"What?"

"Can *you* see the town?" He gestured with both hands, "It's all out there. I mean, how can you miss that? There's even a big windmill on one end. That's not something you see every day, right?"

"I've had just about enough of you, Gnome."

"OK so we're done then? Thanks." Grimbledung moved to walk past the Halflings, "Have a great evening you two."

"What?"

"You said we were done, so I was going home. I'm hungry and all."

"We can't let you in. Those are our orders."

"Come on, even after I pointed out the entire town to you? That's gotta count for something!"

"Listen. I've had just about enough of your antics, Gnome. You need to just go home."

"That's what I've been trying to do!" Grimbledung again raised his hands plaintively, "All I want to do is go home. It's in there you know."

"You're from here?" Asked the first Halfling.

"Sure! This is where my shop is," explained Grimbledung, "I'm just trying to get back."

The Halfling eyed the Gnome suspiciously, "So what are you doing out? There's Martial Law declared you know."

"Well, I must have missed that. I was dead for that part, probably."

"Dead?"

"It happens." Grimbledung shrugged.

"What, often?"

"Well, more often lately than normal."

"Listen you two," said the other Halfling, "you're both getting on my nerves. You stand guard," he pointed at the Halfling. "And you go someplace else." He gestured to Grimbledung.

"But I've nowhere else to go. I live here," argued Grimbledung. He pointed at the town to make his point. "There in yon town."

"But we can't let you in. Them's our orders," said Left Halfling.

The Right Halfling narrowed his eyes, "Can you prove you live in town?" He was trying to find a solution to the impasse since, really the orders were to keep out mercenaries and probably not rightful citizens.

"Sure I can prove it!"

"Do you have a library card from the town?" Asked Right Halfling.

"Library? What's that?"

"It's a place with books in it. People go there to read."

Grimbledung shuffled his feet, "Well, I can't read so there's no sense in having a card to a place full of books, now is there?"

"Fine," said Left Halfling, sorry they had even tried this tack, "can you tell us something about town that only a citizen would know?"

Grimbledung beamed. "There's a windmill in it."

The two Halflings stared at Grimbledung. "You can see it from leagues away. Everyone knows that" said Right. He gestured at the windmill that towered over everything around it.

"How about something everyone for leagues doesn't already know?" Offered the other.

"It's lousy with Halflings." Grimbledung beamed.

"You're on a short path to a quick death, Gnome," warned Left. He pointed his pike at him.

Grimbledung gulped. "The constable's a werewolf!" he declared.

"What?"

"Yeah! All covered with fur. Yellow eyes. Drools a lot. A werewolf!"

"No, he's not!" Said Right Halfling, "who's ever heard of such a thing?"

Left Halfling shook his head, "No. I think I've seen him. All furry. Wearing a badge." He gulped nervously, "He's definitely a werewolf".

"That's him. And he's got yellow eyes. I swear to the gods, *yellow* eyes!" Grimbledung nodded knowingly, "I think he takes a potion to make them that way." He winked.

"Why would he take a potion to do that?" Asked Left Halfling.

"To make him more imposing, I suppose."

"He's a six-foot-tall, drooling, werewolf who has the law behind him. How much more imposing does he need?""

Grimbledung nodded at the Halfling, "You know, now that you put it that way, it is kind of overkill. Say maybe the next time I see him…"

"OK, you two, break it up. Next you'll be pen pals."

"But I can't write! And I wouldn't be able to read what he wrote me. Would you read me the letters he writes me?"

Right Halfling ignored the clearly insane Gnome, "So why are you out of town?" He asked, once again suspicious.

"Well, I've been gone for a few days." Grimbledung shuffled his feet, "But I swear I was already in before I got killed this last time."

"Wait. How many times have you been killed?" Asked the first Halfling.

Grimbledung thought for a moment. He remembered Akita mentioning the number seven. It seemed like a good number. "Seven, if memory serves me right. Sometimes it happens so quick, I don't even notice."

"You know, I think you should really take a look at your life decisions if you've been killed that many times," suggested the first Halfling.

"Yeah, I've heard that before." Grimbledung rolled his eyes. "Listen, I'm too hungry to sit here and listen to you waggle your tongue about my bad decisions…"

"Listen Gnome, you're well on your way to trip number eight to the nether world," warned the second Halfling, "if you don't get on your way."

"Finally, we agree!" Grimbledung quickly shook the Halfling's hand. "It's always nice when folks of different races… even underprivileged ones such as yourselves … can come to an agreement."

"WHAT?"

"Well, keep up the good work then, you two," suggested Grimbledung as he moved past the two highly confused Halflings, "I'll just go a little *farther* to my home, and not a step further." He waved over his shoulder. "Keep up the good work!"

The Halflings unable to do anything else, waved at the strange Gnome's back as he left.

"Should we report this?" Asked Right Gnome. "I think we should report this."

Left Gnome hit him on the head with his pike.

Twenty-Eight
Wherein Grimbledung Arrives at Second Hand Sorcery
But Nobody is Home

"DRIM, I'm home!" Said Grimbledung as he burst through the door of the shop. The dark and empty shop. "Drim?" He looked around the shop worriedly. It seemed as if no one had been in the shop for several days. He turned and looked at Door. "Door, where's everyone?"

Door rattled its knocker and catch several times.

"They've gone out to eat without me but they're going to bring something back for me because they know I'll be hungry?"

Door rattled again. Louder.

"They've all gotten sick from eating bad cheese?"

Door stood silent.

"Listen, you're really not giving me a lot to go on," complained Grimbledung. "I'll just go check at Julie's. Maybe the Gnolls have whipped something up."

Door opened for Grimbledung and he stepped into the doorway.

"Wait- did they fall down a well?"

Door shut quickly, shoving Grimbledung out into the street. "Hey watch it!" he complained.

Door rattled its knocker once again. Somehow, it seemed like an angry rattle.

"I'm going, I'm going," scowled Grimbledung. "There's no accounting for doors these days."

Grimbledung moved out onto the street. It was almost deserted. Looking at the buildings along the main drag, most all the lights -in the completed buildings that is- were on. People were in for the night and

the sun had just gone down. "What gives?" He asked no one in particular. With a shrug, he moved in the direction of Big Julie's school of magic. More precisely, in the direction of its cafeteria.

Twenty-Nine
Wherein Grimbledung Goes to the Cafeteria and finds his Friends

"Well, we need to do something," said Drimblerod, "there's no way that Halfling Army is going to leave Julesville in one piece when they're done here."

"I agree, Drim," agreed Julie. She picked up her tankard and took a drink. "But we can't afford to just kill all these Halflings out of hand, or we're done for, for sure."

Akita scowled. "Well, I got some Orc friends from my days back in Cool Springs. I could see if they'd be willing to come up here and take care of our little problem." He snickered at his own joke.

Nulu shook her head, "That'd be the same thing. The bottom line would be that the Halflings were all in Julesville when they met their doom. We'd be implicated by association."

Akita took another bite from the large smoked turkey leg he was holding. "We can't do nothing" he said as he chewed.

"Well, while we're trying to figure out what to do about these Halflings, we also need to be figuring out how we're going to get to Prost Garrison and get Grimbledung back."

Grimbledung made it to the door of the cafeteria and just as he was about to enter, he heard his name. Drimblerod was lamenting about him! He stopped to listen.

"Grimbledung's going to have to fend for himself," said Nulu, "we've got a crisis here and we can't go traipsing around for one Gnome when the wellbeing of the whole town is at stake."

Akita raised his head and sniffed the air.

"Well I can't just leave my partner out there all alone," replied Drimblerod.

"Really?" Julie remarked, "Things getting too quiet for you?"

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "You tell her Drim" he whispered to himself.

"He may be lots of things…" began Drimblerod.

"Crazy," offered Julie.

"Unstable," suggested Nulu

Akita sniffed the air again. He squinted his eyes. "Smelly."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Oooohhh!" he whispered angrily.

"Loony," said Julie smiling at Nulu.

"Cantankerous" Nulu smiled back.

"Irrational" Julie beamed.

"Unstable," said Nulu

"Hah! You already said that one!" laughed Julie.

The two females toasted each other and drank deeply from their tankards.

"I'm glad you two are enjoying yourselves," interjected Drimblerod.

Akita inhaled deeply. He glanced at the door.

"Well, in my defense," said Nulu, ignoring Drimblerod, "he's that often, so it should be said twice!" She laughed loudly.

Julie raised her tankard. Nulu did as well. They clinked them together and drank.

"To Grimbledung!" Said Julie.

Nulu nodded in agreement.

Grimbledung flailed his arms angrily.

"Wanna know what I think?" Akita offered. He narrowed his eyes.

"What's that?" Asked Drimblerod.

Akita stood up quietly. "I say good riddens to that Gnome." The others stared at him wide-eyed. He placed a claw to his lips and gestured at the door. Akita raised his voice, "More than half the troubles in town are due to his antics." He winked. The group's eyes got even more huge. He gestured at the door again. Stealthily he crept towards the door as he raised his voice even more. "What we ought ta' do is go up to his room, go through his stuff and see what's worth selling before the Halflings get to it." He pressed himself against the wall beside the door. He smiled a wide smile, letting his tongue loll to one side. "I make first claim to his shoes."

Grimbledung couldn't take it any longer. Werewolf or not, he was going to get Akita! Backing up several steps to get some momentum, he ran at the door, arms out in front of him. He burst into the cafeteria at a dead run. "Stay outta my stuff!" He skidded to a halt. "You people!" He looked at the group at the table. Akita wasn't there. "Where's…" was all Grimbledung got out before he was tackled from behind. From the feel of it, it was the work of several Orcs! "Gah! Orcs!" Screeched Grimbledung as he tumbled to the floor. He wrestled with the fur covered Orcs. "Bumble Orcs!" he wailed, "Bumble Orcs! We're doomed!"

Akita pinned him to the ground, claws on his shoulders. "Call me an Orc, will you?" Akita licked Grimbledung's face.

"Gah! I've been kissed by a Werewolf! I have Werewolf germs! Get some hot water! Get some disinfectant! Get some grog!"

Akita stuck out his tongue, "Yech, after all that, I don't want to put my *own* tongue back in my mouth."

Akita stood over Grimbledung, "So you get out of Prost Garrrrrison and sneak over here without so much as lettin' us know you're coming?" He offered his claw to Grimbledung.

Grimbledung took Akita's claw with both hands, "Well, I *was* coming in, till a certain someone started talking poorly of innocent little me."

Akita yanked him to his feet. Easily. "Innocent little you? Now I need some grog." Akita put his arm around Grimbledung and led him to the table, "And you too, I imagine."

"If you two are done. We'd like to welcome back our wayward traveler," Julie said with a smile.

"Did you have any trouble getting out of Prost Garrison?"

Grimbledung blushed, "Errr, maybe a little. They were kind of interested in keeping me around," he lied, "but I convinced them otherwise."

"How about getting back here?" asked Drimblerod.

Grimbledung collapsed into a chair. "It was horrible. I walked the entire way. *Walked.* Then I ran out of food a couple of hours outside of town. I almost starved!"

"A couple of hours out? You poor Gnome." Nulu raised an eyebrow.

"I was down to my last scone."

"No!" Nulu lamented. "What's a Gnome to do?" She rolled her eyes.

"I was so weak, I couldn't even sing a song of lamentation about it."

"Wow!" Nulu's eyes got large, "Not even a song?"

Grimbledung picked up a tankard, "Well, I managed a poem to get me by." He smelled the contents of the tankard and peered into it. He blinked and examined it again.

"You were out of food and nearly starving, and now you're picky about what's in that tankard?" Nulu shook her head, "Gimmie back my tankard, you crazy Gnome."

"There were things floating in it. I wasn't sure if they were supposed to be there or not." He searched the table and found an empty tankard. Leaning over, he picked up a carafe and filled it. "That's better."

Nulu looked into her tankard. "It's the tusks. Stuff gets stuck to them. Occupational hazard when you're a Trolless." She emptied it in one swig. "It all goes to the same place anyway."

"We're all glad you're back safe and sound, Grim," said Julie.

The rest of the table nodded in agreement.

"Now we've only the problem of getting rid of these infernal Halflings."

"Can't you just ask them to leave?" Suggested Grimbledung. He looked around the table. "Where's Rat?"

Nulu shook her head. "Rat's out keeping an eye on the Halflings. He'll be back later this evening with a report." She thought for a moment, "Getting rid of the Halflings isn't that simple. They've occupied the town as part of the Halfling army invasion. They're here until the battle starts." She frowned. "They're under orders."

"And before you say it, we can't kill them or the Lord High Priest will flatten the town," offered Akita. He picked up his smoked Turkey leg and took another bite.

Grimbledung eyed Akita's turkey leg. "Are there any more of those around?" He smacked his lips.

"Usually two per bird," offered Drimblerod with a smile.

Julie raised her arm and waved it. Finally, Bonk noticed her and loped over. "What'rrrr you needin' Jules?"

"This poor Gnome is half starved." She gestured to Grimbledung.

Grimbledung nodded solemnly.

"Is there anything lying about back in the kitchen that he could fill his belly with? Perhaps another smoked leg of some large, ungainly bird?"

Grimbledung nodded hungrily. He was back to eyeing Akita's turkey leg. He was hungry, but not hungry enough to try to wrest it from the full-grown Werewolf. At least for now. When his hunger got the best of him, all bets would be off.

"That we've got. And I thought I spied some radishes and turnips in a pan that I'll run over the coals to heat back up."

A tear of joy came to Grimbledung's eye, "Oh, you're such a nice Gnoll. I like you best of all."

Bonk raised an ear at Grimbledung, "Which one am I?" He asked mischievously. For all intents and purposes, the Gnoll brothers were identical. Unless one knew who put on which apron, only their mother could tell them apart. Even then, there was sometimes guesswork involved.

Grimbledung blinked at the Gnoll. Another tear rolled down Grimbledung's cheek. This one was a sorrowful tear. "Oh, Rolton Chips! Steaming Rolton Chips! I've no idea." He put his head on the table and began to sob, "No food for the Gnome, the poor famished Gnome, now." Grimbledung raised his head and lamented

The Outlook wasn't so brilliant for Grim th' Gnome that day:
His belly 's empty, an' now he'd insulted a Gnoll by not knowin' his name…

"Get him something to eat!" Everyone said at once. Bonk jumped in surprise then loped off toward the kitchen. Quickly.

"Food's coming, Grim. Just sit nice and quiet until it gets here," suggested Big Julie.

Grimbledung frowned.

"To save your strength to eat," offered Nulu quickly, "of course."

Grimbledung nodded. "You're probably right. Any more, and someone will have to feed me."

"Well, you're safe now, and soon you'll be full. Then, we can try to figure out what to do about these Halflings. The town's in grave danger and there don't seem to be any options."

Grimbledung shrugged, "Why don't you just tell them to go someplace else?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "What? You think those Halflings are gonna answer to us? They take orders from the Lord High Priest and that's it."

"No, you said they were here until the invasion started. That's happening up at Frank's Keep and Prost Garrison. All you have to do is have someone tell them they need to get there and they'll all leave." Grimbledung began to eye Akita's turkey leg anew. Hungrily.

As a precaution, Akita shifted it to his other hand.

"We've been through this Grimbledung. For the past two days. There's no way to get them to just leave peacefully. And there's no way we can get rid of them. There aren't any more choices," explained Drimblerod. "It's not like we know a Halfling that would lie to them for us."

Grimbledung propped his head up with his hand, "This whole invasion is being handled by mercenaries. There's hundreds of them running around all over the lands. Just have a group of them tell the Halflings *they* are here to replace them so they can go join the main attack, then the Halflings will all go. Then we'll just send the mercenaries home once the Halflings are out of sight."

Bonk loped back to the table carrying a large wooden tray. On it was apparently the rest of the large turkey that had supplied legs to Akita and Nulu earlier. It was a deep brownish-red, smoked color. Around it were steaming heaps of radishes, turnips, and potatoes. "Oh!" cheered Grimbledung, "you're the best!"

Bonk eyed Grimbledung. "Bonk" he said helpfully.

"Oh Bonk!" cheered Grimbledung, "you're the best!"

Bonk nodded his approval, checked to ensure the carafes were still mostly full, then loped off.

Grimbledung attacked the smoked turkey with a vengeance.

"Grim, how're we supposed to convince mercenaries to lie to the Halflings?" Nulu asked. She picked up one of the turkey's wings. Even the bird was hot! Daintily, she began to nibble the meat off the wing.

Grimbledung grunted as he shoved a turnip past a large chunk of turkey breast.

"What?" Asked Nulu between nibbles. She picked up a potato and popped it into her mouth.

"You're going to choke, you daft Gnome," scolded Big Julie, "chew your food!"

Grimbledung swallowed his mouthful of masticated turnip and turkey. "Hire your own," he said as he reached for a radish. With his other hand, he peeled another morsel of meat off the bird. He wrapped the meat around the radish. "They're mercenaries. They'll work for anyone." With that, he popped it into his mouth. "Rightfm?"

Julie stared at Nulu.

Nulu stared back as she chewed.

"Hire our own mercenaries to act like they work for the Lord High Priest to trick the Halflings to leave town?"

Grimbledung nodded at Drimblerod.

"And then have them leave once the Halflings do?"

"Those are going to be some really pissed off Halflings," said Julie as she also selected a piece of meat.

"You'll never have to worry about them," said Grimbledung as he rolled another morsel- this time a potato and turkey one.

"Why's that?" Asked Nulu as she also began to roll her own turkey-filled-with-a-vegetable morsel. It really seemed like a good way to eat the turkey.

"When the Lord High Priest finds out we tricked those Halflings. *They'll* have him to deal with."

Drimblerod stuck out his tongue. "That won't be pleasant."

"About as pleasant as when the Lord High Priest deals with us for tricking his Halflings."

Nulu shook her head, "He can only do that if his invasion is a success." She slapped Grimbledung on the back. "*That* is a most devious plan!"

Grimbledung smiled a turkey and radish-filled smile back.

"Chew your food!" Scolded Julie as she averted her eyes. "Honestly, it's like watching a frog eat. So where're we going to find some mercenaries willing to work for us?"

"I run into mercenaries all over the place looking for wands. They pay me a silver coin to leave them alone."

"They paid you a silver coin to leave them alone?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Pay," corrected Grimbledung between bites.

"Wait a grain of sand. You go pester the same mercenaries over and over and they give you a silver coin each time? Isn't that kind of dangerous?"

"What?" Grimbledung began to roll another vegetable filled Turkey morsel.

"Pestering people who kill for a living."

Grimbledung swallowed hard. "Well, now that you put it that way, it does sound a little dangerous." He shuddered as he thought back to his numerous meetings with the dark, treacherous-looking mercenaries. "Wow." He sat back in his chair. "Wow." He said again. After a moment, the shock passed; with a shrug, he returned to eating. "Ehh." He added.

"Well, it'll be okay this time, Grim," Nulu assured him, "this time we'll be paying customers. Are you sure you know where they are camped out?"

"Sure. These guys just lay around all day. Lazy, if you ask me."

"Lazy mercenaries?" Julie smiled, "now I've heard everything."

"Well that's what it looks like to me. They told me they get paid to do jobs and then between jobs, they just kind of hang around and spend the money they made." He thought back to a specific conversation. "Yeah, they call it trickling something."

"Trickle-down economics?"

Grimbledung waved a piece of turkey. "That's it! Trickling down economics."

Julie shook her head, "Yeah, the Dragon Brigade talks that way too. I think it's more Voodoo Economics, if you asked me."

"Voodoo? Hey, that could come in handy! We could make up a bunch of little Halfling dolls. Stick pins in them, things like that!"

Big Julie shook her head, "No, we're not even going to go down *that* path. Once you throw that into the mix, things get absurdly out of control. And we're already pretty high up on the absurdness scale as it is."[42]

Big Julie stood up. "Glad you're back Grim." She leaned down and kissed the top of the Gnome's head. "I've got… something to check on. If you want to take the tray with you in case Rat's hungry, you can always drop it back off tomorrow. That way the Gnoll's can wander off as well." She waved. "I'll see you all in the morning."

Grimbledung looked up at her anxiously. "Glad I'm back??"

"Sure! Bringing the angry retribution of the Lord High Priest on these Halflings' heads. Bless their little hearts." She grinned, "I'm going to have the best night's sleep in a week." She turned and walked out.

Grimbledung chewed his mouthful and carefully swallowed. Then he smiled at Nulu. "I think she's warming up to me."

Nulu shook her head, "Oh you poor Gnome. You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"You've been outbid," said Drimblerod as his smile faded.

"Outbid?"

"Nulu's inn is got rebuilt."

"Yeah, I saw. What has that got to do with me?"

Drimblerod put his hand on his partner's shoulder. "Just relax…" he suggested. "Nulu?"

"And the foreman for the job is this huge hulk of a man who recites poetry and has muscles in all the right places and long flowing hair and he has a bunch of money in the bank from building things with his large, strong hands while he wears his long flowing hair in a ponytail." Nulu said.

"Poetry?" Grimbledung asked nervously.

Nulu nodded solemnly.

Drimblerod patted his partner's shoulder. "It's good."

Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "So… the game's afoot."

Nulu laughed out loud. "It *is* good to have you back, Grimbledung." She stood up. "I'm going to turn in as well. I want to go check on my Inn to see if things are alright. The place is finished and the last thing I need is some Halfling foot soldier burning it down. I'm glad you're back you despicable, devious Gnome, you."

Grimbledung smiled broadly at Nulu. "Glad I'm back?"

"Yer not getting a smooch."

Grimbledung stuck out his lip and pouted as Nulu left the cafeteria.

"Come on. Let's take this back to the Shop," suggested Drimblerod as he also stood.

"One for the road," said Grimbledung as he quickly rolled a large radish in a strip of turkey. "Radish in a blanket!" He held the morsel up high in a toast. "Let's go home, partner."

Drimblerod chuckled as he picked up the tray and moved to the door.

Grimbledung opened the door of the cafeteria for his partner so he could maneuver the tray out it. Before closing it, Grimbledung looked towards the kitchen and, in what had become his traditional exit from the cafeteria, shouted, "Thanks, you wonderful Gnolls!"

As usual, he was rewarded with several barks in reply.

Thirty
Armored and Ready

Drimblerod startled awake to a peal of thunder. He sat up quickly and looked out the window. *At least a good downpour will keep those Halflings good and soaked.* It was a clear bright day. Another round of thunder clapped. The entire shop rocked with it. "What in the lands?" Drimblerod hopped from his bed and made for the stairs. A flash of light momentarily lit the upper room from the staircase. Simultaneously, another round of thunder clapped. The entire shop shuddered. Cautiously, Drimblerod moved down several steps, then peeked down into the shop. Grimbledung was hopping back and forth as he reentered the shop.

Drimblerod shook his head as he stood and moved down the stairs. "What are you up to now?" He asked as he moved to the counter.

Grimbledung turned to greet his partner. He was wearing leather armor and had a sword slung low on a wide leather belt. On his head was a leather helmet with two horns -buffalo?- sticking out of it. Unlike other horned helmets he had seen, the horns were pointed downward. Grimbledung smiled and blew on the end of his smoking wand. "Morning Drim!"

"I think you've got helmet performance issues."

"What?"

"Aren't the horns supposed to be pointing upward?"

Grimbledung nodded. He reached up and turned one horn up. It clicked as it went. He swapped the wand to the other hand and adjusted the other as well. "Better?"

Drimblerod sat on the stool beside the counter. "I know I'm going to regret this but… what is up with that helmet?"

"Do you like it? I just got it and the armor!" Grimbledung beamed. "Pretty neat, huh?"

"Yes, very nice. Where'd you get it?"

"Come outside and I'll show you." Grimbledung moved to Door and beckoned his partner to follow, "Come on!"

"It's kind of early, Grim." Drimblerod moved off the stool to follow his partner.

Grimbledung stepped out into the street and turned to face his partner, "Well, I was up early today and I saw a wagon going by. It was a traveling armorer. You know the kind?"

Drimblerod nodded.

"Well, I figured with a battle brewing, I needed to be outfitted. So…" he spread his arms out wide. "I got this!"

"Yes, it's very nice. Why do your horns turn?"

Grimbledung hopped back and forth again. "That's the best part!"

Drimblerod gestured for his partner to continue.

Grimbledung cleared his throat. He sheathed his wand and removed the helmet. "The armor is regular leather armor. Nothing fancy about it." He rubbed his hand across his chest. "Keeps ya safe." He smiled. "The sword…" he brandished the sword. "… is a standard steel sword. The tang is nearly the full width of the blade and it has leather wrapping on it as well." He tilted the sword back and forth. "Not sure what a tang is," he peered at the sword, "but I've got nearly a full width one." With a shrug, he sheathed the sword.

"Impressive," began Drimblerod. A smile came to his face. "Now the helmet?"

Grimbledung beamed, "That's the best part!" He showed the leather helm to his partner. "So, the horns are the best part! You turn them up like they are when you want to make soup." He pantomimed sticking the helmet into the ground. "The horns help keep your soup from sloshing out." He then held the helmet with his elbows and clicked the horns so they pointed forward. "This," he said as he donned the helmet, "is for charges. He ran forward and back leading with his head. "And…" he clicked the horns so they were pointing downward, "this is…"

"For looking ridiculous," interrupted Drimblerod.

Grimbledung smiled a wide smile. "Not exactly." He drew his wand and pointed it upward.

He intoned.

Arcs of *What's This* crackled out of the ground like reversed-lightning and struck the points of the downturned horns. The helmet glowed a dull golden color. Grimbledung was surrounded by what appeared to be a cage of lightning. Thunder pealed through the streets.

"That doesn't look safe, Grim," began Drimblerod as he took a step back.

Grimbledung whirled and slashed his wand as a not-so-near tree. A thick bold of green light zigzagged at it. Instantly, the tree exploded into thousands of splinters. Nearby, a window broke. Then another. Several townsfolk peered out of their windows. One family stepped out their front door nervously.

Drimblerod ducked down. "What in the lands?!"

Grimbledung blew on the smoking end of his wand. "Pretty neat, huh?" He tapped the helmet, "It channels all the *What's This* in the area to it."

"That doesn't sound safe at all," said Drimblerod. "Is it?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "Not for anyone in front of me." He looked down at the ground. There was a charred ring around him. There was a second one right next to it, "Or below me, I suppose."

Nulu rounded the corner at a full run. She had her tree-cum-weapon in her arm. She skidded to a halt in front of the Gnomes.

Grimbledung gaped.

So did Drimblerod.

"What's going on? Are the Halflings attacking?" Nulu held her Shillelagh at the ready in her leather studded gloves as she looked around. The gloves went to her elbows and had sharpened studs along the fingers. As the studs moved up her gloves, they got larger. By the end of the glove near her elbow, the studs were an inch long. And

sharpened. Her low-heeled boots matched her gloves in leather and stud placement. And length

"N-n-no," stammered Drimblerod.

Grimbledung was speechless; his mouth just moved open and closed. "Nah, nah, nah," was all he could manage.

Nulu stuck the pointed end of her weapon into the ground. "What?" She looked down at herself, "What, did I spill something on my armor?" She wiped it off with her hand. "I just got it from the wagon guy; it can't be dirty already."

Nulu stood before the Gnomes in chainmail armor. The medium-sized-ring mail was highly polished and closed on one side with three leather straps. It ended above her knees, acting as a (short) skirt. Fastened in strategic positions were two leather breastplates. Small ones. She also wore a thick leather skirt. It barely hung below the chainmail. On her shoulders were two leather shoulder plates. They had spikes sticking out of them.

"Bah, bah, bah," tried Grimbledung. He was getting closer.

"It's my battle armor," she explained.

Finally, Drimblerod regained some composure, "It doesn't cover much."

Nulu looked down again, "What're you talking about? I'm completely covered."

"Well…" began Drimblerod. "I suppose a sword can't get through." He raised an eyebrow, "But what do you do about prying eyes?" He gestured at Grimbledung.

His eyes were prying full tilt.

"Armor is supposed to protect you. It does it in two ways." Nulu held up her thumb, "It is supposed to keeps things from poking you," she held up her index finger, "and it's supposed to distract your opponent"

"It's got me distracted," remarked Drimblerod.

"I was thinking of poking…"

Nulu grinned wide. "See? You either go with really polished armor that reflects the sun into your opponent's eyes. Or if you got the assets…"

"You got 'em.," assured Grimbledung.

"You go this route." She flexed her muscles. "What do you think?"

Grimbledung nodded, "Baby, if you got it, flaunt it!"

Drimblerod shook his head, "Those poor Halflings. They'll never know what hit them."

Nulu snapped her fingers. She remembered why she came running, "So if that racket wasn't the Halflings, what was it?"

Drimblerod pointed at his partner. "It was Grim showing off his new armor."

"I'm going to help fight the Halflings with my sword and magic helmet."

"Sword and magic helmet?" Asked Nulu.

"And wand" said Grimbledung. He brandished his sword and tapped his helmet with it. "It's a triple threat."

"Well, after what I heard, I think you should save it for when we're fighting the Halflings. You've woken up half the town, you know."

Grimbledung beamed. "Neat!"

"Well," Nulu waggled a finger at Grimbledung, "behave yourselves you two. Especially you." She smiled. "So, I'm working with some of the townsfolk on attacking and defending drills, group attacks, and if there's time maybe some grappling. If you want to stop by after breakfast, we're out in front of the Duck Inn and Dine." With that, Nulu turned and walked back towards her establishment.

The Gnomes watched her go.

"I don't mind that," remarked Grimbledung as he watched.

"Yeah." Agreed Drimblerod. "Me neither."

"What's grappling?"

"It's another term for hand to hand combat," explained Drimblerod. "It's close-quarters fighting."

"Hand to hand?!" Grimbledung shoved his partner. "Let's eat so we can go to the drilling. Woo, that'll be fun! Hand to hand!"

The rest of the day was filled with lessons on combat techniques and strategy. As word spread of who the instructor was -and how she was dressed- more and more townsfolk showed up. Mostly male folk.

Much to their displeasure, when time came for the much-anticipated grappling lessons, they were all paired with each other.

However it was much to the amusement and pleasure of the women folk.

Thirty-One
Julesville –Occupied On All Corners!

In The North of Town

Colossus yawned as he got out of his cot. He stretched his aching back. He was sure the cot was trying to kill him. He turned and looked at it. Rickety and stained, it was a poor excuse for a cot. Even so, it was better than sleeping on the ground- which was what most of the troops were doing. The rank of Corporal *did* have its privileges. *This one privilege just might end up killing me, however*, he thought sourly as he rubbed his lower back. "Tomorrow we are moving into the inn."

Gigantus was still asleep. A career soldier, he was able to sleep anywhere and anytime. He snored contentedly.

"Hey you!" Colossus kicked the cot, "it's time to get up. There's locals to harass."

"I'm up" Gigantus' eyes were still closed.

"Good. Tomorrow we're moving into that inn. It's done, you know."

"Sounds good. What's on your agenda for today?" Gigantus opened one eye and examined his partner. "Personally, there's two in town in particular I'm looking forward to harass." He smiled evilly. "To death even."

Colossus nodded, "Want some company?"

Gigantus smiled, "Sure. We'll break our fast then go find those two. Plus, I want to check on my kid."

"Yeah? He's still in town?" He blinked in surprise.

"He goes to that school in the windmill, remember." Gigantus shrugged, "Seems to like it too."

"It's a shame we're burning it down then," offered Colossus.

"Yeah." Gigantus stretched, "But there's other schools out there. In towns that haven't aggravated mighty Corporals of the Great Halfling Empire."

In The East of Town

Grimbledung lay in his bed sleeping soundly. Peacefully. Comfortably. Satisfiedly. Except for two bakers and a Parchment distributor (the NEWS), so was the rest of Aution.

The pre-dawn quiet was broken by the playing of several bugles. And one drum.

"Gah!" Exclaimed Grimbledung as he rolled from his warm bed, ready for action. He stumbled around in the room looking for the culprit. The horn players were not there. Neither was the drummer. He staggered into the common room and leaned on the table to get his bearings.

Drimblerod emerged from his room moments later. "I hate occupations." He looked at the window sourly. The bugles continued their playing. The drum continued to beat. Annoyingly not in time with the bugles! Now it seemed a pair of cymbals has joined the group.

"What *is* that racket?" Grimbledung sat roughly at the table. He put his hands over his head.

"It's called reveille," explained Drimblerod.

"I've been involved in revelry. Extensively. I don't recall a racket like that." He gestured at the window.

"That's revelry. This is reveille."

"What's the difference?"

"The first is another word for 'having a night out on the town'. The other is another word for 'the Army's not interested in you sleeping in, so get up and do something strenuous even if the weather is bad' ," explained Drimblerod.

"I like the first one better." Grimbledung frowned. "Heaps better."

Rat came stalking up the stairs, "Halflings."

"Who else would it be?" Asked Drimblerod.

"No, no. I know *who* it is. I'm now using their name as a curse."

"It works."

"Thanks, Grim. Remind me later to poop in their mess-tankards while they're all sleeping tonight."

Finally, the racket outside stopped.

Grimbledung exhaled deeply. "You got it." He scowled at the window. "If this turns into a daily event, I might even join you."

Drimblerod put his hands on his hips. "Well, we're up now. We might as well eat breakfast, right?"

Rat nodded, "You know me; any time is a good time for breakfast. I'm in."

"There's turkey left," offered Drimblerod, "and I'll whip up some coffee."

"I'll get the plates," said Grimbledung. He exhaled again. "This is going to be a long day."

After breakfast, the three went downstairs and much to Grimbledung's displeasure, looked out at the still-dark streets of town. "Have I ever mentioned that I don't think it's healthy to watch the sun come up?"

"Several times," said Rat, "and that's just today."

With a sigh, the three watched Julesville come awake through the shop windows. For the first time ever.

In The West of Town

About that same time, Julie sat up in bed. She covered her ears at the noise. "I'm going to kill me a Halfling today." She squinted at the window. There was a very faint glow to the sky; dawn was yet an hour away. "Oh yes." She swung her feet off the bed and into her fur-lined slippers, "Dead Halfling. They'll never miss one little Halfling, right?" She grimaced at the racket coming through her closed window. "It would be justifiable homicide."

She stood and stretched. "Chilly!" She remarked to no one in particular. As she took her robe from the peg by the bed, she took

another glance at the window. "Not a judge in the Lands would convict me if they were listening to that noise."

She padded to her armoire and picked up a brush. "Then I'll get a certain foreman I know to dispose of the body in some construction site here in town. Maybe stick the dead musician in a wall, or under a basement," she mused as she brushed her hair. She leaned forward and looked into the mirror. "That sound okay?"

"Yes, my dearest," said Pinkie as he rolled over and covered his head with the now-vacant, yet still-warm pillow.

Back East…

Grimbledung nodded, "I'm famished. Let's get something to eat." He frowned, "This is why I keep saying getting up before the sun is unhealthy. My innards are all mixed up."

"That, I have to admit *is* unhealthy," agreed Rat, "Grim's innards are unhealthy enough, without being mixed up as well!"

Drimblerod shook his head, "Fine, fine. We'll go get something to eat. Honestly, you're like a couple of kids…"

The trio moved to the porch in front of the shop.

"Well, I have to make my rounds first." Rat shook his fur. "Big Julie said she expected some sort of morning report from me while the Halflings were running amok. It seems they don't pay attention to a rat and I get to listen in on all sorts of plans. As long as she doesn't expect me to sing it, I'll be right along."

"Sing the morning report? That's absurd."

Rat nodded at Drimblerod, "It was only the one time. I think she was trying to be all proper. I heard her say as I was coming into her room something about 'pinkies out'."

Drimblerod smirked, "Yeah, or something."

"So save me something to eat if you're coming back to the shop."

"We'll save you something."

"I'll stick it in my pocket," offered Grimbledung.

"*Drimblerod*," he emphasized the name, "thanks for saving me something. And don't let that something anywhere near Grim's pockets. They're too close to a certain exit of his mixed-up innards." Rat scampered off.

The two Gnomes watched him go. He ran past an early-morning Halfling patrol. They didn't even glance in his direction. They did however take the time to shove an elderly human woman who walked past. She was carrying a mincemeat pie. The shove made her drop it.

"Halflings. I hate those guys," remarked Drimblerod, "and that group there is not making any points with Akita either, I can tell you that."

"Starving…"

"You don't have to remind me, Grim. We'll head over to the cafeteria." He thought for a moment as the group of Halflings stopped to harass two merchants who were setting up a fruit stand. "Then from there I really think we should go find us some mercenaries. The sooner the better. Are you sure you know how to find them?" Drimblerod began to walk towards Julie's school.

Grimbledung fell into step beside his partner, "Yeppers. They're out at that castle by the Great Salty River."

"The ruined one? I've heard that place was lousy with Halflings."

"No, no, the other one. The one that's not falling apart."

"Kilbride Castle."

Grimbledung shrugged. "I suppose. I never asked them what it was called."

"That's only a couple of hours or so out of town, we can easily be there and back before dark."

"You know, when I say things like that, bad things happen. How come they never do for you?"

Drimblerod lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone. "Because I never mention the 'Eff' word."

"What? That can't be it. What's that got to do with anything?"

"That's what causes most of your problems," assured Drimblerod.

Grimbledung shook his head, "What's Fate got to do with anything? *Fate*."

Fate, who was currently in the middle of the Great Sandy Desert enjoying a hopelessly lost situation, glanced towards Julesville.

"Shhh!" Drimblerod shushed the Gnome. "You *trying* to get us killed?"

"Fate schmate," remarked Grimbledung as they reached the large double doors of the cafeteria.

Fate examined the situation at the underground hideout. Things seemed to be going delightfully bad. A few hours away wouldn't make a difference one way or another. Soon, the Pics would arrive and that would be the end of it. There was plenty of time to deal with both situations. Fate took a step towards Julesville. That was, after all was said and done, a most annoying Gnome.

Drimblerod covered Grimbledung's mouth with his hand. "Quiet you! You want to get us killed? There's a reason she's called Fate!" He whispered gruffly into Grimbledung's ear, "That's because Fate holds our fate in her hands! The all-powerful and deadly Fate." He grabbed Grimbledung by the back of his head with one hand while he kept the other over his mouth, "*Right?!*"

"Uhhffmmm," said Grimbledung.

Drimblerod shook Grimbledung's head up and down, "Yes you agree, don't you."

Fate narrowed her eyes. She wasn't buying it.

Carefully Drimblerod moved his hand from his partner's mouth. His other was still on the back of his head. He pushed Grimbledung's

head up and down and nodded himself just in case the message didn't get through.

Grimbledung nodded, "Yes. All-powerful and deadly Fate. We must respect her," he monotoned. He narrowed his eyes, "What's gotten into you? You know…"

Drimblerod covered his partner's mouth again and shoved him into the cafeteria.

Fate nodded as well. Maybe the events around her needed her attention more than that confounded Gnome after all. Maybe she could even get *this* situation to deal with that Gnome. Being Fate, the odds were in her favor those events could be put in motion without any trouble at all.[43]

In The South of Town

Edward slept soundly. He had dealt with not only a pair of twin boys, but a colicky daughter. It would take more than some bugles, drums, and cymbals to wake him. Now that the kids were all old enough to make their own breakfasts, Edward's wife also slept through the racket. Bugles and drums? Pah! It wasn't even worth rolling over for!

Thirty-Two
Dine and…

Grimbledung stumbled into the cafeteria as Drimblerod pushed him in. "Watch it you! What gives?"

"You know half your troubles are because you give the 'Eff' word a hard time."

Grimbledung grinned, "What's the other half from?"

"You're just lucky I guess." He smiled at his partner, "Now let's get something to eat."

The two turned and examined the cafeteria. It was awash with milling or eating students, both groups of which were chattering non-stop. There was a constant dull-roar going on. "What a racket!" Grimbledung shook his head, "Do *all* of these students have that much to say? Honestly."

Drimblerod laughed at his partner, "Haven't you ever been around kids? This is normal behavior. It could be worse you know."

Grimbledung grimaced at the noise. "This be worse?" He swept a hand to take in the students. "How?"

"They could be snogging."

"Gah!" Grimbledung stuck out his tongue.

"Exactly." Drimblerod looked around at the tables. "They're all full. We might have to split up to find a spot. You go left, and I'll sweep right."

Grimbledung nodded as he moved off in search of two places together. "What a hot mess," he said to no one in particular. Then, across the crowded cafeteria, he saw two students - Humans- stand and vacate the end of a bench. "Success!" he thrust his hands in the air as he moved toward the valuable terrain. As he walked, he looked around to make sure no other students had spied the space. "Drim!" he shouted over his shoulder, "I found a spot!" When he turned back, he picked up

a quick shuffle, moving between cliques of students but always keeping the empty space in sight. To his horror on the far side of the cafeteria, directly behind the spot… *His spot*. He saw two Halfling youths moving directly at him. Trays in hand, they were making a beeline for the space. *His space!* "Gah!" he said as he pushed through a group of Elflings.

One of the Halfling youths moved with a purpose toward the empty seats. Even though they were hard to come by, and the place was full, he was confident the spot would be his. After all, what was the point of having a vengeful, bloodthirsty father, if it didn't get you choice seating for breakfast? So confident was he, that he didn't even pick up his pace. Until he noticed a Gnome moving quickly toward him, and his spot. *His spot!* He seemed big for a student. *Maybe he was held back*. He chuckled to himself. *That will make this fun*. Even so, he picked up his pace to make sure he was there before the obviously dimwitted, held-back student. That way he would have longer to taunt him. From *his seat*.

"DRIM!" Grimbledung called in a panic over the din. "Come quick!" He looked frantically around for his partner but didn't see him. "I'll save you a spot!" He picked up as fast a jog as the bustling students allowed. He reached the empty space just after the student. "Hah! Beat ya!" he said triumphantly as he thrust his arms in the air.

"N n no you didn't," said the Halfling. "I bee bee beat you!"

"Kee kee keep telling yourself that, kid," said Grimbledung as he picked up the small Halfling by his collar. He took his tray from him and dropped him unceremoniously onto the floor. "Maybe you'll win your next race too." He turned and looked around, "DRIM!" he called again. He took a muffin off the tray and popped it into his mouth. "DRIM!" he called again around the muffin. It was a small muffin.

The Halfling picked himself up. "You know who my Da Da Dad is?" Tears welled up in his eyes. Tears of fury. "You'll get yours!"

"I don't care who your Da-Da is, *squirt*. Mayhap he can find you a place to sit your little bitty butt to eat your little bitty breakfast with your little bitty hands." He picked up a handful of eggs and shoved them into his mouth. "MMMM!!" Grimbledung cooed. "Thanks for the appetizer," he added as he turned the Halfling around and wiped his hand on the youth's back at the same time. "Bye now." He patted the Halfling's head to get the last of the egg off his hand.

"Ohhh! You'll get yoo yoo yours!" Corporal Gigantus' son fumed as he stomped off.

"Grim!" Drimblerod walked over to his partner, "Say, you found a spot. Great!" He narrowed his eyes, "It was vacant, right?"

Grimbledung feigned offense, "Of course it was! You don't think I'd muscle some little whippersnapper out of a spot to eat their breakfast, do you? I mean, those poor little kids getting ready for a day of learning and having to do it on an empty stomach. That'd be horrible."

"OK, sorry Grim…"

"Some poor Halfling going to class, with a rumbly in their tumbly. I don't think I could stand that."

"Who said anything about a Halfling?"

Grimbledung smiled broadly, "What Halfling?" He brought his hands up plaintively. One still held a tray. The other had bits of egg on it. "Who said anything about a Halfling? Say, you go get us food and I'll watch our seats."

"Grim…" began Drimblerod,

"How lucky to find two spots in such a busy place, right?" Grimbledung put another muffin- the last- in his mouth. "Right?" He asked as he chewed.

"Grim. Where'd that tray of food come from?"

"What tray?" Grimbledung quickly shoved two sausage links in his mouth. Around the muffin. "Whafffm?" Quickly, he bent down and slid the tray under the table. He opened his hands to show they were empty. Greasy but empty.

"Grim…"

Grimbledung sat down as he chewed. He pointed to the empty spot across from him and gave his partner a thumb's up.

"Yoo yoo you'll get yours!" declared a Halfling as he stomped past. To-go bag in his hand.

Drimblerod shook his head, "I know I'm going to be sorry about this later."

Grimbledung smiled a sausage-filled smile at his partner.

With a head shake, Drimblerod moved off to the serving line, leaving his partner to bounce happily in his seat.

Thanks to being a full grown, bouncing, insanely smiling Gnome, no student dared to even ask if the seat across from him was taken.

Even the students sitting beside him in legitimately-obtained seats seemed nervous.

Drimblerod returned shortly with a tray balanced in each hand. "We got double portions since we're bigger than the average student." He smiled at the nervous looking students, "Morning Gents."

The students relaxed and smiled back at the apparently not-insane Gnome that had just joined them.

"Whoo hoo! We should do this every morning!" Grimbledung resumed bouncing.

The students edged away from Grimbledung. Some more.

Drimblerod shook his head, "I think we'd wear out our welcome if we did that." He furrowed his brow as he slid the trays onto the table, "Of course, we could see if we could just pay Big Julie for eating rights. I mean, a few silver a week would be reasonable." He nodded as he eased onto the bench. "That may actually be a good idea." He smiled at his partner.

Grimbledung returned the smile. His mouth was now full of bacon.

"Errr. Maybe they'll get us someplace away from the students to sit."

A Dwarfling sitting beside Drimblerod giggled at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung nodded at his partner as he swallowed, "That does sound like a good deal. You know, a Gnome could get used to a breakfast like this." He jabbed a fork into one of the pancakes on his plate. It was dripping syrup. "Real easy." He forced the pancake into his mouth and used the fork to push in the uncooperative edges until the entire thing was in.

"You know, I brought knives for a reason." Drimblerod waved a knife around. With a shake of his head, he cut his pancake and put a

small portion of it in his mouth. "I don't know if you're a good influence on the student body."

The Dwarfling giggled again.

Grimbledung put his last pancake in his mouth, again without cutting. This time he used his knife to force it in. "Knnifffm!" he said around the pancake.

Drimblerod glanced over at the suddenly quiet Dwarfling beside him. He had almost an entire pancake in his mouth. He was furiously chewing and drawing in the rest of it as he went. He looked like a snake eating something twice its own size.

"I take that back," said Drimblerod as he shook his head, "I'm *sure* you're not a good influence."

Grimbledung picked up the last sausage link on his plate. He glanced over his partner's shoulder towards the door. "Uh oh," he said.

"Last sausage, huh? That is a shame." Drimblerod looked down at his plate, "You can't have mine so don't even ask. You'd enjoy your food more if you took the time to actually taste it as it went down."

"Oh no!" Grimbledung seemed to be ignoring his partner. Something at the door had his undivided attention.

Drimblerod squinted at his partner. "Oh no? Do I even want to turn around?"

"Only because it would make you move faster, I'd imagine."

Drimblerod swallowed his latest piece of pancake. Hard. Steeling himself, he turned in what he hoped was a casual turn. "Gah!" he exclaimed.

"Maybe we ought to just head out now," suggested Grimbledung as he watched the Halfling he had pulled from his seat speak to a Halfling soldier. A heavily armed, angry-looking Halfling soldier. The soldier picked a bit of egg from the youth's hair. His eyes narrowed with rage as he listened to the young Halfling. Grimbledung's eyebrows went up. "Say, I think that's the same kid I knocked down when we first got here! What are the odds of *that*?"

"With you? Pretty even." Drimblerod turned around slowly. "Has he spotted us?"

"No, not... oh wait, the little rat turd is pointing this way." Reflexively, Grimbledung waved.

"What are you doing?!"

"Sorry. It's habit. Maybe we can smooth things over with… Oh no!"

"What now?"

"There seems to be another Halfling with him now."

"What, another? How could this get worse?"

"I don't know. I mean, they both look like Halflings but they don't look related. He does kind of look fam… OH NO!"

"What? What?" Drimblerod strained to look out of the corner of his eye without turning his head.

"Remember that nice Gnomess we met just recently?"

Drimblerod nodded. "Yeah, the one who was trying to kill us?"

"That's the one. Well, if he is the little turnip's father, then his partner is Chéri's honey bunny. Huh, he looks angry too."

"What? So you managed to rough up the son of one of the Halflings in town who also happens to be a friend of…" His eyes got wide, *"the Halfling who was involved with the assassin you shoved into the Abyssmal Box?*"

Grimbledung waved.

"Stop doing that!"

"Sorry."

"They're coming over. I thought you should know."

The quiet-until-now Dwarfling beside Drimblerod giggled.

"Are you enjoying this?" Drimblerod asked him tersely.

The Dwarfling shrugged, "Breakfast is usually kind of boring. You two should come by all the time." He thought for a moment, "If those two Corporals don't kill you, that is." He shuddered, "They're real mean. Even for Halflings."

Drimblerod hopped to his feet. “It’s time to go. Now.”

Grimbledung stood up as well. “No seconds?”

“GRIMBLEDUNG!”

Both Gnomes turned to look at the Halflings.

Grimbledung waved. “Where we going?”

Thirty-Three
…Dash!

"Firstly, out of here!" Drimblerod pointed to the window in one corner of the cafeteria. Students were lined up there. They were scraping their plates into a barrel, dropping their cutlery in a bucket, and then sliding their trays to the waiting hands of some dishwashers. "To the kitchen!" Drimblerod stepped around the table and sprinted for the low-mounted window.

"Gah!" Grimbledung picked up a pancake from the Dwarfling's plate, "Giggle tax!" he declared as he took to a run behind his partner. Albeit not as quick; he was also stuffing a pancake into his mouth as he went.

Drimblerod made it to the window at a run. With a dive, he slid across the wet counter and onto the floor on the other side. Moments later Grimbledung joined him. "Think we've lost them?"

Drimblerod hazarded a glance over the counter, using a startled dishwasher as additional cover. He saw a Dwarfling standing on a bench, pointing directly at him. "Rolton chips! That Dwarfling gave us up!" He turned to look at his partner. Grimbledung was chewing furiously. There was a rivulet of syrup running down his chin. "You didn't!"

Grimbledung's eyes got large. His mouth was too full to answer. He held up his hands defensively.

"You did!" He kicked Grimbledung in the shin. "You maniac!" He turned to the dishwasher, "Is there a back way out of here?"

"Probably over by the back door." The dishwasher smiled amicably as he took a tray from a student. The line was backing up considerably.

"Where's that?"

"Where's what?"

Drimblerod stood and hopped back and forth.

Grimbledung finished chewing.

"Where's the back door?"

"It's out back, 'course."

"WHERE IS BACK?"

The dishwasher turned to look at the Gnome. "If this is the front…" he gestured through the doorway at the milling students, and disturbingly, rapidly approaching Halfling Corporals, "then that is the back." He turned and pointed deeper into the kitchen. Without another word, he turned and retrieved a tray from a waiting student.

"Hourly!" cursed Drimblerod as he grabbed his partner by the arm and moved to what he hoped would be an easy-to-find exit.

Ducking under serving trays, hopping around cooks, the two Gnomes made their way to the back of the kitchen. They faced a blank wall.

"Where's the exit!" Drimblerod begged no one in particular.

"Over here," said a voice from behind a vegetable-filled shelf, "in the corner."

Quickly Drimblerod -with Grimbledung in tow- moved behind the shelf. Before them was a large wooden door. Drimblerod reached for the handle. Attached to it was a heavy, iron padlock. "It's locked! *LOCKED!*"

A Gnome moved beside Drimblerod, "Sure it's locked. That's for safety."

"How could it be safe to lock the back exit of a kitchen?" Asked Grimbledung. "What if there was a fire?"

The Gnome opened his mouth. Then closed it. "Well, aren't we a glass half empty kind of Gnome."

"Listen you two," interrupted Drimblerod, "I can see that you two are kindred spirits, really I can. And I know in my heart that if I let you two go at it, we'd still be standing here when those Halflings got here. Then we'd be dead." He squinted at the Gnome, "So where's the key and keep it short."

"I got it."

"*UNLOCK THE DOOR*," screamed Drimblerod. "Gads!"

"Why didn't you just say so?"

"SHUT UP, GRIM!" Drimblerod turned to the Gnome who was searching a through a large ring of keys. There were over two dozen on the ring. "Open the door or we're all dead!"

The Gnome put a key into the padlock and tried it. It didn't work. He let go of the key and picked another one at random. There didn't seem to be a pattern to his selection process. "Maybe this one?"

"This place has that many locks in it?" Drimblerod asked incredulously.

"No. We've just the one lock. These others are all old keys that don't fit nothing." He jingled the ring, effectively mixing them all up again. "I just keep them all together to keep track of them all."

Drimblerod looked towards the front of the kitchen, fully expecting to see heavily armed Halflings approaching. So far, they were still out of sight. "Please, please open the door!" he begged.

"Try that one!" Suggested Grimbledung. "That's a neat looking one."

The Gnome shook his head, "That's for the old hatch to the attic; I know it's not that one. We threw that lock away years ago. I know which keys are from old locks. I'm not stupid you know."

"Then why do you still keep it on the ring?"

Grimbledung and the other Gnome turned towards Drimblerod, together they said, "It's a neat looking key."

"Gah!" Drimblerod hopped up and down. "Open the door! OPEN THE DOOR!"

Grimbledung winked at his partner. Then he turned to the Gnome, "Say, since you know where all the old keys go, which one is one that you don't know where it goes because it's not one of the old keys that you know where it goes."

Drimblerod just stared at his partner.

"Well, there's this one." The Gnome held up a key. "This isn't one of the old ones."

"They're back there!" Drimblerod heard a cook remark.

"Try it! TRY IT!"

The Gnome put the key in the lock and turned it. The lock popped open. In one move, Drimblerod pulled the lock off the hasp and flung it open. The lock clattered on the end of a short chain. "Let's go, Grim!" He pulled his partner through the door. A thought occurred to him. "Hey, be a pal and lock the door behind us," he suggested to the Gnome as he pushed the door shut.

The Gnome nodded. "Sure, sure. Safety first you know."

Drimblerod looked around as the lock clattered back onto the hasp. "All right then. We need to get to Kilbride Castle." He looked in all directions. "That means we need to head south to the Toll Bridge then east up the river." He pointed at an alleyway. "This way!" It was a broad, and thanks to the rising sun, well-lit alley. "This town needs proper back alleys," he lamented as he grabbed his partner's arm and pulled him along.

"We gotta go to Toll Bridge?" Grimbledung shuddered. "I don't wanna go there."

Drimblerod shook his head, "Listen, it's nice and safe now. All the Trolls are gone. They even took the 'r' out of the sign so that people know the Trolls are all gone." He shook his head, "Of course, now they get to charge people to cross it. I kinda preferred the Trolls. At least it was free then. Left here!"

The two zigged and zagged to the edge of town, keeping to the backstreets all the way. Finally, they stopped at the edge of Julesville, between two large buildings at the end of a long alley. Ahead of them lay the wide, flat remains of the East Shambler Plains. With no cover whatsoever besides few and far between trees.

"There sure is a whole lot of nothing out there," said Grimbledung. "We'll be spotted for sure."

Drimblerod examined the countryside. "You're right. We don't stand a chance." He looked around the end of the alleyway they currently occupied. Except for several barrels and two crates, it was empty. "This is just too clean of a town."

"Give it a few years," offered Grimbledung.

"I don't know if *we* have a few years." A clattering of armor caught their attention. The sound got closer. "They're just one block away. We might not even have a few minutes." Drimblerod frantically looked around the neat and tidy alley. "This is just absurd."

"This is, without a doubt, the cleanest alley I've ever been in." Grimbledung appraised the area, then the ground, "You know, I think they even sweep back here?"

"Help me stack these crates!" Drimblerod grabbed a crate and pulled it toward another one. "Maybe we can make a hiding place."

"Good idea!" Grimbledung moved over and picked up the other end of the crate. With several grunts and tugs, they placed it on the only other crate nearby. "Barrels next!"

"Keep it natural looking."

"Right, right." Grimbledung looked at his partner, "What's a barrel do in the wild? Stand up or lie down?"

"This is no time for your antics!" Drimblerod slapped at Grimbledung's shoulder, "Stack one and lay the other."

The two worked quickly to pull barrels next to the crates. Within moments, they had several stacked up and others rolled over. A seemingly random pile of boxes and crates. "Get in!" commanded Drimblerod as he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled into the pile, followed closely by his partner. Just as a group of Halflings entered the alleyway.

"This place is a mess," remarked a Halfling. The other two nodded in agreement.

Drimblerod watched in silence as the band of Halflings milled around the end of the alleyway.

"Those stinking Gnomes. Messing up my perfectly quiet morning," said another of the Halflings. "When I find them…"

"You'll take them directly to the Corporals if you know what's good for you."

"Ale," whispered Grimbledung to his partner. "That's what he should say back."

Drimblerod shot his partner a stern glance.

"Right. The last thing I need is those two as angry at me as they are at those two Gnomes." The Halfling shrugged, "Better them than me."

With nods all around, the trio moved out of the ally.

Drimblerod let out a sigh of relief, "That was close," he whispered.

"We're never gonna get out of town with them looking all over for us. Even if we made a break for it, they'd have half an hour to spot us before we got out of sight." Grimbledung whispered back.

The two sat in silence for a long moment.

"What now?" Grimbledung finally asked.

"I'm thinking. I'm thinking," assured Drimblerod.

"Why don't we punch the bottoms of the barrels out and walk out of town wearing them?"

Drimblerod stared at his partner, "Right, because migrating barrels on the Great Shambler Plains are an everyday sight. Hey look Halfling Corporal, the barrels are migrating again. That means it's Springtime."

Grimbledung opened his mouth, then closed it. A frown came to his face as he thought quietly. The squeaking of wheels broke the silence. "They're coming back!" Grimbledung ducked down even more.

Drimblerod shook his head, "That's a wagon," he whispered. His eyes grew large. "It's a wagon!" Quickly, he crawled out from under the pile. "Come on Grim! That's our ticket out of here!"

As Grimbledung crawled from under the crates, Drimblerod moved to the center of the alley, blocking the way. A rickety wagon squeaked and clattered toward him. The two donkeys harnessed to it looked to be in the same sad shape as the wagon they were pulling. Drimblerod put up his hand.

The wagon groaned to a stop. The ancient human at the front of it leaned forward and squinted at Drimblerod, "This here's a pretty bright alley for a stickup, sonny."

Grimbledung moved beside his partner. The human eyed him as well, "Ahh a gang, is it? Well, I ain't gonna go quietly."

"Where?" Asked Grimbledung.

"What?"

"Where won't you go quietly?"

The human squinted at Grimbledung. "Not all yer kernels are on the cob, are they." It wasn't a question.

Drimblerod laughed. "That's about the most accurate description I've heard for him." He smiled genuinely at the old man. "Sir, we're not robbers." He moved beside the man, "We're kind of in a pinch and trying to get out of town."

"Trouble with the law?" The old man picked up his reigns, preparing to coax his donkeys into action. "Don't need no trouble with the Constable."

Drimblerod shook his head, "Akita? No, we get along fine with him."

The man raised a completely overgrown eyebrow.

"Really!" assured Grimbledung.

The man raised his other eyebrow. Scissors had never been near this one either.

"It's the Halflings we're having trouble with," confessed Drimblerod. "They're searching the town for us."

"Halflings." The old man spat. "I hate those guys."

"Right?" Grimbledung nodded. "It's the little hands!"

The old man shook his head, "It's the burning and pillaging. Little hands I can ignore all day long."

"Well Sir, we're trying to get out of town and would really like to hide out in the back of your wagon," said Drimblerod. "If that's at all possible."

The old man looked from Drimblerod to Grimbledung and back. "Well, you seem like honest Gnomes. Even though you were hiding in an alleyway."

"Hiding from Halflings," offered Grimbledung.

"I suppose I can give you a ride. But I'm not going out of my way." The old man pointed out of town. "I'm going thataway."

"Where's Thataway? Is it over by South Jute?" Asked Grimbledung.

The old man squinted at him. "Is it safe to take him places?" He asked Drimblerod.

Drimblerod looked at his partner. "I try not to think on it too much. Where are you heading?"

The old man pointed again, "To Salt Flats. Got a load to drop off."

Drimblerod beamed, "We're going to Kilbride Castle to get some help against these infernal Halflings. If you can get us as far as the Toll Bridge, that would be great."

"It's not outta my way. Hop in the back." He jabbed a gnarled thumb at the rear of the wagon. Scissors had not been near his nails for about the same amount of time as his eyebrows.

Grimbledung clapped as he started to clamber over the side of the wagon.

"There's a step in the back ya know. You sure he's safe?" He asked Drimblerod again.

"More often than not," assured Drimblerod as he moved to the back of the wagon and climbed on. Easily. The wagon was full of sacks and barrels. "What are you hauling, if you don't mind me asking."

"Just the usual stuff. Turnips, radishes, and cabbage."

"Gah!" Exclaimed Grimbledung as he flopped into the wagon. "What?"

The old man ignored the obviously unstable Gnome and snapped the reigns at his trusty donkeys, "Giddey, Yapp, let's go!"

With a snort each, the two donkeys picked up an almost-average pace.

"Stay outta my inventory, by the way," the old man warned as he coaxed the donkeys along.

"Don't worry about that!" assured Drimblerod, "you're saving our lives!" He looked at Grimbledung, "Right?"

Grimbledung nodded back. His cheeks were puffed out and several green radish stalks protruded from his mouth.

Drimblerod narrowed his eyes at his partner, "You want us kicked outta this wagon?" He hissed, "stay out of the bags or we're goners!" He reached out and grabbed at the green stalks sticking out of Grimbledung's mouth. Grimbledung bit down and they all came loose into Drimblerod's hand. As he moved to toss them overboard, he paused, shrugged, and put them in his mouth. "No more!" he warned as he also chewed furiously.

"So Kilbride Castle, eh?" The old man asked over his shoulder, "what sort of help you hoping to find?"

Drimblerod swallowed quickly, "Mercenaries. We're going to hire some mercenaries to take care of the Halflings."

The old man nodded. "Fighting fire with fire."

Grimbledung's eyes lit up, "Ohh! That can be Plan B."

"What can?"

"Starting a fire. It sure cleared out Aution." Grimbledung remarked.

Drimblerod slapped his partner's ear.

"Don't remind me." The old man spat again. "I lost everything in that fire. Everything. I had to start over with nothing." He turned and looked at the two Gnomes, "I'm getting kinda old to be doing that regularly." He thought for a moment then grimaced. "At my age, *nothing* happens regularly." With a shrug, he turned back around.

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue, "And now I've lost my appetite."

"I find that hard to believe." Drimblerod waggled his ears at his partner.

"Well temporarily at least. It'll be back, don't you worry," Grimbledung assured as he leaned back on a sack. "What a morning!" He exhaled loudly. "I think this calls for a nap."

Drimblerod nodded, "I'll keep watch." He stood and using the side rails as support, climbed into the front of the wagon. "Mind if I sit up here?" He asked the old man.

The old man snored back.

Drimblerod went to nudge the old man when one of the donkeys looked back and snorted.

"What? Let him sleep?"

The donkey snorted again.

"You know where you're going?"

The donkey stared at him for a moment then went back to looking forward. It leaned over and seemed to whisper something in the other donkey's ear then brayed loudly.

Drimblerod looked ahead of the wagon. They were staying on the road. On the proper side even.

The other donkey looked back at Drimblerod. It brayed as well.

With a frown Drimblerod pointed ahead, "Fine, fine. Have your laughs. I'll just sit here nice and quiet. Keep up the good work." Then, unable to help himself, he added "Aren't you two just a couple of asses."

The donkey squinted at Drimblerod then went back to its task.

"Donkeys..."

After two hours, the stone uprights to the Toll Bridge finally came into view. One of the donkeys -Giddy- looked back and brayed loudly. The old man startled awake. So did Drimblerod.

"We're here. Good work boys," the old man said as he stretched. "Nice and quiet like always."

The donkey nodded.

Drimblerod leaned back and tapped Grimbledung on the head, "Time to get up, Grim. We're almost there."

Grimbledung stretched and yawned. "It's about time."

"About time? You slept the whole way. What are you complaining about?" Drimblerod shook his head. "You're a lifesaver," he said to the old man. "And don't worry; we'll get rid of those pesky Halflings soon enough."

The old man nodded in return, "That'd be nice." He pulled on the reins as they approached the bridge. "Here's yer stop."

Drimblerod nodded as he reached into his belt pouch, "For the toll," he said as he handed the old man a silver coin.

"The toll's not but a copper."

"Well, we owe you at least this for getting us out safe." He hazarded a look at his partner. He was chewing. "And then some."

The old man took the silver coin, "Thanks Mister Gnome. Hope't see you around town."

Drimblerod climbed down from the buckboard as Grimbledung once again clambered over the side of the wagon. As he hit the ground, a radish dropped out of his pant leg.

"Thanks heaps!" Said Grimbledung as he quickly moved to stand in front of the radish. "You really hit the spot!"

"Yep," agreed the old man as he turned and snapped the reins. "Let's go boys," he said to the donkeys. They obediently moved to a below-average pace to cross the bridge.

"Pick up that radish and let's get going before he notices," scolded Drimblerod.

As Grimbledung bent to pick up the wayward radish, another fell from his pocket.

"It's just an hour's walk to Kilbride. I hope you have enough supplies to last you that long."

Grimbledung nodded, "There and back again."

"A Grimbledung's tale." With a shake of his head, Drimblerod pushed his partner in the direction of Kilbride Castle.

"It's more like an unexpected journey, if you ask me. I didn't even get a To-Go basket from the Gnolls."

The two turned and began to walk along the river bank, nibbling on vegetables as they went.

Thirty-Four
Wherein Grimbledung and Drimblerod Hire Mercenaries

The two Gnomes approached the castle. Several banners were flying overhead. They all depicted different weapons- from sword to crossbow to ballista. "Is that their inventory?" Asked Grimbledung.

"A mercenary's gotta advertise somehow."

Grimbledung nodded. "I suppose so," he said as he reached the gate. It was down. "Wanna run through it again?"

Ka - Klack!

Heard the Gnomes. They both turned (without making any sudden moves) to look at the guard shack next to the open drawbridge. There was a large, loaded crossbow sticking out of it.

"I think the rehearsals are all over," said Drimblerod, "we're live."

"So far anyway."

"You got a 'pointment?" Asked the Master at Arms testily as he leaned out of the window. "You don' go see the Gen'ral without a 'pointment. That's 'ow y' end up dead."

"People like us don't need appointments," began Drimblerod haughtily. "We're far too busy to make any plans farther out than a day." He waved his hand around dismissively. "Far, far too busy."

"Dead?" Asked Grimbledung to no one in particular.

"It's prac'lly midday. Why'd ya not make the 'pointment this mornin' then?"

Drimblerod narrowed his eyes. "We were busy then. You see…"

"Can we see the General or not?" Interrupted Grimbledung. The plan was for him to make the pitch to the General after Drim got them there. It was going to be the other way around, but a best two-of-out-three round of rock/parchment/dagger settled it. A little two on one action may help, he thought. "Let's go Drim. I'm sure we can head north and see if those other mercenaries are interested in making a goodly amount of gold... We can head out and be there by tomorrow." He turned and started to go.

" 'Old on 'ere Master Gnomes," began the Master at Arms quickly. The last thing he needed was the General hearing that he had sent a couple of potential clients away. "Mayhap I kin get you in to see 'im. Give me a moment." He turned and ducked into the shack.

"Who's he gonna ask in there?" Grimbledung asked.

A string running from the back of the shack towards the castle drew taut. "We've got company," the Gnomes heard him say.

Drimblerod and Grimbledung approached the shack as the man seemed to have a one-sided conversation. When they got there, they peered in. The man seemed to have a tin can held up to his ear. He was nodding. He then turned and spoke into the can, "Fine. I'll send them up." He returned to listen to the can. After a moment, he hung it back on a hook.

"That's the strangest thing I've ever seen," said Grimbledung.

"Ya kin go up," said the Master at Arms. He pointed up towards the gate.

"Thanks, Mister," said Drimblerod as he started to move off.

Grimbledung was still peering into the shack. "Hey, how's the can wor…" he began. Drimblerod grabbed him by the collar and yanked him towards the gate. "We're in a hurry here, Grim. The next time you're here ask the guy about the can." In all honesty, Drimblerod was also curious how the can and a string allowed the man in the shack to talk to anyone. 'Elfin magic' he decided.

The two Gnomes walked up the stone walk to the castle gates. As far as castles went, it wasn't by any means large. Even so, it was an impressive castle with dozens of parapets and arrow slits. Above the wall, the tops of several trebuchets could be seen as well. Two guards stood on each side of the massive wood gate. It was easily as thick as the Gnomes. "Hello, Gents," offered Grimbledung with a smile.

"You again?" Said one of the guards.

"Dangling Shambler balls. He's got a partner now," said the other as he shook his head.

"How often you come here?" Drimblerod asked.

"Just a few times, as far as I can recall."

"You sure made an impression," replied Drimblerod, "I hope you didn't burn any bridges with your visits."

"Bridges? No. Not bridges," assured Grimbledung.

Drimblerod shook his head again. It was becoming habit. Inside the courtyard were several tents around the outer edge and one large one in the middle. They approached the large tent. Another guard was at the flap.

"We're here to see the General," said Drimblerod with a professional smile.

The guard looked from the Gnomes to the tent flap and back. Twice.

"Can we go in?" Asked Grimbledung.

The guard made another round of looks. "I suppose I'll announce you," he said nervously. He took a couple of relaxing, deep breaths, then ducked into the impressively large tent. Almost as soon as he had gone in, he came back out. He looked paler than he did a moment ago, "He'll see ya." He pointed at the tent flap, obviously not going back in again himself.

Drimblerod became nervous. He had heard rumors of retired generals working as mercenaries and how they retained their lead-with-an-iron-fist military ways. But they couldn't *all* be that way. "You're not going to announce us?"

The Master at Arms considered that a moment, looking from the Gnomes to the tent flap and back again. He spun on his heels in a very crisp about-face and marched off.

"I guess that means no," offered Grimbledung. "You want to go first?" He finished hopefully.

"Ever see the general?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Not even when we were trying to put out that fire."

Drimblerod blinked at his partner. "Well, let's go then." He moved past his partner and just as he got to the flap, he lifted it and stepped to the side. A welcoming smile on his face.

Without thinking, Grimbledung nodded a thank you and stepped in. "Hey *YOU*!" he called over his shoulder as he coasted to a stop several paces in the tent.

Drimblerod waggled his ears.

"What?" Came a deep timbered response, "what'd you call me, whelp?"

Drimblerod paused for a moment and quickly went through the pros and cons of entering himself:

1. Grim was already inside and he could make the pitch BUT he would never hear the end of it if he left Grim in there alone. There'd be Songs of Drimblerod's Cowardice. Sung routinely (and poorly) by Grimbledung.

2. Grim could screw up the pitch and they'd lose an opportunity to hire the mercenaries. There would be never-ending songs of Songs of Lamentations. Sung routinely (and poorly) by Grimbledung.

3. Grim could make the deal and singlehandedly (it was already his idea) save the town. Songs of Success *and* Songs of Cowardice. LOTS of both types of songs. All sung poorly by Grimbledung.

4. Any combination of 1, 2, or 3 resulted in a lot of songs. He might as well go in and at least be involved in saving the town.

With a sigh, Drimblerod selected option 4 and entered the tent to stand beside his partner.

"TWO whelps?" Thundered the voice. "Whaddayawant?" The General was still not in view. It was a big tent.

"General," began Grimbledung. It occurred to him that no one had called him by name-he was just 'The General'. Local accents notwithstanding. "General…" He began again.

The General stepped into the middle of the tent. He seemed to be a Human of above average height and old. His long black hair hung

down around his face like a halo. A black halo. He had dark eyes, and tanned, olive skin. To finish off his foreboding look, he wore blackened cuirboilli armor. The blackening seemed to be from it taking the brunt of a dragon's fiery breath. Around his neck on a leather cord was the incisor of presumably that same dragon. It was as long as Drimblerod's hand. He wielded a staff that was a full foot taller than himself and was topped with a Tiger Eye stone that seemed to have a glow all its own. He looked like Death himself. Or possibly a close relative; by blood not marriage. He definitely went to the Death family reunions and was probably one of those relatives no one wanted to sit next to. It was actually a matter of fact that on the battlefield he acted much like Death- doling out eternal rest to any and all who dared to step in front of him. "Derek" he rumbled.

General Derek? Drimblerod blanched. He had heard of -*a*- General Derek but he had no idea that was who was leading *this* particular band of mercenaries. In fact, the stories of General Derek were so epically heroically and absurdly over the top, many people thought he was a fictional character made up to scare young conscripts. *It may not even be the same General Derek*, mused Drimblerod, *after all, that was a fairly common given name. As long as his last name wasn't…*

"Son of Sander, The Doer of Horrible Things To All He Defeated And Some He Didn't," continued the General.

Drimblerod's knees gave out and he fell back on his behind.

"You may call me General Derek Son of Sander, whelp, or High Supreme Commander Derek." Impossibly, he lowered his voice another few notes, "Don't you dare shorten it."

"General Derek, Son of Sander" began Drimblerod shakily as he moved to stand (Grimbledung still hadn't moved from when he first gazed upon the General), "We are here to hire you for a simple task that you and your highly-trained men should be able to accomplish within a sing…"

"Wait… whelp?" Interrupted Grimbledung, "that really doesn't seem to fit in with those others. How would one even shorten that? The other two I got, but are you sure about that middle one?"

The General completely ignored Grimbledung. "An easy and simple task you say?" Offered General Derek Son of Sander, "Every time someone offers me an easy and simple task, me and my men end up fighting overwhelming odds with the very destruction of the Lands

in the balance." He waved his hands dismissively at Drimblerod, "Haven't any of you people heard of hyperbole?"

Grimbledung shook his head, "No, no Derek, what we're here to offer you and your men…" he began his rehearsed pitch.

General Derek was still looking at Drimblerod when Grimbledung spoke up. He never even flinched or moved his eyes. Drimblerod was sure the Tiger Eye gem blinked at him. A white tendril shot from the Tiger Eye at Grimbledung. Within moments, Grimbledung was completely covered in what looked like spider webs. He was barely visible and pinned to the ground. Acting as if nothing had happened, he continued, "So… lack of hyperbole, or completely unaware of it?"

Drimblerod looked from his partner and back at the General several times. He could see Grimbledung struggling under the webbing and was relieved he wasn't dead. "Ahh, no General Derek Son of Sander" he began worriedly, "I'm not underestimating what you're going to have to do. It's a very simple deception that you'll be participating in." He paused hoping that the General would then ask 'so who are we deceiving?' to show that the pitch was working.

General Derek just stared at him. He did not seem to suffer from the same affliction as his Tiger Eye gem; he did not seem to have the need to blink.

After several moments, Drimblerod decided to just make the entire pitch and hope for the best, "High Supreme Commander Derek (he figured he'd alternate to keep the General pleased) you see, our town is occupied at the moment by Halflings and we were thinking that if you and your men showed up and acted like you were replacing the occupiers, they would leave thinking their replacements had arrived. Then *you* could leave, and our town would no longer be occupied." He paused again hoping for some interaction from the General. He swore that the tiger eye gem blinked again.

The General had turned his attention to Grimbledung who had worked enough of the webs away so he could poke his nose out. He was breathing heavily from the exertion. "Uhfffm?" Grimbledung offered.

"Shaddap you!" General Derek glowered at Grimbledung who now worked both his hands through the webbing- his nose and one eye peeked out as well. It was progress. The General turned to look at Drimblerod again. As far as Drim could tell, he still had not blinked. "That's yer whole pitch then, Whelp?" His eyebrow raised slightly. Still no blinking.

Drimblerod startled- was it all a show and they were about to share a light moment? "Err no General Derek Son of Sander." He paused for a moment and went over the pitch in his head. "Well, actually yes. Yes, that is the whole pitch." He flashed a friendly smile hoping it was contagious.

The General glowered at him; apparently, he was immune. He leaned slightly on his staff. Now the Tiger Eye seemed to be looking at him. To make matters worse now *it* had stopped blinking as well. "So…" he suggested.

"So?" Asked Drimblerod. A grunt from Grimbledung reminded him, "General Derek Son of Sander, are you in?"

The General looked from Grimbledung (his head was now free) to Drimblerod and back again. Apparently, Grimbledung's wrestling match with the webbing was the most interesting thing going on in the tent at the moment. Now Grimbledung had the hole over one shoulder and was working the other through it.

The General startled as Grimbledung pushed the hole in the webbing down to his hips. He slipped out of it as if it were a silky skirt. "Wait!"

Drimblerod looked from the General to his partner. *Was Grimbledung getting free going to set off the General?* he thought worriedly.

"Did you say Halflings?"

Drimblerod blinked at the General. "Well, yes Supreme High Commander Derek. Julesville has been occupied as part of the invasion by the Great Halfling Army of the Lord High Priest."

"Halflings?"

"Ahh, Supreme High Commander Derek, is that a problem?" Asked Drimblerod.

Grimbledung, finally free, moved beside his partner.

"I'd rather not deal with Halflings."

"But…" began Drimblerod.

"But nothing. I'd rather not deal with Halflings," said the General again.

Grimbledung looked from his partner to the General and back. "What I think he was meaning to say, General Derek son of Sander, was, but why?"

The General stared at the Gnomes. Finally, he grimaced. "They give me the willies."

Grimbledung took a step towards the General "Right? It's the small hands!" He turned to face his partner, "See? It's not just me." He nodded at the General to show his support.

Drimblerod blinked. He had *thought* he had brought his partner along to help make the pitch, now it seemed Grimbledung the turncoat was siding with the General. It was two against one, in the wrong direction! "That's just absurd."

"Smell like cabbage too," said the General.

"Exactly! It's creepy," agreed Grimbledung. He took another step towards the General. Apparently, the lines were being drawn.

Drimblerod put his hands on his hips, "All right. That's about enough of that," he said angrily. Both the General and Grimbledung seemed to take an interest in the rug they were standing on. "They're just *Halflings*. That's it. Halflings!"

"Silk?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Hand woven in Iranistan," said the General.

"Nice. A Nain, right?"

"Yep."

"That's enough you two!" Drimblerod stepped forward onto the rug. The rug *was* plush. A couple of them would really make the shop more upscale. He looked down momentarily, then regained his focus. "You people are mercenaries. Hired blades. We're here to hire your services and aren't going to take 'Halflings creep me out' as an excuse to not be available. It's a nice and simple mission that won't even require you to draw your weapons and won't have to say more than a couple of words to the Halflings." He shook his head. "Honestly."

"Fine, fine," the General finally said, "we'll be willing to assist with this charade for a modest fee of twenty gold coins. To be paid in advance."

Grimbledung blanched. "Twenty?" He stepped back towards Drimblerod.

Drimblerod shoved his partner for good measure. He had expected about that amount (Nulu was up to date on current mercenary rates) and was prepared to pay it. "Half upfront, and half when the job's done, Supreme High Commander Derek."

"Fine. We'll do it." He nodded at Drimblerod. "Deal."

Drimblerod removed a pouch from his belt. He counted out ten coins, retied the bag and tossed it to the General. "If you could give us a day to get back so that no one suspects anything Supreme High Commander Derek," suggested Drimblerod.

"Just Derek is fine."

Drimblerod stared at the General. "What? *Now* that's fine?"

Derek shrugged, "Well, before I was working for myself. Now I'm in your employ. It'd be silly to have to keep calling me that." He considered that for a moment. "Unless you really want to."

"After the Halfling display, I think 'Derek' works for me."

Derek nodded. "Go to the red tent and speak with my Number Two. General Aldrin. He'll give you a banner to fly."

"*Two* Generals?" Asked Grimbledung.

"There's six of us in this company of free soldiers, actually"

"Six? Why so many?"

"Well," explained Derek, "When the war was over, there were jobs galore for the cannon fodder who were in the war. But for us Generals, it wasn't so grand."

"Really?" Asked Grimbledung.

Drimblerod lost interest entirely and began to look around the tent.

"Sure, and it's not so hard to understand. Really, what can you do with a general when he stops being a general, or with one that retires?"

"I'd never thought of that."

"Who's got a job for a general when he stops being a general? Infantrymen all get a job but a general no one hires. They fill a general's chest with medals while he's fighting across the Lands."

"Well, that's got to count for something," offered Grimbledung. His interest was waning as well.

"I suppose. And then they spread a red carpet when they come marching home."

"Sounds grand."

"Until the next day when someone hollers when the general comes into view 'Hey, here comes that general!', and everyone else says 'General who?' "

"I can see how that would be a letdown," said Grimbledung impatiently, "say, about that tricking the Halflings thing. Are we all good on that…"

"They're all delighted that I came, but no one can recall my name." the General interrupted sourly.

"Well, in their defense, your name *is* kind of long…"

"Sure, but no one thinks of assigning me when they stop wining and dining me. It seems the Lands has never enjoyed so many one and two and three and four star generals unemployed."[44]

"Well, we're glad to have you work for us," offered Drimblerod. He wanted nothing more than the monologue to come to an end.

Grimbledung perked up. "That's practically a song. You ought to sing it to people. Go on tour."

Derek shook his head, "I don't think so. I *am* a General but I'm no Wallace."

Grimbledung shrugged. It *sounded* like a double entendre but had stopped paying attention about when the carpets were rolled out. "I'm beginning to get second thoughts about this whole arrangement. Drim?"

"Yes, let's leave General Derek to his lamentations and we'll go hit up General Aldrin," agreed Drimblerod.

The two left the tent quickly. "I don't think that guy's all there," said Grimbledung.

"Coming from you, that's really saying a lot."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Well, you're here, not there," tried Drimblerod.

Grimbledung thought for a moment. "Well, that makes sense. Let's go get this banner." The two looked around the courtyard of the castle. "Where's this red tent?"

"Let's ask this fellow," suggested Drimblerod as he pointed at a soldier who was trudging along. Soldiers defaulted to a 'trudge' when they had the opportunity. That is why Officers tended to march them places- otherwise it would take forever for an army to get anywhere. "Hey there soldier, where's General Aldrin?"

"In his tent of course" replied the soldier, not even stopping his trudge.

Grimbledung scowled. "Soldiers." Being salary, they worked as little as possible to still earn their meager pay. "Where's the General's Tent?" He called after the still trudging soldier.

"Follow me. I'm going there myself," replied the soldier as he moved off. Slowly.

"We'll try to keep up," said Grimbledung as they picked up the barely moving pace of the soldier. "Will we get there today, do you think?"

The soldier ignored him. Trudging seemed to take most of his attention.

After only a few minutes (it wasn't that big of a castle but it was a slow pace) they arrived at a medium sized red tent. The soldier stopped in front of the tent. "Here we go."

"Well, you must be bushed after that breakneck sprint here," said Grimbledung, "do ya need to sit down to catch your breath?"

The soldier turned to look at Grimbledung, "Wanna go first?"

"Yeah," said Drimblerod as he pushed past the soldier, "we wanna go first. We'd *love* to be back home by nightfall." He shook his head. "I hope we get to pick who Derek brings with him."

Grimbledung nodded. "Let's get this over with." He gestured toward the tent flap.

Drimblerod nodded back, "Sure, let's go." He moved past his partner and just as he got to the flap, he lifted it and stepped to the side. A welcoming smile on his face.

Again, without thinking, Grimbledung nodded a thank you and stepped in. "Hey *YOU*!" he called over his shoulder as he coasted to a stop several paces in the tent.

Drimblerod shook his head. That should not have worked again. "Definitely not all here either." With a salute to the soldier standing out front, he followed his partner into the tent.

"Stinker," whispered Grimbledung as he jabbed his partner in the ribs.

Drimblerod chuckled as he looked around the tent. It was well apportioned with rugs and seats of various sizes and colors. Along the walls were banners hung from pikes. He cleared his throat. "General Aldrin?" He tried.

From behind a curtain, a hulking mass of Human lumbered out. A mass of muscle. He was dressed in chainmail over a leather shirt and trousers. A long red cape hung from his shoulders to the floor. Protruding from his shoulders were large, polished metal spikes. Six per side. Long black flowing hair hung down the sides of his face to his shoulders. He wore a black goatee to add to his foreboding look. "There is war in the air," growled the General.

Grimbledung sniffed. "Smells just like stew."

The General opened his mouth to answer, thought better of it, and merely pursed his lips. He added a squint to make sure his annoyance was conveyed.

It was.

"Ahhh," began Grimbledung, "we were sent here by Derek…"

"Nice. We're on a job then?" Interrupted the General. He rubbed leather gloved hands together. The gloves were also covered with sharpened studs. "Good. Good."

"Yes, General Aldrin. We've hired you for a nice, simple operation."

"Who we gotta kill? Usurp a king? Dispatch a god?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "Ahh, no General Aldrin. Nothing like that. We need to trick the Halflings who have invaded our town into leaving."

The General blinked at Drimblerod. "That's it?" He said, obviously let down.

"I suppose," offered Grimbledung.

"Do we get to kill them?" The General asked hopefully. "We're really good at that, you know. Heads on pikes. Entrails for banners. That kind of stuff."

Drimblerod shook his head, "No Sir, just trick them to leave town. We're not supposed to kill them."

"Hard to win a battle if you don't get rid of your enemy." Tut-tutted the General. "That's rule number one."

"*That's* rule number one?" Asked Grimbledung. "That's odd."

The General glowered at the Gnome, "Why's that, Gnome?"

"Well, I'd have figured the first rule would be something along the lines of 'don't do something stupid to get yourself killed'. Or maybe 'always have dry socks'. Something like that."

The General stared at the Gnome for a long moment. He turned to the other Gnome. "He good?"

Drimblerod shrugged, "Only when he's not."

The General began to stare at Drimblerod. "I'm beginning to get second thoughts about this whole arrangement."

"Err, General," Drimblerod began again, "We're just here to pick up a banner or something. We're supposed to wave it around, I think. Derek sent us to you to get it."

"Did he monologue the Lamentation of Generals?"

Grimbledung nodded, "I told him he should sing it." He smiled helpfully.

"Don't. Ever. Suggest. That. Again." warned Aldrin. "If that becomes a song, I'll hunt you down and personally put you on a pike."

Grimbledung gulped.

"So, you have a flag for us?"

General Aldrin scowled. It seemed to be his default look. "Here..." He turned and stalked to the far wall of the tent. "No killin'. Just disgraceful," he muttered as he went. Leaning against the tent wall was a stack of red and black banners attached to pikes. He retrieved one of them. "Put this thing out after we're gone." He handed the banner to Drimblerod.

"Why after you've gone?" Grimbledung pulled the banner out and examined it. It was a large rampant warthog on a red background. Its tusks were black and curled. The outer edge of the flag had a black border.

"Advertisement," explained the General.

"I've never seen a warthog on its hind legs," remarked Grimbledung.

The General nodded, "It's more imposing than the typical rampant lion you see everywhere else."

"Still, I've never seen one on its hind legs like that. You sure they do that?"

The General squinted at Grimbledung. "Shouldn't you be going? Somewhere?"

Drimblerod nodded, "I think it is time we went. Thanks very much General." He bowed slightly. Hopefully that was the correct thing to do to a General. "Like I told Derek, don't show up until tomorrow that way we're back in town and no one will suspect anything when you all show up."

"Hind legs?" Said Grimbledung, "I've seen dogs do that. Maybe you could put a dog on there. They stand on their hind legs."

The General pursed his lips at Grimbledung. In a very threatening manner.

"I think I'll be on my way, General." Grimbledung gulped as he moved to the tent flap. The squint was still there but the pursed lips had become a frown. "See you in a day then, Aldrin." He waved at the squinting, frowning General as he ducked under the flap.

"Sorry about that, General Aldrin," Drimblerod began as he rolled up the banner. "He's a bit peculiar."

"I've dealt with worse. You get some real crackpots trying to hire you when you're in the mercenary business." A thought came to him. His face brightened, "Can we rough up some of the Halflings?"

"Sure, I suppose. They probably expect that. Halflings are a pretty vicious race."

Aldrin smiled as he rubbed his studded gloves together again, "That's something at least, thanks very much for that. It's most appreciated."

"If you don't mind me saying," began Drimblerod, "for someone sporting an ominous black goatee, you sure are the friendly type."

"I know. I get that a lot." He squinted his eyes, "Just don't spread that around."

Drimblerod nodded. "Got it." With a wave, he too left the tent.

Grimbledung was standing outside the tent as his partner exited. He was hopping back and forth. "Oh boy, those Halflings are going to get it!" He clapped with glee.

"I suppose so," agreed Drimblerod. "Now let's get back to town."

The two walked out the castle gate. The Master at Arms was waiting for them. "We got a deal?" He asked hopefully.

Drimblerod nodded, "We do."

The Master at Arms smiled. "It's about time. Gets pretty boring sitting here watching the gate."

"Well, tomorrow you'll all be rolling into Julesville," assured Grimbledung, "it'll be a good time."

"Great!" The Master at Arms turned and trotted towards the gate.

"Those are, by far, the friendliest Mercenaries I've ever met," remarked Drimblerod as he laid the banner over his shoulder and pointed towards town. "To Julesville."

"To Julesville," agreed Grimbledung.

After three hours, Julesville finally came into view. "Ahh home!" Said Grimbledung.

Drimblerod came to a quick halt. "Uh oh. We forgot something," he said worriedly.

"What?"

"How are we going to get back into town? They've got the place locked down tight."

"How about we walk in backwards and tell them that we're leaving."

"That's absurd; who'd believe that?"

"It works more times than not." Grimbledung assured his partner.

"Well we need another, better plan."

Grimbledung furrowed his brow then snapped his fingers, "We'll tell them we were out gathering wands!" He smiled broadly, "We *do* run the only wand shop in town you know." He waggled his ears.

"Where're we going to find wands out here?" He gestured around the open plain.

"What's a wand that isn't magical yet?" Grimbledung raised an eyebrow.

Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Right!"

As Grimbledung and Drimblerod walked the last couple of miles back to Julesville, they picked up sticks of various sizes and colors. "We'll just tell them these are the wands we collected." Drimblerod winked. "They'll never know the difference, those stupid Halflings!"

Grimbledung giggled. "Sounds good. Then all we have to do is lay low until the Mercenaries arrive!"

With that, the two snuck back into town.

Oddly enough, the plan worked just as they had hoped. As well as the plan on the next day.

Fate was too busy corralling Pics back towards the underground lair (they had been lured off their course by a passing Gnomess) to be able to deal with the Halflings right then.

Thirty-Five
Wherein Julesville is Liberated In Five Parts:
I -Meanwhile[45]

"Conscripts!" Shouted the Lord High Priest. He had been musing over recent events. He wasn't pleased by them. Rogue Mimes? Neutralized Assassins? Werewolves joining forces with Trollesses? No, he was not pleased at all. "Conscripts!" he called again.

Two Conscripts came running into view. They were always nearby to do the Lord High Priest's bidding but they had been caught at shift change. There was a tense exchange deciding if the present shift or the upcoming shift should answer. With a quick scampering off, the present shift ended the debate; the afternoon shift was on duty a few minutes early. It wasn't that the shifts didn't like each other -far from it- it was just that sometimes the bidding of the Lord High Priest was lethal. For them in any case. Sometimes it was merely unpleasant. For most everyone involved, that is. In almost all circumstances, it was never fun. Of course, as a Conscript, there really wasn't any other choice.

"To the balcony," commanded the Lord High Priest.

One of the conscripts shuddered. He was present when his previous cohort was used as a practical demonstration of the saying 'when Conscripts fly'. Apparently, that time had not come about just yet.

"Bring the Goat of Scrying," snarled the High Priest. He lowered his voice ominously, "and the Deus ex Machina".

This time both conscripts shuddered. Neither was something they wanted to be around. *Curse the morning shift!*

The three moved out to the balcony. The High Priest moved to the edge as the Conscripts pulled the items into position. He looked over his Kingdom. Or at least an eastern part of it. Small houses dotted the landscape. Different regiments were drilling in various locations. The High Priest smiled. *The Siege Brigade is practicing their trebuchet employment.* "Excellent," he said aloud as one of the massive machines hurled an equally massive stone several hundred feet. It smashed into a large - albeit rickety looking - windmill. It exploded into splinters. "Excellentastic!"

"Ready, Lord High Priest," said one Conscript as he muscled the large crossbow onto the balcony. The crossbow was twice as tall as the Conscript and was mounted on a wheeled platform. A dozen bolts as long as the Conscript were stuck into holes on the platform, ready for use. As usual, the crossbow was aimed straight up.

The other Conscript was holding a worn leather strap that was tied to an ancient, ragged looking goat. "Which one first, High Priest?" He asked nervously as he tied the goat's leash to a rusted ring mounted into the floor of the balcony. He was hoping it was the crossbow for nothing more than a little more time to prepare himself for his part of the proceedings.

No such luck.

"The goat first, of course," scowled the High Priest, "I need to know what's going on before I can do anything else." He shook his head. *Conscripts.*

"Maaa," said the goat. It wasn't pleased one bit with its current lot in life.

"Yes, Sire," said the goat-holding Conscript, dejected. The two had played a fevered game of Hammer-Sickle-Parchment to decide who got the goat. He had lost. *Two out of three, no less!* "What're we looking for?" He asked very anxiously. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

"*Maaa?" S*aid the goat hopefully.

"The future."

"*Maaa!" S*aid the goat, relieved. It really didn't understand the game but was at least pleased it was *this* game, not the *other* game.

The Conscript breathed a sigh of relief as he moved to the goat's head. "As you wish," he said as he gripped the goat's lower jaw with one hand, and its snout with the other. Carefully he pried open the goat's mouth and peered inside.

"Ready, Lord High Priest."

The Lord High Priest chuckled, "Buck up Conscript, at least you're looking down the future, not up the past."

"M*aaaa!" S*aid the goat. *That* was the game it really most sincerely didn't like.

Neither did the Conscript.

"Tell me what you see of your future," commanded the Lord High Priest. He slapped the flank of the goat

Future Events

He intoned.

The Lord High Priest moved to the edge of the balcony. He turned and looked out at his Kingdom and the ongoing maneuvers.

A swirl of colors appeared in the goat's throat. They coalesced into shapes and then recognizable figures.

"Tell me your future if I send you to the front," said the High Priest.

The Goat of Scrying showed whoever looked into it, their future. That was the main reason the Lord High Priest didn't want any part of looking into it. Knowing one's fate *seemed* like a good idea, but it was like stepping into a reflecting pool; once it was done, there was no way to undo it and there was no way to stop the ripples as they moved outwards. Ignorance in this case was, as in many other instances, bliss.

The Conscript began to sweat as the figures took shape. "I see a great battlefield. There are soldiers everywhere!"

"Halfling?"

"Yes, I see hundreds of the Lord High Priest's finest soldiers." The Conscript squinted into the goat's throat. As with the High Priest, he wasn't very keen on knowing his fate either. Maybe a hazy squint, but definitely not a full-on stare. The figures were fuzzy and it was hard to tell if they were moving.

"Where are you?"

"I see a great wall winding eastward and westward."

"Which side of the wall? Where are you?" Asked the High Priest anxiously.

"We are to the south of it. On the rolling plains."

"So, you will make it past the wall. Excellent. Then the time to attack is now. *Excellent*."

"A*aaaah*?" Asked the Goat.

"Yes, Lord High Priest, south of the wall. Lots of troops. Both mounted and dismounted." He hazarded another glance. "Is that all High Priest?" Asked the Conscript as he squinted at the future. He could make out some mounted creatures moving around the troops. Obviously they were there to help. *Right*? The Conscript closed one eye. Any more detail and he may have actually seen himself! His eye was barely a slit.

"*Aaaaaaa?" A*sked the Goat again hopefully.

"Fine then," said the High Priest, "that is all I needed to know." He turned to the other Conscript who had been watching intently from behind the crossbow. He was practically crouched behind it.

Relieved, the Conscript let go of the goat's head. "*Maaaa!*" it said angrily as it closed its mouth. It licked its lips at the smell of butterscotch[46].

"Span the Deux ex Machina," commanded the High Priest ominously. He pointed at it dramatically. *This* he would handle personally.

The Conscript strained as he turned the large cranequin, pulling the string backward, one 'click' at a time. The string was as thick as his pinky finger, the bow thicker than his arm. Finally, the string dropped into its notch. *KLAAK*, it went. He looked worriedly at the Lord High Priest.

"Load a bolt." The High Priest smirked. "This time."

The Conscript breathed a sigh of relief. Oftentimes, instead of a bolt, the Lord High Priest sent a more 'personal' message. That was how this particular duty position had 'become vacant', just the week prior.

The Lord High Priest moved to the machine and pulled a blank sheet of parchment from a side container. A smaller container had thin pieces of charcoal in them. He selected one and wrote in large, angry letters

Get On WiTh it !

He then rolled the parchment into a tight tube. "Seek Corporal Gigantus," he whispered into the tube and then slid it into a hole carved in the middle section of the bolt. Without looking to see if the Conscript was clear, he pulled the trigger and with a loud '*THRUMM'*, the bolt shot straight into the air. Just as it began to disappear from sight, it took a lazy southwesterly trajectory. Without another word, he left the balcony, confident in the fact that the upcoming invasion would be a success. After all, the Conscript had seen it with his own eyes.

The Conscript shuddered as he thought back to his vision of hundreds of Halfling soldiers. They were, indeed south of the Great Anti-Ogre Wall. Whether they were actually moving or not was anyone's guess. Through tightly squinted eyes, he wasn't even sure if they were standing or sprawled on the ground. With a shrug, he led the goat back to its pen. Until the Lord High Priest actually followed through and sent him to the front lines, it wasn't really his problem to deal with. He decided he wouldn't mention it if he didn't have to…

Thirty-Five
Julesville Liberation
II - While[47]

Drimblerod and Grimbledung both got up early. "Those stinking Halflings are in for it today!" Grimbledung smiled broadly at his partner. "That'll teach them to mess with a couple of Gnomes!"

"And a Trolless and a Werewolf," corrected Drimblerod.

"I can just hear them now," Grimbledung snickered, "Gnomes, and Trollesses, and Werewolves! Oh my!"

"Don't be ridiculous. No one talks like that."

"Well, they'll be thinking it, I'm sure."

Rat came trudging up the stairs, "And what about Rat? I've been running my poor paws off keeping everyone informed on what's going on. Organizing food banks, keeping morale up. What about me?"

"Food banks? Who said we needed food banks?"

"Drim, with all the running I've been doing, *I've* needed food banks." Rat hopped up and sat heavily on the table. "I'm beat. I'm going to need an entire week off after this is all over."

Drimblerod put a plate in front of Rat, "Well, I hate to say it but just getting rid of the Halflings in town isn't the end of it."

"Wait, it isn't?"

"No Grim, even with this group gone, we still have an invasion to worry about. Things aren't all peaches and mead[48] just yet."

Grimbledung moved to the cupboard and pulled out some cheese, bread, and smoked turkey. "Well, there's cheese and turkey. That's at least something, right?" He set the food on the table. "Tea, Rat?"

"Tea? We're out of Gnollish Dark Roast®? We're definitely not out of the woods yet."

With that, the trio sat down for breakfast…

Thirty-Five
Julesville Liberation
III - And Then

Big Julie came out of the windmill. Today was the day. She rubbed her hands together in anticipation. *Stinking Halflings*, she thought. A group of three (they never traveled in groups smaller than threes) walked past. "How are you wee-folk today?" She asked.

The group skidded to a stop. "What's it to you?" The lead Halfling looked up at her. He smirked, "Well, that makes sense."

"What?"

"At *your* size, everyone is a wee folk." He snickered.

Big Julie narrowed her eyes at the Halfling. "And at *your* size, you're practically bite sized." She leaned against one of the gargoyles in front of the windmill. "Right, Pollux?"

The Gargoyle she was leaning against glanced down at the Halflings then nodded. "Well, I did have a big breakfast, you want one Castor?" He asked the other Gargoyle.

The Halflings all took a step back.

Castor stepped off his pedestal, trailing wisps of stone as he moved, "I skipped breakfast. I'll just rid Miss Julie of them all." He narrowed his stone eyes. Even though they were carved of stone, pure hatred poured out of them.

The trio of Halflings drew their weapons. Rightfully so: At one time Halflings worked closely with the race of Gargoyles; as with most all civilized races, allowing them to roost throughout their cities. Ever watchful and appreciative, the Gargoyles provided a simple service of early warning of invaders for wherever they had settled down.

Until.

Until a certain Lord High Priest of Halflings decided that practically impervious fortifications could be built from ground-up Gargoyles. In one night, the entire population of Gargoyles within Halfling City was wiped out. Word spread quickly of the treachery of the Halflings through the entire of the race. Within the week, thousands of Gargoyles of all shapes and sizes descended on the Halfling capital. By the next nightfall, it was gone. Completely. The entire area was flat as it was before the city had even existed. And just as unpopulated. It was nearly fifty years before any attempt was even made at rebuilding their capital- New Halfling City.

That was four hundred years ago. Battles had been fought. Gargoyle Aeries were destroyed. Halfling outposts attacked. Even though outside mediators had tried to establish peace between the two, it had never once been even marginally successful.

"Back on your perch where you belong, *Stonie*," snapped the leader of the contingent. "We weren't talking to you." He pointed its sword at Castor.

Castor glanced at his brother -the last of six thanks to other encounters with Halflings. Pollux narrowed his eyes and stepped off the platform as well. Castor nodded his approval, then glowered down at the Halflings. "Seems ya brought a sword to a *rock fight*."

The Halfling turned to run.

In a flash that belied his size and material, Pollux was on the Halfling before he was two paces away. Just as quickly the other two were dispatched by his brother.

"Boys, that's going to cause us some trouble," said Julie. "Not that I don't appreciate it though."

Pollux nodded. "We've been standing around too long. I say we go up to the front lines to see what we can do." He glanced at his brother. "Maybe run into some of the others that have come for the fight."

Castor smiled a wide, stone-toothed smile, "Some fresh air would do us well."

"Well, you two know that you always have a place here. Always." Big Julie said as she put her arm around Castor. "And anyone else that wants a place to roost."

Castor nuzzled Julie, "It always does my cold heart good to hear that."

With that, the two Gargoyles walked away from their home of over five years.

"Take care, boys." Big Julie waved as her eyes misted over. "And please come back."

As the two moved down the street, side by side, passersby sidestepped to give the ten foot (at the shoulder) and serious looking, Gargoyles all the room they wanted. And then some.

They rounded a corner and ran headlong into Grimbledung. He was at a full sprint. He banged into Pollux's shoulder and he fell back with the wind knocked out of him. "What in the lands! Who put that wall there?" He asked as he gasped for air. He moved to his knees and then stood.

"Sorry about that, Grimbledung. Didn't see you there," said Pollux as he and his brother once again began their northerly walk.

"Wha?" Said Grimbledung as he watched the two Gargoyles go.

"Hope to see you soon," remarked Castor as he looked back over his shoulder. "Talk over old times and such."

"Whaaa?" Said Grimbledung again. He looked at the departing Gargoyles and then to Big Julie's school. Twice. He was torn between passing Rat's information, or chasing after the apparently mobile (though he suspected it for months) Gargoyles. Finally, Rat's information won out. He resumed his sprint to the windmill.

When he reached it, Big Julie was sitting on one of the large now-vacant platforms, head in her hands.

"Julie!" Grimbledung skidded to a stop.

Big Julie looked up. Her cheeks were tear-streaked. "What is it?" She asked.

"You okay?" He put his hand on her shoulder. Angrily he drew his sword (most of the residents had taken to moving about armed) and twirled around. "Someone do something to you?" He spotted the remains of the three Halflings. "They hurt you?"

Julie chuckled, "No, you silly Gnome. Nothing that serious."

Grimbledung still didn't sheath his sword. "What is it?"

"I'm worried about my Gargoyles." She sniffed loudly. "They're like family, those two." She waved her hand dismissively. "Just ignore me. What do you need?" She smiled at the Gnome.

Grimbledung sheathed his sword. "The Mercenaries are on their way. Rat says they'll be in town within the hour."

Big Julie's smile faded from her face. Her frown returned. "Good. Then we'll be rid of these Halflings sooner rather than later." She stood up. "Where are the others?"

Grimbledung pointed across town, "At Nulu's place. Close to where they have their command post set up."

"Let's go."

Thirty-Five
Julesville Liberation
IV - Soon After

The Mercenaries marched into town. There were thirty of them. General Derek led the contingent, Aldrin at his side.

"They're here," said Nulu. She had been sitting near the window and had a clear view of the street. "Let's go see how this goes."

Big Julie nodded, "Yeah, that's a lot of coins we've put in on this gambit."

Grimbledung and Drimblerod stood and moved to the door.

"Are we going outside?" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "This'll be great."

Drimblerod slapped his ear, "Control yourself. We're supposed to be afraid of these guys. If the Halflings even suspect they're working for us, this will never work."

Grimbledung nodded. "Sorry. Should we go out?"

"I'm not gonna hide in here all day," snared Akita. "If them Merrrrcenaries double cross us, all bets are off." He narrowed his glowing eyes.

Nulu nodded as she stood. "Right." She fetched her Shillelagh that was leaning against the wall (it was too large to lean against a table) and pointed at the window. "Let's go. I want to hear all of this."

The group moved out the door just as the Mercenaries reached the command post. General Derek scowled at the Halflings. Aldrin just flexed his fists at them. They both had the same effect.

Corporal Colossus ignored the group- locals were just background noise- and moved to the heavily-armed warriors who had just entered his town. "Who are you and what are your intentions?" He barked at what was ostensibly the leader of the group.

"I'm General Derek, Son of Sanders." Derek said flatly. He rested his hand on his sword. There was nothing casual about it. With his other hand, he pointed his Tiger Eye staff at the Halfling, "You got my name. Now give me yours, Sir Halfling."

The corporal stepped back at the General's name. He recovered quickly, "I am Corporal Colossus, leader of this contingent of the Halfling Army of the Lord High Priest." He rested his hand on *his* weapon. The scowl on his face deepened.

"Well, Corporal Colossus," began Derek. He paused as he looked around for a long moment then he looked back down at the corporal. "You're relieved."

Colossus stared at the General. "What? You're taking command of my soldiers?"

Derek burst out in laughter. Genuine laughter. "No, you dolt. I have my *own* soldiers. I'm relieving you of your position. This," he gestured at his men, "is a passage of lines. This is *my* entire force and we're here to replace *your* entire force." He looked at the man next to him, "Taking command," he chuckled. His scowl returned, "You, Corporal, are to take your soldiers and move to join the main contingent for the primary assault. We are to hold the town."

"I have heard no such orders," said Colossus as he recovered from the mocking. Several of the Halflings nodded their approval.

"I'm sorry," said Derek, "I don't recall saying anything about asking you if you had heard any orders. *Besides the ones I am giving you right now.*" Now several of his men nodded their approval.

Corporal Colossus narrowed his eyes at the Human.

Grimbledung felt as if his insides were going to burst; the plan was falling apart! Unable to contain himself, he stepped forward, "Listen we'll just keep our Halflings if it's all the same to you." He nodded toward Corporal Colossus, "They're not so bad once you get to know them."

General Derek looked down at Grimbledung. His scowl turned to rage. He grabbed his staff with both hands and jabbed Grimbledung in the face with it. Grimbledung crumpled in an unconscious heap. "Who asked you?" The General turned back to the Corporal. "This is what you call an occupation? *Locals* addressing the military while they are having a

meeting?" He turned to address his men, "We aren't taking over an occupation men," he said loudly.

The men looked at him wide-eyed. So did the Halflings.

Colossus looked approvingly at the unconscious Gnome.

"We're going to have to set one up from *scratch*. These Halflings are here playing camp." He whirled on the Corporal. "We were paid to take over an occupation. Not set one up. Now we're going to have…"

A high-pitch whine filled the air. Everyone looked up. "Incoming!" Shouted a Human warrior semi-correctly. The men scattered. General Derek and the soldier beside him stood their ground.

The Halflings also looked up. With fear in their eyes. "Lord High Priest!" one shouted absolutely-correctly.

With a resounding *THUNK* the four-foot ballista bolt stuck in the ground between the Corporal and the General. Corporal Colossus stepped forward and pulled a rolled-up parchment from it.

General Derek leaned forward, trying to read the message. He stole a glance at Big Julie. Her eyes were large as well. Derek's hand returned to his sword hilt, knuckles white.

Corporal Gigantus carefully unrolled the note and read it. He gulped and handed it to the Halfling beside him. "Get the men ready to move and be quick about it." Unconsciously, he looked up again. More often than not, the message bolts struck their intended target with their message. He looked back at the General. "General Derek, Son of Sanders. The town is yours." He rendered a snappy salute. "May you profit by it."

The General returned it. "Absurdly overwhelming success, Corporal," he offered the traditional Halfling sendoff.

The Halfling nodded at the offer of good fortune. "Let's get going." He looked up again as he turned to leave.

Nulu realized she had been holding her breath. She exhaled loudly.

General Derek shot her an angry glance. 'Not yet', he mouthed as he also turned to leave.

Grimbledung sat up groggily. "I tink a washer buffalo jush ran overme. Whash I'd mish?"

Nulu bent down and picked him up. "We'll fill you in over drinks." She looked at Grimbledung's face. The skin around his eyes was already turning purple and his nose didn't seem to be pointing in the correct direction. There was also a fairly steady stream of blood coming out of it. "Right after we stop by the doctor, you sneaky, conniving, Gnome." She kissed him on the forehead. "Meet you at the Cafeteria?"

Big Julie nodded. "Let's stay off the streets until the Halflings are gone." As Nulu went by, Julie also smooched Grimbledung's head.

"Wash out for that rampashing washer buffalo," Grimbledung warned. He looked around groggily. His eyes didn't seem to be focusing properly. "I don't *wanna* to go to school, Papa. The other Gnomeshpick on me," he said right before he passed out again.

"Meet you all there," said Nulu as she went in search of the doctor.

"Well, that's a good start," said Akita. "What I don't get is why the Ogres have thrown in with the Halflings. Or how the Halflings even convinced them to do it. Not sure I want to deal with Ogres."

"We won't just trick them, I don't think." said Drimblerod. "It's hard to trick them that don't think."

"We may just need to take a trip up there," offered Big Julie as they headed for her cafeteria.

"Grim and I can run up there if you want," offered Drimblerod as he fell in step beside her.

Thirty-Five
Julesville Liberation
V - Head Count

The Halfling soldiers milled around as they checked their equipment. Invariably, a soldier always left something behind whenever they moved from one location to another. To even things out, they also tended to acquire things that they didn't have when they first arrived. Even more so with Halflings. Some had even bought extra sacks to carry their ill-gotten loot. The rest just swiped the sacks as well.

Corporal Gigantus turned to Colossus, "Got everyone?"

Colossus had not been looking forward to that question. Losing soldiers was something that happened in military operations- it was expected. That did not mean that the leader who had it happen to them liked it when it did. "I'm down three," he said sourly.

"Three? What happened?"

Colossus moved close to his fellow Corporal. Rumors were already forming; he didn't want to add any fuel to them. "A couple of Gargoyles got them," he whispered.

Gigantus took Colossus by the arm and led him away from the men. "Get moving north to the Anti-Ogre wall. We'll catch up" he called back. The men nodded solemnly. They had all heard the rumor. And, as soldiers often did, added to it.

"Are you sure?" Hissed Gigantus.

Colossus nodded, "The two statues in front of the Windmill weren't just statues." He frowned, "Stinking Gargoyles. You can never tell what's them and what's art."

"Well, that changes everything if Gargoyles are involved. I wonder how many were here." He looked around the town, "We need to let the Lord High Priest know."

"How could he *not* know already?" Colossus asked. "He's got The Goat, after all."

"Either way, I don't want to be known as the one with that one piece of vital information that didn't get passed, that ends up causing the battle to be lost." Gigantus frowned. "How many messenger crows we have left?"

Colossus thought for a moment, "Four unless one's already been sent out today."

Gigantus shook his head.

"Then it's four." He turned to catch up with the marching soldiers, "we'll send all four just in case."

"All four?"

Colossus nodded, "With Gargoyles in the mix? I'd send ten if I had them."

"What'll we say?"

"Just what we know. You keep things short and sweet with the Lord High Priest; 'Gargoyles in the mix' will be plenty. The Lord High Priest will handle the rest."

The Corporals quickly moved to catch up with the marching soldiers. By the time they got to the edge of town, the notes were written and the messenger crows were aloft.

Only one would make it to the Lord High Priest.

It would be enough.

Sort of.

Thirty-Six
Wherein Grimbledung and Drimblerod Go to Frank's Keep
<u>Not</u> by way of Prost Garrison

Grimbledung sat up in bed. His head throbbed. "My head is throbbing," he said to the empty room. Grimacing, he swung his feet over the side of the bed and gingerly stood up. After a moment's swaying, he felt steady enough to let go of the headboard. Gingerly, he walked to the door, opened it, and stepped into the common room. "Gah" he said to that empty room. He squinted at the stairs. He tried not squinting but didn't seem able to. Reaching up, he felt his eyes. It felt as if several slugs had taken up residence around them. Very sensitive slugs.

After a long moment, he stumbled to the top of the stairs. There were voices below. He tried to listen in on them but there seemed to be a buzzing in his ears. Bees were visiting the slugs, apparently. After several deep breaths, he started down the stairs. With each step it felt as if someone with a large hammer was bonking him on the top of the head. Twice he looked back to have a word with the inconsiderate interloper.

"Ahh, Master Gnome," he heard a voice say when he was halfway down the stairs. "I'm glad to see you up and about."

After three more steps, the person who spoke came into view. "General Derek," scowled Grimbledung, "you got a lot of nerve coming into my shop after that stunt you pulled!" He held his head with one hand, hoping to stop the annoying pounding in his head. It didn't help. "Gah," he said weakly.

"Now Grimbledung, hear me out," began the General.

Unable to stop him, Grimbledung waved his free hand at him.

"I *had* to do something. The Halflings weren't buying my story. So I had to make them believe I was hired by the Lord High Priest. When

you spoke up, I saw a chance to show the Halflings that we were also ruthless."

Grimbledung made it to the bottom of the stairs. He was still holding his head, "So I'm supposed to thank you?" He staggered over to the counter and leaned on it. "You'll have to wait until these bees go someplace else besides my head. And the slugs around my eyes move on." He looked behind him, "And that blasted person with a hammer goes away as well." He put his head in both hands.

"I am sorry about that. I didn't mean to hit you so hard." He shrugged, "I guess I got lost in the part." He moved over to Grimbledung. Gently he put his hand on the Gnome's shoulder, "In any case, we're leaving town and I wanted to wait until you were awake to let you know your plan worked."

Grimbledung looked up.

"The Halflings bought the whole story and left town."

Grimbledung nodded slowly. The bees seemed to have taken up a spirited game of croquet against the slugs. "That's good to hear."

"You saved the town," Drimblerod added. "It was a perfect plan!"

"So where'd the Halflings go again? My current events are a little fuzzy."

"They headed toward the Anti-Ogre Wall from what we can tell," said Drimblerod. "We hear there's an army moving in that direction." He paused and glanced at the General. "I volunteered us to go take a look."

General Derek moved to a wall to look at wands.

"What the three of us?" Asked Grimbledung as he gingerly sat. "The General too?"

General Derek suddenly took an interest in the ceiling joists.

"Err…" said Drimblerod.

"Well, now that you're up and around. I'm going to get back to my men," said Derek as he moved to the door. "Real glad you're doing better. Why, by later today, I'm sure you'll be all set for a nice comfortable wagon ride."

"Wagon ride?"

"Err…" said Drimblerod.

"So long, you two. If you ever need yourself a bloodthirsty group of mercenaries, you know where to find us." Derek quickly moved to the door, opened it, and exited before either Gnome could say another word.

"Drim. My head hurts. My nose feels like it was taken off by a Troll and put back on with a slingshot. Bees are now playing Bocce in my head. If you say 'err' again, I may very well kill you." Grimbledung tried to open his eyes wide. They wouldn't. "When you say volunteered us. Who exactly do you mean?"

"Wasn't it nice of General Derek to come by and make sure you were all right? His men left earlier this morning but he hung around waiting for you to wake up. Good form, that." He smiled at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung stared back. "Who."

"Rat and I of course," said Drimblerod. "Who else?"

"That was going to be *my* question."

"Ithoughtmaybeyouwouldcometoo." Drimblerod smiled. "Ya?"

Grimbledung frowned. A scowl hurt too much. "I'll go," he said. "I'm interested in seeing what's happening up there too." He thought for a moment. "Where we going again?"

"Frank's Keep."

Grimbledung nodded slightly. "As long as it's not Prost Garrison. We don't get along, Prost and I." A thought came to him, "I remember something about Nulu carrying me and saying we were going to the doctor." He felt his face again. "If this is how I am *after* seeing the Doc, I must've been a mess."

Drimblerod shook his head, "You haven't seen the Doc yet."

"That's a relief." He paused again. "Why not?"

"Doc was out taking care of some other patients. Since you weren't going to die, you were put at the back of the list," explained Drimblerod. "He'll be here after lunch."

Grimbledung nodded. "I think I'll take a nap until he gets here."

"Good idea."

Grimbledung looked up at the stairs and frowned again. "I think I'll take a nap right here until he gets here." He put his head on the counter.

"You need anything?"

"Someone to win that blasted game of Bocce."

It was late in the day- the sun was already close to entering its underground lair and Grimbledung sat at the counter of the Wand Shop. The doctor had been delayed and then there were more delays. And more delays until the doctor finally arrived. The only thing reliable seemed to be his frowns. The condition seemed contagious. There was one on Grimbledung's face at the moment. "Where's Rat?" Asked Grimbledung for the fifth time. "I thought we were leaving." He frowned again. "I'm bored," he lamented. Grimbledung looked around the shop. It was empty. "Hey, Door. Want to play a game?"

Door pretended not to hear. 'Open or Shut' was getting old. Even for Door.

Grimbledung hopped off the stool and moved to the front of the shop. Streaks of golden light were still fighting the ever-approaching darkness. They never won. He scrunched up his face. It was still a little tight, and the skin around his eyes still a little dark, but for all intents and purposes, he was all healed. He adjusted his helmet on his head. "Bored!" He opened the door and moved onto the porch of the shop. "Hey" he called to a passerby. "I'm bored," Grimbledung said when the man looked. He sat roughly in the chair beside Door.

Finally, after another long ten minutes, Drimblerod arrived at the front of the Shop with RatShambler pulling the wagon.

"Finally!" Grimbledung stood. "Where've you been?"

"Talking to Akita and Nulu. Getting plans together. We still don't know if the Halflings are going to come back. They *seemed* to be heading to the Anti-Ogre Wall but that doesn't make any sense."

"Well, let's get up there and see who's who in the Anti-Ogre Wall." Grimbledung moved to the wagon and clambered on beside his partner.

Drimblerod shook his head.

"It sounded better in my head," admitted Grimbledung. "We've lost the day already you know. And Frank's Keep is almost three day's ride from here."

"We'll be there by nightfall," assured RatShambler. "What's your rush?"

"I want revenge"

"Revenge for what?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Almost getting my head knocked off."

"Grim, that was General Derek who did that. Don't you remember?"

"Not the entire day, but I *do* remember that it was on account of those Halflings." He narrowed his still-dark eyes, "I'm out for revenge." His eyes became wide again, "Wait. By nightfall?" Grimbledung looked up at the ever-darkening sky. "Today nightfall night today even?"

RatShambler nodded. "Yep. Big Julie got us a vial of Scalosian Bug Juice from the Alchemy department. We'll be there in minutes."

Drimblerod held up a tiny vial. It appeared to be empty.

"It's empty."

Drimblerod shook his head. Then he shook the vial. Several drops of clear liquid sloshed around in the vial.

"Wait, Scalosian Bug Juice? That stuff is absurdly hard to come by. I mean, just catching those quick little things is a quest all its own." Grimbledung peered at the vial. "That had to cost her a heap."

"Well, she waters it down," Drimblerod said. "So it's only one tenth strength."

"That's a lot, right?"

"Yes, Grim. That's a lot. But it's still pretty potent stuff."

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "Why don't we just put a few drops in those Mercenaries and have them wipe out our problems in a flash?" He smiled hopefully.

"Scalosian Bug Juice is highly regulated. It is *not* to be used in any type of combat situation."

"Or what?"

"Remember how angry the Magician's Guild got over the mechanimated things we had in the shop in Aution?"

"Sure."

"Well, let's just say that compared to how the Alchemist Guild will feel, the Magician's Guild felt just as happy as could be with what we did."

Grimbledung blinked at his partner.

"The Alchemist Guild will be furious. Red-faced furious. Those aren't people you mess with. Ever."

Grimbledung gulped. "OK. We only use it to get there. Got it." He reached for the vial, "Just a sip, right?"

Drimblerod moved the vial out of Grimbledung's reach. "*We* don't need to take it. Rat's doing the pulling. *He* needs to take it. We just need to stay down in the back of the wagon and hold on real tight."

Grimbledung pouted as he moved to the back of the wagon. "I wanna move real fast."

Drimblerod smiled, "Oh, don't worry, you will." Drimblerod hopped out of the wagon and moved to RatShambler. "Here you go Rat. Just wait until I say we're set before you drink it."

RatShambler nodded. "Got it."

Drimblerod unstopped the tiny vial and gently placed it in RatShambler's mouth. Quickly he scooted to the back of the wagon and clambered on. He flipped up the tailgate, slipped the two pins into the hasps then lay down beside his partner. "Hold on, Grim" he warned. "Ready?"

Grimbledung nodded

"Go, Rat!"

RatShambler tipped up the vial and the precious few drops ran down his tongue and into his throat. Nothing seemed to happen. He dropped the vial from his mouth. RatShambler looked around. "It didn't

work. Maybe it's too watered down?" He looked back into the wagon. The Gnomes were laying still. RatShambler frowned. He looked around the street and noticed that no one was moving. He looked down. The vial was only barely away from his lips. It seemed to hover in the air. "Everything's frozen!" he said. "Wait." RatShambler took a closer look. The people *were* moving. The vial was dropping. But only barely. "Hang on!" he called as he took to a gallop. Within seconds the town was behind them as just a blur. The occasional trees on the North Shambler Plains whizzed by as if they were one beside the other. "Whoo hoo!" Rat Shambler called.

When they reached the burned outskirts of Aution, the vial clattered to the ground back in Julesville.

Grimbledung gripped the back of the wagon seat with both hands. "Too fast!" he shouted to his partner-who also seemed to be holding on for dear life.

"Not. Best. Idea!" Drimblerod shouted back as the scenery flew by as a blur.

"My brains are in my BUTT!"

Finally, after several long seconds, the scenery started to be discernible. Trees looked like trees instead of green streaks on thin brown streaks. "Almost there?" Grimbledung shouted through the whistling wind.

Slowly, the world around them returned to normal. Drimblerod sat up slightly- he still stayed behind the back of the seat. "I can see why they keep a close hold on that stuff." He wiped his sweaty brow. "When we go back, we take our time."

"Deal!" Said Grimbledung as he too, sat up somewhat. "You trying to kill us, Rat?" The breeze had dropped considerably. Even so, his hair flew back in uncontrolled wisps. Even his ears flapped against his head.

At last Rat came to a stop. Both Gnomes cautiously peered over the front of the wagon's seat. Frank's Keep loomed ahead of them. Where Prost Garrison was a small outpost that required supplies and personnel to be shuttled back and forth to, Frank's Keep was a full-fledged, self-sufficient castle, easily three times its size. Once it was just the large tower that was, by definition 'the Keep', the addition of several outbuildings, and ultimately a four-story outer wall encompassing the

entire area made it a castle. The name 'Frank's Keep' remained even through all the additions.

Frank insisted.

"We're there," said Rat.

The three guards at the lowered drawbridge startled at the wagon that seemed to appear from nowhere. Being on the northern edge of the Great Shambler Plains meant that they were not used to having anyone or anything sneak up on them. Especially from the south. Two guards brought their pikes to the ready. The third lifted a horn to his lips and blew a long, crisp note followed by two shorter ones.

"I hope that means friendlies are here," remarked Drimblerod as he clambered over onto the seat. He picked up the reins as Grimbledung followed close behind. "Let's go in nice and slow, Rat. The last thing we need is a dozen arrows stuck in us."

RatShambler nodded his head. As he approached, the castle's drawbridge lowered over an imposing moat. When he reached the edge of the drawbridge, he stopped.

A contingent of five guards came out to greet them. They also had pikes at the ready. The front-most one stood out due to his gleaming armor. The entire group stopped a dozen paces from the Gnomes and their wagon. "Are you Drimblerod and Grimbledung?" The man asked in a deep, accented voice.

Drimblerod stood. "Yes, we are. How do you know that?"

The man saluted the two, "Big Julie sent word that you were coming to help." He smirked. "I didn't figure you'd be coming alone."

"Coming alone?" Asked Grimbledung.

"We're in the market for reinforcements. Lots of them." He waved off the guards, "No matter. Any friend of Julie is a friend of mine. Won't you come in?" He gestured to the open gate. "We'll be closing up here in a little while. The sun's almost gone."

RatShambler turned his head backward, "Told ya I'd get you here before dark." He winked.

"Thanks, uhm…" began Drimblerod.

"Captain Frank Roarke" He spread his arms out wide, "Welcome. To Frank's Keep."

"Thanks Captain Frank," said Drimblerod as he snapped the reins.

RatShambler looked back at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod snapped the reins again, "Play along, will you?"

RatShambler slowly walked forward, hooves clopping on the wood as he went. When the wagon got beside Captain Frank, he climbed into the back of the wagon. "Onward!" He pointed dramatically at the gate.

The chains holding the drawbridge began to rattle when the wagon was only half way across. Before they even got to the gate, the drawbridge had begun to rise. "Keeps out those unwanted visitors," explained Captain Frank with a wink.

"So, Captain Frank," began Grimbledung as he turned around to address the man, "how are things up here at the Great Anti-Ogre Wall?" He leaned forward, "Quiet?" He asked hopefully.

Captain Frank shook his head. "You're lucky you got in at all. Things are going to heat up here, and fast."

"We're just here to look around, Captain Frank," said Drimblerod, "then we're heading back to Julesville."

Captain Frank shook his head solemnly. "That wouldn't be a good idea."

Drimblerod stood as he turned around, "And why's that?" He asked testily.

Captain Frank shrugged, "It'd be easier to show you than try to explain it." He pointed across the large courtyard. Several tents had been set up among the various out buildings. Even most of the tents were larger than Second Hand Sorcery. Two outsized the Duck Inn and Dine, even. "Head over there to those stairs." He pointed to the far side of the keep. As the wagon went, people hurriedly moved to and fro, carrying bundles or pushing wheelbarrows of supplies.

"Seems pretty busy," remarked Grimbledung. "Is this normal for evening hours?"

"People shifting supplies to where they need to be. Making final arrangements. That sort of thing."

"Wait, what was that second part?"

"Ahh," said Captain Frank, ignoring the question, "everyone out." He hopped over the side of the wagon jauntily and moved to the stairs. "You can leave your animal there." He moved up several stairs, "Come take a look."

"Wanna stay a Shambler?" Grimbledung asked.

RatShambler shook his head, "Not a chance. The tension's so thick here you can cut it with a spoon. It's a lot easier to hide as a rat."

Grimbledung nodded. He drew his wand and slashed it at RatShambler.

"Thanks," said Rat as he scampered up the stairs as well.

"Up here, Gentlemen," beckoned Captain Frank. He began to climb the stairs.

Drimblerod hopped out of the wagon and joined his partner as they climbed the four stories to the top of the wall.

Thirty-Seven
Wherein the Great Battle Begins
Sort of

Grimbledung peered over the Keep's parapet. "Wow! That's a pretty big army," he said as he whistled.

Drimblerod only nodded in response. The army sprawled out before the Keep like a huge shadow. Spears and lances poked out of the front ranks like the many spines on an urchin. Behind were beasts of burden, and farther back were the catapults and trebuchets that invariably began an assault. The Keep was like a small castle in the sand with a black wave ready to wash over it. Drimblerod surveyed the massive army gathered before the Keep. "Rolton chips. We're at The Pinch."

"The what?"

"The Pinch. That's the part of a story where everything looks lost for the hero," explained Drimblerod. "Or heroes, I suppose."

"Well, if that's what that is called, we're there all right." Grimbledung inched up and peeked over the parapet, "They should call it The Pucker." He continued to look over the wall at the gathered force. "Well, at least we have another couple of hours before they get here. We can still make some sort of plan, right?" Asked Grimbledung hopefully as he looked at his partner.

"What are you talking about? Once they get their siege weapons loaded, they're going to attack. We have minutes," replied Captain Frank.

Grimbledung again looked out at the mass of soldiers. He squinted at the foremost forces. "They *have* to be a couple of hours away."

"They will be upon us in moments, Gnome" said the Captain. "I hope you have some sort of devastating wand in your belt."

Grimbledung turned and looked up at the man. "You're both crazy. There's no way those Ogres are close enough to attack us. They look like sucklings. They *got* to be two hours away."

"Halflings."

Grimbledung stood and whirled on the Captain. "Now listen here. You may be in charge of this soon-to-be-overrun Keep, but that doesn't mean you can insult people like that. You know well and good I'm a Gnome." Grimbledung puffed out his chest. "A proud and noble breed, the Gnome." He paused and took a heroic pose, hand on the wall of the Keep. "Call me a Halfling again, and I'll show you what sort of wand I'm carrying."

The man laughed heartily at Grimbledung. "Oh, believe me, I know good and well what you are, Grimbledung. There's no mistaking you!" He laughed again as Grimbledung squinted at him and reached for up his sleeve. "Now, now, I meant no offence, Grimbledung, proud Gnome," the man said quickly. He pointed at the massed army, "*They* are Halflings."

Grimbledung's eyes got wide. He looked between the man and the army. "Halflings? What are Halflings doing taking up arms with Ogres. Ogres usually just *eat* Halflings. I thought we were dealing with Ogres today. Just another group hired by the Lord High Priest to fight his war for him."

"There are no Ogres."

"What?"

"There. Are. No. Ogres." The Captain said again.

Grimbledung flailed his arms around. "WHAT? *No Ogres?" He* took a step towards the Captain. "Are you telling me, you brought us here under false pretenses?"

The man shrugged. "Ogres, Halflings. What's the difference?"

"WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?" Gasped Grimbledung as he looked between the man and Drimblerod. "Drim, you tell him." Grimbledung took to peering over the wall at the massed force. "Halflings. *Thousands of Halflings."*

"Have you ever dealt with Halflings, Captain?" Asked Drimblerod. The captain shook his head so Drimblerod continued, "Well, Ogres are

pretty straightforward fighters. Advance, attack, advance, attack. Repeat until one side is out of fighters."

The Captain shrugged, "Right. And the winners get to write the history books. That's pretty much the plan of any Army. It's a proud and noble tradition, invading, ransacking, writing history to suit your ego."

Drimblerod shook his head, "No, you don't get it. Ogres don't care if they kill all their adversaries or they all get killed. With them it's not personal, it's business. They attack and attack until one side is completely lost."

"Wait a grain of sand!" interjected Grimbledung, "I just thought of something. Don't Ogres live south of Picistan?" He spread his arms out wide to gesture at the wall that ran out on both directions from the Keep. "So why *is* this even called the Great Anti-Ogre Wall?"

The Captain shrugged again -it was becoming a habit. An annoying one. "Who would even give money to build an Anti-Halfling Wall? That doesn't even sound dangerous enough to spend five coppers on."

Drimblerod looked down over the wall. "You know, I did wonder why this thing was only fifty feet high. I mean, a couple of Ogres could boost another one over this thing without any trouble at all." He looked from the base of the wall to the army in front of it and back, "I suppose to scale, this thing is fifteen Halflings high."

"About that, yes." Agreed the Captain, "So, that's all settled then. Halflings instead of Ogres."

"You're not listening, Captain. With Halflings, it's not business; it's personal. They can't afford to lose. If they did, then every race taller than them would see it as a sign of weakness and they would constantly be on the defensive. Every battle has to be fought full on, with a Helm of Craziness and several long feathers of irrationality stuck in it."

The Captain looked down at Drimblerod, "That doesn't even make sense. I mean, we…" he pointed at Drimblerod, Grimbledung, and himself alternatively, "all live in peace and size isn't an issue. Elves and Dwarves do fine too. Those Halflings are just…"

"Crazy. Bat Guano Crazy," suggested Grimbledung. As if on cue, a Halfling came arcing over the wall. It was aimed directly at the Captain. He turned and sidestepped the approaching Halfling.

"DIE YOU! DIE!" Said the Halfling as he approached. "YOU'LL ALL DIE, CAPTAIN FRANK! DIE! DIE! DIE!"

The Captain seemed taken aback by the fact that the Halfling knew his name. "What?" He asked. Yes- even though it was the name of the Keep.

"DIE!" Screamed the Halfling as he hit the ground in front of the Captain. In a flash, he was on his feet, standing on the curved blades tied to them. He kicked viciously at the Captain as sparks flew from his other foot, "First we'll kill ya! Then we'll cook ya' and then we'll eat ya'!" He narrowed his eyes menacingly, "You and your little Gnomes too!"

"Hey, there Halfling, that's getting personal…" started Drimblerod.

"Yeah and…" began the Halfling. Then he wasn't there anymore.

Drimblerod blinked and quickly looked around panicked. He drew his wand and incanted

Hidden dangers and transparent pests

all about-

become visible and make it fast!

He slashed his wand all about him as he grimaced at the horrible rhyme.

"Relax, Drim," said Grimbledung, "He's not here. I got rid of him."

Drimblerod lowered his wand but did not put it away. "What? Rid of him how?" It wasn't that Drimblerod was against killing; these *were* dangerous times after all. It was more out of curiosity.

"I sent him away, of course."

Fate smiled.

Drimblerod shook his head. "Grim you really need to stop sending people to the Great Sandy Desert. At some point, those people are going to work together and escape and we'll be in a bad spot."

"Work together with a Halfling? Not likely."

"But not impossible."

"Well…" began Grimbledung as he considered the possibilities of two particular Magicians Guild Enforcers joining forces with a Halfling. He blanched. "I see your point. No one else goes there." He turned his wand in his hand involuntarily. "We'll just need to use other methods to deal with these Halflings."

"Now you're talking, Grimbledung," said the Captain. "Want me to find some rope to lower you down so you can take care of this issue?" It sounded like a joke, but he wasn't smiling.

Grimbledung peered over the wall as he considered it. Then he considered it again. Then again. "Over the wall," he said absently. Then he considered it again. "Over the wall!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Over the wall," he sing songed. "*Over the wall!* That's it!"

"Grim. You're worrying me," said Drimblerod, "what are you talking about?"

"Well, these Halflings are going to have to come over the wall right?"

The Captain smiled. "Sure? Want me to go get some rope?"

"No, no… So what if while they are doing that, you take your men south out into the Shambler Plains? The Halflings have no way of seeing over the wall and then Drim and I can hold them off while you set up to fight them in the open where they aren't all bunched up and deadly. Plus they'll have to leave those catapults behind. If we hold them off until daybreak, you can move under the cover of darkness and be ready by dawn."

"Grim…" began Drimblerod.

The Captain nodded, "That could work. If we can get them to move faster than their siege weapons, then all they will have is their hand to hand weapons. Our mounted Calvary would be able to take care of half of them in one charge." The Captain mulled over the plan. "I wouldn't want to have to deal with mounted troops while on foot, I

can't imagine the Halflings will appreciate it either." He rubbed his chin, lost in thought.

"Grim..." Drimblerod began again. This time a little louder.

"Right, Captain. By the time these Halflings get over this wall, it will be almost morning. And at the speed they move, it will be nice and bright before they are at the Plains. They'd be tired and out in the open."

"Grim!" Said Drimblerod again.

The Captain nodded, "Excellent plan, Grimbledung. Devious and cunning. And it has an almost even chance of working."

Grimbledung nodded, "Right? That's like what, 100 percent!?"

The Captain blinked at Grimbledung, "Errr, sure?"

"GRIM!" Drimblerod shouted.

Grimbledung turned to face his partner, "What's got you all riled up?"

Drimblerod pointed over the wall. "So what you're suggesting is all the forces *inside* this Keep are all going to hightail it out of here and leave just the two of us to deal with *them*?"

The Captain- who was all in favor of not having to fight the Halflings in any situation- nodded quickly, "Exactly. Once we get out in the open and I have a nice safe place that I can direct my troops, we'll wipe them all out." He smiled broadly. A little too broadly. "It's a great plan."

"Thanks!"

"Wait a grain of sand here," interjected Drimblerod. "So the fearless Captain gets to retreat to open ground so he can safely command his troops in battle instead of penned up in *his* Keep. Just like he wants. The Halflings get to climb over this wall and overrun the Keep, killing anyone they come across. Just like they want."

Grimbledung nodded as his partner laid out the plan.

"And we two. We two Gnomes get to stay behind and do what? Hold them off as long as possible?"

Grimbledung nodded again.

"Well, that's not what *I* want, I can tell you that right now!" Drimblerod finished angrily (and a little panicky), "What I want is a plan that doesn't involve us getting ripped to shreds then eaten by Halflings."

"Come on, Drimblerod, who's afraid of a few…"

"thousand," offered Drimblerod.

"…thousand Halflings" finished the Captain.

"Who? Me, that's who. Those things give me the willies. They're crazy, you know. And coming from a Gnome, *that's saying a lot.*"

"How crazy can they be?" Asked the Captain. He was interrupted by a crash farther down the wall. It appeared that another Halfling had been catapulted over the wall and struck two men. One was dead and the other seriously wounded. "All right men! Just keep an eye out. This isn't anything new." He said loudly. Even though it was. "Stand your ground!"

"It starts," said Grimbledung grimly (sorry for the alliteration, but it is really the best word to use at this point.)

"So, they fire a few of their more expendable soldiers over the walls at us. That's been done since the invention of the catapult." The Captain shrugged again. His newly developed habit was becoming a nervous twitch.

"We're in trouble," offered Drimblerod.

"You can say that again," agreed Grimbledung "is it too late to execute a tactical flanking maneuver?"

"What's that?" Captain Frank was only half listening as he looked out at the impressive Halfling Army.

"Well, you see…" began Grimbledung. He was interrupted by a high pitch scream. It sounded like a rabbit being stepped on. The three of them looked up as a Halfling arced gracefully toward the group of men just beside them.

"AAAAAAIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEE!" Screamed the Halfling as he twirled a flail in each hand. Attached to his head appeared to be a double-bladed axe. His feet had long blades attached to them sticking out at right angles. "DIE DIE DIE!!!! AAAAAAAIIIIIIIEEEEEEE!" he screamed again. The group of men looked at the falling Halfling in terror. All but one moved to the side to avoid it. The one man was

transfixed by the sight[49]. With a sickening thud the Halfling impaled the hapless soldier with its axe headed helmet. If the other men had not moved, its now-still flails would have caused them egregious harm.

"What in all the lands?" Gasped the Captain. "How many of them are they going to shoot over?"

Still impaled on the hapless soldier, the Halfling thrashed about trying to do in anyone who got near him. "Die Die Die" he offered, "All Die!"

No one took the Halfling up on his offer. Instead, a nearby archer doled out *his* offer of a trip to The Great Ever After. Twice, in fact. Just to be sure the offer was accepted.

"Halflings," said Grimbledung flatly, "what they don't have in size, they make up for in numbers. Even at a one-to-one kill rate, we'll run out of soldiers long before they do."

"Well, that was the plan we were using," said Captain Frank, "but now I think we'll go with your plan."

For the rest of the evening, the entire of Frank's Keep emptied. The last to leave were the dozen soldiers on the walls beside the Gnomes to assist with the occasional catapulted Halfling.

Finally, the first rays of dawn began to add a glow to the evening sky. Captain Frank slinked up beside the Gnomes. "Almost everyone's out and moving except for me and these dozen guards." He gestured toward the men. "We've got the fastest horses left to get us caught up with the main force. But we need to go before the attack starts."

"So when do you think that will be?" Asked Grimbledung.

Suddenly, the air was filled with flying Halflings. Each screaming its high-pitched cry of doom. The men on the wall scattered as the Halflings crashed to the floor of the Keep. Some made it all the way to the courtyard and crashed into hapless stragglers there.

"Well, let's get this plan into action!" Said Captain Frank as he quickly moved to the stairs. He paused as he got to the top of them.

For a split-second, Drimblerod thought he had reconsidered the entire absurd plan and was going to stand and fight.

"RETREEEEAT!" Captain Frank shouted to the remaining soldiers as he pointed with his sword to the gate of the castle. "FOLLLLOW MEEEEEE!!"

With that, he bolted down the steps two at a time. As he went, the remaining soldiers fell in behind him.

"Wow, he must really like my plan, huh Drim?" Grimbledung smiled broadly at his partner. He ducked behind the parapet as a ballista bolt screamed by and clattered into the courtyard.

Drimblerod shook his head. "This is nuts."

Rat scampered up to the Gnomes, "What in the lands is going on? I thought I saw you two up here! We're all leaving you know!"

"We're staying here to slow them down," offered Grimbledung.

"What kind of insane plan…"

Drimblerod gestured at his partner.

"…oh well, then it makes perfect sense then." Rat stood on his hind legs, "Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire. You get off this wall right now!" He shook a claw to show he meant business.

Thirty-Eight
A Crow on the Perch is Worth a Bolt in the Air

The exhausted crow landed on the perch beside the Lord High Priest. He was napping. "Caw?" Called the crow. "Caw!"

The Lord High Priest startled awake. "Settle down, Bert," he said. He narrowed his eyes, "and I told you not to call me that. I'm the *Lord High Priest* now," warned Caw Sprawlings (AKA Lord High Priest).

The crow nodded.

"So, what's going on that needs my attention at this very moment. During my nap."

"Got s'message fer ya, Caw!"

"Stop that."

The crow stuck out his foot. Attached to it was a tightly rolled note. The Lord High Priest removed it. "Now get lost, Bert." He shooed off the large crow. Nonchalantly he unrolled the note. His eyes grew large. "Conscripts! Bring the Goat!" he shouted as he moved to the balcony. "CONSCRIPTS!"

Two conscripts came running, "Yes, Lord High Priest?" Asked one of them.

"You!" The Lord High Priest pointed at the conscript. "You are the one who looked into the goat for me!"

"Ah, yes, Lord High Priest," said the conscript, "that was me."

He glowered at the other conscript. "Bring me the Goat. I want a moment alone with this conscript." Glad to not be the focus of the LHP's anger, the conscript moved off quickly. "So you looked into the Goat and saw our absurdly overwhelming success then?"

"Yes, Lord High Priest!" Said the conscript.

"What else?"

The conscript wrung his hands. "What else?"

"What else did you see?" The Lord High Priest rushed to the conscript and almost pressed his nose against the other's. "What else?"

"Err. There was a battle."

Realization came to the Lord High Priest's face. "Mounts!"

"Yes?"

"You said you saw mounted troops, didn't you?"

"Yes! I did, Lord High Priest."

The Lord High Priest narrowed his eyes. "I don't have mounted troops at the Keep." He said ominously.

The conscript opened his mouth then closed it.

"What sort of mounts did you see?"

"*Maaaa*!" Said the Goat of Seeing as it was led onto the balcony. The conscript quickly tied it to the rusted ring in the floor.

"Now fetch me the Deus ex Machina."

Glad to be away again, the conscript quickly moved off.

"Tell me what you see your future is if I send you to the battle."

"What, now?"

The Lord High Priest narrowed his eyes. "Yes, to both questions. Yes, look now. Yes, tell me what your future is going to be in the next ten minutes when I send you to the front lines." He grabbed the conscript roughly by the collar and shoved him toward the goat.

"*Maaaa*?" Asked the Goat.

The conscript moved to the goat and grasped its nose with one hand and its lower jaw with the other. He pried open the goat's mouth.

The Lord High Priest slapped the flank of the goat

He intoned.

The conscript looked into the swirling colors. He squinted his eyes.

The Lord High Priest kicked the conscript, "Open your eyes!" he commanded. He looked at the other conscript. "Crank up that ballista tight!"

The conscript shuddered as he opened his eyes wide and looked at his future. The Lord High Priest had not asked for a bolt to be loaded. A sweat broke out on his forehead as the swirls coalesced into a field of battle. "I see a field of battle," he said quickly.

"Yes?"

"I see the Great Halfling Army."

"What are they doing?"

"Fighting! Fighting gloriously!"

"Fighting. Gloriously." The Lord High Priest narrowed his eyes, "That's not the same as victoriously." He moved close to the conscript. "*Who* are they fighting?"

"Humans…" said the conscript. The less said the better. As long as…

KLAAK! went the ballista

"And?"

The conscript looked again. He knew the answer but was afraid to say it. At least he hadn't seen himself yet. But with the looks of how the battle would go was any indication…

"And?" Coaxed the Lord High Priest again. "Guards!" he called as he moved to the now-armed ballista. He drew a piece of parchment and a bit of charcoal. Two guards appeared breathlessly. The Lord High Priest pointed to the ballista then to the conscript that was gazing into the goat's mouth. He scribbled a word on the parchment and rolled it up. "AND?" He snarled.

"Gargoyles, Lord High Priest," said the conscript as he collapsed into a heap. He began to sob.

"You're on your way to Frank's Keep, conscript."

The swirling colors in the Goat's mouth changed direction. The conscript blinked. Now he saw a deep green forest. Quiet and peaceful. *That's Halflinghaala. I'm going to die*, the Halfling sat back roughly and began to cry.

The Lord High Priest pointed at the conscript. The guards knew the drill; it was the third time this month they had done it. They picked up the sobbing conscript and positioned him on the ballista. The Lord High Priest held the rolled parchment up to the conscript's mouth. " Say Aaahhhh" He said to the conscript. He lowered his voice and whispered into the end of the note, "To Frank's Keep."

The conscript opened his mouth and the Lord High Priest shoved the rolled parchment into it. "Fire," he said simply.

With a pull of the lever, the conscript shot into the sky and arced out of sight.

"Leave me!" commanded the Lord High Priest.

"*Maaaa*?" Asked the Goat.

"Someone get this goat out of here first!"

The conscript sobbed as he streaked through the sky in an arc towards Frank's Keep. The magical properties of the Deus ex Machina ensured he would land safe and sound. It was the matter of the Gargoyle-led attack that had him in tears. For several minutes, he streaked through the air. Finally, Frank's Keep came into view. It seemed quiet; he had expected to land in a full-out battlefield. He landed hard, but not lethally hard, the note still in his mouth. He looked around the courtyard. The Keep was deserted. "Hello?" He called.

Only six dead Halflings lay in the courtyard. Two were obviously hit with some sort of powerful magical spell. The other two looked as if a wagon had hit them. The last two just seemed dead. There was no other sign of the Great Halfling Army. "Hello?" He tried again. The Halfling walked to the Keep's gate and peered out onto the Great Shambler Plains. There was indeed a battle going on miles away, but he couldn't see it.

He unrolled the parchment and read it. It had one word on it:

With a shrug, he balled up the note and dropped it. He looked around again. No one was around. Before him to the east lay a deep green forest. Peaceful and quiet. He weighed his options. Then began walking toward the Foreboding Forest. He had heard some rumors that there was a commune of Elves there. Maybe he would just join them- after all was said and done while they were indeed haughty, Elves were hospitable.

If the Halfling had heard the rest of the rumors, he never would have gone into the forest. As it was, it would be the last thing he did.

Thirty-Nine
Wherein The Gnomes Make a Go of It
Well Grimbledung, anyway

"Well, that makes sense; I should have known it was one of your crazy ideas," scolded Rat. He stood on his hind legs, "Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire. You get off this wall right now!"

"Not yet, Rat. We need to give the soldiers time to regroup and be ready to attack." Grimbledung winked, "Then we'll hightail it out of here. On our trusty RatShambler even!"

Rat twitched his whiskers. "When exactly are we riding out on this trusty steed of yours?"

"When the Halflings are overrunning the Keep," explained Drimblerod, "we're to slow them down so that the soldiers can move out into open ground where the Halflings will be easier to defeat."

"So why aren't we…"

Drimblerod pointed at his partner again.

"… right, right. Wait. Who put him in charge?"

Drimblerod considered that, "Yeah! Who put you in charge?"

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "I'm in charge? Really? Whoo hoo!"

Another Halfling bounced onto the wall. In a flash it was on his feet. "They went thataway!" Said Grimbledung.

The Halfling nodded as it turned toward the stairs. After two paces, it stopped and turned around. "Hey YOU!!" it snarled.

In a flash it was gone.

"This time it wasn't me!" Said Grimbledung defensively.

Drimblerod nodded, "No. That time I took care of the little cuss."

"Desert?"

"Great Salty Ocean. I took a boat ride a few years back."

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Bon voyage!" he waved at the empty air. "Hope you like the ocean!"

Actually, the Halfling would end up having a grand adventure.[50]

Another ballista bolt clattered by. "They're getting closer."

"You think?" Snapped Drimblerod.

"I just had a great idea."

"It was one of your great ideas that got us here."

"You know where we should go from here?" Asked Grimbledung.

"I don't want to know."

"Can't I tell you?"

"No."

"Australis. It's an island out on the Great Salty Sea, just out from EternCity on the coast. They speak common and everything."

"I didn't ask."

"I figured you secretly wanted to know, so I told you," explained Grimbledung.

Drimblerod drew his sword. "You're not helping."

Grimbledung drew a second wand. "Well, let's see what we can do about slowing these Halflings down." He nodded at Rat, "I should change you now so you're ready to go." He jabbed a wand at his friend. In a flash RatShambler towered over the parapets.

"Delberger's Hand! I'm out in the open!" Exclaimed RatShambler as he made a run for the stairs. As he went, a ballista bolt glanced off his shoulder, knocking him off the wall. He fell the four stories to the ground in a heap. "That really hurts you know," he called up as he stood gingerly on healing legs. There was a large dent in his shoulder, which slowly pushed back out to where it was moments before. "Crazy Gnome." RatShambler moved to the now-open gate of the now-vacated keep. He sat on his hind quarters to wait. "Ready when you are."

For the better part of an hour, Grimbledung and Drimblerod blasted Halflings, and at one point used their steel to deal with one well-aimed Halfling.

"I think we're winning," offered Drimblerod. He hazarded a peek over the wall.

"Are there less of them there?" Asked Grimbledung hopefully.

"No."

"Then how are we winning?"

"There's not less of *us* here." Drimblerod hazarded a peek over the parapet. "Think the soldiers have enough of a head start?"

Grimbledung nodded furiously, "More than they deserve and then some!"

"You ready to go out in style?" He gestured toward where RatShambler was waiting. Grimbledung didn't see him point.

"Yeah!" A wild look came to Grimbledung, "Now you're talking!" He clicked his horns into the 'down' position. Standing up, he clambered onto the parapet. He stepped over so he was straddling two of them. "I am Grimbledung! Hear me roar!" he shouted to the mass of Halflings. He brandished his wands.

Ka ***BOOM****!*

He intoned.

Immediately arcs of *What's This* crackled up both sides of the walls of the Keep and into the tips of his horns. His helmet took an out-worldly glow. He aimed his wands at the masses below him and snarled. "Revenge!"

"Grim?"

Great bolts of blue power sprang from his wands as he moved them back and forth. It was as if he were channeling the azure blue of

the ocean's depths up through the ground. Except instead of water, destruction was being sprayed out. Generously.

"Delberger's hand, Grim!" Said Drimblerod, "I meant it was time to go!"

Grimbledung's wands crackled and sizzled above the peals of thunder as all the magical energy in the area was channeled up through his helmet and down into his wands. Several crossbow bolts sizzled and popped ineffectually as they struck the cage of energy surrounding him.

Drimblerod was in awe. He leaned back against the wall and watched the show. He hazarded a look over the wall. There *were* less Halflings near the Keep's walls. "You're pushing them back Grim!" He called to his partner.

Grimbledung looked over at his partner, his smoking wands still doling out blue destruction to all in front of him. He smiled broadly. "Whoo hoo!" he said as he took a little hop. When he came back down, one of his feet almost missed the edge of the parapet. "Woops!" he said as he put out his arms to try and regain his balance. He leaned precariously forward as his arms swam backward furiously. He looked at his partner just as he reached the tipping point.

And fell off the wall.

"Drimblerod!" he called as he twisted in the air to look up at the top of the Keep.

Drimblerod gaped at the space that used to contain his friend only a moment earlier. He stood and leaned over the Keep's walls, oblivious to the arrows and crossbow bolts clattering on all sides of his exposed head. "Grimbledung!" he called down.

Grimbledung seemed to have landed on a pile of Halflings that fortunately broke his fall. Several Halflings grabbed his arms and others pulled his wands from his hand. "DRIM!" Another two Halflings grabbed his feet and together they all hoisted the Gnome into the air.

Drimblerod watched as his partner bounced off, held aloft by half a dozen Halflings. They seemed to be carrying him rather quickly in the direction of the Foreboding Forest.

"COME GET ME!" Grimbledung called hysterically up at his friend.

"I'LL FIND YOU!" Drimblerod called back helplessly. An arrow cut a narrow groove in his shoulder as it went by his head. Drimblerod became aware of the number of projectiles coming in his direction. Instinctively he ducked down. Several arrows passed where his head had been moments before.

"DRIIIIMBLERODDDD!" wafted up to him from below. A ladder clattered against the parapet where he was standing, another, two down. Then a third and a fourth. Unable to do anything else, Drimblerod kept low and made for the stairs.

He took them two at a time as he heard other ladders clatter against the Keep's defenses. "Rat!" he called. "RAT!"

Drimblerod jumped the last five steps. "Rat!" he called as he ran for the front gate. An arrow stuck in the ground beside him as he went. "RAAAT!"

RatShambler turned to look at Drimblerod running across the courtyard. Arrows and crossbow bolts seemed to spring from the ground around him as he zigzagged toward him. RatShambler stood and ran for the Gnome. "Drimblerod!" he called. He reached the Gnome and bent down for him to get on.

"GO!" Drimblerod dug his heels into RatShambler's side. "GO!"

"Where's Grim?"

"He fell," said Drimblerod through tears.

"He's dead?" RatShambler gaped at the Gnome as he turned and galloped for the door. "That can't…"

"No. It's worse than that."

"What's worse than dead?"

"He was captured," said Drimblerod, "he fell off the wall and they caught him."

RatShambler shook his head. "We gotta get him back." He slowed down.

"No! First, we need to lure these Halflings to the Army that's waiting for them! Head for the plains Rat! HEAD FOR THE PLAINS!"

Forty
Wherein The Gnomes Make a Run for It
Well Drimblerod, anyway

RatShambler galloped out of Frank's Keep at full tilt. Drimblerod looked back at the gate as he went. There were no Halflings in sight. "Slow down Rat!"

"Slow down? Are you crazy? There's the whole of the Halfling Army on our tail and you want me to slow down?"

Drimblerod looked back again. "If we outrun them, they'll never chase us to the plains and Grim's plan… Grim... It will all be for nothing."

RatShambler slowed down, "What do you want to do?"

Drimblerod drew his wand. "Turn around and I'll blast a few so they follow us."

"For Grimbledung," said RatShambler as he galloped in an arc and headed back toward Frank's Keep. The sun popped above the horizon on their right side as they went. "Get ready." RatShambler galloped over the drawbridge without slowing. Just as they reached the gate, several Halflings stepped into view. He lowered his head and crashed headlong into them. Halflings went flying as RatShambler did another arc and returned toward the door. When he got there, he turned and stopped.

As they turned, Drimblerod blasted two more Halflings. "Take that stinking Halflings! Is that all you've got?" He looked around the Keep's courtyard. There were several Halflings moving about.

"Uhm, Drim…" began RatShambler.

"Come out you stinking shorters!" Snarled Drimblerod.

"Drimblerod?"

"Yeah?" Snapped Drimblerod, "What?"

"Look up."

Drimblerod looked up out of the courtyard. The upper levels of the Keep were filled with Halflings. Hundreds of them. Many with bows drawn. The rest with swords out. All glowered down at him. In a torrent, they all began to pour down the stairs leading down to the courtyard.

"Time. To. Go." said Drimblerod without moving his lips.

RatShambler quickly backed out the gate as dozens of arrows stuck in the ground in front of him. When he was under the portcullis, he turned and galloped down the drawbridge.

Drimblerod hazarded a look back. Halflings were pouring out of Frank's Keep. "They're on foot so don't go too fast," warned Drimblerod, "we can still lose them."

A blue light flashed through the gate. It encompassed the entire Keep and the Halflings surrounding it. The Halflings kept pouring out of the castle. As Drimblerod looked, they seemed to grow larger. "Rat, maybe you should pick up the pace a little."

RatShambler lowered his head and sped up. Soon he was moving at a full gallop. Drimblerod had handfuls of hair in his hands trying to hold on. He looked back. The Halflings seemed closer.

"Rat, I don't want to alarm you or anything but…are you running as fast as you can?"

"I'm not as young as I used to be you know," huffed RatShambler, "why?"

"They're gaining on us."

"What? How?" RatShambler craned his neck around to look at the Halfling hoard behind him. Their legs were blurs. "Well, that's just not fair!"

Drimblerod twisted around and blasted the closest of the Halflings. "I can't get them all. And before you ask…"

"I know, I know. This is Grimbledung's enchantment so you can't do anything to add or take away from it." He looked back again. There were less than two hundred yards between them and the Halflings now. "This isn't good. How far ahead are those soldiers?"

A sinking feeling developed in Drimblerod's stomach. "They didn't say where exactly they would be setting up their ambush."

"What?"

"Grimbledung made the plan! He said the Shambler Plains."

"This is *all* the Shambler plains!"

Drimblerod looked back again. Another fifty yards had been lost. "Well, head straight. I can't imagine that they would have gone left or right."

"Unless they just left for good, that is." RatShambler wheezed.

"Save your breath and keep looking forward," suggested Drimblerod. He turned and blasted several other Halflings. They were now close enough to aim at easily.

"We should have headed into the forest," lamented RatShambler, "we'd have had a chance of losing them there."

Drimblerod looked around. Their pace seemed to have slowed markedly. "What's wrong Rat?"

"Uphill."

Drimblerod nodded. "Maybe at the top of the hill we'll see the soldiers." Drimblerod stretched up to try and see over the hill. The crest was still a good 100 yards away. RatShambler bucked. Drimblerod lay down on his back to keep from falling off. "What's wrong?"

"Arrow!"

Drimblerod turned and looked back. An arrow stuck out of RatShambler's rear shank.

"Pull…out."

Drimblerod nodded, "I'll try." He leaned and twisted backward and grasped the arrow with his hand. He tugged on it but it stayed firmly in place. "I think it's in the bone."

RatShambler grunted. He was out of breath. He let the injured leg only hit the ground every other time, dropping to an almost skip. Another arrow whizzed by. This time it almost stuck in Drimblerod's shank. "Delberger's Hand!" he cursed.

Drimblerod looked forward again. The hill's crest was less than fifty yards now. If nothing else it would afford Rat a downhill run for a little while. Drimblerod twisted and flipped his legs around so he was seated backward. He reached down and grabbed RatShambler's half-tail for support. Rat was too out of breath to even complain. Steadying his aim, Drimblerod began to blast the Halflings. They were less than fifty yards away now. "We're not going to make it." said Drimblerod. "Oh, Grim. We're not going to make it."

RatShambler reached the crest of the hill. It was a steep drop on the other side. It was more a min-cliff than a crest. He took to the air in a last-moment jump. "Hang on!" he called to Drimblerod. He steeled himself for the inevitable jarring he knew would come when they hit. It was a good fifty feet from the top of the crest to where he was going to land. RatShambler focused on the ground ahead of him, flexing his front legs to try and keep them from breaking as they landed. "This will leave a mark."

Drimblerod lay down along RatShambler's back. He felt his stomach move up into his backbone as they took to the air. He gripped the tail tightly in his hands and closed his eyes. "Sorry, Grim," he whispered.

RatShambler's front hoofs dug into the soft sand as he landed. He stretched out his rear legs in an attempt to absorb some of the impact. The impact felt like a lightning bolt sizzling down his spine. His legs -all four of them- went numb as his spine broke in several places. Even so, he bounded and was back in the air again momentarily. Then he landed heavily again, still moving at a full gallop. He turned his head back to see if Drimblerod was still hanging on.

And ran into a seated, fairly bored, Gargoyle. Blackness enveloped him as he hit the one and a half-ton, stone creature and came to an immediate stop.

Drimblerod fared a little better.

Momentarily anyway.

He careened off RatShambler's back, seeing ground, then sky, then ground again as he flew. For a moment, he caught a glimpse of a sea of soldiers. And several Gargoyles. And a Golem. '*Odd mix'* he thought as he hit the ground and blackness enveloped him as well.

"They're here!" Yelled Captain Frank as he drew his sword.

The soldiers and the Golem stood as the Gargoyle took to the air with a swift downward stroke of stone wings.

"Attack!" Captain Frank shouted, sword pointed forward.

The soldiers turned to face the crest of the hill. Just as the entire Halfling army poured over it...

The End

WILL Grimbledung be rescued?

CAN the Halfling Army be stopped?

Is there going to be an illustration of Nulu in her battle armor?

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About the Author and Guest Illustrator for Book 2



Robert P. Wills is a US Army Interrogator, Chief Warrant Officer Four. He is currently stationed in Germany where he and his wife are enjoying being empty nesters and living in a massive four-story house built in 1750. It is the former hospital of the town of Herrenberg (it's on Spitalgasse, after all) and it's absolutely positively haunted. It is also much too large for them and they like it that way. Along with writing, Robert is an inventor with three patents and several innovations in his workshop.

One innovation- the World's Greatest Garden Hose Guide is currently available on Amazon.com as well as other retailers. He also has a marginally successful wand business on Etsy under the name SecondHandSorcery where customers are routinely insulted by Grimbledung. The odd part is that they seem to like it.

He has, at this point, written the first five books in this series- They Were the Best of Gnomes, They Were the Worst of Gnomes "BOGWOG" as the groupies call it. Really. If you haven't read it, you're missing a lot of character establishment. Honestly, what kind of person starts with book 2 in a series?

Follow Robert's writing antics on his web page: www.robertpwills.com

Nichole Taylor, like her sister who illustrated the first book (BOGWOG), is related to Robert by marriage on his wife's side, so he didn't have to pay her anything either! Talk about not being able to pick your family, right?

Nikki currently resides where most great artists do- Colorado. She spends her time attending school and drawing.



This story is displayed in a typeface known as Garamond. It is one of the most popular families of fonts for use in books. A classic old-style font, Garamond is named for Claude Garamond, a publisher in 16th century France. It is widely believed that he also owned a Second Hand Sorcery wand- a Basilisk Spine to be exact. Prove us wrong.

[1] Take this to heart- it's good advice.

[2] Tendril of snot left out by our artist. There's only so much you can buy on Fiverr.

[3] It really is. If you get a chance to go to a game, do it.

[4] We've no idea which it will be- it's not like we have any outlines or notes to go by as we write this stuff.

[5] A standard rat turd is about ¼ inch. Write that down somewhere.

[6] At one point, Grimbledung had lived above a law office. The Lawyers always introduced themselves with 'esquire' at the end of their names and Grimbledung took up the moniker thinking it sounded high-class and cool. Actually, it does. Try it some time.

[7] When the revenues drop.

[8] Hopefully not alone…

[9] It goes like this: They're 4 feet tall. Now, they're ¼ inch tall, so that means that a real inch to them is (4 x 1) x 4 feet or 16 feet. There's 12 inches in a foot and it's a little under 3 feet to the ground. It's 8 AM, and there's a wagon leaving Julesville right now. For it to arrive at South Jule by noon…oh never mind.

[10] ¼ inch. Remember?

[11] Yes, it is.

[12] Article 54

[13] Hey- we're guessing at these contractions as well. We're doing the best we can.

[14] A mythological (obviously) creature of up to 800 pounds used as beast of burden and labor. They are short and stout with horns that curve down to the sides of their head. No, we don't believe in them either.

[15] Now, now- we didn't *say* Pozzuoli would be discussed at this point; we just said that this was when he set up shop. Give it a chapter or two. We'll get around to Pozzuoli.

[16] That's over 100, remember?

[17] It's been a while since you heard the incantation, here it is.

[18] See?

[19] Mind Reading!

[20] That two-word sentence right there is worth the price of the book, we think.

[21] The wall and closed door helped muffle the scream.

[22] The incident will probably be Chapter 4 of Tales from the Maura Tau Bar and BAR.

[23] Hah hah, get it?

[24] See?

[25] Book 4: *A New Hope*.

[26] Book 3: Here's Looking for You, Grim.

[27] Yes, you read that correctly.

[28] That incident won't be discussed until Book Three.

[29] Honestly, sometimes it's really hard to tell a Run-Of-The-Mill Loon from a Radical Loon.

[30] That's that 'Chutzpa' thing again.

[31] We're not telling. At least until Book 9- *A Few Wands More*

[32] Check the map. It's there.

[33] where $y = v_{0y} t - {}^1/_2 gt^2$, y=1.225 meters in elevation arc. Really. Well, probably.

[34] A derogatory term used by taller races to address shorter races. Remember?

[35] Hah, hah, just kidding recruiters. Well, not really. At all.

[36] Same great-great-grandparents, but two generations younger than his first cousin on his grandmother's side. Obviously.

[37] Yeah…

[38] All right. Enough mushy stuff. Back to the action!

[39] It led a sedimentary lifestyle

[40] Thanks and apologies, Phin.

[41] You're welcome.

[42] Up to almost eleventeen, by our reckoning.

[43] It would just take until Book 3 to happen. One just doesn't hurry fate.

[44] Sorry, Irving. Really, we are.

[45] Yes- the meanwhile is before the actual 'while' is discussed. After everything else, that little detail can't be too hard to swallow, right? We can assure you there is a chart with all the events lined up on them and even though they might not be presented in order, ALL of them occurred at the proper time. Trust us.

[46] Yes- the future smelled like butterscotch. We won't mention what the past smelled like.

[47] Oh, lighten up!

[48] They're better if you dunk them.

[49] In his defense, it was a sight to see. We asked our illustrators for a sketch but didn't get one.

[50] *The Halfling Sailor* - It's a tale of high-seas adventure in the Tales from the Mora Tau Bar and BAR.