Grimbledung and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good Mine

Tales From a Second-Hand Wand Shop: Book 5

By Robert P. Wills

Illustrations By Rio, Nikki Taylor, and unfortunately the author. Sorry.

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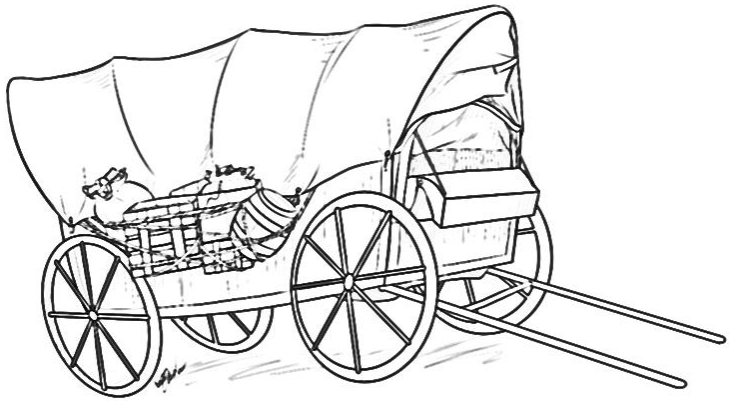
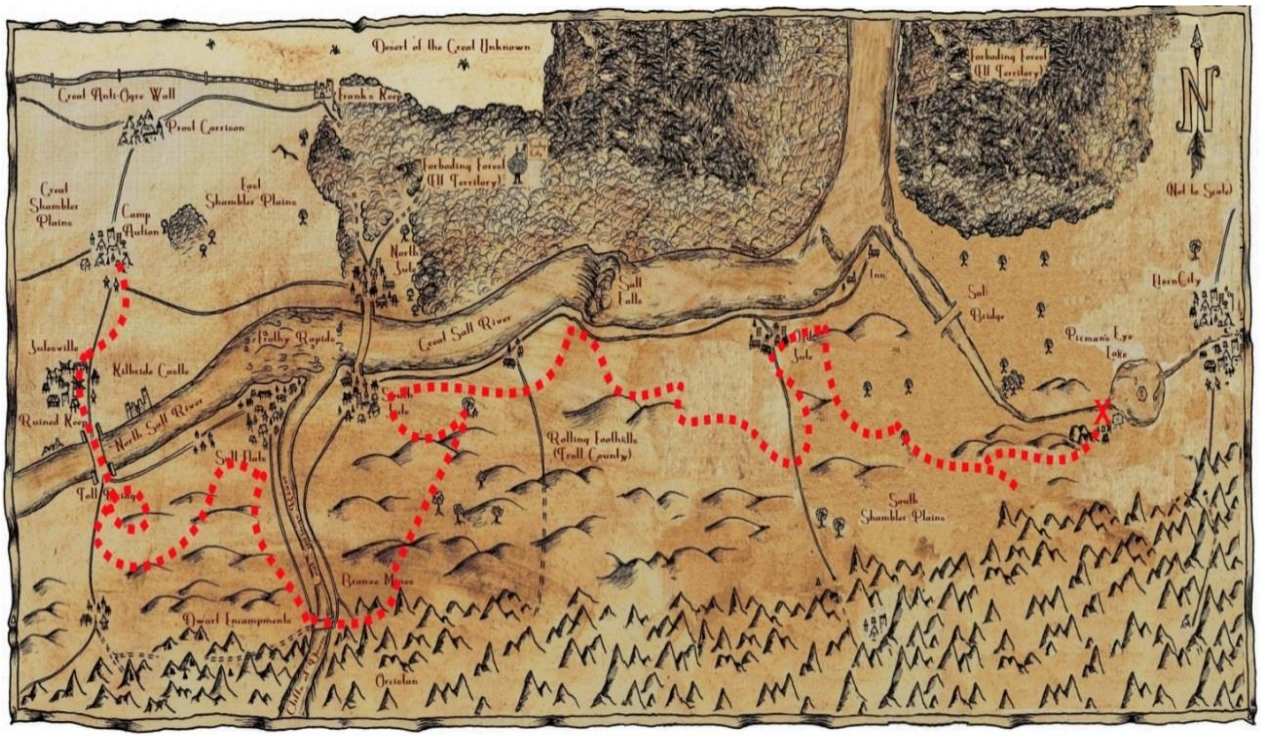


"Life is a journey. Until it kills you. Then you don't travel so much."

-R.P. Wills


Desert of the Great Unknown
Great Half-Ogre Wall
Frank's Keep
Pearl Garrison
Great Shambler Plains
Camp Nation
East Shambler Plains
Forbading Forest (All Territory)
Forbading Forest (All Territory)
N
(Not to Scale)
North Salt
Salt Falls
Inn
Salt Bridge
HornCity
Great Salt River
Pearl Rapids
Yulesville
Kilbride Castle
Ruined Keep
North Salt River
Salt Hole
Fall Rapids
Salt Hole
Rolling Foothills (Troll Country)
Pirate Salt
Pearman's Eye Lake
South Shambler Plains
Bronze Mines
Desert Encampments
Ocisolan

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Chapter 1
Fortune, and Glory, and Road Trips!
Oh…Why?

Grimbledung clambered onto the wagon. "Let's go, Drim!" He flopped down on the seat. "Daylight is wasting!"

"It's still night, Grim."

"Nightlight is wasting," Grimbledung said without missing a beat.

"This is going to be a long trip."

Drimblerod nodded at Rat. "Going to be? We haven't even left yet and it already seems like a long trip."

"What's that I just heard? Long? You know what this trip is going to be?" Grimbledung didn't wait for a response. "I'll tell you! It's going to be Grrreat!" He thrust his hand in the air, finger pointing upward as he said it.

"Great isn't the word I was going to use," admitted Rat.

"Oh, I'd use great. And I'd combine it with rewarding." Grimbledung stood and struck a heroic pose. "Like this: Grrreatly rewarding." He thrust his hand in the air again.

"What do you mean; like morally rewarding where we're all going to learn something about ourselves that makes us have inner peace?"

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "What are you talking about? That doesn't even make sense. I mean rewarding as in we're going to all be absurdly rich once this is over."

"Rich like when we learn something about ourselves during a personal journey that helps make us better folk and we treat others better as well because of it?"

Grimbledung stared at Rat. "Now you're just doing that on purpose."

Rat twitched his ragged whiskers. "Well, maybe a little."

"Grimbledung, just keep in mind that this mine is called 'the lost mine' for a reason."

Grimbledung nodded. "Right, Drim; because no one has ever found it, of course."

"Including us?" Offered Rat. "We're included in that group, I think. As far as groupings go, I'd say we're the groupiest of that grim clan."

"I'm warning you," warned Grimbledung.

Drimblerod snapped his fingers. "Be right back; I forgot something."

"Good decision making skills?"

Drimblerod shook his finger at Rat. "Now *I'm* warning you." He shifted to pointing between Rat and Grimbledung. "Don't you two go and do anything crazy so early in the morning." He turned and jogged back into the shop so he did not see Grimbledung waggle his ears. Or Rat twitch his whiskers.

"I'm not liable to do anything," Grimbledung called to his partner. "Nothing at all."

"That's what I figured." Rat snickered. "Grimblebluffington Stubbytoes esquire."

"Oooh! Now I'm warning you after Drim did and after I did, Rat! That's like three times even!"

Rat sat on his haunches. "Or what? You're going to leave me behind to lounge in the sun all day while *you* pull the wagon?"

Grimbledung brandished his wand.

"Yeah?" Rat tilted his head at the Gnome. "I'm waiting."

Grimbledung slashed his wand at Rat.

Rodentus Grigio!
Transmutis Completes

Grimbledung paused for the slightest of moments

He finished the incantation.

"What was that last part?" Asked RatShambler as a golden light enveloped him. "I'm not familiar with…"

"You're fine, Rat," assured Grimbledung as the transformation took place. He sheathed his wand. "Don't be a baby rat."

"I don't *feel* fine," said RatOx. "I don't feel fine *at all*." He smelled the air. "And what is that stink?"

"I believe that's you."

"That's me?" RatOx sniffed the air again. "I smell horrible?"

"Well, sure."

"You made me something that smells horrible?"

Drimblerod walked out of the shop. He tossed a small pack in the back of the wagon as he climbed aboard. He sniffed. "What is that smell?"

"I blame Grimbledung," said RatOx.

"Well whatever you're eating, Grimbledung you need to stop or you're going to have to walk along, downwind from the wagon."

"No, I mean Grimbledung did that to me."

"Well whatever he's feeding you, you need to stop eating it." Drimblerod stuck out his tongue. "That's gross." He looked forward and did a double-take. "What in the lands is *that*?"

"That's Rat, of course," said Grimbledung.

"Well, I figured it was Rat. What I mean is… what… is he?"

Grimbledung gave a wink. "I got him a disguise so the Halflings won't kill him or us."

"But the smell might," offered RatOx.

"Well, let's get going. Maybe a breeze will help," said Drimblerod. "Let's get going Rat."

"Ox," corrected Grimbledung.

"An *Ox*? I'm not calling him that. I think those things are mythological anyway."

"There isn't a gear in him. I'm sure of it." Grimbledung smiled. "Remember when I whipped up that steam powered ostrich that I rode around the Lands on? That was a hoot!"

"No, I can't say I do. That's the most absurd sounding thing I've ever heard. Who ever heard of a Gnome making a steam-powered anything?"

"Must have been with a different partner then." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Right, RatOx?"

"I'm just going to call him Rat; not some farcical beast you just made up."

"Thank you."

Grimbledung smiled. "Fine, fine. Let's get going. Fortune awaits, you know." He rubbed his belly. "But first Nulu's place for some breakfast."

"Sounds good to me." RatOx started walking toward the Duck Inn and Dine. "Now that I'm this size, my belly's all of a sudden empty."

Drimblerod looked into the back of the wagon. "Hey, you sure that's enough supplies and gear?"

Grimbledung looked back. "Absolutely."

"You told Pozzuoli exactly what sort of terrain we'd be traveling across and how long we'd be gone?"

"Absolutely. And he said that's all we needed. He packed it himself. Personally, even."

"To get there and back again?" Drimblerod leaned back on the seat. "The back again part is pretty important."

"It always is," agreed Grimbledung. "It is expected on even an unexpected journey that goes to where it expects to be where it expects it or not, I suspect."

"Can I just stay home?" Rat interjected.

"Maybe we should inventory it first, just to be sure. I'd hate to be stuck out in the wilds and find out we're short something important."

"Like food," offered RatOx.

"Yeah, Rat; that minor little thing called food comes to mind."

"I suppose I can eat grass," RatOx moved his mouth in a chewing motion. "Flat teeth. I should be fine grazing."

"Well, I'm not going to graze." Drimblerod looked at his partner. "I think we need to make sure Pozzuoli didn't leave something out. That's not a lot of stuff for a possible two-month journey."

"Old Pozz is a professional, Drim. Stop worrying."

Drimblerod frowned. "Well, as long as you let him know where we were going and this is all he said we'd need." He looked at the boxes again. "Maybe it's packed really well?"

"It's packed really well."

"Well if you say so."

"I say so." Grimbledung patted his partner's shoulder. "So we're going in to eat?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "No. We're not going to lose half the day sitting in the Duck while you eat and chat folks up. I asked Nulu to set up some rations for us."

"Rations? You mean like they serve those hapless soldiers?"

"Possibly. It's whatever she comes up with."

Grimbledung took his arm off Drimblerod. "Listen Drim. I know soldiers. Heaps of them. In fact, I was a soldier as one point."

"So?"

"Soldiers are not what you'd call… picky eaters."

"What would you call them?"

"Completely unaware of what a good meal is. Some cook just ladles goop at them and they eat it like it's the best thing in the lands. When in all reality, they are just a step above eating mud pies."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's true! They consider eating sub-standard food part of the job. They even brag about terrible meals and horrible living conditions and reminisce as if they were staying at a seven star resort."[1] Grimbledung frowned. "So

we're not going in, huh? So some lackey is going to hand us a box and send us on our way?"

"Look on the bright side, Grim."

"There's a bright side?" RatOx chuckled. "Let me hear it too."

"Maybe it'll be Flora that gives us our rations and you can tell her goodbye again."

"Again?"

"Sure," Drimblerod nodded. "Since you went by last night and let her know we'd be leaving."

Grimbledung looked up at the dark sky.

"Oh no. Don't tell me you didn't let her know." Drimblerod rubbed his temples.

"What do you think those bright lights are in the sky?" Grimbledung pointed upward. "I think they're our ancestors looking down on us."

"Grim, please tell me…" Drimblerod tried again.

"Or maybe they are big balls of burning gas, millions of leagues away."

"With you everything is gas," said Rat. "I'm going out on a limb, Drimblerod and guess that the answer is 'no'. Sounds like our favorite Gnomess will be on the warpath."

The wagon rolled up to the Duck Inn and Dine. "Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire, tell me you at least told that gal that you were leaving town for an extended period of time. Tell me Rat is wrong."

"Well, I did tell her bye the last time I saw her. It was kind of open-ended, I think." Grimbledung shrugged. "That should have done the trick."

"You were supposed to stop by last night and let her know."

"I was going to tell her in a letter but something kept me from doing it."

"You can't write."

"That's what kept me from doing it." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "She'll be fine. It's not like she's going to miss me or anything, right?"

"If she's bringing out the food, this will get ugly."

The door of the tavern opened. All three turned to look.

Nulu was silhouetted by a bulls-eye lantern from inside the foyer. "Morning, gents," she said. "And you, Grimbledung."

"Bottom of the night, top of the morning to you, Nulu!"

"It's early you know. Early."

"The second early bird gets the cheese," said Grimbledung.

"Or the first mouse gets the worm," offered RatOx. "I think they're both appropriate."

"It's too early for your antics, really it is," warned Nulu. She sniffed. "Take your go-boxes... and..." She sniffed again. "What is that smell?"

"It's me, Nulu, sorry," said RatOx. "Seems I'm a little ripe nowadays."

"It's his disguise." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "That way the Halflings'll not recognize him."

"Probably because their eyes will be watering too much to see," said Drimblerod.

Nulu shook her head. "Oh dear. Well, be off with you." She handed a largish box to Drimblerod. "Food and hot coffee await." She sniffed again. "And be quick about it; folks are going to be eating their breakfast soon you know."

"Thanks, Nulu."

"You sure that's all you need?" Nulu asked as she peeked under the cover at the contents of the wagon.

Grimbledung nodded. "The shop is taken care of. We're all packed and ready to go. We just got some hot breakfast and coffee. We're set."

"Look in on the place, will you, Nulu?" Drimblerod asked. "Just in case."

"Sure thing, Drimblerod." Nulu shook her head. "You're both nuts. You know that?"

RatOx nodded. "We'd already established that as we rolled up."

"Why Flora puts up with…"

"Well, it's time to go," interrupted Drimblerod. "We're on a tight schedule you know. Tight."

"Drimblerod?"

"No time to talk, Nulu. We best be going." Drimblerod snapped the reins. "Let's go, Rat. Quickly."

"Grimbledung…" Began Nulu.

"See you in a little while," said Drimblerod as the wagon turned in a circle. "Back before you know it."

"Did you talk to Flora?"

"Can't hear you, Nulu," Drimblerod called. "You're…too… far… away." He said as the wagon completed its turn. About ten feet away. "See you soooon!" He waved over his shoulder.

Grimbledung waved as well. "See you soooonish!" He called as if he were very far away.

"Think she bought it?" RatOx asked.

"No way. No way in Niflheim she bought that," said Drimblerod. "We need to get out of town before there are any fireworks."

"There'll be fireworks?" Grimbledung asked.

"Most likely when we return," said RatOx.

Grimbledung bounced on his seat. "Those are always fun. I hope I have a front-row seat!"

"That's pretty much guaranteed." Drimblerod dropped the reins. "Head south, Rat. We're heading east of the Rolling Foothills once we cross the toll bridge." He looked at his partner. "Grim?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Yes, according to S'Am *and* the Gargoyles, it's out toward EternCity in some rocky outcroppings overlooking a small lake."

"And they're certain that's where it is?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure, sure; S'Am said he'd been to the mine. So it wasn't so long ago that he's forgotten…"

"How long is that?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "There's no telling with Orcs. I suppose it depends on how much he gets hit on the head."

"And the Gargoyles?"

"I don't think they hit S'Am on the head."

"Grimbledung…"

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Only about fifty years ago."

"Fifty?"

Grimbledung waved dismissively at his partner. "Don't worry, Drim. It'll be just grand." He nodded at RatOx. "Just head to the bridge, Rat."

RatOx nodded. "Sure thing. You know this is going to be a disaster, right? I just wanted to put that out there now so I could say 'I told you so' later on."

"Pushaw!" Grimbledung grinned. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Chapter 2
The Journey's The Thing

Nulu startled awake as someone prodded her- she had fallen asleep at the bar.

"You sleep down here?" Wil asked as he sat on a stool. "Don't look good when the *owner* of the joint sleeps at the bar you know."

Nulu shook her head. "I didn't go back upstairs after giving Drimblerod and Grimbledung a breakfast go-box this morning." She stretched. "Must have dozed off."

"What are those two involved in now?"

"They're heading for the Lost Picman's Mine."

Wil nodded. "Well, that sounds like a fun trip. After all the excitement we've had around here, a little relaxation does sound nice." He shrugged. "As long as that old witch has moved on. She was not the friendliest of hosts."

"You've been to the Lost Picman's mine?"

"Sure." He stood and hopped onto the bar, swinging his legs over, he completed the transition to the opposite side. "Twice, in fact."

"The *Lost* Picman's Mine?"

"That's what the sign says."

"There's a sign on the Lost Picman's mine?" Nulu rubbed her eyes. "It's too early for this. Why oh why is there a sign on the supposedly lost mine?"

"So the tourists know when they're there, I suppose."

"It's a *tourist* attraction?" Nulu put her hands on the counter. "I can't believe this."

"Well, it did really start out as a lost mine, then some Dwarf entrepreneur found it and he decided to make some money off it so he put

in a gift shop, a campground, and a small restaurant. He gives tours to folks." Wil thought for a moment. "Heard he was putting in some rides as well."

"Drimblerod's going to kill him."

"The Dwarf?"

Nulu shook her head. "No; Grimbledung." Now she put her head on the counter. "You see, Drimblerod thinks they're going to find the treasure of the Lost Picman's Mine."

"Well, you *can* buy trinkets in the gift shop." Wil smiled. "Who gave them the impression that it was a lost mine?"

"It's *called* the Lost Picman's Mine!"

"Well sure, but honestly; you don't think the Magical Kingdom is really magical just because it's in the name, do you?"

Nulu rubbed her temples. "Oh man…"

"Tourist trap. Just like Magic Mountain. Not a bit of magic there either. Just smoke, mirrors, and high-priced, low-quality food."[2]

Nulu pursed her lips.

"Ever been to the Gardens of Bush?"

Nulu shook her head.

"There's not a single garden of bushes there. Not one."

"Rolton chips."

Wil smirked. "Seven *Flags*?"

"Now you're just trying to push my buttons. There aren't seven of them?"

"You need to get out more."

"Steaming Rolton Chips."

"So who told them about the mine?" Wil couldn't keep the smile off his face. "That was a great dirty trick if they did it on purpose."

"It was one of the gargoyles out front of Big Julie's. I don't remember which one, now that I think about it. But one of them definitely put the notion in Grimbledung's head."

"Maybe he misunderstood?" Wil smirked. "Listening isn't one of Grimbledung's better talents."

"I think I'm going to go over to Julie's later today to talk to them." Nulu stifled a yawn.

"Julie's? They aren't at Second Hand Sorcery?"

"Nope. They didn't last the afternoon there. Long story." [3] Nulu stretched. "Ahhh… You're killing me, Wil. Killing me."

"Well, I'll take care of the breakfast crowd if you want to get a little more shut-eye."

Nulu smiled. "I think I may just do that. Then I'll talk to those old goats."

"Let me know what they say." Wil smiled. "I'd love to hear how the confusion happened."

"Sure thing." She shook her head. "That Gnome." Nulu yawned wide. "I'll be back before the lunch rush."

"No worries." Wil shooed her off. "Go get some sleep, boss. Hate for some prospective male to see you looking like this and pass up on a good thing."

Nulu raised an eyebrow. "Hey now; I never look *that* bad, thank you very much."

Wil grinned. "Uhmm..." he tried.

"Just give a knock in a couple of hours or so." Nulu walked through the door behind the bar into the kitchen. There was a ladder that led to a trap door in her room. Pinky had installed it for her so she could move quickly from the office she had set up in a corner of her room and the kitchen. Grimbledung had suggested a pole and even tried to convince Pinky to install one. Fortunately, Pinky listened more to reason than to Grimbledung.

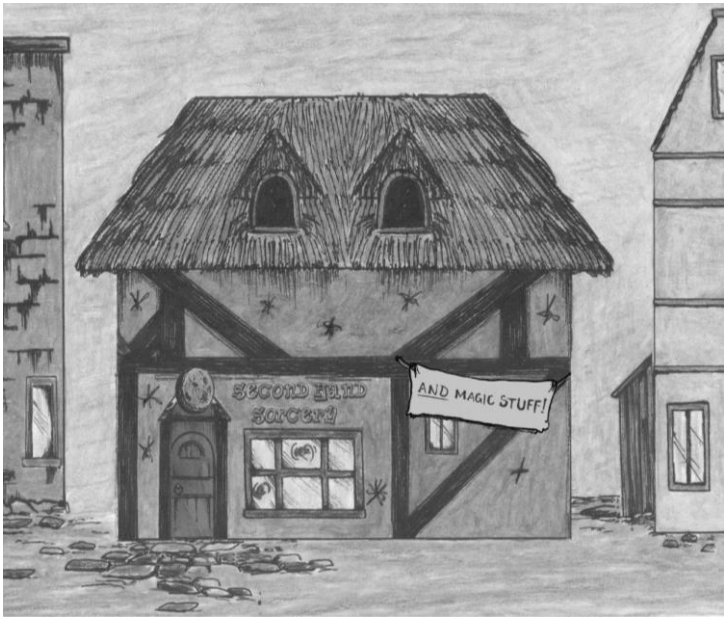
After climbing up, Nulu flopped on her bed and fell to sleep almost immediately. She dreamt of the Gnomes taking a tour of the mine and Drimblerod shoving his partner off a ledge when the witch hostess wasn't looking.

Just before lunch, Wil knocked on the trap door.

"Be down shortly," she called. "In case there are any prospective males down there." She smiled, anticipating a long day of teasing her bartender.

Chapter 3
Second Hand Magicians

Semfeld straightened out in the bed. His feet dangled off the end from his calves down. He stretched his arms out, hitting the headboard. With a curse, he swung around and put his feet on the floor. It was not far away. At all. "We really need some bigger furniture," he remarked. He put his hands on his thighs to push himself up from his squatting position on the bed. "This'll get old quick." With a shrug, he opened the door and entered the living area. *At least the Gnome had enough sense to make this furniture regular sized.* Semfeld opened the door to the POOPA (he had been told it stood for the **PO**le t**O** **P**ersonal **A**blutions). *Another good idea by those two idiots.* "Liverioso, you awake?" He called at the other door in the room.



"I'm downstairs already!" Liverioso's voice carried up the stairs. "First day open you know!"

Semfeld smiled. "First day open. Soon we'll have enough money to set up on our own," he called down.

"Isn't it great?!"

"I'll be down in a little; I'm just getting ready now."

"Take your time; I've got the store!"

With a nod, Semfeld reached out and took the pole in both hands. He swung his legs out and after hanging just a moment, slid down the POOPA.

Liverioso looked at the wands under the glass then the ones on the walls. There was plenty of inventory on display and, he had been told by Grimbledung, there was 'a whole heap of wands' in the magic-proof storage locker in the back. He decided when his partner came down he would go check the locker. A lack of inventory would lead to a lack of profits. He had no idea where they would even look for new wands to sell so he hoped they had plenty for the duration of the Gnome's travels. "Open for business," he said as he moved around the 'L' shaped counter and flipped the sign in the window. With a smile, he opened the front door of the shop.

As he walked back to the counter, the door shut behind him. Liverioso looked over his shoulder. "That's odd." He returned and pulled the door open again. He swung it back and forth. It didn't seem to be off balance, remaining in whatever position he put it. He pushed the door completely open again. Once again, when he turned his back to the door and started to walk to the counter, he heard it click shut. "Hey!" He looked around the shop, hoping to see some interloper. With a frown he went back to the door and opened it roughly. He narrowed his eyes at the door, and with a grunt, dusted his hands off and started to walk to the counter. After two steps, he stopped and looked over his shoulder. The door was halfway closed. While he continued to look, he took another step. The door closed a little more. He backed up a step and the door opened a little. "That's about enough out of you!"

Door swung open. It clattered its latch at the Magician.

"Yeah, yeah. Real funny. Are you going to behave yourself now?"

Door rattled its latch again.

"Well good because it's a nice day out and an open door is a welcoming door. And we want customers to come in right?"

Door remained silent.

"Listen, Door," said Liverioso, "the Gnomes entrusted us to watch the shop while they were away, right?"

Door rattled its latch.

"And part of that means making sales while they are gone to make money. So, we want people to come in and buy wands just like always because otherwise the shop will go out of business."

Door remained silent.

"Then we'll be forced to sell off the remaining inventory *and* any furniture and appliances that are no longer needed."

Door managed to push open a little wider.

"That's better."

"Arguing with the furniture?" Semfeld shook his head as he came through the curtain. "That's not a good sign, Liv."

"He started it."

Door rattled its latch. Because it had.

Semfeld moved to the counter beside his partner. He looked at the glass. "Lots of inventory. That's good."

"Yeth. And Grimbledung said there was more in the back. But if there's not, we're going to need inventory."

"That's true." Semfeld nodded as he pulled a Traveler's Emberstick from under the glass. "Can't very well sell nothing. There's no profit in it."

"But, Themfeld, where do we even get more wands to sell?"

Semfeld opened his mouth, then closed it. "You know, I have no idea. That may be a problem. You should go check the back to see what sort of reserve stock we've got."

An Orc stomped angrily through the doorway.

Semfeld and Liverioso both took a step back. "Are we being robbed?" Liverioso whispered to his partner.

Semfeld dropped his arms. He was still holding the Traveler's Emberstick. If it was a robbery, at least he was armed. "I don't know."

"Have wand!" said S'Am.

"I suppose so," admitted Semfeld. Because they did.

S'Am stared at the two Humans.

The two Humans stared at the Orc.

"Tho..." Offered Liverioso.

"Though what?" Asked S'Am.

"Though what, what?" asked Semfeld.

S'Am squinted at him. "Where Gnomes? You pushing my buttons!"

"No, no Mith-ter Orc," Liverioso said quickly, not wanting to have an altercation on their first day of business. "We are definitely not pushing anything."

"Oh, yes you do!"

"No, no Mister Orc. Honest."

"Yes; you push wands!" S'Am laughed. "That joke!"

Liverioso looked at the Orc. "I thuppose it was."

The Humans stared at the Orc.

The Orc stared at the Humans. "Laugh at joke!" He shouted.

Semfeld clutched his belly and laughed loudly. "Oh, that's a good one, Orc!"

"I don't get it," admitted Liverioso with a frown.

S'Am's eyes got large. "Really?"

"It happens," offered Semfeld. "Just push on; maybe you'll get him next time around."

"What?" Asked Liverioso.

S'Am nodded. "Fine." He cleared his throat. "It new month!"

"On that we can agree," said Semfeld. Because it was.

"Have wand!"

"All right, now don't start that again."

S'Am pulled a wand from his belt. He waved it around. "Got wand!"

"I think this is a robbery," whispered Liverioso again.

S'Am shook his head. "Where Gnomes?" He looked around the shop. "They buy wand when it new month for full price." He scowled. "Second wand pay half price because of taxes."

"That doesn't make thense," said Liverioso. "Why would the second wand pay less?"

"Rat say something about government excise taxes on citizens." He looked around. "Where civics professor rat?"

"He's with the Gnomes. They went on a business trip and left us in charge of the shop while they were away. So you have a wand to sell?"

S'Am nodded. "Yes, have wand! It new month!" He shouted, exasperated. He was missing the Gnomes and truth be told, the rat. If nothing else, the transactions went quicker with them. Plus, he often got a free drink off Grimbledung. "So give coins for wand already!"

"What sort of coins?" Liverioso fished. He had no idea what the Gnomes bought wands for. Somehow the subject never came up.

"Legal tender is best."

"Well, sure. That much we know," said Semfeld.

Because they did.

"How much legal tender?" Liverioso cast again.

Without thinking S'Am blurted out. "Two copper!" Then he winced. "Maybe two silver." He waved his hand dismissively. "Orcs colorblind you know. Whichever you have handy."

"I think two copper is fair."

S'Am frowned at Semfeld.

"Plus," added Liverioso, "we'll pay you two copper for any other wands you find this month!"

The Orc beamed. "Yeah?"

"Sure." Semfeld pulled the coin drawer open. "Two copper per wand for any wand you find." When no reasonable reason came to mind, he added. "We're running a sale, you see."

S'Am put the wand on the counter and held out his hand. "Deal."

Semfeld put two copper coins in his hand. “See you next time, Mister Orc.”

S’Am gave a curt nod then stomped out of the shop.

“Thay, Themfeld, do you think we should have asked where he got the wand?”

“What do we care where he finds them? They’re probably just lying around on the ground in the wilds where he lives.” Semfeld picked up the wand. It was a medium sized, dark brown wand. “Wonder what this thing does.”

“Grimbledung thed the jousting dummy in the back tested the wands.”

Semfeld handed his partner the wand. “I suppose you could ask him while I tend the counter. Plus, you can see what’s in that inventory locker.”

Liverioso took the wand. “Thounds good.” He turned and pushed past the curtain.

Semfeld grinned. “Open for business,” he said.

Door rattled its latch because apparently, they were.

Chapter 4
Dummy Is As Dummy Does

Dummy slouched over to one side, bored. No one had talked to him in several days; the Gnomes were so busy with their preparations they didn't even stop to say goodbye when they left, and the two Humans seemed intent on ignoring him. He swung his arms back and forth, bored. It didn't help with the boredom but he felt it helped convey his current emotional state.

Liverioso cleared his throat.

Dummy swung his arms a little more- there was, after all an audience now.

"You awake?"

Dummy lolled his head up. He gave a weak nod.

"You thick or thomething?" Liverioso turned to leave. Truth be told, he was not comfortable speaking with the jousting dummy. It wasn't the Mechanimation that caused the unease; he wasn't sure just how smart the thing was so he never knew how much to even talk to him. Or was it an it? "Want me to come back later?"

Dummy flailed his arms. His head-lolling turned into forceful head-shakes. He gestured the Human closer.

"Well, if you're sure..."

Dummy gave him a thumbs up. And a hearty head nod.

"All right then." He held up the wand. "We just had an Orc drop this thing off."

Dummy flexed his arms then gestured over his head.

"Yeah, he was a big one."

Dummy gave a thumbs up again.

"You know him?"

Dummy shrugged. He put his mitten above his eyes as if he were shielding them from the sun then leaned toward the curtain. Then he raised both hands questioningly.

"Well, I suppose if you'd have seen him." Liverioso shrugged. "In any case, he dropped off this wand and we were hoping you could tell us what it does."

Dummy held out his mitt. He bounced up and down on his box.

"Calm down or you'll bust a seam." Liverioso handed him the wand. "You test wands for those stupid Gnomes?"

Dummy pointed the wand at Liverioso. He waggled it at him menacingly.

"Sorry, I meant those Gnomes." He held up his hands. "No offense."

Dummy nodded. He looked around the room, searching for the Abysmal Box. Spying it, he gestured at it with the wand.

"What?"

Dummy let his hands fall slack. *Humans.*

"What?"

Dummy pointed at the box then at the wand.

"The wand goes in the box."

Dummy shook his head. He put the wand down on his pedestal. He put his mitts together, palms touching, he pivoted the top one up.

"Oh; open the box."

Dummy rubbed his head.

"You can't get headaches. I'm sure of that."

Dummy clutched his belly and pantomimed laughing.

"Yeah, you're a laugh a minute, I'm sure." Liverioso moved to the box and opened the lid. "There you go."

Dummy stared at Liverioso.

Liverioso stared at Dummy.

Dummy acted like he was going to toss the wand into the box.

"Hey! Don't do that; we need all the inventory we can get!" He stepped between the dummy and the box. "What are you doing?"

Dummy pointed the wand at the box then stretched up to look into it.

Liverioso snapped his fingers. "But won't it all spill out if I put it on its side?"

Dummy shook his head.

Liverioso moved behind the box and pushed it onto its side. When nothing spilled out, he leaned over the top and looked in. "That's just weird." He reached out a hand to touch the swirling colors.

Dummy clapped his mitts together loudly. When the Human looked at him, he shook his finger at him.

"No touching?"

Dummy gave a thumbs up then gestured for the box to be moved closer.

"Not a good shot, huh?" Liverioso snickered as he leaned over and began pushing the box across the room. When he bumped it against the dummy's box, he looked up. "How's that?"

Dummy put his hands on his hips.

"Just kidding." The Magician pulled the box away. "How's this?"

Dummy gave a thumb's up.

"You need anything else?"

Dummy looked down at the wand. He held up his thumb and waggled it.

"Yes, just one right now, sorry."

Dummy shrugged. He picked up the wand and waved it at the center of the swirling colors. A jagged bolt of energy streaked out of it and sizzled as it connected with the colors. After a few seconds, Dummy lowered the wand. He held it over his head.

"Real powerful, huh? Well, what kind of wand is it?"

Dummy shrugged. Truth be told, he knew that it was a Traveler's Emberstick but there was no way he could explain that to the stupid Human. A thought came to him. He pointed at the table along the wall. There were several cans stacked on it.

"What's over there?"

Dummy pointed from the wand to the table.

"You want those cans?"

Dummy nodded.

"Which one?"

Dummy stared at the absurdly annoying man. He forcefully spread his arms out wide.

"Fine, fine. There's no need to shout." Liverioso took several trips but finally had all the cans set up around the dummy. "How's that?"

Dummy looked down at the cans. Seeing the one for Traveler's Embersticks, he dropped the wand into it. He raised his hands over his head and took a deep bow.

Liverioso looked at the writing on the can. "You sure that's what it is?"

Dummy straightened. He put his hands on his hips, tapping his fingers against his hips.

"Wow, you sure are a testy dummy."

Dummy tilted his hand back and forth.

"Test*ing* dummy. Fine." He smiled. "Thanks for that. Now we can sell it." He sat on the edge of the Abyssmal Box. "You know, we're really trying to keep things running here so that when the Gnomes get back we can open our own place. So any help you give us is really helping the Gnomes."

Dummy nodded and gave a thumbs up.

"Say, do you know where the Gnomes keep their extra inventory?"

Dummy gave a noncommittal shrug. He accompanied it with an overall glance around the room.

"I'm only asking because as wands sell out, we'll need to replace them with new inventory. If there's nothing on the shelves, no one's going to come in and shop, you know. It's a legitimate question, after all."

Dummy considered that for a moment. It was a legitimate question. He nodded at the man.

"Grimbledung said they had a good stock of wands back here." Liverioso stood. "And it would be good to do an inventory so we know if we're short of any particular type of wand."

Dummy pointed at a large chest in the far corner of the workroom.

"Over there, huh?" Liverioso moved to the chest. "Well, it's big enough so hopefully we've got plenty of..." His voice trailed off as he opened the lid. There were three wands there. "Three wands?" He leaned into the box. "Three wands is all..." Liverioso's voice trailed off again as he recognized the lining in the box- it was the lining of his Official Magician's Guild Cloak ®. "What the?" He turned to look at the dummy.

Dummy raised his mitts plaintively.

"So, they're lining their box with my... our cloaks?"

Dummy craned his neck up and tried to peer into the box. He gave a shrug when he couldn't.

"And you're telling me you had no idea?"

Dummy made an 'x' over where his heart would be. He hoped the stupid Human would believe him; if he knew that it was Dummy's idea, things might not go so well for him.

Liverioso slammed the lid of the box. "Most annoying, those Gnomes."

Dummy nodded vigorously. Because they were.

"Well, I'm going to tell Semfeld the bad news."

Dummy pretended to hang a cloak on his shoulders.

"No, not that." He considered that for a moment. "I'll save that for another day, I think. I mean I need to tell him that the only inventory we have is what is out on the shelves." He shook his head. "This will definitely be an issue."

Dummy gave a shrug. He hoped that the Human wouldn't lift the false bottom of the chest to reveal the Bag of Holding that was chock full of wands - over a hundred, in fact. That was another one of Dummy's ideas. To his relief, Liverioso stormed out of out the backroom.

Dummy crossed his arms. At least they were talking to him *and* he had shown his worth. The cheeks of his face moved up as the closest thing to a

smile crept across his face. He became certain he wouldn't be tossed away by the Humans. Unless they found out all his lies. And if Door kept its latch shut.

Chapter 5
Regime Change?

Nulu exited the Duck Inn and Dine and tilted her face toward the sunlight. It was a bright, sunny day. Large white clouds floated along on high breezes. She had meant to send a message to the Gargoyles after Wil had told her about the Lost Picman's Mine, but things had been so quiet with Grimbledung not coming in every day, it had slipped her mind. It was now almost three whole days. "That crazy Gnome," she remarked as she started toward Julie's school of magic. "I hope they figure it out soon."

As she got closer to the school, she noticed that there seemed to be more and more people moving in the same direction as she. Finally, when she was within three blocks of the massive windmill, she was almost shoulder to shoulder with those around her. She looked down at a Human female. "What's going on? Did I just join a parade or something?"

The female looked up at Nulu with a determined look on her face. "I'm going to the rally. It's time for some changes around here."

Nulu looked at the crowd as it moved along. Many had the same look of determination on their faces- they weren't angry, just intent on getting someplace. Nulu got worried. "You don't have a pitchfork with you, do you?"

The female shook her head. "What would I have one of those for?"

"Well, usually when determined crowds start moving towards a large windmill or castle, they've got pitchforks and torches." She smiled, hoping to lessen the tension.

"You trying to make a joke? This is serious business you know."

"No, actually I don't know. What are you talking about, exactly?" Nulu frowned, as the owner of one of the largest taverns in the town, she usually heard the town's scuttlebutt. Sometimes even as it was being made up. She had heard nothing of a rally. A thought occurred to her. "You know, they caught the thief that was causing problems at the school, right?"

The woman shrugged. "Now I don't know what you're talking about. Who cares about a thief in the school?"

"Then what's the issue?"

The woman skidded to a halt in a huff. Nulu stumbled, then stopped as well. "The issue is that we are living in a dictatorship!"

"A what?"

"It's where a person puts themselves in charge and then stays in power…"

Nulu raised her well-manicured hand. Her nails were bright blue this week. "Listen, I know what a dictatorship is. I just don't think that's what we're living in." Nulu thought back to when she was a child. It seemed to be on a regular basis that the King's knights would come into the tavern where she worked, drinking and eating for free. And, if anyone questioned them, they arrested them on the spot. The fact that the King seemed to be adept at knighting bullies rubbed a young Nulu the wrong way. "Have you ever actually lived in a…"

"Did you vote for Julie?"

Nulu nodded. "Yes, I did. In fact, pretty much everyone in the town meeting did. Which by definition makes this not a…"

"Well, she said she would have elections as soon as the war was over," the woman said, interrupting Nulu yet again. She spread her hands out wide. "And the war has been over for a full two months." She held up two fingers. "Two! And have you heard *anything* about an election?"

Nulu considered that. She had in fact not heard any mention of upcoming elections, or possible candidates and she saw Julie almost every day. "No, I can't say that I have," she admitted.

"Dictatorship!" The woman said triumphantly as she pumped her fist in the air. She began walking again. "That's what we're living in!"

"But…" Nulu quick-stepped to catch up with the woman. "I know Julie and she would never…"

"Hah! You're part of the power hungry elite!" The woman shook a fist at Nulu. "Are you going to put on the crown next?"

"Well, technically, in a monarchy, kings and queens wear crowns; dictators tend to wear lots of medals and sashes." Nulu smiled.

"I don't think you're funny at all!"

Nulu stopped walking. "Well that hurts. I'm going to find another angry villager to talk to. One that appreciates my humor!" When no one walking around her made eye contact, she continued toward the school on her own. As she rounded the corner, she could hear a loud voice shouting.

"And when do we want it?" The voice shouted.

'Now' responded a great number of voices.

A haphazard stage had been set up a half a block from the windmill. It was close enough that the blades' whooshing could be heard, but not close enough to actually be infringing on school property. A tall pale Human was standing on a box to give him extra height above and beyond the platform. His long black cloak billowed in the breeze. He looked around at the crowd, then held a conch shell up and waved it around.

"What in the lands?" Nulu picked up her pace to reach the stage quickly.

The man brought the conch shell down and held it in front of his face. "We demand change!" He boomed- apparently the shell was able to amplify his voice.

The crowd cheered around Nulu. She looked around. All the citizens seemed to have a determined - yet somehow slightly blank- expression on their face. Many waved their fists in the air.

"When do we demand it?" Boomed the man.

'NOW!' the people around Nulu shouted. Every time the man spoke, the crowd seemed to get more agitated.

"Who is this guy?" Nulu asked the man next to her. He ignored her, eyes trained on the black-cloaked figure.

"When you find yourself wondering who it is that is in charge of your life, then it is time to take control of your OWN destiny!" The man bellowed. "That is what I can help you do!"

Nulu felt a wave of vertigo hit her as the crowd closed in on her.

"I can help you achieve the freedom you deserve!" He bellowed again through the conch shell. "By having ME run your lives!"

The crowd cheered again. For some reason, Nulu felt the urge to raise her hands over her head. Catching herself, she pushed her way through the crowd and around to the back of the platform. The feeling she had a moment ago dissipated as soon as she was out of line of sight of the man on the platform. "Weird," she said to no one in particular as she made it to

the stone walk that signified the school grounds. The walkway used to run almost a half-mile to the main road. Since Julesville grew around the school, the established boundaries of the school were pushed in farther until a mere fifty yards separated the school from the encroaching town. Julie had hastily added a small wall to ensure that no further encroachment occurred.

As Nulu got to the door, Castor turned to her. "What a loon that guy is."

"But he gets people to listen to him," offered Pollux. "Dangerous combination in my experience."

Nulu nodded. "You know, you're right?" She turned to look back at the platform. There seemed to be more people around it. And more cheering. "He is oddly mesmerizing." She thought back to what he had said. "And he's not a good speaker, really."

Castor shrugged his massive shoulders. "Prolly has someone else putting words in his mouth."

Nulu exhaled loudly. "Well, now that I'm here, I was going to talk to you two, but now I think I need to talk to Julie first."

"What ya' need to talk to us about?"

Pollux nodded at his brother. "Yeah, maybe we can make it quick for ya'."

"Did either of you talk to Grimbledung about the Lost Picman's Mine?"

Both gargoyles nodded. "Yeah, we did," said Castor. "Asked us about it, he did."

"Said some Orc brought him a wand from there," finished Pollux. "He wanted to know if there were more wands there."

"But, it's not really a mine though, right?" Nulu looked up at the windmill. She now wanted to talk to Julie and the conversation with the gargoyles didn't seem to be going as quickly as she would have liked.

"Yes and no," continued Castor. "We told him that it used to be lost and it was a mine. Back when we went there, it had only just been rediscovered."

"Now it's some place you take yer kids to on a holiday."

"So it's not really full of treasure?" Nulu asked.

"Well, they got a nice gift shop I hear."

"Right, Pollux. And every so often someone'll find a chip of gold on the floor."

"But what about wands?"

Both gargoyles shrugged. "You know anything 'bout wands, Castor?"

Castor shook his head. "Nope."

"Well, that's just…" Began Nulu.

" 'Cepting of course, the rumor of the stash of wands that's still not yet been discovered," continued Castor, "in some secret passageway that no one can find."

"What?" Nulu did a double-take.

"You can buy the book at the gift shop. It's all 'bout the mine," said Pollux. "And it's got a page on some lost stash of wands that's never been found."

"Prolly because they aren't there," said Castor.

"If it weren't there, why'd they put it in the book?" Countered Pollux.

"Listen…" Began Nulu.

" 'Cause they want folk to buy the book so they try and make it all interestin', 'course." Said Castor as he squinted at his brother. "It's called *marketing*."

"But who's going to believe it?"

"Grimbledung," interjected Nulu. "Grimbledung would. And he's taken Drimblerod along with him. They put those two magicians in charge of the shop and have wandered off to search for the Lost Picman's Mine." Nulu shook her finger at one gargoyle, then the other. "Because of you two."

"Well, if he asks for directions, he's not gonna have any trouble finding it," Pollux pointed out. "They'll be back in a week."

"That is true. Popular place." Agreed Castor. "It's on a main road even."

"Got a place to park your wagon."

Castor nodded. "And a gift shop."

"Ya said that already."

Nulu shook her head. "You two. I'll try and fix that problem later." She looked over her shoulder as the crowd cheered again. "But I need to resolve this one first. Excuse me, gents," she finished with a small curtsy.

"Sure, sure. Talk to you later, Nulu," said Castor.

Both doors of the school opened.

"Step right in," offered Pollux.

Nulu gave a wave and walked quickly to Julie's office. When she got there, she knocked loudly. When she did not receive an answer, she opened the door slowly. She peeked in around the door. "Julie?"

"Julie's not in there," said a voice behind Nulu.

Nulu startled and pulled the door shut as she spun. "Pinky! You startled me."

"You seem on edge." Pinky smiled at her. He leaned a fishing pole against the wall and put down a pail. "Anything I can help with?"

Nulu rubbed her brow. "Well, Grimbledung and Drimblerod are off on a wild goose chase, and Julie…"

"Hold on," interrupted Pinky. "Are they *really* chasing wild geese, or is it something else?"

Nulu opened her mouth, then closed it. Considering Grimbledung, it was actually a valid question. "They're searching for the Lost Picman's Mine to find a stash of wands."

"Never heard of it," admitted Pinky.

"Well, it doesn't exist. Apparently, the mine is now a tourist stop."

Pinky chuckled. "Sorry. It's just kind of funny."[4]

Nulu shrugged. "I suppose it's a little funny." She gestured toward the main entrance. "But the guy on the platform isn't though."

"I told Julie I'd use him in my next foundation if she wanted."

"Well, that's helpful."

Pinky put his hands on his hips, his arms bulging as he did so. "My first offer was to knock his head right off."

"More gruesome, but still helpful," offered Nulu. "So where is Julie?"

Pinky pointed upward. "She's up top listening to that guy rant. I told her not to."

Nulu stepped close to Pinky. "But…" She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Why *hasn't* she held elections?"

Pinky closed the distance between them even more. "That's not her job, of course," he whispered back with a smirk.

"But… what?"

Pinky put his hand on Nulu's shoulder. "I tried to explain this to the crowd out there but they wouldn't listen to me. An elected official doesn't set up their own election. There's an *election committee* that does that so that it remains fair. If Julie wants to run for *reelection*, she'll have to let the committee know of her intention to run and if she gets enough verifiable townsfolk signatures on a petition endorsing her, she gets on the ballot." He pursed his lips. "I think it's a hundred signatures. Then when the election date is set, she will be allowed to campaign for a certain amount of time leading up to that date. And there'll be a public debate or two, depending on how many candidates there are." He shrugged. "It's all decided by the election committee."

"Well, who runs the election committee?"

Pinky smirked. "The city council is supposed to appoint citizens in good standing to do it. The mayor…" He gave a wink. "Or mayoress, has no play in it whatsoever."

"So why haven't they done that?" Nulu heard another cheer from outside.

"The city council sits around and argues all day about zoning issues and granting waivers or variances. They hardly seem to accomplish anything, much less appoint folks to a reelection committee."

Nulu took Pinky by the shoulders. "That's… that's…" She shook him back and forth. "Why don't we fire the city council if they won't do their job?"

"Because, dear Nulu, the city council is *elected*." Pinky put both his hands on Nulu's shoulders and shook her back. "That's one of the elections an election committee would set up. We're due for a round of city council elections as well. So you can understand why it's not high on their list of priorities." He grinned. "See?"

"That's preposterous!" Nulu frowned. "And yet, those people out there are mad at Julie."

Pinky flashed his white teeth. "Well, sure! Everything gets blamed on the mayor or mayoress. Even the weather when it's bad."

"That's nuts."

"That's politics. I told her to not run again…Saaaay, *you* want to be mayoress? I hear it's a great job!"

Nulu knocked Pinky's hands off her shoulders. "And have the next angry rally in front of *my* place?" She poked him. "Don't ever suggest that again." She poked him again. "To anyone!"

Pinky laughed. "Fine, fine. Go talk to Julie. Maybe you can cheer her up." He frowned. "And get her to come down and stop listening to that loon."

"Who is he anyway?"

"Some guy named Magnus Opus von Magnus or something. He came to town a month ago and opened a tailor shop. Within half a week, he was already sending angry letters addressed to the self-appointed dictator, Julie."

"I'll go talk to her." Nulu smiled at the man.

"Thanks." Pinky picked up his fishing pole.

"Going fishing, huh?"

"Garibaldis invited me." He shrugged. "I figure I can cook up a nice fish dinner and take her mind off her worries."[5]

"Can't she just quit?"

Pinky leveled his eyes at the Trolless. "Big Julie? Quit?" He poked at her with the fishing pole. "Don't ever suggest that again."

Nulu laughed. "Fine, fine. You go catch some dinner and I'll talk her down."

"Deal" Pinky saluted her with his fishing pole. "If I catch any extra, I'll run them by the Duck for your personal stores."

"Deal!" Nulu waved to the man as she turned and practically jogged to the spiral staircase that ran up the middle of the windmill. Taking the stairs three at a time, she made it to the top quickly. Even so, she was winded when she got there. As she stepped onto the balcony that was behind the massive blades, the crowd cheered again. "Julie?" She called as she moved around the curved balcony.

Julie was sitting on the wood floor of the balcony, feet dangling down into open air. "Over here, Nulu."

Nulu moved to her friend and flopped down beside her. "Hey." She smiled. "How are things?"

"Well, so far I'm not seeing any pitchforks or torches." Julie continued to look straight ahead at the back of the man on the platform.

"It's early still." Nulu nudged Julie.

Julie turned to look at Nulu. It was obvious she had been crying. "I… I don't know what to do."

Nulu moved closer and put her arm around her friend. "Hey, I don't either, but we'll figure something out together. You can count on that," she said seriously.

"I appreciate it, Nulu." Julie rested her chin on the lower railing. "I just don't understand what they want me to do. All I've tried to do is get the town up and running as well as I could." She frowned. "And I think I've done a pretty good job at it. Now, they act like I'm some Orcish warlord that's imposed martial law."

"Pinky explained it to me. It's not your fault."

Julie pointed. "They don't see it that way." She sniffed. "I mean, all I wanted to do was get the town a good start then go back to running my school. Now… Now those dolts on the city… council…" A tear ran down her cheek. "Are making me look like a tyrant."

"Have you tried talking to them?"

"I've tried. They just argue."

"Maybe I can talk to them."

Julie sniffed again. "Well, it couldn't hurt I suppose." She narrowed her eyes. "I really don't like that guy."

"Magnus Opus."

"Magnus Opus *von Magnus*," corrected Julie. "Apparently."

"I'll see what I can find out about him as well. Someone in my place should know something."

"He came out of nowhere."

Nulu nodded. "That's what Pinky said. Still, someone's bound to know something about it." She nudged her friend again. "I'll see what I can find out."

Big Julie nodded. "Thanks."

"So, when's the next council meeting?"

"Tomorrow upstairs in the town hall."

Nulu nodded. "I'll make sure I'm there." She pulled herself to her feet. "So why don't we go down to the Duck and I'll open a bottle of Marzamino?"

Julie smiled. "Well, that would improve my day, I think."

Nulu offered her hand to her friend. "Let's go."

Julie looked at Nulu's hand. "Blue. Very nice." She grasped her hand and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet.

"And no more listening to Magnus von Opus von stupidous until I talk to the council." Nulu pointed to the stairs. "We'll swing by and grab Maca on our way so we don't have to go through the crowds."

Julie smiled. "Thanks, Nulu." She hugged her friend.

The two went down the spiral staircase and out the back door of the windmill towards Maca's *Herbs and More, Much More*.

Chapter 6
Flora O. Willowfeet- A Gnomess Scorned

Flora yanked open the door to the Duck Inn and Dine and stalked into the foyer. She looked toward the old Dwarf working the reception counter. He didn't make eye contact with her. It was a mistake he made the morning before. "Morning," Flora tossed in his direction.

The Dwarf muttered a quiet reply. He did not want to get pulled into a conversation with the Gnomess. That was another mistake he had made later that same day that he hoped to never repeat. He looked down at the counter, picked up a piece of paper that he was only moments ago going to throw in the waste basket. He nodded with furrowed brow at it. "Finally found you. Better get this filed," he said to no one in particular. Without looking up from the paper that was covered with doodles from the night reception clerk, he turned and went to the backroom. To hide.

Flora frowned at the space that until recently contained Erick the Dwarf, son of Choick. A truly noble and brave Dwarf if there ever was one. "Harrumph," she said with a frown. She yanked the curtains aside and entered the dining area. Her eyes moved from patron to patron. They looked away in turn.

Nulu watched from the bar. Erick had mentioned that he had been lambasted by a certain Gnomess for merely asking her how she was doing. Since it was very early in the morning, he had assumed that everything was going well up to that point.

Apparently, it wasn't.

At all.

Nulu cleared her throat.

Flora either did not hear her, or did not realize it was directed at her. Or just didn't care. She moved to the pegs by the curtain and retrieved her apron.

Nulu cleared her throat louder.

Flora tied the apron around her waist then slid her serving tray out of the slot beside the pegs. She tilted it back and forth as she looked at herself in it.

"Flora, can I speak with you a moment?" Nulu said, deciding her throat was as clear as it was going to get.

Flora tilted her serving tray so that Nulu's reflection joined hers. "Mmm hmmm." She said.

"Over here by the bar?"

Flora let go of the tray with one hand, it banged against her side as it hung. Nulu expected it to clatter to the floor. "Sure," she said as she turned and moved to the bar.

"Have a seat," suggested Nulu.

"Mmm hmmm." Flora climbed up on a stool, placing her tray on the bar. "Want me to make a pass of the room?"

"Maybe in a minute," Nulu said. She realized most all the patrons were watching them in one way or another- some staring directly at them, some peering through the bottoms of their empty glasses as they pretended to drink, some from the cover of their menus. "Right now I wanted to discuss something with you."

"Mmm hmmm." Flora spun her tray on the bar using one finger, making it go faster and faster.

Nulu put her well-manicured hand on the tray to stop it. "We need to talk."

Flora looked up at the Trolless. There was really no way of hiding it so she didn't even try.

Nulu looked at the Gnomess' bloodshot eyes. She had been crying very recently. "Flora. I have been... The employees too... the customers even.... well, we are all worried about you."

"Mmm hmmm."

Nulu put her hand on Flora's. "Flora, I know you're upset..."

Flora dropped her eyes.

"But you have to accept that Grimbledung has wandered off on one of his crazy adventures." Nulu took Flora's hand. "But he'll be back safe and sound. You have to realize that..."

Flora pulled her hand out of Nulu's. "I *realize* that he left me. He. Left. Me. Without as much as a goodbye."

"But when he gets back," Nulu said, trying a different tactic. "You can..."

Flora smiled. It was her first smile in a week. "When he gets back."

Nulu smiled along with her. "Yes, when he gets back, we'll all..."

"Oh, I'll take care of him," interrupted Flora. The smile melted from her face turning into a sneer as it settled.

Nulu stopped smiling. "I'm not sure I know what you mean." She hoped it was a pleasant taking care of, instead of a more physical assault-like taking care of often indicated by a sneer.

"Well, you'll just have to wait and see, now won't you."

Nulu steeled herself. She looked out into the room. Everyone was looking at her expectedly. No one was even trying to be sneaky about it anymore. She let out a long breath. "Flora. I have a business to run here. With now edgy customers. And, I have to say, nervous employees." She put both hands on the bar as she prepared to deliver her ultimatum. "So..."

"I quit." Flora hopped off the barstool. She started to walk off then stopped. She turned and yanked her serving tray off the bar.

"So what we…Wait, Flora." Nulu said testily. "Wait one moment." She pointed a finger at the Gnomess. "How dare you act like you're the only one who has ever lost someone important to them." Several patrons nodded. "Don't you stand there and act like you're the only one in this town who has had someone they care about walk out on them."

Flora looked down at her tray.

Nulu raised her voice. "At least you have the comfort in knowing he'll come back. In case you haven't noticed, we just went through an invasion around here. There are *a lot* of folks that have loved ones that are *never* coming back." She put her hand on the middle of the bar and crouched down. She hopped upward, vaulting the bar easily, landing heavily beside Flora. "Now quit your moping about. Quit your tongue lashings of poor Erick and the entire staff. And quit treating the customers like they're the ones who convinced Grimbledung to wander off on some crazy adventure!"

"Here, here!" Said a patron, unable to control himself.

Flora looked up at Nulu. "But what am I supposed to do?" Tears ran down her face.

"Well, you can pass the time with your job and your friends." Nulu smirked. "And deciding how you're going to deal with that crazy Gnome when he gets back."

Flora looked down at her tray as she thought.

After a long moment, Nulu put her hand on the Gnomess' shoulder. "Well?"

Flora looked up at Nulu. "You're right." She turned and shoved her tray back into its slot and began to untie her apron. "Can I have an hour to take care of something then I'll be back and ready to work? There's something I need to do."

Nulu looked at her patrons. Several nodded at her. One pointed toward the door. "Sure, Flora. Take an hour to get yourself in order."

Flora nodded at Nulu. "Thanks, Nulu. You're a good friend." She hung her apron on the peg. "I'll be back in a little bit. I really appreciate your advice."

Nulu smiled. "That's what friends are for."

Flora turned to the patrons. "I'm sorry, folks. Really I am. I've been taking this out on you when you had nothing to do with it. I'll…"

"Here, here!" Said the same patron.

"… be back in less than an hour." Flora ducked around the curtain and went straight to the front door. She pushed it open and stepped into the morning light. There was a slight breeze pushing white puffy clouds along. The rest of the sky was a light blue. She could hear birds on the nearby tree. A passerby gave her a friendly nod. "Nulu's right," she said to no one in particular. "I've been going about this all wrong." She nodded at herself, determined. For the first time in a week, she knew what she needed to do. "All wrong." Flora started down the street at a brisk pace, knowing exactly what she needed to do. And where she needed to go.

True to her word, she was back to cheerfully serving customers within the hour.

After having bought a miniature crossbow and several poisoned bolts from a shady-looking character in a dingy alleyway.

Chapter 7
On The Road Again. Again

The wagon rolled along silently.

Grimbledung slept along, snoringly.

"Honestly, how does he get so tired doing nothing at all to sleep so much?" RatOx shook his shoulders as he walked.

"Imagine the alternative."

"I can hear you, you know."

The pair ignored him, having discovered after an annoyingly disjointed conversation that Grimbledung talked in his sleep. And oddly enough, occasionally responded in it.

"Well, I suppose random demands and such are better," admitted RatOx. "Of course, an actual conversation passes the time pretty well too."

"There's a fire in the barn!" Grimbledung exclaimed.

"Well, we're getting near the Toll Bridge and I know Grim enjoys driving across bridges so I suppose I'll wake him up," said Drimblerod.

"Likes driving across bridges?"

Drimblerod shrugged. "Maybe it's a Gnome thing; I kind of enjoy bridges too."

"Maybe you've got some Troll in your family tree."

"I don't think so." Drimblerod shook his head. "I think it's more the builder in us that does it."

"I thought you folk built contraptions and such, not buildings."

"A Lannister always pays his debts!"

RatOx craned his head around. "What?"

"I've no idea," said Drimblerod. He gave a shrug. "Well, we are pretty handy at making contraptions, I suppose but we Gnomes are also like Dwarves; secretly wanting to be architects."

RatOx nodded. He looked forward again. "Bridge approaching."

"It's a real nice bridge." Drimblerod twisted in his seat and prodded his partner. "Grim! Wake up."

"We there yet?"

"When you say there, what is it you mean exactly?" RatOx asked.

"The Lost Picman's Mine, of course."

"The lost mine. You think we're at the mine that is lost."

Grimbledung sat up and stretched. "Well sure. I mean, that's where we're going right?"

RatOx snorted. "We're at the Toll Bridge."

"Is that where the mine is?"

"No, Grim," said Drimblerod. "I figured you'd want to be awake for the bridge."

"It is a real nice bridge."

Drimblerod nodded at his partner. "Especially now that the Trolls are gone."

"And that goat, Billy." Grimbledung stuck out his tongue as he clambered onto the seat beside Drimblerod. "Pretty gruff fellow, that old goat."

"Billy wasn't the nicest of fellows."

Grimbledung nodded. "Of course, he got rid of the Trolls, in a roundabout way."

"How'd he do that?" RatOx asked. "Did he knock them into the river?"

Grimbledung thought for a moment. "From what I understand, he hired the Trolls as his personal muscle and set himself up as a hired assassin."

"A goat assassin?"

Drimblerod nodded. "He was pretty successful for a while."

"Till what?"

"The Trolls came across of a barrel of mint jelly and that was the end of old Bill."

RatOx stuck out his tongue. "I'm sorry I asked."

"In any case, they crossed out the 'r' and started demanding a toll to cross. And now of course..."

"Halt!" Said a voice from under the bridge.

"Here we go."

Drimblerod fished a coin from his belt pouch. "I have the toll right here. A copper."

"Well toss it down!" There was a short pause. "Hey, you got a wagon up there too?"

RatOx looked back at the Gnomes. "Uhm. No?"

"I am sure I heard wheels!"

"That was my belly," said RatOx.

"You got wheels in your belly?"

"I was hungry."

"You a goat?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm an Ox."

"You're not sure?"

"Well, I've never personally seen one, so…"

"Oxen pull wagons you know!"

Drimblerod exhaled loudly. "Fine, fine. We have a wagon."

"How many axles?"

"One?" Tried Grimbledung.

"That'd be a chariot. Rich folk use chariots you know. Rich. Chariots are a silver."

Grimbledung frowned. "This is absurd."

"It's a regular wagon!" Drimblerod snapped. "Just a plain wagon with four wheels."

"You got a spare wheel?"

Reflexively Drimblerod looked to the side of the wagon where a spare wheel was strapped. "Nope."

"Not very safe traveling without a spare you know. Break a couple of spokes and you're on foot."

"Will you just take the copper so we can be on our way?" Drimblerod maneuvered the coin over his thumb, preparing to flip it into the copper funnel; affixed to the side of the large bridge.

"Where you heading?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business," said RatOx.

"I'm just curious is all," said the voice. "Making conversation. Such as it is."

RatOx looked back at the Gnomes. Grimbledung shook his head violently then put his finger to his lips. He waved the other hand over his head.

RatOx grinned at him. "We're on an adventure to find the Lost Picman's Mine and the untold treasures found within."

"Gaaaa!" Screeched Grimbledung. He flopped into the back of the wagon, arms and legs flailing in the air.

"Well, have a good time on your trip there," said the voice.

Drimblerod hesitated in flipping the coin. "Wait; you know of the Lost Picman's Mine?"

"Sure, sure. Famous place."

"Gaaa!" Grimbledung clambered back into the seat. "Shhhhh!" He said, finger to his lip again. He shook a fist at RatOx.

Drimblerod put his hand on his partner's shoulder. "Just hold on, Grim."

Grimbledung held on.

To the seat.

"You know where the mine is? Have you been there? We'd pay an extra copper for that kind of information."

Grimbledung shook his head. "Secret!" He hissed.

"So have you been there?" Drimblerod flipped the coin into the funnel. It spun around the rim then clattered down the tube that led under the bridge. "That's for the toll."

"Thanks. You sure you don't have a spare wheel?"

Drimblerod pursed his lips. "You mentioned knowing about the mine?" He jingled his coin purse.

"Well, haven't been there myself but I met a fellow who has."

RatOx snorted. "We're supposed to believe a random voice from under a bridge about the location of a lost mine?"

"Sure," said the voice. "And why not?"

Drimblerod pulled out another copper. "Got the copper here. So who's the holder of the information on the..."

"Don't say Lost Picman's Mine," whispered Grimbledung.

"Lost Picman's Mine," finished RatOx with a grin.

"Gaaaa!"

"Met an innkeeper just east of Old Jute out on the shore of the Great Salty River. Said he'd been there."

"How does that even come up in conversation?" Drimblerod asked, unconvinced. "It seems pretty far-fetched."

"Hey now," said the voice, "I already passed the information; you can't get stingy with the coin now!"

Drimblerod flipped the coin into the funnel. It clattered out of sight. "Fine, fine. Thanks for the information."

"What's the name of the inn?" RatOx asked.

The trio sat quietly on the edge of the bridge, with only the sound of the burbling water passing under it breaking the silence.

"Most annoying," remarked Grimbledung. He waggled his ears. "Well, let's get across the bridge...on our chariot!"

"Hey!" The voice exclaimed. "That cost extra!"

RatOx bounded to a gallop and dashed across the bridge. "Aaaand they're off!"

"Oooh! You'll pay extra next time. Mark my words!" The voice threatened.

"Grimbledung," corrected Grimbledung. "Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire. Who's Mark?"

"Just you wait!" The voice screeched. "I'll get you *Grimbledung* and your little Ox too!"

"If I had a copper every time someone threatened you..." RatOx said as the wagon made it to the other side of the bridge. "I'd hire someone to pull *me* around in a wagon."

"You know, maybe you should not drop your name all the time," offered Drimblerod. "That causes most of your problems you know."

"Really?"

Drimblerod nodded. "Well, if you remained anonymous, all the people you tend to rub the wrong way wouldn't be able to track you down and cause you issues later on."

"Isn't conflict the spice of life?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "No. It is not."

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Well, I'm proud of my name, just so you know."

"It's becoming infamous, just you so you know," said RatOx.

"It just causes you trouble is all I'm saying. Maybe you should not refer to your name as often. Just to cause us less problems."

"Well, I can give it a try, but I don't see how folk knowing my name causes me troubles."

"And while you're at it, stop telling folk where you live," suggested RatOx. He panted as he moved to a walk. "I need to be a Shambler again; these Ox things aren't built for running."

Grimbledung nodded. "Well, I'll see what I can do."

"About being more discrete or about me being a Shambler?"

"A little of both I suppose." Grimbledung frowned. "Honestly, when was the last time having someone know my name caused me any sort of grief?"

"Are you kidding? They could write entire *books* about all that grief."[6] Drimblerod shook his head. "Why don't we just keep a low profile for a little while? Try and have some quiet, uneventful days."

"That wouldn't make an interesting book," said Grimbledung.

"Well, I'm sure other stuff would act as filler." Said RatOx. "Subplots and all that. Tying up or creating loose ends. A little romance here and there. Folks love that kind of stuff."

Grimbledung rolled to the back of the wagon and sat with his feet hanging off the back. "I can't imagine."

Chapter 8
Assassin's CREED

Cherí swung her feet off the bed and stretched. A movement off to her side caught her eye. She leapt for the dresser next to the wall for cover. When she slid against it, she pulled a long thin dagger from a sheath that was fastened to the back of the dresser. Just in case.

"You're getting rusty, Cherí," said a voice. "It's embarrassing."

Cherí flipped the dagger in her hand, catching it by the point. She mentally calculated the distance to the chair. As she leaned out, she drew her hand back, ready to throw it at whoever had snuck into her room. An Elf was sitting on the overstuffed chair, his brown clothes had blue flowers on them, blending in with the chair perfectly. Had his head been covered, he would have been easily missed. "Please put down the knife," he said. "With how rusty you are, you might damage this comfy chair." He crossed his legs as a smile crept across his face. "I've really gotten to like this chair."

"L'owen Brushwood," said Cherí as she stood. She still hadn't put down the dagger- she let it drop to her side where she could easily execute an underhanded flip with it. "What brings you to Julesville? Business or pleasure?"

L'owen put his hands on the arms of the chair so they were in plain sight. "Pleasure, of course." He smiled again. "When I heard that Cherí Belladonna, Master Assassin and former pupil of mine was getting married, I just *had* to come by."

"And a note before-hand was too hard to do?" Cherí put the dagger on the dresser. Had he wanted her dead, he could have done it as she leapt for the dresser, or while she was asleep. Or when he was in her house earlier, finding out what color her furniture was so he could purchase clothes made of the same fabric. Or while he had sat in the chair numerous times, deciding that he liked it.

L'owen stood, arms outstretched. "It is so very good to see you."

Cherí moved close and hugged her former instructor. "And you." She looked up. "You didn't have to come all this way you know. A letter would have been plenty." She smiled. "But it's really nice you came."

L'owen pushed her away, holding her at arm's length. "For my best student? A note would certainly *not* do justice." He raised an eyebrow. "Am I… invited to the ceremony?"

"Well, I was going to send word out over the net. It's not for a couple of months still."

L'owen let go of Cherí. "Well, I'll make sure I'm in the area so I can be there." He frowned. "Who is this lucky male? Will I approve of this fellow, do you think?"

Colossus burst into the room, sword in hand.

In an instant, L'owen dropped to a crouch, two long black blades appearing in his hands as he snatched them from two back sheaths.

"Wait, wait!" Cherí stepped between the two and put out her arms. "Just hold on!"

Colossus looked from the Elf to Cherí and back.

"L'owen, this is Colossus Basher**,** my fiancé. Colossus, this is L'owen Brushwood, my former master."

Colossus lowered his sword. "I heard voices and was…concerned."

"Oh really?" Cherí raised an eyebrow. "Concerned or jealous?"

Colossus crossed his arms. "Concerned, dearest." Now he raised an eyebrow. "Of the male voice I heard coming from my fiancé's room. Early in the morning."

L'owen laughed. "I approve of him already, this Gnome that I have never met." He put out his hand. Colossus hadn't seen it happen, but the Elf had managed to sheath both of his blades. "It is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Colossus Basher of the Clan of the Black Hand, son of Precipitous."

Colossus sheathed his sword and took the Elf's hand. "I see I am completely unknown to you. It is a pleasure to meet you as well, L'owen." He smirked. "So is this visit business, pleasure…" He raised an eyebrow. "Or recruiting?"

"He came because he heard of the ceremony."

L'owen held up a finger. "And perhaps just a little bit of business."

"Are you here to take Cherí away? How about we discuss it over breakfast? I have fried eggs done and coffee that should be boiling by now."

L'owen turned his head to the side. "Ahhh…Yes. It just started."

Colossus smirked. "After you, Sir," he gestured to the Elf.

The Elf gave a nod as he moved past the pair. "And the kitchen's this way then?" He asked innocently.

"As if you didn't already know," said Cherí.

"What?"

Cherí put her arm around Colossus. "He's wearing clothes that match our *chairs*, dearest. He knows exactly where the kitchen is."

Colossus shook his head. "Assassins."

"Yes? You called?" L'owen pointed when he got to the end of the hallway. "Left or right?"

"Just get the cups while I'll get the eggs and bread," Colossus said with a headshake.

"That reminds me; you're low on butter," remarked L'owen.

"I suppose I'll make a list if you haven't already," said Cherí.

As they entered the kitchen, L'owen pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. He handed it to her sheepishly. "And bacon and flour."

"I see." Cherí took the paper. "I'll make sure we're stocked up before you drop by again."

L'owen moved to a cupboard, opened it and took out three large cups.

"You know, you could at least *pretend* you don't know where things are," said Colossus as he opened the breadbox and took out some rolls.

L'owen moved the cups to saucers and deftly carried all three to the table. "Sorry about that. Old habit."

Cherí took a jug of milk from the ice box. "Uh huh. So how long have you been in town?"

"I arrived earlier." L'owen answered noncommittally. He moved to a drawer and took out spoons and knives.

Colossus stirred the eggs to scramble them, then caught himself. "Oh, sorry; are eggs all right?"

L'owen nodded. "Yes, thanks for asking. I do eat meat on occasion."

"Plates?" Colossus said to Cherí as he took the skillet off the stove.

"On their way."

"What sort of business?" Colossus asked L'owen.

"Well, I heard on the Assassin's CREED that Cherí was looking for information."

"Assassin's Creed? You mean like your mission statement?" Colossus ladled eggs onto the plates Cheri had put down. He raised the spatula and held it over his heart. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good and promise to only kill people whom I am paid to, unless otherwise required for my own personal satisfaction."

L'owen took the coffee pot. "CREED as in Collaboration REquest and Enemy Discussion network." He poured coffee into the cups, leaving room for cream in Colossus' and his own cup. He filled Cherí's to the top. "Your lovely fiancé put the word out that she needed some help."

Colossus looked at Cherí. "With the wedding?"

Cherí startled. "Oh!" She patted Colossus' hand. "I had forgotten I had put out a request for information on Liverioso." She beamed. "You have something from my R- F- I??"

"You were always such a romantic." L'owen put the coffee pot on the stove to stay warm then moved to the table. "Make sure you are up for that, Colossus."

Colossus smirked. "I am indeed."

L'owen raised an eyebrow. "A romantic Halfling?"

"He even recites poetry." Cherí sipped her coffee.

L'owen patted Colossus' hand as well. "Well, your secret is safe with me."

"What were you doing for that buffoon, Liverioso?" Colossus looked down and realized that L'owen knew he took milk in his coffee. He shook his head as he poured some in.

"Well, it's a tragic tale of two families that ordered their youngsters to never see each other again." Cherí picked up her fork. She pointed it at L'owen. "Definitely *not* very romantical."

Colossus shook his head. "Forbidding two young kids in love from ever seeing each other. Haven't these parents ever read any classic literature? That never works out well. Ever."

L'owen chuckled. "I see you two are a smart match. No; it did not work out well and our two lovers lost contact with each other."

"Until now!" Cherí said around a mouthful of eggs.

"Until now," agreed L'owen. He picked up his fork. "Seems Liverioso and Sage are actually living close to each other and don't even realize it."

"She's in town?" Colossus gaped. "What's she doing?"

L'owen shook his head. "That would indeed be ironic. No, she's not in this town but she is running a novelty shop of all things."

"Did you hear that, Cherí? The former girlfriend of a future magician runs a novelty shop."

"It is an unusual coincidence," said L'owen.

"It was meant to be." Cherí and Colossus said at the same time.

L'owen raised an eyebrow at the Halfling.

"That's my Colossus." Cherí leaned over and kissed him. She looked at L'owen. "So, where is Sage?"

The Elf started to point across the room, looked around to get his bearings, then adjusted where he was pointing, "She's over in Cuticle not a week's ride from here."

"Well, I'm sure Liverioso will be excited when… wait, where?"

"Cuticle."

"How did the Cartographer's Guild ever approve of a name like Cuticle?"

"Well, in their defense, they aren't on any official maps."

Colossus chuckled. "That'd do it."

"And they are at the base of the Devil's Thumb."

"Now you're just making things up."

"Assassin's honor!" L'owen raised his left hand. "Honest, Colossus; it's this plateau that sticks up like a giant black thumb in the mountains south of the Riatoh Bronze Mines."

"Cuticle."

L'owen shrugged. "That's where she is. Running her shop."

"Oooh, I can't wait to tell him." Cherí clapped.

Colossus tilted his head toward Cherí. "Cherí the matchmaker." He ate some more eggs.

L'owen smiled. "So, when is the wedding?"

Colossus stopped chewing his eggs. "Uhm…" he said around a mouthful, "Probably soon after we get them back together?"

Cherí shoved her fiancé. "He meant us. It's going to be soon. Supposed to be in a couple of months. We don't have an exact date, but we're hoping to do it on a day that has nice weather so we can have an outside ceremony."

The Elf nodded. "Well, I can't stay in town that long, but if you give me a week's warning, I will definitely be here."

"Will we know when you arrive or will you just come out of the shadows at the ceremony?"

"I'll make sure you know ahead of time that I'll be in town. Of course, I can't say the same for anyone else who plies the trade that decides to come."

"Oh? Do you think there'll be a lot of… similarly employed folks coming?" Colossus asked.

"Well, it's hard to say. Free meals bring us out in droves, and it doesn't hurt that Cherí is well-liked by most." He smiled. "Of course, someone definitely needs to iron things out with the local law enforcement before a dozen assassins show up in town all at once."

"I didn't think of that," said Cherí. "But I'll make sure I swing by Akita's and let him know." She waggled a finger at her friend. "You just need to make sure there's no freelancing while they're in town."

"I think I can put the word out. Everyone should be able to behave." He suppressed a grin. "For a little while, anyway."

"That'd be nice; I'd hate to wear out our welcome in town," said Colossus.

L'owen nodded. "Especially when you've built such a lovely home." He looked around the room. "Of course, you might want to consider putting a grate on that chimney."

Colossus chuckled. "I believe I can take care of that. Anything else I should consider?"

L'owen shook his head. "You're doing all the right things to keep out everyone but the most… professional of folks."

Colossus stood and retrieved the coffee pot. "Well, it's nice to know I'm doing all right in that area." He held the pot out.

"Please."

Colossus filled the Elf's cup again, leaving room for milk. "So, how long are you in town for?"

L'owen picked up the cup. "Unfortunately, I'm just passing through. I'm supposed to meet a group of locals north of Prost Garrison. Seems a couple of fellows have set themselves up as kings in this kingdom north of the Desert of the Great Unknown. They're calling themselves gods, in fact." He shrugged. "Some of the local up and comings want them gone." He took a sip. "But I'm definitely going to stay a few days when I come for the ceremony."

"You're welcome to stay with us when you come back." Colossus smirked. "You know where the extra bedrooms are."

"Lovely furniture in there; you have good taste, indeed." L'owen ran his hand over his tunic. "I had a second tunic made in this just because it was so nice."

Colossus sat. "Well, I'm always glad to help an assassin stay fashionable."

Cherí smiled at Colossus. "My husband, the fashionista. After breakfast, I'll swing by Akita and talk to him, then I'll visit the wand shop to give Liverioso the news."

"I'll just tell Akita myself when I go in later this afternoon; you can go straight to the wand shop, dearest." Colossus said.

"Liverioso is running a wand shop? The word on the street is that they've been booted from the Magician's Guild for being behind on their dues."

Colossus nodded at L'owen. "That is true. He and his partner Semfeld are just tending it while their owners are out on some fool adventure. They've been gone a little bit."[7]

"A fool adventure? Those are the best kind." L'owen smiled. "Maybe I'll walk with you, Cherí. Just to see his reaction." He waved his hand dismissively. "For professional curiosity, that is."

"And I'm the romantic?"

L'owen didn't make eye contact with the Gnomess. "Pushy isn't she?"

"And she hits when she doesn't get her way." Colossus toasted L'owen with hic cup. "Hard. Probably thanks to you."

"I'm afraid so." He toasted the Halfling back. "All part of the training."

The three chatted while they finished breakfast. Once they were done, L'owen and Cherí left Colossus to the dishes while they went to find Liverioso. Who happened to be with Akita at the moment.

Chapter 9
When Marginally Good Orcs Go Bad

Akita pushed open Door and stalked into Second Hand Sorcery. His eyes glowed yellow as he looked around the main selling area, searching for any invisible shoppers. There was no one present. Except for the two now-alarmed looking Humans behind the counter.

"Uhm... Can we help you, Constable?" Offered Semfeld. "We're not really open yet; we were going to have breakfast first."

Akita let a growl start at the back of his throat. It kind of just stayed there rumbling angrily. "Know what I don't like?"

"Asparaguth?" Tried Liverioso. "Horrible things." He stuck out his tongue. "Not fit to eat by man nor beast."

"Beast?"

"Well, prethent company excepted, of course."

"So yer playin' the rrrroll of Grimbledung, eh?" Akita shook his shoulders. It worked its way down his back to the tip of his tail as he moved to the counter. "Well, that's gonna get annoying real quick."

Semfeld prodded his partner, "I'm going to check on those wands in the thing while you talk to the Constable." Even though he was pretty sure he wasn't contagious and wouldn't just bite him out of hand, Semfeld never felt comfortable being in the same room as the werewolf. He ducked under the curtain. Then listened from the other side.

Akita felt let down. Between the two, he preferred Semfeld's company better. He always seemed more genuine than his shifty and usually annoying partner. "So, it's just me and you then."

Liverioso took a step back. "Do I need a lawyer?" He looked left and right. Briefly his eyes dropped to the glass counter, looking for a formidable wand in case he needed one in a hurry.

Akita put his paws on the counter. "Not yet ya don't. Let's keep this civil like."

"That's always fine by me." Liverioso frowned. "And that means you don't come in here into *my* shop and try to bully me around, Constable."

That's why I don't like this guy. Akita narrowed his eyes at the man. "First off, it's not *your* shop; you're just minding it for a spell. Second, I don't appreciate you causing trouble in town. Wasn't too keen on you coming back in the first place, in case ya didn't know."

"Why, we're law abiding citizens of this fine town, that much is certain." He narrowed his eyes at the Constable. "Of course, I've heard of a certain lawman who takes bribes to look the other way when it's convenient for him. I wonder who would be interested in that information. Mince meat pies indeed."

"Folks would be about as interested in that piece of information as they would be about a missing Magician." Akita narrowed his eyes to slits. "I wonder which would be published first."

Liverioso's eyes got large. "I'm offended, Constable. Offended!"

"Yer also under suspicion. I'd worry about that first."

Worried that their time at the shop was in danger of ending, Semfeld ducked back under the curtain. "Suspicion of what, Constable?"

"Contributing to the delinquency of an Orc."

"What?" Semfeld looked from his partner to the constable and back again. "Us?"

"And I have to tell you, they're a pretty delinquent bunch all on their own."

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Well, I've had complaints all over town about a certain Orc trying to muscle wands from folks because apparently *you two* told him to bring you all the wands he finds and you'd pay him two copper for each and every one. Notice all those 'yous' in that sentence, mister under suspicion?"

"Wha... what?? That's not what I meant at all!" Liverioso brought his hands up plaintively. "Obviously, he misunderstood what I was saying."

"That there's an admission of guilt." Akita tapped his claws on the counter. "You know, Grimbledung would only buy one wand a month

from that Orc. It was a pretty good arrangement he had. Why'd you muck it up?"

Semfeld frowned. "Well, we are worried we are going to run out of inventory before the Gnomes get back." He spread his arms out wide. "How do those stupid Gnomes even *get* all this inventory?"

Akita shrugged. "I haven't a clue, but what I am sure of is that they were able to do it without me having to chase a wand-wielding Orc several blocks."

Liverioso stifled a chuckle at the thought of Akita chasing a frantic, wand-waving Orc.

"Ya think that's funny?" Akita stopped tapping his claws.

The laugh made its way out of Liverioso. "Yeah, thorry. Thinking of that poor Orc running from you is kind of funny. The look on his face…"

"Stop buying wands from S'Am."

"Sam?"

"That's his name. Stop buying wands from him."

"Completely?" Liverioso put out his lower lip. "We need the inventory, Constable."

Semfeld nodded. "Can't sell what we don't have and if we're going to do right by those Gnomes, we need inventory."

Akita scowled. "Fine, fine; at least not more than once a month then." He shook his head. "Gads, I hope them Gnomes aren't gone over a month."

Semfeld nodded. "We will do our best to not make your job any harder than it already is." He gave a genuine smile. "We really are trying to fit in here, Constable. Do the right thing and run a proper shop."

Akita growled. "Good then." He turned and walked to the door. As he reached for the doorknob, it hit him in the hand as it opened quickly. He gave a yip and did a little hop. "Hey, watch it!" He stepped back as three Dwarves pushed their way into the shop.

"Yer gonna bowl over some innocent bystander actin' like that." Scolded Akita. He shook his hand. "That smarts you know."

The front Dwarf gave Akita a looking over. Starting and ending at his badge. "Sorry about that, Constable."

Akita looked at the stern-looking Dwarf and his two companions. "Fine, fine. It's no trouble." He waved his hand dismissively. "Good luck with your business dealings, I believe I will just…" He frowned. He was going to say 'go have a snack' but he had forgotten that Maca had left last night for a secretive meeting of the Council of Elves. Or maybe it was an Elf Council. Either way, he was going to eat alone for the next few days.

"Never seen a Dwarf before?" The Dwarf scowled at him.

Akita squinted down at the Dwarf. "You live around here or just passing through?"

"I don't believe that's any of your business." The Dwarf crossed his arms. The other two nodded in unison.

"I thought you folk were supposed to be happy. Pretty sure there was a Happy Dwarf I met a while back."

The Dwarf moved his hands to his hips. "He was a one-off. Raised by a couple of minstrels or something. Didn't get the traditional Dwarfish upbringing."

"I see." Akita looked back at the two Humans "Make sure you find your stock from a variety of places." He looked down at the Dwarf again, successfully fought the urge to insult him, and stalked out.

"What's his problem?" Asked the Dwarf as he moved to the counter.

Semfeld looked at the closed door. "He has problems? I hadn't noticed."

Liverioso nodded. "So what can we help you with today, good Dwarves?"

"We are looking for a Gnome."

"We don't sell Gnomes," admitted Semfeld. "Just wands." He spread his arms out wide. "Not sure how legal it would be to sell Gnomes anyway." He grinned. "Besides, storing them would cost a fortune with how they eat." He put his hands on the counter. "Just the wands."

"And of course, Magic Marbles, and Swizzle Sticks." Tossed in Liverioso.

Semfeld nodded. "Oh yes; those too. And we have a couple of Stink Eye left if you're in the market." Those were three items they could make on their own with hardly any trouble at all.

The Dwarf turned and spoke to his two compatriots in Dwarfish for several moments. After a heated discussion, the lead one turned around again. "Did you two just buy this shop?"

"Oh; we don't own it." Semfeld shook his head. "Not a bit."

"I'm talking to *hourlies*." The Dwarf scowled as he moved his hands to his hips again. "The owners are Gnomes then?"

"Yes, Drimblerod and Grimbledung are their names." He paused for a moment- he wasn't sure what their last names were. "Not sure what their family names are. I think one is an esquire. Whatever that is."

"And they left you two in charge? Without even telling you their last names?" Snapped the Dwarf.

"We're trustworthy like that," snapped back Semfeld- he had had enough of the Dwarf's attitude and decided to add some of his own. He lapsed into his Magician's Guild Enforcer tone. "If you aren't in the market to buy something from this shop, you should go elsewhere to just *stand around and be annoying*." He squinted. "I suggest in front of a large, fast-moving wagon."

"Listen here, laddie," started the Dwarf on the left.

"You a customer?" Liverioso asked him, following his partner's lead. "Or just here to waste our time as well?" He looked at Semfeld. "Now I want to call the Constable and see what he does to loiterers. Probably has a special place in his dark heart for them. Most constables do."

"We are here on business, *Human*," said the first Dwarf. "But it's with the owners of this shop."

"Well, they're not here, *Dwarf*." Said Semfeld. "And we're not sure when they'll be back," he added quickly. "It might be next month before they are back to town."

The third Dwarf pointed a stubby finger at him. "Well when they get back, you tell them that we want to talk to them about some spices they have."

"Spices? They sell spices too?" Liverioso looked at Semfeld. "Never heard anything about that."

"Whatever makes money, right?" replied Semfeld.

Because it is.

The first Dwarf turned to the other before he could answer. "Don't bother; if they don't even know their last name, they sure won't know anything about the spices."

"What spices?"

"Don't you worry about that, Human. Just let them know we are willing to pay very, *very* well for them. A Dwarfish fortune even."

"What spices?" Semfeld asked again.

"Just pass the word to the Gnomes." The Dwarf started to turn then stopped. "Tell them the worst thing they can do is to talk to the Elves."

"What Elves?"

The Dwarf shook his head. "Just tell them to fly a red banner from the roof of this dump when they get back and have their greedy little hands on those spices. We'll have someone watching for it." Without another word, the Dwarves filed out.

Liverioso punched his fist. "Those stinking Gnomes are sitting on a fortune of spices?"

"Well, spices are in general, expensive but it would have to be a large amount to be worth so much that Dwarves *and* Elves are both interested in it." He looked around the shop area. "I haven't seen any massive bags of spices, have you?" He sniffed. "Seems I would have smelled them too."

Liverioso shook his head. "Me neither, of course I haven't been looking." He turned. "I'm going to athk Dummy."

"Good. And look around in the cooking area to see if it's there. I'll check upstairs."

With that, the pair split up.

After a frantic two hours, they had ransacked the entire shop from top to bottom.

Neither gave the small sack of spices hanging from Grimbledung's headboard a second look.

Chapter 10
Romantical Assassins? Of Course.

Cherí and L'owen walked down the street, keeping to one side.

"This town is really growing," remarked L'owen. "Are you two are going to settle down here?"

Cherí nodded. "Well, for the most part the folks are pretty accepting of Colossus and I being together."

"Most part?"

"Some of the Dwarves aren't too happy about it."

L'owen nodded. "The Halflings' mountain campaigns really pushed hard into the Dwarvish kingdoms. Halflings can be…" He hesitated, searching for the right word. "Enthusiastic in their campaigns."

"We don't talk about his past."

L'owen nodded. "That is probably best." He pointed at a tailor shop. "Got my fabric there. The owner's not what he seems. Fellow named Magnus Opus von Magnus." He smirked. "I'd keep an eye on him if I were you; he's definitely up to no good."

Cherí looked at the plain looking building. "I've never been in there; Colossus picked out the interior, but thanks for the tip."

"He has an eye for it. Maybe he can open an interior decorating business."

"He's actually looking at becoming a private investigator once we're settled."

"He could do both, I imagine." L'owen smiled. "He could call it An Eye for an Eye Investigations and Interiors. He could handle cozy mysteries."[8]

Cherí laughed. “I’ll tell him that.” She pointed. “If you haven’t been, that’s the Duck Inn and Dine. I recommend it. Good food with a friendly owner. Gal named Nulu. Lots of good people in this town.”

“I’ll give it a visit before I leave… Nulu? She a Trolless?”

Cherí nodded. “She is. You know her?”

“Bentknees?”

“That’s her.”

L’owen pursed his lips. “I might just stop by and say hello.” A smile crept to his face. “More than just might, actually.”

“Old flame?” Cherí teased.

L’owen tilted his head to the side as he thought back. “Well, there were flames involved, yes.”

Cherí laughed. “Well, let’s just leave it at that then, L’owen ‘No Convictions’ Brushwood.”

“Let’s.”

“Wand shop’s down a couple of blocks on the left.” She pointed again. “The two Gnomes who run it are pretty decent folk. One is actually very decent. The other has a good heart but his unstableness sometimes gets in the way.”

“Aren’t all Gnomes a little that way? It’s part of their charm, I think.”

Cherí shook her head. “Well, Grimbledung can be charming, I suppose. And now that his Pixie madness is gone...”

“Well, that is a step in the right direction, right?”

Cherí gave him a sidelong glance. “And he is getting used to his lycanthropy…”

“Ahhh, well then. Two steps forward, three lopes back.”

“He is fairly tolerable to be around.” She frowned. “Deep down, he’s good folk too. Just don’t ever mention to him that I said so or there’ll be no living with him.”

L’owen chuckled. “Your secret is safe with me. So a Trolless, some Gnomes, a Werewolf, and some Humans tossed in the mix. You have built yourself an unusual family, Cherí.”

"Family often is." She pointed. "There's Second Hand Sorcery there on the far corner."

The pair walked up to the front of the shop.

"What're these pedestals for?" L'owen pointed at the two large blocks of stone positioned on either side of the door. "Someone steal their statues or they planning on putting some in?"

"Nothing so glamorous. When the battle with the Halflings ended, a few of the Gargoyles came to town to rest and relax."

"Sounds nice. Always nice to have living art hanging about. Keeps property values up."

Cherí shrugged. "Well, it lasted all of an afternoon."

"Gargoyles are pretty relaxed creatures around most folks besides Halflings." L'owen stepped up onto the platform and put his hands on his hips. "They'll sit quietly for weeks on end if you let them." He spread his arms out as if they were wings. "Really good conversationalists if you just take the time to talk to them. Were they fliers?"

"Not these two; couple of goats."

"Still." L'owen dropped his arms. "Just an afternoon?"

"Seems those relaxed, quiet, property value raising goats and Grimbledung didn't mix well."

"An afternoon?"

"I'll tell you about it over dinner."[9] She pointed at the door. "Let's go give Liverioso the news."

L'owen hopped off the platform. "Maybe they can put a couple of planters here or something. Or a bench. You should get Colossus' opinion first though." He bowed slightly and gestured at the door. "After you." He smiled. "You can pass the good news."

Cherí clapped as she hopped up the three steps to the covered porch. "This'll be great!"

As the pair entered the shop, Semfeld looked up at them, surprised. He was straddling his friend's chest. Choking him.

"Urp!" Said Liverioso. Because that's all the breath he had available.

Chapter 11
Jack Rabbit Stew

Drimblerod moved to the back of the wagon. It was practically empty. He picked up a box. It was more than practically empty. "We're almost out of food, Grim. One week and we're almost out of food. We're never going to make it to…" He turned to speak to his partner but he was no longer beside him. "Oh, I hate when you do that, Grim," he said to no one. Mainly because no one was there. "Just a simple 'I'm wandering off while you're not looking so stop trying to talk to me' would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"Well, sure," he answered himself. "After all, if you are in a conversation with someone, you should let them know when you decide to take yourself out of it, right?"

"Right." He agreed with himself. He looked around the campsite. Grimbledung seemed to be laying down on a small hilltop not thirty yards away.

"Are we going to bed hungry tonight?" Drimblerod asked.

"Not if you would have cooked that partner of yours like I suggested just yesterday," said Drimblerod.

"No, no; I suggested it," replied Drimblerod. "Remember?"

"Now I do, yes. It was in fact, your idea. You know the worst part of this whole affair?"

"What's that?" Drimblerod asked himself.

"I am now answering myself just like my unstable partner, which I have to tell you, is not a good sign at all."

"Well, I'll stop talking, if that helps," offered Drimblerod.

"It does, thanks." Drimblerod shook his own hand. "I'll take it from here." He cleared his throat. "Grimbledung!" He shouted.

Grimbledung didn't look back- he just waved his hand at his partner. Repeatedly. And up and down. And he pointed in several directions. Then he held up two fingers, bent at the first knuckles and bounced them up and down.

Drimblerod wasn't sure if the intricate hand-waving was supposed to mean something to him or not. With a sigh, Drimblerod jogged toward his partner to see what he was looking at. "I want to talk to you," he said as he neared. "About some things."

"Dinner, Drim," said Grimbledung when his partner got beside him.

"Yeah, dinner is one of the things I want to talk to you about." Drimblerod kneeled down beside his partner. "You see, I was just talking to myself and we decided…"

"It's right out there, you know," said Grimbledung. If he had heard his partner, he didn't let on. "Lookit that." Grimbledung pointed at a nearby hill. "Our scrumptious dinner waits on yon hill."

Drimblerod turned to look where his partner was pointing. "Yon, huh." Almost a hundred yards away sat a jack rabbit. It was looking left and right, seemingly ignoring the two Gnomes. "You couldn't hit an Oliphant at that distance and he knows it." He kicked his partner's leg. "That annoying animal isn't even worried."

"Oh, he should be worried." Grimbledung rolled to his side and brought a crossbow to his knee. He grasped the loading handle. "He should be." As the mechanism dropped into the groove and hooked on the string, it let out a metallic 'Ka'. Grimbledung hazarded a glance at the animal. It was still looking around. It was ostensibly oblivious to its impending doom. "Oh, it is definitely oblivious to its impending doom," affirmed Grimbledung.

The rabbit was definitely oblivious to its impending doom.

"Why don't we just have some biscuits and jam?" They had only been on the road for a week and their supplies were running short thanks to Pozzuoli's apparent lack of planning for the entire trip. "Maybe tomorrow we can forage something to tide us over until we get to Old Jute." The pair had spoken with a family that had confirmed that the innkeeper past Old Jute was an old tracker that might be able to guide them on their way. Had the Gnomes been forthcoming, the family would have told them right where the Lost Picman's Mine was - as they had just come from it.

Grimbledung clenched his teeth as he pulled back on the lever. When the string dropped into the release mechanism, it made a loud 'Clack.' "Biscuits and jam are for the meek. The bold eat meat."

"You'll never hit that thing, Grim." Drimblerod took a knee. "It's facing us so you don't even have a big target and I hear those things are as fast as lightning. By the time you reload that crossbow, it will be a thousand Smoots away."

"Shhh," said Grimbledung out of the side of his mouth as he sighed at the two-foot tall animal. "Jack rabbit stew is on the menu and this little fellow is more than willing to make that happen." He closed one eye.

"That's the wrong eye, Grim."

Grimbledung closed the other eye.

"You need at least one eye…"

Grimbledung pulled the trigger.

Drimblerod stood. "Biscuits it is." He watched as the bolt traveled in an arc. It actually went in the direction of the jack rabbit, landing within twenty feet. "Not bad for having your eyes closed, but not good enough to make a stew. Jack rabbit or otherwise."

Grimbledung rolled to his side raised an eyebrow at his partner as he casually reloaded his crossbow. "Stew is on the menu. Jack rabbit stew."

"*Our* menu?" Drimblerod looked around. "That thing is long gone, Grim. I don't know why you're even reloading that thing." He gestured toward the wagon. "We can add some jerked meat. I think we have some of that left."

"Go take care of that fire, Drim." Grimbledung brought the crossbow back to his shoulder. "I'll take care of this part."

"I don't think another rabbit is going to come by any time soon."

"Jack rabbit," corrected Grimbledung.

"Fine; jack rabbit," said Drimblerod. "I don't think another jack rabbit is going to come by any time soon."

"Ever hunt jack rabbits?"

"I can't say that I have. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." Grimbledung lay down on the ground. "Peculiar critters, jack rabbits."

"I've got a partner like that." Drimblerod crossed his arms. "So how are they peculiar? Do they leap in front of crossbow bolts fired in their general

direction? I'll admit that'd be most peculiar. Hop into a boiling pot? That'd be convenient."

"You're not far from the truth," Grimbledung said as he pulled the crossbow to his cheek. "Shhhh…"

"Listen, Grim," said Drimblerod. "It's getting dark. Let's just eat a light dinner and in the morning maybe we can find some eggs or something. A hearty breakfast will…" He stopped as the crossbow thrummed when Grimbledung fired it. He turned to look in the direction his partner was aiming. Not a hundred yards away, he saw a jack rabbit -the same one perhaps- running as fast as it could parallel to them. The crossbow bolt rose slightly as it flew. The jackrabbit did not seem to notice the approaching bolt and continued on his course.

A collision course.

The bolt found its mark and after a short tumble, the jackrabbit lay still.

"What in the lands?" Was all Drimblerod could say.

"Jackrabbits," said Grimbledung as he pushed himself to a standing position, "tend to run in a big circle when they get spooked." He hefted the crossbow to his shoulder. "Sure they're fast, but if you give them a little time, they end up right back where they started." He waggled his ears. "Take the crossbow and get the fire going. I'll go dress it out there and be back before the water is boiling." He smiled wide. "One more and I can make some neat gloves." He raised his eyebrows. "Oooh! Or put on a neat puppet show."

Speechless, Drimblerod took the crossbow and returned to their campsite.

The trio ate a hearty meal that evening, and Drimblerod was too annoyed to admit, the entire next day as well.

Of course, the following day was another matter entirely.

Chapter 12
All's Fair In Love and Dates

"Gaa-hhg!" Gasped Liverioso as he grasped his friend's wrists, allowing a little air to enter his burning lungs. It wasn't an actual word, but at two syllables it was an improvement.

"Is this normal?" L'owen asked. "I mean, should I be worried or just enjoy the show?"

"Semfeld! What are you doing?"

Semfeld looked from the Gnomess to his partner and back. "Does this need explaining?" He leaned forward and tightened his grip on his partner's throat. "Fine then; an explanation: I am choking my good for nothing partner to death."

"Gahhh?" Gargled Liverioso because that was all that would come out.

Semfeld bounced his partner's head off the floor. "Because you deserve it, that's why!"

"Semfeld, my fiancé is a deputy here in town; I don't think you want to commit murder in front of me."

Semfeld bounced his partner's head off the floor again, then let go. "Well, that doesn't mean it won't happen later." He stood and dusted his hands off. "You looking for a wand?" He looked at the Elf.

"No, not particularly." L'owen shook his head. "Don't have much use for them."

Semfeld looked at Cherí. "You?"

She shook her head as well.

"Well, if you're not here to buy something, I'll bid you a fair day and ask you to leave so I can get back to…" he glanced at his partner that was now on all fours, trying to catch his breath, "…business."

"Semfeld, what is going on?"

Semfeld sighed. "He's killing me, Cherí."

"Looked to be the other way around." When Semfeld scowled at him, L'owen raised his hands and moved to one of the stools at the counter. "I'm just passing through making observations; don't mind me."

"What started this?"

Liverioso twisted around and sat on his butt. He jabbed a finger at Semfeld. "He is trying to get me to go on a date! A DATE!"

"Well, if he's not interested, it's just plain rude to treat him that way," offered L'owen. "No is no is no." He shook his head. "I mean, honestly."

Semfeld scowled at the Elf. "Not with *me* you dolt; with the friend of a woman that I am trying to take out on the town that won't go anywhere unless her friend has a date as well."

"Oh... well…" L'owen frowned. "No, I'm sticking to my original statement; you can't just make him go if he's not interested. That's still just plain rude."

"He doesn't *need* to be interested; he just needs to *pretend* to be interested because I'm interested. *He* just needs to help out his partner of ten years this one time."

"I won't betray my love for Sage!" Liverioso leapt at his partner and grabbed him around the neck. "I won't do it even if it's pretending!"

Semfeld struggled to stay on his feet as his partner grasped him around the neck. "You haven't seen that girl in years, Liverioso, years! She has probably moved on by now. Married with kids even!"

"No!" Screamed Liverioso. "She has not!"

"She is still single," said L'owen. "As far as I know."

"And forgotten all about you by now," continued Semfeld.

Liverioso climbed up his partner onto his chest. The added weight knocked the both of them to the ground. He straddled Semfeld and grabbed his throat. "That is just not possible!"

"Word is that she will still tell the story about the water tower if you even get close to it in a discussion," said L'owen.

"What?" Liverioso turned to face the Elf. He still had his partner by the throat. "What did you just say?"

"What?" Semfeld tried to turn to face the Elf but couldn't because his partner still had him by the throat.

"Are you mocking me?" Liverioso let go of Semfeld and hopped to his feet. "*Elf?*"

"Tell, him Cherí." L'owen rested his hands on his thighs and put his feet on the bottom rungs of the stool. "Tell him before someone gets hurt." He prepared to leap at the Human before him. He was quite sure that Liverioso was right handed and that his partner had an old injury to his left shoulder. He was also quite sure that he could kill them both within seconds.

"You keep mocking me and thomeone *is* going to get hurt!" Liverioso balled up his fists. "I died the day she…" He could not bring himself to use the word 'left'. "… Disappeared from my life."

"Liverioso, the Assassin Guild found Sage!" Cherí blurted out.

"What?"

"How about we all calm down and have a seat and I can tell you all about it." Cherí realized that the only bit of information she had was that she was in the town of Cuticle, which she had no idea of its actual location. "Actually, my friend can tell you more about it than I can."

"Sage?" Almost in a daze, Liverioso moved to a stool and sat. "Found?"

"Yes, we know where she is, Liv." Cherí put her hand on the Magician's shoulder. "Semmie, you all right?"

Semfeld nodded at the Gnomess. "Sure, sure. Happens all the time." He sat up. "Of course, that means I still don't have anyone to occupy the time of that other gal." He eyed L'owen.

"She good looking?"

Semfeld nodded at the Elf. "Yeah."

"Human"

"Uh huh."

"I thought you were on your way out of town."

L'owen shrugged at Cherí. "Well, a few hours' difference in exposing some fake gods won't make a difference one way or another, I can't imagine. Good looking, you say?"

"Hair like coal, eyes like the sea on a cool spring day. Skin like alabaster. And tall."

"Yikes. Count me in."

"If you two are done preparing to bamboozle those women…"

"Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" L'owen leered.

"Where is Sage?"

All eyes turned to Liverioso. Well, Semfeld gave a quick wink and nod to L'owen. Then all eyes were officially on Liverioso.

"She's in a town called Cuticle."

"Cuticle? Get serious."

"Really, it's called Cuticle. It's not on the maps yet, though."[10]

"If it's not on the maps, how am I supposed to find her?" Liverioso leaned forward and put his head in his hands. "I'll never find her… again."

"It's simple, Liv, really it is," assured Cherí. "Right?"

L'owen nodded. "Sure, sure. The town is at the base of the Devil's Thumb, a mountain south of the Riatoh Bronze Mines."

Cherí looked at L'owen. "He can't miss it, right?"

"Not likely," said L'owen. "It is one of the tallest peaks in the region. When you get within a couple day's ride, you can't miss it because it looks like a giant thumb."

"A thumb?" Liverioso didn't pick his head up. "I am looking for a thumb."

"Well, it's a butte, really. It will look like a massive black mountain with the top cut off. The town is situated at the base of it. It's not a really big town so finding her shop won't be difficult once you are there."

Liverioso finally picked his head up. "What kind of shop?"

"Novelties."

Liverioso let out a long sigh. "Sage sells novelties. You hear that Semfeld?"

"I heard, buddy. I heard." Semfeld smiled at his friend. "And we'll just go find her. The two of us together."

"Tomorrow would be a good time to start I think."

Cherí hit L'owen.

"Hey! If our esteemed Magician here has made a date with a local gal, it would be impolite to just stand her up."

"You're a real gentleman."

"It's one of my better qualities, so I've been told."

Liverioso hopped out of the stool. He kissed Cherí. Then L'owen. Semfeld was too far away because he was still sitting on the floor. "This is the best news ever! I need to go pack!" He bolted up the stairs.

"I think he's going to leave right now if he gets the chance," said Semfeld. "Where exactly *is* this town?"

L'owen looked around the room then pointed at a far corner. "It's that way about six day's travel by beast."

Semfeld frowned. "Across the Shambler Plains and Troll country. That will be the journey to Niflheim."

"You heading out now then?"

Semfeld shook his head. "We need to make arrangements before we just head out on a trip like that. Locate beasts. Get supplies. And a wagon, I think."

"And someone to take care of the shop," reminded Cherí.

Semfeld looked around. "That is also something we need to deal with." He stifled a grin. "Perhaps it may indeed be tomorrow before we head out."

L'owen chuckled. "Well, I'll be heading to the Duck Inn and Dine if you need… a partner."

"Males." Cherí scowled.

"Hey, we can't all be romantics." L'owen pointed upwards where Liverioso could be heard pulling drawers out and letting them hit the floor.

"He's romantical enough for the two of us," said Semfeld.

"I suppose." Cherí shook her head. "Well, I'm going to talk to Colossus and Akita about the upcoming influx of…" She glanced at L'owen. "Unromantic types."

"That's a broad brush."

Semfeld dusted off his breeches as he stood. He nodded at the Elf. "Mainly because she's a broad."

Cherí hit Semfeld. Hard.

"Sorry. I taught her that," offered L'owen to the doubled over Semfeld.

Semfeld waved off the Elf then he put his hands on his knees. "Not… first time… happened."

Cherí shrugged. "That is true." She moved to the door. "Let us leave these males to their plans, oh lecherous one."

No one moved for a moment.

L'owen startled. "Oh, she means me!" He gave Semfeld a wink. "Duck Inn and Dine if you need me."

Door opened for Cherí.

"Thanks Door," she said. "At least you are still above board and honorable."

Door rattled his latch, sure that Cherí was unaware of the torrid affair going on between itself and Maca's coat rack.

"The Duck Inn, huh?"

L'owen nodded. "Figured I'd get a drink and a snack and listen to what the locals have to say. See if there are any jobs to be had. Want to come with?"

Cherí shook her head. "I think I might stop by the Constabulary and see how Colossus' day is going."

L'owen smiled. "Give him my regards. And if I don't see you before I leave town..." He held his arms out wide and moved to hug Cherí. "It was *very* nice seeing you, and it really and truly does this old Elf's cold heart good to see you doing so well with your new family."

Cherí smiled. "It was good seeing you too."

With that, L'owen let go of the Gnomess and walked off, angling toward the side of the street so that he was only exposed on one side.

Cherí watched her old teacher for a moment, then with a smile, headed towards the Constabulary.

As soon as Door closed, Liverioso bounded back down the stairs. He had a large suitcase tucked under his arm. Clothes were sticking out of it where they wouldn't all fit inside. "Semfeld, I'm ready! We need to go find her now. NOW!"

"But we're supposed to be running the shop for the Gnomes. We promised them that."

"You know I don't ask you for a lot. Really, I don't. I know we promised to run the shop but this is Sage! *Sage*! We need to go!"

"I don't know, Liv."

"Remember when we were freezing to death and we combined our bedrolls to survive the night?"

"You promised to never bring that up again. Ever."

"Well now I am. That is as important as this."

Semfeld looked around the shop. A thought occurred to him. "Hey! Where did Cherí say Cuticle was?"

"Just south of that bronze mine."

Semfeld snapped his fingers. "Perfect. I say we take this stupid shop with us and set it up there for a few days or so. Then we can bring it back later on." He beamed. "That way we are still open for business and honoring our word to those Gnomes!"

Liverioso hugged Semfeld. "Brilliant!" He looked around the shop. "But do you know how to Minisculate this place? I don't know that spell."

"I think I know someone who might be able to help." He glanced at the curtain to the back room. "At least I hope he does."

Liverioso hugged Semfeld again. "Let's ask him!" He released his friend with one hand and pulled him toward the curtain. "Let's go! I want to be ready to go today!"

Chapter 13
Keebler, Leaves, and Teeth

Three Elves walked down the boardwalk of town early in the morning. One turns to the others and says "So I don't suppose you'll be needing a drink." [11]

Three Elves walked down the boardwalk of Julesville. It was early still. "It's no joking matter; I hate being in town," said the one on the left. The far left- he was walking slightly away from the other two. Mainly because they annoyed him to no end. Or at least, no end was ever in sight. "That stinking Grimbledung making me come all the way out here." He scowled. "With you two."

"Yeah, we had to go too," Leaves grinned.

The first Elf scowled again. "Hate it out here."

"Too much open spaces," said the one beside him.

"Well, the outdoors are like that," said the third. "Know why?"

The first grimaced; it had all the earmarks of another half-day discussion about nothing. The worst part was that since the trio was almost a week's walk away from the Foreboding Forest, it meant at least fourteen half-days of discussions about nothing. Not including innumerable quips and comments that usually made no sense whatsoever. He closed his eyes and exhaled long and hard. He counted to ten in his head. In Giantish.

"Why's that?" Asked the second.

"Cause of all the spaces."

When neither said anything else, the first let out a breath of relief. Often the pair would have hour-long conversations about nothing at all. Sometimes about completely different subjects at the exact same time, each ignoring what the other said. He was sure it was because of the frogs they licked on a regular basis. And the mushrooms they smoked. And ate. Once, he had even caught them trying to smoke a hapless purple tree frog. Through a mushroom stem.

"You know what?"

"For the love of all that is green," said the first Elf. "Could we perhaps just walk in silence?" He looked at the pair. "Think we can do that? So we can get this over with?"

"What do you think, Teeth?" Asked the second Elf, completely ignoring the other.

"I like the quiet," agreed Teeth. He smiled. "Know what else I like, Leaves?"

Leaves grinned broadly. "No, man; I have no idea. Hey, Keebler, you know?"

Keebler scowled. "I imagine it's the outdoors, or weeds, or mushrooms, or frogs, or maybe playing a gig."

"Hey! I like all those things!" Exclaimed Leaves.

"Me too, man!" Teeth slapped his hands together. "We should do all those things. Want to pick up a gig while we're in town? It'd pay for a couple of frogs probably."

Keebler stopped walking. "No." He hesitated, cringing on the inside. "Listen dudes," he added, hoping it would garner their attention. "We are going to complete the mission." He started walking again. As usual, the other two hadn't stopped when he did.

"Hey, I wanted a mission!" Leaves said.

Teeth nodded. "Me too! Then they brought me one. Served it up like breakfast."

"I like breakfast too."

Teeth became serious. "Now I never want another one."

"Breakfast?" Leaves gaped at him.

"Sure, I want breakfast," said Teeth.

Keebler slapped the back of Teeth's head. "Stop it. Just stop it. It's almost noon; we are not having breakfast."

"Lunch?"

Keebler slapped the back of Leaves' head. "We are going to deliver the ultimatum and then go home."

Leaves frowned. “Are we having lunch before we leave?”

“Have we missed a meal yet?”

Leaves considered that for a moment. Truth be told, the past week was - as with most weeks- a complete blur. An incident from several days ago moved through the fog of his mind. “What about that one thing a couple of days ago...”

“Trying to smoke that frog through that mushroom was not...”

“I *swear* Keebler, that frog said to put him in that King Stropharia.”

“Teeth, that frog did *not* tell you to stuff him into that mushroom.”

“Maybe he was already there?” Offered Leaves.

Teeth nodded heartily. “Yeah, that’s probably...”

Keebler shook his head. “I don’t even know why you two are with me.” He frowned. “What have I done to annoy the Chief to have her send you with me?” He thought back. “I mean, all I do is mind my own business and bake. Really, really well too. What would make her think I needed you two addle-heads to come along?” He looked at the pair as he raised his hands plaintively. “What?”

“Maybe we got fans?”

Teeth grinned at his partner. “We got fans, dude!”

Keebler scowled. “I would like to think that folk are more discerning than that”[12].

“I think the discerning people are long gone by now,” said Teeth solemnly. “We’re down to the riff raff.”

“Maybe even dregs,” offered Leaves.

Keebler shook his head. “Let’s get this message delivered so I can go home.”

Leaves nodded. “Whatever you say, Keebler.” He raised an eyebrow. “You know you’re uptight?”

“You should relax.” Teeth patted his pockets. “Hey, you need a frog? I think I got one.”

"No!" Keebler said louder than he wanted. Several passersby looked at the slow-walking trio of Elves. "I do not need a frog. What I need is to get back to my ovens and my baking."

"I could use some brownies," admitted Leaves.

"Please...."

"Sorry, Keeb. *Please* you got brownies?!"

"No, Leaves. I don't *got* brownies." Keebler sighed. "*Please* let's just walk quietly for a little bit."

Teeth nodded.

The trio walked in silence for several paces.

Teeth looked at the buildings as they went. "You know, this town's growing like…" He frowned. "Like…"

"Growing things," offered Leaves. "Fast growing things."

Keebler glanced at the pair.

"Yeah. Just like fast growing things."

The pair walked in silence for several blocks.

"You know what?"

"What's that, Leaves?"

"This town's growing."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Like Weed."

"Weed weed?"

"No, Weed; your nephew, Weed not weed."

"Weed?"

"Yeah." Teeth nodded.

"Weed is growing pretty good." Leaves held his hand to his waist. "I remember when he only came up to here." He moved his hand to his chest. "Now he's up to here almost."

Leaves nodded. "You know who else is almost that tall?"

"Who's that?"

"Weed."

Teeth nodded. "Yeah. He's growing like this town. Hey, where's this wand shop again?"

Leaves tried to remember. "It's on a corner, I think."

Teeth smiled. "Yeah. On a corner." He pointed. "That one?"

"Please, please. Just some quiet is all I ask for," pleaded Keebler. "Ahh, finally!"

"Finally it's quiet?"

"No, finally there's that Duck Inn and Dine. From what I hear, those two Gnomes are friends with the proprietor."

"Good idea, Keeb' ," said Teeth. "We can deliver the ultimatum and get something to eat."

"At all once even," agreed Leaves.

Keebler cringed at the shortening of his name. "I know I've told you to not call me that."

"Don't worry Keebleralicious," said Teeth.

"Keeblerooney." Leaves shot back.

"Keeblarific." Teeth returned deftly.

"Keebtastic!" Leaves overhanded.

Teeth grinned. This was one of his favorite games. "KeeblerCoconutDream!" He volleyed.

"Yaaa!" Keebler reached out for Teeth. "I am going to throttle you right here if you do not shut up!"

"You should relax." Teeth patted his pockets. "Hey, you need a frog? I think I got one."

"Yaaa!"

Leaves winked. "You know what they say."

"What do they say?" Teeth asked.

"A little Elfin frog goes a long way."

"No; no one says that," countered Keebler. "Not ever."

"He just said that." Leaves pointed at Teeth. "Heard it myself even."

"Hey, I heard it too," said Teeth. He perked up his ears. The voice *was* kind of familiar. With a shrug, he pulled open the door to the Duck Inn. "Let's go inside, Keeb. Get something to eat."

"Deliver that ultimatum." Leaves added with a wink.

"And get some lunch." Teeth added helpfully. He gestured. "After you Keebalistic."

Chapter 14
Three Elves Walk into an Inn

The three Elves walked into the Inn. Keebler scowled as he pushed past the two into the small foyer. "The jokes are getting old." He hesitated for a moment then moved left into the dining area. The smells from the kitchen washed over him. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Ahhh..."

Teeth bumped into the back of Keebler. "No stopping in the doorway, Keeb!"

Keebler stumbled forward. "I *swear*!"

"Don't do that, Keebs. We'll start losing even the dregs if you do that."

Teeth nodded at Leaves. "Those are true words you just spoke."

"Can I help you three... Elves?" Flora asked. She held a tray to her hip. "Or are you just going to stumble around spooking the patrons."

Teeth smacked his lips. He eyed the Gnomess hungrily. "I'm starving."

"Well, *Mister Starving*, I'm not on the menu."

"That's no good." Leaves frowned. "You sure?"

"Yeah." Flora glowered at the Elf. "It's not that kind of establishment. *And I'm not that kind of gal.*" She shifted the tray to one hand and moved her other hand to her pocket. "But if you want to see the kind of gal I am, keep making passes like that." She narrowed her eyes. "We'll be serving fried green tomatoes and Elf ribs for dinner."

Leaves perked up. "Say, that sounds good." He blinked. "Wait."

"Just get us a table, *Gnomess*," said Keebler. "We want to eat and take care of some business here in town and be on our way."

"Say Gnomess like that again." Flora pulled her hand from her pocket. There was a long thin blade in it. "Just once."

"There some trouble here?" Nulu said from behind Flora. Since Grimbledung's departure, Flora had been even testier than normal, snapping at customers and even threatening to cook several. The dirk was a new development. She leaned over the Gnomess' head and gestured at the knife. "Something amiss, Flora?"

Flora gestured at the lead Elf with the dirk. "Nothing's amiss. As long as *he* changes the way he says Gnome." She pointed it at Leaves. "And *he* doesn't suggest that I'm on the menu."

Nulu looked at the Elf. "Excuse me?"

"Well it was a misunderstanding," offered Keebler. "My associate was definitely not implying that this is a house of ill repute."

Teeth's eyes got large. "What? No, no. That is not what I meant at all." He shook his head. "Sorry about that little, miss. That's not what I meant!"

"Well, that's good to hear," said Nulu.

Leaves nodded. "Yeah, we figured we'd cook her and eat her. It's been a goodly while since we ate a Gnome." He frowned. "Last one we tried to eat got away."

"What?"

"Uhm..." He pointed at Keebler. "He's in charge. Talk to him." Leaves stuck his hands in his pockets. "I'm just along for the ride, man."

Nulu stared at the Elves. "Wait a grain of sand. Are you from the *Foreboding Forest?"*

Teeth grinned. "Yeah, you been there?" He eyed Nulu. "You look kind of familiar. You a Troll?"

Nulu rolled her eyes. "No, I'm a really tall *Dwarf*."

"Wizard!" Said Leaves with a nod.[13]

Flora looked up at Nulu. "Do I really have to serve these three?"

Keebler looked down at her. "Our money's good, Miss Gnome. Get us a table so we can finish our business and get out of here." He let out a sigh. "If you please."

"What sort of business brings Foreboding Forest Elves to town?" Nulu put her hand on Flora's shoulder. "I'll show them to a table and take their order."

Flora nodded. She put the dirk back in her pocket. "Fine. I'll do a pass of the room and check up on these three after." With that she turned and left.

"This way, gentlemen," Nulu gestured to a table in a corner, hoping they would not interact with any other customers. She wanted nothing more than to get the cannibalistic Elves on their way. "Got a nice table in the corner."

The trio followed her there and sat. Teeth and Leaves slouched in their chairs in very un-Elflike manners. Keebler sat arrow-straight in his chair, hands on the table in a very Elflike manner.

"Man, I'm starving. What you got on the menu that's ready right now?" Teeth snapped a napkin as he stuffed it into the front of his jerkin. "Got any meat?"

Nulu nodded. "I'll bring you some ribs. You want any sort of vegetables?"

Keebler nodded. "Vegetables would be great."

"And to drink?"

"A few ales."

"I'm not going to have any trouble out of you am I?" Nulu narrowed her eyes.

Keebler shrugged. "We're looking for someone specific."

"A Gnome," said Leaves. "An annoying one at that."

Nulu exhaled. "Oh, man."

Teeth nodded. "Yeah, that's him!" He frowned. "Caused a ruckus is what he did. Ran off all impolite like."

"You were trying to eat him, from what I heard."

"It wasn't anything personal," offered Leaves.

"Cooking and eating someone is about as personal as you can get." Nulu shook a finger at him. "And, I have to say, it's not very civilized. Especially for Elves, I should say."

"Well, that all depends on how you cook them," countered Leaves.

"I take it you know this Grimbledung?" Keebler asked, seeing an opportunity to be relieved of his mission - and his two traveling companions.

Nulu nodded. "He's a good friend of mine, as a matter of fact."

Keebler pulled a parchment from inside his vest. "Give him this." He held out the tan parchment. It had a ribbon with a blotch of wax holding it in place.

"What have you there?" Nulu took the parchment.

"A royal proclamation, man. From the Chief even," said Teeth. "That makes it royal."

Keebler glanced at Teeth. "Yes. I am sure she figured that out." He looked at Nulu. "That is personal correspondence so you need to give it directly to him." He narrowed his eyes. "The fate of the entire town rest on his answer."

"Of course it does," said Nulu. She put the parchment in her apron. "Well, there's a couple of things that might cause issues with your royal proclamation that deals with the fate of the entire town."

"Of course there are." Keebler slouched in his chair. "What are they?"

"Well, first and foremost, Grimbledung can't read so unless this is a *royal* pictogram, he's going to just play with it."

Keebler pursed his lips. "And?"

"And the little basket of insanity's not here." She looked up. "But I'm sure wherever he is, he's causing turmoil."

Keebler looked around the tavern. "Well, I figured that much or I would have handed it to him personally." He gave a genuine smile, realizing her Gnome associate gave her the same amount of consternation as his pair gave him. "Please just read it to him when you see him."

"No, that's not it. I mean he's not here in town; he's gone on an adventure."

"I love adventures!" Leaves said.

"Hey, me too, man," said Teeth.

"Now I'm getting annoyed." Keebler closed his eyes. "When. Does. He. Get. Back."

Flora sidled up beside Nulu. She put the edge of her tray on the table and slid off three frosted ales. "We have no idea when he will get back. And you'll need to get in line; I've been annoyed by his antics for *months*."

Keebler rubbed his temples. "The royal proclamation is *explicit* about the timeline."

"No way man; we can't have explicit!"

Teeth nodded at Leaves. "That's as bad as swearing!"

Nulu smirked. "Well, you and your royal proclamation are going to just have to wait until he comes back."

"Cool. Where'd he go? Mayhap we can run across the little fellow," Teeth said. He picked up the ale and took a drink. "On that adventure you so helpfully mentioned."

Flora scowled. "To the Lost Picman's Mine."

"Oh, I love that place!" Leaves said. "Hey, Keeb, can we go there too? Can we? *Can we*?"

Keebler rubbed his temples harder. "No."

"Go there too?"

Leaves nodded at Flora. "You never been? You should go! Or come with us!"

"Yeah! Come with us, little Gnome lady!" Added Teeth.

"We are *not* going to the Lost Picman's Mine." Declared Keebler.

"What?" Flora said.

"I was going to tell you, Flora. The mine isn't really lost."

"WHAT? It's lost you know. It's even in the name!"

Keebler put his hands on the table as he exhaled. "You people are killing me. *Killing me*. That's just a name. A marketing gimmick." He stood up. "Let's go."

"But..." Leaves picked up his drink. "We've ordered."

"Just a grain of sand," said Flora. "The *lost* mine is a gimmick?"

Teeth gulped down his drink then stood as well.

Keebler dropped a silver coin on the table. "This is intolerable." He pointed at Nulu. "If you see that cursed Gnome first, *read* him that royal proclamation. Otherwise, we will deal with him ourselves."

"Dude! We're going to the Lost Picman's Mine!" Leaves toasted Teeth with his mug then downed it in one gulp. "I want to ride the ferret wheel!"

"But I'm hungry, Keebler," said Teeth. "Starving even."

"Well pick up someone on the way out of town."

"What?"

Keebler scowled at the Trolless. "Some-*thing*. We'll pick up something on the way out of town."

The three turned to leave. "Deliver the proclamation," Keebler said over his shoulder as he stalked to the curtain. When he got there, he held it back. "Let's get going."

Teeth and Leaves scrambled to be first through the curtain. Keebler just shook his head as they tried to shove past each other.

Without another word, Keebler followed the pair out.

"I've got to find Akita." Nulu moved to the curtain. "Keep an eye on things, Flora."

Flora pulled the silver coin to the edge of the table and let it drop into her pocket. "If those three find Grimbledung first..."

"I'm sure he'll be fine. He's pretty good at taking care of himself. He's gotten out of some pretty tight spots, Flora. I mean really tight spots."

Flora nodded. "Yeah, I know." She slid the two empty mugs onto her tray. She picked up Keebler's mug and took a long drink from it. "That's what double shackles are for."

Nulu blinked at the Gnomess. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing at all." Flora put on a sweet smile. "It's just an expression." She downed the rest of the drink and put it on the tray.

"You can explain it to me after I get back. Right now I need those three escorted out of town before they grab someone to be their snack." Nulu gave a wave over her shoulder as she pushed past the curtain. When she barged out the door, she ran headlong into L'owen.

As the two tumbled to the ground, L'owen twisted so he was on top of Nulu. "Still barreling your way through life?" L'owen asked as he smoothly rolled to his feet. He extended his hand. "And looking great doing it, I might add."

Nulu looked up at the Elf. "L'owen?" She grasped his hand and let him help her to her feet. "What are you doing in town?" She looked around suspiciously. "Business?"

"Personal; I was visiting a former student of mine to congratulate her on her upcoming nuptials."

"Very nice of you." She raised an eyebrow. "Just that?" She looked down at their hands which were still together.

"Well, to be honest with you, I had no idea you were even here in town. I lost track of you since the thing with the guy at the place." He smiled. "I'll never forget it."

"Well, that was my pleasure; I'd never been to Belizistan."

"If you're going to be around with time to spare, maybe I'll stay as well." L'owen brought her hand up and kissed it. "Have a drink. Or something."

"We could have one here in a little bit." She jerked her thumb at the Duck Inn and Dine.

"I hear you're a regular there."

Nulu smirked. "Oh, it's much worse that that; I own it."

"Yeah, that's what I heard." L'owen said. "Good base of operations; a bar."

"I'm legitimate now…" Nulu paused. "Listen, I have to go have the constable escort some cannibal Elves out of town before they snatch and grab a snack on their way out. I'll be back shortly." She started to back away. L'owen still held her hand.

"I'll be here." L'owen finally let go. "Paying for drinks until the owner comes back." He waved. "Go save the townsfolk, Miss Legitimate."

Nulu grinned then jogged off. She made it only a half dozen steps before she noticed Big Julie standing in her path. She had her hands crossed across her chest. Nulu skidded to a stop. "Julie!"

"So, who's the tall, pale, and handsome Elf?"

Nulu did a double-take. "Wha- what?"

"The gentleman that I saw that didn't want to let go of your hand." She raised an eyebrow. "After kissing it."

"Oh... him."

"Yes... him."

"He's an old friend from my old life. He did some work for me when I was running…" She paused and looked around. "That thing with the people that worked for me."

Julie laughed. "I see."

"Listen Julie, I can't talk right now; three Elves just showed up and delivered a royal proclamation for Grimbledung." Nulu took it out and handed it to Julie. "And I need to make sure Akita follows them out of town so they don't accost some citizen as a snack."

Julie's eyes got big. "Gads! Yes, go tell Akita and I'll meet you inside." She pointed. "Akita's back at the jail. I saw him heading that way as I was coming here." She stifled a smile. "I'll meet you back at your place."

Nulu took to a run. The fact that the Elves could take a hapless person from town as a meal was still forefront in her mind, however it was now accompanied by the fact that Big Julie and L'owen would have time to talk without her around.

Nulu ran as fast as her feet would carry her to Akita's.

Even so, by the time she got back it was too late.

Chapter 15
Abbreviated Road Trip

Semfeld stood from the table and carried his plate to the wash basin. "Well that hit the spot." His partner had bolted from the table after wolfing down their late breakfast. "Where are you, Liverioso?"

"I'm downstairs," Liverioso called. "Are you ready yet?"

"I just finished eating!"

"It's almost noon you know! We need to get going."

Semfeld rubbed his temples. "Fine, fine. Give me a few minutes…"

"We need to leave now!"

Semfeld clenched his fists and shook them. "Give me a few minutes!" When his partner didn't answer, he turned and went to the POOPA. As he opened the door, he called down the stairs. "Give me just a few minutes and I'll be down!" When his partner didn't answer him, he grasped the pole and slid down.

Exactly ten minutes later.

Semfeld walked into the front of the shop. "Liverioso," he began as he pushed past the curtain, "I hope you realize we can't just leave lickedy-split. We have response…"

Liverioso leapt in front of his partner. He pointed a wand at his partner. "I have it!"

"Liverioso?" Semfeld backed against the curtain. "What are you doing?" He turned and looked over his shoulder, judging the distance to the back door just in case he made a run for it.

"Semfeld; I have it!" Liverioso waved the wand again. "Right here!"

Semfeld backed another step, pushing the curtain to the side so it wouldn't slow him down when he ran for the back door. It was a long way back. He decided to stall for time. "What do you have?"

"The answer to our problems." He held the wand up. "Right here!"

"How is that an answer to our problems? What problems are you talking about exactly?"

Liverioso noticed his partner had backed up three steps. "Are we just going to leave? I thought you said we should get our affairs in order first." He moved to the counter. "This is a great day, Semfeld!" He put the wand on the counter.

Relived his partner wasn't more unstable than usual, or homicidal, Semfeld let the curtain drop in place behind him as he reentered the sales area. "Yes it is. It has been a long time coming too." He pulled out a stool and sat. "So... what's with the wand?"

"It's the solution to our problems!" Liverioso held out a coffee pot for his partner. When Semfeld pushed his cup under it, he poured the coffee.

Semfeld brought the cup to his lips and blew on the coffee to cool it. "What problem is that? Is that a wand that will take us to Cuticle? Is that why we now have time for coffee?"

"I wish this would get us there." He patted the wand as he picked up his own cup. "This, my friend, is the wand that stupid Gnome used to put this shop here. I actually found it last night."

Semfeld looked at the wand. "You sure it's the right one?" He peered at it. After watching an hour of charades between his partner and the annoyingly unhelpful jousting dummy, he had given up and gone to bed.

Liverioso poured himself some coffee. "Dummy confirmed it; it's the Minisculate! Wand." He put some sugar in his coffee.

Semfeld took a sip. "Well, we can just use the wand too. That is good you found it."

"My first plan was to just burn the place to the ground when I couldn't find the thing." Liverioso took a tentative sip. "But this way the law won't be involved and we don't have to find someone else to run the shop while we're away because we'll just take it with us. And when we stop at night, we can just ContraMinisculate it to have a place to stay and even make some sales along the way. It's a perfect plan!" He toasted his partner and took another sip.

Semfeld nodded. "I'm glad you found it; that is one big thing out of the way. Now all we need is a wagon and a beast to pull it." He looked around the shop. "And maybe some…" He stared off into space.

Liverioso put down his cup. When his partner still hadn't moved he got worried. "Semfeld, you all right?"

Semfeld slapped his hands on the table. "A teleport spell!"

Liverioso frowned. "Well, I can do a pretty good Dispel Kidney Stones trick, but I don't think that will translate to what we need. We don't have a teleport spell."

Semfeld shook his head. "No, not yet. Akita's the solution to *that* problem."

"You think he can extradite us? We'd have to commit a crime in Cuticle. And if we did that, then our problems would be solved. But we'd have to be in Cuticle to do it, and at that point, we wouldn't need extradited." Liverioso frowned.

"No, no. Akita's seeing that Elf-witch that runs that shop. I'm sure she has something along those lines. And if she's not willing, I am sure Akita would like to be rid of us for good, so he would put in a good word for us.."

"You sure?"

"Everyone knows they are a couple."

"No, not that. I mean that she has something to send us there."

Semfeld nodded. "I'm sure. She's a witch, after all."

Liverioso grinned at his partner. "Brilliant! We'll be there in a wink of an eye." He considered that a moment. "Or a rubbing of a lamp."

"That's only for Djinns."

"Oh." Liverioso rubbed his hands together. "Oh, well maybe it will be something else then." He smiled. "Let's go see what she has to say. I really want to see Sage now that I know where she is."

Semfeld nodded at his partner. "I am happy for you, Liverioso. Really I am."

"Let's go then!" Liverioso stood and gulped down his coffee. "I'm ready!"

"Right." He frowned. "Well, I was going to actually enjoy my cup of coffee." A thought occurred to him. "Let's let Dummy know what's happening so he doesn't cause any problems for us. Besides, maybe he can mind the shop while we're at Maca's."

"I'll go tell him while you have that cup!" Liverioso bolted to the back room.

Semfeld sipped his coffee. "Well, at least one of us has found love." After only a moment, Liverioso was shouting at Dummy. With a scowl Semfeld hopped off the stool to see what was happening. When Semfeld entered the back room, Dummy was frantically waving his arms over his head. "Why are you shouting, Dummy?"

Liverioso turned towards Semfeld and pointed an accusatory finger at Dummy. "*You* tell him that I HAVE to go!"

Dummy pointed at the floor.

"We can't leave the shop here!" Liverioso shouted.

Dummy pointed at himself.

"You can't be left running the shop!"

Dummy raised his mittens exasperated.

"Yes, for today… *this today*… you can, but not on a long-term basis!"

Dummy waved his arms.

"Just because!"

Dummy crossed his arms.

"Semfeld, please help!"

Semfeld took a deep breath. "Listen, Dummy. We are trying to do right by the Gnomes. The other option is to just board up the place and head out. We are trying to do the right thing here." He pointed at Liverioso. "It is, after all, his long lost love. You can't very well expect him to *not* go after finding out where she is after all this time."

Dummy made an hourglass shape.

"Well, they were young teenagers back then so it was more like this." Semfeld made a straight line with his hands, careful to not spill his coffee.

Dummy put his hands on his hips.

"Well, she's probably filled out by now."

Dummy gave a hearty thumbs up.

"Then you'll watch the store this morning while we're getting things arranged and stuff?"

Dummy tilted his mitt back and forth.

"And we'll let you tend shop more often as well," added Semfeld. "Promise."

Dummy stuck out his mitt.

Liverioso shook it. "Deal."

"Fine then. Get the box, Liverioso." Semfeld picked up Dummy (from behind or it would have been creepy) and shuffled to the front of the store.

After Liverioso put the box down behind the counter, Semfeld put Dummy on it.

Dummy gave another thumbs up.

"We'll be back as soon as we can." Semfeld said. "And we'll make sure you're more involved with shop operations from now on," Semfeld lied.

Dummy gave two thumbs up.

"Let's get to *Herbs and More. Much More* and see what that witch can do for us."

Semfeld nodded. "After you." He gestured at Door.

The pair left the shop and practically jogged to Maca's. Without even checking the door first, Liverioso barged in.

Chapter 16
Herbs and More. Much More

The shop was empty.

"Where is everyone?" Liverioso looked around.

"Well, it's early. Maybe she doesn't have any customers yet," offered Semfeld.

Liverioso sat in a chair and put his head in his hands. "I'm never going to get to her."

"Maca's got to be around someplace." Semfeld pointed at the door. "The door's unlocked so someone has to be tending the place, right?"

The coat rack perked up.

Semfeld didn't notice.

The coat rack gave a little hop.

The movement caught Semfeld's attention. "Hello? Do you know where Maca is?"

The coat rack shrugged.

"Is she here? When does she get back?" Semfeld asked.

Liverioso looked at the exchange between the pair "Didn't we just leave this insanity in our shop?"

The coat rack leaned left.

"What kind of answer is that?"

The coat rack leaned back.

"Well this is just absurd. Who is in charge?"

The coat rack did a little hop.

"We'll never get there," sobbed Liverioso. He put his head back in his hands and began to cry.

The coat rack scooted over to the sobbing Magician and patted him with one of her wooden arms. When he looked up, she re-curled it.

Semfeld eyed the coat rack. "Say, are you the coat rack that our door is seeing?"

The coat rack craned its spine and looked at the ceiling. Then the wall. Then the counter.

"So it is you!"

The coat rack shrugged as noncommittally as a coat rack could.

"This is hopeless. How are we supposed to get anything out of her if we can't even understand what she is saying!" Liverioso leaned back in his chair. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Hopeless."

The coat rack uncurled two of its arms and spread them out wide.

"You can sell us stuff?"

The coat rack gave a salute.

"Fine then. We need a way to get to Cuticle." Semfeld paused. "It's a town south of the Riatoh Bronze Mines. We were hoping for some sort of teleportation type spell so we don't spend a two and a half weeks going there and back."

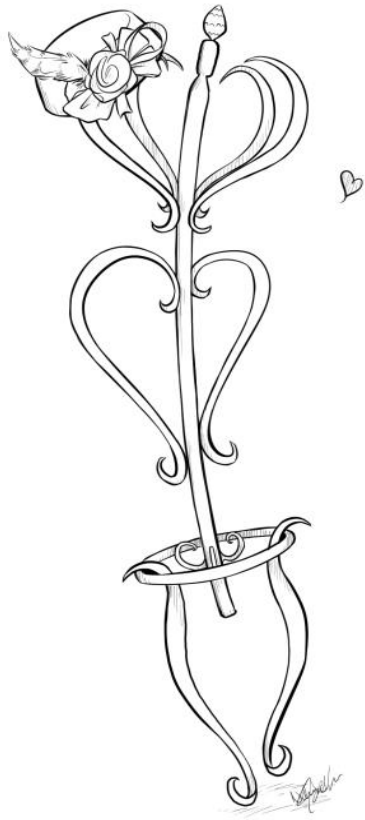
Coat Rack nodded.

"Do you have a way for us to get there?" Liverioso peered up at Coat Rack.

Coat Rack nodded.

Semfeld exhaled slowly. "That is a relief. What do you have?"

Coat Rack uncurled two arms and pantomimed riding an animal.



"We were hoping you have a more efficient, more magical way of getting there."

Coat Rack rubbed the ends of its arms together.

"Expensive huh? Well, if it saves us two weeks riding through Troll country, then it's worth it. What's it cost?"

Coat Rack stared at Semfeld.

Semfeld stared at Coat Rack. After a moment he startled. "Oh! Sorry. Is it… a copper?"

Coat Rack tapped one of its feet.

"Fine, fine... Five silver?"

Coat Rack paused for the slightest of moments then motioned higher with one of its arms.

"Eight?"

Coat Rack motioned higher.

"Gads; it's not a whole gold coin, is it?"

Coat Rack did a little hop. Secretly, she was happy she was able to overcharge the Magician by a whole three silver coins. She figured if he balked, she would lower the price.

"Fine, fine. A gold coin for a magical method to get all of us to Cuticle and back. Oh, and also Sage if she comes back as well."

"Why wouldn't she come back?" Liverioso sat up. "What are you saying?"

Coat Rack held up two arms, inquisitively.

Semfeld held up his hands. "All I meant was that if she is settled in Cuticle, she may not want to come to Julesville. Then of course, you'd stay there. Or she might need to get her affairs in order before coming here since she has a business there. That's all."

Liverioso nodded. "I didn't consider that, but you're right." He looked at Coat Rack. "He's right."

Coat Rack nodded. She pointed at one of the shelves. A small box rose off the shelf and floated to the counter.

"So that's it then. Very nice!" Semfeld reached for the box.

Coat Rack slapped his hand then shook an arm at him.

"I'm good for the gold coin!" Semfeld rubbed his hand. "You can trust me, honest!"

Coat Rack gestured off into the distance with one arm, then waved with another.

"Well, we wouldn't just run off and never come back to pay, if that's what you're getting at."

Coat Rack put her arms about where her hips would be if she had hips.

"Fine then. We will be back and ready to go in about an hour. We will pick up the box then."

Coat Rack shook an arm at him.

"We will be paying for it then as well, don't you worry." Semfeld patted Coat Rack. A thought occurred to him. "Oh, Door is coming with us on this trip so he's going to be away until we get back, sorry."

Coat Rack slouched some, then straightened. She patted Semfeld back.

"I just thought I'd let you know." He gave a smile. "We'll be back in an hour. Liverioso?"

Liverioso stood and hugged Coat Rack. "Thanks for your help. I will bring Sage by so you can meet her when we come back."

Coat Rack held up a wooden arm at the pair.

"What?"

She put the box on the table then held up two arms questioningly then pointed around with another one.

"Oh!" Said Semfeld, understanding. "You need a target! We need to get to Cuticle. It is at the base of the Devil's Thumb near the Bronze Mines of Riatoh." He looked around the shop quickly then pointed at the far wall. "It's south of here."

Coat Rack nodded then pointed toward the door and shoo'ed the pair.

As the two Magicians made their way to the door, Coat Rack gently opened the box and hooked her arm around a plain tan leather loop sticking out. The large crystal that hung from the plain leather loop bathed the shop in red flickering light.

Ominous red flickering light.

Chapter 17
Truffles, Truffles Everywhere!

Drimblerod rummaged through the wagon. "You're killing me, Grim. Killing me."

"What'd I do now?" Grimbledung rolled over. He was using two of the bedrolls to make a nice, comfy bed. "It's early still, you know."

"We've no food, again *you know*," countered Drimblerod.

Grimbledung sat up. "What?" He pulled the top bedroll up to his chin. "Why are you trying to scare me first thing in the morning?"

"Scare? No, I'm *threatening* first thing in the morning." Drimblerod threw an empty box hard at the floor of the wagon. "Why is it that every time I turn around, we're almost out of food?"

"Well, you see, I get peckish at times."

"Well, stop getting peckish at times."

"What; all times or just some times?"

"All times while we are living on a wagon." Drimblerod looked around. "We're still out in the middle of nowhere. With no real idea of where that mine is."

"It's in some rocky outcroppings overlooking a lake," Grimbledung reminded him. "Remember?"

"That's pretty vague, Grim. And if you haven't noticed, we haven't seen a single outcropping. Rocky or otherwise in days. We'll be to Old Jute in a couple of days. If we haven't found it by then…"

Grimbledung opened his mouth to complain.

"… or gotten a good idea of where it is, then I say we just turn back."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Ooh! Ooh! Can we stop and see that guy who has that magical floating boat thingie to get back?"

Drimblerod considered that. "Well, if we make it all the way to Old Jute we can see if he is willing to run us upriver towards Julesville." He shrugged. "Maybe he can give us a ride part of the way at least."

Grimbledung clapped. "That sounds great!"

"No, it sounds absolutely horrible."

Grimbledung stopped mid-clap. "Why?"

"Because that means we won't have found the mine and are just returning home empty-handed." He frowned. "The whole trip will have been for nothing." He looked back towards Julesville. "And there's no telling what has been going on with the shop. No telling at all."

"I imagine it's going swimmingly back in yon shoppe." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "You worry too much." He squinted his eyes at his partner. "Say, you haven't been sneaking food to comfort your worrying, have you?"

Drimblerod picked up the box and threw it at his partner. "I've not sneaked *any* food from this wagon, you dolt." He shook his head. "I knew I should have been the one to talk to Pozzuoli." He pointed an accusatory finger at Grimbledung. "If only you had told him about our trip all honest like, we wouldn't be constantly scrounging for food."

"Is that a question or a request?"

"IT'S A STATEMENT!" He pulled in his finger and shook his newly-formed fist at the Gnome. "I specifically told you to tell him exactly where we were going and how long we'd be gone!"

"Well, I thought you meant to *not* tell him any of that." Grimbledung picked up the box and sniffed it. "Those were some good biscuits." He shook the box then tilted it up, emptying the crumbs into his mouth. "Real good."

"No, what would have been real good would be to have a month's worth of them instead of a week's." Drimblerod turned and rummaged around the boxes again. "We've got a little hardtack, some pretty soft fruit, and some pretty hard bread that in another day will be identical to the hardtack." He turned. "And nothing at all that resembles meat."

"Well that won't do." Grimbledung pulled on his shoes. "Want me to do something about that?"

Drimblerod clenched his fists. "That sounds like a great idea since you are the one completely, wholeheartedly, and solely responsible for our situation."

"Well, if you think it might be my fault..."

"Might?" Drimblerod picked up their cooking pot. "We've got a pot and nothing to go in it." He tossed it at his partner. "Resolve. That. Problem."

"Fine, fine." Grimbledung picked up the pot and smelled it. "I seem to recall that we passed a stream right before we stopped for the night." He pointed at the rise back in the direction they had come from. "Over yon rise." He picked up the pot. "I'll go fish up some... fish."

"And how are you planning on doing that?"

Grimbledung looked from the pot to the rise and back. "Uhmm... I'm gonna whack those fish with this here pot." He smiled triumphantly. "They won't know what hit them." He frowned. "Unless they know what a pot looks like, of course."

Drimblerod looked at their meager supplies. They really didn't have anything. "This isn't good."

"Hey, hey, HEY!" Grimbledung dropped the pot and scooted to the wagon.

"What?" Drimblerod looked around. "What now?"

Grimbledung swung onto the wagon and snatched the ever-present though never-used whip. "This here's perfect!"

"I agree. Give it to me so I can whack you with it a few times."

Grimbledung shook his head. "No, no, I mean for fishing!"

Drimblerod considered that. "That is sort of a fishing pole I suppose."

Grimbledung snapped the whip several times. "This'll be great!" He beamed at his partner. "If Rat asks, tell him I've gone fishing." He waggled his ears. "Know why?"

"Why?"

"Cause I've gone fishing!" Grimbledung hopped off the wagon. He was still swinging the whip around.

"You do that." Drimblerod shook his head. "All you need is a hook..." He rummaged in the tools box. "Here!" He held up a medium-sized fishing

hook. "Tie this to the whip and redeem yourself." He tossed the hook underhand at the pot.

The hook clattered around as it landed in the pot.

"I got this, Drim," he assured.

"Well you better hurry before Rat gets back or there'll be hell to pay."

"Well, it doesn't pay well at all, from what that gondolier has told me."

"Then there'll be Rat to pay."

Grimbledung gulped. He tucked the pot under his arm and scampered past. "Don't tell him!"

Drimblerod shook his head. "I'll rearrange our meager supplies while you're away then I'll get a fire going. When you get back we'll cook up some fish and hang the rest off the wagon to dry for later. Got it?"

Grimbledung gave a wave with the whip as he went over the rise. "Got it, Drim!" He called.

Drimblerod turned to look at the boxes in the wagon. Most of them were empty. "What a disaster."

"What's a disaster?" Asked Rat as he hopped onto the back of the wagon.

"What?" Drimblerod hopped around to face him. "Who said anything about a disaster?"

"You did." Rat sat up. "Just now."

"I was talking to myself is all."

Rat looked at the boxes. Many of them seemed empty. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Drimblerod waved his hand dismissively. "There's nothing to worry about, Rat."

"A wise man once said 'the only thing we have to worry about is worry itself' ".

"I don't think that's what he said."

"Well it fits." Rat scurried onto the pile of boxes. "These are empty aren't they." It wasn't a question.[14]

"Are they?" Drimblerod began stacking the boxes. "I hadn't noticed."

"Where's Grimbledung?"

"He's getting breakfast."

"What sort of breakfast could that unstable Gnome come up with out here in the wilds?"

"He's fishing." Drimblerod held up a piece of fruit. "Want a piece of fruit?"

Rat twitched his whiskers. "What I want is some meat, not some soft fruit."

"Well, Grim's working on that right now. He's got a good chance at it."

"Oh?"

"I hate to admit it but he's actually a pretty skilled fisher."

"You're kidding."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Well, it's a pastime that you can do laying on your back while you eat and drink and you don't have to do anything for hours while you wait."

"Well, when you put it that way." Rat sniffed the boxes. "Hey, you know there's something I'm pretty skilled at as well."

"What's that, Rat?" Drimblerod nestled a smaller box into another.

"It's not common knowledge that Shamblers have excellent smell."

Drimblerod laughed. "It's definitely better than that Ox."

Rat shook his head. "No, no. That's not..." He considered that. "Well, yes Shamblers smell a whole lot better than Oxen, but what I meant was that Shamblers have a great sense of smell. Much better than Rats even."

"I didn't know that," admitted Drimblerod. He pushed a stack of boxes against the front-board of the wagon. "How can we use that to our advantage?"

"Even as a Rat, I can tell there's some wild onions growing around here and earlier while wandering, I caught a whiff of some truffles."

"Truffles? Wow. We'll be eating in high fashion indeed."

Rat nodded at him. "If Grim'll change me into a Shambler, I can go searching for edibles." He looked around. "Where's the pot?"

"Grim took it with him to put the fish in."

"Give me an empty box so I can swap him."

"Why don't you use the box?" Drimblerod removed a smaller box from the stack he had made and tossed it to the ground. "Leave him the pot?"

Rat put his claws on the box. "The pot's got a handle so I can carry it easier when I'm a Shambler." He looked at the box; it was bigger than him. "And as a Rat as well, I think."

Drimblerod smiled at him. "Do you need a hand with that?"

"I can drag it to him if he didn't go too far."

Drimblerod pointed over the ridge. "Apparently, he's over yon ridge."

"Yon ridge, huh?" Rat grabbed the box with his claws and began to walk backwards, dragging it with him. "I'll be back in a little bit."

"I'll get a fire going and finish consolidating our supplies." Drimblerod looked at the wagon. "Not that there's a lot to even consolidate." With a shrug, he went in search of wood for a fire- he would save the boxes to burn when they were really in a bind.

Rat stopped to rest. The box outweighed him considerably and being box-shaped, was not conducive to being dragged along rough terrain. "Stupid Gnome," he said yet again. While he rested his legs, he moved around the box sniffing. There were definitely plenty of tubers growing that could be harvested; he had decided to wait until he was a Shambler however, since the box was already almost too much weight for him. As he moved closer to a nearby tree, a pungent odor came to his nose. "Oh, there we are, my dear truffles." He backed up to get a good look at the tree so he could find it again. "I will deal with you momentarily, my succulent morsels."

After another circuit around the box, he returned to tugging it through the long grass and other debris that invariably seemed to be directly in his path.

Grimbledung sat on the pot looking at the sky. "Turnip," he said absently as a cloud went by. "Riding a unicorn," he added when another

cloud crept alongside the first. He jerked the whip back and forth, making the dragonfly he had stuck on the hook dance on the water.

"Grimbledung!"

Grimbledung startled. "Yes, mighty clouds! What is thy bidding?" He shouted at the skies. "Tell me and I obey!"

"Come get this box, you!"

"What box do you speak of, mighty clouds?" Grimbledung shielded his eyes. "I see the turnip and the unicorn." He squinted. "And that pixie arming the trebuchet at the Goblin encampment, but where is the box you demand I fetch?"

"Grimbledung, I swear if you don't get over here and get this box," warned Rat.

Grimbledung looked to his side. "Oh, Rat! I was just talking to the clouds."

"I'll bet."

"You've got a box, too?"

"I'm warning you..."

"What are you doing dragging a box around? Trying to snare a Box Troll?"

"I am *not* hunting Box Trolls."

"You sure? They can't pass up an empty box you know." He gave a wink. "Handy things, Box Trolls."

"I am not hunting Box Trolls."

"Well if you catch one, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Fine."

"What're you doing with that box?" Grimbledung gave a sly wink. "If you're not hunting Box Trolls."

"I'm trading you for your pot."

"I'm not sure a box is worth a pot." He looked down at the pot. "What else you got?"

Rat sat up and twitched his whiskers at him.

"Anything to eat in it?" Grimbledung jerked the whip again. "That'd definitely make me want to trade."

"I'm going gathering and I need the pot, Grim."

"You can barely handle that box. What makes you think you can carry this big iron pot?" Grimbledung patted it.

"I'm going to be a Shambler so I need something with a handle that I can grab with my mouth." Rat hopped onto the box. "I won't be able to carry this box." A thought occurred to him. He twitched his whiskers.

"I suppose that makes sense." Grimbledung flipped the end of the whip again. "Still, this pot's awfully comfortable."

"Shouldn't you be sitting on the bank to fish?" Rat said, setting up his joke.

"This works just as well," said Grimbledung. He patted the pot, oblivious to the impending gag.

"I'm telling you I need the box; you can't do both. What you need to do is..." Rat leaned forward as he got ready to launch the joke.

Grimbledung twitched the whip. "What's that?" He looked at the end of the whip- he had a bite.

"Fish or get off the pot."

Grimbledung fell off the pot. "Hey now!" He sat up. "When I say things like that people threaten me."

"It's all in the context."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Trust me on that." Rat scooted the box toward the Gnome. "Take the box."

"Fine, fine." Grimbledung sat up and looked at the end of the whip. "Got some nibbles," he muttered.

"Change me into a Shambler."

Grimbledung didn't take his eye off the end of the whip. "Uh huh." He drew his wand and aimed in the general direction of Rat. "Stand still..."

Rat scooted over into the line of fire. "Go."

Rodentus Grigo
Transmutes Completes!

Shambler Verdes

He intoned quietly.

"Thanks, Grim," said RatShambler. "Now I'll go fetch some accoutrements for the fish." He pushed the box beside Grimbledung.

Grimbledung carefully shifted his butt to the side and slid onto the box. The end of the whip dipped several times as he did. "Uh huh."

RatShambler took the handle of the pot into his mouth like a bridle. "Know what, Grim?" He asked around it.

"What's that?" He muttered, staring at the end of the whip.

"Now you don't have a pot to fish on."

"Yaaa!" Grimbledung fell off the box.

Satisfied, RatShambler moved back towards the cluster of trees. When he got there, he dropped the cast iron pot and stuck his nose to the ground. Moving it back and forth and he inhaled, he started to walk slowly in larger and larger circles.

By the time Grimbledung walked up to him, RatShambler had a large pile of truffles formed in the shade of the tree.

"That there is a big ole pile of truffles," remarked Grimbledung.

"It's several gold coins worth of them, as a matter of fact."

Grimbledung dropped the box. "Just a minute! You're telling me you can find several gold coins worth of truffles without any issue or time and yet you let me hawk used wands all day?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all."

Grimbledung pointed at the pile. "Then what is that?"

"Several gold coins worth of truffles. Just like I said."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Say! Why am I selling wands all day long? And even worse; why did we live in a drafty barn for years?"

"That's easy to explain, really." RatShambler twitched his half-tail. "Simple even."

"Fine then; explain it easily and simply to me." Grimbledung crossed his arms.

"Truffles are indeed easy to find when there are a lot of them around. But when there aren't any around, they are hard to find."

"I imagine everything works that way. Tell me something I don't know."

"If a frog had wings, it wouldn't hit its butt every time it jumped."

Grimbledung stared at his friend for a moment. "Why aren't you finding truffles on a daily basis, Rat?"

"Because they aren't around." RatShambler sat on his haunches. "Back in civilization where we live," he pointed southward, "folks are *always* searching for mushrooms and truffles so there aren't a lot to be found." He pointed at the pile. "But out here where hardly anyone has come by in months, they are all over because no one has dug them up."

Grimbledung put out his lower lip. "Fine, fine. That's a reason but not a good one."

RatShambler stood. "Well, it's the reason we have a pile of them now but don't when we're in town." He smiled. "But, from now on, every night when we stop, I'll do a quick pass around our campsite and you can dig up any that are nearby. If nothing else, that will give us something we can barter with when we're in town."

Grimbledung clapped. "That is a brilliant idea, Rat!" He looked at the pile again. "Or we could just eat most all of them. Tasty things, truffles."

RatShambler nodded. "Oh, that they are. Between those fish and these truffles, we should be eating well for the next few days. At least long enough to get us to a town."

Grimbledung moved to the pile of truffles and began to put them in the pot. "Any that don't fit we can put in my box."

"Good idea. I'm starving. I hope Drimblerod has gotten enough wood to make a decent sized fire to roast these fish and smoke the rest overnight."

"We could make fish soup."

RatShambler stuck out his tongue. "Let's save that as a last resort. I'm not too keen on mushy fish."

Grimbledung tossed another truffle into the pot- it was now full. "I don't think they'll all fit even in the box. Should we pitch the fish?"

RatShambler shook his head. "Stuff them in your pockets if you have to." He stood. "Or, take off your pants, tie the ends and use your pants as a sack!"

"Again with the brilliance!" Grimbledung loosened his belt and dropped his pants. He bent over and tied knots in the legs. "And I can use the belt as a sling to carry it." He shoveled the rest of the truffles into his empty pants. After cinching the top with his belt, he tried to pick up his pants. "It's too heavy, Rat. Can I sling them over your back?"

"If you had two you could. Just put the end of your belt around the pot's handle and I'll pick up both. I hope you can get the box because I can't carry that as well."

Grimbledung dragged his bulging pants to the pot and wrapped the end of his belt around the thick wire handle. He skipped back to the box. "Ahhh! There's nothing like being au naturel out in the ol' natural."

RatShambler shook his head. "I really don't hate to break it to you, but your pants go back on as soon as we get back to camp."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sure Drimblerod will insist on it."

Grimbledung shrugged. "Fine, fine." He hefted the box. "Gads! Lead the way quick like, this thing's heavy!"

The pair shuffled toward camp with Grimbledung only having to stop once to rest.

When they finally got to the camp, Drimblerod had his back to the pair, adding wood to a good-sized pile.

"Guess what we got, Drim!" Grimbledung called as he turned and walked backwards to hide the box.

Drimblerod looked at his partner. "Well, I haven't been mooned in a good day and a half, so thanks for that."

"Well it's not on purpose, I can tell you that."

"I can't imagine it's not on purpo…" He looked at RatShambler. "What in the lands are in your pants?"

"Truffles! It seems Rat is a truffle-finding *fiend*! He got the pot full. My pants full. And more on top of the fish!"

"That's a lot of truffles." Drimblerod moved to his partner and took the box. He grunted. "How many fish are in here?"

"Lots. Seems a whole school came by and they weren't used to being fished so they all kept biting at the hook."

"Nice, Grim, real nice." He put the box down beside the wagon. "And great work on your part, Rat!"

RatShambler put the pot and Grimbledung's pants down. "It's easy to find them when you look where others haven't picked the place clean."

Drimblerod untied Grimbledung's belt and let the truffles tumble out. He tossed the pants to his partner. "There you go, Grim."

"See? Told you." RatShambler chuckled.

Grimbledung frowned as he untied the pant legs. "You know, there's nothing unnatural about being all natural out in nature, naturally."

"Unnatural? No. Unappetizing? Yes."

"I couldn't have said it better myself, Rat." Drimblerod began pulling the truffles out of the box. He started tossing them on the ground, larger ones on one side of the growing pile, smaller ones on the other. "From what I recall, cooking these dissipates the flavor so we need to store them in one of the boxes and make sure they don't dry out." He smelled one deeply. "Oh yeah, we'll slice, scrape, or grate these all over those fish and eggs and whatever else we find." He smooched the truffle. "You scrumptious little accoutrement." His ears perked up. "It's an accoutrement, Grimbledung; I do not want to catch you eating these things all by themselves."

"Oh, you won't catch me." Grimbledung assured his partner with a wink.

"Grimbledung Sixtoes, Esquire." Drimblerod dropped the truffle onto the pile. "I hereby and forthwith forbid you from eating any truffles without the consent of a majority of our party." He clapped his hands once and stomped his foot twice. "For the remainder of this journey."

Grimbledung gaped at his partner. "Wha…? You dare to make a Grand Gnome Edict about the truffles?"

"Oh, I dared." Drimblerod pointed at his partner. "The edict has been presented to a quorum of the party." He squinted. "And so it stands valid."

"Oooh!" Grimbledung stomped his feet. "Fine then." He looked at RatShambler. "Rat, I don't know if you know how much I appreciate you."

"Don't even try buttering me up. I worked hard for those truffles and I'm not going to let you scarf them all down while we're not looking." RatShambler sat on his haunches. "Now if you'll change me back into a rat, I will enjoy my meal that way."

"Oooh!" Grimbledung drew his wand and flourished it. "Fine then. Fine." He put out his lower lip. "Can I just have one now to tide me over?"

Drimblerod looked from the substantial pile to his partner and back again. "Yes, here is a nice large one you can nibble on until your belly is content." He picked up one of the larger truffles and tossed it to his partner. "There's no sense in being unreasonable about it."

Grimbledung bobbled the truffle as he tried to catch it and not drop his wand. He ended up dropping both. "Fine then. Rat becomes a rat and the truffle is mine." He picked up the truffle and his wand. "Don't move, Rat." He waved the truffle at RatShambler

Shambli Verdes

Transmutis completes
Rodentus Grigo!

Rat blinked at Grimbledung. "Stop messing around."

Grimbledung shook the truffle. "This thing must be jammed or something."

Drimblerod shook his head and returned to sorting the truffles by size.

"Let me try again." Grimbledung cleared his throat. He still held the truffle out. "As I was saying."

"Grimbledung, either swap hands or change me back right handed."

Grimbledung shook his head. "No way, you get bad magic when you try to do things right handed. Bad magic." He swapped the wand and the truffle. "Now stand still."

Shambli Verdes
Transmutis completes

Rodentus Grigo!

He slashed the wand at RatShambler.

As usual, RatShambler flared gold, then shrunk almost immediately to rat size.

"Finally. Back to my old self." Rat sat back on his haunches. He sniffed the air. "Oh yeah, those smell good." He twitched his whiskers. "Hey Grim, can I have a nibble of yours?"

"No deal. This is my one and only truffle thanks to Drimblerod Edict Declaring Axebreath over there."

"That's *Mister* Drimblerod Edict Declaring Axebreath to you," corrected Drimblerod.

"Well, I'll just wait until dinner time, I think. How many fish are in that box, Drimblerod?"

"There's…" Drimblerod made a quick count. "Holy Roltons; there's fifteen of them in here." He smiled at his partner. "Nice work, partner!"

Grimbledung rubbed his truffle on his shirt as if it were an apple. "Master fishergnome is what I am."

"I think we should cook up three of them and smoke the other twelve. What with the crackers and dried meat, we've suddenly upped our food stores to almost a week." Drimblerod sighed. "Things are looking up." He moved to the pile of wood he had made. "Grim start a fire while I get some spices for the fish. I'll get dinner going in no time."

Grimbledung aimed his wand at the pile of wood and shot a stream of lava at it. Within seconds it was blazing orange with every piece of wood alight. "And that's how you start a fire." He looked at his partner. "Hey, I think Rat should get a truffle as well for his work."

"I agree," said Drimblerod. He picked up one of the smaller truffles. "Here's a good, rat-sized one."

Rat shook his head. "I will save that for later." He twitched his whiskers. "For when I'm peckish."

"You're not peckish now? Really?"

Rat shook his head at Grimbledung. "No; I am *ravenous* now. That little truffle would only arouse my appetite without bedding it back down. I'll wait for my fish."

"Fine then." Drimblerod looked at the blazing fire. "You do fires pretty good too." He smiled. "Well, the fire's good and hot so I'll get the fish going. Grim if you'll shave some of a truffle, we will get these fish into our belly post haste."

Grimbledung hopped to his feet. "You got it; I'm ravenous too!" He drew his dirk as he moved to the truffles. He chose a small one and began to grate it with the blade of his knife onto the box lid. "Oh, this will be a good meal indeed!"

And it was.

After a hearty meal, the trio watched the fire burn low. As the darkness enveloped them, they all fell fast asleep.

Chapter 18
A Human, a Trolless, and an Elf are in a Bar

"That's a great joke!" Nulu heard as she burst into the eating area of her business. A loud laugh drew her attention to a corner table. L'owen had his hand around Big Julie's shoulder and he was doubled over laughing, head almost on the table. Julie's head was tossed back. She was in the middle of a laugh as well.

Nulu steeled herself and moved to the table. "A fine time is being had by all, I see."

L'owen wiped a tear from his eye as he finished laughing. "Oh, Nulu. The stories Julie has about you!"

"They're probably all exaggerated," tried Nulu. "Julie spins a fine yarn, adding to it as she goes until it's a rope."

Julie feigned offense. "Not at all!" She pointed a finger at her friend. "What about that incident with that traveling salesman? Remember that episode? You almost burned down the entire tavern!"

L'owen started laughing again.

Nulu pursed her lips and gestured toward L'owen's arm over Julie's shoulder, trying to change the subject from the dashing traveling Troll Oil salesman who gave very up-close and even more personal demonstrations of the apparently highly flammable oil. "Say, where's Pinky?"

L'owen pointed at the side door. "Outhouse. Had to take a break," he managed between laughs.

"Mister Haney and his wagon load of things." Julie picked up her drink. "That was one fast-talking Troll who seemed to have just what folks needed on that wagon of his." She eyed Nulu. "Am I right?"

Nulu sat at the table. "Say what you will about Mister Haney but he definitely had what a gal needed."

L'owen perked up. "On his wagon of needful things?"

Nulu poured herself a drink. "Yeah, let's stick with that."

Pinky walked to the table. "What'd I miss? Nulu! We were just talking about you."

"I figured as much; my tusks were burning." She raised an eyebrow at the Elf. "So you're heading north then? To kill off some gods if I remember correctly?"

"Killing what?"

L'owen took his hand from around Julie and patted Pinky's arm. "Just a couple of rabble rousers who have set themselves up as kings in the Northern Lands. One of them got shot with an arrow in the chest and it stuck in his snuff box. Since it didn't kill him but was sticking out of his chest, some of the locals called him a god. And now because of that, he and his pal have made themselves the de facto kings in the area and they're pushing around the locals."

Pinky nodded. "I see, and you're going to expose them?"

L'owen nodded. "It should be an easy gig once I get there."

Nulu smiled. "I used to love doing those *easy gigs* with you." She took a drink. "Seems to me we would end up running for our lives at the end of most all of them."

Now Julie laughed.

"Hey, we're both still here, right?" L'owen smiled at his friend. "Speaking of here, did Mister Haney stick around town? Open up a respectable shop?"

Nulu shook her head. "No, no; he moved on. I don't think Pozzuoli would take too kindly to someone else opening a similar shop here in town."

L'owen shrugged. "Well, the town's pretty big. I can't imagine it will be long before you get more than one of most everything you have here." He toasted Nulu. "In fact, I saw a couple other places on my walkabout that do what you do."

Nulu nodded. "Well, they don't do it with the same class as my joint. Although I hear that one of the taverns is looking to add rooms in as well."

"Competition is the spice of life." L'owen took a drink.

"Oh! Spices! I almost forgot." Julie pulled the proclamation from her pocket. "It seems that Grimbledung has managed to annoy the entirety of the Elf Nations."

"What?" L'owen put down his drink. "I haven't heard anything about it. What's going on?"

Julie put the proclamation on the table. "Well, that's an exaggeration, really. He's just managed to annoy the Elves that live in the Foreboding Forest."

"Yeah, he hasn't visited any other Elf communes." Nulu laughed.

"The Forest Elf encampment- Der Kibbutzim, in Elvish if I remember correctly." L'owen picked up the proclamation. "What did he do to annoy them? That's a pretty easy-going group from what I hear."

"They eat people!"

L'owen nodded at Pinky. "That is true, but they're easy going about it." He read the proclamation quickly. "Oh dear."

"That's an understatement." Julie gestured at the parchment. "A declaration of war and impending annihilation and all we get is an 'oh dear'."

"He has their Sack o' Royal Spices?" L'owen put the parchment down. "That's one of those 'closely guarded artifacts' of their community. How did he manage that?"

"Apparently when they were going to eat him, he convinced the cook to oil him up so he'd be tender," said Nulu. "Then when the cook left for a moment, Grimbledung slipped out of the ropes, grabbed the spices and made a run for it."

L'owen laughed. "I'd have loved to have seen that!"

Nulu stuck out her tongue. "Took two chapters to get his clothes back on."

Now Pinky laughed. "That's hilarious."[15]

"What's so special about these spices? Can't they just replace them?" Julie took the parchment back and rolled it up.

"They can, and probably have already started the process." L'owen got serious. "But it's a long and arduous process to make the royal spices, and even more importantly, the spices are a thousand years old. They have to start from scratch."

"What? That Gnome stole thousand-year old spices?" Julie shook her head. "I can see why they want him dead."

L'owen shook his head. "Well, sort of." He paused for a moment. "It's like those inns that serve hundred-year soup where they just add more stock and water to the large pot so it never empties. In theory there is always something from the old soup in the pot so it is a hundred years old, but really, it is more the tradition of the soup that makes it famous."

"That's how the spices are."

L'owen nodded at Pinky. "Only ten times as old. And owned by one of the most rabid races around when it comes to tradition."

"The old ways of the Elves." Nulu shook her head. "Wars have been started because of them."

"Well look on the bright side," said L'owen.

"There's a bright side to total annihilation?" Nulu took a drink. "I'd love to hear it."

"Just give the spices back. Once they get their original thousand-year spices back, they'll be fine. They will add what they have already put together and the tradition can continue and they'll leave you alone."

"But Grimbledung's on some fool adventure," said Julie. "He's gone for who knows how long."

"Did he take the spices with him?"

Julie opened her mouth to answer the Elf then stopped to consider it. "That is an excellent question; I've no idea."

L'owen picked up his mug. "Well, we can go down to his shop and look around." He took a drink. "They'll be in a leather pouch." L'owen put his mug down then held his two hands apart, fingers and thumb forming a circle about the size of a small saucer, "About this big with a leather strap so the Chief can wear it around her neck for ceremonies. Shouldn't be too hard to spot, really." He gave a wink. "I even know what they smell like."

Julie hugged L'owen. "Perfect! Will you come along to see if you can spot it? I'd love for the town to actually be around for its upcoming election."

L'owen nodded. "Sure, sure. Let's finish our drinks then head over." He smiled. "Those spices aren't going anywhere and you can send a runner to deliver them well within the deadline of late next week."

Nulu sat back in her chair. "That Gnome is able to cause trouble even when he's not around. A toast to that unstable Gnome!"

Everyone at the table picked up their mugs.

"To Grimbledung and the practically found spices!" Nulu lifted her mug high. "May he come home soon so we can bonk him on the head."

"Here, here!" Julie took a drink. "I claim first bonkings."

At the bar, Flora raised a glass. "Oh, you'll have to wait Julie" she said to herself. "You'll *all* have to wait to deliver your bonkings." She downed the drink in one gulp. "I've bonkings of my own planned."

The group at the table had seconds on their drinks and even a round of snacks before leaving for Second Hand Sorcery two hours later.

The delay allowed Semfeld and Liverioso to make it to *Herbs and More, Much More* and back.

Chapter 19
Love, and Reunions, and Road trips? Oh Yes!

Semfeld and Liverioso stood in front of Second Hand Sorcery.

"That took long enough," said Liverioso sourly. They had stopped by the bank and put the shop's accounts on hold. The banker suggested they do the same for the butcher, baker, and ale shop. So they did. "Did we miss anyone?"

He thought for a moment. "I don't think so; that's pretty much all the deliveries that would show up during the day. I don't' see how those two stay in business with how much they spend on food and drink."

"Well, we're not going to have to worry about it anymore," said Liverioso. "Once we're gone, any deliveries that come by will see the shop missing and just go back to wherever they are from."

"We should make a sign," suggested Semfeld. "Just in case."

Liverioso frowned. Another delay. "Fine. You make the sign and I'll find a backpack to put the shop in and get our traveling cloaks. Make it a simple sign because I want to get going."

Semfeld patted his friend on the shoulder. "We'll be on our way in no time, buddy. Promise."

After only ten minutes, Liverioso closed the door to Second Hand Sorcery and moved to his partner. "You ready?"

Semfeld turned a crudely fashioned sign so his partner could read it. "How's this?" He lifted a hammer. "I even remembered to keep a hammer out."



"Perfect." Liverioso drew the wand. "Let's get going." He pointed the wand at the shop.

Minisculate 'emmm!

He intoned.

A silver light flashed around the shop as it immediately began to shrink.

As the shop got smaller, Semfeld moved beside his partner. "How small is it going to get? Did you get the right number of ems on it?"

"I believe so," said Liverioso.[16]

Finally, the shop stopped shrinking at the size of a small dollhouse.

"That's just about perfect," said Liverioso as he knelt down to put the shop in the backpack. He was careful to keep the shop level as he did it. "Get the sign in the ground and we'll go get that teleport thing from that coat rack."

Semfeld moved to the now open area Second Hand Sorcery recently occupied and put the sharpened end of the sign onto the dirt. "How's here?"

Liverioso stood and put the backpack on his shoulders. He looked around the area. "That works for me. Hammer it in."

Semfeld obliged, hammering the sign into the ground enough for it to stay secure even if it rained. He looked at the hammer when he was done. "Can I put this in the backpack?"

"Fine, fine." Liverioso adjusted the straps as Semfeld dropped the hammer into one of the outer pockets. "Let's go!" Liverioso pointed down the street. "We've wasted half the day."

"You know I had a date planned for later tonight."

"Maybe Sage has a friend."

"Maybe. If so, you better talk me up, and good!"

"Deal." Liverioso put his arm around his partner. "On to Sage." The pair of Magicians walked quickly to the corner of the next block, turned left and headed towards *Herbs and More, Much More.*

Only a couple of minutes later Big Julie, Nulu, L'owen and Flora rounded the corner from the opposite block. "I say you two check upstairs in the living area and the cooking area and Cherí and I'll check the…" Big Julie's voice trailed off as she looked at the empty space that was once occupied by Second Hand Sorcery.

"Hey!" Exclaimed L'owen. "It was just here! Cherí and I were *just here* this morning!"

Flora stared at the empty space. Words to express her fury were beyond her.

"Were those two Magicians here then?" Julie walked to the sign. "Hmmm."

L'owen nodded. "That they were. In fact, one of them had a date planned for tonight. I don't know why he would have... Oh…" His voice trailed off.

"What?"

L'owen looked at Julie. "Well, Cherí and I might have told that one… Liverioso?… Where his long lost love was."

"Oh great." Nulu frowned. "And where is this long lost love, exactly?"

"Cuticle." L'owen turned and pointed in its direction. "At the base of the Devil's Thumb. Probably a week, week and a half away. Depending on the weather and how many bands of Trolls you come across."

"So those two headed out as soon as you told them. Just great."

L'owen raised his hands plaintively. "Now Julie, I had no idea at the time that the Royal Spices of the Foreboding Forest Elves were somewhere in the shop! I mean, how could I have known *that*?"

Julie sighed. "I know, I know." She looked at the sign. "It's just that now we have no way of actually stopping those Elves from rampaging over Julesville."

"Just head toward Cuticle," suggested Flora. "How much of a head start could those two idiots have gotten if they were here earlier today? Why, I can't imagine those two idiots are farther away than just the outskirts..."

A peal of thunder tore across the clear blue sky.

The group all looked up as it echoed throughout the town.

"You know, it's usually Grimbledung that says things like that. You two sure are a pair." Nulu said. "I'm almost afraid to ask what that was."

"If I had to guess…" Began L'owen. He was cut off as an Orc barreled around the corner toward them at a full sprint.

Akita was right behind him. "Stop that Orc!" He shouted.

L'owen drew two daggers. He flipped one over to hold it by its point. "Got him."

The Orc skidded to a stop in front of the sign. "Hey! Where shop go?"

Akita slid beside the Orc, grabbing his arm as he stopped. "I told you to sto…" He looked at the empty space. "Where'd the shop go?"

"I ask first!"

"Quiet you!" Akita snatched the wand from the Orc. "Give me that! Don't you know you don't take things that don't belong to you? What are you; some kind of animal?" He waggled a finger at him.

"This no good." S'Am crossed his arms. "Where my favorite fence go?"

"Stop stealing wands!" Akita stuck the wand in his belt. "But while we're on the subject; where did this Orc's favorite buyer of stolen wands go?"

"Apparently when Cherí and I told Liverioso the location of his long lost love, they packed up the shop and headed that way." L'owen looked skyward. "Magically, I think."

"Nuts."

"Would you just go away?" Akita asked the Orc.

"Sure, sure!" S'Am paused for a moment. "Want me to return wand?" He tried to stifle a smile but wasn't very successful. "I do that for you. Save you trip."

"No," said Akita, "just get going before I lock you up."

Not wanting to be arrested for what would surely end up being his first actual conviction, S'Am made a quick exit.

"Magically, you say?" Akita asked.

"If that's what that crack of thunder was on this clear blue day," offered Julie, "then the answer is yes." She smiled. "Which means they went to Maca's! Let's go see what she gave them."

"Maca's not here. She heard that the Council of Elves were convening and she went to it. Seems the Elves are riled up." Akita's eyes got large. "I wonder if it has to do with those three you had me follow out of town."

"Uh oh," said Nulu. "That Gnome."

Akita scowled. "What'd Grimbledung do now?" He spread his arms wide. "I mean, he's not even here and he's causing trouble!"

"Seems while he was captured by the Foreboding Forest Elves, he stole their thousand-year old spices." Explained Julie.

"Of course he did."

"And," she continued, "they have just delivered an ultimatum that if they are not returned by late next week, Julesville will be no more."

"Seems reasonable." Akita crossed his arms. "That Gnome."

"But if Maca is gone, who is running her shop? Or is it closed?" Nulu looked at Julie. "And, if she's closed up, who else would have magical transportation items in town?"

"Well, Maca's gone but she might have someone running it for her. Let's start there," suggested Julie. "Akita, want to come along in case those two broke in and stole something to transport themselves to Cuticle?"

Akita shrugged. “I’ll go, but there’s no way those two broke in. If they did, there’d be more than one crack of thunder on this pleasant day.” He smiled.

“So this gal has a pretty good security system?” L’owen asked.

“Oh, it’s a Demon.”

“That tough?”

Akita shook his head at the Elf. “No, no; it’s an *actual Demon*.”

No one said anything for a moment.

“Well, let’s go there and maybe get a clue on how they got to Cuticle,” said Julie. “We need to get ahead of this impending destruction.” She shook her head. “If anyone even suggests I run for reelection, I’ll bop them on the nose.”

As the group started toward Maca’s shop, Flora lagged behind- she was staring at the sign.

“Flora, you coming with?” Julie asked.

Flora shook her head. “I’ve got an errand to run before the mood leaves me.”

“Oh, all right then, I’ll see you back…”

Flora turned and walked away as Nulu was speaking. Overtaken by fury.

And the need for a whip.

Chapter 20
Taking Stock of Stocks

Grimbledung stretched as he woke up. "Are we there yet?"

"Where?" Drimblerod asked as he put down the book he was reading.

"There."

"Technically, I think we're here," said RatOx.

"So, we're here?" Grimbledung sat up. "That didn't take long."

"Well, we're always here," said RatOx. "Of course."

"And once we get there, it becomes here," said Drimblerod, picking up where RatOx left off. "And there is someplace else because then we're here not there."

"All right you two. Where are we?"

"Here," said Drimblerod and RatOx at the same time.

Grimbledung stood in the back of the wagon and looked around. "How close do you figure we are to Old Jute?"

Drimblerod stood and looked ahead. "Well, I can't see the town yet so I'd say another hour or so."

"Why don't you use that looking glass and see what you can see," suggested RatOx.

"We should have gone by carpet." Grimbledung frowned. "We'd have been there by now."

Drimblerod shook his head. "I'm not getting on one of those temperamental things. Getting dumped to the ground from two hundred feet when it gets tired of flying is not how I want to end up."

"Well, if you find a nice stable Nain, I can't see that happening."

"I'd rather fly on a broom."

Drimblerod nodded at RatOx. "Now there's a nice, stable flying device. Never heard of a broom just up and dumping a passenger."

"What about bubbles? I hear that's a real fancy way to go."

"Yeah, that's what I want to do is get inside a fragile soap bubble and float along with the wind. Takes a whole lot of powerful, evil magic to keep a soap bubble from popping. Never trust *anyone* who travels by bubble; they're up to no good. Every. Single. One. Of. Them."

"You been crossed by someone who travels by bubble?" Grimbledung eyed his partner. "You seem kind of bitter."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Not me personally, but I had some drinks with this really well-spoken scarecrow that warned me about folks who travel by bubble."

Grimbledung nodded. "Well, if you can't believe a scarecrow, we've got big problems." He looked around again. "Say, we cross into the Shambler Plains from the Rolling Foothills yet?"

"About an hour ago," said RatOx.

"Hey, you want to be a Shambler now that we're on your plains?"

RatOx considered that. "Well, I suppose it would be all right; after all, there are herds of Shamblers out here. That's handy, right?"

"Sure, sure; it gives the Trolls something to eat," agreed Grimbledung.

"Maybe I'll just leave well enough alone then."

Grimbledung clambered into the front of the wagon. "Suit yourself." He picked up the spying glass.

"Do not look at the sun with that. Again."

"I swear it waved at me." Grimbledung looked through the glass at the surrounding hills. "This looks like the Rolling Foothills."

"Probably because it is." Said Drimblerod.

"Now that we're here but aren't there yet."

"Rat, I'm warning you…"

"How's this: we'll get there when we get there." Drimblerod waggled his ears.

"That's not much better." Grimbledung swiveled around and looked at his partner through the spyglass. He leaned back. "Not so close!"

Drimblerod put his eye up to the large end of the glass. "You're really far away, Grim!"

"If this makes things seem closer, why can't it just *make* them closer?"

"Just be patient, Grim; we'll be there soon."

"But I wanna be there now, Drim." Grimbledung exhaled. "I'm bored, you know."

"I figured as much."

"Well, I figured we'd be at the mine already. I was asleep for a long time, I think."

Drimblerod looked at the sky. "It's not yet noon."

"Of the same day I fell asleep?"

"Yes."

"Rolton chips. I was hoping to miss most of the journey." Grimbledung snapped the spyglass shut.

"The journey is the best part," said RatOx.

"Really?"

"Well, present company excepted, of course," Rat added with a chortle.

"You're a laugh a minute." Grimbledung sat down hard.

"I aim to please."

Drimblerod tucked his book into his pack. "I say we stop for lunch in a little bit. Stretch our legs and such. Then we'll get into town in time for dinner."

"My legs are stretched enough as it is," said RatOx. "I'll just sit for a while."

"You tired?" Drimblerod asked.

RatOx shook his head. "No, actually this is a very strong form to be in. I think I could walk for days without any problems. I barely even notice the wagon either."

Drimblerod scrunched up his nose. "Well, since we're out in the middle of nowhere, maybe you can be a Shambler until we run into someone. As long as it doesn't make you more tired."

"You don't like my work?" Grimbledung tut-tutted.

"It's fine to look at," Drimblerod said as he wrinkled his nose again, "but smelling it is a different story."

"You want a story?" Grimbledung bounced in his seat.

"I don't think that's what he meant," tried RatOx. But it was too late.

Grimbledung cleared his throat. "All right... there were these three brothers who were traveling at twilight…."

"Are they related?" RatOx interrupted.

"By blood *and* marriage, of course." Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "Quit interrupting."

"Did they marry into blood?" Interrupted Drimblerod.

Grimbledung ignored him. "And as they walked, these three brothers reached a river too treacherous too cross.…"

"Where are they going?"

"What time of day is it?"

"… sometime past evening time. Maybe close to midnight possibly. *That's not important*," continued Grimbledung. "Since they weren't learned in the magical arts…"

"Were they dumb?" Rat asked.

"That's not the same as unlearned," said Drimblerod. "But they may in fact be…"

"They decided to cross anyway," Grimbledung pressed on.

"To do what?" Drimblerod asked.

"Probably eat," RatOx said. "That's what I'd do."

"What were they going to eat?" Drimblerod waggled his ears.

"THE THREE BROTHERS CAME TO A TRECHEROUS RIVER. WHEN THEY TRIED TO CROSS, THEY FELL IN AND DIED!" Grimbledung screeched.

"I was going to ask if it had a moral," said RatOx.

"Grimbledung has no morals," offered Drimblerod.

"If you think I'm going to tell another story with you two acting this way," said Grimbledung, "you've got another thing coming." He crossed his arms and pouted.

"Well, now that *that* is out of the way, how about lunch?" Drimblerod patted his partner on the shoulder. "Want something to eat? I know how story-telling builds an appetite."

Grimbledung snorted. "I'm not sure I'm hungry."

RatOx planted his feet, bringing the wagon to an abrupt halt. "What did I just hear?"

"Grimbledung said he wasn't hungry."

"That's not what I said and you know it." Grimbledung didn't uncross his arms. "I said I wasn't *sure* if I was hungry or not." He snorted again for good measure.

"Well, that's still something." RatOx grinned wide. "If you want, Grimbledung, you can finish your story over lunch."

Grimbledung uncrossed his arms. "Well…"

"And we promise not to interrupt this time," assured Drimblerod.

"I suppose that would be nice."

Drimblerod looked around. There was really not much to see besides rolling hills. "Any place is as good as any other when you're on the Rolling Foothills."

Grimbledung hopped off the wagon. "Unless you're dealing with a band of angry Trolls, then being in any other place besides where you currently are is better than staying where you currently are instead of any other place you could be because angry trolls aren't very sociable."

Drimblerod considered that for a moment. "I think that's the most confusing thing I've heard all day."

"That's because Grimbledung's been asleep most of the day," admitted RatOx.

"I can hear you two, you know."

Drimblerod nodded. "Well, we'll just try and be cordial if we run into any Trolls."

"Change me back, Grim, so I can get a non-grazing meal in me." RatOx shook his head. "And maybe I can just be a Shambler when we're moving again."

Grimbledung shielded his eyes with his hand as he scanned the area. "Doesn't seem to be anyone around. I suppose that'd work." He brandished his wand. "Ready?"

"Always."

Ovibos moschatus
Transmutis Completes

Rodentus Grigo!

Grimbledung intoned as he hacked his wand at RatOx. "Better?"

Rat flashed to his normal size, slipping out of the harness as he shrunk. "Just about perfect," he said when he hit the ground. He twitched his tattered whiskers. "That reminds me, Grim. You know when I was a tiny Shambler and was kidnapped and sent to that mine?"

"Sure. Those were fairly recent events."

"Well, remember when I was still a rat in the top of Big Julie's windmill…"

"I was unconscious for most of that part, but I think I can follow along."

"Good. Well, when I was…"

"GRIMBLEDUNG!"

Rat ducked.

Grimbledung ducked.

Drimblerod fumed. "What have you done?"

"I changed Rat back," said Grimbledung as he slid his wand up his sleeve into his wrist harness. "Of course." He turned to look at his partner. He was standing in the back of the wagon. Fuming. "Why?"

"Where is the food?"

"We ate it that first morning. Right after Nulu gave it to us."

Drimblerod moved to the backrest. He put his hands on it and leaned forward. "Not the food Nulu gave us for breakfast…"

"Well, you're going to have to be more specific than that, I think."

Drimblerod took several deep breaths. "The food that we resupplied with at South Jute because you loused up that one single thing when you went to see Pozzuoli!"

"Ohhh; *that* food."

"Yes; ohhhh, that food."

Drimblerod stared at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung stared at Drimblerod.

Rat didn't want to make eye contact with either of the Gnomes, so he scampered out of their line of sight.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Grimbledung moved to the side of the wagon. "I was sleeping while I was back here so I know I didn't mess with it." He narrowed his eyes. "What did *you* do with it?"

"What? Me?" Drimblerod shook his fist. "You think I did something with it?"

"Well, that's the only thing I can think of." Grimbledung wheeled around and pointed at Rat. "Unless *Rat* is the culprit." He nodded. "Oh yes, I'll get to the bottom of this mystery!"

Chapter 21
The Case of the Missing Case of Food

There I was, out in the middle of nowhere when a case dropped on me like a Tolkien of Orcs. There was food missing and it needed to be found. Finding things is what I'm good at. That and solving mysteries.

Grim Noir is the name. Being professional is my game.

That and dames. I'm game for dames too.

Chapter 22
No Noir is Good Noir. No Noir I know.

"Grimbledung, you will *not* be solving any mysteries." Drimblerod shook his finger at his me. "You're the one responsible for this and you're not going to shift the blame on anyone else! So you can just drop that point of view right now!"

Now he was shouting.

At me.

Angrily even. Normally I'm the level-headed kind of Gnome that can deal with that sort of thing without getting my hackles up. And believe me- I have some hackles that are raring to go at a moment's...

"And stop that inner monologue this instant!"

Chapter 23
Flora- Shading Toward Gray

Flora rushed into the Duck Inn and Dine. "Sorry I'm late," she said as she quickly tied her apron.

"What's the excuse this time?" Wil asked. He had heard several outlandish reasons for Flora's recent inability to arrive on time. "I'll bet it's a good one." He smirked as he wiped out a glass.

Flora picked up her tray. "Well you see, I had this order I had put in and I've been waiting for the delivery."

"Uh huh."

She wiped her tray with her apron. "And it's one of those orders that Gray's Wholesalers say you have to sign for so you have to be there or they take it back because they won't just leave it out front because it's too expensive and too big to just leave out where someone could take it because that might happen since it's a big order and expensive so you have to be there to sign for it when it arrives so you can move it inside your place so Gray's is no longer responsible for it because you accepted it."

Wil smiled. "Nice, very nice. Except you left off one minor detail."

Flora looked up at the man. "What's that?"

"What's the order?"

Flora shrugged. "Some wheels and an axle is all."

"Wheels? Like wagon wheels?"

Flora nodded. "Yeah, two of them."

"Well, that is a large and expensive order. *Very* strange though."

"What's so *very* strange about it?" Flora tucked her tray under her arm. She looked away from him.

"Well, it's simply strange because you don't own a wagon as far as I know." He slid the glass across to a group of cleaned glasses and put a new one into the crook of his arm. "And ordering an axel for the un-owned wagon is the '*very*' part of the very strange."

"Well, it's not against the law to order wheels, the last time I checked," she said testily. She continued to not make eye contact with him.

"No one said it was illegal." He started to wipe out the glass. "Just strange. Very strange in fact." He waved the cloth around. "Like ordering an extra-long wood bed when you're the size of a Gnome which was the excuse the last time you were late. Or that spool of heavy rope even though you don't own a boat the time before that." He put down the glass. "Or those shackles earlier last week." A thought occurred to him. A disturbing one.

"Well, it's for little projects here and there is all. Crafting and such." She turned to face the dining area. "It's not unusual and really none of your business."

"Well, it *is* my business when my employee comes in late all the time because of these strange purchases she has to have delivered to her quiet cottage at the edge of town." He paused as he considered his disturbing thought. "If someone didn't know better, they'd think you were building a rack in your basement."

She pivoted to stare at him for a long moment. "That's just absurd. Nothing could be farther from the truth, in fact."

"That is a relief."

Flora turned and walked toward the dining area. "I don't have a basement."

Chapter 24
The Case of the Food Apparently Wasn't a Case After All

"Rolton Chips," I said. "Back to third."

Chapter 25
Back to Taking Stock of the Stock

"Okay Grimbledung, where is our food?" Drimblerod asked.

Grimbledung moved to the back of the wagon and peered in. He let out a relieved whistle. "Well, there it is." He pointed at a largish box. "You had me worried, Drim." He hung his arms over the top of the sideboard. "That's sure a relief!"

Drimblerod let the hinged lid of the box clatter open. "This is not a relief, Grim." He pointed into the box. "This is maybe a week's worth of rations if we're careful."

"That's impossible!"

Drimblerod crossed his arms. "Why's that?"

"Because I specifically said we needed two weeks of…" His voice trailed off. "Uhm…"

"Two? Two weeks? You were supposed to get food for a *month*. I figured this was a box of holding or something and it was packed with food." He looked into the box. "This is a regular wood box."

"Well, I'll have to bring that up to that mercantile when we see him again." Grimbledung shook his head. "Bad form that."

"Bad form? You were supposed to get a month's worth of food from that mercantile to replace the months' worth of food you *didn't* get from Pozzuoli!" Drimblerod worked the hasp on one of the other two boxes in the wagon. "That means these are regular boxes as well then." He nodded as he flipped the lid open. "Bed rolls, canvas, some rope."

"Ohhh! See? There's the rope I asked for!" Grimbledung smiled. "Handy stuff, rope." He stuck out his tongue. "So there."

Drimblerod moved to the last box and opened it. "*Another* couple of bedrolls, some hard tack and some smoked beef. And a lantern and a couple of slickers." He flipped the lid shut again and sat on the box. "We've

maybe, *maybe* two weeks of food if we're careful." He gestured at the two casks. "There's more alcohol that anything else."

"Well, that's good news."

Drimblerod shook his head. "One thing. I asked you to do one thing to fix the one thing you didn't do when I asked you to do one thing." He stood and kicked a box lid shut. "Twice now I've asked you to do one thing."

"Does that equal three?"

Drimblerod stared at his partner.

"At least we can pick up supplies when we go to Old Jute," offered Rat. "Right?"

"Why, Grim? Why is there so little?" Drimblerod asked.

Grimbledung looked into the back of the wagon. "Well, I couldn't rightly tell that mercantile exactly where we were going, now could I?"

"Yes, you could, Grim; then he'd have given us the proper amount of supplies. That mercantile doesn't care where we're going. You don't even have to mention that part; just say 'a month's worth of food for the open road, please and thank you' and that's it!"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Well, that wouldn't have been a friendly conversation at all. And then the truth would have gotten out and that sneaky Human would have run off ahead of us and gotten the treasure all for himself!"

"I don't know how you talked me into this." Drimblerod looked back the way they had come. "We should just go home and try again later when we're more prepared."

Grimbledung flailed his arms. "No, no! We're well on our way! We have to keep going." He pointed in the direction of Old Jute. "Old Jute isn't that far away. We can pick up supplies there and talk to that innkeeper that is supposed to know the way!" He brought his hands together plaintively. "I was trying to keep our trip secret is all!"

"You know," said Rat. "Pozzuoli *and* that mercantile Human might have known about the mine and could have given us more directions besides that it is in some rocky terrain overlooking a lake."

"That didn't occur to me." Grimbledung frowned. "You think he might know where it is?"[17]

Rat twitched his whiskers. "Besides, Pozzuoli is a friend and I can't see him doing something conniving like that."

"He did kill me once," reminded Grimbledung.

"Well, there were extenuating circumstances," countered Rat.

Grimbledung nodded at Rat. "That's true, I suppose. He's been nothing but helpful since then."

"Well, you can ask him about the mine when we get back."

"But Drim, that's later!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Let's go to Old Jute for more supplies!"

Drimblerod looked in the direction of Old Jute, then back towards the toll bridge, then back to Old Jute. "Fine. We can go to Old Jute." He raised a finger. "But if we can't get properly outfitted there, then we turn around. I'm not going to risk heading into the unknown wilds with what we have right now."

"Deal." Grimbledung nodded furiously. "Deal, deal, deal!" Then he raised a finger. "But we keep quiet about the mine in Old Jute since we don't know anyone there and those people might just try and jump our claim."

Drimblerod nodded. "I suppose that sounds reasonable."

"Well, let's get something to eat then head to good old Old Jute to see about visiting an outfitter and that innkeeper." Drimblerod pulled a small sack out of the first box. "And I suppose we can listen to the rest of that story."

Grimbledung shook his head. "That's it; Death gets all three brothers at the treacherous river. In turn they fall in and hit their heads on the rocks just below the surface and drown. End of story." Grimbledung smiled. "It's called the Deathly Shallows."

"That is kind of a happy ending, I suppose," said Rat.

Grimbledung nodded. "The fellow at the docks always smiles when he tells me that story."

"He tells you the same story every time? Doesn't that get boring?"

Grimbledung nodded at his partner. "Sometimes. But one just doesn't interrupt Death when he's telling a story. He really, really doesn't like it." He thought for a moment. "Oh, and he cheats at checkers but you're supposed to act like you don't notice."

"I'll keep that in mind if I ever run into him."

"I think I'll just avoid him," said Rat.

"Well, sooner or later, everyone's going to sit on the dock of the bay of Death. You'll be sitting in the morning sun. Then you'll be sitting playing checkers when the evening comes. Watching the ships roll in. Then you'll watch them roll away again."

"Ships-*sss*?"

"Lots of folks moving around in the Hereafter. Can't carry them all in one ominous black gondola."

Rat shuddered. "Why don't we talk about something more cheerful?"

"I'm getting really good at checkers," offered Grimbledung. "Really good. Almost won last time, in fact." He frowned. "Not sure what that'll get me though; he said we were playing for some fish."

"Fish?"

"Yeah, Cod, Trout... I think it might have been Sole. Something like that anyway."

"Oh dear. Grim, don't play that guy for... fish."

"No?"

"No."

Grimbledung nodded. "Fine then. But I almost won some really nice steak knives off him last time."

"Don't do it." Warned Drimblerod. "Well, how about the mine? What do we know about this lost mine?" Drimblerod tried as he steered the conversation away from Death.

"There's a treasure of wands and gold in it."

Drimblerod pulled a sack from the box. "Anything more specific you got from the Gargoyles or that Orc?" He opened the sack and rummaged in it.

Grimbledung thought for a moment as his partner pulled out several pieces of wrapped jerky and some hard tack. "Let's see… Pollux said that the mine had a secret passage that was full of wands."

"Did he mention where it was?" Rat sniffed some of the hard tack. "That would be helpful."

"He said it was hidden somewhere in the mine." Grimbledung picked up a piece of jerky. "Well, that narrows it down, I think." He bit off a piece and chewed.

"Narrowed down to somewhere in the mine isn't all that narrowed down, Grim." Drimblerod tore a piece of meat off and put it in front of Rat. "Near the entrance? Near the back?"

Grimbledung swallowed. "I remember Castor said something about a ledge."

"There aren't many of those in a mine," Rat picked up his piece of jerky.

"Really?"

"No! The place will be full of ledges and outcroppings and rocks!" Rat shook his jerky at the Gnome. "That's really no help at all."

"How big of a mine is it?" Drimblerod put a piece of jerky on some hard tack and bit down on both.

"They didn't say." Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "S'Am said the entrance was covered with some sort of mechanical spinning trap of some sort. And some bushes. That narrows it down even more I think."

"You're kidding. The best you have for directions is that we're looking for a hidden entrance to a mine of undetermined size that has a secret passage on a ledge." Rat looked at Drimblerod. "The toll bridge isn't that far behind us yet."

"No, no!" Whined Grimbledung. "I'm telling you we can find this place and the treasures inside. We'll be rich!"

Drimblerod sighed. "Well, we have the shop taken care of so we might as well give it a look." He raised a finger. "But we're not going to waste a lot of time looking."

"A month?"

"No, Grim."

"A week?"

"I'll give it a couple of days after we talk to the innkeeper," said Drimblerod. "That should be about when we get to the right area."

"But we don't even know the right area," said Rat. He sat on his haunches.

Drimblerod frowned. "Well, I've never been farther east than South Jute."

"I've been to Old Jute," offered Grimbledung. "I know that that's there."

"That's where the road that heads south to Cool Springs is," said Rat. "I remember that town."

"Anything around it?"

Rat shook his head at Drimblerod. "No idea. We came up from Cool Springs to it then headed west toward Salt Flats. I remember the falls were really loud and if you got close to them you got wet."

"See? The pieces of the puzzle are falling together as we eat!"

Drimblerod shook his head. "What pieces? A loud waterfall isn't a piece of the puzzle, Grim."

"Well, maybe it's one of those middle pieces that you think really doesn't help with the overall puzzle but then as you get going, you realize that it shows you the actual picture you need to know to solve the puzzle and after that one piece, all the other pieces just fall right into place because now you know what the puzzle should look like when it's together."

"The corner pieces are the most important part when you're putting together a puzzle," said Drimblerod. "You do the corners and edges first and work your way in. Haven't you ever put together a puzzle?"

Grimbledung put the rest of his jerky in his mouth. He shook his head. "Nope. I've seen them done though," he said as he chewed. "Exciting stuff."

"I never thought of puzzle solving as a spectator sport."

"I went to the regional championships once. It was riveting," assured Grimbledung. "Rivet- ing."

The three moved to the back of the wagon to eat what would be a good portion of their meager supplies even though they weren't sure if Old Jute even had a mercantile.[18]

Chapter 26
There's No Jute Like Old Jute. No Jute at All

"Old Jute," said Drimblerod. "Finally."

"Yeah; finally a town that puts us closer to where we need to be!" Grimbledung clapped his hands. "We're getting there!"

"Where we need to be... where we *should* be is selling wands back in Julesville."

"Oh pushaw, Drim," said Grimbledung, "we have progress right here before us. Right in front of this here mercantile even."

The trio looked up at the massive two-story mercantile.[19]

"Very nice indeed," said Rat. "They're bound to have everything we need in there somewhere."

"And this brings up another issue that I really didn't want to deal with."

"How we're going to split up the treasure?"

Drimblerod shook his head at his partner. "The amount of coins we have left in our possession."

"I must say that that that should be plenty, I should say," said Grimbledung. "Plent-eee. I should say I must say it even."

"Well, it was plent-eee for what I was expecting."

"Everything but the unexpected, I'd imagine."

"Grim, we have done a complete resupply at every single town we have passed, as well as that shady-looking Gnome that had that shack under the tree east of South Jute."[20]

"Not sure I liked that fellow's profit margin."

"Me neither but since our supplies needed to be restocked, we had to pay his prices."

Grimbledung scrunched up his face. "Well what are we down to?"

"A gold and four silver."

"What, each? That's not too bad, right?"

"Total, Grim. That's the grand total we have among ourselves for everything we're going to need until we are back home."

Grimbledung shook his head. "Now that's not right..."

"You're telling me!"

Grimbledung ignored his partner's interruption. "… because when we find the Lost Picman's Mine we'll travel back in style. Why, we will have more riches than we can imagine."

"I don't know about that," said Rat, "I can imagine an awful lot."

"That means we're just going to pick up the basics..."

"But Drim..."

"The *basics* and then see how we are doing." Drimblerod pointed his finger at his partner. "We're going to have to spend the night in town and I would like to do it in a proper bed." He pointed at Rat. "Rat, while I'm doing this, think you can go to the inn and try and arrange for a place for us to bed down."

"One bed?"

"I'd really prefer two."

"Should I take that as a personal affront?" Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"I'm pretty sure Drimblerod and I will be the ones affronted personally being in the same room as you."

Grimbledung grinned wide. "Hey, aren't we supposed to have a full moon tonight?"

"All of a sudden I'm sure we're going to be affronted."

"And depending on what I have for dinner, behinded." Grimbledung winked.

"On that note, I'll see about two small rooms." Rat gave a wave to the pair and scampered off the wagon.

Drimblerod waved at Rat. "Meet you at the inn," he called.

Rat did a little hop to show he had heard his friend.

"Grim, let's get the basics." He pointed at the door. "This place should work out nicely, I think."

"Why's that?" Grimbledung looked up at the large shop. "Looks like any other shop to me."

"That sign says 'kids and pets welcome'. It's got to be a friendly shop to have that on the door."

"I suppose that is true. Anyone who likes kids and animals can't be all bad."

"My thoughts exactly." Drimblerod gave a short bow. "After you, partner. Let's go get those basics."

Grimbledung waggled his ears again. "Basics and more."

"Basics."

Grimbledung nodded. "And more."

Drimblerod pointed into the store. "In you go and be on your bestest behavior."

"Bestest is what I do best." Grimbledung skipped into the shop.

With a sigh, Drimblerod followed his partner in.

"Morning gents," said the Dwarf behind the counter. "Haven't seen the two of you around here before."

"That's because we weren't here until just now. Before we were there." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Which is elsewhere now that we're here."

"Uhm..." Started the Dwarf. "Fine, fine, I suppose. You folks new to town?"

"This town? Yes." Grimbledung smiled. "Towns in general? No."

"We're traveling by and are looking to resupply ourselves." Drimblerod glanced at his partner. "We're looking for…."

"A goodly amount of supplies," finished Grimbledung.

Drimblerod closed the door. "A reasonable amount of supplies. An affordable amount of supplies."

"Goodly?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "I think you need to find a different word until we get back home and have an income again."

"Heaps?"

"That's worse than goodly."

Grimbledung stuck out his lip.

"You look absurd."

Grimbledung switched- sticking out his lower lip instead.

"Well, that's an improvement at least."

"A goodly one?"

"You two gonna buy anything?" The Dwarf behind the counter said. "Or stand there tossing idle banter back and forth."

"It's what we do," offered Grimbledung.

"Well, do it while you're picking out things. Or at least do something else."

Grimbledung scratched his butt.

"That's not an improvement," the Dwarf said. "Goodly or otherwise."

"See? Now you're getting into the swing of the banter." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Say, how much for ten pounds of jerky?"

"All depends on the type."

"Meat," clarified Grimbledung.

The Dwarf stared at Grimbledung. "You doing that on purpose?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "A goodly amount."

"Good Dwarf, we're going to get some supplies." Drimblerod glanced at his partner. "Just the basics."

"And possibly more," Grimbledung added a wink. He noticed the display of ropes in a corner and quickly moved to it. "Oooh, ropes!"

"We are traveling on a budget."

"I am sure I can get you outfitted and keep you under budget." The Dwarf rubbed his hands together. "Do you need just provisions or are you in need of outdoor gear and wagon parts?"

"Just provisions." Drimblerod glanced at his partner again. "We seem to be running through those at an alarming rate. We've more outdoor gear than we know what to do with."

"Fine, fine. Basic provisions'll be back on the side." The Dwarf gestured to the far corner of the shop where barrels, boxes, and sacks were stacked. "Let's go take a look."

"Excellent, Mister Dwarf, I appreciate your understanding and not trying to upsell us."

"Well, don't count that out just yet." The Dwarf smiled. "There's always room for an upsell or two." The Dwarf pointed at the sacks. "Provisions are all here."

Grimbledung slid to a stop beside the pair. "Lookit this length of rope!" He twirled it over his head. "I think we need some rope as well."

"You have rope in the wagon."

"But this one is nice. Nicer than those old ropes. I'd have to say it's the nicerest rope I've seen in days."

"Basics, Grim."

"Well, let's see what we can do about the provisions and maybe we can work out a deal for the rope," the Dwarf said with a smile. He rubbed his hands together again.

Drimblerod exhaled. "Fine, fine. Just don't pick out anything else."

Grimbledung scampered back to the display, twirling the rope over his head as he went.

"So... provisions. You doing your own cooking or you want already prepared just add water and heat up meals?"

"Cooking is fine. It's a nice wind-down to a day's events."

"Traveling is that exciting?"

Drimblerod looked over at his partner. He now had several ropes wrapped around himself and was twirling a bright red one over his head.

"It can be, yes." He raised his voice. "Grim, don't break anything!"

The Dwarf nodded. "Oh, that's the quickest way to have to buy something you didn't come in for. That's why the sign outside says 'kids and pets welcome'." He rubbed his hands together.

"I see." Drimblerod narrowed his eyes. "You don't have a brother named Pozzuoli by any chance, do you?"

"Nope. Not that I know of."

Drimblerod shrugged. "It was just a thought. In any case, I think we'll take a sack of rice." He pointed at a fifty-pound bag, then turned to look at Grimbledung. He had a barrel on its side and was walking on it, making it roll back and forth. "And I hate to say it, but a fifty-pound bag of beans as well."

"That's a lot of rice and beans. Need some meat to go with it?"

"What's the sacks cost?"

"For you, a... two silver each."

Inside, Drimblerod cringed- he was almost up to half a gold coin. "Will you bring that down if we get some jerked chicken as well ?"

A crash made the two of them turn and look.

Grimbledung's feet were sticking out of a pile of cans. "Who put these cans here?"

"Grim, restack those cans and stop messing with that barrel!" Drimblerod shook his head. "Sorry about that."

The Dwarf shrugged. "Nothing breakable over there, so..."

"No upsell yet."

The Dwarf rubbed his hands together. "Not yet. So some jerked chicken then?" He gestured to the counter. "Meats are behind the counter. Got several kinds so come sample which you want. There's no returns on foodstuffs, of course."

"Free samples?" Grimbledung sat up. "Of jerky you say?"

"Once you restack those cans and put that barrel back where you got it."

Grimbledung scrambled to his feet, kicking cans in all directions. "I'll be right there!"

"Fine, Grim; meet you at the counter."

The Dwarf moved quickly behind the counter. "Right, we have fifty pounds of rice and beans so that would mean you probably need a good fifteen, twenty pounds of meat." He rubbed his hands together. "Now are you sure the rest of your troop is going to be fine with just rice and beans?"

"Rest of my troop?"

The Dwarf nodded. "The others traveling with you, of course."

"As far as..."

"Gnomes? Humans? Fellow Dwarves? You know; folk traveling with you. Some sort of fellowship perhaps?"

Drimblerod gestured at his partner. "This is it for our troop. Except of course for a rat."

"Of course."

"So what sort of meats are you offering today?"

The Dwarf rubbed his hands together. "Well, we have a wide variety of meats from a variety of beasts." He gestured behind him to a large cabinet with dozens of drawers. "Are you interested in chicken then, or something more exotic?"

"Exotic?"

"How about roasted Shambler? Quite tasty and surprisingly tender."

"No. Definitely not. That traveling companion I mentioned that is a rat spends a bit of his day pulling our wagon as a Shambler. That would cause issues, I think."

"Understandable, understandable of course." He gestured at a lower row of drawers. "Let's stick in the chicken row then."

Grimbledung skidded to a stop, hitting the counter with his chest. "Chicken sounds great!" He put out his hand. "Most everything tastes like it anyway. What sort'a free chicken you gots?"

The shop door behind Grimbledung swung open. He did a little hop. "Hey! No sneaking up!" He waggled his butt. "Grrrr!"

"Excuse me?" The woman said.

Grimbledung nodded. "No harm done, right Drim?"

"Nope; no drooling or excessive howling, so everything's fine."

"If you say so." The woman pulled the child closer to her side and gave him a worried look.

"What's that look supposed to mean?" Grimbledung waggled his butt again. "Grrrr!"

The young boy reached out and scratched Grimbledung behind his ear.

Grimbledung's foot thumped on the ground. After a moment, he did another little hop. "Hey now, stop that!" He considered it for a moment. "Once you move to the right and down a little."

The youth obliged and began to scratch the back of Grimbledung's neck.

Grimbledung's foot began thumping again. "Yeah… right there."

The Dwarf behind the counter cleared his throat.

The boy stopped scratching.

The woman raised an eyebrow.

Grimbledung frowned.

"Morning Grimhilde," said the Dwarf. "What are you in the market for today?" He absently rubbed his hands together. "Morning, Parton."

"Morning, Mister Paul!" Said the seven-year-old boy. "Whatcha got today that's really neat?"

"Well, I just got in some new glass floats for fishing nets. Really neat things, I'd say." He gestured toward the far corner of the shop.

"Just stay by me," ordered Grimhilde. She eyed the two Gnomes. "For more reasons than one."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Glass floats you say?" He eyed Grimhilde. "Say, do *you* float?" He eyed her up and down. "Want to go floating along in some river, or maybe a tub even?" He grinned. "Been on the road a long time you know."

"Wait- what?" Grimhilde took a step back. "I must say..."

"In water, of course." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Floating."

"Well, I never!" Grimhilde shook with rage.

Grimbledung jerked a thumb at the woman "Witch," he said matter-of-factly. "They can't stand water. Common knowledge, that."

"Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire!" Scolded Drimblerod. "You can't just call that female names like that; you were very forward with her!"

"Who called her names?"

"You just did!"

The Dwarf nodded. "I don't think I want to serve folk that insult ladies that come in the store."

"Who insulted who?" Grimbledung looked back and forth. "Or whom for that matter?"

"You called that nice woman a witch."

"Who?" Grimbledung looked around. "You mean that witch and the kid?"

Drimblerod started to nod then caught himself.

"Probably her familiar. Or she'll cook him later on." Grimbledung gave a wink. "She's a witch you know."

"Stop calling her that!"

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "You heard it yourself; she doesn't float and never has gotten near water."

Drimblerod exhaled loudly. "Just because someone doesn't float does *NOT* make them a witch!"

"That's an old wives' tale."

Grimbledung pointed at the Dwarf. "Ah ha! Now who's calling her names?"

"What?" Paul looked from Grimbledung to Grimhilde and back again. "Who me?"

"Well, I never!" Grimhilde took Parton by the hand and stormed out of the store.

"She is one of my best customers, you know," said Paul.

Drimblerod rubbed his temples. "Can we just get back to the jerky?"

"Then we can look at the floats." He glanced at the door as it closed. "Since they float in water."

"We are not going anywhere near the water, Grim. We absolutely positively do not need floats."

"Well, if you're going to waffle like that…" He took a step towards where Paul had gestured.

"Let's just get our shopping done, Grim. Then we can get back on our adventure. Our supplies alone are going to drain pretty much the last of our funds."

"We're that low on money? Really?" Grimbledung said. "Why, this is the first I've heard of it!" He reluctantly nodded. "Floats would have been neat though."

"What're we up to for the beans and rice?" Drimblerod asked. "And for the jerky."

Grimbledung hopped up and rolled -very ungracefully- over the counter to the other side. "What'd ya say, Paulie?" He said when he hit the floor. "Haggling is what we Gnomes do best," He narrowed his eyes, "So be forewarned." He elbowed the Dwarf. "Ehhh?"

"You said something about four silver for the beans and rice. If we go light at fifteen pounds of jerky, what will you do on the lot?" Drimblerod asked as he leaned forward. "To make a sale today?"

"Get him, Drim!"

"Eight silver for the lot!" Drimblerod tossed out.

"Yeah!" Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "What he said."

Paulious IronHammer, son of Theron Skees Stonefeet and master haggler squared his shoulders and narrowed *his* eyes at Grimbledung then Drimblerod. "Let's haggle then."

Haggling not seen in a hundred years ensued- even Fate looked over to see the commotion.

She was duly impressed.

Chapter 27
An Inn For All Seasons

Rat scampered down the street- he kept to the side because even though he was articulate, sometimes folks didn't actually try to engage him in conversation before deciding he was a garden-variety rodent and should be dealt with appropriately.

A Human sitting on a bench looked over as he moved toward him "Where you going in such a hurry little fella?" He asked.

Rat had noticed that sometimes people engaged him in conversation even when they were sure that he was not able to speak- in fact Humans were the worst perpetrators of this. He had seen Humans have entire conversations with dogs, goats, horses, and once a fish that was in the process of being caught. Not to mention numerous arguments with some contraption or another that was not working properly. Rat smiled- often his ability to speak flummoxed a Human. "Looking for a cheap Inn." Rat skidded to a stop in front of the man. He stood on his hind legs. "Know of any?"

If the man were at all surprised by a talking rat, he hid it well. "What's a rat need with an Inn? Can't you just sleep anywhere?"

Rat nodded. "Sure, sure. But my traveling companions..." He gave an apologetic shrug. "... Couple of Gnomes… aren't too keen on sleeping under some building."

"Prefer beds, huh?"

"Truth be told, sleeping indoors has really started growing on me," Rat admitted.

"I'm an outdoors kind of guy." The old man leaned forward past the covered sidewalk to look up at the sky. "Like the stars over my head. Fresh air."

Rat nodded. "I can understand that." He looked around. "So... A place to spend the night."

"Just passing through then?"

Rat examined the old man. He was unsure of how much information to give the elderly Human- Grimbledung and Drimblerod had been very clear that their final destination had to be a secret lest someone else get to the mine first. Still- what were the odds that this old man was a claim jumper? "We're just passing through town. Picking up some supplies on our way." He frowned. "Truth be told, we're actually lost at the moment."

"Where you trying to get to?"

Rat took a risk: "We're on our way to the Lost Picman's Mine."

The man stared at Rat for a long moment. "The what?"

"It's a mine that's lost."

"Picman you say? Never heard of the fellow."

Rat nodded. "That's probably why he's lost." Inside he cringed; worried that he had given up too much information.

"Nope; never heard of it." The old man said finally. He perked up. "But last night while sittin' at the tavern, there was this clown in the corner who was trying to trade pamphlets and maps for drinks. I think he might'a mentioned it now that I think about it."

"Clown? You mean acting like a buffoon or dressed up with a red nose?"

"A real buffoon. Talking up everyone, wanting to hand out maps or something. I was there to drink so I wasn't really paying attention to him. Prolly he's got a map to what you're looking for."

"That might be. Where was this tavern?"

"Up the road." The old man pointed. "Bout five blocks on the left."

"Do you remember what it was called?"

"The Minotaur's Tale. Big red Minotaur on it. Can't miss it." The man smiled. "And they got rooms on the top floor as well."

"Thanks very much." Rat gave a short bow. "If you make it there tonight, I'll be sure to have my companions buy you a drink."

The man perked up. "Well, that sounds like a deal then." He smacked his lips. "How soon till your companions start drinking?"

"Probably not until the sun goes down. But only because the one companion that would start drinking as soon as he got out of bed in the morning isn't in control of the money," admitted Rat. "If you see two Gnomes wandering past, point them toward the inn, will you?"

"Sure thing." The man smiled. "See you 'round sun down then." He gave a little wave. "Mayhap I can panhandle another couple of drinks by then so I can make a night of it." He looked left and right. "As long as the law doesn't put a damper on my panhandling."

"Good luck with that." Rat gave a wave of his own and then went in the direction the old man had pointed.

True to the old man's word, after about five blocks, Rat saw a large wooden sign hanging from the front of a large building- it had a muscular Minotaur on it. The Minotaur was leaning onto one edge of the sign as if it were a doorway. He was holding a piece of parchment and a quill. Since he was scampering along the walls of the shops, he wasn't able to see the top of the building- which was much more impressive than the sign. "Ahhh; tale, not tail. That's at least more appetizing." He waited by the door until a patron exited, then scooted in before the door closed. Rat scampered to the bar and hopped onto it. "Hey bartender," he called. Mainly to ensure that the other patrons realized he wasn't a run of the mill rat. "When you have a moment."

The bartender glanced down the bar at Rat. He raised an eyebrow. When Rat waved at him, he gave a nod.

Rat sat on his haunches. In front of him was a bowl of nuts. Figuring they were going to be patrons later on, he took a large one and began to nibble on it. By the time the bartender made it to him, he had eaten a half dozen nuts. He looked down at the bits of nuts at his feet. "Sorry about that; I kind of got carried away."

The bartender shrugged. "Folks usually eat them by the handful not one at a time. Besides; they're there to make you thirsty and buy more drinks." He raised an eyebrow again. "Need a drink?"

"Actually, no. Not at the present, anyway."

The eyebrow lowered. "Then stop eating my nuts. They're for paying patrons you know."

"That's me!" Rat nodded. "I actually need a room, so..."

"Like a cubby hole or something? Got a cigar box under the bar that might suit you."

"My traveling companions are two Gnomes; we need something with real beds."

"They send you to arrange for a room. What- are you the brains of the operation?"

"I absolutely am." Rat gave a wink with his good eye. "I am a key employee, in fact. Key. Just don't mention that to them; they like to think they're in charge."

"Got it." The bartender began to wipe the counter with an old rag. "So room for three then. For just the night?"

"Yes; we're passing through. You see we're on an…"

"Save the stories for when you're buying drinks." Said the bartender. "A room for the night'll be four copper."

"Do we get a complimentary drink with that?"

"What; each?"

Rat twitched his whiskers. "I can guarantee they'll put down at least four drinks each once you get them started. They are, after all, Gnomes and parched from days on the road."

"I can see why they sent you on ahead of them." He sighed. "Fine, a complimentary drink to get them going."

"Each?"

"Each."

"Deal." Rat twitched his half-tail.

The bartender leaned over and looked around Rat. "You got pockets or you planning on paying later?"

Rat held up his claws plaintively. "Rats aren't marsupials."

"Not sure I know what that means."

"Means if I carried a coin without said pouch, it wouldn't be comfortable and you'd not want it when I got it out. They'll pay when they get there."

"Should'a figured that much." He nodded knowingly. "'The mar-soup pals'll pay when they get here."

Rat resisted the urge to correct the man. "Absolutely." He twitched his whiskers again. "Mind if I just run up to the room till they get here?"

"How you going to unlock the door?"

Rat smirked. "When all is said and done, I am still a rat; I'm sure there's a loose floorboard or baseboard I can squeeze around."

"Room three oh five. Gotta get back to filling glasses anyway."

"Thanks!" He hopped off the bar and scampered off. "See you in a bit."

The bartender shrugged, then returned to filling drinks. After all, if one couldn't trust a talking rat, times were really tough.

Chapter 28
Burlapped in Old Jute

Grimbledung, Drimblerod, and Paul lay on the floor of the shop. Spent.

"Then it is settled."

Drimblerod wearily clapped his hands twice. "Settled on our end."

The Dwarf tugged at his beard. "And here."

Grimbledung sat up. He rubbed his belly. "Now that that is settled, what sort of jerky do you have to offer?"

"I thought we decided on something middle-of-the-road."

Paul sat up as well. "Yes, that's what was agreed on; something middle of the road gives you a selection of about four types of jerky," said Paul. "Anything from mildly spicy to not spicy at all." He rolled to his feet then moved behind the counter. Paul ran his hand over a series of drawers. "If you go with something spicier, then you're not having to buy spices to put in your beans and rice and that'll save you some money." He gave a wink. "And still have a tasty meal."

"Does the spicy stuff cost more than buying the plain and then adding spices?" Drimblerod raised an eyebrow.

The Dwarf tilted his hand back and forth. "Not unless you go to the far end of the heat range." He gave a genuine smile. "Really, if you go with a medium spicy jerky, then you can skip the spices and save a few copper."

"We'll do that then, thanks."

"Number six is probably what you're looking for." The Dwarf opened the drawer and pulled out two pieces of jerky about the length of his finger. "Right down the middle. Give this a try."

Grimbledung took his piece of jerky and smelled it. "Earthy and full bouquet." He licked it. "Fairly dry but still has some moisture." He nodded approvingly.

The Dwarf raised an eyebrow at him.

"He's a connoisseur of food," explained Drimblerod.

"I see."

Drimblerod popped his piece of jerky into his mouth. He gave an approving nod as he chewed. "I see what you mean; this will flavor the beans and rice nicely. Grim, what do you think?"

Grimbledung was chewing his piece of jerky with a stern look on his face. "Nice after-taste on the spices. Not too long of a linger.... Very nice indeed." He smacked his lips. "Still, not as spicy as it could be."

"We're just trying to give the beans and rice some flavor, Grim. We're not trying to win a competition with the stuff."

"What's the spicy stuff like?"

The Dwarf put his hand on the drawer at the very end of the row. "The spiciest?"

"Spiciest is what I do best."

With a shrug, the Dwarf opened the drawer and retrieved a small set of tongs from inside. He gingerly picked up a thin sliver of jerky. Even though it was chicken it was completely black. "It's called Witch's Finger." He handed it to Grimbledung. "Make sure you wash your hands after handling it."

Grimbledung waved at him dismissively as he took the jerky. "We Gnomes are *known* for being able to handle spicy food. Why I remember..." He took a whiff of the jerky. "Remem... reme... You sure this isn't the finger of some dead witch?" He moved the jerky to his other hand and smelled it. "Gads. That smells..." He smelled it again. "Like..." He looked at the twisted sliver of meat then at the Dwarf. "It can't be."

"Araakis Spice." Confirmed the Dwarf. "Very spicy and *very* hard to procure." He rubbed his hand together. "And very expensive."

"I don't think you should eat that, Grim. That stuff is legendary hot."

"Bah!" Grimbledung popped the meat in his mouth and began to chew. Tears streamed down his face. "Nice... bouquet.... that rampages over the entire tongue." He stuck out his tongue and panted. The sliver of meat was crumpled even more, but still intact in his mouth. "Gahhh! Teeth! On! Fire!"

"That's gross, Grim. Just swallow the thing." Drimblerod scrunched up his face. "That's gonna burn again in about eight to twelve hours, just so you know."

"Hot!" Grimbledung stomped his foot. "Hot!"

"Just swallow it!"

"Spit it out if you have to," suggested Paul. "I won't tell anyone you are a paper belly."

"Never!" Grimbledung pushed his head forward and swallowed hard. The jerky seemed to sear his throat all the way down. Even with the meat gone, his mouth was on fire. "Hot!" He reached up…

"Don't do..." The Dwarf said.

Grimbledung rubbed both of his eyes.

"Uh oh," said the Dwarf.

"Heeeyaaaahhh!" Grimbledung began to hop up and down. "I'm blind! I'M BLIND!"

"Open your eyes, Grim. You're not blind; you just have your eyes closed." Drimblerod put his hand on his partner's shoulder.

Grimbledung tried to force his eyes open. It felt like there were hot pokers in them. Hot pokers stuck in by angry Ogres. Who had a running start. "BLIND!" Scalding tears ran down his cheeks. "Yaaaa!" He fanned his eyes with his hands. Then rubbed them again. "YAAAA!"

"Get him to the counter," said the Dwarf. "I do have the counter for that spice." He reached under the counter and pulled out a jar. "Turn your head to the side so I can pour this into your eyes."

"Blind!" Grimbledung did not open his eyes because he was sure flames would shoot out of them and set the entire shop of fire. "What're you going to pour into my eyes?! What?"

"Well, the counter to the Witch's Finger of course." The Dwarf unstopped the jar. "Hold still now. This stuff is really expensive as well."

"As well?" Drimblerod put his partner in a headlock and turned his head to the side. "Hold still!"

Grimbledung stomped his foot. "Ahh-ooooo!" He howled. Hairs sprung from his ears.

"Hurry!" Drimblerod tightened his headlock. "He's going to change!"

"Into what?"

"Just hurry!"

Grimbledung began to drool as his teeth elongated.

"That's just gross." The Dwarf let several drops of the milky white liquid fall into Grimbledung's eye. "I'm going to need to mop."

The burning stopped almost immediately so Grimbledung opened his now-restored eye. "What kind of place you running here!" He reached up to rub his eye again. "You're going to make me blind!"

Drimblerod grabbed his hand. "Stop doing that! Hold still so he can get your other eye, Grim."

Grimbledung wrapped his arms around his chest and leaned back, tilting his head toward the ceiling. "Do it quick before my eyeball explodes!"

The Dwarf put several drops in Grimbledung's other eye.

Grimbledung staggered back, fell on his butt and continued until he was flat on the floor. He shuddered. He thrust a finger into the air. "After due consideration, I think we'll stick with that first sample."

"Agreed." Drimblerod nodded. "Otherwise we'd have to buy a jar of that stuff." He looked at the ancient-looking jar. "What's in that anyway?"

The Dwarf stoppered the jar and put it back under the counter. "Well, besides ice cold cider, the only other counter for Witch's Finger is, of course, Witch's Milk."

"Is that another euphemism like Witch's Finger means really dangerously spicy chicken jerky?" Grimbledung cocked his head at the Dwarf.

The Dwarf gave a little shrug. "Sure, we'll go with that."

"Wait a grain of sand!" Grimbledung sat up. "What exactly did you just pour into my eyes?"

"Let's just move on," suggested the Dwarf. "Before we get into inappropriate territory."

Grimbledung raised a finger. "I feel obliged to point out that we recently determined that 'nipple' is fine."

"Medically speaking, sure" agreed Drimblerod. "I don't think in this case it would be."

"Then we won't discuss the source of the witch's milk," Paul said.

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Gross. And coming from me, that's saying a lot." One of the drops trickled down his cheek.

"Just don't get it in your mouth…" Started the Dwarf.

Grimbledung absently licked it off. "Yaa!"

"Gross," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung clambered to his feet.

"Uh oh," said the Dwarf

"I don't feel so good all of a sudden!" He thrust his hands in the air. "Hey now, I don't like this at all!" He exclaimed. "Just what are the effects of…" Grimbledung started to say.

He wasn't in any condition to finish his sentence.

Because he was petrified.

Chapter 29
Mark the Plan with a B
For Pinky and Me

"There he is," said Julie as she pointed at a figure that was several hundred yards away. "That's him."

Nulu squinted. "You sure that's him?"

Julie nodded. "I know my man." She drew her wand and raised it skyward. She flicked and swished it (it is, really, the most effective way to use a wand), sending several red sparkles into the air. At about twenty feet, they exploded with a loud rapport. The far off figure turned to look. He gave a wave then began to run toward them.

"Nice attention getter you have there."

"Thanks. It's all in the swish."

The two watched as Pinky ran toward them. As he got closer, Nulu realized he wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Doesn't that guy ever wear a shirt?"

Julie shrugged. "Shirts are overrated."

Pinky waved again as he ran. Since it was out of his usual ponytail, his hair billowed in the breeze, trailing behind him. He lifted the sledgehammer he was still carrying and tossed it from his right to his left hand, never missing a step. His muscles bulged as he did so.

"Is he wearing his little brother's pants? Seem awfully tight." Remarked Nulu.

"They fit just fine as far as I'm concerned."

Nulu shook her head. Truth be told, he was a fine specimen of Human manhood. As if on cue, Pinky raised the sledgehammer, latissimus dorsi muscles flaring out as he held the hammer above his head. He smiled wide, white teeth gleaming. It seemed as if he were running in slow motion.

"Is he running in slow motion? How does he do that?"

"Who cares?"

Finally, Pinky reached the two females.

"How do you run in slow motion yet still cover a lot of ground?"

Julie glanced at Nulu. "Ever see sausage being made?"

Nulu stuck out her tongue. "No. And from what I hear, I don't want to."

"Do you still eat it?"

"Well sure," admitted Nulu. "Tasty things, sausage."

"This is kind of the same thing; don't worry how it's done, just enjoy the scrumptious results."

"I'm standing right here you know," said Pinky. He hefted the sledgehammer to his shoulder. "You just call me over to ogle?"

"Yes," said Julie.

"No," said Nulu. She smiled. "Well, not entirely." She gave a wink. "Speaking of sausage... Does your little brother know…"?

Julie elbowed Nulu. "What Nulu was going to ask was if you would help us with a problem."

Pinky smiled. "I'm always available to help." He waggled his eyebrows. "Within the reason of my lovely girl, that is."

"There's no reasoning with her, lately." Remarked Nulu.

Pinky grinned. "*Lately*?"

Julie poked Pinky in the ribs. "That's enough out of you, mister. What my esteemed associate was getting at, is that we need help with dealing with Opus von Magnus."

Pinky rubbed his chin. "Well, I have that job coming up that's got a basement, remember?" He flexed. "Unless you want his head knocked off."

"Yes!" Said Nulu. "First that second one, then the first one!"

"No," said Julie. "To both." She considered that for a moment. "Well, let's save them; it's always important to have a 'plan b'. We are hoping to find someone to run against Opus."

"Why don't you just run against him?"

Julie nodded. "That's what I said."

"Oh no, you're not roping me into that gig. Running an inn is what I'm doing with my life right now." Nulu pointed at Julie. "You're the politician around here."

Julie shook her head. "You know I'm through with politics." She thumbed toward the windmill. "I want to concentrate on my school. Do some expanding before the town completely blocks me in." She sighed. "I just took the job because the Halflings were going to attack and I wanted to make sure we were organized enough to put up some sort of resistance. I did promise that after the crisis was over, I would have proper elections. And the crisis is over." She stifled a smile. "You should run, Nulu."

"Next suggestion, if you please." Nulu waved her hand. "Moving along to next suggestion. Or we'll implement 'plan b'."

"What's the problem you need me for?" Pinky let the sledgehammer drop to the ground and he leaned against the handle. "The crisis is over and now there is going to be election." He smiled. "If you could actually get the election council to actually establish a date for one. Just let Opus run uncontested and your problem is solved, right?"

"Have you been listening to what that *crackpot* has been saying?"

"Now that you mention it, Nulu, I haven't seen Grimbledung in a while."

Nulu glanced at Julie. "Could you do something to get your man under control?"

"Yeah, Julie. What *can* you do to get your man under control?" Pinky waggled his eyebrows.

"You know if she were some sort of elected official that would help."

"You mean like being on the city council?" Pinky grinned.

"I was thinking of something with more power." Nulu scrunched up her face. "Some sort of elected position where they are in charge of everything in town."

"They have that?"

"I think they might," Nulu said.

Julie looked from Nulu to Pinky and back. "If you two are through."

Nulu nodded. "I'm done." She smirked. "I think you are too, mister."

Pinky grinned. "Yeah, something tells me I am as well."

"I'm serious here. We need someone to run against Opus Magnus. That guy is *dangerous*."

"Well, what do you want me to do…" Pinky's eyes got large. "Wait; you're not suggesting that I run against him, are you?"

Nulu perked up. "You're well liked, you'd look good on a poster, and you have all your teeth. Why not?" She poked him in the chest "You'd have to wear a shirt more often though."

Pinky shook his head. "I'm not a politician." He looked around suspiciously. "I've got skeletons." He said in a loud whisper.

"What; in basements and walls?"

Pinky shook his head at Nulu. "Those are *corpses*. They're not any worry." He looked around again. "I mean actual bone-clattering skeletons."

"What; with swords and everything?"

"I think they are classified as sabers, technically." Pinky picked up the sledgehammer and held it out as if it were a sword... or a saber. "You see if the blade has a certain curve then it's considered…"

"Pinky, we're being serious," interrupted Nulu.

"So is he." Julie shrugged. "You know, I've met Harry and Hausen and they are mostly harmless, really."

"Wait… *Skeletons*?"

Pinkie nodded. "Second cousins one removed, I think it is. Half a dozen in all. Those two are okay, I suppose." He pointed over his shoulder. "They're actually out on an adventure, last I heard. They set up a free company and picked up a gig to guard some treasure that is supposed to remain distinctly unlooted. It's a pretty good gig since it's hidden underground and the odds are that no one will ever manage to even find it. It's a six-month stint."

"Skeletons guarding treasure?"

Pinky nodded. "It's their main staple, really. And since it was straight guild-work, they had to take the gig."

Nulu grinned. "Well if they're respectable, why can't you run?"

Pinky paused for a moment. "They'd show up, want to vote. Crash the election party." He grinned "And those guys can really put down some drinks. Start fights. Oh, and generally creep people out."

"That's absurd."

"It's true and..." He let the sledgehammer thump on the ground. "I don't wanna run. I really don't wanna."

"Fine then. Think of someone who would be good to run against him. There's got to be a businessman you've dealt with that would do a good job." Nulu snapped her fingers. "What about the guy who runs the hat shop by Pozz? He seems respectable enough."

Pinky shook his head. "Pozzuoli is buying him out, last I heard. Mamma is going to run the hat shop. Old Pozz is looking like he's building himself a business district."

"I don't think that's too good for healthy economic competition."

Pinky shrugged at Julie. "Not my concern. All I do is make sure the roof doesn't leak. The mayor'll have to deal with a syndicate starting up. Or mayoress."

Julie shuddered. "Well we need someone who can do that *and* stand up to Magnus von stupidous in a debate."

"That would be helpful; you can't stick a candidate up there who he'll eat alive," Nulu said.

"And they should be someone that is well known by the rabble of town," offered Pinky.

"The rabble?"

Pinky nodded at Nulu. "Sure, sure; there's always way more of them than respectable folk. You need someone they know." Pinky grinned. "Say…"

"But if you get someone who runs the back alleys, then they are probably not going to be trustworthy enough to run the town properly."

"Oh, I think there are folk that dip their feet on both sides of that puddle." Pinky smiled wider. "You know…"

Julie shook her head. "But to find someone like that on such short notice and to make sure they are vetted so we don't elect a criminal wanted in some other town. That's asking a lot."

"Well, we better find him soon or that guy will win by default."

"Not necessarily a him," said Pinky. "*Anyone* who is known by a lot of folks, liked by them even and that could perhaps hit old Magnus on the head if he gets out of line in a debate would work."

"What?" Julie looked at Pinky.

Pinky picked up his sledgehammer. "Oh yeah, someone adept at bonking out-of-liners in the head, that doesn't take any gruff from anyone, and that lots of folks see on a weekly if not daily basis." He paused for a moment. "Yes?"

"Who?" Julie and Nulu asked together.

"Why, our own Flora O. Willowfeet of course." Pinky took a small bow. "You're welcome."

Julie and Nulu looked at each other.

"Flora definitely doesn't take to being pushed around, that's for sure." Said Nulu.

"And she is pretty well known. Especially by the rabble." Agreed Julie.

"And, as an added bonus," said Pinky, "she has all her teeth and would look darned cute on a poster."

Both females stared at Pinky.

"Well then." Pinky held his sledgehammer to his forehead as a salute. "I'm going back to pounding pegs." He winked. "Gotta lay out that foundation for that plan b in case you can't talk Flora into it."

"Off with you then," Julie shoo'ed him with the end of her wand. It cast out some red sparkles as she did. "Back to working up a sweat."

Pinky winked and ran off. "See you tonight, dearest," he called over his shoulder.

Julie hesitated for a moment, watching him run off. "See you," she called.

"We going to watch him run off or you want to see what that crazy Dwarf is up to on our way to talking Flora into running?"

Julie turned back to Nulu. "No, no. Let's go talk to the old cuss. I am still the Mayoress of Julesville for the time being so this is my concern for a

while longer anyway." She smiled. "Then Pozzuoli will have to deal with Flora for matters involving his budding syndicate."

"That poor Dwarf."

"He'll get what's coming to him."

"Speaking of what's coming to him," said Julie, "is Akita sure that the shop will return before those Elves? I don't think we can stall them when they arrive."

"Akita said that Maca told him in a dream that the shop would return before the Elves." Nulu shrugged. "If we can't believe... whatever Maca is, then we've got bigger troubles."

"I suppose so." Julie exhaled. "Well, we won't worry about that then. Let's just go see Pozzuoli."

The two turned and made their way to *Everything in Between*. In a testament of her dedication to her position, Julie only turned to look over her shoulder once at Pinky as they left.

So did Nulu.

Chapter 30
He's a Stone Hearted Gnome

"Oh come on!" Drimblerod looked at his now stone partner. "This is just re-Gnomed-diculous."

"I tried to warn him."

"What'd you do to my partner!" Drimblerod rushed to Grimbledung's side. "You've *killed* him!"

"It wasn't *me*!" The Dwarf pointed at himself. "It was the antidote for that hot jerky is all." He pointed at Grimbledung. "*He* shouldn't be asking for hot foods that he can't handle."

"Can you help him?" Drimblerod grabbed his partner's arm and tugged it. It was solid stone. "This looks serious!"

"Well, the effects could be temporary."

"Petrification is *temporary*?"

The Dwarf came around the counter. "Well, it can be."

"Can be? He looks dead."

"Well, maybe yes, maybe no." He stifled a chuckle.

"This isn't a laughing matter!"

The Dwarf straightened his smile. "He is either dead or he's not dead."

"Well, those are the only two possibilities." Drimblerod let go of Grimbledung's arm. He tapped him on the head. "It's an either-or kind of condition."

The Dwarf shook his head. "No, no. You see the Witch's Milk will either kill you, or petrify you. For thirty minutes or so."

"Thirty minutes?"

"Well, if it doesn't kill you. We just need to see which is which."

"Well, thirty minutes is probably enough for a full game of checkers. Wonder what that gondolier is going to think of that."

"What?"

"It's nothing." Drimblerod let out a sigh. "But if he is dead, dead, what should we do?" He narrowed his eyes. "And don't say check his pockets for loose change."

The Dwarf smiled. "Course not; they're petrified too." When Drimblerod balled up his fists, he raised his hands. "Now, now. I suppose there is a shop that might be able to help." The Dwarf rubbed his chin. "The East Orchard Herbs and Fruit Shipment Company could help."

"Fruit shipment and herbs?"

"Diversification is the key to success in business."[21]

"Thanks for that tip." Drimblerod frowned. "Is the cure expensive?"

"Yes; of course it is expensive, why don't we just wait and see what happens."

"While we wait, why don't you tell me what kind of additional deal can you make me on the jerky since you killed my partner?"

"He might only be temporarily dead. Let's not jump to conclusions."

"He'd petrified! What conclusion should I jump to? That's as bad as dead."

"No, not at all."

"How is this better?"

"Well, he's not aging anymore and there's a chance he might make it back so he's getting some free time on us. Possibly. That's good, right?"

Drimblerod turned to face Paul. "Now, just a moment here!" He put his hands on his hips. "This is definitely not acceptable. I can't travel with a petrified partner."

"Well, it is quieter all of a sudden." Paul smirked.

Drimblerod looked at his partner. "So how long do we have to wait to see if this is permanent again?" He tapped Grimbledung's head.

Paul tugged on his beard. "Well, since he's a Gnome, it's probably definitely not permanent. If he were Human, he'd be out of luck. Any Humans in his family tree?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "Just a Dwarf somewhere in the branches is the best I've been able to determine."

"Well, he'll probably be fine in under thirty minutes. Most likely."

"Thirty minutes?" Drimblerod pointed at Grimbledung. "What am I supposed to do until then? You want I leave him here?"

"No!" Said Paul, almost too quickly. He looked around his shop. "He'd spook the customers, I think. How about I loan you a wheel barrow and you can just take him along." He gave a nod. "Honestly, in probably thirty minutes, he'll be good as…" He looked at Grimbledung. "Well, as he normally is."

Drimblerod frowned.

"I'll even toss in a burlap sack you can put over him so no one gawks."

"Does he know what happened to him?" Drimblerod looked into his partner's surprised eyes. "Or what's going on now?"

"I don't believe so. I've never heard anyone say they did." Paul moved from behind the counter. "As far as he knows, he will just instantly jump from being here to wherever you have him sitting when he un-petrifies." He shrugged. "You know; he'd work quite well in a garden or by a palm tree." He pointed at a corner. "That wheelbarrow will do just fine, I'd think."

"Fine, fine." Drimblerod exhaled. "And the sack as well, if you please."

Paul nodded as he tossed a large burlap sack into the wheelbarrow. "So where are you staying so I can get my barrow back? And this high quality burlap sack."

Drimblerod opened his mouth, then closed it. "I'm not sure actually. Our partner went to procure us a room for the night while we got supplies." A thought occurred to him. "Say, can we pay for the goods now and then pick them up in the morning so they don't get stolen at whatever inn we stay at?"

"This is a respectable town you know."

Drimblerod smirked "Well, even respectable towns have their rabble."

"They're usually just passing through." Paul tossed back at him.

"I can just leave him here to pick up the stuff, if you'd like." Drimblerod returned deftly.

"No, no. We're looking at eight silver, if I remember correctly."

"What if you killed him?"

"He's not dead," assured Paul. "Witch's milk is most likely probably not poisonous to Gnomes."

"If you say so." Drimblerod looked down to fish out the lone gold coin from his pouch. "Gads, we're low on funds."

"You got a good deal, I assure you."

Drimblerod tossed the gold coin to Paul. "Sure, up until my partner became a lawn ornament."

"You could easily sell him for twice the cost of the supplies, I'm sure. Gnome lawn ornaments are haut couture right now."



"I'd rather just have my partner back, if it's all the same to you."

Paul rolled the wheelbarrow beside Grimbledung. "Want help getting him in?"

"Of course; the last thing I want to do is chip something important off."

"That would be bad. Get the legs?" Paul grasped Grimbledung under his arms. "He's going to be heavy you know."

Drimblerod grabbed his partner's legs and picked him up. "Lay him down in it?"

Paul grunted and nodded.

The pair shuffled sideways and put Grimbledung in the wagon. One hand and one foot stuck up out of the wheelbarrow.

"How are we going to get him in that sack?"

Paul looked from the petrified Gnome to the sack. "Let's just put it on top of him."

The bell over the door jingled.

Both the Dwarf and Drimblerod turned to look.

Grimhilde entered the store. She had the young boy and now a long black staff with her.

"We're back, Paul. I completely forgot to buy what I originally came in for. And I brought my staff to…" She looked at the petrified Gnome. "I see he's already been taken care of. Who did him; that wizard that runs the confectionary?"

"Witches milk." said Paul.

"Ahhh…irony."

"Yes, so everything's fine, Grimhilde, just fine." The Dwarf gave a smile. "These customers are just passing through town. Stocking up. That sort of thing. Then they'll be on their way."

"And getting petrified by Paul over there." Drimblerod pointed at the Dwarf.

"He'd look good in my garden," remarked Grimhilde.

"He's not for sale," Drimblerod said flatly.

"You sure?"

Drimblerod looked from his partner to the woman and back again. "Yes, I'm fairly certain. I'll just take him along with."

Paul moved back behind the counter. "Got the sack, Drimblerod?"

Drimblerod nodded. He bent down and picked up the sack. With a flourish, he guided it down on top of Grimbledung as if he were making a bed. "I suppose that works."

"He'll be fine. Just don't dump him out of there."

Drimblerod tucked the sack under Grimbledung. "At least he doesn't know what's happening to him."

"What happened?" Grimhilde asked. "Why would he even drink that stuff?"

"He asked to sample the Witch's Finger."

"What kind of person would do a fool thing like that?"

"That's my part… dead partner you're talking about there, lady," began Drimblerod, "and I'd appreciate it if you had a little respect for the very recently deceased."

Grimhilde let out a small sigh. "Fine, fine. Far be it from me."

The young boy prodded Grimbledung with his foot. "Gross."

"Hey kid- stop that!"

The boy grinned. "Never seen a dead body this close before."

"Parton!" Scolded Grimhilde.

"Sorry, Aunt Grimhilde." The boy put his hands in his pockets.

"What are you in the market for?" Paul smiled at the tall, raven haired woman.

"I'm looking for some red delicious apples, something that will knock out Dwarves, and some magic mirror polish."

Drimblerod bent over and took the handles of the wheelbarrow. When he stood, the back of the wheelbarrow came off the ground. "Can you get the door, kid?" He rolled forward a little.

"What was that middle thing?" Asked Paul.

"Sure, sir." The boy reached out and tapped Grimbledung's foot again. "Gross!" He turned and skipped to the door. When he got there he opened it with a flourish.

"Some sort of sleep aid would do just fine. Do you have any black root? I've read that puts Dwarves to sleep."

"I'll let you know where we're staying." Drimblerod rolled the wheelbarrow toward the door.

As the wheelbarrow got beside Grimhilde, the burlap sack began to thrash about.

Grimhilde screamed as she put her hand to her mouth. She backed up a half step, caught between the counter and the now-thrashing sack. "What is going on?!"

Drimblerod let go of the handles and the wheelbarrow clunked to the floor, tipping on its side.

Grimbledung rolled out of the wheelbarrow, tangled in the sack. "I'm still blind!" Grimbledung rolled over again, out from under the sack and under Grimhilde's long skirt.

Grimhilde screamed again. She grabbed the counter preparing to climb over it.

Grimbledung stood up. "Wait, I can see a little light now. Hey now? Hey now! Where am I exactly? Hey, hey, my situation is improving, I think!"

Grimhilde's skirt puffed out in several places as Grimbledung thrashed back and forth.

"Where am I? Exactly?"

Grimhilde fainted, collapsing in a heap. As she rolled onto her back, Grimbledung's head popped out from her skirt. He waggled his ears.

"Grimbledung you're alive!"

"Told you it probably wouldn't last that long." Paul gave a wink.

"You sure toss around qualifiers like it's no trouble at all."

"Plausible deniability," explained Paul.

Drimblerod offered his hand to his partner. "Grim, I'm glad you're okay."

Grimbledung nodded. "What happened?"

"You tasted that Witch's Milk and it petrified you!"

"Gads!" Grimbledung patted himself down. "But I'm better now?"

Drimblerod looked at Paul. "Are there any side effects?"

"He might be unusually irritable," said Paul.

"Did that for a while. Nothing new there."

"Unexplained unstable outbursts."

"Had them."

"Fits of rage."

"Still familiar territory."

The Dwarf stared at Grimbledung. "What about clairvoyance?"

"Dated a Dwarfess named Clair for a couple of decades, does that count?"

"Flashes of the future."

"You mean like right before you die?"

"That's the past that flashes before your eyes."

Grimbledung nodded. "Right, right. Then you're playing checkers."

"Checkers?"

"Don't ask," Drimblerod interjected. "So how long will this clairvoyance last?"

"Maybe a few days. Maybe not at all. Especially if he only got that one…"

Grimbledung licked at another trickle then puffed out his cheeks as he put his finger over his mouth. "Urp! Rolton chips! Someone give me a rag or something!"

The Dwarf rubbed his hands together.

"Use your tunic, Grim."

"Will this stain?" Grimbledung licked at another drop as it trickled down his cheek. "Gah!" He leaned over and rubbed his face off with Grimhilde's skirt.

"Hey!" Grimhilde pulled herself up using the counter. "What are you doing?"

"Returning something that was probably yours to start with," Grimbledung explained.

"Well then," began the Dwarf, "so we're going to go with number six then? A nice middle of the road jerky. And that sticks with the original agreed upon price."

Drimblerod nodded. "Seven silver, if my memory serves me," he tried.

"It seems it's not serving you at all. You're at eight silver."

Drimblerod smirked. "Sorry, with all that excitement, I probably maybe forgot the actual amount…"

"Hey, jerky is expensive and tedious to make and you want fifteen pounds of it." Paul pointed at Drimblerod. "You are getting a really good deal here. And some really good jerky, I might add."

Chapter 31
Mixed Trails in Old Jute

Parton perked up. "Jerky? Hey, can I have a snack, Aunt Grimhilde? Can I have some jerky too?"

"How about some healthy nuts instead?" She tried.

"Nuts'r boring." The boy put his hands in his pocket.

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Hey!"

Drimblerod looked at his partner.

"HEY!" Grimbledung hopped again.

Paul looked at Grimbledung. "Are you all right?"

"Someone give me a bucket!"

"I'm afraid to ask," admitted Grimhilde.

"Me too," agreed Drimblerod, "but we might as well find out sooner rather than later." He nodded at Paul. "Got a bucket?"

"Got an idea percolating, Drim! Percolating all inside my head!"

Paul handed a bucket to Drimblerod.

"Thanks. Apparently my partner's percolating." Drimblerod handed the bucket to his partner.

"Indoors?" Grimhilde once again pulled her son to her. "In public?" She held her staff out. "I'm warning you…"

Grimbledung snatched the bucket and ran behind to a display of stacked barrels. He stuck his nose in the air and sniffed. "Yeah, oh yeah!" He flipped off several bucket lids and put handfuls of their contents into the bucket. He shook the bucket as he ran behind the counter.

"What is wrong with him? Besides percolating?" Paul grasped the counter as Grimbledung shoved his way past him. "You shouldn't be back here you know. Employees only."

Grimbledung ignored the Dwarf, running with his nose in the air, inhaling deeply. "Here we go!" He shoveled two more handfuls into the bucket. "Almost there." He scooted out from behind the counter and then up the stairs. Random crashing could he heard.

"Anything breakable up there?"

Paul shook his head at Drimblerod. "Breakables are all down here so's I can keep an eye on them."

"Well, that's good to…"

Drimblerod was interrupted as Grimbledung barreled down the stairs, bucket swinging behind him. He skidded to a stop in front of the counter. After a slight pause, he scurried behind it. He gave the Dwarf a wink. "Gimmie some room to work, Paulie; I've got it from here."

"I haven't a clue what you've got, but I'm pretty sure I don't want it."

"Oh you want it. *You want it all right*!" Grimbledung shouldered the Dwarf. "You WANT it!" He gave him a wink, then turned to the mother.

Grimhilde took a step back.

Grimbledung cleared his throat then looked around the store as if he were surveying a large crowd. "Folks, just what does one do when their child wants a snack but not a wholesome snack as youth tend to do? Anyone? Anyone of you?" He looked around the room as if it were crowded. "You sir, there in the front. What do you do when your offspring wants some sort of snack?"

Drimblerod looked behind himself. "Who, me?"

"Yes, you, the fine looking Gentlegnome in the front row."

"Well, I don't know." Drimblerod looked around nervously. "Give him what he wants just to shut him up?"

Grimhilde gasped. "Oh dear."

"Oh dear indeed, my fine non-floating woman. Oh dear!" Agreed Grimbledung. He clapped his hands once. "Folks, I can solve your snacking problems with the wave of my hand, this very hand." He waved his hand above his head.

"Now just a moment…" Began the Dwarf. "I'm not so sure I need you as a partner."

"Oh you need a partner," assured Grimbledung. "Just as sure as the Sun goes to its resting place every night to make room for the new Sun, and lightning makes snakes, you need a partner."

The Dwarf opened his mouth to argue both those points but Grimbledung pressed on: "You. The young man, there." Grimbledung pointed at Parton. "You say you want a snack?"

The boy nodded. "If my Aunt'll let me."

"Something filling?"

"Sure."

"Something tasty?"

"That's better than filling."

Grimbledung raised an eyebrow up high. "Something *healthy*?"

"Not particularly." Admitted the boy.

"Yes." Said Grimhilde.

Grimbledung clapped his hands once. "Well, I have the solution to all your problems." He hefted the half-full bucket onto the counter. "Mixed Trails!"

"Mixed trails?" The Dwarf peered into the bucket.

Drimblerod shook his head. "Mixed trails. Rat won't be pleased."

"Step right up and give it a try, son." Grimbledung beckoned to the youth. "A good handful to see what you think."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," began Grimhilde.

Paul raised a hand at her. "No, no; let him try it." He gave a sidelong glance to Grimbledung. "The Gnome's onto something. Give it a try young man."

Parton moved to the counter and stood on his tiptoes to reach into the bucket. He took out a small handful and tried to peak around his fingers to see the contents of his hand.

"Just pop it all in your mouth." Said Grimbledung. "And chew yourself to delicious bliss."

The boy tilted his head back and emptied his hand into his mouth. He chewed slowly, then sped up. He gave his Aunt a nod. "Uhmm-hmmm!"

"Uhmm is just the word to use," said Grimbledung, still in selling-mode. "But the word *you* would use dear woman is healthy."

"Healthy?"

Grimbledung nodded. "And affordable."

"What'd you give my nephew?"

"Mostly nuts, pieces of chocolate for sweetness, some dried fruit, and some broken crackers for crunch. Nothing more."

"Can I have more?" Parton asked.

"Well, you'll have to talk to the shop owner for that, I imagine." Grimbledung slid the bucket toward the Dwarf. "He'll probably sell it for a copper a scoop."

"I what?"

Grimbledung pushed the bucket closer to the Dwarf. "After he gives this young man a healthy sized sample for him to show to all his friends and tell him where he got his scrumptious snack…" He raised an eyebrow at the woman. "… and for his Aunt to tell their parents that it is also healthy."

"She will?"

Grimhilde took a tentative handful of the Mixed Trails and ate it. She nodded as she chewed. "I think I'll take a couple more scoops after the free sample for his two brothers, Paul." She reached into her coin purse.

"You will?"

"Two copper then?" Asked Grimhilde.

"Yes Ma'am." Declared Grimbledung. "A copper a scoop all day long. Half price on Grunsdays."

"Well, let's not jump to conclusions," said Paul, regaining his wits. He smiled at Grimhilde. "I'll get my scoop while you get out the two copper."

Grimbledung waggled his ears at his partner.

"Very nice, Grim." Drimblerod waggled his ears back. "You truly have a dizzying intellect for marketing."

Grimbledung grabbed a handful of Mixed Trails and popped it into his mouth. When Paul returned he gave him a wide grin, showing off chewed nuts and chocolate. "Mmmm!"

Paul furrowed his brow at him. "You are one strange Gnome." He dug the scoop into the bucket and poured a heaping portion into a small paper sack. "One." He repeated the motion. "And two." He smiled at Paul. "And a large helping for my young advertiser." He scooped one and a half scoops into a third sack. "Don't forget to tell folks where you got your…" He looked at Grimbledung. "Mixed Trails?"

Grimbledung shoved another handful into his mouth. He nodded. "Mmmm hmmm!"

Paul gave him a double-take then moved the bucket to his other side, away from Grimbledung.

"There you go, Miss Grimhilde." He slid the three bags across the counter.

Grimhilde put two copper on the table. "Thanks, Paul." She nodded at Grimbledung. "And to you; for the snack that I approve of." She handed Parton his sack, then picked up the other two. "Now, about those apples. I prefer red delicious..."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Another satisfied customer, eh Paul?" He elbowed the Dwarf.

Paul stared at Grimbledung.

"Eh?" Grimbledung elbowed him again.

"So, Paul," began Drimblerod. "Now that my partner here has showed you how to move inventory that might take a long time to move on its own." He gestured at the stack of barrels of various nuts. "Which I might add, will also be a nice hook, creating other sales…"

"Eh?" Grimbledung gave Paul another elbow.

"Think you can give us a couple extra pounds of jerky?"

Paul glanced at Grimbledung. "Stop elbowing me." His eyes got wide. "And get back to your side of the counter!"

"I think the additional business should be worth quite a bit to you over the coming, day, weeks, months." Drimblerod paused for effect. "*Years*."

Paul frowned. “I suppose…”

“So how about we make it an even twenty pounds of jerky, and then we call it even?” Drimblerod leaned forward, expecting another bout of haggling.

“Eh?” Added Grimbledung. “Ehh??” He waggled his elbow at the Dwarf.

“Fine then. Fine.” Paul clapped his hands twice. “Deal.”

Drimblerod clapped as well. “Deal.”

Grimbledung leaned over the counter and took two hands’ full of Mixed Trail. “Works for me too, Paul.” He waved two fistfuls of the treat. “Eh?”

“I really need some apples,” said the woman. “I’m trying to wrap up a long term project that I’d rather not discuss the fine details of…”

Paul nodded at her. “Right away.” He turned to the Gnomes. “So stop by in the morning and I’ll even help you load the wagon.”

“That sounds good to me, Paul.” He gestured at his partner. “I’ll just collect my partner and we’ll be on our way.”

The pair left the mercantile, heading toward what they hoped was a nice comfortable, affordable room for the night for a restful evening.

Besides comfortable, it wasn’t any of those things.

Chapter 32
Close Encounters at the Devil's Thumb

Semfeld and Liverioso appeared in a flash of red light.

Semfeld threw up.

So did Liverioso.

Then Semfeld threw up again.

Liverioso fell over. "Now I see why that's not a popular way of travel," he said.

Semfeld held his stomach. "Good thing we did that on an empty stomach." He dry heaved. "Gads!"

Liverioso sat up. "Exactly. Make a note for our return trip; no eating beforehand."

Semfeld extended his hand to his partner. "Let's go find that novelty shop, partner. And a fountain to rinse out my mouth."

Liverioso grabbed Semfeld's hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "My thoughts ex-thactly!"

The pair looked up and down the street. The people who were walking about were furiously trying to not make eye contact with the two sick-to-their-stomachs Humans who has just appeared in the middle of the street.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," said Semfeld.

The woman looked at the other side of the street as she picked up her pace.

"Could you direct us toward..." Liverioso said to a Dwarf as he approached. The Dwarf made a sharp turn and moved to the far side of the street.

Semfeld spied a friendly looking Gnomess. "Excusemeareyoufamiliarwithanynoveltyshopsnearby?" He said quickly as

the female moved past. He frowned when she picked up her pace. "Maybe we should move away from our... mess."

Liverioso pointed down the street. "Let's move toward the center of town. That's where I'd want my business."

The pair began walking toward what they felt was the center of town- toward the looming black walls of the Devil's Thumb. The cross streets curved in either direction as they walked down the street- the town was set up like spokes on a wagon wheel with radiating cross streets.

After almost a half hour of ambling along, the walls of the butte loomed ahead of them. "You think she's on a side street?" Semfeld looked left and right. Since the side streets were curved, it was difficult to see very far down them.

"Hey!" Liverioso exclaimed. Semfeld turned to look at his partner- Liverioso was looking the other way. "Hey you kids!"

Semfeld looked in the same direction as his partner. Four youths were walking in their general direction.

"I have a question for you kids," continued Liverioso. He put on a friendly smile. "Say, you fine youngsters know where I could go to buy some magic novelties?"

"What's a novelty?" Asked one of the youths- a Human.

"It's those fake things like those glasses that are supposed to let you see through clothes but they don't. Or those little Sea Apes® that aren't apes at all," explained another Human child.

"What about Magic Marbles?" said the Gnomeling. "Those are pretty neat."

The first youth perked up. "Those are the only thing worth buying."

The other Human youth tilted his head. "You sure those Sea Apes® aren't real? They look real on the box."

"I bought them once. They didn't look like the package at all." The first Human frowned. "Even after about a month they looked like little shrimp."

"What'd you do with them?"

Semfeld looked back and forth as the two discussed Sea Apes®.

"I fed them to my cat."

"What'd your cat..."

"Listen kids," interrupted Semfeld. "I am sure the story of the wholesale slaughter of your Sea Apes® is exciting and all, but we are looking for a novelty shop."

"Did you lose your novelty?" Asked the Gnomeling.

"No, I did not lose my novelty!"

"Well that's good to hear." The Gnomeling waggled his ears. "You know, they don't usually accept returns."

"That's why I fed those Sea Apes to my cat."

Liverioso shook his fists. "Gaaa! I just want to know where there is a novelty shop!"

"What are you looking for? That'd help us know where to send you."

Liverioso exhaled slowly. "So where could I go to buy some Magic Marbles?"

"I'd try a novelty shop," the Gnomeling deadpanned. He put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "If I were you."

Liverioso looked at his partner. "What is it with Gnomes? They feed them tainted milk when they're young?"

"Hey now," said the Gnomeling. "You casting aspersions on my mother's..."

"Don't say it," warned Semfeld.

"I thought it was already established that…" The Gnomeling furrowed his brow. "We're not?"

"No; we're not. So where is the novelty shop in town?"

"There's just one?" Asked one of the Human kids.

"I suppose," Liverioso said to him.

"I thought there were a couple at least," said another Human youth. "Maybe five or six even."

"There are; there's that one over on Knuckle Lane," the Gnomeling pointed off to the side. "And that one on Ring Road," he pointed the other direction. "Right?"

One of the Humans nodded. "What about that one over on Phalanges?" He pointed in a completely opposite direction. "Then that place at the end of Franch Tippe."

"You're kidding me," said Liverioso. "Four?"

"Oh, right" said the Human youth, "there's that one over on Forefinger Circle. Thanks. Forgot about that one."

"Come on." Semfeld said. "How many novelty shops are there in this town? And why are there so many of them here?"

The Gnomeling shrugged. "Probably because of the factory, I suppose."

"You're getting on my nerves, kid," said Semfeld.

"There's a novelty factory in town?" Asked Liverioso.

"They don't grow on trees you know," said the Gnomeling. "Except for divining rods, technically speaking."

"Excuse me," interrupted a figure in a green cloak. The hood was pulled up, obscuring the person's face.

"What, you going to tell me about another shop?" Liverioso asked. "You work at the factory or something?"

"Not at all," the figure shook his head. "My business has nothing to do with novelties."

"Good. So go about your non-novelty business," Liverioso said, "we're busy."

"Great, thanks. I'd love to go about my business." The figure pulled back his hood revealing a tanned face and close-cropped beard. He raised an eyebrow at Liverioso. "Just say when."

"Well, go to it then." Semfeld shooed the Human off.

"Well, I suppose that's my cue." The Human pointed at him. "You're under arrest." He smirked. "And your pal as well."

"What?"

"What?"

"Good luck to you!" Said the Gnomeling. "Let's go fellas!"

The youths quickly left.

"Well then, where were we..." The Sheriff smiled. "Oh right; you're both under arrest."

"What for, Sheriff?" Liverioso put his hands on his hips.

"Creating a public nuisance."

"Just because we talked to some kids?"

The Sheriff narrowed his eyes. "And flagrant littering."

"Oh."

"Well, we can explain *that*," said Semfeld.

"We can definitely discuss *that*," said the Sheriff.

"Great!"

"Down at the jailhouse." The Sheriff pointed down a side street. "That way, gentlemen."

"But... but..." Liverioso stammered.

"You keep giving eloquent rebuttals like that and I'm liable to let you go."

"Really?" Semfeld perked up.

"No."

Semfeld perked down.

Liverioso grabbed the Sheriff by the shoulders. "But you can't arrest us! We just got here and I'm looking for my long lost love!"

"Well, that's a better speech, I'll give you that." The man looked at Liverioso's hands. "How about you explain it from a little farther away?"

Liverioso let go of the man. "You see, years ago I was at this wedding as a young man and I met the most wonderful girl." He let out a long sigh. "She was just wonderful."

"And that pertains to now, how?"

"Well, we lost track of each other and then my friend who is an assassin said she could..."

"Your friend the assassin?"

Liverioso nodded. “Sure, what’s wrong with having a friend as an assassin?”

“Nothing at all. I just didn’t figure you as someone who had friends. Much less female ones.”

Liverioso stared at the man.

The Sheriff smiled. “Go on with your story then.”

“She... my friend the assassin... put out a request for assistance from any assassins that knew where my long lost love was. And after just a little bit of time, the assassin network said that she was here.” He grabbed the lawman by the shoulders again and shook him. “She. Is. Here!” Realizing he had grabbed the man again, he quickly let go. “Sorry. She is here,” he said meekly.

The Sheriff rubbed his eyes. “And this long lost love of yours. Does she...” He paused and looked to Semfeld. “Want to be found?”

Semfeld opened his mouth then closed it. “Well, I imagine so,” he finally said.

“Of course she wants to be found!” Liverioso said, louder than he wanted to. “She is the love of my life!”

“And does this wonderfully wonderful love of your life have a name?”

“Sage.”

The Sheriff stared at Liverioso. “Sage.”

Liverioso crossed his arms. “She is from a family of herbalists. It is a good and proper name, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh, I know.” The Sheriff pointed at him. “Are you here to take Sage away, or are you staying here with her?”

Liverioso considered that for a moment. “Well, I am hoping she will be willing to come with me to Julesville.”

The Sheriff nodded. “Well, maybe I can help persuade her. She was on my list of people to see today anyway.”

Semfeld narrowed his eyes. “Is she is some kind of trouble?”

The Sheriff waved noncommittally. “Who said anything about trouble?”

“You did. Just now.”

The Sheriff grinned. "You have me mistaken for someone else, methinks."

"Ithinks you should quit with the attempts at humor and we should go to Sage's shop," said Liverioso. "If you know where it is."

"Oh, I know." The Sheriff pointed. "She's up Devil's Spine, on the left." He started walking. "Follow me, gents."

Liverioso put his arm around his partner. "We're going to her, Semfeld!" He squeezed Semfeld's shoulder. "Going to her now."

Semfeld put his arm around Liverioso. "It's been a long time coming, partner. You really need to make sure you thank Cherí for finding her."

"She'll get magic marbles for life!"

The Sheriff looked over his shoulder at the pair of magicians. He shook his head and looked forward again. As he walked, he tore a sign from a pole.

"What's that?" Liverioso asked.

"Lost cat."

"You find it or something?"

The Sheriff again turned to look at the pair. "Nope. Never do."

"Then you stop looking for them?"

"I never look for them. I just pull down the signs after about a week."

"That doesn't make sense."

"How far is her shop?" Asked Semfeld. "Are you sure she's even open now?"

"She's open. If it's light out she's open." He turned and looked at Liverioso. "You know she's..." He let his sentence trail off.

"She's what?" Liverioso asked.

"Yeah, what?" Added Semfeld.

After a moment, the Sheriff shrugged. "Open for business, of course."

"Well then let's go." Liverioso sped up to get beside the Sheriff. "What are we waiting for?"

"Well, most likely we are waiting to get to the next intersection which is Devil's Spine, then we're going to wait to meet her until we walk up that street a good ways and go into her shop on the left."

"So do you actually make any money with your comedy?"

"I get a free drink at open talk night at the FestHammer Saloon and Bistro. Want to hear my routine?"

Liverioso frowned. "Maybe we should try jogging to get there faster."

The Sheriff shrugged but continued to walk at the same pace.

When they reached the intersection, they turned onto Devil's Spine and walked uphill for a good ways. Finally the Sheriff stopped in front of a shop. "Here we are. Sage and Coriander's Shop of Magic and Herbs."

"Coriander?" Liverioso asked. "Who's that?"

The Sheriff worked the latch on the door and walked in. He turned to face Liverioso. "Her husband, of course."

Chapter 33
Yea Olde Vulgar Unicorn?

Drimblerod and Grimbledung walked down the street. "Busy town. If we ever sell a franchise, it should go here," remarked Grimbledung. "Hey, is that the place?" He pointed at a large Inn. "The one with the horse with the spike in his head?"

"That's a Unicorn."

"Those are real?"

"Well, it's on the sign either way. I don't think that's the place; should be a Minotaur." As they got closer, Drimblerod was able to read the name under the sign. "Oh no. No. We are not going in there."

"Why not? That there Unicorn looks like he's having a good old time. You sure that's not the Minotaur Tail and they haven't updated the sign?"

"No; it's Yea Olde Vulgar Unicorn. Says so right there at the bottom of the sign."

"Maybe someone named Vul Gar is the proprietor and it's really a polite unicorn?"

"No, that's not it at all," said Drimblerod. "We are *not* going in there."

Grimbledung perked up an ear. "Sounds like a lot of people in there having a good time. Let's go in and see what Mister Gar has going on for entertainment."

"No."

"But..." Grimbledung looked longingly at the sign. "But, I wanna go in! Imagine the tales we'd hear!"

Drimblerod shook his head. "Absolutely, positively not."

"But... But why?" Grimbledung hopped up and down. "I wanna go in and listen to some of the tales from Vul Gar's Unicorn!"

"We'd end up infringing like no one's business." He looked around. "We're probably just over the edge as it is." He rubbed his head. "I feel a headache coming on."

"Sounds like you need a dose of Asprin."

"There you go. Right there. Just stop it." Warned Drimblerod. "We're going to stay a good four blocks from this place, just to be sure."

Grimbledung pouted. "Fine, fine. We'd probably be in fool's company in there anyway."

"Stop it this instant! You keep tempting Fate like that and you'll end up with shingles or something."

"That's just a myth." Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "And shingles are a myth nomer if I ever heard one."

"Move it." Drimblerod pointed down the street. "Rat said we were looking for a Minotaur's Tail."

"They're usually right at the end of them, from what I remember. Opposite the horns." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "I'll keep my eyes open for a Minotaur's buttocks that will indicate that the tail is hanging around nearby."

"I can't imagine that's what's on the sign, Grim."

"Well fine; the last thing I want to do is cause trouble."

"I find that hard to belie…Ah-ha! There it is!" Drimblerod pointed to a pair of large horns sticking out of the side of a building on the opposite side of the street. The entire top floor was shaped like the head of a Minotaur. Smoke was even coming out of its nostrils.

"Wow- talk about curb appeal."

Drimblerod nodded. "Well, let's see if the insides are as good as the outsides."

"Of what; a Minotaur? My experience is that the insides of any beast are not as appealing as the outsides. Unless you're making chitterlings, that is."

"I see you're in rare form tonight. Let's see how this goes." He gestured toward the door and gave a short bow. "After you."

"I don't mind if I do." Grimbledung puffed out his chest and charged into the Minotaur's Tale. "Here we go!"

"Here we go," repeated Drimblerod (though without the same zeal) as he followed his friend in.

Chapter 34
Drinks in the Minotaur Tale

The entire first floor of the establishment was one large room. A corner was set up as an open kitchen with a large roaring fire. Several types of meat were on slow-rotating skewers and boiling pots were sitting on grates. In a far corner, four haggard looking minstrels played background music.

"Gads, it smells great in here." Grimbledung inhaled deeply. "How much money we got left?"

"A couple of silver is all." Drimblerod pointed to the bar. "We're getting just a drink each then heading upstairs to get some rest."

"Just one drink?"

"Yes, so make it last."

"Hey, there's Rat!" Grimbledung pointed at the counter. "Or at least a rat. Let's go say hello."

Drimblerod shook his head. "I can see us running out of town just ahead of a massive bar tab."

"That sounds exciting, you want to do that?"

The pair started walking towards the bar. "No, Grim, I definitely do not want to do that. Remember we have to go pick up all the supplies we've bargained and paid for and that's deeper into town." He pointed ahead of them. "It's hard to make a getaway that way." He pointed behind them. "When you're going that way. We'll end up on the gallows for sure. Or at least in debtor's prison until we paid your debts."

Grimbledung sidled up to the bar. "Well, we can easily pay off all our debts when we are rich."

"One drink, Grim. That's it."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Excuse me, rodent. Can you speak? Besides RatSpeak, that is." He raised his voice as he leaned in towards Rat.

He spoke slowly: "We are looking for a companion of ours that is also a rat."

Rat twitched his whiskers at Grimbledung. "So that's how you're going to start the evening?"

Grimbledung put his hands on the counter. "The evening has already started? Gads! I'm missing it!"

"Drimblerod?" Rat looked at his friend. "What did you find out as far as rations go?"

"We're going to be stocked for the remainder of our trip." Drimblerod raised his hand and waved at the bartender. "But it's cost us nearly a gold coin, so we're real low on money right now. Real low."

"Enough for a few drinks though," assured Grimbledung. "A few each."

Drimblerod did a double take. "You get one drink, Grim. Remember none of this would be happening if it weren't for you."

"Well, thanks for that." Grimbledung smiled. "I really appreciate I will get all the credit for making us filthy rich."

"Uhm, Drimblerod…" Started Rat.

"We're not filthy rich. Right now we're stinking poor," said Drimblerod. "Stinking not filthy."

"Filthy!" Said Grimbledung.

"Stinking!" Retorted Drimblerod.

"Filthy!"

"Stinking!"

"Filthy!"

"Stinking!"

"FILTHY!"

Drimblerod paused for a moment. "Filthy!" He shouted.

"Stinking!" Said Grimbledung.

Drimblerod waggled his ears. "What are we?"

"Stinking poor is what we…" Grimbledung frowned. "Hey wait."

"If you two are just going to shout dirty words at each other, you should just get a room," offered the bartender.

Both Gnomes stared at the bartender.

"Uhm, Drimblerod." Rat pointed at the bartender. "This gentleman is the proprietor of this establishment. He has given us a room that'll cost us four copper and I assured him that we would be drinking for the evening."

Drimblerod opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Grimbledung opened his mouth. Something came out: "Say now; that sounds like a plan to me. Set them up tarbender and I'll put them down!"

"First one's on the house," said the bartender. "As agreed. The next four aren't. And don't call me that; it's annoying."

"Well, that works, we'll have two each and Rat'll have sips from ours. Perfect. So we'll just..."

"Each," Rat interrupted Drimblerod.

Drimblerod looked at Rat. "What?"

"Each is what we agreed on, Drimblerod." Rat pointed at the bartender. "And four copper for a room. It all seemed pretty reasonable to me."

"I just spent nearly a gold coin on supplies!"

"What?" Rat raised his claws plaintively. "What'd you buy; a whole meat locker?"

"Hey, *you* try feeding him!" Drimblerod pointed at Grimbledung.

"Are you folks going to argue about your kid all night, or order drinks?"

"I'm right here, you know."

"I lived with him for *a hundred years* so I know full well his eating habits!" Rat shook a claw at Drimblerod. "And his digestive antics as well, unfortunately!"

"Hearing every word."

"Ordering drinks. That's what I want to hear from you. Not arguments." The bartender put his hands on the counter. "Or you're all out on your ears."

"Honestly, I don't know what all the fuss is about!"

The trio looked at Grimbledung. "You!" they all said in unison.

"A drink'll be nice, if it's not too much trouble," he added meekly.

Drimblerod didn't make eye contact with the bartender. He figured it would make it easier to run out on the tab if he didn't actually look the man in the eye. "We'll start with those complimentary drinks. Three ales, please."

"And keep them coming!" Grimbledung slapped his hand on the bar. "I'm parched!"

The bartender nodded approvingly. "Comin' right up."

As soon as his back was turned, Drimblerod grabbed his partner by the collar. "What are you doing? We are out of money, you daft Gnome! We can't afford nine drinks!"

"Nine? It's three drinks, Drim. Three. That's way less than nine, I'm sure of it. Half probably."

"Each!"

"Fine, have it your way. Three each." Grimbledung smiled wide. "What's the problem?"

"We. Do. Not. Have. Enough. Coins…"

"What?" Asked the bartender as he stepped in front of the pair. "What don't you have enough coins for?"

"For us to order steaks," Rat said quickly.

"For us to order steaks," said Drimblerod almost too quickly. "We'll just snack on nuts." He realized he still had his partner by the collar so he let go quickly. "Just nuts is all."

"I was thinking the same thing," the bartender said as he put the drinks on the bar.

Drimblerod smoothed Grimbledung's collar. "Sorry about that. It's been a stressful couple of weeks."

"That's fine, Drim."

"I was talking to the bartender." Drimblerod picked up his drink, toasted the bartender then took a sip. "Thanks."

With a nod, the bartender returned to filling orders.

"What're we going to do?" Rat asked in a whisper. "We're going to need a silver coin just to get out of this place." He hazarded a glance at the bartender. "And I'm sure he's keeping an eye on us now."

Grimbledung did a little hop.

"Here we go."

Grimbledung nodded at his partner. "Oooh! I have an idea!" He pointed at his head. "Right up in here!"

"Well, that's better than the ideas he has when he points at his belly," Rat admitted.

Grimbledung pointed at his belly. "Oh my stomach had a part in it; nuts are not going to be satisfying. Not by a long shot."

"Well, I'm always a little afraid to ask this question, but I'll give it a shot anyway. You've surprised me before." Drimblerod lowered his head. "What's your idea, Grim?"

Grimbledung grabbed Rat's drink and downed it in one gulp.

"Hey!"

Rat's exclamation made Drimblerod look up just as Grimbledung snatched his mug. He downed it as well. "Hey!"

"Right? It's one of my best ideas ever!"

"Now just a minute here…" Drimblerod began.

Grimbledung put his finger onto Drimblerod's lips. "Shhh." He said. Then he downed his own drink. "Shhh," he said again. "Grimbledung's got it under control."

"You are *never* under control." Drimblerod said. He picked up his mug and let the few drops left trickle into his mouth. "I ought to smash this thing…" He started.

Grimbledung scooted away from the bar, still carrying his empty mug. "Can't talk now, Drim; I'm making us some money!" He called over his shoulder as he moved to the minstrels in the corner.

Chapter 35
A Quartet… Plus One

Grimbledung moved to the minstrels as his two friends watched. When he got there, he put the mug down then began to hop and wave his hands around. He pointed into the distance then down at his feet, then at the ceiling.

"What is he doing?" Rat asked.

"From my experience, he is telling a whole slew of lies."

Rat nodded. That was his experience as well.

For almost a full minute Grimbledung gestured and hopped- sometimes on one foot, sometimes on the other. Once he sat on a chair and flailed his legs around.

Throughout the entire display, the minstrels nodded at him while they played.

Finally, Grimbledung stopped gesticulating and stood before the minstrels. He raised his hands plaintively. In turn, the four minstrels nodded.

Grimbledung pulled the chair in front of the minstrels then stood on it. He drew his dirk and tapped it loudly on the mug. When a majority of the patrons in the bar were looking, Grimbledung smiled and took a small bow. "Good evening all. It's good to be here. Real good." He took another small bow. "You should be pleased to know that the owner of this establishment…" He paused as he leaned over towards one of the minstrels- the Psaltery[22] player. After a moment's discussion, Grimbledung looked toward the patrons again. "… the Minotaur's Tale… has hired me for a one time only engagement as part of my All the Known Lands Tour." He took another small bow.

A drunk Dwarf in the corner clapped.

"Yes, yes, applause is always appreciated." He raised his hands as if the entire establishment was applauding. "But save it for the end." He put the

mug on the seat of the chair. "So without further ado, I would like to introduce the famous bard and poet… straight from a successful tour of the Hinterlands, Barren Wastes, and the Royal Court of Picistan…" He took another short bow.

"Oh boy; here comes the biggest lie of the evening," Rat said. "Prepare yourself."

"Maurus Magnentius!" Grimbledung took another short bow.

Now several patrons clapped, since, after all, Marus was famous.[23]

"What?" Drimblerod looked at Rat. "Oh no; he's going to get arrested."

"Well," said Rat, "let's at least hear the poetry. At least until the authorities drag him off kicking and screaming. Again."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Fine. Poetry first. Kicking screaming to jail second."

Grimbledung clasped his hands in front of his belly. "I shall now recite," he said as he suddenly swayed slightly. "With no regard for the ill effects of the drink whatsoever."

"That I find hard to believe!" Rat said louder than he should have.

Grimbledung shot him a look.

It missed entirely.

Grimbledung looked to where it had landed- near a spittoon that didn't seem to care one way or another. With a shrug, he cleared his throat and pressed on:

"No more delays… I recite!"

An unlucky young Orcess named Boon
Was born in an oriental monsoon.

Her looks were most horrid;
Square eyes and no forehead.

And a body that was shaped like a bassoon!

Grimbledung started to take a bow but fell off the chair instead. He quickly got to his feet and executed a bow from the hard-packed dirt floor.

"Well, that was about as bad a limerick as I have ever heard." Rat said.

One of the Orcs at the bar began to clap. Slowly. "Beautiful," he said. "Beau…tee…ful."

The other Orcs in the establishment joined their comrade in applause.

The other races in the bar, not wanting to draw the ire of the apparently limerick-appreciating Orcs started clapping as well.

"Thank you, thank you!" Grimbledung picked up his mug and toasted the crowd. "I will pass around my mug during my next recitation and hope to match my meter to the clinking of coins!" He handed the mug to a human closest to the stage. "Starting with you."

The human started to pass the mug to someone else when a large Orc leaned over him and dropped a copper into it. When the two met eyes, the Human quickly dug into his coin pouch, pulled out a coin and let it clatter into the mug. When the Orc gave him a satisfied nod, the Human passed the mug to the next table.

"Unbelievable." Was all Drimblerod could manage.

Grimbledung clambered back onto the chair. He held out his hands. "Back to the poems!" When no one clapped he turned toward the minstrels. After a few moments of heated discussion and arm waving -by the minstrels as well this time- Grimbledung turned back around. "With musical accompaniment!"

Grimbledung waved his hands to his sides as if he were conducting an orchestra.

The minstrels began to play softly.

"Merry it is while drinks last," said Grimbledung. He raised and lowered his arm to get the minstrels on the same beat. He continued to move his arms as he recited:

Me'ry t'is while drinks'l last
With alës song;

O see now head o'foëm's tall
Cover'n alcohöl's strong byte.
Ei, ei, what does this night long?

Drinks!

Add ice with fruit'n umbrellas to add to th' mix'rs' song
Shake 'n serve, 'n fast!

Those drink all the night long.

Now scattered applause were intermingled with the sounds of coins being dropped into the mug as it moved around the tables.

"Absurd." Drimblerod said. After a brief pause he added, "But I have to admit it, he's not half bad."

After a full quarter hour of poems, and exchanging for an empty mug, twice even, Grimbledung stepped off the chair. "Thanks folks, thanks! It's great being here…" He paused and turned back to the minstrels. After a quick exchange, he turned back around. "… at the Minotaur's Tale. We'll be gone tomorrow but make sure you tip your servers tonight!"

Grimbledung bowed again to applause then picked up two of the mugs full of coins- the third one he left on the chair for the minstrels.

Grimbledung waggled his ears as he approached his speechless friends. "Well?"

"It seems we are speechless." Said Rat.

Drimblerod nodded. "That was absurdly absurd."

"Well, it's hard to argue with poetry." Grimbledung put the two full mugs on the bar.

As they clinked down, the bartender almost skidded to a stop in front of them. "Yes?" He asked. "You gents want to pay your tab?"

"So now we're gents," Drimblerod observed.

Grimbledung slid one mug toward the bartender. "This should about do it."

The bartender looked down at the mug. Even though it was only filled with copper coins, it was still full. "I do believe so."

"Fine then, we need a fresh set of drinks, methinks." Grimbledung said. He gave a wink, "And for the minstrels as well if you please. Ooh; and some meat to go with it." Grimbledung paused for a moment. "And for those fellows on the instruments as well. Seems they are starving artists."

"Would you be able to exchange this into more easily carried currency?" Drimblerod gestured at the other mug. "That's a lot of copper coins to lug around."

The bartender nodded. "I'll make it mostly silver and be back with it." He smiled genuinely. "It is a pleasure to have a famous poet in the place, Mister Magnentius. A pleasure indeed. I had no idea, really." A thought occurred to him. "Mayhap I'll invite other poets and bards to recite once a week; the crowd really seems to like that sort of thing. Yes?"

"Oh, I believe you'd have no trouble finding local talent to come in here and liven up the place with some poetry and other rhymes. Why, your place will be lousy with culture."

The bartender picked up the two mugs and toasted Grimbledung with them. "Be right back with your drinks and change, Mister Magnentius."

"Unbelievable," Rat said.

With another smile, the bartender left quickly.

"How was that for an idea?" Grimbledung asked.

"You know you can end up in jail for impersonating a poet like…" Rat stopped as an Orc bent over them.

"Great recitation. Great." The Orc said. He held out a napkin. "Can I get your auto…"

Grimbledung took the napkin and blew his nose in it. "Ahhh, there we go."

"Uhm, Grim…" Began Drimblerod.

"Thanks!" Said the Orc as he took the napkin back. "Thanks very much, Mister Magnentius!" He moved back to the other Orcs sitting at the end of the bar waving the napkin over his head.

"The absurdness level has got to peak at some point."[24]

Drimblerod nodded at Rat. "Hopefully soon." He looked at Grimbledung. "I think we need to keep a low profile, Grim. If this poet is as famous as he seems to be, word is going to get out that he was reciting here and since he wasn't, the authorities are going to get involved."

The bartender put three drinks in front of them as he went by. "Changing those coins next, Mister Magnentius," he said without stopping.

"Pushaw!" Grimbledung said. "This is great! Maybe I'll go on tour for real!" He turned and toasted the Orcs with his mug. "To you all!"

Two Orcs clapped while others toasted him back.

"Hey you! Stop encouraging him," said Drimblerod.

"My adoring public," Grimbledung said as his smile grew wide. He waggled his ears. "Adoring is what they are."

"Poor judges of character is what they are," said Rat. He waggled a claw at the Orcs. "That's enough of that! We have to live with him you know; if you're going to encourage him that way, we'll just leave him here with you."

The clapping stopped abruptly.

Grimbledung stopped waggling his ears. "Wait. What?"

"Get back to your libations," Rat ordered.

The autograph-receiving Orc raised his eyebrows. "On you?"

Rat exhaled loudly. "Fine. I'll put up a round for you and your fellow Orcs if that will..."

The Orcs started clapping.

"Stop it or you'll be buying your own drinks."

The clapping stopped.

As if by magic, the bartender appeared. "What was that?"

Rat nodded at the bartender. "Keep track. One drink each."

"I have pal. Ran across the street for some tobacco," said an Orc.

"Me too," said another. "Went to get some flint for... pipe."

"You must be present to win." Rat declared.

"Not valid at all locations," added Grimbledung. "Some assembly required."

"You're not helping." Rat glanced at the Gnome. "As usual."

"Some restrictions apply." Grimbledung waggled his ear again. He winked. "I get a drink too, right?"

Rat shook his head. "This is a limited time offer so I suggest..."

Grimbledung slapped his hands on the bar.

One ale please. Light on the föam
From yon barrel if you please, kind sir

Before 'round the room, fillin' mugs
you roam.

He recited

Several patrons clapped.

Drimblerod exhaled slowly. There wasn't much more he could do. Or wanted to when the bartender returned with fresh drinks for the three of them.

After almost two hours of drinks -and several more poems- Drimblerod, Grimbledung, and Rat stumbled up the stairs to their room. There was a long table set up across the top of the landing and a Dwarf sitting at it. He looked up from the book he was reading. "Can I help you?" He asked in typical Dwarf-gruffness.

Chapter 36
Finally Heading in the Right Direction

"We've got a reservation for a room," said Grimbledung. He rested his arms on the counter. "We'd like it and a bath."

Drimblerod nodded at his partner.

"Well, I can definitely help you with a room." The Dwarf scrunched up his face. "But I'll not be giving you a bath." He raised an eyebrow at Drimblerod. "Nor your friend, for that matter."

"Listen, Arbuckle..." Began Grimbledung.

"That's fine," interrupted Drimblerod. "We'll just take the key to our room and find our way down to the bathhouse on our own."

"I just call them like I see them," said the Dwarf.

"Fine, fine, don't get your butt up on your shoulders about it," said Grimbledung.

"What?"

"You know what I mean!" said Grimbledung.

"No. What *do* you mean? That's not even possible."

"Oh you know what I mean. *You know."*

The Dwarf looked at Drimblerod for help. Drimblerod just raised his hands plaintively.

"Yeah, I guess I know."

"Fine then, fine." Grimbledung smiled. "So... Where're we staying?" He pointed left and right. "Yon that side or the other will we find our slumber?"

"Not a poem out of you, laddie," warned the Dwarf.

Grimbledung put out his lower lip.

"Last room on the left," said the Dwarf. He handed a key to Drimblerod. "And keep the noise down. Any complaints and you're out on your ears." He pointed at Grimbledung. "And no refunds."

"We're on our best behavior," assured Drimblerod.

"Bestest in his case." Rat pointed at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "That's what I'm always on."

"Wait!" Rat did a little hop on Grimbledung's shoulder.

"It's true, I assure you."

"No, not that Grimbledung." Rat shook his head. "I was supposed to ask some clown about a map and I completely forgot"[25] Rat looked down on the bar. "And now I don't see him anywhere."

"A clown?"

Rat nodded at Drimblerod. "A guy I met on the street said he might have a map we could use." He considered that for a moment. "Never saw either come in."

"He probably would have bogged down the scene even more." Offered the Dwarf. "Truth be told, watching from up here, I really had no idea where it was going." He picked up a parchment from the table. "But, now that you mention it, that joker is a regular here. He leaves a stack of maps for travelers." The Dwarf hesitated for the slightest of moments. "He gets a copper for them." He offered it to Drimblerod. "Best deal in town."

"A *free* map would be a good deal in town," observed Rat.

"Well maps don't just draw themselves you know," said the Dwarf. "Lots of work goes into them. One can't rightly make a living giving away hard work for free."

"I suppose that's right." Drimblerod said. He looked at Rat. "And this guy on the street said this was what we needed?"

"It's what he said," confirmed Rat.

"Thanks." Said Drimblerod. He took the map. "And you're sure this shows the way to…" He hazarded a glance at Rat.

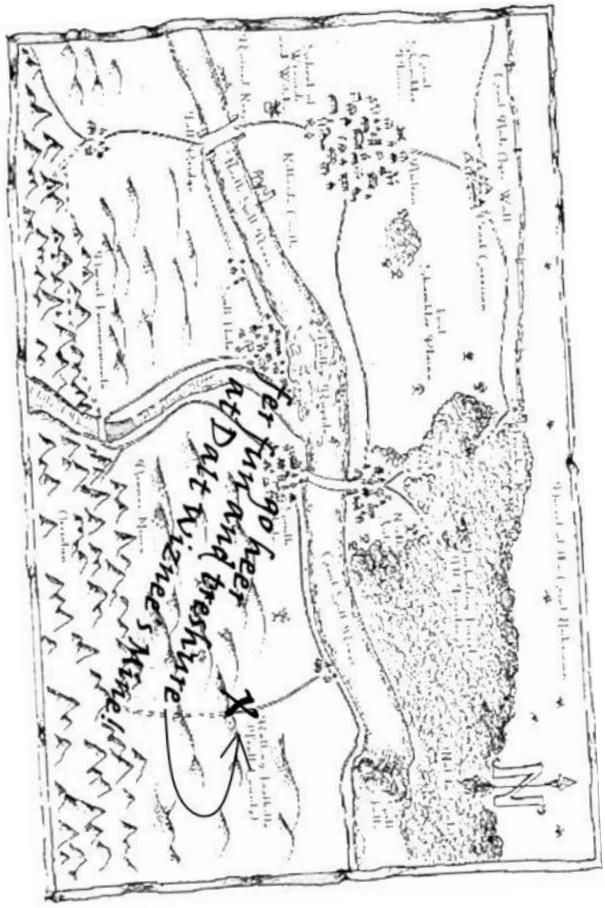
"I'm telling you what he told me."

Drimblerod nodded. “Fine, fine.” He handed a copper to the Dwarf. “Thanks.” He rolled the map and put it in his belt. He smiled at the Dwarf. “Thanks very much.”

The Dwarf nodded then returned to reading his book- Ten Habits of Highly Successful Dwarves and Three Destructive Ones You Might as Well Try.

After retreating to their room, Drimblerod and Grimbledung took their baths. While sitting in bed, Drimblerod looked at the map.

He was not pleased.



Chapter 37
Sage and Coriander's Shop of Magic and Herbs

"Huh... Huh... Huh..." Stammered Liverioso. He reached out to his partner for support. "Z-band?"

"What?" Said Semfeld. "But Cherí said that she was unattached!"

"Hah cha!" The Sheriff said as he splayed his hands out, fingers waggling. "I deal in shock humor."

In two bounds, Liverioso was on top of the Sheriff. Choking him.

And banging his head on the wood floor.

"I'm going to KILL you!" Liverioso screamed as he bounced the man's head off the floor.

"What are you doing to the Sheriff, you madman!" Sage yelled from behind the counter. "Help! Someone help!" She pointed at Semfeld. "Get that madman off our Sheriff!"

"Sage?" Semfeld asked.

"Coriander!" Yelled Sage.

Liverioso bonked the Sheriff's head on the floor again. "Coriander?"

"Toss in some peppercorns and you got a rub!" Rasped the Sheriff. "Ha cha?"

"I'll show you a rub!"

"Coriander!" Sage yelled again.

"Sage!" Semfeld yelled.

"Sheriff!" Yelled Liverioso. "No, wait."

"What is all the racket about?" Coriander asked as she stepped out from the back room.

All eyes turned to look.

Except the Sheriff since he was looking at the ceiling. He put his hands on Liverioso's wrists. "Enough's enough. Le'go of me or you'll go to jail for sure. Lost love or not."

"Get off that man," Coriander commanded.

"Cor... Cor... Cor..." Stammered Semfeld.

"Iander, if you please," Coriander said. "Only my brother calls me 'Cor'."

Liverioso hopped to his feet. "Sage!"

"Do I..." Sage began. Her eyes got large. "know..."

"Sage!" Liverioso took a step towards her, reaching his hands out. "Sage?"

Sage gaped at Liverioso. Then fainted.

The Sheriff rolled to his feet. "Now look what you did!"



"What I did?" Liverioso wheeled on the Sheriff. "*What I did*?" He took a step towards him. "You and your husband crack caused this!" He gestured to the counter where Sage was standing only a moment before. "Look what *you* did!"

Coriander moved to Sage and took her hand in hers. She peered over the top of the counter. "Who *are* you people?"

"I'm the Sheriff, of course." The Sheriff said He tucked his thumbs into his bent and rolled back on his heels. "Keeper of the peace."

Coriander rolled her eyes. "Yes, I've seen your shtick at the saloon."

"Yeah?" The Sheriff waggled his eyebrows. "Good, huh?"

Liverioso moved to the counter and scooted across the top of it. "Sage?"

"After a few drinks you're almost tolerable."

"Thanks!" The Sheriff crossed his arms and rocked back and forth from heel to toe. "It's always nice to meet a fan. You know, I'm reminded of the time..."

"Shut up!" Liverioso took Sage's other hand and patted it. "Sage? Semfeld, find some water or something!"

Semfeld flourished his wand. "Find water you say? Why, that is mere child's play." He raised the wand. "Any douser *hack* can do that." He waved his wand over his open hand.

Gimme some water!
'Cause I got Sage fainted behind the counter.

Cool, cool water

Oooh, gimme some water
I need a little water!

A large glass of water appeared on Semfeld's palm.

"Nicely done, Semfeld!" Liverioso dropped Sage's hand and applauded.

Semfeld took a little bow, causing the glass to wobble on his hand. He quickly shoved his wand in his belt and took the glass. "Here's the water. Cool, cool water."

"Old Dan would be proud," remarked the Sheriff. He raised his hands and waggled his fingers.

Everyone ignored him.

Semfeld walked to the counter and put the glass on the far side of it. "Here you go, partner."

"That should help," said Coriander. She smiled at Semfeld. "That was a very nice trick."

Semfeld beamed at the very attractive woman. "Uhm.." He managed to say.

Sage groaned.

"She's coming to," said the Sheriff. "Hit her with the water, you!"

Liverioso nodded. He took the glass and splashed the entire thing onto Sage's face. As soon as he did it, his eyes got big. "What kind of Sheriff are you?" He started to throw the glass at him but Sage began to sputter so he just put it on the counter.

"I think it helped," said Coriander.

Semfeld moved to the counter to not only look at Sage, but to get a better look at Coriander.

Coriander looked down at her cousin. "Are you all right?"

Since she was looking down, Semfeld couldn't get a good look at Coriander's face. So he looked down her shirt instead.

"Liverioso?" Sage said as she opened her eyes. "Is... Is that you?"

"It is me," said Liverioso. He kissed the back of her hand. "After all this time, it is me."

"I hoped you would find me." A tear ran down her face. "I knew you'd find me."

"You're Liverioso?" Coriander asked. "*The* Liverioso?"

Liverioso nodded.

Sage looked up at Semfeld.

Semfeld quickly moved his eyes to her face. "Uhm..."

Coriander smiled. "And you are?"

"Uhh…Uhhh... Semfeld."

"Uhh Semfeld, it is nice to meet you." She smiled again.

"No, just Semfeld." He straightened slightly. "Semfeld the Astounding, actually."

"Oh, well, if you say so."

Semfeld put his hands on the counter. "Yes, in fact, after what was to date the longest engagement as the Royal Magician to the House of Naru, I embarked on an equally successful..."

Sage sat up. "Liverioso!"

"Sage!" Liverioso said.

"Sheriff!" Exclaimed the Sheriff. When everyone looked at him, he smiled sheepishly. "Oh, I thought we were starting that roll call again."

"Sage, I came to take you back with me."

Sage looked at Liverioso, then Semfeld, then Coriander. "Coriander?" Reflexively, Sage's hand went to the jagged scar on her forearm.

"Home is where the heart is, Sage." Coriander put her hand on her cousin's shoulder. "Follow your heart."

"But." Sage rubbed the scar. "But..."

"If you want my opinion," the Sheriff said, suddenly serious. "I think you should seriously consider this man's offer." He uncrumpled the parchment and held it up for her to see. "*Seriously* consider it."

"Is that your lost cat? We can find him before we go." Semfeld pushed up his sleeves. "I have a great location spell that's really worth the look!"

Sage met eyes with the Sheriff. "No, there is no need Semfeld."

"Yeah, that cat's not gonna turn up." The Sheriff said flatly.

Liverioso put his hand on Sage's. "If you think that after all this time, a little scar is going to make me leave you..."

"It's not that." Sage lowered her eyes. "It's..."

"It's settled," said the Sheriff sternly. "Pack your things and go." His voice softened. "After all we've heard about this Liverioso fellow and the water tower, I'll shackle you to him if I have to."

Sage smiled. "Why don't we go to the house to discuss things."

"And stop by the bank to close your account there," added Semfeld. "Sheriff, how about you settle their outstanding debts and…"

"Just hold on there Mister Astounding," said Coriander. "This is *our* business here and that makes it none of your business."

"I thought."

"You thought." Coriander frowned at the Magician. "You thought that since Sage here is reunited that I'd just blindly follow along to be your… your I don't know what… because I'm just some love-needy female who will follow some strange man after a moment's introduction?" She stood. "Maybe love's first kiss would make it all better." She puckered her lips and leaned toward him. "MMMMMmmm!"

Semfeld looked at his feet.

"Oh, well, I guess not then." Coriander turned back to Sage. "Let's get upstairs to discuss matters."

Sage smiled. "Always level headed, dear cousin." She reached out to her. "Do you think you will stay here?"

Coriander shrugged. "Well, at least a little while. Plus, I would need to see what this other town looks like and if we could even be successful there."

"Thanks for your patience, Sheriff. I will definitely take your advice." She smiled at the man.

Semfeld looked from the Sheriff to Sage and back. "Patience?"

"It's nothing. Nothing at all." The Sheriff waved his hand dismissively. "All part of the service." He smirked. "Besides, that means you can catch my next show this upcoming Grunsday."

Liverioso jumped to his feet and extended a hand to Sage. "Then it's settled. We pack up and head to Julesville."

Semfeld nodded. "And I was worried someone would notice the shop was missing." He patted the bulging backpack. "We'll be back in no time."

"You have a shop?"

Liverioso shook his head at Sage. "Not exactly; we're watching it for someone."

"We're kind of between shops right now," added Semfeld. "But things were looking up before we got word where you were."

Sage grasped Liverioso's hand and he pulled her up.

The two stared at each other for a long moment.

"Oh kiss her already," said Semfeld. "You're due."

Liverioso kissed Sage.

Sage kissed Liverioso

Liverioso and Sage kissed.

Sage and Liverioso kissed.

"Well, I have things to attend to," the Sheriff said finally. With a headshake, he left the shop.

Semfeld cleared his throat. "So, Coriander, where do you ladies live?"

Thankful to be able to direct her attention elsewhere, Coriander turned to face Semfeld. She pointed at the ceiling. "Upstairs from the shop."

"That's convenien..." Semfeld snapped his fingers. "Say, you wouldn't by any chance have a backpack of holding, would you?"

Coriander shook her head. "No. Why would we need one of those?"

"Well, when… If you decide to come to Julesville, I can just Minisculate the shop and bring it back." He gestured at the backpack. "Just like we're doing with this one we're keeping an eye on."

The pair turned to look at Liverioso and Sage. They were still kissing.

"Let's go buy one," suggested Semfeld. "Just in case you decide you want to follow on later on." He held up his hands. "Because you want to, not because of anything having to do with me."

Coriander smiled. "Let's." She moved around the counter and to the front door. "I know where there's a supply shop that should have one." She gestured outside.

Semfeld looked at his partner. "We'll be back in a little bit."

Liverioso and Sage stopped kissing.

Sage smiled. "Want us to come with?"

"Sure, you are always able to get a better deal than I can."

"Let's go then. We can buy the backpack, get something to eat, catch up, then head out," said Liverioso.

"We'll be back in Julesville before anyone notices." Said Semfeld. He pulled Coriander out of the shop. When he got outside, he realized he had taken her by the hand. "Oh, sorry."

Coriander pulled her hand from his and then punched him on the shoulder. "Stop that." She smirked. "I see our relationship is going to involve me hitting you fairly regularly."

"Well, that's a start."

As Liverioso and Sage left, Liverioso turned to the door. "Stay locked up until we..." He frowned. "Hmmm."

"I'll just use my key," said Sage as she eyed him. "Talk to fixtures often do you?"

"Well, the ones I know are more… animated."

"Let's go then before someone notices we're missing," Semfeld said.

"Do the folks back in Julesville know you're gone? I mean, the owners of the shop, that is."

Semfeld shook his head. "No, no. They are out of town on some fool adventure. Couple of Gnomes."

Coriander's face got stern. "You associate with *Gnomes*?"

"Sure, sure. They're okay once you get to know them, really they are. And I am sure you and Nulu will get along well too."

"Another Gnome?"

Liverioso laughed. "Nulu? Oh no; she's a Trolless. About as far away from a Gnome as you can get, I'd think."

"What kind of town are you living in? Folks mixing with other kinds?"

Semfeld's smile faltered. After a moment's consideration, he decided on the simplest, most direct answer: "A good town."

The group walked in silence for a short while, then Sage and Liverioso began to chat. By the time they reached the shop, Semfeld was walking beside his partner and Coriander, her cousin.

After the quartet found a suitable backpack of holding, they went to the tavern next door. Several courses and drinks later, the sun was going down before they returned to Sage and Coriander's shop.

They were most definitely missed in Julesville.

Chapter 38
The Lost Picman's Mine!
(Sorry for the Delay)

Grimbledung stood in the wagon. "Look!" He pointed. "Look at that rocky outcroppings. This *has* to be the place!" Grimbledung held the map out at arms' length. He lowered it to peer over it as the wagon rambled up what could only be marginally called a road. Ahead, what was in fact a rocky outcropping, got nearer. "It's getting nearer!" It began to look just like the one on the map. "It looks just like the one on the map!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "Nearer and more like-er!"

Because it was.

Drimblerod sighed. "That's what you said the last time."

"But this time it is really rocky!" Grimbledung pointed at the sharply inclining road. "There were it sharply inclines! See Rat? See?" Grimbledung clambered forward onto RatShambler's shoulders. "See?" He pointed at the map, then at the outcropping.

RatShambler sighed. "That is what you said last time. That stupid map is wrong. Which is why a garden-variety map is often better to have than a map given to you by a clown."

"But this time..." Grimbledung grasped the top of RatShambler's head. "Oh… Oh… Let's turn around." He finished quickly.

"But it's a rocky outcropping, Grim." Drimblerod said in his partner's voice. "A rocky one."

"I know what I said," Grimbledung turned and moved back to the front of the wagon. "But this isn't the right outcropping."

"How can you tell which..." RatShambler skidded to a halt. "You have got to be kidding." RatShambler looked down the other side of the steep incline. "You just got to be."

Drimblerod lurched forward as the wagon came to an abrupt stop. "What is going on up there?" He sat up. "Rat, what are you doing?" Since

Drimblerod was still seated in the wagon, he couldn't see over the incline- only the sky above.

"Turn around Rat!" Grimbledung pleaded. He took the reins from his partner and snapped them "Turn around, Rat!" He snapped them again and again. "Coming about! Jibe ho!"

"Grimbledung poet imposter Sixtoes esquire." Rat turned to look at his friend. "You have outdone yourself this time."

"What are you going on about, Rat?" Drimblerod snatched the reins from his partner. "And today is my day to steer. No steering for you until tomorrow, Grim." He tut-tutted.

"I expect Grim just wants to skip the rest of this day," offered Rat. "Right, Grim?"

"Yes! Let's just skip back to the shop!" Grimbledung skipped in place. "Skip to the end; that's fine by me!"

Rat started walking again.

"Grim, I told you we were going to look for two more days yesterday so we still have all of today." Drimblerod smiled. "So let's give it until we... stop... night..." Drimblerod stammered to a stop.

Rat kept walking.

They were now close enough to hear music.

Drimblerod sat in silence as they approached what appeared to be an extensive carnival.

Grimbledung looked in the opposite direction.

Rat came to a stop next to an immense sign.

"Grimbledung Sixtoes," Drimblerod managed to say. He looked up at the sign.

"Hmmm?" Grimbledung was still furiously looking the other way.

"Hmmm? That's all you have to say for yourself?" Drimblerod gestured at the large sign. "I am sure you can make out what this is."

"Part of the East Shambler plains." Grimbledung shielded his eyes with both his hands and squinted at the distance. "I should imagine."

Drimblerod took his partner by the shoulders and turned him around. "This. This here is what I am talking about."

"Yon sign?" Grimbledung stalled.

"Yes, yon sigh. What do you make of it?"

"Well constructed, it seems to me."

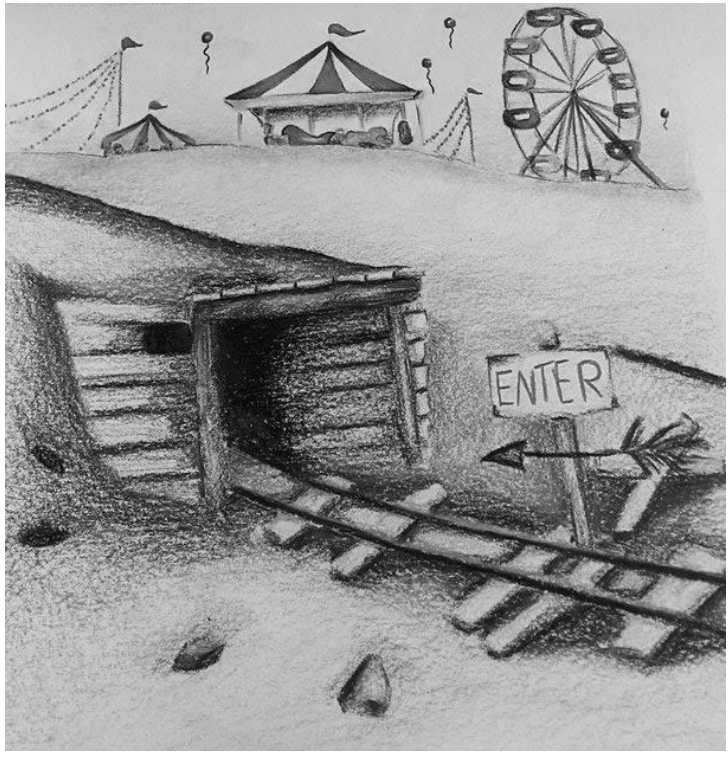
"Is that all you have to say?"

"Brightly colored?"

"And..."

"Neatly painted? Not sure much else since I can't read it."

"And what beyond yon well-constructed, brightly colored, neatly painted sign that you can't read?"



"Seems to be some sort of park. Of amusements perhaps. Of some sort."

"And the main attraction is?"

"Ferris wheel?"

"Grim..."

"Some sort of large opening in the ground?"

"What would you call a large opening in the ground?"

"A cave?"

"A grave for Grimbledung?" Offered RatShambler.

"That would be small square-ish hole with a bulge in the middle."

"Hey now, that's getting personal." Grimbledung waggled a finger at Rat.

"Grimbledung Sixtoes," began Drimblerod.

"Esquire?"

"Deadsquire is more like it."

"Rat, you are not helping. If you don't have something helpful to say, you should just wait until you do. Right Drim? I mean honestly, when we're in the market for something helpful to say, and the best..."

Grimbledung didn't finish his sentence because his partner swatted his ear.

Hard.

Grimbledung swatted his partner's ear.

Hard.

Ten minutes of mainly ear swatting later, Drimblerod and Grimbledung sat on the ground with RatShambler between them.

"Let's go look around," RatShambler suggested. "Maybe there is treasure to be had after all."

"Sounds good, right Drim?" Grimbledung got to his feet. "Let's go find that treasure and head home to finish off a successful adventure."

Drimblerod shook his head. "There had better be some sort of treasure here."

Grimbledung scooted to the front of the wagon. "There is, I'm sure of it! Let's get you hooked back up, Rat!" He smiled. "Then we'll go find it!"

Chapter 39
Queueing In the Queue

Drimblerod stood in line. Patiently.

Grimbledung far less so.

"Are we there yet?" Grimbledung asked. He had stopped hopping back and forth because the large human female behind him had threatened to spike his feet to the ground if he didn't.

"I can't believe I am spending two silver to get in here."

"But this is why we came here, Drim," Grimbledung whined. "We gotta go in. We GOTTA!"

"If you can't keep your kid quiet," warned the female, "he's not getting out of this cave alive. Neither are you."

"Back off lady," Grimbledung pointed a finger at her. "No one talks to my Pops like that! Right Pops? Teach her a lesson Pops! Yeah, teach her a lesson!" He hopped back and forth shadowboxing.

Drimblerod lowered his head as he took another step forward. After seeing the exorbitant entry fees, he had realized the cheapest way they could get in was with the parent-child discount ticket. He had regretted it as soon as he explained the scheme to Grimbledung, who immediately began to call him 'Pops'.

"Hey, Pops." Said Grimbledung.[26]

"What?"

"You going to handle this lady?" Grimbledung tossed him. Underhanded and slow.

"Not even on a bet," he answered, hitting the line full-on. He waggled his ears.

"Nice, Pops. Nice." Grimbledung waggled his ears as well.

"You two talking about me?" The woman tightened her grip on her purse, preparing to whack one of them. Or perhaps both if the ear-waggling didn't stop.

"Next." Said the bored-looking youth in the small ticket booth.

Drimblerod stepped up to the window. "Parent and a child." He said as he put two silver coins on the counter.

"Thanks, Pops."

Drimblerod closed his eyes. "Quiet, Rat."

"Pets aren't allowed," said the youth.

"I'm not a pet," said Rat.

"Are you a child then?" The youth asked. "That's another five copper."

"He's over a hundred years old," offered Drimblerod.

"Hurry up you people!" The female angrily called.

"We're hurrying up as fast as we can hurry up. Or out even. Maybe down since we're going into a mine."

"Are you through?"

Grimbledung waggled his ears at the woman. "I can keep this up all day."

"That is true," said Rat.

"He could just be an old kid," said the youth. "Do you support him?"

"Not the drinking, that's for sure," said Grimbledung. "No one should support the amount of drinking Rat does."

"I'm warning you," said the female.

"Then he's a pet. No pets allowed."

"Fine then," said Rat as he hopped off Grimbledung's shoulder. "I'll just ben an *infestation*." He scurried past the youth and farther into the cave.

The youth frowned.

"For a mere silver coin, I can resolve your rat infestation," said Grimbledung. "Before the authorities find out, even."

"Hurry up!"

The youth looked from the Gnomes to the female, then into the cave, then back to the Gnomes.

"HURRY. UP!" The female lifted her purse over her head.

The youth took one of the silver coins. "Fine, fine." He pointed at the entrance with the mandated-by-upper-management, two fingers. "Your tour starts in the gift shop."

"Of course it does," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung took the silver coin. "Come on, Pops. Maybe you can buy me an overpriced plush toy. They cost a silver, right?"

"Only the ones as big as your thumb," replied Drimblerod. "The prices get more absurd as the toys get bigger. Let's just stand quietly in the gift shop and try not to break anything. With any luck, that silver can buy us lunch."

"Pish-posh," said Grimbledung, "once we're done finding the treasure, our money troubles are over, Pops. You'll see."

"You are not getting a plush toy with our last silver coin. And stop calling me Pops."

"I'm telling you, they will be over and done… Dadcicle."

"You are *not* getting a plush toy." He narrowed his eyes "*Dadcicle*?"

"It would 'a been 'Popsicle' but you said not to use 'Pops'." Grimbledung stuck out his lower lip. He returned Drimblerod's narrow-eyed stare. His lip started to quiver.

"And throwing a tantrum will ensure that you don't get one for the rest of the trip! So let's get going." Drimblerod walked into the cave.

Grimbledung turned to look at the female. "Grownups, right?"

"Why are you still here?" The female tightened her grip on her purse.

Grimbledung smiled at the female. "You know, this is supposed to be the happiest place in the lands, get with the program, toots."

"I'll get you, you stinking kid. And your little rat too!"

"If I had a coin for every time I heard that threat…" He scooted away to catch up with Drimblerod as the female swung her purse to deliver what would probably have been a painful blow.

Chapter 40
Yea Olde Shoppe of Gifts

Grimbledung continued to scoot all the way into the gift shop. It was full of customers.

"This place sure is full of merchandise," Grimbledung commented.

"Grimbledung, over here!" Drimblerod waved from beside a tall rack of plush toys. He was at the far side of the shop from his partner.

Grimbledung waved back. "And I'm over here!" He smiled wide. "Lookit all this stuff!"

"Come stand by me!" Drimblerod waved again.

Grimbledung picked up a snow globe.

Drimblerod quickly maneuvered his way to his partner. "Put that thing down, Grim; it looks expensive."

Grimbledung shook the globe then looked at his partner through it. "I can barely hear you, Drim!" Grimbledung made a sound like blowing wind. "This blizzard is really picking up!" He shook the globe again since the snow had started to settle. "Helloooo!" He called as he shook the globe again. Violently.

"Would you give me that. You're going to break the thing!" Drimblerod snatched the globe from his partner. "And like it said, it is probably expensive."

Grimbledung leaned forward and peered into the globe. It was of a very tall building with a glowing sign above large doors. "How can you tell it's expensive?"

"Because it's in here." Drimblerod carefully put the globe back in its place. "Everything in here is expensive."

"What is that thing anyway?"

"It's a snow globe of course." Drimblerod waggled his ears.

Grimbledung stuck his tongue out at his partner. "I know it's a snow globe. I mean what is it a snow globe of?"

Now Drimblerod peered into the globe. "Seems to be some kind of hospital. Never seen one that big though." He pointed at the sign. "Seems it's called Es Tee Elsewhere."

"Never heard of it."

"Me neither." Drimblerod put his hand around his partner and turned him so they were shoulder to shoulder. "Let's make our way to the front so we will be able to hear what the guide is saying."

Grimbledung nodded. "Good idea. That way we can listen for clues on where the treasure is."

Drimblerod sighed. "I don't think there is any treasure, Grim." He spread his arms out wide. "This is as far from a lost mine as you can get."

"Are you saying you're giving up?"

"It's moving up on my list of things to do."

"Well, getting filthy rich is still at the top of my list."

"I thought getting a meal was at the top of your list."

"That's always on the top of the list. It just holds its own special spot." Grimbledung rubbed his belly. "It does with most folks, in fact."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Ever heard someone say 'That sure hit the spot' after a really good meal?"

"I'm not sure that's what they mean."

"It's what they mean," assured Grimbledung. "Hey, let's get to the front of this crowd." He waggled his ears.

"What're you planning?"

"Hey Pops!" Grimbledung called. "Where are you Pops?" He started pushing his way through the crowd. "Pops!"

Drimblerod pursed his lips.

"Pops? Where are you Pops?" Grimbledung repeated again. He was getting near the front of the crowd. "Pops!" When he reached the front of

the crowd, he hopped up and down. "Where you at Pops?" He waved at Drimblerod. "Pops!"

Drimblerod waved back as he stifled a smirk. "That's not too bad," he said to himself. "I might need one of those myself. I wonder if Flora's got a sister." He called out: "Son, where are you? Son!!" He began to push his way through the crowd. When he finally reached Grimbledung, he grabbed him by the ear. "Oooh, you had me so worried you little rascal!"

"Maybe you should hold his hand or something," scolded a nearby parent. An angry looking Dwarfess. She held up her hands showing she was holding onto both of her childrens' hands.

"Hold hands? Don't be gross."

"You tell her, Pops."

"I just did. Weren't you listening?" Drimblerod picked up his partner's ear. "Helloo!" He called into it. "This thing work?" He leaned in and bit it. "Yuck. Maybe I *should* just hold your hand after all."

Grimbledung waggled his eyebrows at the woman. "Unless *you* want to hold my hand."

"I would recommend that over biting his ears," said Drimblerod.

"Hey, let her make up her own mind. Right, toots?"

The woman turned around.

"Well, I'm dashed."

"Me too," agreed Drimblerod. He stuck out his tongue. "And I need a drink now. When was our last bath?"

Grimbledung looked around- there was a fair bit of space between them and the rest of the crowded area. "Mayhap a bit too long."

Rat scrambled up Grimbledung's side onto his shoulder. "Here you are!"

"Of course we're here." Grimbledung pointed across the room. "If you looked over there, you wouldn't find us. 'Cause we're here."

"Unless you were there," said Rat. He gestured across the room.

Grimbledung looked back across the room then frowned. "But how could I be anywhere but here?"

"When you are there, of course."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Didn't we resolve this dilemma south of Old Jute? Last week it was, now that I think about it."

"That was then. This is now," said Rat.

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "South Jute was our last bath!"

"Mayhap we are due."

Rat nodded at Drimblerod. "Probably, but wait until we're out of this place."

"Why's that, Rat?"

"Because you two are real easy to find in your current olfactory condition." Rat twitched his whiskers. "Real, real easy."

"I think we should be offended." Offered Grimbledung.

"That is true."

"I think you mean we are offensive." Corrected Drimblerod.

"That is also true," Rat repeated. He twitched his whiskers again.

"What is it you needed exactly?" Drimblerod squinted at Rat.

"Hmm… Why did I come here? Now I forget. Did I insult you already?"

"Yes." Drimblerod pointed at Rat. "And don't twitch your whiskers again."

"Right, right. Then I think it might have been to tell you about the secret passage. Unless I already mentioned that."

Several people moved closer to the trio.

Drimblerod quickly scooped Rat off Grimbledung's shoulder. "Keep it down about things of such," he whispered.

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "Is this like the Great Map Incident?"

Drimblerod's eyes got large. "Hey, is this like the map incident?" He waggled a finger at Rat.

"Exactly like it." Rat assured. "Exactly like it."

"Well that was a complete waste of a copper."

Rat sat on his hind end and spread his claws out wide. "Please remind me where we are at the moment?"

"Sure, but it wasn't at all what we were expecting," countered Grimbledung.

"That, my dear Gnome, is entirely *your* fault. My map business venture got us here in two days instead of the wandering aimlessly for almost three weeks."

"Hey, that's right!" Drimblerod waggled his finger at Grimbledung now.

"Now hold on a grain of sand!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "I thought we were ganging up on Rat!"

"That was yesterday," said Rat, matter-of-factly.

Grimbledung smiled at his partner. "Oh yeah, that's right. That was a fun day."

"Rat doesn't need ganged up on," said Rat, "he needs a pat on his head and a snack in his belly."

"I'll make sure not to mix those two up."

Rat nodded at Drimblerod. "I'd appreciate that."

"So when we get close…" Drimblerod looked around. Several people had moved even closer to the trio. "Grim, if you please?" He gestured at his partner.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. Then flapped his arms furiously. The change of aroma in the immediate area was immediate. And gut wrenching.

Everyone took several steps away from the trio.

"Thanks."

Grimbledung gave a little bow.

"SO when we get close, just give the 'hi' sign."

"The 'high' sign?"

"No, 'hi' sign."

"High?"

"Hi!"

"I have no idea what either of those are," admitted Rat.

Drimblerod exhaled loudly. "Grim, give him the 'hi' sign."

Grimbledung waved at the pair. "Hi." He said with a smile.

"I really need to reassess my life choices," said Rat.

"Hi!" Said Grimbledung.

"For the love of…"

"Hi!"

"Hi, hi HI!" Rat waved repeatedly at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung put his hand down. "You don't just leave a 'hi' sign hanging like that," he tut-tutted.

"That is true," agreed Drimblerod.

"You know, he's rubbing off on you, right?" Rat asked Drimblerod. He turned and judged the distance to Grimbledung's shoulder. "That's a little far. Can you just put me there?"

Drimblerod obliged Rat. "There you go. Thanks again, Rat."

"So when does this tour start, Pop?" Grimbledung looked around expectedly. "Rolton Chips, why doesn't it work like when something bad is going to happen?"

"We'll just have to wait patiently, Grim."

A long three minutes later.

"Now wait a grain of sand. What if I am there instead of here?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Yaaa!" Screeched a Dwarf. "You won't be *anywhere* if you don't just be quiet!"

Most everyone around Grimbledung nodded.

"Well, I'm dashed." Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "Officially dashed." He peered at Rat. "You dashed?"

"That is a good assessment. I am sitting here dashed as well."

"I agree that you are sitting there dashed."

"I thought I was here." Rat twitched his whiskers.

Grimbledung shook his head. "No, no; you are definitely there. I can see that from here."

The Dwarf grabbed Grimbledung by the collar and shook him violently. "Be quiet!"

"Gaa!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. Because that was all that would come out.

"Hey let go of my part… kid!" Drimblerod grabbed the Dwarf's shoulders and began tugging.

Grimbledung's head now spun in a circle instead of back and forth.

"Not… an… improvement!" Grimbledung offered.

"Well you are getting more air there," offered Rat.

"Yes... more… air… here."

"Yaaa!" The Dwarf tightened his grip. "I'm going to kill ya right here and now, Laddie!"

"Security!" A female voice shouted. "Security at the Grand Mine Tour entrance!"

Two Orcs pushed their way through the crowd. Even when folks moved out of their way, they veered to make sure they could still shove people out of the way.

"Leggo dat Gnome!" Said one. "Or else."

The second Orc hit the Dwarf on the head with a rather large blackjack.

The Dwarf obliged by collapsing in a heap.

"Hey, you no give him chance to decide if he want or else or not." Said First Orc.

"Oh, I thought I make that decision." Second Orc said. He looked at the very unconscious Dwarf. "You not talking to me?"

"What now? Yes."

"No, then."

"Over there?" Grimbledung tossed into the mess.

"Yeah, over there, then." Said First Orc, suddenly confused. "Or maybe here, then."

"Maybe you were here and there then."

First Orc squinted down at Grimbledung. "You want or else?"

"What here?"

First Orc produced his own well-worn black jack. "Yeah, here."

"No, sir." Grimbledung put his hands in his pockets.

"Clean up at the Grand Mine Tour entrance!" A female voice shouted. "Cleanup at the Grand Mine Tour entrance!"

"Dat us too?" Asked Second Orc.

The first Orc nodded. "Dat us." He pointed at the Dwarf. With two fingers of course. "We clean up messes we make."

Second Orc picked up the now-just-groggy Dwarf. "Where we take him? The dump?"

"Sure? Dat sound right."

Feeling bad that his partner's antics had caused the Dwarf to fall into the predicament he currently occupied- namely not going on the tour that he paid a nonrefundable entrance fee for- Drimblerod offered: "How about lost and found? That way someone can claim him."

"Folk get claimed at dump," countered First Orc.

"That's technically 'repurposed'," said Drimblerod to First Orc. "I think the lost and found is a better idea."

"Sure?" Tried First Orc.

"Well, dat closer than dump."

"Cleaning up!" Screeched a female voice. "Cleaning up at the Grand Mine Tour entrance!"

"They're cleaning up here, lady!" Rat twitched his whiskers.

"Yeah, there's a cleanup's going on there," said Grimbledung.

"Lost and found then." Agreed Second Orc. He shook the Dwarf. "Let go so pay not get docked."

The first nodded. "Need all my money. I make hole in crowd." He pointed at the exit with two fingers. As the crowd parted to give them a clear path to the exit, the Orc veered into them pushing them into the open area they had just created.

Second Orc followed behind his partner.

"Well, that was a show," said Grimbledung.

A female cleared her throat. Loudly.

Everyone turned to look.

A petit blond Elf stood in front of a red velvet rope stretched across the entrance to the mine. She smiled sweetly. "If I may have everyone's…"

"Got a sore throat there?" Interrupted Grimbledung. He waggled his ears.

The Elf stopped looking around the room and focused a seething stare on Grimbledung. If daggers could come out of her eyes, they would have. She cleared her throat again.

Grimbledung stopped waggling his ears and looked down at his feet.

The Elf smiled sweetly. "If I can have everyone's attention for a moment, we will start the Grand Mine Tour. My name is Laurita and I will be your guide."

Grimbledung kept looking at his feet.

Laurita cleared her throat.

Grimbledung looked up. While he was sure he didn't see daggers, he was pretty sure that her eyes now had a red tint to them. He smiled sheepishly. "I think I'm in love," he said out of the corner of his mouth to Drimblerod.

Laurita smiled sweetly and began to look around the room, making eye contact with folks as she did. "The Grand Mine Tour is an hour-long walking tour of the mine. Some passages are narrow. There are no hand rails blocking most of the chasms, holes, or crevices. And blood sucking bats live in one of the mines. Anyone not want to continue my tour, just say so now." She narrowed her eyes.

No one dared answer.

She smiled. "Excellent. Also be aware that the mine has been extensively searched; there are *no* secret passages and *absolutely positively* no treasure to be found."

Rat winked at Drimblerod.

"And in the absurdly unlikely event something is actually found," the Elf continued, "be aware that the mine is private property and taking anything from it will result in immediate persecution."

Grimbledung raised his hand.

Laurita made eye contact with Grimbledung.

"Don't you mean *pro*-secution?"

Laurita smiled again. "With the immediate, *terminal, per*-secution being carried out by the Pinker Tonnes Security Division."

Several people gasped.

"I know a guy who dealt with PTSD; it was no joking matter, Grim," said Drimblerod.[27]

Grimbledung gulped.

"Oh yes," the Elf continued. "And even though it is not necessary at all, the mines are also guarded by ten Gremlins who work in the Property Recovery Division of that self-same company."

Drimblerod winked at Rat. He elbowed Grimbledung. When his partner glanced at him, he pulled up his tunic sleeve revealing his six-toed tattoo.

Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"And if the thief happens to make it to the light of day and actually breathe free air, the Personnel Locating Division will find them in short order. Then deal with them." Laurita cleared her throat

Grimbledung and Drimblerod immediately looked at her.

"We will all stick together throughout the tour…"

Grimbledung raised his hand.

"… and I will answer all questions at the end of the tour." The Elf scowled for the briefest of moments. "There's one in every group." She smiled again. "Yes, Mister Gnome, what is it?"

"I have three questions: does this tour include the Lost Picman's mine?"

"And?"

"Are all Pixies mean or just the ones I meet?"

The Elf stared at Grimbledung. Her voice dropped a full octave. "And?"

"Does this tour include the Lost Picman's mine?" He dropped his hand.

The Elf glanced at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod shrugged. He wasn't really listening to the questions. Three weeks on the road with his partner had made him numb to a fair bit of his antics.

"Yes, the Grand Mine Tour does indeed include the Lost Picman's mine. The tour includes three mines and one cave…"

Grimbledung raised his hand.

"…That I will discuss each as we enter them!"

Grimbledung lowered his hand.

Laurita's tone softened. "Well then, let's start the tour, all right?"

Grimbledung raised his hand.

"All Pixies hate you!" The Elf screeched.

Grimbledung put his hands in his pockets.

"You seem dashed over there?" Rat twitched his whiskers. "Yes?"

Laurita turned and unhooked the velvet rope on one side. She tossed it at the other pole where the small brass hook caught on the eyelet there. Flourishing a wand, she held it aloft. "Follow the light." The end of the wand burst into a bright bluish light.

"It's the second mine," said Rat. "It's mine, mine, cave, mine."

Drimblerod nodded. "Well, we might as well enjoy the tour until we get there."

"Mine, mine, mine, huh? Greedy," Grimbledung said. "I was going to share with you, but now I'm not too sure."

Rat bit Grimbledung's ear.

"Hey-a!" Grimbledung rubbed his ear. He pulled his hand away fulling expecting to see his own blood.

Laurita craned her neck to look back at him. "Is there a problem?"

"Not here." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"Nice," Rat whispered. "I think you had her going there."

"Nice." Responded Grimbledung.

"Quiet you two," whispered Drimblerod. "We need to keep a low profile so we can break off from the group without anyone noticing."

The pair nodded back.

"The first mine starts here," said Laurita. "Welcome to the Dwarf Mine of Doom."

Chapter 41
Dwarf Mine of Doom

"Dwarf mine of doom?" Grimbledung gulped. "That doesn't sound enjoyable at all. I'm going to ask her why it's not called something nice like Happy Mine of Fun or something."

"Don't be dopey," said Rat. "You'll just make her grumpy doing that. She's happy now, so let's keep her that way." He held a claw to his mouth. "Shhhh."

"The Dwarf Mine of Doom is called that because of its previous owners; the Troll brothers Heigh and Hoe Doom." Laurita gestured around the mine.

"What was wrong with these Trolls? I know a couple of Trolls and they're pretty nice." A female near Laurita asked.

Laurita lifted her wand and panned it over her head. As she did, a wide swath of light spread out from it. The fifty-foot band of light hovered in the air then very slowly rose to the ceiling casting light all around them. "That is a good question." She lowered her wand. "These two particular Trolls were greedy and often bought the indenture contracts for hapless gamblers and forced them to work off their debt here."

"Hey, she didn't even raise her hand," Grimbledung complained. "I'm going to point that out."

"Low profile, Grim. We need a low profile so just let it go."

Grimbledung exhaled loudly. "Fine, fine." He looked around. "It is a nice looking mine as far as mines go."

"Yes it is," agreed Laurita.

Emboldened by the lack of any castigation, Grimbledung continued: "Probably still has lots of mining left in it too, I'd imagine. Yes?"

Laurita shook her head. "Actually no. That's why we were able to buy it so cheaply; the last poor indentured servants who worked the mine were forced to practically clean it out of gems."

"Really? Who were these intrepid miners?"

"They were actually older gentlemen." Laurita raised an eyebrow to scattered chuckles. It was a standard, approved by management joke.

"Oh yeah, I'm in love," Grimbledung said to Drimblerod softly. He smiled at the Elf. "Hah, good one there Laurita. So who were these older gentlemen?"

"It was a troop of Dwarves."

Grimbledung considered that for a moment. "Ah, so twelve of them? I can see how that many natural diggers would be able to strip a mine."

"Well, after their debts were bought by Heigh and Hoe, five of them ran off, never to be seen again. The ones that remained worked the mine."

Grimbledung startled. "Those five ran off and left the remaining ones to dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig in the mine the whole day through? Bad form, that."

Laurita nodded. "Yes, but remember that they were Dwarves so to dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig is what they really like to do."

"Working like that, it's no trick to get rich quick." Offered Grimbledung.

"Sure, if you dig with a shovel or a pick." Agreed Laurita.

"In a mine? Where a million diamonds shine?" Grimbledung crossed his arms. "That'd hardly be work."

"Well," Laurita continued as she moved to the rest of the company approved spiel, "they would dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig from early morn' till night."

"Why at that pace, they'd dig up everything in sight!" A female Human exclaimed.

"They did dig up diamonds by the score, a thousand rubies, sometimes more."

"What did Heigh and Hoe do with all those gems? You'd think they would flood the market and wreck the price of precious gems." Drimblerod asked. He had never heard of a hoard of gems flooding the market.

"We don't know what they dug 'em for." Admitted Laurita.

"How's that?"

Laurita looked up- the light from her wand had started to fade. She quickly cast another smear of blue light. It dutifully began to rise. "Well, Heigh and Hoe ended up dying in the mine when they were betrayed by this old hag."

"Spooky." Grimbledung shuddered.

"It is." Laurita lowered her voice. "And, on some nights when the wind blows just right, you can hear the two brothers calling to each other, still driven by greed to mine gems…." Laurita raised her voice to a high, spectral sound and chanted: "Heigh… Hoe… Heigh… Hoe…Heigh… Hoe! Off to work we go!"

"Gads, that *is* spooky," said Rat. He moved closer to Grimbledung's neck.

Laurita stopped chanting and perked up with a smile. "Let's continue the tour." She pointed into the mine. "On the left, you will see the mine car the Dwarves used to move the gems and to ride around in."

Grimbledung started to whistle as they walked.

"You scared?" Rat asked.

"You kidding? Remember the last time we ran into some ghosts?"

Rat moved right beside Grimbledung's neck. "Yeah, I remember. Let's get going, huh?"

"Just relax you two," said Drimblerod. "Just remember that once we find the treasure it's home from this we go."

The pair nodded at him.

"If you want to see the cottage the Dwarves lived in, you can book that tour at the end of this one," Laurita said, giving the obligatory upsell pitch.

"Typical," muttered Drimblerod.

The entire group had begun to walk as the trio had been talking. "Hey, we're getting left behind!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "Let's get back to the front so we can hear what's happening."

Drimblerod shook his head. "No, this is perfect; from the back we can slip away unnoticed easier. So it's the next mine then Rat?"

Rat nodded. “Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Grimbledung; I am sure. Of everyone in this little fellowship we have, I believe I am the most reliable when it comes to hearsay.”

“Where am I?” Asked Drimblerod.

“Tied for the lead,” said Rat.

“Ohh! That means I’m second!” Grimbledung blinked. “Wait, that’s not good.”

“Keep quiet.” Rat held his claw to his lips. “We need to slip away unnoticed.” He pointed ahead. “Let’s get back with the group but not completely back with the group.”

“How do we do that?”

Rat shrugged at Drimblerod. “I don’t know; walk casual.” He tugged on Grimbledung’s ear. “Let’s go.”

As the trio caught back up with the end of the group, they heard her say: “This is the original section of the Lost Picman’s Mine. This is where the original story of unfathomable treasures began.” She paused for dramatic effect. “And continues to this very day.”

“We’re there.” Hissed Rat.

“Where? Here? I know that.” Grimbledung waggled his ears.

“We’re there?” Drimblerod asked, suddenly becoming serious.

“Here?” Grimbledung pointed at the mine floor.

Rat glanced around then pointed over the edge of the ledge they had been walking along side of. “Yeah, this is it.”

“You sure?”

Rat nodded at Drimblerod. “Heard a Gremlin complain to another about the jump during shift change.”

The tourists filed out of the room as the trio remained behind. The tour guide’s voice got softer and softer as she continued her spiel.

Drimblerod shuddered as he looked over the edge into the darkness. “But if that Gremlin knew you were listening in, that’s exactly the kind of

trick they would pull." He leaned farther over the railing. There was no way to tell if there was another path ten feet below, or jagged rocks a hundred feet below. "Oh, Rat."

"They didn't see me," Rat said. "Besides, why would they ever think that some grey rat was anything special and they should try and trick it into anything?" Rat shook his head. "No, my information is good. Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"There was that time you told me I could fit a whole pumpkin in my mouth."

Rat turned to Grimbledung. "And could you?"

"Well, sure. But it took three days to get it out. I couldn't say a thing the entire time."

"Sorry for doubting you, Rat," Drimblerod said. He looked toward the last tourists. "They're far enough gone we should make our move." He put his hands on the railing. Then looked into the darkness again. "And you're sure those Gremlins didn't see you?"

"Rock solid sure." Rat leapt from Grimbledung's shoulder onto the thick wood railing. "This sure." He jumped into the darkness.

"Rat!" Grimbledung went to the edge and looked down. "I can't see him."

The two were quiet for a long moment.

"Would you two get down here already? Someone's liable to see you loitering up there." There was a pause then: "Oh, and jump straight down and not out like I did or you might miss this ledge completely."

"Poor Rat's ghost is warning us of what he did wrong." Grimbledung tugged his ears. "Poor Rat. I always liked that rodent. Really I did."

Drimblerod climbed to the other side of the railing, standing on the narrow edge. "How far down, Rat?"

"All the way, Drim. Poor Rat fell all the way down!" Wailed Grimbledung.

"Probably eight to ten feet. Like from the top of the stairs to the bottom at the shop."

Drimblerod stepped off the edge. He flexed his knees and almost immediately hit solid ground. His legs buckled under him and he fell back hard on his butt. When he put his hands out to stand, they met open air.

"Gads, this is a narrow ledge." He rolled to his knees and stood. "Keep right near the edge, Grim!" He called up. Drimblerod took two steps to the side to make room for his partner. "You can do it."

"Now my partner is dead too! Both missed the ledge entirely!" Grimbledung sobbed.

"Get down here!"

"What if you're a ghost now and you're trying to lure me to my death?" Grimbledung answered.

"If you don't get down here, Drimblerod and I will keep all the treasure to ourselves!"

Grimbledung looked left and right. The darkness suddenly seemed to overwhelm him. He took a step in the direction of the tour. "They're just around the corner. I could catch them easily." He took another step.

"Get down here!"

This time it was Drimblerod.

"What if you're a ghost too?"

"I solemnly swear that I am not a ghost and neither is Rat."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm going to make you a ghost if you don't get down here!"

Grimbledung swung his legs over the railing. With a final look left and right, he pinched his nose and stepped into the darkness.

He landed on top of Drimblerod. The pair fell to the ground, rolling opposite directions. "You oaf! Why did you move to the side!" Drimblerod rubbed his shoulder where Grimbledung had landed. "You could have killed me."

Grimbledung got to his feet. "Well, I strongly suspected you two were ghosts, so I was thinking of just rejoining the tour. Besides, it was really getting interesting."

Drimblerod shook his head. "You're killing me, Grim. Killing me."

Rat hopped back onto Grimbledung's shoulder. "Now that we're all down here, stay close to the wall because there are no railings here. Give us some light, Grimbledung."

Grimbledung drew his wand and held it aloft.

"A really small light," said Drimblerod. "Or we might get spotted."

Grimbledung obliged with a small blue light at the end of his wand.

"That's not enough to see anything." Said Rat.

"Give it a minute."

The trio stood in the darkness as their eyes grew accustomed to it. Finally, they were able to make out the edges of the ledge and even some features on the wall face.

"Nice, Grim. Real nice. Which way now, Rat?"

Rat looked ahead and behind them. "I am not sure. I didn't hear that part of the conversation. Want me to run ahead and see what's there?"

"If it's Gremlins, you really need me along," said Drimblerod.

"Fine then. Lead the way with the light, Grimbledung." Rat pointed ahead. "Let's try that way first."

"Why that way?"

"We're going to check both ways, Grimbledung. We're just checking that way first."

With a nod, Grimbledung held his wand ahead and began to walk cautiously. "If there were going to be bats in this cave that swarmed around folk, this would be the ideal place for it."

"I swear…" Began Rat. "If any bats show up, I'm going to pitch you off this ledge myself."

"And I'll help," added Drimblerod.

No bats appeared.

A large door did, though.

"Ahh, easy entrance to the Lost Picman's treasure!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "Nice."

Chapter 42
An Easy Entrance to the Lost Picman's Treasure!

"It's locked," said Drimblerod.

Chapter 43
~~An Easy~~ A Locked Entrance to the Lost Picman's Treasure

"Well, maybe not so easy," corrected Grimbledung. "But at least we found it." He beamed. "Told you it existed."

"All we found was a door on a ledge, Grim. There might just be a Gremlin breakroom behind it." Drimblerod tried the catch again. It still didn't open.

Grimbledung knocked on the door. Loudly.

"What are you doing?" Rat exclaimed.

"Well, if it is a Gremlin break room, they'll let us in," explained Grimbledung. "But if it's the loot room of a certain Mister Picman, then no one will answer." He put his ear to the door. "I don't hear anyone coming."

"You sure?"

Grimbledung nodded. "I hear some clattering maybe. Like there's some wood wind chimes in there, but that's it."

"I don't think there'd be a wind chime in the treasure room. Much less a breeze to make it clatter around."

"Well that's what it sounds like, Drim. Don't know what else to tell you."

Drimblerod put his ear to the door as well. "I don't hear anything."

"Well it's stopped now, of course."

"Of course," Rat said. "So how do we get in?"

"You want me to open it?"

"Sure, Grim. But do it *quietly*."

"You should move to Drimblerod, Rat."

"Do it quietly, Grimbledung." Rat hopped to the other Gnome. "Please." He added even though he knew it wouldn't make any difference one way or another.

Grimbledung grinned wide. "Nice and stealthy; just you wait and see." He held his wand up to his nose.

Flaring boogers

He intoned.

A blue ball of light appeared on the end of this wand. Grimbledung inhaled quickly and the blue ball disappeared into his nose. He snorted deeply. Then cleared his throat.

"Gross."

Grimbledung waggled his ears at his partner. He snorted and cleared his throat again. Then smacked his lips.

"Whatever you're going to do, do it soon; my stomach can't take more of this."

Grimbledung snorted again then spit over the edge. A blue globule flew out and fell from sight. Grimbledung moved to the edge to watch it fall.

Drimblerod did as well.

They watched for almost a minute as the globule fell. Finally, when it was almost out of sight, it spattered.

"That there is a long way down," said Rat.

"Perfect," said Grimbledung.

"Perfect?"

Grimbledung turned to the door and raised his wand as if he were going to conduct an orchestra.

Bits of Sedimentary, Metamorphic and Igneous too.
Combine them together into red-hot lava?
Sure! But have it come out like goo!

He intoned.

"No not that one!" Rat said.

A stream of lava bathed the area in bright orange light as it spurted from his wand.

"That's too bright!" Exclaimed Drimblerod.

Grimbledung aimed the stream at the top hinge. It melted off almost immediately. He continued downward, cutting the middle and bottom hinge. Without stopping he tracked across the door to the latch and cut it as well. As the door started to fall toward them, he cut off the lava stream and the area was dark again. It had taken less than five seconds for the entire cutting. Grimbledung put his shoulder against the falling door and shoved it toward the edge of the ledge.

Almost silently, the door skidded to the side and fell into the darkness.

After almost a minute, there was a very faint thud as the door hit the rocks below.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "How was that?"

"Perfect, Grim. Just perfect! Now get that little blue light back and we'll get in there."

Rat nodded at Drimblerod. "Once our eyes adjust again. All I see is orange streaks."

Grimbledung obliged with a flick of his wand. The trio once again stood still until their eyes readjusted to the dark.

When they finally did, they looked into the now-open entranceway.

There were five skeletons patiently waiting inside. Each held a gleaming saber and a small, round wood shield.

"Rolton Chips," said Grimbledung. "Another correction awaits."

Chapter 44
~~An Easy~~ ~~A Locked~~ The Guarded Entrance to the Lost Picman's Treasure

"Think we can just talk this over?" Drimblerod gave a friendly smile.

"If we did," said the lead Skeleton, "you'd just be delaying your death." He slashed his saber at Drimblerod. "Every enemy we have faced, we have annihilated!" They all took a step forward, onto the narrow ledge. Sabers at the ready.

"With your breath, I'm sure they all suffocated," retorted Grimbledung. He drew his dirk.

The skeletons all took a step back.

"I will stain my jimping with your blood!" Grimbledung slashed his dirk back and forth.

"*You'll* be the one doing the staining," said the Skeleton, "and in your pants to add to the crud!" The skeletons all took a step forward again.

Drimblerod drew his short sword. "That will be the day!"

"For your insolence, with your lives will you pay!" The skeletons all took another step forward.

"Drim! Let me handle this!" Grimbledung exclaimed.

"We'll take them together, Grim." Drimblerod slashed at the air. "We'll cut them apart!"

"Well, I guess we know with whom we'll start," said the Skeleton on the far left. He lunged at Drimblerod, delivering a fierce overhead swing.

Drimblerod staggered back from the blow. "How are they so strong without any muscles? They're just dried bones!"

"Quiet, Drim!"

"They'll put those words on your tombstones!" The Skeleton slashed at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod stumbled back as the tip of the sword ripped his tunic and left a line of blood across his chest where it cut him. He stumbled and fell on his butt.

Emboldened, the other skeletons advanced on Grimbledung, crowding him. As they did, Rat scurried around them and into the dark vault.

"Now we have you, you stinking shorter!" The lead Skeleton thrust his saber at Grimbledung's heart.

"That insult only works from Halflings, you smelly athletic supporter!" Grimbledung parried and swung at the lead Skeleton as it staggered back.

Drimblerod did a double take at his partner. He looked back just as the skeleton brought the blade down with two hands right at his head. "I'll split you in two!"

"I think I'll stay in one piece… thank you." Drimblerod said as he scooted back. If the skeleton's sword had not hesitated, it would have hit him square on the head. As it was, it sparked as it hit the ground between his legs. Safely out of reach, Drimblerod rolled to his feet. "Come at me then!" He waggled his sword at the skeleton. "You mismatched collection of bones!"

"Where the door went, Drim!" Grimbledung said as he pivoted to put the wall to his back. "The door!"

The five skeletons spread out in front of Grimbledung. The far right one feigned an attack while the one on the left slashed at the Gnome's arm. The blade hit the dirk right at the hilt, knocking it to the ground. "We have you now, you stinking treasure stealer!" The two middle Skeletons moved their swords to their shield hands then grabbed for Grimbledung as he pressed against the wall.

Grimbledung swatted at their hands. "The door, Drim!"

The left one sheathed his sword. "Pitch him over the side, Hausen! Give him a hand, Lynd!"

Grimbledung drew his wand. "Have I ever told you my favoritest thing; passing wind!" He slashed his wand at the four Skeletons.

Not a maelstrom by any means
Nor a gentle breeze.
Something in between.

Beaufort Thirty Three, if you please!

He intoned.

The skeletons were picked up by the blast of wind[28] and hurled over the edge.

"Hey!" The Skeleton in front of Drimblerod exclaimed. "Those were pals of mine!"

Drimblerod dropped flat to the ground, spread-eagle. "Get him, Grimbledung!"

Grimbledung panned his wand across and hit the remaining Skeleton with the blast of air as it dissipated.

The Skeleton teetered at the edge, arms rotating forwards as it tried to regain its balance. "Hah, you needed a little more wind to get me over the edge, it seems!"

"Hah!" Exclaimed Rat as he came out of the vault. He was holding a very large diamond. He threw it at the careening Skeleton, hitting him square in the chest. "In your dreams."

The Skeleton tipped back and fell. "Wilhelm!" He shrieked as he fell from sight.

"Rat! Where've you been?" Drimblerod got to his feet.

"Keeping out of danger and scouting about."

"Rat! I can't believe you threw a diamond of that size at that skeleton!"

"Well, there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for that," said Rat.

"What's that?" Grimbledung moved to the edge and looked into the darkness.

"It was the smallest one I could find."

Grimbledung teetered at the edge. "Wha-what?"

Drimblerod grabbed his partner by the collar and pulled him back. "Easy there, Grim." He moved to the edge as well and looked down. "They are *not* going to be pleased when they hit the bottom."

"Not in the least." Grimbledung shrugged. "Hopefully it takes them a long time to get out of there once they pull themselves together."

"Hopefully." Drimblerod turned toward Rat. "Wait. Did you say that was the smallest diamond you could find?"

Rat nodded. "There were smaller rubies, but the diamond was easier to hold with that point on the end."

"Diamonds? Rubies? Told you there was treasure-by the score!!" Grimbledung dashed into the vault.

"There'll be no living with him from now on."

Rat nodded. "Well, to be fair, there was barely living with him up until this point. At least now that he's rich, we can call him eccentric instead of insane."

A shriek from Grimbledung emanated from the vault. It was followed by "No, no, no!"

"Gads, the skeletons might be gone, but they still have Gremlins and Orcs patrolling about. We need to keep him quiet. Let's go, Rat."

The two rushed into the dark vault, expecting the worst.

As usual, things were not what they seemed.

Chapter 45
The Terrible Horrible No Good Election Committee

"I hate you people," said Julie.

"I second that emotion." Nulu said with a smile.

Magnus sat with his arms crossed. He had a smug look on his face. Even though Nulu had threatened to slap it off just moments before.

"So the election will take place in two months' time," said a council member.

Magnus nodded. "That is just fine by me; the sooner the better."

"I'm not sure if two months is enough to put on a proper campaign."

"You're running then?" Magnus raised his eyebrow at her. Even though Nulu had threatened to rip it off just moments before. "Won't that be entertaining."

"No, I am not running, you dolt," Nulu said.

"Then it's you again, Miss Dictator?"

Nulu stood. "Remember what I said about that tongue of yours?"

"Yes, I believe you threatened to pull it out of my head just moments before." Magnus stood in one fluid motion. His hand reflexively fell to the ever-present conch shell hanging from his belt. "You know; I am really going to enjoy revoking your liquor license when I am mayor."

"Fine, fine. It's settled then?" Another council member said nervously. He wanted nothing more than to get the group of people who were on the verge of what would be a fairly gruesome brawl to go elsewhere. "The election will take place at the end of the month in two months' time." He smiled hopefully. "And in the meantime you can take your violent tendencies elsewhere, if you please."

"What would please me," Nulu said turning on the man, "would be if you buffoons had done your job *months* ago so we wouldn't be in this situation."

"Well, we are mere elected officials after all; we just can't make decisions on things." Said the female Dwarf at the end. "See you in a couple of months then?" She pointed at the door. "And not too much sooner, please."

Julie shook her head. "Yes, we are leaving so you can go back to doing absolutely nothing at all, all day long."

All seven councilmen looked relieved.

Julie rolled her eyes. "Let's go Nulu. We need to find a candidate for mayor. And for several councilman positions."

All seven councilmen looked less relieved.

Opus von Magnus steepled his fingers. "Yes, you do that. Find a candidate who will invariably lose to me. Go find them!" He tapped his fingertips together. "Mwuahaa, mwuahaa, haaa haaa!"

"If you keep speaking Giantish in public, I'm going to have Akita lock you up." Julie deadpanned.

"I wasn't speaking *Giantish* you oaf, I was laughing menacingly at my own success." As soon has he said it, Magnus realized he was being mocked. With a flourish of his black robes, he stalked out.

"Oh, Nulu, who are we going to get to run against him if Flora won't?" Julie turned to the council. "Any of you want to do it? I don't know if I can handle waiting while she makes up her mind."

In a flurry of speed they had never displayed, the entire group hopped up from the long table and barged their way through the double doors at the back of the town hall.

"Well, I'll have to remember that as a way to get a meeting to end when it's gone too long."

"So do you think Flora'll do it?"

Nulu put her arm around her friend. "Don't worry, she'll come around. After all, it will let her completely boss around Grimbledung. How could she say no to that?"

"Or we could just have a tavern owner run." Julie put her arm around her friend. "A well respected and successful one at that?"

"Why don't we make that plan double zee?" Nulu said with a smile. "I am sure we can convince Flora to go along with it. Honestly, anyone we put up will be someone that most townsfolk would vote for over someone who just showed up in town like that Opus dolt."

"Well, let's go discuss it over a drink."

Nulu grinned. "Now you're talking. I know just the place." She led her friend out of the town hall and down the street. When they got to the Duck Inn and Dine, they watched Flora singlehandedly toss out a rather large, very inebriated Orc. To the applause of the rest of the establishment.

"Oh yeah; she'll do just fine." Nulu said. "She's a gal after my own heart, that one."

Chapter 46
The Secret Chamber of the Lost Picman Mine!

Grimbledung shrieked again.

"Will you keep quiet! There's other security here you know!" Drimblerod said as he ran into the vault. "You're going to get us arres…" He stopped because Grimbledung was nowhere in sight. "Grim?"

Grimbledung sprang from a pile of gold. "I can't keep afloat!" He tried to backstroke on the coins but just sank again. "How does that duck do it?"

"Grim, we need to get out of here," said Drimblerod. "There is no way those skeletons are the only security down here."

As if on cue, a bell on the wall rang. The string attached to it tugged furiously.

"Whoever is on the other end of that string isn't too happy," said Rat. "You should answer it."

"And what?"

"I don't know," said Rat, "sound official or something. Tell them everything is all right."

Drimblerod picked up the curved animal horn. "Uhm... Situation normal. Everything is under control," he said meekly.

"What is going on down there!" demanded an angry voice from a horn mounted on the wall.

"Ahhh... We had a minor… skeletal malfunction," tried Drimblerod. "But… uhm… everything's perfectly fine now. We're all fine down here, just fine, thanks. How are you?" He cringed.

"I'm sending a couple of Ogres down there!"

"No, no. There's bones everywhere. Slip hazard at the moment. Kind of dangerous. Just give us a minute to lock them all back in place."

"Who is this? Where's Hausen?"

"Uhm…" Drimblerod hung the horn back on its hook. "Boring conversation anyway. Grim, we're gonna have company, so stop messing around!"

Grimbledung sprang from the pile of gold. "That's no good. We aren't prepared for company at all." He pulled a sack from his belt pouch. It should not have been able to fit in it. "Here, fill this up."

"You were keeping a bag of holding in a loot pouch?" Drimblerod gaped. "That's really dangerous."

"Pushaw," said Grimbledung. "I do it all the time." He pulled a second bag from the pouch. He let that one fall to the ground. "Here." He pulled a short-handled shovel from the pouch and tossed it to his partner. "Start shoveling gold. I'll start with the diamonds and rubies."

"Got it!" Drimblerod caught the shovel then began to shovel gold into the bag. Even though the pile was larger than him, he knew it would all fit in the bag, and easily be light enough for him to carry.

"Rat! See what else there is to loot in here besides this loot that we're already looting." Grimbledung began to shovel the diamonds and rubies into his bag.

"Right!" Rat scurried off into the darkness.

"We've only got minutes until some security Ogres… or worse show up!" Drimblerod said. He dropped the shovel and straddled the bag. He started using both hands to shove gold into it.

Outside the vault, a loud gong sounded.

"Uh oh. You think that's for us?" Grimbledung asked. He pointed at the opening with his shovel. "Maybe we should close up yon entrance."

Drimblerod didn't' stop scooping coins. "With what?"

"A door would be nice." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Hey, where'd we leave that door?"

"Under the skeletons, I think."

"Rolton Chips. They probably won't bring it back with them once they put themselves together. Bad form, that."

"Hey you!" A deep voice called. "Wot you doin'?"

Both Gnomes turned to look.

"They went thataway!" Drimblerod said as he pointed behind the Ogre. "We're just cleaning up the mess!"

"Yeah, we're cleaning up all right!" Grimbledung waggled his ears again.

Rat skidded to a stop between the Gnomes. "Pla… pla…"

"Yes, we need a plan, Rat," said Drimblerod.

"And a door," offered Grimbledung.

"Do…do… door," Rat said breathlessly. He pointed into the darkness.

"Perfect! Think it will fit in that space?" Grimbledung gestured at where the vault door used to be with his head. "We're in the market for a door about that size. Got one of those on you perchance?"

Rat shook his head. "I can't say that I do. Say, did either of you order a hearty serving of Ogres?"

"No." The Gnomes said in unison.

"Well someone did." Rat pointed outside. "A triple serving even."

"Kind of gluttonous, if you ask me."

"You two stop!" Shouted an Ogre.

"How can anyone steal with all this racket going on?" Grimbledung hopped to his feet. "I mean, honestly!" He smiled. "Or dishonestly." He drew his wand and panned it across the opening. "Hmmm."

"Stop that you!" A second Ogre commanded.

The Ogres were less than thirty feet away and approaching slowly-mainly because at their size, they barely fit on the ledge.

"What repels Ogres?" Grimbledung asked.

"A hefty bar tab?" Rat suggested.

"Ogre Mothers-In-Law." Tried Grimbledung.

"No idea." Drimblerod said. He had shifted to the pile of gems and was raking them into Grimbledung's bag as fast as he could. "Not much, really."

"That's not helpful."

The gong sounded again.

"Oooh! I got it!" Grimbledung did a little hop. He pointed his wand at the top of the doorway.

Minisculate openinggggg-gah!

He intoned as he moved his wand in a circle around the opening.

The doorway puckered in until it was only a foot tall.

"Hey!" Complained the lead Ogre. "Stop that!"

"Problem solved." Grimbledung took a bow. "Rat, what did you reconnoiter?"

"There's a door." Rat pointed at the back of the vault.

"We're not in the market for a door anymore, Rat. Keep up with current events; I solved that problem just now." He pointed at the small opening. Then took another bow.

The Ogre was on the ground peering through the opening "Come outta dere!"

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Not likely."

Drimblerod stood. "Well, we are going to need a way out of here eventually." He picked up the bag and cinched the leather straps tight. "Actually sooner would be better than eventually," he said as he tied the bag to his belt.

"Well, we can wait until these oafs get bored and leave. Or their shift ends."

"Not likely," the Ogre said. He stuck his arm into the hole. It would only go in to the elbow.

"Hah, hah!" Grimbledung pointed at the Ogre.

The Ogre pulled his arm out. One of his eyes came into view. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah! Get the rest of the gems, Drim. I'll finish the gold."

"You asked for it," said the Ogre. "Call for the Rabid Pixie Brigade." He said over his shoulder.

"Hey now, let's not get hasty!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "How about we split the loot?"

A higher pitched gong sounded.

"Too late," said the Ogre. "Nice knowin' ya' little fellas."

Grimbledung looked from his partner to the opening - it was now filled with the Ogre's smile. He waggled his butt. "Oooooh! Drimblerod, I don't feel so good all of a sudden."

"No poopin in the vault!" Commanded the Ogre. "That's jus' rude."

"Oh no! Stay calm, Grim! Stay calm!" Drimblerod pulled the cinch on the other bag. "Rat, what did you find besides that door? And where does that door lead?"

"I'm not sure. I could only see the very top of it." He said matter-of-factly. "The pile of platinum was blocking most of it."

Grimbledung stopped waggling his butt. "Pile of…. Platinum? *Pile*?" The hairs that had started pushing out of his ears stopped.

"I've never seen more than two coins ever." Admitted Drimblerod. "And that was at two different times. Several decades apart even."

"Sorry Mister Ogre, we have to run." Grimbledung waved. "If you would sit in front of that hole to stop the Pixies, we'd appreciate it."

"Well sure…" Started the Ogre. "No wait, I'm not gonna do that!"

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Never hurts to ask." He grabbed the bag of coins. "Lead the way, Rat!"

"Right! It's back here around the corner, next to the chests."

"Oooh, nice! Chests like those things girls keep below their necks?" Grimbledung asked.

"Somehow I don't think that's it." Said Drimblerod. He slung the other bag over his shoulder and followed behind the other two.

Chapter 47
Out of the Vault, Into the Chute

Grimbledung and Drimblerod rounded the corner just behind Rat. The pair stopped, mouths open.

Grimbledung dropped his bag.

So did Drimblerod.

"Pla… pla…" Said Grimbledung.

Drimblerod just nodded- words failed him.

In front of the Gnomes was a three-foot-tall, eight-foot-wide pile of platinum coins. The pile was held in place by stacks of chests.

"Oh, Grim. How I doubted you." A tear ran down Drimblerod's cheek. "I am truly sorry."

"It's fine." Grimbledung put his arm around his partner. "I'd have doubted me too if I acted the way I do."

For a long moment, no one said anything.

Then a gong sounded again.

"We need to get out of here. And take this with us." Drimblerod gestured at the pile. "You could buy an entire *kingdom* with this!"

Grimbledung opened a chest. It was filled with wands. He kicked it over, letting the wands spill out. "Outta the way, stinky wands!" He opened another chest- it had what seemed to be moldy clothes in it. "Refill these chests, Drim! With real loot!"

Drimblerod nodded as he began to shovel the pale-grey coins into the empty chest. "Where're we going to put them?"

"In my loot bag of course!" Grimbledung began to shovel coins into the other chest. "Rat, toss coins in as well. Each platinum is worth a hundred gold!"

For a long moment, the only sound heard was clinking coins.

And occasional snickers of avarice.

"Grimbledung, were you humming just now?" Rat asked.

"That's not me; I was snickering with avarice."

"Me too," said Drimblerod. "I figured it was you, Rat."

Rat shook his head. He looked towards the entrance. "It's getting louder, I think."

"Pixies." Grimbledung said. "Sounds like Pixies. Didn't that Ogre mention something about Pixies?"

"Rabid ones is what he said." Said Rat.

"I'll go hold them off as best I can," said Drimblerod. "Get these chests filled and in your pouch. And get that door open!" He drew his wand. "You've got maybe a couple of minutes, Grim. I'm counting on you." Drimblerod drew his sword and his wand as he moved around the narrow bend towards the entrance.

"Got it, Drim!" Grimbledung flipped the chest's lid into place and threw the latch. He moved to the chest Drimblerod had been filling. After a few more scoops to ensure it was completely filled, he closed it as well. "Stand back, Rat. I'm going to clear the door," said Grimbledung. He drew his wand.

"Load the chests first so you don't…" Began Rat.

Blast it!
Blast it all!

He intoned.

The pile of platinum coins exploded in all directions.

Grimbledung and Rat both shielded their faces as coins flew in all directions.

"You could give a warning or something." Said Rat. "I've only got one good eye as it is!" He looked around the small room. The coins were scattered everywhere and the chests were all askew. The door was almost completely exposed as well. "Which chests are…"

"I'll get the chest and a couple to spare, Rat." Grimbledung said. He pointed at the nearest chest.

Minisculate Chestssssss-aaah!

Grimbledung panned across the five chests nearest him.

"I don't think those…" Rat started. A Pixie dove into the room accompanied by the sounds of angry bells. "Look out, Grimbledung!"

"Grimbledung?" The Pixie tinkled. "Sixtoes?" It smirked. "Esquire even?"

"Grrr!" Said Grimbledung. The hairs on his ears- which had stopped growing earlier, now sprang out.

"Grim, get the chests put away before you change!"

Grimbledung's eyes swirled to muddy brown as thick fangs protruded from his upper jaw. "GRRRR!"

"Get the treasure put away!" Rat pleaded.

Grimbledung snatched the Pixie from the air.

"Let me go, you stupid, *stupid* Gnome!" The Pixie said. "I command you to…"

Grimbledung stuffed the Pixie in his mouth and swallowed it whole. Claws pushed out of Grimbledung's toes.

"Grim! Put the boxes in your pouch!"

Grimbledung looked at Rat. A tendril of drool started on one side of his mouth.

"I'll never get used to that." Admitted Rat.

With the last vestiges of awareness, Grimbledung picked up the now-tiny chests and put them in his belt pouch. After getting all five in, he grabbed several handfuls of coins and stuffed them in as well.

"Nicely done, Grimbledung!" Rat said. "Now we need that door open."

Grimbledung stuffed his wand up his sleeve into its sheath then grabbed two handfuls of coins. He held them out wide and pointed his face at the ceiling. "Aaahhh oooooOOOO!"

"Well, that's not helpful, really." Rat said. "It'd made a great illustration though, now that I think about it."[29] He scampered to the door and pointed at it. "Open the… wanna go for a walk? Wanna go for a walk?" He pointed at it again. "Walkies are out there!"

Grimbledung did a little hop then stuffed the handfuls of coins in his mouth. He swallowed hard as he stalked to the door, claws clicking on the stone.

"Well, in about eight to twelve hours, if we get out of this, you'll poop a treasure trove." Rat said. "Now open the door."

Grimbledung dug his claws into the sides of the small door and leaned backward, newly-formed muscles in his back bulging as he did so.

"Get it off, Grimbledung!"

Drimblerod raced around the corner, his wand was smoking. "When they said rabid Pixies, they weren't kidding." He turned and blasted a Pixie. "My wand is really overheated." He saw his partner. "On no, I don't think we need a WereGnome right about now." Grimbledung was hunched over the door, breathing hard. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine."

Drimblerod looked at the scattered coins and the askew chests. Several had opened as they tipped, spilling their contents. Gems, coins, and what appeared to be more clothes were strewn about. "Where are *our* two chests?"

"I'm worried that…" Began Rat.

Grimbledung let out a howl as he finally wrenched the door from its hinges, part of the stone wall coming with them. "Grrrr!" He said as he turned with the door above his head.

"Put it there!" Rat pointed. "Over there to block the way!"

Drimblerod sidestepped as Grimbledung lowered the door in front of himself and charged the opening that led to the front of the vault. Within five paces he reached it, and the door splintered on its edges as Grimbledung crammed it into the small opening that doubled back to the main vault area. He leaned into the door, pushing it a full foot farther. "Doooor," he growled, "set."

"Good boy!" Rat scratched Grimbledung on his thigh.

Grimbledung's other foot began to thump.

Drimblerod looked to where the door used to be. There seemed to be a small wooden crate in the space. Drimblerod sheathed his wand and sword. "A dumbwaiter! Everyone get in!" As he moved to the space, he grabbed a handful of coins and worked them into his bag of holding. He crouched down and got into the small dumbwaiter. "Everyone in! I hope this goes someplace near the outside."

Rat scampered in and moved under Drimblerod's feet. "I don't think he's going to fit."



Grimbledung looked at the door, then at Drimblerod. "Grrrrr! Innn?"

"We're going for a walk!" Exclaimed Rat. "Gonna leave without you!"

"Naahh! Waaaalk!" Grimbledung snarled as he stalked to the dumbwaiter. He crouched down and stuffed himself in. "Gonnna chase rabbbitzz." The tendril of drool broke free from his mouth, hitting next to Rat.

"Gross! Stop doing that."

Drimblerod pulled on the thick rope running down the middle of the box. "Pull on the rope, Grim, pull on it!"

Grimbledung grasped the rope and stuffed it in his mouth. He began to chew.

The door shuddered as a loud tinkling filled the area.

"They're going to get through!" Rat exclaimed.

"Pull on the rope! *Pull*." Drimblerod grabbed the rope above where Grimbledung was chewing on it and began to tug on it. The crate moved only a few inches. "It's too heavy for me to do on my own!"

"Puuulllzz?" rumbled Grimbledung. He spat out the now-wet rope.

It hit Rat on the head. "He's doing it on purpose!" Rat shook his claw at Grimbledung. "Grimbledung WereGnome Sixtoes Esquire, pull that rope until we are at the top of wherever this goes!"

"Griimbaldung!" Tinkled the Pixies on the other side of the wall.

"Yaaaa!" Grimbledung began to tug on the rope, hand over hand, pulling the dumbwaiter out of sight just as the door fell forward. A wall of Pixies swarmed into the room and into the shaft. Since the box fit in the shaft tightly, they couldn't get past.

"We'll get you when you stop, you stinking Gnomes…"

"Yeah, yeah, and your little Rat too," interrupted Rat. "We've heard it all before."

"Just you wait!" The Pixies pounded on the bottom of the crate as it rose. "You stinking good for nothing thieves!"

After a full five minutes of insults from the Pixies, the crate started to slow.

"We're slowing down," said Rat. "What's wrong up there?" He tried to peer from around Drimblerod's legs.

"Grimbledung's changing back!"

True to Drimblerod's words, Grimbledung's features softened - and became less hairy.

Drimblerod grabbed the rope and pulled as hard as he could so they wouldn't plummet back to the bottom. "Grim, you have to help with the rope!"

"What? Where are we?" Grimbledung tried to turn his head but couldn't. "Who put us in a box?"

"We put us in a box!" Rat exclaimed. "To get away from the Pixies and Ogres."

The box slipped down a good foot.

"You're in for it now!" The Pixies jingled.

"Grim, help pull us up!" Drimblerod tried to turn to get a better grip on the rope but the box was too small.

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure thing. Where're we going?"

"Up!" Drimblerod and Rat said in unison.

"Down!" The Pixies all chimed. "To your doooom!"

"I pick up." Grimbledung grabbed the rope, one hand above Drimblerod's one below. "Ready? You keep it tight and I'll pull. When I get tired, we can swap."

Drimblerod braced his elbows on the side of the crate. "Ready."

Grimbledung grabbed the rope and pulled with all his might. The small dumbwaiter moved upwards slightly. "Gads!" He looked at the bottom of the box. "How about you Pixies give us a push? Just to get us going?"

"We'll give you a push!"

"Great, great." Grimbledung smiled. "Very accommodating, those Pixies." He tugged on the rope again and Drimblerod took up the slack. "That's heaps better, thanks!" Grimbledung shouted to the bottom of the box.

"We're not helping!"

"Quiet, you!" Rat said. "If Grimbledung says you're helping, then YOU'RE HELPING!"

"Again." Grimbledung said as he moved his hands higher on the rope. "Push Pixies!"

After a dozen iterations, the pair switched tasks.

By the time it came back to Grimbledung to pull, the box clunked onto a hard ceiling.

"We're here!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Home free and foot loose."

Rat looked around. "But there's no opening for us to go out." He tapped the wall on the open side of the dumbwaiter. "Hey, this is some sort of stone colored board." He tapped it again. "Yeah. Think you can kick at it, Drimblerod?"

"I think so." Drimblerod squatted down as Rat moved under Grimbledung. "Here goes nothing…" He kicked out with his foot. The rock colored plaster on the board cracked.

"You're getting it, Drimblerod," said Rat. "Keep kicking in the same spot."

After several kicks, a hole opened in the board.

"Let me take a look around before we go in."

"I don't know how much longer I can hold this rope," said Grimbledung.

"Then we all go in. We don't have any other choice in the matter anyway."

"You can fall to your deaths!" Suggested the Pixies. They began to pound on the bottom of the dumbwaiter. "Fall. Fall. Fall." They chanted.

"Kick it down, Drim." Said Grimbledung. "We'll deal with what's in there once we're on solid ground."

After several more kicks, the hole was big enough for the Gnomes to make it through.

"How are we supposed to get through that hole and hold the rope?" Drimblerod asked.

The Pixies all laughed.

"Go first, Rat. And take the end of the rope with you," said Grimbledung.

"But it's sloppy wet with WereGnome slobber."

"Rat!"

"Fine, fine." Rat shook his head at Drimblerod. "It's an easy request when you're not the one doing it." He stuck out his tongue as he took the rope in his claws and backed out of the dumbwaiter. "Now what?"

"Drim, take the rope." When Drimblerod took the rope, Grimbledung took out his wand. "Now put the rope in your mouth so you can hold it while we climb out."

"What? No way!"

"Come on, Rat!" Drimblerod pleaded.

"Just drop to your deaths!" The Pixies proposed. "It's going to happen anyway so why delay it?"

"Oh, the things I do for you two. Just make it quick."

"Ready when you are," said Grimbledung. Once Rat took the rope in his mouth, Grimbledung hacked his wand at him.

Rodentus Grigo!
Transmutis completes

Shambli Verdes

He intoned.

"This tastes gross," said RatShambler. "Hurry up," he said out of the side of his mouth.

"You first," said Drimblerod.

With a nod, Grimbledung made his way through the hole. "It's clear in here, come on, Drim!"

Drimblerod clambered through the hole and rolled to his feet. "Nicely done, Rat."

"Thanks!" Said Rat. The rope slipped from his mouth and the dumbwaiter immediately fell from sight.

Grimbledung moved to the hole. "Fly fast you stinking Pixies! Like your LIVES depend on it!" He shouted down. He turned around and dusted his hands together. "Good riddens to bad Pixies."

Drimblerod looked around. "Where are we now?"

The area was mostly dark- there was pinpricks of light coming in from various tiny holes in the structure they were in. It was marginally oval shaped and on one side were two large holes that light seemed to pour through towards the ceiling.

"I have no idea," said Grimbledung as he looked around. "But those two holes look like the best way out of here." He pointed at them. "They're on that little ledge but I think we can make it up there." He flourished his wand. "Of course, they seem more rat sized than shambler sized, right Rat?"

RatShambler nodded. "Definitely rat sized. Get on with it."

Shambli Verdes
Transmutis completes…

Grimbledung paused for the briefest of moments.

Mus musculus Negro!

Grimbledung finished.

"Wait, what was that last part?" Asked Rat as he was bathed in gold light.

"I thought you should be more stealthier is all."

Rat looked at himself. "What am I?"

"I went with a black mouse. That's heaps more stealthier than a grey rat, if you ask me."

"Who asked you?!" RatMouse put his hands on his hips. "This is absurd. Drimblerod?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "You might blend in better at a carnival as a black mouse than a grey rat."

"Really?"

"Sure; grey rats are seen as pests."

"And what are black mice?"

"Corporate symbols."

"Oh boy!" RatMouse exclaimed. "Well as soon as we're free and clear… Hey! What's happened to my voice? Why am I so high pitched?"

"And foot loose," interrupted Grimbledung.

"… and foot loose. When we're away from here I want changed back to my regular grey self. This feels weird."

"Deal," said Grimbledung. "Say, you want some pants or something in the meanwhile?"

"Don't be absurd." RatMouse said. He scurried up to the ledge and looked out one of the holes. "It's just a few feet to the ground down there. Looks like it's got a slope to it." He stuck his head out the hole. After a moment, he sat up. "Well, this is going to be disturbing."

"What? Is it a long drop?"

RatMouse stifled a chuckle. "No Drimblerod, it's just a drip to the ground, really. It'snot far at all."

"Well then let's go before those Pixies get back up here." Grimbledung moved to the edge of the structure and clambered up to the ledge. "There's room up here for the two of us Drim, so you should come up so we can make a break for it all at once. Catch them by surprise."

"Yeah, don't blow it." RatMouse deadpanned.

"You all right?" Grimbledung asked.

"Sure, sure. I just nose where we're going." Rat pointed at the opening. "Me first. You can do the post drop."

Drimblerod nodded as he got onto the ledge. "Fine, fine. Then Grim and I will go out together. Once you're out, Rat, head in the direction you think is best since you're out first. We'll follow your lead."

RatMouse nodded. "Here goes nothing." He leapt into the middle of the opening and fell from sight.

With nods to each other, Drimblerod and Grimbledung worked their way to the holes and climbed out feet first. When they were hanging by their hands, they looked down to judge their landing before letting go.

"Ewww!" A child exclaimed. "What's coming out of Mortimer's nose?"

Chapter 48
Rehearsing Rehearsals

Flora stormed into the Duck Inn and Dine. "Sorry I'm late!" She called to Wil as she grabbed her apron from the peg.

"You were…" Wil said.

"Uhm…" Flora said. "Late?"

Wil startled. "Oh, I was expecting 'I was waiting for a delivery of leeches' or 'There was a shipment of ropes coming in' or something else just as disturbing." He narrowed his eyes. "What was it this time?"

"I was with someone and the time got away from me."

"With a male?" Wil leaned forward on the bar. "You went on a date?" He frowned at her. "With who?"

Flora shrugged. "A fellow I met earlier this week," she said noncommittally as she tied her apron. "Just a fellow."

"Flora O. Willowfeet," said Wil, "I am shocked. Shocked at what I am hearing!"

Flora looked at the man wide-eyed. "What? Why?"

"Now I know that he is sometimes annoying, and other times infuriating, and even other times completely outlandish." Wil held up a finger. "But, I can tell you with no uncertain terms that Grimbledung cares about you." He pointed the finger at her. "And the two of you make a smart match." He opened his hand and held it out plaintively- if he still had his other hand, it would have been out as well. "You two were *made* for each other. Two peas in a pod, as it were."

Flora nodded. "That is true, yes." She picked up her tray and scanned the seating area. "Yeah, I know that," she muttered.

"Then how can it be that you're having a date with some other fellow when Grimbledung, *your* Grimbledung is out of town?"

Flora leveled her eyes at Wil. The temperature seemed to drop ten degrees (or 5 1/2 degrees Celsius even). "Are you suggesting that I have been unfaithful?" She took a step toward the bar. "Me, unfaithful? When he has been lured to go out gallivanting around the countryside looking for a treasure by that partner of his? Treasure that definitely does not exist instead of spending time with me? By that partner of his?" She took another step. "Me, unfaithful when that innocent Gnome is out hanging out in various bars, taverns, or worse thanks to that bad-influence Drimblerod?" Now she took two steps. "Me, unfaithful who has been diligently working and trying to keep it together while that unimpeachable Gnome is gone from my sight and could possibly die because of something Drimblerod does?" She dropped her tray and clambered up the barstool. When she got to the top, she put both hands on the bar as if she were going to vault over it and attack Wil. To death probably. "*Me*? unfaithful?!"

"Well," Wil looked around the bar nervously. There were, thankfully, several witnesses around. Even so, he didn't feel totally safe. "Not you personally. I mean just in general like, you know. Folks and things like that. In general even."

Flora gave the man a curt nod then climbed back down the stool. She picked up the tray. "That's what I thought you meant."

"But…" Wil said, without thinking, "you said you went on a date."

"A date? No I did not."

"Yes you did." Now Wil became agitated. When all was said and done, he was Flora's boss, and he outweighed her by a good eighty pounds. And there was a bar between them. A nice tall one that would slow her down giving him a pretty good head start on her. And there were those witnesses that would hopefully come to his aid. Emboldened, he added: "You most certainly did; just a moment ago in fact."

Flora put her hands on her tray and held it in front of her. "I said no such thing; I said that I had met a fellow. It is not the same thing."

"How is meeting a fellow for a date and just meeting a fellow, different things?"

"Well," Flora said matter-of-factly, "one is a meeting with an expectation of something amorous."

"Yes, that is indeed what a date is. So what's the other?"

"The other is just a practice run." Flora explained as she started walking toward the seated patrons. "To make sure things are running smoothly. Get the kinks out. That sort of thing. Before the real… event."

Wil gulped. "And is this male… all right?"

"It's nothing some rest and ointment won't fix." She shrugged. "As long as he doesn't pop any of the blisters." With that, she moved to the nearest table.

"Gads," said Wil. He picked up a glass and put it in the crook of his stump then began to polish it with a towel. "That poor innocent unimpeachable Gnome is in for it when he gets back."

Chapter 49
The Mortimer Runs

Grimbledung and Drimblerod landed and immediately turned around.

"This seems to be some kind of ride," said Drimblerod. He looked up at the large head they had just dropped out of.

"This *is* some kind of ride!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "Flying carpets even." He hopped up and down. "Can we ride it, Drim? Can we?"

"No! We are on the run. There is not time to…"

"You're in for it when we get you, you stinking Gnome!" Yelled an Orc. He punched his fist into his open hand in case there was any confusion as to what they would get.

"Who us?" Grimbledung asked as he looked around.

"The three of you!" Shouted the other Orc. In case there was any confusion who would be getting it.

"I am sure this is all a misunderstanding," Grimbledung called back. "You sure we can't just talk this over?"

The two Orcs leaned in to each other and had a quick discussion. By the time Grimbledung and Drimblerod completed a revolution of the ride, the two were looking up again.

"Sure, sure. Come down here and we'll straighten you out."

The other Orc nudged him.

"Straighten *this* out!" The first said quickly. "Definitely this."

"I'm not completely sure those two are on the up and up," said Grimbledung.

"Well we need to do something because we're drawing a crowd around this ride." Rat pointed at the crowd that was drawing. Around the ride.

"Hey, want me to do a poem?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Folks like a good poetical recitation."

"We need to get away from here." Drimblerod looked around. "There's at least ten security looking folks down there."

"What about those?" Rat pointed at the rugs that were tethered at the end of each of the arms of the ride. The rope holding them in place allowed them some back and forth movement but only enough to make the ride slightly bumpy- they still had to go up and down when the arms did. "Can't we ride one of those?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "I hate those things. Temperamental and apt to just dump you off while you're way high in the air."

"Woo! Flying rug is how we need to get back home, Drim. Flying rug!" He did a little hop. "We'd be home in no time!"

"Get down here now!" Ordered another Orc. This one was wearing a very official looking red shirt.

"Give us a moment, Mister Orc!" Grimbledung called down. "We're just planning our…"

"Descent!" Rat interrupted. "That's what we're planning!"

"That one there." Drimblerod pointed. "The Isfahan. The blue one with the missing tassel. How about that.?"

The rug, hearing its description, bucked against its rope.

"That don't sound like you're comin' down!" The red-shirted Orc shook his fist. "Sounds like you're discussing rugs. For a getaway!"

"The Nain," said Grimbledung. "You can never go wrong with a Nain." He started down the arm of the ride toward the rug. "The Nain carpet is a luxurious alternative to its parent rug, the Isfahan," Grimbledung said matter-of-factly.[30]

Hearing its (accurate) description, the Nain flexed its tassels.

"Stop the ride," ordered the Orc. He pointed at the others in the security detail. "As soon as it stops, get up there and grab 'em."

"It's now or never, Drim. Now or never!" Grimbledung kept moving down the arm. He was over halfway to the rug. "Let's go!"

"How is it he gets to make these kinds of fool-hardy decisions?" Drimblerod picked up Rat as he started down the arm as well. "If Flora heard some of the decisions he made, she'd wallop him."

Rat moved to Drimblerod's shoulder. "I'm pretty much unbreakable and I don't like riding on those things either."

Grimbledung hopped onto the middle of the rug. "Gads, this thing is soft! I'm taking my shoes off." He sat and began to unlace his shoes.

The ride slowed as the operator worked the lever controlling the large cog that made it rotate.

Sensing the reduction in movement, Drimblerod scooted quickly to the rug. "Keep your shoes on you goof!"

"But I took a bath just recently. I can take my shoes off, I'm sure."

Rat jumped to the front of the rug.

"While you two are discussing the need for shoes or not, the ride is coming to a halt. I just thought you'd like to know."

Grimbledung peered over the side of the rug. Their forward motion had stopped, and true to Rat's word, they were now sinking quickly. There was less than ten feet between them and several angry-looking Orcs.

"Cut the rope, Grim!" Drimblerod moved to the front of the rug to steer it. "I'll steer from here."

Grimbledung rolled across the rug to the other side. "Gads, this is one luxurious rug." When he got to the other side, he pulled out his wand.

Crumbly Sedimentary, Hot Metamorphic
and a little Igneous to boot.

Mix 'em together and heat them up
So we can cut this rug and scoot!

The rope instantly burned in two as the stream of lava passed through it. The brightly painted wood paneling below on the ride took only a fraction of a second longer before it also caught fire. Grimbledung continued to pan his wand sending a stream toward the gathered security detail. "Back you fiends! Back!"

"Your dirk would have done just as well," Drimblerod said.

The Orc in the red shirt looked hurt. "Fiends? Us? We're just doing our job and you come here, rob us and start a fire! We're liable to get fired over this you know, and these are hard times! You know what they say..."

"Hard times are no times to be unemployed," offered Drimblerod.

"Exactly!" Called up the Orc.

Grimbledung stopped the lava stream. "Well, if you put it that way, maybe we should come down there and get our comeuppance."

The Orc grinned wide. "Yeah, I got some uppance I want to send your way!"

"Let's go down there, Drim," said Grimbledung. "Hate to not get something owed to me. Especially if I deserve it."

"This is NO time to develop a conscience!" Rat shook a claw at him. "All those other times and yet you pick now?"

"Well, that Orc makes a pretty convincing argument." Grimbledung leaned over the rug. "I'm on your side Mister Orc! It's these people I associate with that aren't going to go along with it! Seems I'm a bad judge of character."

"We're leaving," Drimblerod exclaimed as he pulled up on the leading edge of the rug. "Up rug, up!" It obliged by rising quickly.

"Sorry about the fiends!" Grimbledung called down. "Really I am!" He waved as well.

"Commere you!" The Orc said as he tried in vain to jump and grab the wayward rug. "Rug thief!"

"Rug setter freer is more like it," said Grimbledung. He rolled to the middle of the rug. "And a nice rug it is." He ran his fingers through the thick pile.

The rug rippled from front to back.

"Stop that, Grim!" Drimblerod lay down on the rug. "You'll get us tossed off." He pushed down on the rug. "Go straight, Nain. *Straight*."

Rat moved beside Drimblerod. "I say we make a straight line from here to Julesville." He pointed ahead and to the left. "Straight there until morning."

Drimblerod shook his head. "I just can't sleep on this thing." He leaned in to Rat. "It might dump us off while we were asleep."

"You're paranoid," said Rat. He looked down at the rug. "Are you going to dump us off?"

The rug rippled from front to back again.

"I figure that's as close to a no as you're going to get, Drim."

"I don't care!" Drimblerod shook a fist at his partner, then quickly grabbed the rug again. "Besides, how would we know which direction to go?"

"It's the second star on the left and straight on until morning, I think."

"That's someplace completely different."

"Fine then; we circle until morning," tried Grimbledung.

"It will be the death of us!" Drimblerod said as he put his hands in the air. "The death of us!"

"That's the spirit, Drim!" Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air. "Thrust your hands in the air, Drim. Wave them around like you don't care even!" He pointed down. "Look we're gliding by those people who have stopped to stare." He put his hands back in the air. "Wee!"

"No, not wee," said Drimblerod. He tried to lay even more flat. "Not by a long shot." He patted the rug. "In payment for setting you free, would you be willing to fly us in that direction for a while?"

The rug crumpled up a corner and raised it. Several tassels separated from the bunch and stuck up like a thumb.

"That looks like a yes to me," said Rat.

"I'm completely convinced of our safety," said Grimbledung. "Any other old business we need to take care of before moving on to new business?"

"What about the wagon?" Rat asked.

"Who needs a wagon?" Grimbledung said. "We're rich; we can buy a new wagon. A better wagon. A *covered* wagon, in fact."

"Grim, we had a covered wagon. And it was full of food. Food we're going to need at some point really soon. Food we paid a whole lot of coins for. And it was a borrowed wagon so Big Julie is expecting to get it back. *And it has that food that we're going to need really soon".*

"Well, it was just a suggestion." Grimbledung sat up. "Hey, wanna see how fast thing this thing will go?"

"No, I don't wanna see how fast this thing will go." Drimblerod raised his head slightly. "This is a fine speed, Rug. Just keep this speed."

The Rug gave another thumbs' up.

"Okay, rug we're going to have to go back for that wagon, I think. Make a nice easy turn to the left and head to the hill that's overlooking that carnival."

The rug waved its tassel then executed a banked turn that made Drimblerod screech with terror.

Grimbledung squealed with delight.

Rat fought hard to not pee on the rug that was their escape.

"Think they'll come after us?" Grimbledung looked over the side once they were level again. "The place looks so small from up here." He waved.

"Stop doing that! This instant. Nothing good ever comes about when you wave at folk."

"There was that one time at that rope bridge…"

"No."

"What about when we were in that tower…"

"No." Drimblerod carefully moved to a sitting position. "Listen, Rug. Do you think you can fly lower to the ground?"

The rug dove sharply at the ground.

Drimblerod flopped over onto this belly as the ground loomed ahead of them. Within a foot, the rug leveled out. Then gave another thumbs' up.

"How about a little higher than this? Ten feet would be good, right Rat?"

Rat looked around. "I'd go thirty of forty so we're not weaving around trees and such. Or within reach of jumping Trolls."

"Gads! Fifty feet it is. Once we get that wagon." Drimblerod pointed. "See it there on the hill?"

The rug adjusted its course to head straight at it.

"Grim, when we get there I need you to take care of the wagon."

"Got it, Drim." He waggled his ears. "You can count on me."

"I wish he'd stop saying that," said Rat.

"Okay Mister Rug," Drimblerod said. "Just land beside the wagon and my partner will take care of the rest." He glanced at Grimbledung- his head was hanging over the side of the rug looking at the ground below. "I hope."

The rug banked around a tree then landed beside the wagon.

"Get to it Grim!"

Chapter 50
I've seen a Horse Fly. I've seen a Dragon Fly. But I've never seen a...

Grimbledung rolled off the rug and then stood. He dusted his pants off. "Ahh, now we're set." He scooted to the wagon and immediately jumped into the back. Crashes could be heard as he rummaged through their supplies.

"Grim!" Drimblerod hopped to his feet. "We need to go! Rat, keep an eye out from up there!"

Rat dutifully scurried to the top of the large sign.

Drimblerod moved to the back of the wagon and peeked in. Grimbledung had a piece of jerky sticking out of his mouth. "I'm on it Drim!"

"What are you doing?"

"Hey, Drimblerod," Rat called down.

"What it is Rat?"

"You weren't too clear on my task up here." Rat said. "How much of a warning you want if I see anyone?"

"At least a few minutes if at all possible."

"When you say a few, how many exactly do you mean?"

Grimbledung dumped out a large box of very loud items.

"RAT! Just let us know when someone's coming!" Drimblerod wheeled on Grimbledung. "What are you doing?"

"Oooh! Rope!"

"Someone's coming." Rat called down.

"I'm getting things together to go on the rug, of course," explained Grimbledung. "Just like you said."

"You're supposed to Minisculate the wagon so we can take it all with!"

"There are folks coming this way." Rat said again.

"Quiet Rat! What are you doing in here, Grim?"

"Yeah, what are you doing in there, Grim?" Rat said.

"You said to take care of the wagon, so that's what I'm doing," Grimbledung replied. "You should know as well as I do that you just can't pile together so many Minisculated things in one place." He panned his arms out. "So we're going to add this to the HEAPS of things already Minisculated? We'd blow up for sure."

"Now it's more of a group approaching," Rat said.

"Rat... What?" Drimblerod turned to look at Rat. "What did you say?"

"Well..." Rat turned and looked down the hill again. "It's hard to count because they are close together, but I'd say we are going to have about twenty folks showing up for Grimbledung's meal."

"Oooh! I should put tea on!"

Drimblerod flailed his arms. "Everyone back to the rug!" He scampered back to the rug. "To the rug!"

"Hey, the rug. There's an idea," Grimbledung said as he clambered out of the front of the wagon. He had a second piece of jerky sticking out of his mouth.

Rat moved beside Drimblerod. "I just thought I should let you know there's twenty-two folks moving this way. Mostly Orcs."

"We aren't going to have enough tea." Grimbledung said. He bent down and put his hands on his knees. "Hey there you good looking Nain, would you be willing to pull a wagon for a little bit?"

The Nain gave a shrug.

"Everyone on the wagon!" Drimblerod flailed his arms as he moved back to the wagon. "On the wagon!"

"Let's get you hooked up." Grimbledung said.

"I'll just ride up here," said Rat. "I've never been at the front of the wagon before."

"HURRY UP!"

"Let's go rug," Grimbledung said. He gestured at the wagon. "I'll tie the bindings to your rear tassels."

The rug shrugged as it moved into position.

"Wait," Drimblerod said. "How's this rug going to get this wagon off the ground? It will just hang underneath it like an anchor."

"There's no way." Grimbledung said. "Absolutely positively no way it would do that."

"I don't see how." Drimblerod replied. "Why not?"

"Because it's not an anchor of course." Grimbledung said. "Anchors are designed to hang straight down and hold things in place. Wagons are designed to get pulled behind something and go along with it. As soon as the rug starts pulling it, the wagon will automatically float in the air to stay behind it."

"That's not how it works." Rat said.

"No, I think he's on to something," Drimblerod said.

"Then it's settled." Grimbledung said.

"Stop you!" An Ogre called.

"Ogres?"

There were Ogres as well.

"Oh, sorry Drimblerod. I forgot to mention the Ogres."

"Yaaa!" Drimblerod flailed again. "We're doomed!"

Grimbledung tied the harnesses to the rear tassels of the rug then hopped onto the buckboard. "That should about do it." He drew his wand. "Should we wait for a proper amount of suspense?"

"Go, go, GO!"

Off we go-
Up in yon yonder

Off we go-
Into the air!

Grimbledung recited.

"See? It's the spell that makes the wagon fly, not that it's a wagon." Rat pointed out.

"That's just crazy talk." Grimbledung said

The wagon rose into the air just as the group got to them. One of the Orcs leapt to grab the wheel- it was just out of reach.

"Get down here you fiends!"

"You know, that does hurt." Grimbledung said. He leaned over the side of the wagon. "Sorry about the fiend comment earlier." He waggled his ears. "If it makes any difference."

The Orc nodded. "It does. But I'll still gonna wallop you!"

"Get going rug!" Drimblerod snapped the reins.

With only one buck, the Nain moved forward, wagon following dutifully behind. Because that's what it was designed to do.

"Nice, Drim, nice." Grimbledung leaned back and put his feet up. "Very nice indeed."

Drimblerod put the reins down. "If you could go northwest until we hit the river, rug, that would be great." Drimblerod leaned out and looked back.

"Drim, you should relax. We are home bound." Grimbledung stood up and dusted off his breeches. "And fancy free, if I don't mind saying so myself." He grabbed one of the uprights for the covering of the wagon and leaned way out. "Bye all!" He waved with his free hand.

"SIT DOWN!"

Grimbledung teetered to one side then flopped onto his butt. "Calm down partner." He waddled on his butt to Drimblerod. "The Halflings would say we are now at the tail end of an absurdly overwhelmingly successful adventure." He winked. "A highly profitable successful adventure, if I don't say so myself."

Drimblerod smiled. "You know, you're right." He cautiously sat up. "And when you're right, you're right."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "All we need to do is fly home and we can go through our loot in the comfort of our own shop."

Drimblerod smiled. "Oh, that sounds nice." He waggled his ears as well. "And I can't wait to see everyone's faces when we show back up."

"We should invite them over to the shop when we get back. To have drinks and snacks!"

"Ahh, the shop," said Drimblerod. He hugged his partner. "It will be nice to be back home. And I'm sure everyone will be happy to see us back."

"It's probably been quiet in town. Boring quiet." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Say," he called out to the rug, "how would you like to hang out with the most quietest calmestest Gnomess in the lands?"

The rug bent in the middle to face him. It raised its front tassels.

"There's this gal I know. Quiet and reserved as a temple mouse. You could lay about her quaint cottage and go on rides whenever you wanted." He gave a wink. "And you'd be the wonderfulest present!"

The rug gave a nod then returned to watching where it was going.

"Ahh, easy street, Drim. That's where we are. Right on the corner of Easy Court and Street Lane. Where that florist shop is."

Drimblerod covered his head. "Stop saying things like that. Let's just fly until we're far enough away to have Rat go back to pulling us."

"What?" Rat sat up. "I don't mind saying that this is about the best way to travel across the Great Shambler Plains." He looked down. "I don't have to walk. No dust, no flies, and I don't have to walk. We'll get there in no time at all. And I don't have to walk. If I could be turned back into a normal grey rat, my world would be perfect."

Drimblerod peered over the side. "Is this that much faster than you walk? It seems about the same. You sure you don't want to walk?"

"Well sure, *this* isn't faster than that old rat walks," Grimbledung said. He took the reins and snapped them. "Let's get home in record time, majestic Nain! Tassels to the breeze and fast as lightning we fly!" He snapped the reins again.

The Nain buckled in the middle and as it sprang forward. So did the wagon. Both Gnomes leaned back as the wagon sped up incredibly.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! I don't think this is safe." Drimblerod held on with both hands. "Not safe at all."

"Pushaw, partner; have I ever steered you wrong?"

"There's not enough time left in the day to even address that question properly." Drimblerod closed his eyes. "I hate heights."

"Hey! Lookit those Trolls walking along all unaware like. Let's swoop'em, rug!" He took the reins and snapped them. "Look out below!"

"No!" Drimblerod clenched his teeth. And opened his eyes.

He was sorry he did.

The Trolls weren't too pleased either.

Chapter 51
Home Again, Home Again, Jiggety RAAR!

"WEEEE!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. Yet again

"Stop doing that," warned Drimblerod. "It got old yesterday and I stopped counting when you got to fifty. We will *not* start the day that way. I'm warning you."[31]

Grimbledung clambered back down from the top of the wagon. He had sat straddling the cloth top of the wagon cheering "Wa-hoo!" as the sun went to its resting place. He did the same as the new sun rose.

Until Drimblerod threatened to turn him into a newt. And toss him overboard.

"I swear I'll turn you into a non-flying newt and pitch you overboard."

"I thought that threat was just for yesterday." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Unless you have a more entertaining, well thought out threat you want to substitute for yesterday's?"

"No, I'll stick with my original threat, if you don't mind." He looked down over the edge of the seat. They had risen to several hundred feet above the ground to ensure that they weren't a target for any wand-wielding walkers. Or at least, harder to hit targets. "We need to find a place to set down."

"What for? We're making great time. Why, we'll be in Julesville before noon at this pace. You want to get there later in the day or something?"

"No, I don't have a problem with the pace; I have a problem with... the morning ablutions."

"Ablute away." Grimbledung gestured off to one side.

Drimblerod looked over the side again. "I don't think…"

"Birds do it."

"Well, sure..."

"Bats even."

"I suppose, but there is a…" Drimblerod tilted his hand back and forth. "…scaling difference involved."

Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "Dragons do it." He held up his hands as if they were claws. "Raar away!"

"If you put it that way." Drimblerod looked over the edge, then at the back of the wagon, then back over the edge.

"Back of the wagon." Grimbledung jabbed his thumb in that direction. "The wind is pushing backwards and it provides the necessary amount of privacy." He winked. "That's why it's called a privy, you know."

"Well, I do want to be back before lunchtime."

"Well, besides breakfast, brunch, tea, supper, dinner, and evening snack, it *is* the most important meal of the day."

"That is true." Drimblerod stood carefully and started to duck under the front cover.

"Parchment's already torn into slivers behind the barrel." Grimbledung purposely looked forward. "I'll wait here."

"I think that would be for the best."

"If you need me to veer left or right to put us over any Trolls you see down there…"

"I do not think that would be for the best."

"But…"

"Just fly straight and level. No jostling if you please."

"You can count on me!"

Drimblerod ducked under the cover and immediately began to look for a strap to tie himself to the wagon. "No dips, swoops, banks, or…"

"What if I see a *big* group of trolls all standing close together?"

Drimblerod was glad his partner couldn't see him smirk as he considered it. "No, not then either."

After a good while, Grimbledung heard pots and pans clattering. "You getting breakfast together?"

"I thought we'd do something cold," said Drimblerod. "Not too sure about starting a fire way up here off the ground."

"Dragons do it."

"Well we're not dragons."

"I heard you go 'Raar' a couple of times."

Drimblerod exhaled slowly. "That was for different reasons." He stepped through the slit in the covering of the wagon. "Here, have some jerky. I'll get some fruit to go with it shortly."

Grimbledung took the jerky. He startled. "Why are your hands wet?"

"I washed them of course."

Grimbledung nodded. "You know, I always worry about eating establishments that have to remind their employees to wash their hands after leaving the facilities. Honestly, if you can't remember that one simple, all important thing, how can I trust you to actually cook my food properly?"

"Maybe they only work well with simple specific instructions."

"I hope so."

The two ate their jerky in silence.

"Hey!" Rat scampered to the back of the rug. "What gives? You're eating without me?"

"Well, you were sleeping so soundly we figured we'd leave you to your dreams."

Grimbledung nodded. "And it means more for us."

"We have a month's worth of jerky, Grim." Drimblerod held out his piece of jerky. "Catch?"

Rat sat up. "Toss away!" He held out his claws.

Drimblerod tossed the jerky toward Rat. As it arced, the wind moving past them caught it making it fall short.

Without thinking, Rat jumped for the jerky.

"Rat!" Drimblerod leaned forward.

Rat caught the jerky in both paws. "Hah! Saved it," he said as he fell through the space between the rug and the front of the wagon.

Drimblerod leaned forward and watched Rat fall. "I think we may have to land after all."

"I'm on it, Drim." Grimbledung got to his feet, and in a testament of his complete lack of fear of heights, he stepped forward onto the wagon's tongue. "Go get Rat, rug!" He started untying the Rug. "He should be the only plummeting rodent you will come across, I should imagine." When he finished untying the reins, he raised his hands. "Time!"

"Catch the rat!" Drimblerod called. "And stop messing about!"

Rug obliged by quickly diving toward the ground.

"Uh oh; I don't know if that was a good idea." Drimblerod looked over the side of the wagon.

"We'll just coast to a stop until that rug gets back," assured Grimbledung. He pointed at the levitation wand that was stuck into the front of the wagon. "Easy peasy."

True to Grimbledung's word, the wagon gradually coasted to a stop, bobbing softly.

"I don't like this," said Drimblerod. "Just sitting out here."

Grimbledung walked on the tongue of the wagon, arms outstretched as if he were a tightrope walker. "We're safe from anything on the ground way up here. Just enjoy the sights until that Nain gets back." He hopped to the seat. "I'm getting another piece of jerky. Want one?"

"I don't know, Grim…"

"Oh relax Drimblerod." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Honestly; what could happen way up here?"

"Raaar!" Roared the large grey dragon as it approached.

The other one nodded in approval.

"I wonder if they'd eat a newt," remarked Drimblerod.

Chapter 52
An Impending Union-Reunion

Nulu pushed open the door to the jail. Akita was bent over some paperwork, writing. She was able to enter and close the door without Akita even seeming to notice. "Akita?" She asked tentatively.

Akita didn't look up. "Hmmm? It anything important?"

"Well, I was… we were all wondering if today was the day."

"The day?"

Nulu moved to the chair and sat. Its squeaks of protest finally make Akita look up. "Use the other one. Safer." He leaned back and dropped the quill on his desk. "Aggravatin'."

"Sorry," said Nulu. "I didn't mean…"

Akita crumpled up the parchment and tossed it at the corner. There was a large pile of balled up parchment covering the garbage can. Akita growled.

"Akita? What's wrong?" Nulu moved to the other chair. To her relief, it didn't squeak at all. "Are you making wanted posters, or what?"

"Them two are killing me."

Nulu nodded. "Grimbledung and Drimblerod, I can see why."

"No not them two."

"We are *not* going to play the pronoun game," Nulu tut-tutted. "If not Grimbledung and Drimblerod, then who? Flora? She rough up any more hapless males?"

"No, no." Akita's ears perked up. "Well, actually yes. But that's not it." He pointed at the pile of parchments. "Colossus and Cherí have asked *me* to preside over their nuptials and I'm tryin' to write up a nice speech about their impending marriage."

Nulu smiled. "That's really nice of you, Akita."

"It's gonna make my hair fall out. Folk'll think I've got the mange." He pulled another piece of parchment from under the desk. "Last one. Gotta make it count."

Nulu laughed. "I think you're putting too much effort into this, Akita."

"What? I'm not goin'ta run through the ceremony slipshod." He narrowed his sky-blue eyes at her. "I'd never hear the end of it."

"You off of your potion?"

Akita shrugged. "Maca likes them blue. The glowing is good for keeping rabble down, but now that I've got an unhinged Halfling as a deputy, I just threaten to send him over to deal with rabble rousers."

"Effective, I'd imagine."

Akita grinned. "And now that word is out that I actually *can* be contagious…"

"I can see how that helps as well." Nulu leaned back. "So how about some help with writing the nuptials? I'm sure if we sat down together we could get something down that is really quite nice."

"The help would be greatly appreciated." Akita looked back at the pile of discarded parchments. "And save me some coins in parchment."

Nulu stood. "Well, from my experience, first and second drafts oftentimes have what you want to say, they just need polished."

"Well I think I've got an eleventythird draft over in that corner."

Nulu moved to the corner and began to un-ball parchments. "Speaking of eleventythird, do you have any more updates from Maca on our wayward Gnome?"

Akita stood and went to help Nulu. "Seems it's going to be a close finish between them, those magicians and the Elves. And it'll be today."

"A close finish? She can't see exactly?"

"Well, Maca says there's this old saying-

Difficult to see.
Always in motion is the future.

That chest of silver may be tin
and the gold? Worthless pewter."

He recited.

"So they'll all get here today but their order might change around depending on all the variables they could slow or speed and of them. Yes?"

"Yes. Of course, I'd really like them Elves to come in last if at all possible." Akita smiled. "Think you could delay them with a meal if they get here first? Tell them we'll bring the spices to them at your place, or something?"

Nulu considered that. "Well, a meal on the house is worth not getting the town annihilated."

Akita smoothed out the last of the parchments. "This is the last of them."

"The eleventythird one?"

Akita chuckled. "Somewhere 'round there." He looked around his jail. "You want to lay them out on the floor so we can get a look at them all at once?" He got serious. "Really, I want these nuptials to go off without a hitch. Kind'a grown fond of that annoyin' little Halfling."

"Well then, how about we sit at one of my nice long tables for eight and do it properly over a drink?"

"That, my dear friend, is a most excellent idea." Akita rolled the parchments he was holding. "And, I'll even pay for the drinks since you're coverin' the Elves."

"That my dear friend, sounds like a deal." Nulu gestured toward the door. "After you."

The pair walked to Nulu's establishment and diligently worked on the ceremony for Colossus and Cherí.

So diligently they lost track of time and didn't notice the Gnomes returning.

Or the Elves.

The clap of thunder signaling the return of the magicians got their attention however.

Chapter 53
How to Deal with an Untrained Dragon That Really Does Not Want Trained

"Raar!" Called Grimbledung. He put his hands out as claws. "Raar right back at you, Messrs Dragon and Dragon!" He startled. "Oh, sorry. Mister and Missus Dragonses!" He shouted as he clawed at the air again.

Drimblerod looked over the edge. He couldn't see Rat or the rug. "Get us to the ground, Grim!"

"We have the high ground, what're you worried about? Hate to give up the high ground. Bad tactics, that."

"What tactics? We're floating in place. AND THERE IS NO GROUND!" Drimblerod flailed his arms. "Get us on the ground before we plummet there!"

"Raar!" Grimbledung leaned past the edge of the wagon, holding on with one hand as he roared. He clawed at the air with the other. "Good morning to you, fine dragons! How goes the day thus far?"

The two dragons soared past the wagon- one on each side. Very close on each side. They both executed graceful banking curves and came back towards the Gnomes.

"Should I put on some tea?" Grimbledung asked Drimblerod. "You want tea?!" He shouted at the dragons. "It will only take a few minutes!"

"Stop taunting those things!"

The spikes on the left dragon's head -the male- spread out wide as it approached.

"He's going to flame us!" Drimblerod looked around. There was nowhere to hide and nowhere to go. "There's nowhere to hide and nowhere to go!" He lamented. "We're goners for sure."

Grimbledung hopped to the very front of the tongue of the wagon. Clear sky and a lethal drop surrounded him. "A fine morning to you!" He called to the rapidly approaching dragons. He bowed deeply.

The male dragon veered toward Grimbledung, passing within a foot of him as it ducked under the wagon. The second continued by the side. The turbulence of the two caused the wagon to rock back and forth.

Grimbledung put out his arms to keep his balance. "Hey, there's the rug! And it's got Rat!" He waved. "Good job rug! Now get back up here!"

The rug and Rat watched the two dragons as they both turned again- this time much more sharply. "I say we stay here and see how this pans out," said Rat.

The Nain rippled.

"You're very much on the flammable side and I'd rather not fall completely to the ground." He sat down. "Besides, Dragons are suckers for tea. I bet you Grimbledung gets them with the tea."

The rug bent one of its corners up toward Rat. It split its tassels into two bunches and rubbed them together like fingers.

"Oh, right. That treasure of platinum might play into it. Dragons are suckers for treasure. More so than tea. You know really…"

"Stuff's happening up here!" Reminded Drimblerod.

"What, what's happening?" Grimbledung turned to look at his partner. "Did I miss something?"

"It's all resolved now. Had a distraction going on there." He pointed. "They're coming back!"

"Hey you two, I'm going to make tea!" Grimbledung gestured as the male dragon suddenly bolted from under the wagon and hovered in front of him. The female began to hover off to the wagon's right side- the gnomes were positioned to be in a devastating crossfire. When the fire started crossing. "How do you take it?"

"What. Do. You. Do. Here." The male dragon rumbled.

"We hover?" Grimbledung tried. He smiled. "Or do you mean the tea?" He rubbed his hands together. "Well, I've got a smooooth Ogrejeeling I can

put on that's really worth the wait." He did a little hop. "Or I've got some great moldy Elvish Pu'er tea that would knock your socks off." He looked at the dragon's massive claws. "Metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Can't. Stand. Elves." The dragon rumbled again. He flapped his massive wings. The turbulence pushed the wagon back.

"Well, who can blame you," said Grimbledung. "Always thinking they're better than everyone else in the room. All nose in the air kind of folk." He shrugged. "Even the ones that want to eat you, look down on you. Rude is what it is if you asked me. And believe me plenty of people have asked me my opinion of Elves and I have given it heartily in return."

"Got any other Pu'er?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "It's the only one I've got, sorry. Say, I can mix it with the Ogrejeeling if you want." He rubbed his chin. "Yeah, that'd taste nice, I think. You think?"

The dragon stared at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung stared at the dragon.

"Uhm… Grim?" Tried Drimblerod.

Grimbledung looked at the female dragon and gestured at the male with his head. "He shy or something?"

"Why do you fly in our realm?" The female asked.

"It beats walking, sister." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Am I right or am I right?"

The female looked at the male. "Well, he is right."

"Right?" Grimbledung looked at Drimblerod. "Put on a big pot of the Ogrejeeling, Drim. Add the Pu'er once it gets hot. We're going to be here a while, I thinks." He looked at the male dragon. "We will heat it with the Ogrejeeling if that works for you, Mister Dragon."

"I really hope so," said Drimblerod.

Rat crossed his arms. "Stupid gnomes. I can't hear a thing from down here. Hey rug, just move back up into position nice and smooth like so I can hear what's happening."

The rug obliged by floating upward towards the wagon.

"Wagons do not fly." The male dragon said. "They just do not."

"A wagon fly? Don't be absurd." Grimbledung cleared his throat.

"Don't." Drimblerod begged. "Please don't."

"I've seen a horse fly. Seen a *dragon* fly." Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "Why, I've seen a porch swing, a diamond ring. But I done seen 'bout everything when I see a wagon fly."

"What'd. You. Say?" The male dragon rumbled.

"I said when I see a wagon fly."

"What do you do then?" The female asked.

"Hover." Grimbledung held out his hands and let them bob in the air. "We're hovering. Hovering in yon sky, enjoying the breeze and such." He glanced at his partner. "Making tea even."

The female dragon sniffed.

"And the last thing we want to do is get on your bad side," said Drimblerod. "So if you prefer we roll along the ground…"

The male dragon sniffed.

Rug eased up under the tongue of the wagon. The two dragons seemed to ignore them.

Rat moved to the back of the rug and started tying it to the harness.

The male dragon inhaled deeply. "That smell." He looked at his mate. "Dearest?"

"Oh, sorry," Grimbledung said sheepishly. He waved his hand behind his butt. "Been up on the bonnet watching the new sun come up. I swallow a lot of air when I'm flying." He smiled. "How about you? Hey, you ever blow fire to see if…"

The female dragon inhaled deeply as well. "Yes, I smell it too now."

"Well, then you *dealt* it sister!" Grimbledung guffawed. He slapped his knee. "Am I right or am I right? Got that tea on yet, Drim?"

Rat finished attaching the rug to the harness.

Drimblerod sat down.

The male dragon narrowed his eyes at Grimbledung. "Where have you been?"

"What lately?" He gestured around. "Hovering, just like I said."

The dragon flared his wings and thrust his head toward Grimbledung. With his neck stretched out, he inhaled deeply on Grimbledung's belt pouch.

The spines on the side of his face popped out again. "Where! Have! You! Been!" The dragon roared.

Grimbledung looked over his shoulder. "Well, back there someplace. Not sure exactly where really. Don't have a map as it were. Didn't stop to ask directions. Slept through most of it. Had to go to the…"

"WHERE! HAVE! YOU! BEEEEEN!" The smell of Sulphur filled the area as the dragon inhaled through his nose. Tendrils of fire popped into existence around his nostrils as he inhaled.

"The Lost Picman's Mine!" Drimblerod exclaimed. "We were on holiday and are trying to make good time back home." As he started to point in the direction of Julesville, he stopped and pointed in a different direction.

"That one lies." The female said. Now the spines on her face spread out. "He *lies* to us."

"Well, you can't trust wee folk," said Grimbledung as he reached into his pouch. "They're small and crafty fellows who will do whatever it takes to get their way with cunning and trickery because they lack in physical prowess." He pulled out his hand. "But their lack in physical prowess..."

The male dragon reared his head back, preparing to blast the entire wagon in one breath.

"Does not mean you should discount their abilities." Grimbledung held out his hand and opened it. There were six platinum coins in it. "Because that, dear fire belly, is a big mistake."

The dragon's eyes locked on the coins. "Platinum!"

"Oh yes, a veritable treasure trove of it." Grimbledung waved his hand back and forth. The dragons' head and neck tracked it as it did. "And I can tell you where it is. *Piles* of it."

"Where is it?!" The female demanded.

Grimbledung held his hand above his head. "For safe passage, I will tell you exactly… *exactly* where it is."

"Tell me!"

"For safe passage, Mister Dragon."

"You shall have it." The male said. The spines folded flat against his cheeks. "On my honor you will have safe passage."

"Fine then."

"How do we know you won't just incinerate us after we tell you?" Drimblerod shouted.

Grimbledung dropped his hand and turned. "Drimblerod Axebreath, I am shocked. Shocked is what I am." He slipped the coins back into his pouch then pointed at his friend. "It is just plain rude to go around calling someone you just met a liar. Why, I'm dashed. And, truth be told, a bit embarrassed by that."

"Well…" Drimblerod looked at his feet. "I just thought…"

"Excuse me…" Said the male dragon.

"You just thought." Grimbledung tut-tutted. "That's why folks don't get along with each other like they should." He waggled a finger at his partner.

"Just tell me…"

"If folks would be more pleasant with each other and less short and gruff, these lands would be a much nicer…"

"TELL ME WHERE THE TREASURE IS!" Twin rings of smoke popped from the dragon's nose. They passed on either side of Grimbledung.

Grimbledung ducked. "Easy there, big fellow." He turned back around. "Don't go off by accident."

"Where is it, Gnome?"

"You know about the Lost Picman's Mine?"

"That place that's an amusement park?" The female said.

"Why is it *everyone* knew that but us?" Drimblerod said.

"I know the place," said the male dragon. "What of it?"

"Well, they have this great ride where you get to sit on a flying carpet." Grimbledung pointed at the Nain. "And it's really grand especially if you get one of the nice soft rugs like this one…"

"What does that place have to do with the treasure!"

"I was getting there," Grimbledung said. He turned to the female. "Before he wasn't saying anything. Now I can't get a word in edge-wise."

The female tilted her head. "Males can be like that."

"TELL ME!"

"Well, if you go to that place, the Lost Picman's Mine, and you look for the ride with the flying rugs."

"Yes?"

"There is a large head in the middle of the wheel the rugs go around."

"A large head? Of what?"

"Well, it's not a real head. It's made of wood." Drimblerod interjected. "And, now that I think about it, it may be slightly charred as we set fire to it when we left."

"Inside the big head there is a shaft that leads down to an underground room."

"And inside that room?"

"Heaps of gold and gems, gold. Platinum. Stuff like that."

"Can this be?" The male dragon looked at Drimblerod.

"Hey now! I just got finished saying how we should all just try to get along, didn't I? And not going around disparaging one another's honor." Grimbledung jabbed a finger at the dragon. "Didn't I?"

"Well, I…"

"Honestly. I mean, honestly." Grimbledung raise his hands plaintively. "Honestly?" He pointed back the way they had come. "Down the shaft is your treasure."

The male dragon pulled his wings to his body and immediately fell from sight.

Grimbledung leaned over and looked down. "You're welcome." He looked at the female dragon. "If you're ever in Julesville," He pointed in that direction, "Look us up; Grimbledung and Drimblerod at Second Hand Sorcery. I've got a great selection of teas back home and lots of local honey."

"Thanks," said the female dragon. "For the treasure and the offer of tea. Maybe next time?"

"Sure, sure."

The female dragon closed her wings as well and dropped from sight.

"What in the lands did you tell them exactly who we were and where we lived for?" Drimblerod shouted.

"Well, so we could have that tea we offered, of course." Grimbledung responded as he moved back to the seat. "At some future, undetermined date."

"You're going to be the death of me."[32] Drimblerod leaned back in his seat.

"Right?" Grimbledung sat as well. "What a disaster!"

"What are you talking about? We went from most definitely getting incinerated to definitely not getting incinerated. That's about as far from a disaster as you can get." Rat said.

"What, that?" Grimbledung jerked his thumb backward. "With the dragons? You just need to know how to talk to dragons." He shook his head. "No, I meant the treasure. *That's* a disaster!"

"How is it a disaster?" Drimblerod waggled his ears. "We're loaded."

"Remember when I kept sending those magicians to that one underground shelter in the Great Sandy Desert?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Do you remember why I was doing that?"

"Comedic relief?"

"No. Well, yes. But also because, if you remember, that was the farthest place I had ever visited."

"So?"

"So I sent people there because I had been there. Just like I've been to that cave of treasures." He thumbed backward again. "Where I just sent those two dragons before I got a chance to send *you* there with a couple of backpacks of holding."

Drimblerod opened his mouth and closed it. He leaned out past the side of the wagon and looked backward. After a long moment be leaned back in. "What a disaster! Get us back you rug! Back to Julesville!" He grabbed the reins and snapped them. Since they weren't connected to the rug because it has no mouth to put a bit in, it just stayed put.

"Hey noble and luxurious Nain," said Grimbledung.

The rug flexed in the middle to turn back and face him.

"If you could get us back to town as quickly as possible, I will make sure to give you a good whacking when we get back. You'll be as clean as when you were made."

The rug straightened then shot off. Pulling the wagon away at incredible speed.

Thanks to the rug's speed, the Gnomes would beat both the magicians and the Elves back. It would only be by a few minutes.

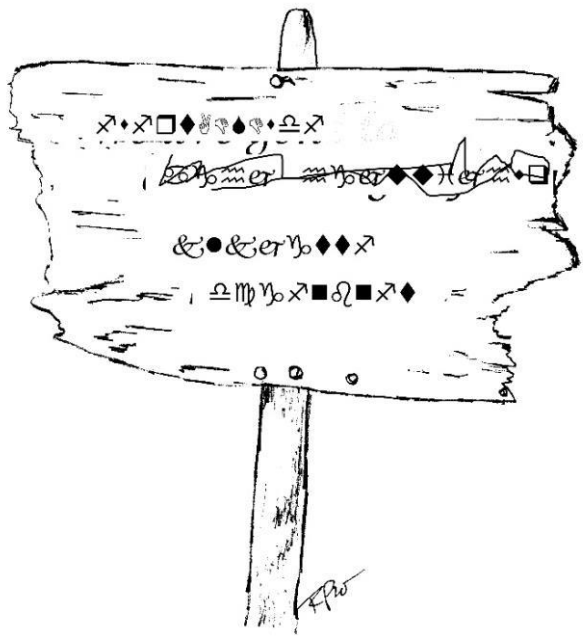
But it was plenty of time for at least one Gnomish panic attack.

Perhaps two.

Chapter 54
A Second Hand Sorcery Shaped Hole in Julesville

"AHHHHH!" Screamed Grimbledung. As he flailed on the ground. Because he had hopped out of the wagon as Drimblerod made a turn a block away and encountered the space that used to contain their shop before anyone else in the wagon.

He stared at the sign that was stuck in the ground where the shop used to be.



"AHHH!" Screamed Grimbledung again. Because nothing else came to mind.

"Grimbledung, what is the matter?"

Grimbledung turned his head to look at Pozzuoli. "Oh, it's terrible Pozzswoolie, just terrible."

Pozzuoli ignored the mangling of his name. Even though it infuriated him because at least half the time, the annoying Gnome got his name correct so there was *no* reason he could not get it correct every time. "What's-a the trouble?" He looked around. "Where is the Drimblerod?"

"He's landing the wagon." Grimbledung sat up and wiped his nose on his shirt. "Just wait until he sees what has happened." Grimbledung tugged on his ears.

Pozzuoli read the sign. "I don't see. So what is wrong?"

"There is no shop! Someone has stolen it!" Grimbledung flopped onto his back and drew his legs up. He grabbed his knees and rocked back and forth. "All is lost."

"It-a says right here that the two magicians took the shop."

Grimbledung sat up again. "Those dirty thieves!"

"Thieves don't usually leave notes or signs saying what they a-done." Offered Pozzuoli.

"Those *considerate* dirty thieves!" Corrected Grimbledung. He hopped to his feet. "What's the sign say?" He leaned in to where his nose almost touched the wood. "What's it saaaay, Signore Pozzuoli?"

It was moments like this that made Pozzuoli think that Grimbledung's antics were all a long-term, well-played-out ruse.[33] Even so he just answered politely: "It-a says that they took the shop when they left and they will-a be right back."

"When did they leave?"

"I dunno." Pozzuoli shrugged.

"Where did they go?"

"Search me."

"How long will they be gone?"

"No idea." Pozzuoli looked around, hoping someone -anyone- who could extricate him from the conversation would show up.

"I knew we shouldn't have left the shop with them!" Grimbledung grabbed the sign with both hands and shook it back and forth. "Ahhhhhh!"

"Grimbledung, what is the racket about?"

Grimbledung wheeled on his partner. "The shop is gone, Drim. GONE!"

Drimblerod looked at Pozzuoli. "Pozz?"

"It's-a gone all right."

Drimblerod walked to the sign and read it. "No, I meant do you know what happened? How long was the shop here before it disappeared?"

"It was here until yesterday," Pozzuoli said. "Those two magicians did an okay job running your place." He glanced at Grimbledung. "There was at least more silencio."

"That a type of cheese?"

Pozzuoli shook his head at Grimbledung. "No." He turned back to Drimblerod. "It seems that the assassenino woman find out where Liverioso's love was." He raised his hands plaintively. "So they-a went to get her."

"A minute ago you didn't know nothing about anything," said Grimbledung. "Now you have details?"

"So they've been gone a day then." Drimblerod leaned on the sign. "Well, hopefully they find her soon."

"What if they never come back?" Grimbledung flopped to the ground again. "Never ever never!" He pulled his ears for good measure.

A peal of thunder made Pozzuoli and Drimblerod duck.

In a flash of blue light, Liverioso, Semfeld, and Sage appeared.

Semfeld doubled over. He put his hands on his knees and breathed deeply. "Shouldn't... have... eaten."

Liverioso dropped to his knees and put his hands on the ground. "Better... second... time."

Sage threw up.

"Hey, you!" Drimblerod said. "What's the idea of taking our shop?" He looked at the trio. "Where is the shop, anyway?"

"You three don't look okay," Grimbledung rolled to his side and looked at Sage. "You really don't look all right. You all right?"

Sage looked at Grimbledung.

And threw up.

"Well, that's a little insulting, I should say."

Semfeld shrugged off a backpack. "We have it right here." He took a few more deep breaths. "We didn't know who to leave in charge after you left us in charge." He stood upright. "We brought it along so we wouldn't have to worry that who we put in charge would just steal the shop."

"Like you did!"

Semfeld nodded at Grimbledung. "Exactly."

Liverioso rocked back onto his heels as his head reeled. He pointed. "We left a sign."

Grimbledung rolled across the ground to Liverioso and grabbed him around the leg. "Where is our shop?" He tried to pull Liverioso's leg to his mouth to bite him but Liverioso hopped to get out of reach. Grimbledung scrambled over to him on all fours and bit his pant leg. "Where is it?" He said around the fabric.

"I said it's right here, you crazy Gnome." Semfeld patted the backpack.

"Grrr!" Said Grimbledung as hair sprang from his ears. "GRRRR!"

"What is this?" Sage stepped back. "Is he…"

"Calm down, Grim," said Drimblerod. He moved over and took his friend by the collar. "Drop the magician. Drop him I say."

"Grrr!" Grimbledung replied. His teeth grew longer and sharp. So did his finger and toenails.

Sage stepped toward Grimbledung. A growl started in the back of her throat.

"Sage?" Liverioso was torn between looking at the now-hairy Gnome and Sage.

"Let go!" Drimblerod said. He tugged on his partner's collar.

Akita and Nulu ran into the open area.

"We heard the thunder peal so we figured…"

"Akita!" Drimblerod turned to the constable for help. "Stop Grimbledung from biting Liverioso."

Akita barked at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung looked at him. "Grrr-rabbits?"

"No, no rabbits today. Let go of that man's leg." Akita pointed. "Maybe rrrabits tomorrow," he said as he rolled his r's.

"Akita?" Sage said. "Akita? Akita *Finnish*?"

"Well, at least these two beat the Elves here. Saves me a free meal," said Nulu.

"Grrr!" said Grimbledung as he hopped to his feet. He let his arms hang down. "Grrr-rle?" He looked at Sage and sniffed the air.

Akita sniffed the air as well. He looked at Sage.

Sage took a step toward Akita.

"So, now that the authorities are here, I'm gonna leave." Pozzuoli said.

"Hey, we're getting together for a meal at the Duck Inn tonight around eight. If you could make it, that would be great," said Drimblerod. He smiled. "Bring Mamma Pozzuoli as well."

"I will-a do that," said Pozzuoli. He gave a wave and left the area, very relieved. To be leaving the area.

"Well, we need to see about getting the shop set up before those Elves get here," said Nulu.

"Which Elves?"

Nulu turned to Drimblerod. "Some Foreboding Forest Elves. Seems your partner stole some royal spices."

"Grrr?" Grimbledung said. He moved to Sage and sniffed. Her butt.

Sage slapped Grimbledung's nose. "Stop that."

"Yeah, stop smelling my girl," said Liverioso. He moved beside her. "You unstable Gnome."

"So you want me to put the shop back?" Semfeld asked. He put the backpack down and began to undo the buckles.

"That would be great, thanks Semfeld." Nulu said.

Grimbledung panting slowed. As it did, the hairs on his ears retracted to normal Gnome ear-hair length. Which meant there were still several very long hairs mixed in with the shorter ones. "Elves want what?"

"Our Royal Spices!" Declared Keebler as he strode purposefully around the corner. "I'll have them back, now."

Leaves and Weed ambled behind him.

"There's no way you heard us talking," said Liverioso.

"With those ears? I imagine he did," said Semfeld. He looked at Nulu. "What spices?"

"The Royal Spices of the Foreboding Forest Elves," said Nulu. "They want their stuff back and its somewhere in the shop."

"Ohhh… those spices," Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Tasty stuff." He smacked his lips.

"I hope for the sake of the town you didn't eat all of them." Keebler crowded Grimbledung.

"Everyone just calm down," Akita said. He glanced at Sage. Something seemed familiar about her but he couldn't place exactly what. He turned his attention to the crisis at hand. "Let's get the shop set up so these Elves can be on their way."

"Can we stay for dinner?" Leaves asked. "Getting late and dinner's an important meal."

Grimbledung nodded. "Besides breakfast, brunch, lunch, tea, supper, and late-night snack, it sure is."

"No!" Nulu said almost too quickly. "I mean…I am sure these three will want to finish their expedition and get back to their forest."

Teeth stuck out his lower lip. "Starving on this trip is more like it." He grasped his belly. "I haven't had anything substantial to eat since lunch."

"That was just a couple of hours ago," said Keebler. "Now keep quiet or you'll be on the menu!"

"You know the best part of Elves?" Grimbledung asked. "The knuckles." He waggled his ears.

Semfeld took the miniature shop from the backpack. "Where do you want it?"

"Same place it was before would be nice," said Drimblerod. "Put the door over on that side." He pointed at the main street.

Semfeld carefully placed the shop down. "Need to pull up the sign," he said. "So it doesn't get in the way."

Akita pulled the sign from the ground. "Let her rip, Semfeld." He put the sign over his shoulder.

Semfeld drew his wand. "Everyone stand back." He took a short bow. "Ladies and gentlemen prepare to be amazed by the ever-popular, always-amazing Contra-Minisculate trick."

Grimbledung clapped.

Semfeld took a quick bow, pushed up his sleeves, then waved his wand at the tiny shop

ContraMinisculate 'emmmm

He intoned.

The shop began to grow in size as silver light bathed it.

The group shielded their eyes from the bright light. When it finally faded, they all looked.

"Is that it?" Sage asked.

"No of course, that's not it," said Semfeld. He took a bow. "Tada!"

Grimbledung clapped.

"*Now* the trick is done," said Liverioso.

"I want our spices." Said Keebler.

"I agree," said Nulu, "where are the spices, Grimbledung?"

Grimbledung looked at the shop. "Let's see. Where did I put those things?" He tapped his finger on his chin. "Oh! They are hung on my headboard for safekeeping."

"Why would you hang spices on the headboard and not put them in your kitchen?"

"Did you look for the spices?" Grimbledung tapped his finger on his chin again.

"Well, sure but we never found them." Semfeld admitted.

"Did you check the bedroom?" Grimbledung waggled his ears.

Semfeld frowned at the annoying Gnome, and the thought of the treasure the Dwarf had said they would pay.

"Let's get those spices," Akita suggested. He gestured at the shop. "After you all." As the group moved into the shop, he moved behind Sage and surreptitiously smelled her. There was a familiar smell but he could not place it. "We know each other?" He whispered into her ear as they walked. Since she seemed to be with Liverioso, he did not want any sort of friction if this was a woman from his past that he did not remember. "Or something?"

Sage turned to look over her shoulder as she walked into the shop. Her eyes flashed red. "Or something."

Akita stopped in his tracks. An image from his childhood popped into his head. "Sage?"

She gave a smile and turned back around. "Nice to see you again as well, Kita-Kita."

"I'll go grab them," said Grimbledung. He moved to the stairs quickly. When he started to climb them, he tripped and fell on his face.

"Smooth." Said Nulu. "Good thing no one was watching."

"What the?" Grimbledung stood up. He carefully moved up a step. "This place is too big!" He turned to face Semfeld. "You made it too big! What a crummy thing to do."

"Oh, I wonder if the beds are more comfortable now," said Liverioso.

"They were comfortable before!" Grimbledung backed up one more step, using the railing for support. "This is annoying."

Semfeld shrugged. "Look at it this way; you now have more storage."

"I suppose that is true," said Drimblerod.

"I think it's grand that your shop is now bigger," said Keebler, "but I would really like to be someplace else in the very near future." He gestured at the stairs. "If you would get those spices."

"Right?" Leaves said. "Then in the very near future we can get something to eat!"

"For the first time in months even," added Teeth.

Keebler rubbed his eyes. "Please, please get the spices."

Grimbledung turned and walked up the stairs, being more careful this time.

Liverioso saw Akita staring at Sage so he moved to the Constable. "Sorry I didn't introduce you two."

"Well, there were other things going on."

Liverioso beamed and moved to Sage. "She's my long lost love!" He put his arm around her. "Sage, this is Akita Finnish, the town constable. Akita, this is Sage Sagacious. Shes..."

"Your lost love. I heard." Akita stifled a smile. "It's nice to see you again, Aunty Sage."

"Aunt?" Nulu did a double-take. "Your… aunt?"

Akita nodded. "I barely remember her…you. You used to watch me while I was very young, right?"

Sage smiled. "I did. For a time. Then…" Her hand reflexively went to her scar.

Liverioso looked at the scar. Realization hit him. "Did you?" He looked at Akita. "Did you bite her?"

Akita looked at the scar. "I don't remember. I was young then. Was I even…"

"Two. You were two."

"You *bit* her?" Liverioso said again, angrily this time.

"I was two, Liverioso and not in control of my actions by any means. I don't even remember the incident." Akita reached for Sage's scarred arm. "I am sorry, Sage; I had no idea. You were like a wisp of a memory."

"Well, this really calls for celebration then!" Nulu exclaimed. "We will celebrate the return of the Gnomes and a family reu…" Nulu's face paled. Or at least as much as a Trolless' face could pale. "Uh oh."

Everyone else turned to look where Nulu was looking- the door.

Flora was standing there.

With her hands behind her back.

Not looking happy.

Flora closed the door behind her then worked the lock. “Where is he?”

Chapter 55
Making Amends

"Grimbledung's not here, Flora," Drimblerod said loudly. Very loudly. "But we can bring him by the tavern if you would like. The nice, public tavern."

A crash upstairs made Flora look at the stairs.

"Now Flora," started Akita. "We're celebratin' right now. Long lost family, reunited friends. Why don't we just all go to Nulu's and celebrate together?"

"Oh, we'll celebrate all right. I've got some special cele…."

Grimbledung tumbled down the stairs, landing upside down against the counter. "Those stairs are just absurd. We need to paint them yellow or something."

"Grim," said Drimblerod. "I… didn't know you were here."

Flora squinted at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod moved behind Akita.

"Flora O. Willowfeet! You were going to be first on my list of people to see!" Grimbledung hopped to his feet.

"And yet I am last." She took a step forward. "Every single person is here but me." She looked at Saga and the Elves. "Even strangers are here but not me."

Grimbledung cleared this throat. "Well, there's a good enough explanation for that."

"Right," interrupted Akita. "You see, we waylaid them as soon as they came in, Drimblerod and Grimbledung." He moved to Grimbledung and snatched the small leather pouch from his hands. "You see, these Elves…" He strode to Keebler. "Insisted on getting this pouch from Grimbledung as soon as he arrived so we made sure that happened." He put his arm around

the Elf's shoulder. "Well, thanks for coming, hope to see you soon." He steered Keebler to the door, pushing Flora out of the way. "And come back sometime much later or not at all really," he reached for the door latch. It was locked. "Flora?"

Flora took the key from her pocket and unlocked the door. She snatched it open. "Get out."

"What about eating?" Weed complained. "This doesn't solve that all important problem."

"We'll eat on the way."

"Something already prepared," said Akita.

Keebler nodded to Akita. "Something already prepared and then we'll be on our way."

"Sounds great." Akita gestured outside. "Well then."

"Well then." Repeated Keebler. "Let's go you two. I want to get home."

As soon as they were gone, Akita shut the door. He was sorry he did- the only escape route for Grimbledung was now up the apparently treacherous stairs.

"Now, Flora, why don't we all go get a meal together with enjoyable company?"

"Sounds great!" Grimbledung rubbed his belly. "I'm ready for a meal that I didn't prepare myself."

"Grimbledung Sixtoes," said Flora. She took a step forward and brought her hand up. It was holding a miniature crossbow. The silver bolt in it was sharpened to a point. "Esquire even."

"Hey, that's me!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Flora, I've missed you."

"I'm not sure if this is a good idea," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung raised a hand to quiet his partner then pushed him out of the way. He stepped in front of the crossbow. He looked at Flora and cleared his throat again.

Flora aimed the crossbow at Grimbledung's heart. "You contemptible pig." The crossbow shook with her fury.

"Grim?" Drimblerod took a step away from his partner- to the side so he was completely out of the line of fire.

Grimbledung waved his hand again at his partner then pointed at the Gnomess. "Flora O. Willowfeet, listen..."

"I remained celibate for you." She closed one eye and sighted down the crossbow at Grimbledung. "*Celibate*."

"I have something to tell you."

"Mmm hmm." She thumbed the safety off.

"It wasn't my fault!"

Flora sighted down it. She panned up and down Grimbledung, finally settling on the middle of his head as a target. She closed one eye to make sure she didn't miss.

"Just listen!"

"I'm listening."

Grimbledung put both hands over his heart.

Roses have lost their scent.
And lilacs too.

Flora opened her eye.

I yearn for a sweet fragrant kiss from you.
With each breath, I recall your delicate perfume.
My eyes keep watering in deepest gloom.

Flora took her finger off the trigger.

For too long I have been away.
It is with you that I now want to stay.

So say you will, my little shot of ale
Don't let my affection grow stale.

Grimbledung finished the poem on one knee.

No one moved for a long moment.

The crossbow clattered to the ground. "Oh, Grimbledung." The crossbow went off, sending the thin bolt into the side of the counter. The wood sizzled where the poison touched it.

Grimbledung hopped to his feet and closed the distance between him and Flora. He grabbed her in his arms and kissed her.

"Well that's absurd." Drimblerod said.

Akita punched Drimblerod's shoulder and wiped away a tear with the other hand.

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at the Werewolf.

"A gnat flew in there," growled Akita. "A *gnat*." He shuffled his feet. "Say, Grimbledung, you mind if I use that poem on Maca?"

Grimbledung pulled his face away from Flora. "Not at all. Back in South Jute, I myself found it on a bathroom wall. I had the attendant read it to me. Twice even so I wouldn't forget it."

Sage shook her head. "And there goes all that romance just laid down."

"Oh, Grimbledung!" Flora exclaimed, "And you remembered it all this time for *me*?"

"You know it!" Grimbledung kissed her again.

"Well, I am surprised to say that this whole scene hasn't destroyed my appetite." Akita opened the door. "How about we move this party to where there are drinks and food?"

"Sounds great, Constable," said Drimblerod. He looked down at his clothes. "How about we meet you there? We're kind of dusty from the day's travel. And I'd like to put on some fresh clothes."

"That sounds good to us," said Nulu. She pointed at finger at him. "You have thirty minutes to get there. A whole half an hour to be washed and walk five minutes to the Duck Inn and Dine in thirty minutes which is half an hour so that you are not late.."

"So do we have thirty to get ready and five to walk there, or is it all combined?" Grimbledung asked.

"Thirty total minutes. An entire half an hour." Nulu said. "To be seated in the Duck Inn and Dine within thirty minutes is your goal."

"Well, if you can't give us a hard and fast time, we'll do the best we can." Grimbledung let go of Flora. "I shall see you there then." He gave her nose a peck.

"The time starts now you two." Akita said. He stepped out. "Come on everyone, the countdown has started."

The Magicians and Sage followed Akita out. "I'm getting hungry as well," said Liverioso.

Flora pointed a finger at Grimbledung. He crossed his eyes to focus on it. "The next place you will be when you leave this shop of yours will be the Duck Inn and Dine. Nothing else will cause you to detour." She bent over and picked up her crossbow. "Nothing."

"Absolutely." Grimbledung nodded furiously. "Why I may even be early."

"Well, let's not get absurd." Said Nulu. "Showing up on time in thirty minutes from now will be good enough for me." She left the shop. "Come on Flora. We'll make sure the kitchen puts on some ribs for us all."

Rat held up a claw. "How about someone give me a lift so that I am actually on time?"

Akita smiled. "Hop aboard, Rat." He leaned down next to the counter so Rat could jump to his shoulder.

"Thanks; I miss half the fun because of these two."

"We'll be on time, just you wait and see!" Grimbledung declared.

With unbelieving headshakes, everyone left.

Grimbledung closed the door and spun around. "Well, well, WELL. We are home, my friend. Home from a most successful trip even." He drew his wand. "Only one thing left to do.

"Get washed up, changed, and get to the Duck Inn and Dine in thirty minutes."

"What? No!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "We can do that any time."

"We need to be there in thirty minutes, Grim. Everyone's waiting on us."

Grimbledung moved to the counter. "Well then we need to get going!"

"Going where?"

"To grab more treasure of course, before those dragons get it all." Grimbledung pulled the curtain back.

"We can do that tomorrow."

Grimbledung let the curtain fall. "Oh, tomorrow. Fine, fine." He crossed his arms. "What your plan involves," he said, "if I am hearing it correctly, is waiting until tomorrow so that you get to deal with two dragons that are probably not going to be pleased to see you in their newly made lair. That tomorrow?"

Drimblerod considered that. "Well, I suppose not. But we have half an hour."

"Then we need to get moving!" Grimbledung pushed through the curtain. "Drop your gear," he called from the back room. "I'll get you a trunk of holding. That should be plenty!"

"Fine, we just need to make it quick. Did you *see* what that bolt did to the counter? I'm afraid to even pull it out." Drimblerod removed his belt and carefully laid it on the counter.

Grimbledung backed out of the curtain pulling a chest. "I dumped all the wands out of it so you should be able to put a heap in it. A heap!"

"Well that's fine, Grim. Just fine." A thought occurred to him. "Hand me that shovel you have."

Grimbledung latched the lid. "Have a seat on top." He pulled one of the short handled shovels from his pouch. "Here you go, partner."

"So what's the plan again?" Drimblerod hopped up and straddled the chest.

"I'm going to send you to the cave of treasures. Because I have been there, I can send you there as well. You shovel as much platinum into the chest and we're richer than we already are. Richly rich. Stinking smelly goat cheese rich. Rude to waiters rich. Park our wagon wherever we want to rich. Order off menu rich."

Drimblerod nodded. "Well, that does sound like a good plan." He lay the shovel across his lap. "But I have a question."

Grimbledung flourished his wand. "Here goes nothing Now don't move or anything!"

"But..."

Grimbledung slashed his wand at his partner.

Far and away!

"Wait. How do I…"

Für ein viertel!

Grimbledung finished in Giantish. Since after all, it was their spell he had learned while living under a Giant's hat. That she was wearing at the time. For nearly a year.

Drimblerod felt an empty feeling inside his chest- it was unusual but not painful. The feeling moved out in all directions until he felt he wasn't there anymore. Which he wasn't.

"There, that should about do it." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Mixtra StoneFeet, you were a delightfully informative roaming home. I thank you again."

Chapter 56
The Reek of Riches

"Those two will be there in half an hour?" Sage asked as the group walked away from Second Hand Sorcery. "Is that enough time to even cook ribs?"

"No, not all all." Nulu shook her head.

"So how is that good?"

"Well two reasons." She held up a finger. "First, the ribs are already partially cooked and being kept warm; the cooks just need to move them to the middle of the grill and baste them."

"Well, that makes sense", said Semfeld. "I always wondered how you served those so quick."

"And second," Nulu jerked a thumb at Second Hand Sorcery. "Those two are always late."

"Always?"

Flora nodded at Sage. "We have an hour." She considered that. "Maybe an hour and a half. Even."

"An hour would put them right about on time," said Nulu. "I say we don't even get worried until we hit two hours."

"Two hours? I don't think I can wait that long!" Akita clutched his belly. "Maybe I'll just have a little snack."

Nulu laughed. "Fine then, how about we all meet there in half an hour and start the pre-party." She raised an eyebrow at Sage. "I'm interested in hearing from this Aunt of yours."

"Me too, actually." Akita smiled. "Truly, I had almost forgotten you. I was so young when you left."

"I never forgot," said Liverioso. He took her hand. "Oh! We need to get Cherí to come as well. She should know her plan worked."

"Her plan?" Sage asked.

"She's the one that put the word out through the assassin's network to find you." Explained Semfeld.

"If you stop by and grab her, Akita, I'll go make sure the cooks get the meats heating up and Flora can make sure we get one of those large round tables for us all."

"Let me go with you, Flora," said Rat. "I'll just sit at the bar until everyone shows up."

"Fine by me." Flora sidled up to the Constable so Rat could move to her shoulder. "We'll see you all at the Duck."

"Sounds like an excellent plan. See you there." Akita dropped to all fours and loped away.

"Wow, he has to be hungry if he's going to actually run to Cheri's place." Nulu said.

The group started walking towards the Duck Inn and Dine.

"Well then." Semfeld looked back at the wand shop. "I wonder if they'll let us stay there for a few days. We still don't have a place to stay."

"Stay at the Inn. I have a couple of empty rooms," Nulu suggested. "Once those Gnomes pay you for working their shop, you'll be able to get your own place. Even if you just rent it."

"You think they're going to pay us that much?" Semfeld asked.

"For less than a month's work?" Liverioso added.

"They should since you were the reason they were able to go on that absurdly successful adventure of theirs. They ought to pay you handsomely."

"Handsomely?" Semfeld looked at the Trolless. "Why?"

Nulu tapped her nose. "You probably couldn't smell it but this Troll nose works pretty good." She looked in the direction Akita ran. "He smelled it too but probably didn't know what it was. Figured it was the smell of well-traveled Gnomes."

"What was?" Liverioso asked.

"Those two just *reek* of platinum."

"Platinum? I've never even *seen* a platinum coin. Reek?" Liverioso looked back towards the shop then at Rat. "What do you know of this?"

"Me? Nothing. Nothing at all," said Rat. "I think you need to discuss it with them." He looked at Nulu. "And what makes you think they have any treasure at all, much less a hoard of platinum?"

"I was dating this miner once and he was working a vein of it for some Dwarves. Came home every day smelling of it. I would shake his clothes off into a box before washing them. After three months, we had a couple of coins worth in dust."

"Wow, that's a fortune!"

Nulu shrugged at Liverioso. "That's what he said when I told him."

"What'd you do with that much treasure?" Liverioso asked.

"I have no idea. The next day he and the box of platinum dust were gone."

"Oh, sorry, Nulu." Said Semfeld. "That must have hurt."

"It really and truly did." Nulu pursed her lips. "I was going to do the same thing but slept in that day."

"Oh." Was all Liverioso could say.

"Wait," said Nulu. "Who mentioned a hoard?"

"Not me," said Rat. He looked up at the sky. "Think we'll have any weather?"

"Rat..."

Rat raised his claws at Nulu. "Listen, I'm just along for the ride. You need to discuss those matters with the Gnomes."

"I thought you were a key employee," said Flora. "Key."

"Well, I am sure I don't know what you're talking about," Rat said. "I'm just a common garden variety rat, trying to get quietly along in a world full of pushing and shoving."

"Piles of platinum coins?" Flora asked?

"Yeah, and gold and gems as well." Rat put his claws in front of his mouth. "But you didn't hear it from me."

"We'll talk to Drimblerod," said Nulu. "Your secret is safe with us."

The group walked in silence to the Duck Inn. When they got there, they went their separate ways- Nulu and Flora into the tavern section. Semfeld, Liverioso, and Sage to two rooms upstairs. Rat went to the bar and started drinking.

They were all downstairs within thirty minutes. Akita, Cherí and Colossus showed up soon after.

After twenty minutes of waiting for the Gnomes, they ordered drinks and food.

When the Gnomes were officially an hour late, they ordered more drinks.

Twenty minutes later, they had had several drinks each and snacks.

Chapter 57
~~The Lost Picman's Mine~~
The Dragons' Lair!

"…get back?" Drimblerod finished. "Oh, that Gnome," he said to no one. He was facing the back of the cave, the door to the dumbwaiter was missing and so was the dumbwaiter. The edges of the shaft were cracked and parts of the wall had fallen in. *When the dumbwaiter fell down it must have broken into bits*, he thought.

With a shrug, Drimblerod slid off the chest and flipped the lid. "Might as well fill the chest while that loon decides how he's getting me back." With a long sigh, he started shoveling the spread-about coins into the chest. Since it was a chest of holding, the coins were visible on the bottom of the chest, but they did not rise up higher as he continued to shovel. In fact, the chest would hold the equivalent of ten chests and still weigh what one did. "Why do they even make regular chests?" Drimblerod wondered aloud.

Rightfully so.

After a full ten minutes of diligent shoveling, Drimblerod leaned on his shovel. He wiped his sweaty forehead on his sleeve.

That's when he heard the snore.

Even though he was sweaty, a chill ran through him.

Something snored again.

Something big.

Drimblerod gingerly leaned the shovel against the side of the chest and crept toward the outer room.

A snort made him freeze in place just before the entranceway. He peeked around the corner.

The chill ran through him again. Twice: up to his eyeballs and then back down to his big toes.

Both dragons they had met earlier in the day were sleeping soundly on a pile of gold coins.

Drimblerod walked into the room and looked around. He tried to see if he could get past the pair of beasts. Unfortunately, the way past the dragons- into the safe waiting arms of the Orcs or Ogres even- was completely blocked. With clenched teeth, Drimblerod tiptoed back to the chest. He looked from the chest to the dragons and back again. With a shrug, he returned to filling the chest; after all, the sounds of him shoveling hadn't awoken the beasts before, why should it now? Even so, he moved slowly and as quietly as possible.

When he had shoveled almost half the coins near the dumbwaiter shaft into the chest, Drimblerod leaned the shovel on the chest and got on his hands and knees to push the scattered coins into a pile.

"That stupid Grimbledung. Sticking me out here with no way back."

"It's not very polite is it? But, from what I have seen, probably not unexpected." A very deep, yet still female voice said.

"That is true," replied Drimblerod. "He is pretty good at figuring out how to get me in compromising…" The chill Drimblerod had earlier was replaced with a CHILL that didn't run up and down his body- it enveloped it all at once.

"Positions?" The voice suggested.

"Yes, positions." Drimblerod agreed. "Thanks." He tightened his jaw as he turned, hoping it was merely a Rabid Pixie, or an Orc that had snuck up on him. Or even an Ogre. Or three Ogres.

He was disappointed.

"Hello again," said the Dragoness. She tilted her head to the side. "Cleaning up, are we?"

Drimblerod looked at the chest and the pile of coins he had just made. "Well, it is kind of messy here. So I just figured…"

"You'd sneak in here... somehow." She looked at the dumbwaiter shaft. "Somehow. Shinny down that long shaft perhaps? And now you're pushing these delectable coins into nice neat piles?"

Drimblerod realized the dragon did not know he had already shoveled hundreds of coins into the chest already. Since it was a chest of holding, the coins were still only one layer deep. He moved between it and her. "Well, I

figured it would be the sociable thing to do." Silently he cursed his partner. He glanced over his shoulder at the shaft.

"The rope is gone because we came down that way. I honestly don't think you can get up that way," said the Dragoness. She sat on her hind end- completely blocking the way past her. "So how did you get here? Hmmm? I know you didn't sneak in because I only smelled you once you peeked around the corner." She winked. "That's what woke me; your curiosity." She gestured behind her with one of the claws on her wing. "There's a nice cool draft running from the inside the mine up the shaft so your smell wasn't making its way in until you entered our lair."

"Well, we hoped you would like the place, Grim...my partner and I." He said, hoping to not have the dragons know who they were.

"Yes, the talkative one." The Dragoness panned her large head around the room. "Where is Grimbledung? Back at Second Hand Sorcery?"

Drimblerod's shoulders sagged. "Uhm..."

"Already back in Julesville, perhaps?"

"Oh, I wish I knew." Drimblerod scowled. He clenched his hands. "I'd love to get my hands around his neck." He looked past her, wondering if he could make it through the door before the male woke.

The dragoness looked back. "Oh, that is a long way to the door, my little Gnome. A very long way." She turned to look at him. "You know I am not going to roast you, right?"

"You're not?" Drimblerod wiped the sweat that was running down his face. "Well, that's a relief."

The dragoness took a step forward. "I'd hate to melt all those coins. Do you know why? Why dragons love coins so much?"

Drimblerod shook his head. He wasn't sure how long he wanted to delay the inevitable. "No, I have no idea. Because precious metals are a good investment?"

"They are terrible investments," The Dragoness chuckled. "Terrible. How does one even spend a gold coin buying a loaf of bread? Do you slice a sliver off or buy five hundred loaves?" She shook her head. "No, it's because coins clink. Blobs of gold, silver, and platinum don't." She tilted her head. "We like the clinking sounds, you see. Gems and such are nice but they don't clink. They are of course, usually found with coins so folks assume it is all treasure that attracts us. But it's not." She took a step toward Drimblerod. "The clinking of coins sooths us."

"Oh, I see." Drimblerod moved to the side of the trunk. He rested his hand on the shovel. At least he had some sort of weapon to fend off the dragon. He looked toward the shaft again.

"Oh please do," said the Dragoness. "I would even give you a good five minute's head start."

"You would?" Drimblerod looked at the shaft again, wondering how far up he could get in five minutes.

"Oh of course." The Dragon's voice dropped a full octave. "That way when I *rrrroasted* you, none of these coins would get melted." Her voice returned to its normal pitch as she gestured at the shaft. "So up you go. I'll start counting now."

Drimblerod blanched. "No thanks."

"Well then, eaten by a dragon will be written on your gravestone." She smiled again. "If of course, anyone ever finds out what really happened to you that is." She took a step forward. She was almost close enough to stick her neck out and bite him.

Drimblerod took the shovel and held it in front of himself. He felt an empty feeling in his chest. "Oh that Gnome."

"Yes, we will deal with *him* later." The Dragoness took another step. Drimblerod was now less than ten feet from her. She towered over him. "But first things first."

Drimblerod ran his shovel under the newly made pile of platinum coins and hefted it up as the feeling in his chest expanded. He tossed the coins at the Dragoness. "Here're your coins!" The coins clattered against her chest and fell around her massive claws. "Choke on them!" As the feeling expanded, he rolled into the chest.

"You insolent Gnome!" The Dragoness roared. She hit the chest with her claw just as it disappeared.

Chapter 58
On the Verge of the Duck Inn and Dine

As the chest appeared in front of Grimbledung, it spun toward him.

"Gads!" Grimbledung hopped back out of the way of the chest. When it stopped, the side facing him had three deep gouges in it. "Oh no! The dragons were already there!" He flopped onto his butt and tugged his ears. "Poor Drimblerod. Eaten by a majestic dragon!" He rocked back and forth. "Poor, poor Drimblerod!"

Inside the box, Drimblerod sat up. He had been knocked over when the dragon had swatted the box. When he stood up, he was almost knee-deep in coins. He looked down. "Oh, that was worth the trip. Definitely." He dusted his hands off and reached up toward the lid. It was too far up even though it seemed to be just a foot above his head. Even the sides of the box, which appeared to be within arm's reach, moved to be just out of his grasp. "What?" He said. He jumped up to push the lid. Once again, it seemed to move to stay just out of his reach.

Grimbledung rocked back and forth. "Oh, my poor partner!" He cried. "Why did I make it a quarter?" He grabbed his toes as he rocked back and forth. And cried.

Drimblerod ran to the side of the chest. After almost ten paces, he ran into it. "Finally!" He felt his way along the side until he reached a corner. Looking back, the opposite corner was only three feet away, but when he reached for it, his hand just passed through open air as it pushed backward. The strange perspective was disorienting. "This is really weird." He looked at the top of the box again. "If the sides are here, the top *has* to be there." He backed away from the corner and began to push coins there.

Thankfully, they piled up at the corner. “So the sides *do* have a place that they stop.”

Grimbledung got up and flopped over the top of the chest. “Oh Drimblerod, how I wronged you so many times.” He wailed. “Never on purpose mind you.” He added quickly. “But wronged is what you were!” He pounded his fists on the chest. “Wronged and eaten by a dragon! A succulent Gnome morsel, I imagine.”

Thumping on the top of the chest made Drimblerod stop pushing coins. He heard his partner’s muffled wails. “Grimbledung! Grimbledung!” He shouted.

“Roasted to perfection!”

“Grimbledung!”

Grimbledung perked his ear. “I hear you from beyond the grave, wronged partner of mine. I hear you.” He put his head on the box again. “And I am sorry for your untimely death.” He tugged on his ear with one hand. “But not completely culpable, mind you,” he added quickly.

“Grimbledung I’m in the box!” Drimblerod shouted.

“Yes, your spirit resides in the box, I know that now,” Grimbledung replied. “I will bury the box with your spirit in it. To make amends for your being digested by a dragon.” He pounded on the box again. “Which was not entirely my fault.”

Drimblerod shook his head. “That absurd Gnome.” A thought came to him. He cupped his hands to his mouth. “Seeeek the treasure, Grimbledung! Seeeek the treasure!” He moaned.

"No, do not seek the treasure!" Grimbledung replied. "That is how your partner got himself killed," he said to the chest. "If I recall, it was entirely his idea in the first place to even go to the mine."

"Seeek the treasure!"

"No, do not seek the treasure. You'll get turned into a toad or something!"

Drimblerod scowled. Another thought came to him. "The treasure awaits in the chest! The treasure awaits YOU in the chest!"

"There is no treasure," Grimbledung tugged on one of his ears. With the other hand, he pounded weakly on the chest. "Stop taunting me ghost of Drimblerod. For something that was probably, for all legal purposes, your fault entirely."

"The treasure is already in the chest!" Drimblerod screamed. "Just open the chest, you dolt!"

"Hey now, spirit. Just because you got yourself killed is no reason for you to be calling me names." Grimbledung said. He lifted his head. "Fine, fine. I'll get the treasure which, by the way, is rightfully mine thanks to community property laws." He flipped open the lid and looked inside.

Drimblerod was standing knee deep in coins. His hands were on his hips. The coins near one foot were jingling because he was tapping his toes. "Community property laws, really?"

"Well, that's just something I heard about once that seemed to be important to people who live together and are common to the law of living

together but aren't actually married to each other or in some other kind of relational kind of relationship where you might have to defend what you own from the communal relationship in a court of law if the need ever arose due to the unforeseen and, I might add, un-prosecutable death of one of the communal parties."

"I'm sure." Drimblerod put his hand up. "Get me out of here!"

Grimbledung leaned into the chest and looked around. "Never been inside of one of these. Seems weird."

"It is. Now get me out." He reached up and grabbed for his partner's hand. "Heave me out."

"Heaving." Grimbledung grunted as he leaned over until his feet were off the ground. He still couldn't reach Drimblerod's hand. "Mayhap I need to find a ladder or something."

"Fine, go get a ladder from the back." He considered that. "Do *not* stop to explain anything to Dummy or to look around. Just bring the ladder that is leaned up against the side of the back door."

"Got it Drim!" Grimbledung moved to the back room.

Twenty minutes later

"Got the ladder, Drim!" Grimbledung maneuvered the end of the ladder into the chest.

"What took you so long?"

"Well, Dummy was explaining something to me. You never put that as one of the rules, so I figured it was all right." He let go of the ladder and it dropped half way in. "Weird."

"What was Dummy explaining?" Drimblerod started climbing the ladder even though it appeared as if the top of the chest was just over his head.

"He's seeing someone."

"Someone?" After Drimblerod climbed up several other rungs his head finally popped out of the chest. "He's dating someone? Or more importantly, someone is dating a jousting dummy?"

"The best I can get is that she works for Maca in some kind of inventory control capacity. Hats, I think it is."

"Hats?" Drimblerod stepped out of the chest. "I thought Maca sold spices and herbs and such."

Grimbledung shrugged. "Maybe that's the lots more part; hats." He began to pull the ladder out, hand over hand. "Diversification is the key to success in business."

"Or be really good at one thing."

"Like thieving coins from a lost mine no one knew was actually still lost." Grimbledung leaned the ladder against the counter. "That seems to have worked pretty well."

Drimblerod nodded. "That is true, partner of mine." A thought occurred to him. "Say, when were we supposed to meet everyone for drinks? I think we're late."

"Pushaw, Drim. We've got plenty of time. Plenty." Grimbledung waved a dismissive hand. "Let's go get cleaned up and then head over."

"Deal." Drimblerod shut the lid of the chest. "We'll count up the loot tomorrow."

"Deal." Grimbledung gestured at the stairs. "Careful of those things; they'll reach up and trip you."

"I saw." Drimblerod moved to the stairs and gingerly climbed them. They were in fact, all about three inches taller than they used to be and the difference was disconcerting.

An hour (total) later.

Drimblerod and Grimbledung were running at full speed.

"How we doing?"

"Same as always," puffed Drimblerod.

"That late, huh?"

"Well, if we hurry we can be there right at an hour and a half late."

Grimbledung dropped to a fast walk. "Hey, does that mean we're there an hour past when they told us to be there with the half hour margin, or are we an hour and a half past it?"

Drimblerod considered that as he too slowed. "We are going to get there an hour after the half hour that we had to get there. So an hour and a half in total."

"Aren't we allowed to be late since we're rich?" Grimbledung asked.

"But they don't *know* we're rich yet. All they know is that we're late. Again." A thought occurred to him. "You know you told those Dragons exactly who we were and where we lived."

"Did I?"

"Yes, and I know I told you to stop doing that."

"Did they seem upset?"

"Well, the male was asleep. The female seemed a little upset we were there." Another thought occurred to him. "But, I got the impression she didn't know we had taken any of the treasure."

"She didn't see you shoveling?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "No. I was pushing coins in a pile when she snuck up on me. Then the only coins I put in my shovel, I tossed at her."

Grimbledung looked at his partner. "You threw coins at a full grown dragon?"

Drimblerod smiled. "Seemed like the thing to do at the time. But, that means as far as they know, we tried to sneak in and get the treasure but didn't manage to. I hope that makes a difference when they show up."

"Well, I'll make tea to make sure the scales tip in our favor."

"Tea?" Drimblerod shook his head.

"Something nice. You'll see," Grimbledung assured him. "I'll have those two eating out of my hand."

"I'm dreading it already."

The pair slowed even more. "This is absurd," said Grimbledung. "We're going to show up sweaty messes."

"What we need are mounts so we can ride places instead of running. Real mounts that we're not having to make from Rat. Wait.. Why didn't we make Rat a Shambler to get us here quicker this time?"

"If he were around, that would have worked. He snuck out with everyone else. He's probably been drinking the whole time." Grimbledung frowned. "Well that's annoying."

"We buy mounts in the morning," said Drimblerod. He pointed. "Look, the Duck is just around the corner. We're there anyway."

"Fine then," said Grimbledung. "Tomorrow we get mounts." He smiled. "Maybe we can get Rat something to ride as well," Grimbledung said. "What'd be a good mount for a rat? How about a cat to ride?"

"I think he should just stick with riding on whatever we have." Drimblerod shook his head. "It would be the second Great Cat Incident all over again."

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Good point"

"Right? He stunk for a week."

The pair walked up to the door of the Duck Inn and Dine.

Chapter 59
Sitting at the Duck Inn and Dine!

"Ahhh, finally!"[34] Grimbledung opened the door and bowed. "After you, my good Gnome."

Drimblerod bowed to his partner. "I hope they didn't start without us."

Grimbledung put his arm around Drimblerod as they both walked in together. "I can't imagine. Say, that was a fine adventure if I do say so myself."

Drimblerod nodded. "You know, we wasted about three weeks we didn't have to. Next time I say we don't just rush off head-long and instead do some serious planning and research."

Grimbledung wasn't listening to his partner. "Sure, sure. Running with one's head long doesn't sound too useful." He pointed at the curtain. "Then everyone's going to meet us there for some celebratory drinks? Did word get to Pinky and Julie?"

"Yes, Grim, I imagine everyone's already there; we're about an hour and a half late, remember?"

"Well, that's pretty close to being on time, I should imagine."

Drimblerod nodded. "I think so too. Fashionably late is what we are."

Grimbledung smoothed his tunic. "Definitely fashionable. Think Flora'll be here already?"

"What; serving or drinking?"

"Serving of course. She makes my favorite drinks."

Drimblerod pulled the curtain open. "Well, I am sure that even if she's drinking with us, she can still make sure you get your favorite drink." He paused for a moment. "What is your favorite drink?"

"One someone else pays for, of course." Grimbledung entered the foyer with a short bow.

"Hey, that's my favorite as well!" Drimblerod pushed his partner in and followed close behind. The large round table in the center of the room was filled with their friends. They were all laughing.

"And eating and drinking," remarked Grimbledung.

And eating and drinking.

"Well, let's catch up then," Said Drimblerod.

"Ahhh, here are the wayward travelers!" Nulu raised a large mug. "With a quarter hour to spare even."

"We're not late?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Nice!"

"No; you're an hour past the half hour Nulu gave you," said Colossus as he pointed at the Trolless. "We all decided that if you weren't here in two hours, we were going to set Flora on you."

Grimbledung laughed. "Ahhh, that's a good one. Send her to find us, you mean."

"No. *Set* her on you." Colossus said straight faced.

Flora was standing beside the table. Her trusty tray was at her side. She stared at Grimbledung. "Set." She said icily.

"Don't mind if I do," Grimbledung said. He scooted to an empty chair and sat in it. "Setting and waiting!"

"I declare the buyers of the drinks are here!" Akita banged his mug on the table. "Anyone second that motion?"

"I second," said Nulu.

"I third it!" said Julie. She banged her mug on the table. "And the motion carries. You already have a hefty bar tab, I should warn you."

"Who?" Grimbledung looked around. "Of course you mean Flora O. Willowfeet. She's the buyer of the drinks?"

Flora turned and walked off.

"No, my fine Gnome. That would be you and your partner. Your *loaded* partner." Akita said.

"Uh oh. The news of our success has preceded us." Drimblerod frowned.

"Who us?" Tried Grimbledung again.

Drimblerod patted his partner's shoulder. "Well, if the word is out, I suppose we can cover this evening's festivities. We're going to have to do something to make sure we don't get robbery attempts on a weekly basis with so many people knowing we have a treasure hoarded in our shop."

"Details, details. I'm a big-picture kind of Gnome."

"I thought you were more a big pitcher kind of Gnome."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "That too."

"Did I hear pitchers?" Pozzuoli held up his hand. "Several a-pitchers of ale" He said loudly.

"One for me as well." Said Nulu. "My fingers get tired holding those little glasses."

Akita let his tongue hang out. "So the adventure went well, I hear."

Grimbledung nodded. "It sure did, why we were able to ..." He stole a glance at his partner who raised an eyebrow at him. "... we were able to get out with a very small portion of the treasure. Really, it was barely enough to cover our expenses. Broke even is what we did."

Now Akita raised an eyebrow. And one ear. "That's not the story I heard. I might have'ta hire another deputy with the number of thieves the rumors of that treasure is goin' to attract. Real or not."

Flora shuffled to the table. She gently lowered the tray from her shoulder to the table. It leaned precariously to one side as she did. Everyone on that side of the table scooted back until the tray was safely down. "I'm glad this is my only pass to this table. Don't think I could make another with how much I've drunk." She slid several pitchers to the middle of the table and then one toward Nulu. "That one's yours." She pushed five clay mugs off her tray then moved to the chair beside Grimbledung. "Okay, now I'm done's done." She put the tray behind the chair then plopped into it. "Ahhh. that feels nice."

"Being done's done or sitting?" Grimbledung asked.

"Being off work before the down goes sun…" She blinked and tried again: "Sun goes down."

"Does that mean you're not going to pour?" He frowned. "I like the way you pour."

"It might be safer if I do it, you silly Gnome." Nulu picked up a pitcher and filled the mugs. "She's off remember?"

"So's Grimbledung. More than a little even." Akita guffawed as he slapped his knee. "I crack me up!"

"You're a laugh a minute." Grimbledung took a mug. "It's good to be home though." He toasted everyone sitting around the table. "Real good." He paused. "Hey, where's that gal of yours?"

Akita's ears perked up. "Gal? What gal?"

Pozzuoli pushed a mug toward the constable. "The one that's the..." He wasn't sure how to describe her. "She owns the herb shop."

"That's her!" Grimbledung toasted Pozzuoli.

"It is," agreed Julie as she also toasted Pozzuoli. "Honestly; everyone who is anyone knows."

"And even those folk that are no one, I imagine." Grimbledung hiccupped. He glanced at the mug. "Even the ale agrees."

Akita shook his head. "Well, she hopped back to that council meeting of the High Elves to make sure news of the returned spices got to them quickly." He glanced toward the curtain. "I expected her back to..."

Maca appeared in front of the table in a flash of green light. "What'd I miss?"

"Apparently, Akita here has himself a gal." Grimbledung said suspiciously.

"What?" Akita's ears went up. "That's not 'xactly what I said."

Maca's eyes flashed red. "Oh really?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Yeah. And he's trying to keep it a secret."

"Oh *really*?" Maca eyed Akita.

"So don't tell no one that is anyone."

Maca eased herself onto the bench beside the fidgeting constable. "Oh, I wouldn't dare, would I, Constable Akita?"

Julie slid a glass toward the Elf. "You can keep a secret, right Maca?"

Maca elbowed Akita. "I think I can."

"Then it's settled." Grimbledung toasted Maca. "Drinks all around!"

Drimblerod leaned back in his chair. "After the month I've had, I need a drink or three."

"That will still have you behind, just so you know." Flora sipped her drink. "Even me."

Grimbledung put his hand on Flora's shoulder. "A drink or three you say? Behind? You been drinking on the waitressing job? Well, I'm dashed!"

Flora slid off the chair and fell roughly onto her butt. She looked up at Grimbledung. "Grimbledung Sixtoes, if you think you are going to traipse into to the Duck Inn and Dine after being long for so gone..." She pointed a finger at him. Or at least in his general direction. She closed one eye to aim better. It didn't help. "I'll..."

Grimbledung grabbed Flora by the forearm and yanked her to her feet. "Flora O. Willowfeet, I officially challenge you to the game of drinks." He kissed her. "The first to sloppy fall down drunk wins."

Flora swayed. "Oh, Grimbledung, you are such a romantic."

"I think she's almost there," remarked Pozzuoli. He reached out to steady her.

"Yeah, I'm in on that game." Akita put his hands on the table. "Just say when. Think I'll put Deputy Colossus on duty for the rest of the night."

"Hey," Colossus said. "That's not fair."

"Seniority has its privileges." He smiled. "Tell ya what; I'll give ya holiday pay for the evening."

"Deal." Colossus picked up his mug. "I'll just do a toast for the return of everyone then get to the jail."

"I didn't know you cared!" Grimbledung toasted Colossus.

"Well, actually" Colossus gestured toward Cherí . "She said we couldn't have the ceremony until everyone of importance was back in town."

"Hey, Drim; we're in the entourage!" Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air. "Whoo hoo! Do I get to wear a hat?"

"You're attendees, Grim." Cherí smiled. "But yes, you can wear a hat."

Nulu picked up her pitcher. "I better get drinking; Grimbledung seems to be in rare form tonight."

Drimblerod looked about the table. "You know; we should move the party to the Mora Tau then. That way Nulu can drink to excess as well."

"Neutral territory; good thinking Drim," Nulu said.

"Julie, Pinky?"

Pinky nodded. "Sounds like a good evening to me." He smirked. "As long as Grimbledung recites poetry."

"You actually *like* his poetry?"

"At least we ate earlier; I hear you shouldn't eat within half an hour of Grim's poetry," said Akita.

"I'm right here, you know."

"I thought-a that was swimming," said Pozzuoli.

"It applies to both."

"I can hear you talking about me." Grimbledung tossed in.

"So no-a swimming within a half hour of hearing it. Got it," said Pozzuoli.

"Every word. Making it into my head."

"You actually like Grim's poetry, Pinky?" Drimblerod asked. "Really?"

"His poetry? Not a bit." Pinky winked. "But Julie does and I like to be around when she enjoys it."

"Well, that's something, I suppose." Grimbledung picked up his mug. "If we're moving this party, can we bring our drinks for the walk there?"

Nulu picked up her pitcher. "As long as we sit on the ground floor we're fine. They don't allow glass downstairs."

"But we ought'a sit downstairs." Said Grimbledung. "That's where the action is!"

"I thought it was upstairs!" Guffawed Liverioso.

Sage let out a low growl.

"Is what I heard," Liverioso finished quickly. "From others."

"Word on the street even," added Grimbledung. He stood. "We move! Charge your mugs." He looked at Nulu. "Or preferred container of drink."

Everyone at the table stood as well. "At least we have the constable with us so we can't get hassled for having drinks on the streets," said Julie.

Colossus toasted her. "Here, here." He looked at his drink. "I'll just take this with me to the jail. Hate to waste it."

Cherí laughed. "Well, if you're going to sit in the jailhouse all night, I might just follow the crowd to the Mora Tau."

"Yeah, follow the crowd!" Grimbledung said. He started for the curtain and beckoned with his mug. "It's what the cool people are doing. If you don't, we'll just say you did, so you might as well anyway!" He took a drink. "The masses are moving! Say, that reminds me of a poem."

"Here we go. The traveling poet." Sage prodded Pinkie. "I think you need to encourage him less. And that's coming from someone who just met him."

"No, no; you're spot on Sage." Nulu said. "Glad to see you're fitting right in."

"I recite!" Warned Grimbledung.

There once was a lass
who went along with the mass

Upfront she'd walk, noble and proud.

"We don't mind it t'all" said the group
Thanks to her enormous…

Flora cleared her throat. Throatily. In a threatening throaty manner.

Personality

Finished Grimbledung. Meekly.

"I think you're a good influence on him," said Drimblerod.

With that, the group walked to the Mora Tau BAR and Bar. Several poems were recited on the way. And all the drinks finished.

Chapter 60
All's Well That Ends.
Well...

Much later at the Mora Tau…

"Cured ham?" Grimbledung said to the serving wench. "What'd they cure it of? Upstaging? Because, you know... it's a ham?"

Everyone stared at Grimbledung.

He frowned. "Hey, they can't *all* be gems."

"We'd settle for one," admitted Drimblerod.

Grimbledung waggled his butt in his seat. "Grrrr!"

"Not at the table, Grim," said Drimblerod.

"That's what mother always said," agreed Sage. She gave Drimblerod a wink.

"What?"

"You missed the conversation at my place," said Nulu, "because as usual you were late."

"That wasn't my fault." Said Drimblerod. "You see; I was trapped in a chest."

"A chest of *platinum*?"

"Pla-tee-what-um?" Drimblerod looked at his mug. "I'm not even sure what that is."

"Pla-Tee-Num. It's the most valuable of metals." Said Nulu.

"Well, who said anything about platinum?" Grimbledung picked up his mug. "Chests are made of wood, last time I checked." He grinned. "The carrying kind of chest that, that is. I prefer the other kind…"

"And the conversation heads toward the gutter," interrupted Julie.

"And this treasure hunt you went on..." Nulu said.

"Well, it was more of an outing than anything else," said Drimblerod. "We were just out and about. With the mild possibility of finding some sort of not very valuable treasure. Marginal treasure, I think it's called."

"Has Grimbledung been coaching you on evasiveness?" Nulu leaned over and smelled Drimblerod. "You smell that, Akita?"

"I've smelled something on and off throughout the night, but there are lots of smells out and about. I try to ignore most of them." He stuck out his tongue. "Especially when I'm eating or drinking."

"Smell that kind of rusty peach smell?"

"Sure, I figured it was of a mix of stuff in the room."

Nulu leaned Drimblerod towards Akita. "Smell the Gnome."

"Oooh, I don't wanna."

"Smell him." Nulu gestured at Drimblerod. "Trust me."

Akita let out a snort then sniffed at Drimblerod. His ears perked up. "Smells like rusty peaches. If that's a thing."

"Oh, it's a thing all right. It's the smell of platinum." She pointed at Drimblerod. "He *reeks* of it."

"Well, there's a simple explanation for that," said Drimblerod.

"That, I would love to hear," said Semfeld.

"Me too," said Grimbledung. "Why, I'm dashed. Platinum you say? I'd have to admit under oath to a legal competent authority that I have no knowledge of such a thing."

"I bought some cologne. It's… It's called Raco Pabanne Platinvmis."

"That explains it all, I imagine," Grimbledung tossed in.

Drimblerod smelled his armpit. "It's made with real…"

"Platinum?"

"Pabanne." Drimblerod smiled at Nulu.

Akita snorted. "We know you were going to that amusement park…"

"Told you we should have asked." Drimblerod frowned. "Saved a lot of time on the road if we'd have."

"… to look for that lost Picman's Mine," continued Nulu. "And I am sure you found at least some platinum because I can smell it on you. Now." She pointed at Julie, "Even though it won't be her problem for very much longer, you should at least let us know if there are going to be anyone coming to look for this as of yet unnamed treasure."

"There were some skeletons." Grimbledung took a drink. "They seemed upset even before we pitched them into that chasm."

"Skeletons? Guarding a treasure?" Pinky asked. "By any chance was one of them named Harry?"

"We didn't get their names while they were trying to hack us to bits." Drimblerod tilted his head at Pinky. "Harry? You know some skeletons?"

"We might be related if it's the same ones guarding an underground treasure."

"So some skeletons who Pinky might be able to reason with." Julie said. "That's the only part that isn't as bad as I thought it would be.."

"What about the Orcs? Think they'll come?" Grimbledung asked Drimblerod.

"Only if the Ogres bring them," replied Drimblerod.

"And I suspect they would bring the Rabid Pixies." Grimbledung took a drink.

"I suspect."

"Wait." Nulu pointed at Grimbledung. "You managed to annoy Orcs, and Ogres, *and* Pixies?"

"Oh my?" Tried Grimbledung.

"Oh my is an understatement, I think." Pinky said. A thought occurred to him. "Was that it?"

"Isn't that enough?" Julie asked.

"Well, it might be enough, but it might not be all of the offended parties. They were gone for almost a month, remember."

"The owner of the amusement park comes to mind," said Drimblerod. "I can see him being upset because of the fire."

Grimbledung shrugged. "Never saw whoever that was. Say, did that dragon seem upset, Drim? I never saw them after that first time."

"Them? How many dragons?" Julie leaned back in her chair. "Dragons-sss he said."

"Well, there were two we came across while we were flying home. They seemed pretty sociable. Especially after I told them where to find a treasure of plati… plates."

"Plates. Right." Nulu looked at Drimblerod. "I hate to ask but was this as yet unnamed dragon upset?"

Drimblerod took a drink. He didn't make eye contact with anyone at the table.

"Drimblerod Axebreath!" Said Nulu.

"Well, the male was sleeping at the time and the conversation I was having with the female was going pretty well."

"Was?" Pinky asked.

"Well, it kind of went south there at the end."

"South? How far south?"

"Well, when I scooped up a bunch of coins and threw them at her before I disappeared, I kind of got the feeling she wasn't too pleased with me."

Grimbledung nodded. "If those claw marks are any indication, she was definitely not too pleased."

"Oh, you two." Julie shook her head. "We've got enough troubles in town without…"

"Wait, what did Nulu mean that it wouldn't be your problem for very much longer, Julie? Are you leaving?"

Julie nodded at Grimbledung. "Leaving office. We're having elections. See how much you miss while you're out running amok?"

"I don't think we came across any muck. Did we, Drim?"

"No. No muck." Drimblerod raised his mug at Julie. "Well, congratulations on a very fine term of office. Who's running next?"

Flora raised her head from the table. "And as your mayoress, I promise to ensure that Grimbledung Sixtoes' antics will be kept to a bare minimum!" She put her head back down.

"So she's running on a populist platform." Drimblerod toasted the inebriated Gnomess. "Very smart."

"I get to be bare?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "She's got my vote! Twice even."

"Oh dear," said Nulu.

"Flora O Willowfeet for mayoress?" Grimbledung bounced in his chair. "That's a candidate I can get behind!"

"Didn't you say the same thing about me?" Julie eyed him.

"Well, I…" Grimbledung returned to his drink.

"She's well known so I can't imagine she'd have any trouble… Who else is running?" Drimblerod asked.

"Some goon named Opus."

"He a penguin?"

"No, Grim. He's not a penguin." Pinky took a drink. "That would have made it easier, I think."

"Magnus Opus von Magnus. He owns a tailor shop in town." Nulu jerked her thumb behind her. "And he's been getting a lot of followers with this magical conch shell."

"You don't know if it's because of that shell. Or if it's even magical or not," said Pinky.

"You never see him give a speech without it, do you?"

Pinky shrugged at Nulu. "Well, maybe it's a comfort item or something."

"It's going to make it hard to beat him. The people who listen to him talk while he's holding that comfort item seem to become mindless believers in anything he says."

"Hey, Drim! Want to go on a secret mission to steal that shell to see what it really is?" Grimbledung elbowed his partner. "Eh, eh?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "I'm tired of secret missions. Why don't you try just asking him?"

Grimbledung rolled his eyes. He looked at Rat. "Hey Mister Magnus Opus, sir. What's that super special conch shell you carry there?"

"This conch shell here?" Rat answered.

"No, the one there." Grimbledung pointed at Rat's mug.

"Yes, this one here. It's just a plain old shell that I use to listen to the ocean sirens sing. That's all."

"I see," said Grimbledung. "Nothing nefarious then?"

"Well sure, plenty of nefarious things. Why I'm going to do something nefarious here in a little bit."

"I knew it!" Grimbledung banged his mug on the table. "See, right there, Julie; something nefarious."

"You are aware that you were just speaking to Rat, right?"

"Yes, but he was playing Magnus, so that's the same thing!"

"I don't think so. You really need to speak to him... Magnus... personally for that," said Nulu.

"But you need to be discrete," said Julie.

"I don't think he knows what that word means," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung downed his drink. "Oh, I know." He winked. "I know." He looked at the sleeping Flora. "I'll become the secret arm of Flora's campaign. Anything you want found out, I'll do the finding!"

"How can she lose now?" Julie shook her head. "Oh dear."

"Fill me up!" Grimbledung waved his mug around. "A toast to the new... whatever you call the secret arm of a campaign!"

Julie filled Grimbledung's mug. "Business as usual for Grimbledung?"

"Well, that spells trouble in my book," said Rat.

"Oh, I know; campaign manager!" Grimbledung clambered onto his chair.

"Let's spread the jobs around," suggested Julie. "Just stick to that one."

"Fine, fine. Just one rousing speech then I'll stick with secretness and underhandery." Grimbledung teetered a little, then stood upright. "Attention all! May I have your attention please. Attention please!"

A fair number of the patrons turned to face him.

"Close enough," Grimbledung said. He cleared his throat.

We've got to go, town.
To vote!
It's all right. I'm not afraid.

Some time, town, when the electorate is up against it,
when turnout is low and that Magnus is beating Flora,
ask them voters to go in there with all they've got
and vote just once for the Flora.

I don't know where I'll be then, town.
But I'll know about it, and I'll be happy.

So let's win an election for the Flor'!

Several of the patrons clapped.

One fell out of his chair.

Grimbledung took a bow then sat. "Ahh, looks like the campaigning is working already."

"I don't think one speech to a bunch of drunks is going to do the trick, Grimbledung," said Akita.

Grimbledung toasted the Constable with his mug. "A mighty hurricane starts with one exposition."

"I don't think that's right."

A Human walked past Grimbledung on his way to the door. He patted Flora's shoulder. "I didn't even know we were having an election, but you can count on me." He weaved slightly on his way out.

"Ahhh, the electorate has spoken."

"This is going to be a long election." Julie shook her head.

"When's the vote?" Drimblerod asked.

"In a couple of months. You really need to get caught up on current events." Julie said. "A long two months."

"Two months won't be that long," Drimblerod said. "Really."

"Ooh! I have another speech!" Grimbledung clambered onto his chair. "And this one is *poignant*." He cleared his throat.

"Really?" Nulu asked. "Two months won't seem like a long time?"

"I see what you mean." Drimblerod gestured at Grimbledung. "Pinky, if you wouldn't mind."

Folks, all this stuff you hear about Julesvillers not wanting to vote, wanting to stay out of the election,

is a lot of Orc…

Pinky yanked Grimbledung from the chair. "There'll be time for speeches later." Grimbledung's leg flailed as the large man sat him down. "Just sit and finish your drink. Quietly."

Flora raised her head. "No candidate ever won an election by voting for themselves. They won it by making the other poor dumb candidate vote for them!" She took a drink then flopped back down.

"Yeah, baby! That's the spirit!" Grimbledung toasted Flora.

"Yeah, this is going to be a long two months."

"You said it, Nulu." Julie stood. She teetered and grabbed Pinky's shoulder for support. "So I think I might call it a night. Akita, will you stop by the wand shop tomorrow to get an assessment of the treasure?"

"What treasure?" Drimblerod asked.

No one paid attention to him.

"I can do that." Akita said. He smiled. "Did I mention I work for tips?"

Grimbledung hiccupped. "Sounds fair to me. Don't eat yellow Pixies."

Sage laughed. "Well, that is a good tip." She elbowed Akita. "Make sure you follow that one at all times."

Maca stood. It seemed that no matter how much she drank; it did not affect her at all. "Well, I believe I will allow the fine Constable to walk me to my residence."

"You will?" Akita stood. "All the way to your residence?" He leaned on the table for support. "Whoa… Or mayhap mine since the alcohol doesn't seem to affect you in the slightest, you lead me to mine."

"Well, there's a line!" Grimbledung stood. "How's about we go to my place not yours?" He asked the asleep Flora. He waggled his ears at her.

"It's a lot smoother the way he said it," Maca said. "Besides, I think he just wants to make sure he gets home safe and sound." She chuckled. "Hate to run into a wild Meerkat out there."

"That's just a legend," said Akita. His eyes got large. "As far as I know anyway."

"Well, better safe than sorry." Maca took his arm in hers. "We'll get to the jailhouse and up the stairs safe and sound."

Akita let his tongue hang out. "If we see any rousers of rabble, I hereby deputize you to deal with them."

"Yes, Mister Constable." Maca gave a nod to everyone. "See you all soon." She glanced at the ceiling for a moment. "See you tomorrow afternoon Grimbledung."

Grimbledung toasted her with his mug, then finished it off. "Woo. Not sure how I'm going to get home." He leered at Nulu. "Say, you waanna tuck me under your arm for old time's sake?" He pointed at the now-dozing Drimblerod. "One per side even."

"Once was enough, really." She smiled at Pinky. "You want the experience?"

"Their place is on the way to ours." Pinky stood. "I suppose I can. Julie, you ready?"

"No groping," warned Nulu.

"Yeah! No taking advantage of an inebriated Gnome! Bad form, that."

"No, Grimbledung; I meant you of him."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "What if he asks for it?"

"I won't. Promise."

Nulu stood as well. "Now we just have this hefty bar tab to deal with. I think we've drunk a couple gold's worth tonight." She nudged Drimblerod.

"Wha- what?"

"We decided you were paying the tab."

"Fine, fine. I got a couple of coin with me." Drimblerod stood groggily and reached into his belt pouch. He pulled out several coins and let them clatter onto the table.

Everyone at the table stared.

So did several patrons at nearby tables.

"Uh, Drim. I think five platinum is a little much. Unless you're *buying* the entire place." Said Julie. "Gads, now I want Akita to walk us home as well."

Drimblerod dug in his belt pouch again, rummaged around then dumped some more coins on the table. "Better?"

Now several patrons stood.

Nulu quickly leaned over and retrieved the dozen platinum coins and several gold ones, leaving three gold coins. "That's a tip that'll get you served quickly next time." She started to put the coins in her own pocket when Julie cleared her throat. "Oh come on, you know they drink and eat for practically free every time they come in. They did the same in Aution too."

"Fine, fine," said Drimblerod. "Call that even." He squinted. "What'd I hand you anyway?"

"Three gold's all," Nulu said. She pocketed the coins quickly. When Julie looked at her wide-eyed she added: "A Gnome I know says that ill-gotten loot is good-gotten loot."

"Say, that reminds me of a limerick!"

"Tell it on the way, Grim." Nulu pointed at the door. "Lead the way, traveling poet."

There once was a bartender named Ted Handy
Who used to drink rum like it was candy…

Began Grimbledung as he left…

No one let him finish.

Chapter 61
Counting, Breaking, Bad-ing

Maca entered Second Hand Sorcery. "Morning all." She said. The front of the shop was open. "Where's everyone, Door?"

Door rattled its latch.

"Back room. Thanks." Maca said. "You want me to send over Hattie later today so you don't have to sneak over?"

Door rattled its latch again. Heartily.

"You got it. About eight then." Maca smiled at Door then walked to the curtain. She stopped to listen. "This is absolutely ridiculous, you two." She heard Akita say. "I mean, ridiculous." The curtain lifted all on its own as she walked in. "Morning all."

"Morning Maca," said Akita. He was sitting in front of a pile of coins and gems. It was larger than him.

"Oh dear. I didn't realize there was so much."

"Right? How long you think it will be before those dragons come looking for all their loot?"

"Akita, like I told you, we sent them there *after* we had been in the Lost Picman's Mine, so they never saw all this stuff," said Drimblerod. "They seemed pretty happy with what was there still."

"See? Nothing to worry about." Grimbledung twirled in a long, very tattered looking cloak. "And as an added bonus, we found all these neat clothes as well!"

"Yes, I can see how that's the best part of this haul," said Maca.

"What about the folks that work there? I'd like to think one of them would notice this much missing lootage," Akita said.

Drimblerod considered that. "Well, the Pixies didn't seem too keen on counting it. It would probably be the Ogres but now that those two

Dragons are there, they have no need to be going in there now. I would like to think, anyway."

"And the dragons?" Maca asked.

"Well, they seemed reasonable."

"If you get a chance to reason with them," Akita replied. "Dragons tend to be a flame first, ask questions later kind of creature." He looked at Maca. "What do you think?"

Maca closed her eyes for a moment. "Hmmm." She said. "I don't think dragons are your biggest worry."

"Really? That's a relief!" Grimbledung took the robe off and picked up a tattered shirt. "So what will be?"

The back door of the room burst open and five skeletons piled in. "Ah ha! Now we have you!" Harry said as he flourished his saber.

"Rolton chips, Maca; don't feed him lines like that!" Drimblerod shook his head. "I've got enough troubles as it is."

"Everyone stand still!" Said one of the Skeletons.

Drimblerod gestured at them. "Case in point."

"Nuts." Said Akita. "Get Pinky over here quick like, Maca. We'll try to hold them off until you get back."

"You little thieves!" Yelled Hausen. "You stinking little thieves!"

Drimblerod clambered over the side of the chest of holding, disappearing from sight.

"Hey, who you calling little?" Grimbledung pushed up the sleeves on the shirt. "*Bones*?" He drew his dirk.

"Be right back." Maca disappeared in a green flash.

"Who you calling bones, *meat sack*?" Harry slashed his saber back and forth. "You are a pain in the tail bone, Gnome!"

"I've got a bone to pick with you, Gnome." Wilhelm pointed his saber at Grimbledung. "For pitching me off that ledge."

Akita stood. "All right. Now everyone just rela..."

"Sit, you mangy dog!" Wilhelm said

"Oh, this won't go well," said Grimbledung. "Grrr!" He waggled his butt.

"What. Did. You. Call. Me?" Akita loomed above Wilhelm, claws out.

"Well..." Wilhelm said, hesitantly. "Maybe that was a little out of line." He lowered his saber, "After all, you weren't..."

Wilhelm shattered as GrimbleWolf pounced on him. "Grrrr!" He said, for good measure.

"Hey, you!" Screamed Hausen. "Get off my cousin!" He advanced on GrimbleWolf, saber at the ready.

"Grrr?" GrimbleWolf said. He had Wilhelm's femur in his mouth.

"Leggo my leg!" Wilhelm's skull said.

Maca appeared in a flash of green light. She had her arm around Pinky.

Akita picked up Harry.

"Hey, hey!" Pinky said. "What is going on here? Calm down, fellas!"

"He started it!" Said Wilhelm's skull. His hand, that was a few feet away, pointed at Grimbledung.

"Pinky." Akita said as he put Harry down. "Can you talk some sense into these...."

Hausen stabbed Akita through the chest.

"Akita!" Maca stepped forward. "YOU!" She bellowed as she increased in height.

"Hey now, that hurts!" Akita said. He stepped backward, off Harry's blade.

"YOOOU!" Maca burst into flames.

"Ahh-oooooh!" GrimbleWolf added for good measure. He dropped Wilhelm's femur and waggled his butt. "Grrrr!" He turned to face two of the Skeletons.

"Hey there, doggie," said the one on the left.

"Let's talk this over," said the other.

"Grrrr!" said GrimbleWolf; he was having none of it.

"I'm fine, Maca, really I am." Akita looked down at the blood running down his chest. "It looks worse than it really is."

"Hausen! Stop stabbing folks!" Pinky stepped forward and took Akita under the arms. "Akita? Are you all right?"

Akita leaned on Pinky. "Not silver, so I'll be all right." He smiled at Maca. "I'll be fine, Maca." He looked down. "See the bleeding's already stopped."

"Stop stabbing people!" Pinky put his arm under Akita's. "Maca, could you..." He turned to look at Maca. She appeared to be a flaming demon. "Maca?"

"Yes?" Maca's flames disappeared but her larger-than-life size remained. Her arms bulged. "Akita, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Akita waved her off. "Just... Gads woman!" He looked at Pinky. "Could you please talk to those relatives of yours?"

Pinky looked at Hausen. "Let's talk this over."

"Fine by me," said Wilhelm. His upper body was together and his legs were working their way toward the rest of him.

"Everyone just put away their weapons and let's talk this through." Pinky shook his head. "Man, this is just like last Thanksgiving."

"Well, that was completely understandable." Harry said.

"You can't just stab someone because they brought green bean salad as a side." Pinky said.

"That is obviously untrue." Hausen pointed out.

"If someone could get me out of this box, I'd appreciate it," said Drimblerod.

The skeletons moved to the far corner of the room as Akita fished Drimblerod out of the box of holding.

"All right, if everyone would just remain calm," Pinky said.

"We're always calm," said Harry. "That's our middle name."

"I thought it was Eustis," said Wilhelm.

Harry bonked Wilhelm on the head. "Quiet you!"

"Both of you be quiet!" Harry poked both Wilhelm and Hausen in their empty eye sockets.

"And that's enough of that," said Maca. She stepped forward - back in her typical form. "There'll be no more shenanigans from you five."

The skeletons shuffled their feet. "Yes, Miss Maca."

"But," said Wilhelm, "Those two stole the treasure we were supposed to be guarding! That's bad for business you know!"

"Well, maybe we can work something out," offered Pinky.

"I can't see how," said Hausen.

"We didn't even get our guild cards punched for that job," said Harry.

"We lost two whole months of pay!" Wilhelm added.

The other skeletons nodded.

"Well, maybe we can work something out." Pinky said. He looked at Drimblerod. "Can we work something out?"

Drimblerod pushed up his sleeves. "I am sure we can work something out that is equitable to all parties."

Grimbledung clinked two platinum coins together. "Let the haggling begin!"

Haggling not seen in thirty-five chapters ensued…

The End

Will the haggling be successful?

Can Grimbledung run an effective, and more importantly, legal campaign?

Can Flora's run for office survive Grimbledung's probably not always legal election antics?

Find out in Book 6 It's the Election, Stupid

Available NOW on Amazon.

Please leave a review!

If you enjoyed this story, please take the time to leave a review at Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk. Cripes- it's not that hard. Just type this in:

I am from (insert your home town) and I think Book Five of the Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop series is one of the better books I've read while living here and/or eating breakfast. I am probably looking forward to more stories by Robert P. Wills and I hope he visits (insert your home town) for a book signing. Especially if he buys the drinks. Even if it's just coffee.

There- that wasn't so hard, was it?

And if you haven't yet, please review the first four books in the series. You did read those first right? Right?! Just change those to the appropriate book number and paste away!

About the Author

Robert continues to write, spending eight percent of his time working on the Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop series (book 7 in the works), seven percent on the now-titled Prodigals series (book 2 in the works), three and a half percent of his time working on his pirate story (75% done as of this sentence), about ninety eight percent of his time doing a lot of running around taking care of things that he doesn't remember having to do before he was retired from the Army but now that he is, he seems to spend a great portion of his time dealing with random, highly critical tasks. Oh, and he eats and sleeps 1.5% of the time.

He still fully expects to be eaten by a shark at some point, and Sea World still has him on some sort of Watch List. Yes, with capital letters.

About the Illustrators

Sara Allen continues to draw while living in the lovely state of Ohio. She has recently started drawing pets on request. It would be odd if she just drew random people's pets without said request. And not nearly as profitable, I would imagine.





Rio Burton also continues to draw as well. She does it from the lovely state of Colorado. You can view and purchase her work here on her website here: http://rioburton.storenvy.com/ .

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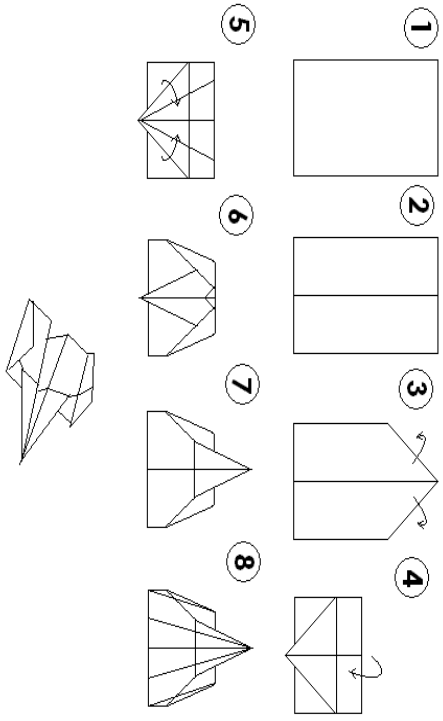

[1] It's a sad and unfortunately, absolutely, positively true fact. No; we can't explain it.

[2] If a bartender says it, it must be true.

[3] That's a chapter in the Tales From the Mora Tau as well: 'It's All Fun and Games Until Someone Loses a Neighbor'.

[4] Right? Boy we hope so- it's our one big gag.

[5] We'll keep sending him fishing with Garibaldis until we can slip a gruesome, tragic fishing accident past our editors.

[6] Five and counting, it seems.

[7] We don't worry about little details like continuity!

[8] Yeah, that series is in the works.

[9] It's a fun, dialogue-rich chapter in the Tales of the Mora Tau Bar. Which is still in the works. Really.

[10] We're working on it. Those cartographers can be persnickety sometimes.

[11] Sorry about that- That is, in fact, the start of a famous joke; not the start of the chapter. Honest mistake.

[12] No, apparently not. Sorry.

[13] I'm still trying, Lucas. Really I am.

[14] Hence the missing question mark.

[15] Right? RIGHT?

[16] It's right- check Book 2 if you don't believe him.

[17] In fact, Pozzuoli knew about the mine and could have given him absurdly specific directions right to it.

[18] Don't feel bad- at this point we aren't sure either. Outlines are for sissies.

[19] See? We have it all under control.

[20] Check the map- it's there. We're not making this stuff up, you know!

[21] It really is- ask any business owner.

[22] It's that thing with the strings that you pluck to play. Look it up- it's real.

[23] He is. Or was, really.

[24] Chapter 42, by our calculations.

[25] We did too. Until just now. We blame the lack of outlines on this oversight.

[26] See?

[27] PTSD is definitely not a joking matter. The gag was "Pinker Tonnes" (get it?). It was only after "Security Division" was added that the acronym happened. They have a "Property Recovery Division" and "Personnel Locating Division" that turn up as well.

[28] Thirty-Three is nearly gale-force, after all.

[29] Wouldn't it Rio? Wouldn't it?! Sigh…

[30] Mainly because that's a fact.

[31] See?

[32] Yep- there's the Dragon we needed. Now we just need a Pixie and a misunderstanding.

[33] You'll have to wait until the final book in the series. It is written but won't be released until the author is eaten by a shark.

[34] Finally, right?