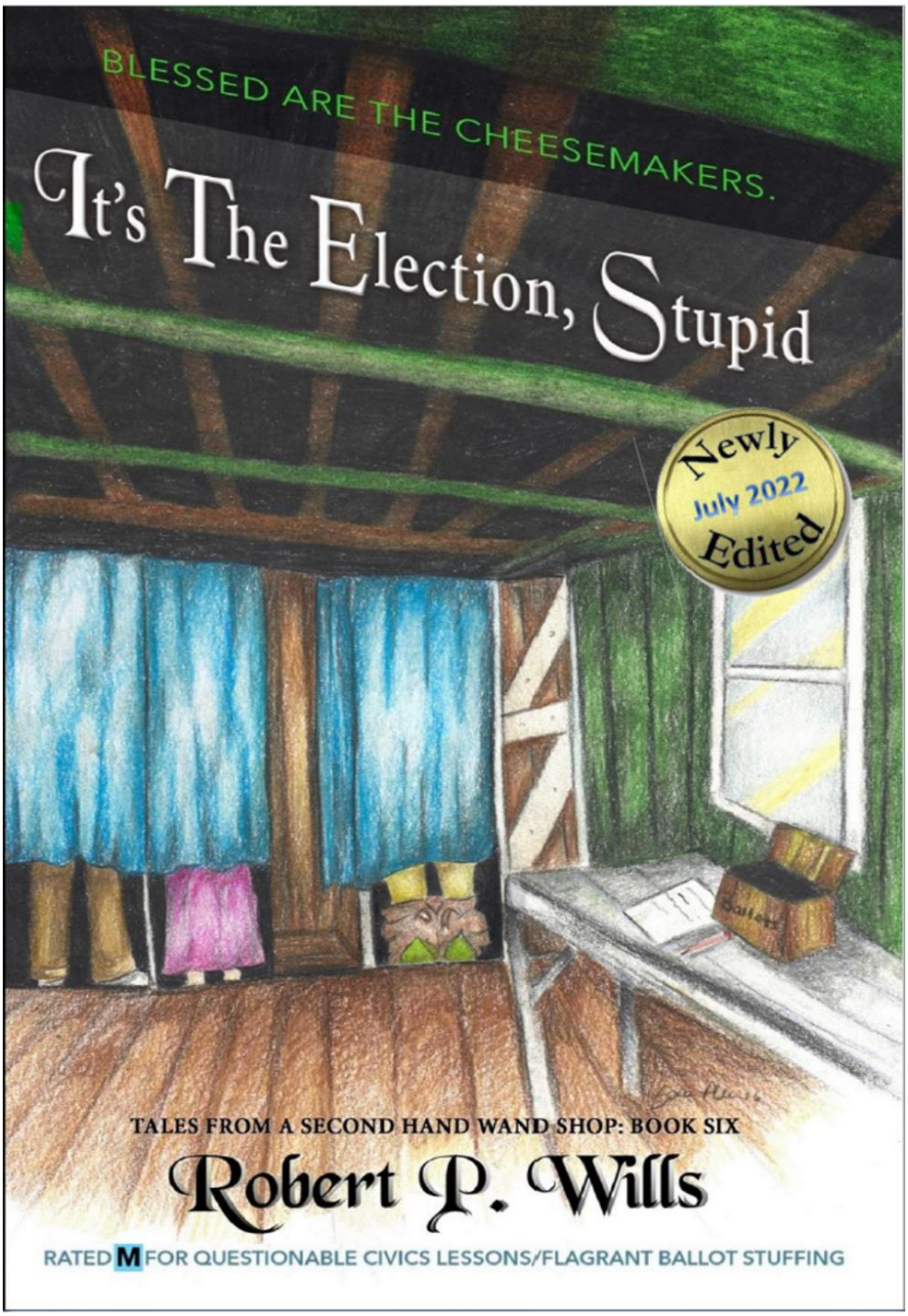

BLESSED ARE THE CHEESEMAKERS.
It's The Election, Stupid
Newly
July 2022
Edited
TALES FROM A SECOND HAND WAND SHOP: BOOK SIX
Robert P. Wills
RATED M FOR QUESTIONABLE CIVICS LESSONS/FLAGRANT BALLOT STUFFING

It's the Election, Stupid

Tales From A Second Hand Wand Shop, Book 6

(Every Vote Counts. Sometimes Twice)

Any similarity between the characters in this book and persons running for any particular office of government- Local, State, or National is purely coincidental. The author is going to stick by that no matter who comes knocking on his door. Mainly because he's not going to answer it. Because he's not home. And his wife isn't sure when he's coming back.

Absolutely no politicians were harmed in the writing of this story. Although a great many of them could stand for a good bonking on their heads.

By Robert P. Wills

Illustrations by Milena Vitorovic and Others

Special thanks to Chance for his cover work- listen to his music at www.mynameischance.com

Cover Illustration by Sara Allen

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A Mighty Steed

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Chapter 1
Haggling Interruptus Flagrante

Grimbledung clinked two platinum coins together. "Let the haggling begin!" He frowned then clinked the coins again. "I said- 'let the haggling begin!' so… Let it begin?".

"Would you stop doing that?" Drimblerod said around the bacon he was eating. "Why do you keep doing that?"

Grimbledung put the two coins on the table and picked up his coffee. "Well, I keep expecting some sort of more detained exposition of recent events."

"Why?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "I don't know; past experiences?"

Drimblerod exhaled. "There's not much more detail to add to it." He picked up another piece of bacon and pointed at Grimbledung with it. "We haggled with those five skeletons for the better part of the night, and came to the decision that four of the skeletons would stay behind…"

"Harry, Hausen, Wilhelm, and that Skeleton Two fellow…" Grimbledung offered.

"Right, and Cormen decided to return to the Lost Picman's Mine."

"Still right."

"And," continued Drimblerod, "he promised to let us know if the dragons decide to come out here." Drimblerod put the last of his bacon in his mouth. "How was that?"

"It's not as detailed as I would have liked, but it'll do, I suppose." Grimbledung clapped his hands once. "Well, on with events currently running concurrently!"

"You mean current events like maybe actually running the Wand Shoppe for a change instead of all sorts of absurd distractors?"

"Well, they are the spice of life; distractors."

Drimblerod frowned. "I thought spices were the spice of life."

"Now you're doing my lines." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Do that now."

Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Good?"

"No, that doesn't work; stick with your own shtick."

"Shtick, huh? In that case." Drimblerod looked expectedly at his partner.

"Sure, finish it up." Grimbledung gestured back.

Drimblerod stood and tiptoed with his plate to the sink. "Well, that's what I'm trying to do…"

"Don't say it," Grimbledung warned. He leaned back in his chair. "Even I wouldn't…"

Drimblerod stopped, standing on his toes in front of the sink. "Line, please."

"Fine, fine." Grimbledung cleared his throat. "What is it you're trying to do?" He asked loudly.

"Walk softly and carry a great shtick."

Grimbledung toppled backwards onto the floor. "Are you waggling your ears?"

Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Yes."

"All right then. Now back to working at selling wands." Grimbledung sat up. "And I'll run the errands while you do it!" He put his finger on his nose. "One, two, three - done!"

"Bah!" Drimblerod looked down at his hands- he was holding his plate and cup. "Fine; you can run the errands this morning." He put his plate in the sink. He looked around. "You seen Rat lately?"

Grimbledung righted his chair. "Now that you mention it, no, no I haven't. Want me to summon him for something?" He held his hands out to clap[1].

"No, I was just curious. We can ask him about his adventure when he shows back up." A thought occurred to him. "Would you know if something happened to him?"

"I think I would." Grimbledung thought back to his original incantation. It was a complete fog. "Probably most likely." He pushed his chair against the table. "Definitely possibly even."

"Well, if you're that sure, let him be."

Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air. "Then I'm off errand running!"

"You're going to run?" Drimblerod smirked. "On purpose?"

"Don't be ridiculous; I've got a far better means of transportation than mere feet, you know." He sighed wistfully. "Much, much better."

"Oh, I know." Drimblerod shook his head. "I know indeed. At least things seem to be calming down around here for a change."

"Peacefulness and quietness and calmness?" Grimbledung perked his ears. "Oh my!" He let one ear droop in a very non-Gnome manner. "Is that what you're asking for?"

"Don't you dare say it, Mister Grimbledung Sixtoes Esquire." Drimblerod warned. "Don't you dare."

It was too late:

"I'm sure everything will be just fine for a looong time." Grimbledung said flatly. "Fate's got nothing on us. Nothing at all."

Fare frowned in the direction of Julesville. She was busy dealing with two black widows and their current targets of assassination- a large group of brothers. A half dozen of them. They mostly seemed safe, but there was one they had singled out. He was quickly coming up on the end of his lifespan.

"What's Fate got on us?" Grimbledung smirked. "Fate, schmate."

"Grim, please." Drimblerod pleaded.

Grimbledung brought his hands up theatrically. "Bah!" He said. "Fate's a pushover that even *Destiny* won't give the time of day!"

Fate scowled- the two Black Widows were causing her no end of trouble but that one Gnome was always a sore point. With a nod, she sent two of her minions – Providence and Chance – to deal with him.

Grimbledung waggled his perked-up ears then scampered down the stairs. When he was halfway down, the toe of one foot caught the heel of the other and he tumbled down the rest of the stairs.

Chance smirked.

"You all right down there?" Drimblerod called.

"Sure, sure!" Grimbledung called back. "Bah! What are the chances of that?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Nothing to worry about!"

Drimblerod sighed. "Well how bad could it be?"

Providence poked Chance in the ribs and gestured toward the crowd gathering in town. The two left to join in.

Chapter 2
Regime? Changing

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 was surprised how

things had been quiet since Drimblerod and Grimbledung had returned. Of course, they seemed to be drinking nightly at the Mora Tau instead of her establishment. "I can't believe I'm considering inviting them here."

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, determined look on her face. "I'm going to the rally. You'd better believe there is some change coming."

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? Or a torch perhaps?"

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. "No torch?"

"This is serious business you know."

"No, actually I don't know what you're talking about." Nulu frowned. "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…"

"Listen, I know what a dictatorship is. I just don't think that's what we're living in."

"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…"

"So did I. And she had said she would have elections as soon as the war was over," the woman said, interrupting Nulu. 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?" She poked at Nulu with the two fingers.

"No, I can't say that I have," she admitted.

"Dictatorship!" The woman said triumphantly. She began walking again. "That's what we're living in!"

"I suppose so…" Nulu quick-stepped to catch up with the woman. "I would have thought that Julie would have had an election by now, now that you mention it.…"

"We need to rid ourselves of the power hungry elite!" The woman shook a fist at Nulu. "Join in the fight!"

"I will join the fight!" Nulu thrust her hand in the air as well.

"That's the spirit!"

The pair walked together toward the school. As they 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 platform. His long black cloaks 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.

"Now!" Nulu shouted as she put her fist in the air.

"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. "And you do that by having me run your lives!"

Nulu felt a wave of realization hit her as the crowd closed in on her. "My own destiny!"

"I can help you achieve the freedom you deserve!" He bellowed again through the conch shell. "Then you can have freedom under my strict control!"

The crowd cheered.

"Freedom!" Nulu cheered along with them. She noticed that the base of the platform the man was on was made of torches.

"Torches!" Nulu said. She pushed her way through the crowd to the platform. "That's what we need!"

"And then WE will be in charge!" The man shouted.

"Yes!" Nulu picked up a torch and thrust it in the air. It burst into flames. "Now we're talking!" She turned to face the windmill. It was a good distance away. Far too long of a distance to throw a torch... "Oh yes!" Nulu leaned back and heaved the torch at the windmill. It flipped end over end as it flew in an arc.

"Follow me to victory!" The man bellowed.

Nulu watched as the torch sailed to the very top of the windmill. It passed between two vanes and landed on the balcony behind them. Instantly, the balcony burst into flames.

"Victory!" Nulu shouted.

The flames climbed to the top of the windmill almost instantly.

Several people around her grabbed Nulu and patted her on the back. "That's what Julie gets for going against the will of the people!"

The flamed enveloped the entire windmill as the people now cheered for Nulu.

"Flames!" Nulu sat upright in bed. She was tangled up in her sheets. "Flames!"

"Flames where?"

Nulu looked down. "The windmill was burning."

"What, now?"

Nulu fought to get out from the sheets. "And the crowd..."

"Oh, I can imagine. The crowd even more so."

Nulu squinted at the smirking Troll. "Eustis, I am not sure if what you're doing is being supportive."

Eustis reached up. "How's that?" He said with a smirk.

"Well, I can see how that fits the literal definition of support." Nulu said with a smirk of her own. "But it's not what I meant."

"What was your bad dream about? Fires and crowds?" Eustis also sat up. "Tell me, Nules."

Nulu ignored the pet name. "That man who is running for mayor. He was inciting the crowd and got me involved as well."

"And the fire?"

"I burned down the windmill."

"Well, it's just a dream, Nulu." Eustis put his hand on her shoulder. "You are the most level-headed person I know. Don't put stock in dreams."

"But I burned down the windmill." Nulu laid back in the bed.

"I can't see you doing that." Eustis rested his head on her shoulder. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless your dream means that you will definitely get Julie out of the mayorship."

"But who will win?"

"I can go get some chicken bones or some frog scat and see what I can..."

Nulu hit Eustis on the head. "I'm being serious."

"Just do what you always do; ravenously support your friends and everything will work out as it should."

"What if it should mean that Magnus wins?"

"If he wins the campaign then he wins the campaign; you will have to honor that."

Nulu growled.

"As someone who has lived in a lot of different types of governments, I have to say the democratic one is the most useful when it comes to living a free life, so I hope you are not suggesting some sort of anti-democratic campaign where you don't accept the election results."

"You say the most romantic things sometimes."

"Yeah?" Eustis grinned wide.

"That's not one of them."

Eustis laughed. "Well, since it didn't even rhyme, I figured it wasn't in the running. But speaking of romantic things." He smiled even though Nulu couldn't see his face.

"Yes, speaking of."

"I can take much of what your Constable said and incorporate it into a traditional wedding ceremony and come up with something that really will be quite nice."

"I worked on it too," Nulu reminded.

"I figured as much. It was quite romantic."

"Well, I'm quite the romantic." Nulu ran her fingers through Eustis' hair. On his back.

"Well, I'll take it all back with me, get it all written up and be back in time for the nuptials." He picked his head up. "Which are when?"

"They're working on that still; give me a few weeks."

"Just let me know when it is." He put his head back down. "I'll have the ceremony ready within the week so any time after that."

"You're leaving?"

"I've got to finish my route and get back to the capital." Eustis pushed himself up on one elbow so he could look at Nulu. "Duty calls and all that." He waggled his eyebrows. "So… I'm only in town for a short time, *Miss* Bentknees."

Nulu waggled hers back at him. "Then we should make the best of it, *Mister* KnockeHeads

So they did.

Chapter 3
Into the Sewers

Rat sat on the ledge looking down at the other rats. He had been in the recently-constructed sewers for three days now. Or perhaps it was four. It was hard to keep track of days when there was no sunlight. Rat had been lonely for some companionship and had come to the sewers to reconnect with his rodent-heritage. As usual, it had not been going well. Even though the normally-territorial rats had accepted him much sooner than they had in the past.

Several decades ago, Rat had tried to start a family of like-minded rats. It was a failure. It seemed that his ability to speak and reason as well as his longevity could not be passed down to his offspring. Within a year, his original two dozen sires had all failed to reach their typical two to three-year lifespan due to the hard life rats led. To make matters worse, his hundreds of great, great-great, and so forth children did not even recognize him as the top of their familial tree.

Rat exhaled loudly as he looked at the several dozen rats that formed this particular colony.[2] They had no self-awareness whatsoever. Rat sat on his haunches. "Fellow rats," he declared, "I have called you here because I wanted to discuss important matters of rat-dom!"

The rats continued to scurry about, nibble at fleas, and generally act like regular grey rats. Two rats in the corner were busily working on their own next generation of rats.

Nonplussed, Rat pressed on. "We have been cast out by society because of our unsanitary ways! Treated harshly for doing no more than nature intended us to do!"

A rat walked by Rat. It hissed as him as it went. Rat kicked it to move it along.

"Time and again we have proven our tenacity and resolve and yet we have nothing to show for it!" He pointed at a nearby rat. "You there! Are you not the rat who avoided the black tomcat with your superb scurrying?"

The rat didn't even look at Rat. Even though he had done just that thing the day before.

"Yes, exactly!" Rat clapped his claws together. "And yet there are no accolades! Why we even..."

A wave of water rushed past from some toilet upstream from the brick channel that ran down the middle of the room, which was actually a junction box at the intersection of four streets. An apple and several other bits of food floated past. A rat reached out and grabbed the half-eaten apple and tossed it onto the ledge. It looked up at Rat.

Rat met eyes with the surprisingly industrious rat. "Well done, Mister Grey," Rat said. "Well done indeed!"

Mister Grey's fur puffed out and he squeaked at several other rats that approached his newly acquired fruit. His attention was now completely on the apple.



Rat shook his head. "A glimmer of hope, dashed by a soggy apple." He waved his claws. "We will never get the respect we deserve until we stop acting like mindless animals. Even the Orcs make time to hold meetings and take out the trash once and a while! Hell, they even write poetry!"

Two rats now fought over the apple. It looked like Mister Grey would lose to the larger, older one.

"Fight on, Mister Grey!" Rat called to it. "Fight for what is yours!"

As Rat looked on, the larger rat nipped at Mister Grey's hind paw, causing him to squeak in protest and back away from the apple.

"Litigate, Mister Grey! Sue that rat for all he's got." Rat twitched his whiskers. "Which apparently includes that apple now." Rat exhaled again as the large rat began to eat the apple. "Poor Mister Grey." A thought popped into Rat's head. "Poor Mister Grey; what you need is good representation." Rat sat up straight. "Good and proper representation by one of your own kind." He stood on his hind legs. "And I nominate *me* for that position!" He spread his claws out. "Who is with me?"

The other rats continued to do rat things.

"With that resounding endorsement, how could I refuse to be your candidate?" Rat waved his claws at the rats to quiet them. "Yes, yes, I hear you all and I promise to do my best to represent you... as mayor!" He sat back on his haunches. "Stupid rats. You're the best kind of constituents a candidate could have; completely clueless and just wanting your piece of the apple without having to actually work to get it."

A female rat approached Rat. She twitched her whiskers at him. "Ahhh… another constituent," remarked Rat. "Are you looking for a place in my administration, good Miss Gray?" He twitched his whiskers. "It *is* Miss, isn't it? I can't afford a scandal so early in my candidacy." He winked. "Later on, after I am elected, of course, I will be immune from most every kind of scandal. Once I have my network of lackeys and prominent business owners in my pockets, I'll be completely immune from most everything."[3]

The female rat twitched her whiskers again- completely oblivious to anything Rat said. Nevertheless, she moved a little closer to him.

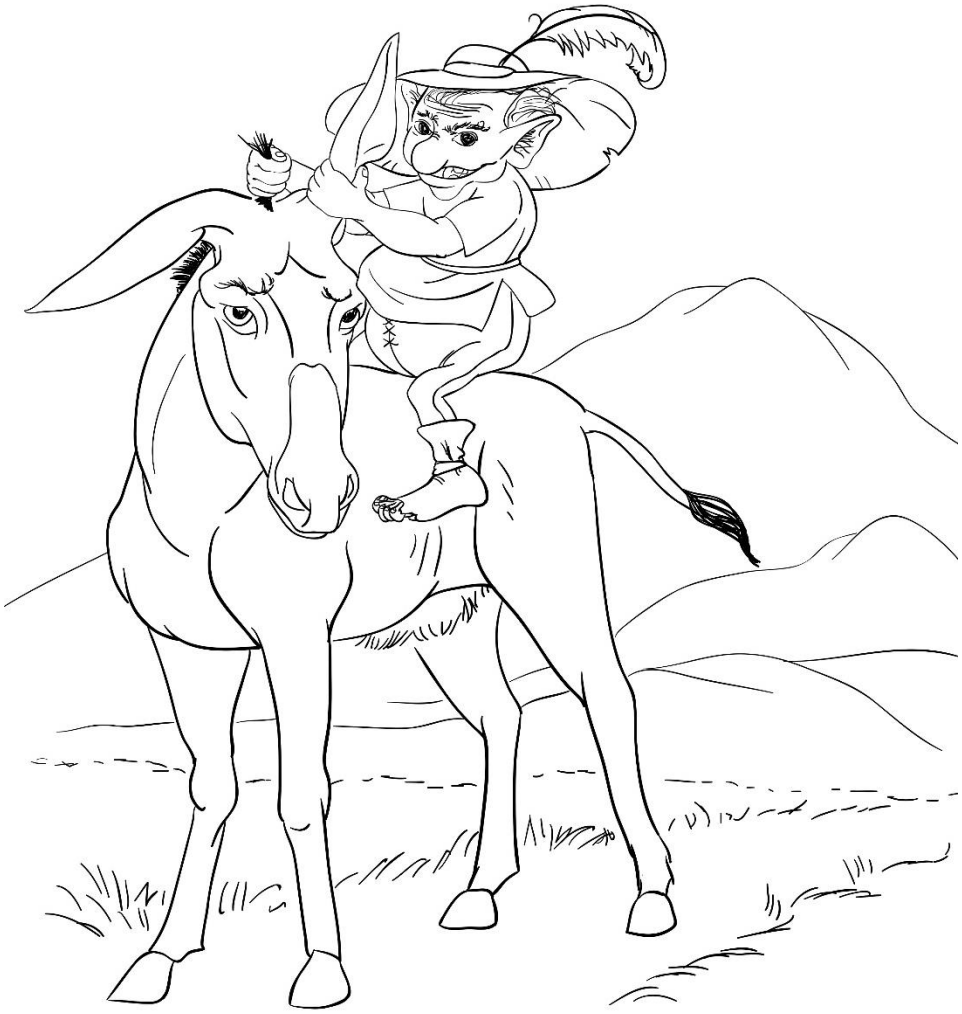
"Yeah, you're my kind of constituent alright." He moved closer to Miss Gray. "I suppose I *could* add to the pool of registered voters before starting my candidacy." He twitched his whiskers back and for good measure added: "Squeak!"

Later that evening, Rat returned home, content that in a mere three weeks (and of course six weeks of weening) had had added anywhere from two to twenty potential voters to his constituency. When he found the shoppe empty, he headed for the Duck Inn and Dine.

Chapter 4
A Wide Hat on an Ass

Grimbledung rode down the center of the road, hoping folks would notice.

They did.



He waved at every person he passed.

Occasionally one waved back.

He tipped his huge floppy hat at female passersby.

The ones that didn't know him nodded back. The ones that did rolled their eyes at him. Grimbledung considered both an acceptable greeting.

It had been a couple of months since he and Drimblerod had returned from the mine and he had only been allowed to buy several tunics with their newfound riches. And one animal. Neither were plated with gold- even though he had ~~lobbied furiously~~ wailed and cried for gold plating or weaving or dipping. He had also ~~requested~~ begged to use their newly acquired flying carpet as transportation. Or a team of black stallions to pull him around in a chariot. Gold plating begrudgingly optional.

He got one donkey and several tunics. And one large, floppy riding hat. Even so, he was happy he now had an animal to ride- even for very short outings. And neat, new tunics to

wear that had little pockets in the front he could tuck his thumbs into and rock back on his heels as he spoke. Whether he had a point to make or not. So he wore them everywhere just so he could rock back and forth on his heels. When he wasn't tipping his floppy riding hat to the ladies as he rode his mighty steed.

Down the middle of the road.

He waved at the baker who was walking along. "Welmyra! Welmyra P. CoppersGalore," Grimbledung said, "what's cooking?" He tipped his hat at her for good measure.

Welmyra glanced over at the fellow Gnome. The fellow Gnome that annoyed her greatly. And almost daily. If it weren't for the fact that he was an excellent customer that always paid his hefty bill on time, she would have not even give him the time of day. *Or day of the week, for that matter*, she mused.

Or day of the week, for that matter.

"Baking," Welmyra said, initiating their now tired-to-her exchange.

"Baking cooking?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Or cooking baking?"

"Baking," she snapped. "Baking, baking."

"I'll take one of each," Grimbledung guffawed as he moved past her. "Pick it up later!" He waved over his shoulder.

Welmyra frowned, not looking forward to Grimbledung's impending visit, which usually ended up lasting a good hour. She consoled herself knowing that he would, in fact, buy almost one of everything in her shop. "Send your partner to pick up your order!" She called hoping he would oblige her and send the more mature, stable partner instead. *And*, she thought, *readily available.* As a successful Gnomess well over the four-hundred-year mark, she was looking for someone to spend her leisure years with. It wasn't that she wanted to start a family; she had had a good dozen Gnomelings over the centuries to ensure the continuance of her proud and noble race; she wanted company. Mature, unannoying company. And more specifically, mature, unannoying company that wasn't also a freeloader. From what she could tell, Drimblerod fit that bill nicely. Especially if he didn't bring his partner along. She decided to stop by the wand shop to deliver some specially baked items when she was sure

Grimbledung was away. She was fairly sure that through their normal interactions, Drimblerod was aware that she was interested in him. And, she didn't mind admitting, she was a very well put together Gnomess.

Unfortunately, in typical male fashion, Drimblerod was completely and totally unaware of any such interest. However, in typical male fashion, he was distinctly aware that she was very well put together.[4]

Grimbledung reached the Duck Inn and Dine and began to wave with both hands at several patrons sitting at the newly erected outdoor seating area. "Hello all. Hello to all you pedestrians! I salute you foot traficanters."

Several patrons waved back amicably. The ones who drank with him gave a smile as well, since lately he seemed willing to buy practically every other round.

"Any drinks left?" he asked as he swung his leg off his donkey.

"Plenty inside, I think," said a Dwarf gruffly. "You should check there." He scowled in typical Dwarf fashion in case the gruffness in his voice didn't make the point.

If Grimbledung noticed, he didn't let on. "Great, great. I'll give it a look-see, Mister Dwarfish fellow." He flipped the reins over the hitching post and they twirled around it twice. He had practiced the move two whole days. "Be back shortly," he said to the animal.

The animal snorted at him then tried to follow.

Grimbledung patted its head between its ears. "No, no; wait here, Wonky. Sit… Stay."

Wonky obliged by sitting on his haunches.

The Dwarf snorted as he choked on his ale. "Your donkey is named Wonky?"

Grimbledung grinned. "For short." He leaned on the animal. "His full name is Wonkillian William Alistair Donkey, to show his full lineage of course." He patted Wonky's head. "We were going to name him 'Dwarf' but that name is reserved for lackluster, dimwitted beasts that are a burden to all around them." He smiled amicably. "Of course."

Now two other patrons coughed on their drinks.

"What?" The Dwarf stood.

"He's also not hard of hearing, so you can well see why 'Dwarf' just didn't fit him." He patted Wonky's head. "Right Wonky?"

Wonky snorted.

The Dwarf moved to the white picket fence that marked the boundary of the seating area. "Come in here and say that, you stinking Gnome."

Grimbledung ignored him and looked at the other patrons. "Anyone need a top off? I can send out a barmaid if need be."

Several nodded approvingly at Grimbledung. They knew that when it came to drinking, he was always a consummate professional. Everything else was wildly unpredictable.

"I'll let them know." Grimbledung turned and walked to the door, keeping his back to the fuming Dwarf. When he pushed down on the latch, he finally turned to face the Dwarf. His wand was in his hand. "And if I hear another word out of you disparaging my fine animal, *Dwarf*, I'll send you to visit the lair of a couple of Dragons I've recently made the acquaintance of. I'd *love* to ask them later if your charming personality was able to get you out in one piece." He pointed the wand at the Dwarf. "And since Dragons absolutely *hate* Dwarves and their hording of gold and treasure, I'm sure you three will hit it off just splendidly." He closed one eye and sighted down his wand at the Dwarf. "Or are you just going to go back to your drink and enjoy it quietly and *al Fresco*," he finished in Dwarfish.[5]

The Dwarf looked from Grimbledung to the other patrons and back to Grimbledung. He raised a finger and pointed at Grimbledung. As he opened his mouth to speak, Grimbledung interrupted him:

"Or… before you hurl another tired Dwarfish insult in my direction, how about I just bite your throat out?" As he took a step toward the Dwarf, his front teeth sprang out, doubling their size as hairs sprang from his ears. There also seemed to be a very disconcerting red glow to his eyes. "What'llll it be Dwwwarrrf?" He growled. He had spent the better part of a day working on his partial transformation and had it down pretty well. Only a couple of times did he end up turning into a complete WereGnome and ransacking his room. And once chasing Drimblerod around the counter several times.

The Dwarf turned and went to his spot on the bench and sat back down. And quietly returned to drinking.

"Drrrinks topped up, I'll tell the wwwwench." Grimbledung growled. When none of the other patrons responded- terror had them frozen in place- he gave a curt nod and turned back to the door. As he pushed down on the latch again, he started taking deep, calming breaths. By the time he got to the curtain, he was completely back to normal except for some extra hair on his ears. Since he was a Gnome, no one would even give them a second look.

"Hello all," he said as he pushed past the curtain. "Any drinks left?"

"Got a couple left," Wil said from behind the bar. He raised an eyebrow "Aren't you supposed to be working right now?"

Grimbledung skipped to the bar. "I am!" He clambered up on the stool. "I was picking up some highly-specialized woodworking tools for some delicate wand repairs. I'm just stopping in for a quick bite to eat is all."

Wil smirked. "And a drink, I imagine."

Grimbledung nodded. "Seems your imagination is working just about right today." He slapped his hands on the counter. "Something quick to eat and something to chase it down with." He gave a long wink. "If you please."

"Sandwich and an ale it is then." Wil smiled. "Let me get the food going and then I'll pour."

Grimbledung rubbed his hands together. "How about you pour, then get the food going…then re-pour?"

Wil laughed. "I imagine I can do that as well."

"What an imagination!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Thanks very much, Wil." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, the fellows outside are interested in some top-ups."

Win nodded. "I'll send out Hefty." His face soured. "There's an angry Dwarf out there that gave Flora a hard time so she's not wanting to go out there again."

"What, him? I just got finished telling him to keep quiet." Grimbledung's eyes flashed red. He stood on the footrests of the stool. "Why I'm going to..."

"Have a drink?" Wil said. "And leave the annoying Dwarf to me, the professional bartender who doesn't let *anyone* give his barmaids a hard time?"

Grimbledung sat back down. "Well, I suppose I can do that."

"Grimbledung Sixtoes," Flora said as she sidled up beside him. "Were you going to bite that Dwarf's throat out for being mean to me?" She tried to flatten the extra hairs on Grimbledung's ears but they were having no part in it. Grimbledung's foot thumped on the stool as she did.

"Well, either that or send him to meet a couple of dragons I know." His eyes got wide. "They'd end up tearing him apart, roasting him, and having a fine mid-morning snack. It would be gloriously gruesome."

Flora smooched him loudly on the cheek. "You're such a romantical Gnome." She slid her serving tray toward Wil.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Say, you want to get a drink later?"

Flora narrowed her eyes. "Am I serving said drinks?"

"Not at all. I'd be doing the serving." Grimbledung hesitated. "If passing a bottle back and forth counts as serving, that is. Wil, can I get an official ruling?"

"Passing a bottle to someone is indeed serving them drinks," Wil said. He placed several drinks on Flora's tray.

"Apparently, it's official; I'll be serving," Grimbledung said without missing a beat.

"That sounds grand!" Flora picked up her tray and moved it to her shoulder. "I'll stop by the wand shop when I'm off."

"Great!"

Flora moved off with her tray. "See you then," she called over her shoulder.

Grimbledung exhaled loudly. "What a great morning I'm having."

"Really?" Wil drew an ale.

"Yeah; I got some work done. Threatened a Dwarf with death. Got Flora to come over for drinks, and I'll be back at the shop before *noon*!"

Wil pushed the drink to Grimbledung. "That does sound like a very productive..." His eyes went to the curtain. "Oh no. How about you come eat in the back?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "This is fine right here." He picked up his ale. "I'll just nurse this until the sandwich is done. Easy hopsies."

"I really think it would be better if you came to the back..." His eyes tracked over Grimbledung's shoulder. "So your day keeps going well."

"What's gotten into you Wil?" Grimbledung looked over his shoulder. There was no one there. When he turned back around, Magnus Opus von Magnus was sitting on the barstool beside him.

Glowering.

Chapter 5
Magnus Opus von Magnus!

"Yikes! Keep the sneakery to a minimum, if you please!"

"Grim," Wil said. "You sure you don't want to move?"

"Only enough to get this drink down my gullet…"

"When you are done listening to this Gnome's prattling, I'd like to order," Magnus said.

"What?" Grimbledung's foot thumped on the footrest. "Who's a prattler?"

"You are. Just now." Magnus looked at Wil. "I will have a whisky." He held his thumb and forefinger far apart. "And water." He moved his fingers together until they were almost touching. "And whatever vegetables you have that are fresh."

"Not having any meat?" Grimbledung raised an eyebrow. "Meat's good for you, you know. Meat puts meat on your bones. You know that?"

"No."

"No, you don't know meat's good for you?" Grimbledung glanced at Wil. "Make my sandwich first before you go slicing vegetables. It should go without saying that you could put a radish or two on my plate if you have them handy and it would be just fine by me."

"Prattling," Magnus gestured at Grimbledung. "Right there. In public even."

Wil ignored the man. "I have some beets."

"Are they pickled?"

Magnus looked between the pair as they spoke. His frown got more pronounced as he did.

"Haven't had time to do that yet," Wil said. "How about I serve them with a nice vinegar chaser?"

Grimbledung grinned. "Brilliant! You are indeed a professional bartender."

"When you two are done..." Began Magnus.

"He'll get to your plate of rabbit food," Grimbledung assured him. "Want a sip of my ale while you wait?" He pushed his drink toward Magnus.

Magnus pushed the mug back. "I most definitely do not want ale."

"There's no meat in it." Grimbledung took a sip. "Say, are you an Elf or something?"

"What?" Magnus was caught off guard by the change in topic.

"I'll whip up that sandwich," Wil said. "Keep calm, Grimbledung, and drink on."

"Words to live by." Grimbledung took another drink. "So Elf or non-Elf?"

"I am not an Elf. I am Human," said Magnus. "Why? You have something against Elves?"

"Not at all." Grimbledung ran his finger around the circle of water made by his frosted mug. "Well, the ones who tried to cook and eat me aren't high on my list of folks to invite over, but in general, no. Not at all."

"Elves tried to eat you?"

Grimbledung nodded. "They would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for my keen intellect and cool head in times of danger."

"I can imagine." Magnus rolled his eyes. "You are a veritable cornucopia of intelligence."

"There you go with the vegetables again. What do you have against meat?"

"Fruit too."

"You calling me a fruit?" Grimbledung's foot started thumping again.

"No; cornucopia also contain fruit."

Grimbledung considered that for a moment. "Well I don't think I could argue with that." He raised a finger. "But they don't have meat. What do you have against meat?"

"Nothing. I just don't eat it."

"What about ribs?"

"No."

"Steaks?"

"No.

"Pic Mountain Oysters?"

"No one should eat those."

"A savory pudding of sheep's heart, liver and lungs, with minced onion, oatmeal, suet, spices, and salt, mixed with stock, and encased in the animal's stomach?"

"Gads; you're going to ruin my appetite." Magnus stood and moved to a table. He sat with his back to Grimbledung.

Grimbledung picked up his drink and quickly scurried to sit across from the man. "Back hurting you?"

"No."

"Front hurting you?"

Magnus exhaled slowly.

"Lungs sore?"

"Is there a reason you're sitting here?"

Grimbledung took a drink. "Sure, sure. Perfectly simple explanation."

The two stared at each other for a long moment.

"What is the reason?" Magnus rubbed this eyes.

"Because I'm not sitting over there, of course." Grimbledung pointed to the empty barstool. "Can't be in two places at once you know."

"If you were cut in half you could be."

"You a magician?"

"No." Magnus looked at the curtain.

"Expecting someone?"

"No." He looked back at Grimbledung. "I was just hoping that when I looked back, you'd be gone."

Grimbledung winked. "Sounds like you're wanting to be a magician."

"I am not." He looked toward the side exit.

"Exiting stage left?"

"No."

"Because if you wanted to be a magician I could help you out because I have had a good bit of experience with magicians and I can tell you what you should and shouldn't do if you wanted to be one which would be nice because right now I don't think there are any magicians working in town so I can't get any fresh magic marbles so if you wanted to be a magician I'd be a really good customer because I am in the market for some magic marbles."

Magnus looked toward the kitchen.

"Hungry?"

Magnus exhaled loudly. "A little, yes. I was hoping for a quick bite so I could get back to work."

"That's what I'm doing!" Grimbledung held up his drink. "Nothing like drinking on the job, right?"

Magnus smirked. "No, I suppose not."

"Well then." Grimbledung picked up his ale and toasted Magnus. "To drinking on the job."

Magnus only nodded because his drink hadn't arrived yet. "Here, here."

Wil walked up to the table. "You two doing okay?" He lowered a tray to the table then slid a plate in front of each of them.

"We've agreed that drinking while working is a fine thing to do." Said Grimbledung.

"You two agreed on something?"

Magnus nodded at Wil. "Truly, I am surprised as well." He picked up his whisky from the tray. "Alcohol; the great mediator." He toasted Grimbledung with it and took a sip.

"It also starts a lot of fights," said Wil. "And because of that you only get one more drink, Grimbledung Sixtoes, Professional Drinker Esquire."

"Not counting this one, right?" Grimbledung took another sip. "I've been nursing it so much I'm going to burp it soon.

Magnus shook his head. "One shouldn't be able to feed themselves lines like that," he muttered.

"Grimbledung, I don't think..." Began Wil.

Fruitlessly.

Grimbledung let out a loud and long burp. When he was done, he waggled his ears. "There, there; all better?" He patted his mug. "Got a wee bit of gas do we?"

"Well, if you need anything else, just give a wave." Wil picked up his tray and returned to the bar.

"So what line of work are you in?"

Magnus ate a couple of slices of vegetables. He hoped the prolonged silence would convince the Gnome to go elsewhere.

It didn't work.

Grimbledung waited until the man had finished chewing and swallowed. "So what line of work are you in?"

Magnus let out a long sigh. "I have a shop a couple of blocks away. Clothing." Magnus took a sip. "But my main business is getting elected Mayor of this dump of a town."

Grimbledung froze in place, staring at the man. *Running against...* Wheels of conniving and underhandedness began to turn in his head. They moved levers of chicanery. Several of them. The entire machine was powered by large billows of trickery. A lamp of sneakery was lit- dimly of course- so the entire process was basked in an underhanded glow. *Against Flora O. Willowfeet?*

"You alright?" Magnus asked, not really interested if the Gnome –whose left eye was twitching all of a sudden- was alright or not. He actually hoped it was a stroke.

Grimbledung's plan fell into place like a greased monkey into a house of cards. *Or some other metaphor for a plan coming together that includes some sort of slick simian*. He nodded as he took a bite of his sandwich. "Well if I'm in the market for some new clothes... Got anything lined with gold?"

"No."

Grimbledung feigned surprise. "Wait, what was that second part?"

"Becoming Mayor."

"Well, lucky for you there are upcoming elections." He winked. "Best time to win an elected office is during an election you know."

"It's actually the worst time," Magnus said. He took another drink. "Offing the current elected official and taking their place is a good way. Or with a group of armed thugs. Or..."

"That doesn't sound very democratic." Grimbledung interrupted. "And, I dare say, not very legal."

"Well, when you're in charge, who's going to stop you?"

Grimbledung took another bite of his sandwich and nodded. "Good point, good point, mister, ahhh..." Grimbledung tossed out.

"Magnus. Magnus Opus von Magnus. Or," continued Magnus, "offing anyone running against you. And you are?"

Grimbledung took a drink of his ale. "Oolery. Tom F." His eyes got large. "Offing?"

Magnus put the last of his vegetables in his mouth and chewed slowly.

"Offing, offing?" Grimbledung asked again. He stared at Magnus as he chewed. "Offing?"

Finally, Magnus swallowed. "If no one is running against you, then winning is a breeze. They say the uncontested vote wins the contest."

"Dad always said 'Vote early, vote often' was the way to win an election."

Magnus nodded. "He knows what he's talking about." He picked up his drink and downed the last of it. "Well, I need to get to business. Can I count on your vote?"

"Uhm... What's your platform?"

"It's more of a gallows, really."

"A whaaat?" Grimbledung tried to ooze innocence.

Magnus waved a hand. "Merely a figure of speech Mister Oolery. Merely a figure of speech." He looked down at Grimbledung. "Your vote. Can I count on it?" He said in a more threatening than inquisitive tone.

"A vote from Mister Tom F. Oolery is coming your way!" Grimbledung assured the man. "Most assuredly even."

With a nod and a flourish of his cloak, Magnus left.

"Well then! The game is afoot." Grimbledung looked around the tavern. "Anyone hear what that fellow said?"

Several patrons shook their heads. Most just ignored him, focusing on their drinking- even with the Halfling invasion out of the picture, times were still tough. "Wil!" Grimbledung hopped to his feet. He took a step towards the bar, then realized he still had a good portion of sandwich left. "Wil!" He picked up his sandwich and stuffed the rest of it into his mouth. "Wilfm!"

"What's wrong, Grimbledung?" Wil asked as he stepped out from behind the curtain.

"Manffm kifflm candidafmms!" Grimbledung exclaimed around his full mouth.

"I didn't get any of that." Wil smiled. "I don't think anyone could. Professional or not."

Grimbledung picked up his mug and poured it around the sandwich in his mouth as he moved to the bar. When he got there, he closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Tears ran down his cheeks. "That man said he was going to kill folks!"

Win nodded. "Ah yes; Magnus and his plans to rule the lands." Wil nodded. "They often include the deaths of many innocent bystanders."

"What?" Grimbledung looked around the tavern. "Is this the kind of seditious conversations that go on around here?"

Wil nodded. "Well, it's a balance between overthrowing the lands in some gruesome coup and wooing the attention of some woman." Wil smirked. "And for some of these fellows, them getting *any* woman's attention would be a coup."

"That's the best you got?"

Wil frowned. "Well, I think that's the best I've got to offer as far as jokes go. Not much to work with when you've got a bit part, you know."[6]

"Sorry to hear that. Must be tough."

"That would be nice." Wil said.

"Who you talking to?" Grimbledung asked.

"A Mister Otes. Foot N. Otes." Wil waved his hand dismissively. "What were you saying again?"

"I have to go!" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver coin- he hadn't carried copper coins since returning from the Lost Picman's Mine. Drimblerod had convinced him that carrying platinum coins could get him in trouble, so he opted for mainly silver with a couple of gold in his pouch just for color. He tossed the coin onto the bar. "Keep the change, Wil." He looked around again. "Tell Flora I'll see her later."

Wil nodded. "No problem." He leaned forward. "Don't let Magnus get you upset; I think he's mostly bluster."

"Well I don't like that bluster either."

Wil frowned again. "See? Why can't I get some lines like that?"

Grimbledung turned and scampered to the curtain. After a quick scuffle with it, he managed to push past it and to the outer door.

Flora walked up to the bar and set her tray on it. It had a large dent in it. "Where'd Grimbledung go?"

Wil thought for a moment. "I think he went back to working." He smiled. "But he said he'd see you later."

Flora frowned. "Hopefully. Most of the times he sets up a time to be together, he ends up involved in some sort of crisis and I end up having a drink with his dimwitted partner."

"You think Drimblerod is the dimwitted one?"

Flora stared at Wil. She absently rubbed the dent in her tray.

Wil gulped. "Drimblerod, that dimwit," he said finally.

"Exactly." Flora pushed out her lower lip. "That's who I end up with when Grimbledung gets caught up in some sort of serious crisis."

"Well, things happen."

Flora nodded. "Usually to poor Grimbledung when he's just minding his own business. Current events come along and… you know."

"Well... I'm sure you can ask him about his current crisis tonight." Wil looked at the tray. "Problem?"

"Minor Dwarf issues." She smiled. "It's taken care of now though."

"I see." Wil laughed. "Nothing we need to get the law involved in, I hope."

Flora shook her head as she tucked her tray under her arm. "I imagine he won't remember a thing." She smiled sweetly. "Going around back to hammer this thing out then I'll make a pass." She looked at the tray. "Maybe I need to get a reinforced tray or something; I seem to have to hammer this out a lot. Maybe some iron supports with studs in them?"

Wil shook his head. "No, if you did that then the constable would *definitely* get involved."

Flora nodded as she left to go to the impromptu smithy she had set up behind the tavern.

With a sigh, Wil started wiping out glasses in preparation for the after-work rush.

Chapter 6
Name Calling Calling Names

Grimbledung scampered down the street toward Second Hand Sorcery. "Outta the way!" He would call at passersby. Even the ones that weren't in his way. "Gnome on a

mission!" As he ran, he passed the owner of the Fat Blue Mooned Tyre brewery and pub, or as Grimbledung liked to call it 'Ye Olde Tasting Salon'. "Hey there Lebesch!"

The man continued to walk. Now however he had his eyes trained on the road in front of him.

"Mister Villa! Grimbledung called. "Hey-ho! How are things going at yon Tasting Salon?"[7]

With an exasperated sigh, Lebesch stopped and turned to face Grimbledung. "Fine, fine. Things are fine." He turned to head down a side street even though it was the opposite direction of where he was going. "Got to see a fellow about some things." He pointed down the street. "Talk to you later!"

"Great! I have a great idea for what you can do between the Mashtun and the Lautertun!" Called Grimbledung- he still was running straight ahead but was looking back at the man who was now going in the opposite direction.

Lebesch frowned; even though Grimbledung was mostly annoying, he was in fact, an excellent customer and had indeed come up with some brewing ideas that had been helpful. He had no idea how or why the Gnome was good at it. "Stop by when you have a chance then." Lebesch yelled at the running Gnome.

"Great; I'll stop by..." He was interrupted because he ran into the back of a pedestrian.

"What the?" The pedestrian said as he turned in a flourish of black cloak.

"Rolton chips; forgot my mighty steed!" He looked up at the person he ran into. "Oh! Ahhh... Hello stranger," he stammered.

"Hello. Again." Magnus said.

"Who me? I'm sure we've never met, good Sir. Never, ever even." Grimbledung worked his way to his feet. He looked down the street and back the way he had come- torn between continuing to the shop or going back for his donkey. Or going to the Fat Blue Mooned Tyre for a drink and a discussion about the brewing process. "The name's ButtsGalore. Seymour D." He stuck out his hand. "And you are?"

"Magnus Opus von Magnus." He didn't shake Grimbledung's hand. "I am pretty sure we just met in the Duck Inn and Dine."

"Wasn't me." Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "You saying all Gnomes look alike to you? That's racist."

"Well, yes; and not just Gnomes in fact," the dark man said honestly. "Most all peasants look alike to me." He held up a finger. "And do *not* make some sort of bird reference."

Grimbledung stuck out his lower lip. "Well I'm dashed."

"So why are you running blindly into folk on the street, Seymour D. ButtsGalore?"

Grimbledung snickered. "Just out for a morning jog. Birthday suit season is almost upon us, you know."

"I refuse to ask."

"Big inaugural run in the morning to start the season. Anyone who is anyone will be there in their birthday finest." He waggled his toes. "Shoes are recommended but not required."

"I did not ask."

Grimbledung stuck his lip out again. "Drat it. Well, I've got to go Mister von Magnus." He patted his substantial belly. "Still got a little running left to do so I make a good showing of the season-opening fun run."

"I don't even want to picture it." Magnus pursed his lips. "And you're saying we have not met before?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Got a twin. Might'a met him." He pantomimed tipping a glass to his lips. "Big drinker, my brother. Probably ran into him in a tavern. He tell you about me?"

"No." Magnus looked up the street. "Well, I need to get back to work."

"What line of work you in?" Grimbledung asked. "Ominous black cloak sales?"

"Clothing."

"So ominous black cloak sales."

"No. This isn't for sale." He flourished his cloak - it was one of the things he dearly enjoyed. Along with crushing little people.[8]

"Well, of course *that* one isn't." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "I meant *other* ominous black cloaks."

"I don't sell cloaks." Magnus looked up the street again.

"Looking for someone?"

"An exit to this conversation."

"Can't help you there, von. Can I call you von?"

"No."

"Do you have cloaks in my size?"

"No."

"Don't cater to Gnomes? That's racist too you know."

"I've got a short and stout kids section that would do you well."

"That's kind of insulting."

Magnus stared at Grimbledung for a long moment. "Oh, you are probably waiting for some sort of apology."

"Yeah, now that you mention it."

Magnus frowned at Grimbledung then turned (with another flourish of his cloak) and walked off.

"I'm dashed!" Grimbledung called after Magnus. He looked back toward the Duck Inn and Dine and then toward the shop. Not wanting to have his donkey sit alone all day, he scurried back to the tavern. When he got there, Flora was putting a bucket of water by Wonky.

"Grimbledung Sixtoes, you just can't leave your mighty steed just sitting on the street that way," Flora scolded. "Poor thing." She scratched behind his ear.[9]

"Well, I was in the process of handling a crisis when I left him here for the briefest of moments." He patted the animal's flank. "He knows the way back to the shop if he got bored, right Wonky?"

Wonky took a drink of water.

"That's a good mighty steed." Grimbledung patted him again.

"What crisis?" Flora rubbed Wonky between the ears. "It's not something that will keep you away this evening, is it?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Not at all. It's the smallest part of a crisis, really." He assured her. "I'd be inclined to call it a predicament, in fact." He looked up the street. "A minor one."

"Well, as long as you'll be around this evening."

"Oh, I'll definitely be around this evening. I can assure you of that!" Grimbledung put his foot in the stirrup. "Definitely around."

"Well, that's good to hear." Flora rubbed her hands together. "I'd hate to think..."

Grimbledung looked up the street.

"... that you'll not be around when I stop by later this evening."

"Uh huh," Grimbledung said. "My sentiments exactly." He clambered atop his donkey and took the reins. "Listen, Flora O. Willowfeet, I have to deal with a very minor... quandary right now."

Flora smiled. "Fine, fine. There is tonight, right?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Definitely. There will definitely be a night tonight."

"Well, I..." Began Flora.

"We ride, Wonky!" Grimbledung shouted. He kicked his heels into the animal's side.

Wonky turned his head to look back at him. With a shake of his head, he started to walk away. Slowly.

"... will see you tonight." Flora finished.

"Sure, sure thing, Flora O. Willowfeet!" Grimbledung called over his shoulder. He tipped his hat at her for good measure. "See you in the evening!" He waved. "Faster Wonky, faster!" He kicked his heels again.

Wonky moved to a slow trot. A very slow trot.

"Whoo hoo! Faster than Scalosian beetles!" Grimbledung leaned forward. "Swifter than eagles!" He gripped the reins tightly. "We fly!"

Wonky continued to canter.

"Mighty steed coming through!" Grimbledung called. "To the shop, Wonky!"

Wonky, knowing where the shop was- and that there was plenty of food there, moved to a loping gallop.

"Fastest... donkey... ever!!" Grimbledung bounced up and down in the saddle. After a moment, he caught the rhythm of Wonky and settled into the saddle. "We're making good time, Wonky!" He said. "There is indeed a carrot in your future!"

Wonky, loving carrots and knowing that they were called 'carrot', turned his head around, hoping to be rewarded with one right then. He didn't stop his gallop.

"What, now?" Grimbledung patted his pockets. "I'm all out of carrots right now. But there's a bag of them in the shop." He patted Wonky's head. "When we get back..." Grimbledung was interrupted because Wonky ran into the back of a pedestrian.

"What the?" The pedestrian said as he was knocked to the ground. In a flourish of black cloak.

Grimbledung flew off the back of the suddenly stopped Wonky, landing atop a puffy black cloak. "What in the lands?" Grimbledung said as he rubbed his elbow. "That hurt!"

The cloak buffeted as the person underneath it struggled to get out. "Get off of me!" Came a voice.

Grimbledung rolled to the side and off the cloak. "What're you doing walking along in the commuter lane?" He dusted himself off. "You alright Wonky?"

Wonky shook his head, ears flopping back and forth. "Hee Haw!" He brayed.

Magnus struggled to stand- his head was ringing where he had been elbowed. "You stupid Gnome!" He snapped his cloak down around him. "You could have killed me."

"Sorry about that, kind stranger" Grimbledung gestured at Wonky. "My mighty steed was traveling so fast that I didn't see you until you were completely in my way." He narrowed his eyes. "In the commuter lane, I need to add."

"There's no such thing," Magnus said as he rubbed his head.

"Well, I am sure that if you kept to the side, mister... mister."

"Magnus. Magnus Opus von Magnus. We've been through this already. Twice even, in fact."

"We've never met, I'm sure." Grimbledung picked up Wonky's reins. "I'm just commuting through, you see. On my way to see my brother."

"Seymore D. ButtsGalore?"

Grimbledung snickered. "That's my one twin brother. I'm going to see my other twin." He pointed down the street. "Grimbledung."

"There's three twins?"

"Four really. We're identical paternal twins on my mother's side."

"I don't believe that is possible," Magnus said. He stopped rubbing his head- it didn't seem to help with the ringing. "Even for Gnomes."

"Well, I can assure you that it is." Grimbledung stuck out his hand. "I'm DogtaLick. Ivan A."

Magnus ignored his hand. "Of course you are. Should I ask what the fourth brother is called?"

"Yeah, at this point, you should get all our names just in case."

Magnus gestured with his hand.

"Bowles, Louis Bowles." Grimbledung deadpanned.

"And you don't have the same family name because…"

"Like I already said; we're paternal twins on my mother's side." Grimbledung winked. "Different fathers."

"I still don't believe that is physically possible. Unless your mother…"

Grimbledung jabbed a finger at the man. "Be aware that *any* disparaging remarks about my esteemed mother will not bode well for you."

Magnus closed his mouth and exhaled loudly through his nose. He pursed his lips just to complete the effect.

Grimbledung looked up the street. "Well von... Can I call you von?"

"As I have probably told you before; no."

"Well, von, sorry about the accident. Rest assured I shan't press charges." He smiled. "I do recommend you stay out of the passing lane, though."

"There's no such thing."

"Right, right. So... You live around here?"

Magnus pointed up the street. "Yes; upstairs from my clothing shop," he answered- not knowing why.

"Very nice. Makes for a short commute, that." Grimbledung narrowed his eyes again. "So you don't *really* need to be in that commuter lane after all, now do you?"

Magnus stared at Grimbledung. He pushed more air out his nose.

Grimbledung moved beside his donkey. "Well, I gotta get going, Mags. If you see my brother, give him my regards."

"Seymour D. ButtsGalore?"

Grimbledung snickered. "No, the drunkard."

"Tom F. Oolery?"

Grimbledung snickered again. "Yeah, that's him; tell him to lay off the drinking." He tipped his hand back and forth as if he were drinking.

"I don't believe I will."

Grimbledung swung up onto Wonky. "Nice meeting you then, von. See you around perhaps." He waved.

"It wasn't and I hope not."

"Away mighty steed!" Grimbledung heeled Wonky in the sides. "Hee-yah!"

Wonky walked away. Slowly.

Magnus scowled at the departing Gnome. "Stupid Gnomes. Once I'm running the town, *you* will be the first to be outlawed."

When Grimbledung got to the shop, he rode Wonky straight in the front door without stopping.

Door had taken an immediate liking to Wonky since he was able to bring over Coat Rack any time Door wanted.

"Door, didn't I tell you to stop letting that stupid beast in!"

Door rattled its latch inquisitively.

"The donkey of course. Grimbledung is mostly allowed indoors." Drimblerod snickered then turned to face his partner. "And haven't I've also told you to stop riding that stupid donkey into the shop?"

"What today?" Grimbledung swung off Wonky.

"Yes, in fact I *did* tell you that exact thing today! Earlier this morning when you were supposedly going to pick up those tools I ordered."

"And I did just that." Grimbledung lifted the saddlebags off the donkey. "With my mighty steed to hasten the process."

"You've been gone most of the morning, Grim; how is that speedy?"

"If I were on foot, I wouldn't have made it back until nightfall." Grimbledung pointed to the back room. "Go get a carrot or two from Dummy." Grimbledung held up three fingers. "But that's all or you'll spoil your dinner."

"That stupid donkey eats better than I do." Drimblerod held his hand out. "Those the tools?"

Grimbledung passed his partner the saddle bags. "They are." He snapped his fingers. "Oh! Do you want to hear about the crisis I just discovered?"

Drimblerod started taking the tools out of the bags. "I doubt I actually have any say so in the matter, but I'll try anyway. No; I don't want to hear about the latest crisis." He looked in the saddlebags. "Where's the hydrospanner? Can't very well fix wands without that all important tool."[10]

"It's still with the blacksmith," Grimbledung said. "She said it'd be ready tomorrow." He smiled. "I'd be more than willing to go pick it up then."

"No deal." Drimblerod shook his head. "Tomorrow *you* stay in the shop and *I* run to the smithy." He leaned forward and sniffed at his partner. "And the Duck Inn, it seems."

"But."

"One, two, three, done." Drimblerod touched his nose.

"Fine." Grimbledung clapped his hands once. "Crisis?"

"Yes, yes; what's the crisis?" Drimblerod absently straightened the tools on the counter. "You know some quiet, non-crisis times would be a nice change of pace. How about some thinly veiled satire unencumbered by chapter breaks? Girl becoming a wizard. Or maybe Death having a hard time of it, perhaps."

"It's been done. Besides, you know what they say..."

"Vote early, vote often?" Drimblerod said because for the past several days, Grimbledung had been saying it repeatedly.

"Well, yes, but also 'Never let a crisis go to waste'." He waggled his ears. "Even if you have to make up the crisis to distract voters from any illegal or immoral activities of yours that are being on the verge of being exposed."

"And that's not thinly veiled satire?"

"There's an issue with the up and coming elections." Grimbledung pressed on.

"Yeah there is." Drimblerod pushed the tools together. "Flora decide not to run?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Worse; seems that there's this other fellow looking to run and..." Grimbledung leaned forward on the counter toward his partner. "And he's not planning to run a fair campaign!" He started arranging the tools by size.

"Were *you* planning on running an above-board campaign?"

"Of course not!" Grimbledung sat on a stool. "What kind of thing is *that* to ask?"

"So you can run an unscrupulous campaign but others can't?" Drimblerod put the tools back into the saddlebag. "And that method works?"

"I hear that's how they elect the Arch Chancellor."

"I see," said Drimblerod. "Well, so the only unscrupulous campaigner allowed is you? Did you let him know that? What's he planning on doing that you aren't"

"Well for starters, this fellow is planning on killing anyone who runs against him!"

"All right; that is a bit harsh." Agreed Drimblerod. "What was your plan?"

"Several devastating debates, some character assassination." Grimbledung winked. "Not physical ones, I assure you. Copious mudslinging." He gave another wink. "Metaphorical *and* literal. And of course, copious ballot box stuffing."

"Sure, sure." Drimblerod closed the saddlebag. "And that little issue of not being able to read; will that affect said ballot stuffing?"

"I can't imagine it will. Radishes and Turnips, those two issues are."

"Both vegetables?"

"No."

"Both are good pickled?"

"No. Well, yes. But no."

"On with it then."

"Completely different."

Drimblerod shook his head. "What are the odds that you are going to work the rest of the day?" He narrowed his eyes. "Until closing."

"How closely are you going to be watching my every move?"

"Pretty close." Drimblerod gestured at the back room. "And not once will I allow you to go down in the vault."

"But what if…"

"Not once." Drimblerod pointed at his partner. "You'll be down there until nightfall." He shook his head. "You and those skeletons waste more time than…" He thought for a moment. No one he knew wasted time better than either Grimbledung or the skeleton gang. Together they were professional-grade time wasters. He frowned.

"Got too many choices to decide from?" Grimbledung tried. He waggled his ears for good measure. "Figured that much."

"No, actually. No one comes to mind."

"Well, I'm dashed."

"Well, be dashed out here working. That's what…" He was interrupted by the bell above Door ringing. He turned to look. It was the baker.

"Say there Welmyra P. CoppersGalore, what's cooking?"

Welmyra purposely turned toward Drimblerod. "Mister Drimblerod, how are you?"

"I'm doing great," Grimbledung said. "Better than usual, I would imagine this fine late morning early afternoon of the day."

Welmyra didn't take her eyes off Drimblerod.

"I am fine, Miss Welmyra." Drimblerod smiled. "And you?"

"She's baking, baking," Grimbledung guffawed. "Am I right or am I right?"

Welmyra brought the basket from her side. "I just brought a couple of new recipes I have been working on. I thought I'd get your opinion before serving them to the public."

"Well, if you're in the market for an honest food taster, then I'm your Gnome!" Grimbledung rubbed his belly. "Let's see what you gots, sister!"

"Weren't you going to talk to the skeletons about something?" Drimblerod asked.

Grimbledung looked to the back curtain then back to the basket. Twice. "It'll keep."

"Skeletons?" Welmyra asked.

"I can wait."

"You sure? What if the skeletons are out later tonight? Then you'd miss them."

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Bah, those fellows do run off quite a bit." He looked at the curtain again. "And I do have an important miss… thing I need to discuss with them."

"Well, I'll watch the shop while you deal with your dealings." Drimblerod winked. "Most likely very important dealings to be dealt with dealingly."

"Real skeletons?"

Grimbledung looked to the basket. "Well, sure, but… Food tasting."

"I'll save you some," Drimblerod lied. "Promise," he dolloped on top of the other lie. It sat there nicely.

"Really?"

"Most assuredly." Drimblerod put a cherry lie on top of the sundae of lies he was creating. "Count on it," he sprinkled on top like nuts because a sundae without nuts wasn't a sundae. Even when dealing in lies.[11]

"Well, with an assurance like that." Grimbledung waved to the baker. "See you later, Missus CoppersGalore."

"Only if I have to," admitted Welmyra. She had discovered that any insult she tossed at the odd Gnome went completely by him. Or over. Either way, they didn't seem to stick.

"Sounds great!" Grimbledung forced his way through the curtain. "I'll just be a moment."

Welmyra frowned. "Really?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "He's gone for a long while." He jerked a thumb at the still rustling curtain. "He's gone until the wee hours of the night, I'd imagine. When he and those skeletons get together, they get a lot of nothing done."

"Real skeletons? I thought those were a myth."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Nope. They're real flesh and… well, they're bones, really."

"So why do you have skeletons in your back room?" Welmyra moved to the counter and put her basket on it. "I heard that they only guard treasures." Her eyes got wide. "You didn't *really* find the Lost Picman's Mine treasure, did you?"

Drimblerod was torn between telling her the truth or making up a second hearty serving of lies. True enough, she did seem interested in him and he had to admit, she was definitely someone he was also interested in. Still, he didn't know her that well. Yet. "No, no; we ended

up running into some dragons," he said, starting with a little truth to keep the story straight. "And while running around under the amusement park…"

"Amusement park?"

Drimblerod smirked. "The Lost Picman's Mine, in case you haven't heard Miss Welmyra, is an *amusement park* now." He was pleased that he could use more truth than lies in case their relationship moved forward. "This Dwarf developer bought up the whole area. They give tours of the mine." He paused. "Actually, there are four mines connected together and you can get a guided tour of them."

"Really?"

Drimblerod nodded, happy that the subject had changed from the hundreds of pounds of gold, gems, and platinum coins currently residing under the shop. "It really looks nice. We should run out there one day. They even have some rides."

Welmyra smiled. "Well, that would be a fun time. Is it far?"

Drimblerod tilted his hand. "Well, if we go by wagon it is." He gave a wink, "But we did manage to get a flying carpet while we were there so we could make it there in a day, spend a day, then fly back the next." He cringed when he realized he had brought up the subject of treasure again.

"A flying carpet?" Welmyra looked around the shop. There were several area rugs in the shop. "One of these *flies*?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "No, Grimbledung keeps it at Flora's place. But we could easily borrow it."

Welmyra hopped onto a stool. "Well, that would be a fun adventure. I've never been on a flying anything before." She opened the basket. "And if you like any of my new concoctions, we could bring some along as well." She opened the basket and the smells of roasted radishes and cinnamon wafted out of it.

"Gads woman!" Drimblerod leaned over the basket and took a deep breath. "That smells absolutely wonderful!"

Welmyra smiled. "Well, hopefully they taste as good as they smell." She had thought about going by Macca's *Herbs and More, Much More* to pick up something along the lines of an Interest Potion but decided to woo Drimblerod the old-fashioned way; by secretly finding out his favorite foods and combining them.

Drimblerod glanced at the stairs. "Say, did you bring something to drink with your treats?"

Welmyra's smile faltered when she realized she had completely forgotten to bring anything to drink. "No; I forgot. I had some fresh milk set aside but I left it on the counter when I packed the basket." She frowned. "Oh, drat it all."

Drimblerod patted her hand. "Fear not; I have just the thing."

Welmyra smiled. "Oh, that would be grand. If you had some milk, that would go well I think."

"No, not milk. Better." He looked back at the curtain. "And since I know my partner is going to be busy for the rest of the day, I'm glad to bring it out."

"Oh?"

Drimblerod scampered to the stairs. "I will be right back!" He called as he ran up them. "Don't start without me!"

After some loud rummaging, Drimblerod ran back down the steps. He had a bottle of very bright orange liquid in one hand and two mugs in the other. "Sorry; had to find some suitable mugs."

"The right size?" Welmyra tried.

"The right cleanliness."

Welmyra gestured at the stool across the counter from her. "Well, you pour and I'll serve the treats."

Drimblerod clambered onto the stool. "Deal." He pulled the cork out with his teeth.

"That's really orange. What is it?"

"It's a delectable drink Grimbledung and I came across in our travels." He held the bottle out. "It's called Melonchello."[12]

Welmyra tentatively sniffed at the end. "Smells sweet. Is it just melons?"

Drimblerod shrugged. "Actually, I have no idea how it is made. It's melons and alcohol." He poured a little into the mug. "See what you think of that." He offered it to her.

Welmyra took the mug and tipped it back tentatively. As the liquid reached her mouth, she tipped it more. When it was empty, she smacked her lips. "Oh my."

Drimblerod took the mug and filled it half full.

"Oh my!" Welmyra said again as her stomach warmed. "There is indeed a lot of alcohol in that." She smirked. "I hope you're not going to take advantage of me after you get me drunk."

"The thought hadn't crossed my mind." Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Until now of course, now it's forefront in my thoughts." He slid the mug toward her. "Mayhap I need a treat to take my mind elsewhere."

"Well, this will help, I am sure." Welmyra handed him a frosted tart.

"Cinnamon and candied beets?" Now Drimblerod took a tentative taste. "Oh my." He said as he chewed. "Dee-lectable."

The two ate and drank, and talked for the better part of two hours.

When the bottle was empty and the treats gone -and since they were both legal, consenting adults- they told Door to lock up and then took advantage of each other.

Oh my!

Right?

Chapter 7
Skeletons? Key.

Grimbledung pushed through the curtain. "Make sure you save me something!" He called over his shoulder. As he moved to the large rug in the middle of their back room, he looked around before dropping to his knees. He quickly rolled the rug until a large wood trap door was exposed. He looked around again then rapped on the door three times, then once, then three times again.

Nothing happened.

Grimbledung repeated the knocked on the trap door.

Twice.

Finally, he grabbed the large iron ring on one side of the door and heaved it open. A thick strap kept it from opening completely.

"Hello?" He called into the darkness.

No one answered.

With a frown, Grimbledung climbed down the ladder set into one side of the large shaft.

A hundred feet below, he finally reached the bottom. "Hello?" He tried again- fruitlessly. "Most annoying." He said as he started down one of the two tunnels. After a mere fifty feet, he exited into a large chamber. It was filled with gold, gems, and of course platinum.

And a square card table.

And four chairs.

And four skeletons.

"What is the use of a secret knock if no one answers it?"

The skeletons sat deathly still. Peering over the cards in their hands.

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips.

"I raise five gold," said Wilhelm after a long moment. He slid five coins into the substantial pile in the middle of the table.

"I call," said Skeleton Two.

Skeleton Two didn't remember who he was before he died because he had been hit on the head with an axe just moments before It[13] happened. Decades later, when his skeleton was reanimated, thanks to being revived by the same magician that revived the other three sitting at the table, he had immediately asked what happened. The magician had said "You're a skeleton, too." Since his (metaphorical) ears were still ringing, he heard 'you're Skeleton Two'. And the name stuck.

Hausen looked at the pair. "I think you're bluffing." He pushed five coins into the pile. "I think…so I'll just call."

"I *know* you're bluffing," said Harry. He put five gold coins into the pot then added two platinum coins as well. "And I raise."

"Those are mine you know," Grimbledung complained. He slowly walked around behind the skeletons, looking at their cards. When he got to Wilhelm, he whistled softly.

"I'm out." Declared Hausen.

"Me too," said Skeleton Two.

"Well I…" Stammered Wilhelm. He looked over his shoulder at Grimbledung. "Be gone, you Gnome! Scat!" He moved his cards close to his chest and shoo'ed Grimbledung with his other hand. "That's cheating, you know!"

Grimbledung moved to the opening of the vault. "Can you just finish up this hand already?"

Wilhelm looked at his cards again, then peered over them at Harry. He squinted at him, then at his cards again. Finally, he tossed two platinum coins onto the top of the substantial pile of coins and gems. "Fine then. Let's see what you got!"

"Hah!" Harry looked at his cards. "Wait- is it still light out?" All four skeletons looked at Grimbledung.

"It's still light out." Grimbledung said. "Why?"

"Hah!" Harry said as he lay his six cards down. He had a three, a five, a six, an eight, a nine, and a ten. They were all red.

"Nice, Harry, nice." Said Skeleton Two. He pushed his seven cards (because he was on the dealer's right) into the discard pile. "Had me beat."

Harry reached out to pull the pile toward himself.

"Just a second, old man." Wilhelm dealt his cards out: a king and a deuce, two jacks, an ace and a seven. "I was missing the second ace for a Royal Fizzbin."

"I had it," said Hausen. "Since two hands ago." He pulled it out of his pelvis.

Grimbledung did a double-take. "You've been hoarding a card for *two* hands?"

Skeleton Two nodded. "You can keep one card for up to three hands."

"Only on Thraksdays," added Harry.

"Only on Thraksdays," agreed Hausen.

"What kind of game are you playing? Are you making up the rules as you go along?" Grimbledung shook his head.

"There are rules," countered Harry. "There are *definitely* rules." He pulled the pile of coins toward himself, a good portion of them fell off the table and scattered around his chair, adding to the general mess of treasure.

Grimbledung looked down. "And weren't these all stacked not just yesterday morning?"

"We had a wrestling match late last night."

"I won." Declared Skeleton Two.

"Why in the lands are you wrestling down here?"

"To stay fit, of course."

Grimbledung tuned to Hausen. "Stay fit? You don't even have muscles!"

"Well, the worst thing that can happen is to get out of breath when you're in a sword fight," Harry pointed out. He started stacking the coins still in front of him.

"You don't have lungs!"

"Listen… we're in the middle of something important here." Wilhelm stood. "Two?" He gestured to the seat to Skeleton Two's left.

The other skeletons stood and Wilhelm and Skeleton Two swapped seats with the players on their left.

"Is that a rule too?"

Harry cocked his head at Grimbledung. "Want to play? We can fit another chair in. We're short one anyway with Coreman gone."

"No thanks."

Harry shrugged and tossed a coin into the middle of the table. "Alright, threes, fives, sevens, and red Queens are wild but only if you are building a Three Quarters or a Full. Or a combination of the two.

"Right." Skeleton Two tossed a coin in. "Sounds simple enough."

Wilhelm added his coin. "And…" He looked down at his pelvis. "Red nines are also wild and can act like two cards."

Grimbledung shook his head.

"Sound's fair." Hausen added his coin. "But *only* if you call."

"And Royal Fizzbins have to be natural." Added Skeleton Two.

"Well sure, otherwise we'd just be playing Slop." Wilhelm merely cut the cards instead of shuffling them then began to deal. "One…"

"Listen guys, I need your help for something." Began Grimbledung.

"Two…"

"With what? I don't want to restack all this stuff, if that's what you're getting at." Skeleton Two said. He peeked at his two cards.

"Three…"

"There's this guy I need to check up on this evening."

"I've got a date." Said Skeleton Two. "Can't make it."

"Three…"

"A date?" Grimbledung smirked. "I can't imagine any gal…"

"Four…"

"It's a hot date." Wilhelm said. "Five." He continued to deal the cards.

"A hot date?"

Skeleton Two nodded at Grimbledung. "She's a wild one." He winked. "Coat rack."

"Is that an expression?" Grimbledung cupped his hands in front of his chest. "For... you know…"

"No; she's a coat rack." Said Skeleton Two. "A rack upon which coats are hung."

"She's a tart is what she is." Wilhelm said.

"What?"

"Six… A real tart; running around on her steady, that one."

"What?" Grimbledung looked at the ceiling. "A *coat rack*?"

"And one for me and the dealer's right." Wilhelm gave himself and Hausen an extra card. He put the deck near the middle of the table so all players could reach it if they needed to draw a card. "The game's afoot!"

"What about you other guys?" Grimbledung began to walk around the table looking at each Skeleton's cards. None seemed to be anything particularly good until he remembered the large number of wild cards in play. "Want to help?"

"Sure we're in. What's the gig?" Harry pulled his cards close to his chest.

Grimbledung leaned down and looked through his rib cage to see them anyway. "What's wild again?"

Hausen exhaled loudly[14]. "Threes, fives, sevens, and red Queens. Just the standards."

"And red nines," reminded Wilhelm. He looked down again to confirm. "Definitely red nines."

"What an absurd game. Where'd you even pick it up?"

"From this ship's captain. You'd have liked him; drinker, womanizer. Made up stuff as he went along. Always threw a good party. Fought like a ballet dancer but no one could beat him."

"Sounds like a fine fellow". Grimbledung nodded. "But it's to be expected; most sailors are well mannered, respectful of other cultures, world travelers."[15]

"We're world travelers too, you know." Skeleton Two took a card from the deck and discarded a different one in front of himself. He also added a gold coin to the pot. "Raising."

"So this guy is interested in being mayor," continued Grimbledung, "and he's not going to play fair."

"Were you going to play fair?" Wilhelm asked.

"Well…" Grimbledung shook his head. "Let's not get off task here. This guy is looking to off people."

"That's a time-honored tradition in politics. People dying from suicide with a long bow. Single wagon accidents," said Wilhelm.

"Falling off a flying carpet," offered Hausen.

"Shot in the back with a crossbow in an apparent suicide." Harry picked up Wilhelm's discarded card. "Happens all the time." He discarded his own in front of himself then tossed a gold coin into the pot. "Calling the raise to stay in."

"In any case," said Grimbledung, "I need to sneak into this guy's place and see what he's all about." He looked at Skeleton Two's hand. "You've got them out of order." He reached over and tried to rearrange the cards.

"Hey now! You sort like you want, and I'll sort like I want!" He slapped Grimbledung's hand. "Keep your hands off my cards if you want my help."

"But you've got a date," Grimbledung reminded him.

"With a tart." Said Wilhelm. He took a card from the draw pile. Slowly he reached under this thighbone and pulled out another card. He didn't discard but instead tossed two gold coins into the pot. "Raising the calling of the calling the raise to stay in."

All the skeletons nodded; it was now two gold coins to stay in the hand.

"Watching this is going to give me a headache." Grimbledung moved to the entrance to the room. "So can I count on you being ready by nightfall?"

"When's that?" Wilhelm looked around. "Hard to tell down here."

"About two hours, I'd say," said Grimbledung. He moved back to the table and looked at Wilhelm's hand.

"Then I'd better get rid of this queen soon," said Hausen.

Grimbledung shook his head. "What's wild?"

The skeletons all looked at him.

"What, this hand?" Wilhelm moved his hands close to his sternum.

"Just pull up a chair and wait here," suggested Skeleton Two. "You know you want in." He waggled his cards toward Grimbledung. "Plaaaay the gaaaame."

"Or we can just meet you at the Duck entrance." Said Harry. "Easy enough."

When the treasure room had been carved out of the ground under Second Hand Sorcery, Grimbledung had pointed out that every single treasure room he had ever been in had a secret back entrance. When it was pointed out that this second entrance invariably became not-so-secret and caused a bunch of the treasure to be hauled off, he hired the skeletons to guard it. Instead of not adding the secret door.

"I think I might just sit here." Grimbledung said. He glanced at the ceiling. "I think that Welmyra and Drimblerod need some alone time."

"Ooooh!" Said all the skeletons at once.

"Exactly." Grimbledung pulled a chair up between Harry and Hausen. "So how do I play this absurd game?"

"Well, you can't come in in the middle of a hand, that's for sure." Said Harry. "Unless it's Moonsday, of course."

"It's not," assured Skeleton Two. "If it were, I wouldn't have a date."

"With a tart," reminded Wilhelm.

"You're just jealous." Skeleton Two took a card from the discard pile.

Hausen nodded. "Yeah, yeah; we know." Hausen rolled his eyes. Metaphorically speaking, that is.

Skeleton Two discarded a card into his stack and tossed a platinum into the pot. "Raising the raising of the calling of the calling the raise to stay in."

"How long is this going to take?" Grimbledung frowned. "I'd like to play a hand. And I've got a mission you know. I've wanted a mission for a while now."

"Yeah, yeah," said Hausen. "They brought it down like room service. We've all heard the story."

"Then you know it's important." Grimbledung looked around suspiciously. "I am trying to get Flora elected and there's this guy who wants her dead!"

"Dead, dead?" Harry drew a card. "It's not so bad once you get used to it."

"Are you in?" Grimbledung asked.

"Sure, sure." Harry tossed a platinum coin on the pot. "I'm in."

"Gah!" Grimbledung stomped his feet. "We've got things to do!" He frowned. "And I want to play a hand. Finish the hand already!"

"We're getting to it," assured Harry. "I assume this mission is going to involve sneakery and underhandedness?"

"Of course."

"And, I also assume it will involve some Under dem Schutz der Dunkleheit?"

"Of course!" Grimbledung said again. "That goes with sneakery."

"What does that even mean?" Skeleton Two asked. He drew a card from Harry's stack, looked at it, then put it back. He drew another card from the main discard stack, then discarded another from his hand. He looked at his cards for a moment. "I'm out." He tossed his cards on the table.

"You sure you don't want to come?" Grimbledung leaned toward the skeleton.

Skeleton Two shook his head. "No chance. I live by three rules."

"You're dead, you know." Grimbledung reminded him.

"Keep bows tight. Keep arrows sharp"

"Well, those are two good rules," admitted Grimbledung. "I'll give you those. What's the last rule?"

"Never turn down a date with a tart."

"I thought it would be to never put money into show business," said Hausen.

"That is also important." Skeleton Two nodded.

"You live by some good rules." Grimbledung said. He clapped his hands once. "So we head out at nightfall then."

"That's that Dunkleheit," Harry winked. "That was recently mentioned."

"So…" Hausen laid out his cards. "Beat this!"

Grimbledung looked at the cards. He had played many hands of many different card games- the hand in front of him seemed to be a mish-mash of cards with no order, color matches, and only two face cards.

"Drat it!" Harry slapped his cards onto the table. "Beats me."

"Beats me too," said Grimbledung. He waggled his ears. "Can I play now?"

"Sure, sure, just a quick hand or two." Said Harry. "Then we head out."

Five hours and dozens of hands later.

"Hey! Where'd the time go?" Grimbledung exclaimed as he drew a card. A deuce. He added it to his formidable hand. "We really need to get to the mission!"

"Last hand. I call last hand," said Wilhelm. "No limit on bidding."

Everyone at the table nodded. Except Skeleton Two; he had left three hours earlier to go on his date.

"With a tart." Wilhelm said.

With a tart.

Chapter 8
Project ~~Flora~~ O Mayhem

Grimbledung led the way down the winding corridor that went from the Second Hand Sorcery treasure room to the larder under the Duck Inn and Dine. When they got to a thick wooden door, Grimbledung put his ear to it.

"There's almost never anyone down there," said Harry.

"And when there is, it's Julie and she knows the secret door is there," added Hausen.

"And Wil. Wil knows too," said Wilhelm.

"Since when does Wil know?" Grimbledung asked. "You know how secret doors become not-so-secret doors?"

"By telling Wil?" Wilhelm asked.

"Well, where there's a Wil…" Harry guffawed. "Right? Right?"

Grimbledung shook his head. He pulled back on the large bolt that locked the door. "I have a bad feeling about this. Maybe I should have gone alone."

Hausen put his hand on Grimbledung's shoulder. "We're professionals you know. You'll be glad we came along before this is all over."

"You say that every time."

"And are you?" Hausen asked.

"No." Grimbledung struggled to push the door open. The bottom of the door on the other side had a ledge built onto it so that barrels or boxes could be stacked directly up against it - making it nearly impossible in the darkness to see there was even a door there.

Harry pushed on Grimbledung's back, helping him get the door open.

"That's plenty," said Grimbledung. He turned sideways and squeezed through the opening. "If you open it too far, you just have to push it back more."

The skeletons moved to the larder. "What's the plan then?" Hauser asked. "Is there even a plan?"

Grimbledung struggled to push the door closed. "There's a plan," he huffed. "There's a plan."

Harry sat on a box and picked up an apple. He bit into it and chewed it up. Bits of it bounced down his rib cage and out the bottom of his pelvis onto the ground as he did.

"That's gross." Wilhelm said. "It's like you're pooping right here in the larder."

"No pooping in the larder!" Grimbledung hissed.

"Why are you hissing?" Harry asked. He bit into the apple again. "These keep you from getting scurvy, you know."

"You don't have scurvy," said Hausen.

"Because I eat apples." Harry waved the apple at his partner. "An ounce of preventative medicine is worth a pound of cure that gets stitched in time before the worms get it." He looked at Grimbledung. "Why are you hissing?"

"We're on a mission!" Hissed Grimbledung.

"What, officially? Now?" Harry asked. "Does the mission have a name?"

"Missions should always have a name," agreed Hausen. "Makes them sound more official."

Grimbledung officially named the mission: "We will call it Project Flora."

Wilhelm winked at Harry and Hausen. "Project Mayhem is more like it," he whispered.

Both nodded back.

So the name was officially changed.

"Well then, voices down, chaps." Harry dropped the mostly eaten apple into the bin. "The game's afoot…" He winked. "For Project Flora."

"Mayhem," corrected Hausen.

"Mayhem," said Harry without missing a beat.

"A foot?" Grimbledung whispered.

"Well, *we* don't use metrics," admitted Harry. He dusted his hands off. "So where are we off to?" He added softly.

"We are going to Magnus Opus von Magnus' home to see if we can figure out what he is up to."

"But Grimbledung, you said he was going to kill Flora to become mayor," said Wilhelm. "We already know what he's up to." He nodded at the other two skeletons. "Easy mission right there." He held out his hand. "We still want to be paid current spy scale though."

Both Harry and Hausen nodded.

"Plus expenses," added Wilhelm.

"Of course."

"Goes without saying."

Grimbledung tugged on his ears. "No, no, no. We are going to his house to snoop around to see if we can find anything incriminating we can use against him to keep him from killing Flora."

"Flora doesn't die?" Harry asked.

"No!"

"Really? I mean, *you* die on a regular basis and it works out, right?"

Grimbledung opened his mouth then closed it. He considered that for a moment. "Well, if we can prevent it from happening, that would be nice."[16]

"Right, so Grimbledung's gal makes it…." Began Harry.

"Possibly," reminded Hausen.

"Possibly," continued Harry, "and we find incriminating evidence."

Hausen raised his hand.

"You don't have to raise your hand," said Harry.

No one said anything for a moment.

Wilhelm exhaled and gestured at Hausen

"Yes, Hausen, what is it?" Asked Harry.

"Can we plant incriminating evidence if we don't find any?"

Grimbledung moved to the stairs leading out. "Excellent question; that goes without saying."

Wilhelm winked. "Right. Plausible deniability." He waved his hands dismissively, "Forget I ever mentioned it."

"Well let's go," Grimbledung said. He started up the stairs. "Out the door, then we go left to his place. Just keep it nonchalant so no one notices us coming out."

"Right, right. Three skeletons and a Gnome come out of a larder that has no exit." Harry grinned. "Hey, how about we walk out backwards and if anyone askes, we tell them we are going in?"

Hausen poked Harry in the eyes. "That's the most lamebrain thing I've ever heard. How are we supposed to walk out of here backwards?"

"I would suggest toe, heel, toe, heel," said Wilhelm. "Nyuk, nyuk!"

Hausen slapped Wilhelm. "Don't you start!"

Wilhelm's head did a complete spin. "Hey now!"

"Alright you three," said Grimbledung. He grasped the handle to the door. "Just keep your stoogery to a minimum so no one notices." He pointed. "So out the door then left to Magnus' place."

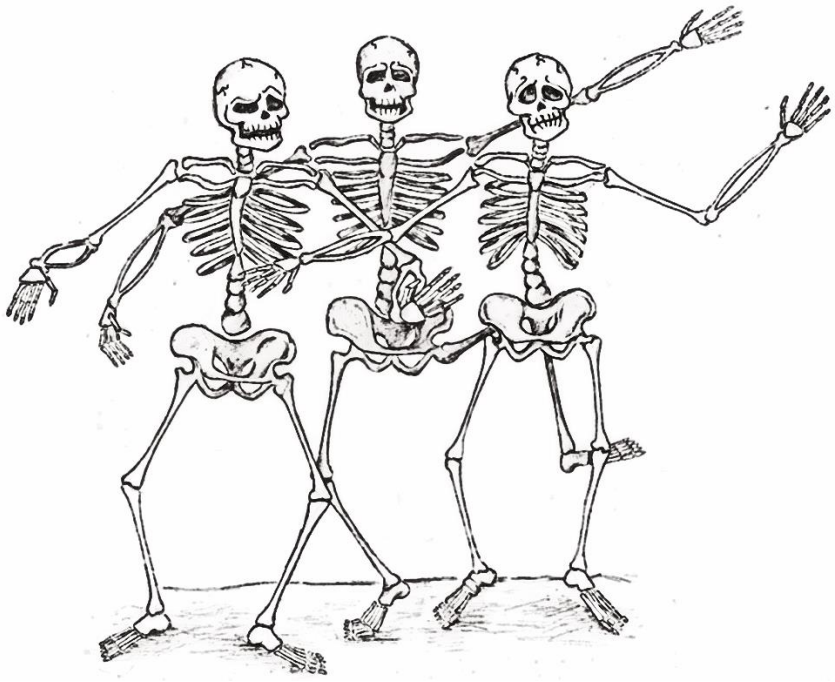
The skeletons all nodded.

Grimbledung opened the door and stepped out. He looked down to make sure he didn't make eye contact with anyone. He purposefully moved to the curtain and pushed his way out. In the foyer, he nodded casually at the couple who were coming in and exited the establishment almost completely unnoticed.

The skeletons exited the door and immediately turned left. They crowded each other as they went and spun in a circle. This put them heading toward the back of the bar. The three tightly-clustered skeletons shuffling towards the bar had everyone stop to watch what they were doing.

"A nice exit," Grimbledung said. He turned around. "I don't think anyone noticed...There was no one behind him.

"Gah!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth several times then stormed back into the Duck Inn and Dine.



The skeletons were at the bar. Each had a drink.

"Gah!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Oh, sorry," said Wilhelm. He held up his thumb and waggled it back and forth. "One more drink for our benefactor, if you please, Wil."

"No, that's not what I meant," Grimbledung hesitated. "Well, just one drink, I suppose."

Three hours and half a dozen drinks later.

"So what kind of mission you going on?" Wil asked.

"A secret one," Wilhelm hissed.

"Why are you hissing?" Wil asked.

"It's a secret," Wilhelm said.

"That you're whispering or the mission is?"

Wilhelm frowned. "Both I think."

Harry nodded. "Both." He looked toward the door as Grimbledung came in. "Ahh, there we go. The leader of the mission back from the outhouse!"

"Shhh! It's a secret!" Wilhelm said.

"The mission or that he's the leader of it?" Wil stifled a grin. "Or that he was in the outhouse?"

Harry winked. "Now you've got it."

"Well that's good because it's getting late and I really need to close up shop," Wil said. "We've been closed for a good hour now." He gestured. "Even the professional drinkers are gone."

"Well, Grimbledung is still here," offered Hausen.

"That is true. But still. It's really late." Wil looked toward the large window. "It will be light in a couple of hours in fact."

"Gah!" Grimbledung said. "We're losing our Dunkleheit!" He pointed at the door. "Let's go!"

Wil leaned over the bar to look at the floor. "So why don't drinks just flow right through you?"

"You mean like they do Grimbledung?" Guffawed Harry.

"Well… yes." Wil said.

"Well," explained Hausen. "There is a limit to the amount of acceptable potty humor so we hate to waste it all at once."

The other two skeletons nodded.

"Fair enough." Wil said. He hesitated for a moment. "And the tab is going to be covered by whom?"

"Our benefactor, of course," Wilhelm grinned. "That's what they do."

Grimbledung scowled. He reached into his belt pouch. "What's the tab then?"

"Well…" Wil did a mental calculation. "There were six drinks each for the bones brothers… four for you… that round you bought for the entire place before people left…"

"Sounds like I'm up in gold territory," Grimbledung said.

Wil nodded. "And the fact that you kept the place open past the posted times which could have gotten me a hefty fine puts it at a couple of gold coins."

"Gads, Drimblerod won't be pleased." Grimbledung fished two gold coins from his pouch. "Let's get going."

"One for the road?" Wilhelm suggested.

Wil shook his head. "That's what you said an hour ago." He shooed the group toward the door. "Away with you. Go on that secret mission. Or sleep it off. Either way, be gone and don't return until business resumes during normal operating hours."

"Well, that's the nicest I've ever been thrown out of an establishment," Grimbledung said.

"Us too." Admitted the skeletons.

Harry pointed at the door. "Lead the way, Grimbledung."

Chapter 9
Grim Findings

Flora walked down the side of the street toward Second Hand Sorcery. She smiled at passersby, knowing in her heart that Grimbledung would be at the shop as he had said he would.

She thought back to their conversation in front of the Duck Inn and Dine.

Her steps slowed.

She thought harder- nowhere in the conversation, she realized, had he actually said he would be there.[17]

Flora stopped walking. A scowl grew on her face. "Oh, Grimbledung Sixtoes. If you are not there…" She let the threat hang in the air.

A Dwarf walking towards her had to duck to avoid it.

Flora picked up her pace as she now marched toward the wand shop. "Grimbledung Sixtoes, you had better be there."

"Flora," a voice called from beside her. "Flora, do you have a moment?"

Flora looked to her left, scowl still on her face. Julie was there.

"Oh dear," Julie said. "You look like you've seen a Gnome," she teased.

"It's exactly the opposite," Flora said as her face softened. "I was supposed to meet Grimbledung but I'm now thinking he's not going to be at the wand shop after we've made plans." She frowned. "Again."

Julie nodded. "Well I am sorry to hear that, but I can tell you that he does care for you." She looked toward the shop, knowing he wasn't there. "Do you have a moment?"

"I suppose so… he's not there, is he."

Julie shook her head. "Not at the moment, no; I saw him running down the street." She decided to leave out the three skeletons accompanying him. "But he'll be back later on, I'm sure."

"This evening?"

"I'm… never sure when evening ends… and night begins." Julie stammered.

"Before midnight." Flora specified tersely.

"Well, Maca told me that the future is hard to see sometimes." Julie said noncommittally. "A powerful shaman once said 'always in motion is the future'."

"I would think that emotions would affect the future."

"That was a long and heated debate - motion or emotion- that we had." Julie gestured to a bench. "When said shaman slurs their words, messages are open to interpretation and debate. You see what happens is…"[18]

Flora walked to the bench and sat roughly on it. "Do you need help with something or are you just trying to delay me until Grimbledung comes back?"

"Well actually, I was thinking *you* might need some help with something."

"You want to teach me some new knots so I can keep that Gnome in place?"

Julie laughed. "Well, how about we start with running for election." She sat beside the Gnomess. "It can be stressful you know."

"Holding a public office? I image it could be."

"No, I meant running for public office. Unlike other endeavors, getting there is ninety percent of the battle."

"I see." Flora frowned. "Actually, no; I don't see. How can getting there be harder than staying there?"

Julie thought back to her conversation with Maca about how they would pitch their proposal and to whom. The more she thought about it, the more she thought she had gotten the more difficult of the two tasks- speaking to Pozzuoli would have been far easier. And would have probably included pastries. "When you run for public office, one of the things that happens is that your private life invariably becomes public and then the subject of heated debate and examination… and sometimes exaggeration."

Flora thought of her back room. "Raising the ordinary to extraordinary."

Julie laughed again. "What?" She endeavored to not pry into peoples' private lives, but with Flora, the rumors were rampant."

"Nothing." Flora smiled at the woman. "I'm sorry, I don't really understand what you're asking of me."

"Well, just to get some help with your campaign…"

"Grimbledung said he was going to help with that."

Julie nodded. "Yes, of course he did; because he cares for you. But you should also get some professional, experienced help as well."

"You want to help with my campaign?"

"No… well, yes I'll help, but that's not what I meant. I… we were thinking that you could benefit from someone who has experience with running successful campaigns. An advisor of sorts."

"Who?"

"Well, Maca is talking to Pozzuoli about that. She said that she was sure he knew someone who could provide…"

"I'm not going to cheat to win, if that's what you're proposing." A frown returned to Flora's face. "I either win fair and square or not at all."

Julie put her hands on Flora's. "And I would never ask you to do something unethical. It's just that if you've never run for any sort of office… You haven't, have you?"

"No."

"Then you should keep in mind that the folks running against you might not be completely ethical in their campaign. And they can help with that."

"Well that would be good. What else?"

Julie thought about the pastries and coffee Maca was probably enjoying while she tried to come up with an example. "Ahh!" She raised a finger. "With the debates for one."

"As a server, I'm pretty good at arguing with people."

"Well, a debate isn't an argument. It's more about answering the question the way you want to answer it no matter how it is asked. And..." Another thought occurred to her. "We can help set up mock debates for you to practice on before the real one. Or ones."

Flora nodded. "I hadn't thought of that; practicing a debate before actually doing it."

"Sure, sure. It's done all the time. We will set up a room, put folks in it to watch."

"People will watch the practice? What if I mess up?"

"That's why it's a practice one. Then you can ask the folks that came what they thought of it. What you said well, what you should try to say better."

"And Magnus Opus is going to agree to this?"

"Oh, he won't be there. Someone else will stand in for him to debate against you." Maca smiled. "He'll be doing the same thing."

Flora considered it for a long moment. "Fine then. Let's get an expert to help me win the election."

"Then it's settled." She looked toward Second Hand Sorcery. "You should get a good night's sleep."

"He's not coming back tonight, is he?" Flora's frown came back again.

Knowing the unstable Gnome well, and knowing he was out with at least three Skeletons, she decided to just answer truthfully. "No. But if it helps any, he has your best interests in mind." Julie stood. "I can guarantee that much at least."

"That much?"

Julie thought back to what she knew of Grimbledung. And how Maca had described a vision of him swinging from a chandelier, arms outstretched while a skeleton frantically held his feet. "Yeah, that I can guarantee." She shook her head, trying to get the image out.

Chapter 10
Four on a Door

Harry, Wilhelm and Hausen marched down the center of the street. They had learned that trying to sneak places just brought unwanted attention. Just walking three abreast made people immediately avoid eye contact with them and forget they had even seen them soon after.

"Hey, where'd our inglorious leader go?" Wilhelm asked. After leaving the Duck Inn and Dine, Grimbledung had scampered off with only a 'I'll catch up' as an explanation.

"No idea," Hausen said. "And the narrative didn't help either."

"Well, here's the place." Wilhelm pointed. "What do we do?"

"I thought the plan included breaking in."

Wilhelm nodded at Hausen. "You volunteering?"

"I'll give it a shot, I suppose."

Wilhelm winked at Harry. "You heard him."

Harry bent over and grabbed Hausen's leg near the ankle. As he lost his balance, Harry grabbed his arm as well.

Wilhelm did the same thing on the other side.

"Think this will work?" Hausen asked.

"Did it last time?"

Hausen shook his head at Wilhelm. "I'm not sure; the events are kind of fuzzy."

"Well it's sure to work this time. It's just a regular wrought iron reinforced oak door." Wilhelm said. "Here we go."

Wilhelm and Harry took a step back, swinging Hausen backwards. As they stepped forward, the banged Hausen's head against the door.

"Did that work?" Hausen asked. He shook his head to clear the sound of bells. "Is it open?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure we're almost there." Wilhelm said with a grin. "Let's give it another couple of go's then we'll trade up."

"Deal." Hausen said.

So they tried again.

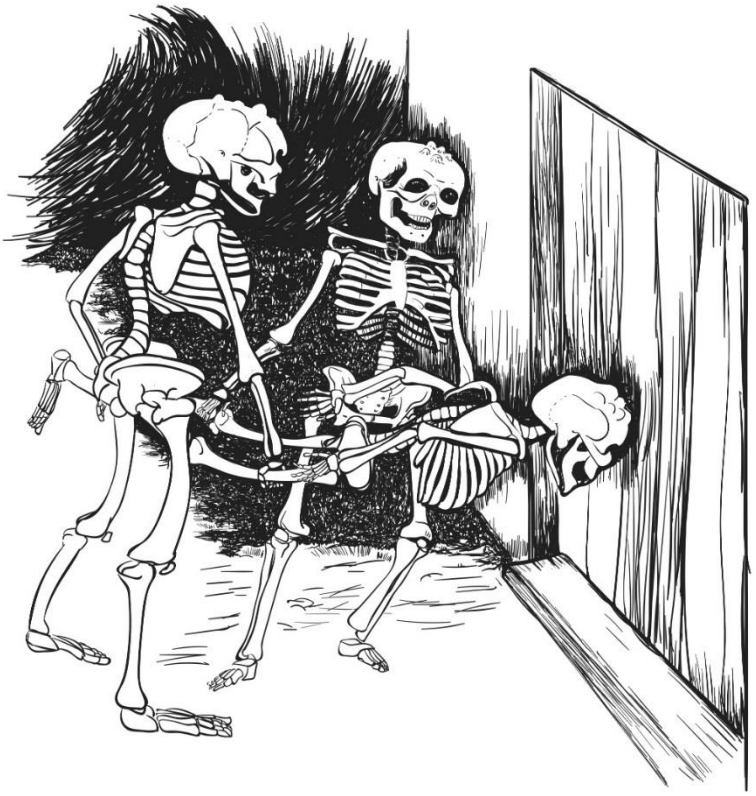
And again.

And again. Then they swapped positions.

And they tried again with Harry as the battering ram.

Several times.

By the time Wilhelm was hearing bells, Grimbledung skidded to a stop beside them. "What in the lands are you doing? I could hear you two blocks away!" Grimbledung hissed.



"We're breaking in of course," Harry said. "Again?"

"I think I felt it move that last time. Give it another shot," Wilhelm said.

"No!" Grimbledung grabbed Wilhelm's shoulder. "Would you stop doing that?" He held up a coil of rope. "I brought this!"

"Well, I'm no expert but I'm pretty sure you can't batter a door down with a coil of rope." Hausen said.

"Put him down!"

Hausen and Harry let go of Wilhelm, who promptly fell on his face.

"Hey now!" Wilhelm got to his feet. "That kind of hurt."

"Bashing your head into that door didn't hurt but falling did?" Grimbledung asked.

"It's all about the angle," said Wilhelm. He dusted his hands off. "Hey, wanna try with him?" He jerked a thumb at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung took a step back.

"Four on a door is bad luck," Harry reminded everyone.

Because it was.

"So what do we do?" Hausen said. "We should go back to playing cards until the bars open again."

"No." Grimbledung paused. "Well, we can make that 'Plan B'. First let's climb up on the roof and sneak in nice and quiet from there." Grimbledung pointed skyward. "Nice and easy like a cat burglar."

"Never stolen a cat." Wilhelm said. "Nyuk, nyuk!"

"That's terrible." Harry slapped Wilhelm.

"Hey!" Wilhelm shoved Harry.

"Alright, you two; break it up." Hausen stepped between the pair.

The pair bonked Hausen on the head, knocking him to the ground.

"If you three are done." Grimbledung said. "Look. We can climb up the drain pipe." He pointed at a large drainpipe anchored to the side of the building. "It looks plenty sturdy."

Hausen got to his feet. "Fine then. Never broken into a place from the roof. I can't imagine it will be an issue though."

"As easy as making pie." Grimbledung started to shinny up the pipe.

"Making pie is actually pretty hard," Wilhelm said. "Have you ever tried?" He started up the pipe behind Grimbledung.

"Fine then," Grimbledung said. "Buying pie."

"Oh, that's easy enough," Harry said. He hopped up and grabbed the pipe, following Wilhelm.

After a few minutes, the quartet made it to the roof.

Chapter 11
Meanwhile

Righty picked up his bowl. The watered-down porridge in it sloshed around as he walked away from the others. In one gulp, he downed it. There weren't even bits of meat in it since it was just the morning meal.

When he was sure no one was looking, he reached into his apron, pulled out a piece of jerky, and stealthily put it in his mouth as he yawned. If things went as they had all the previous days, he would turn in his bowl and get in line with the other prisoners to walk to the entrance of the salt mine.

Except today he did not plan to chip away at rock salt in the dim light for almost fifteen hours. Today he was escaping. He picked up his hammer handle- the iron heads were kept in the mine and handed out after the prisoners had been safely shackled in place. The handles they kept as their only personal possession. And of course, they could be taken away for any infraction, forcing the workers to have to use just the iron head to chip out their day's quota of salt. And the usual day's quota would still be expected. Or else.

Many prisoners had carved the ends of their handles into spoons to eat their watered-down meals. Righty had spent his time tempering his already strong wood handle over the evening fire. And carving small indentations in it that matched his meaty hands. He had also practiced with it until it was an extension of his own hands. A lethal extension.

"Get in line!" A gruff voice shouted.

Dutifully- lest they lose their handles- the workers all stood and shuffled to where the line always formed.

The particulars of the line was one of the many things that Righty had made note of during his captivity. He scowled as he thought back to that fateful day when a particularly annoying Gnome tricked him. All the hard work he had done to rise through the ranks as a non-left-hander had been crushed that fateful, eventful day in the forest.

In that one day, Righty had lost the Lord High Priest's prize trophy, been captured by Elves, and watched two of his comrades killed right before his eyes. Then when it was his turn to die, the Elves had hurriedly shackled him to a table to go in search of that same Gnome. It only took him a few minutes to break the table and escape. When he made his way

back to the Halfling supply train, he was immediately thrown in shackles and spirited on his way to Halfling City to receive his punishment. He had hoped for something quick and mostly painless but instead he received ten years' hard labor in the Morton's Salt Mines. Even after he punched the Judge in the mouth, hoping for an immediate execution. Apparently, the Judge wasn't that lenient.

And so Righty went to the mines. And watched the patterns around him.

Righty moved behind the Halfling in front of him, exactly where he had stood since his first day at the mine. He knew that the five in front of him would walk past the ruthless (even by Halfling standards) overseer Cosmic as he rolled a cigarette. As Righty passed he would be holding the cigarette in both hands, licking the edge of the paper to finish the job. His attention would be wholly on the cigarette. It was then that Righty was going to hit Cosmic with all his might in the middle of his thigh. Righty had been practicing the move and if the cracks he made in the mine wall were any indication, the guard would be in no condition to do anything besides fall off the speckled pony he rode. When he hit the ground, Righty was prepared to kick him in the head if he was still conscious before riding off on Billingsley- whom Righty had been sneaking his weekly carrot for the better part of six months. As the first Halfling started walking, Righty nervously counted.

One.

The first Halfling passed Cosmic. Righty casually pushed his handle off the ground, using it as a walking stick.

Two.

Righty bounced his handle off the ground and switched it to his other hand. Hopefully once again in what seemed to be a casual manner.

Three.

Cosmic rolled his cigarette with one hand as he closed his tobacco pouch with the other.

Four.

Righty shifted the handle to both hands, one over the top, the other from the bottom. He tightened his grip.

Five.

The fifth Halfling -having *never* done this before- looked up at the guard. "Got an extra Mister Cosmic-ness?" He said with a smirk. "I'm itching for a smoke."

Cosmic held the cigarette up to his mouth as he looked down on Number Five. "Get a move on or I'll smoke you." He said as he stuck out his tongue in preparation to moisten the glue on the wrapper.

Number Five paused in front of Cosmic and gave a little shrug, apparently planning on watching him lick the cigarette.

Righty put the wooden handle in the middle of Number Five's back. "Those things'll kill you, you know." He said.

Number Five looked over his shoulder at Righty. "Cigarettes?"

Cosmic looked down at the pair. He pulled his tongue back in. "Get moving you two!" He stuck his tongue out again and slowly licked the paper along its length.

Righty shoved Number Five forward just as Cosmic finished licking the cigarette. His attention focused on carefully rolling the moistened edge over without catching any wayward pieces of tobacco. Just as Cosmic's hand dropped from the cigarette, Righty slammed the wooden handle into his thigh. A loud crack let Righty know the leg had been broken.

Cosmic's eyes rolled up in his head as the pain roiled through him. He slumped over in the saddle, remaining in place.

"See?" Righty said.

"What are you doing?" Number Five shouted.

Before any other guards could come investigate, Righty pivoted and hit Number Five in the chin with the butt end of the handle. The Halfling crumpled satisfyingly to the ground. Righty whirled on Cosmic- who was still slumped over.

"Neigh?" Asked Billingsley. Cosmic had never given him a carrot so his allegiance was up for grabs.

Righty shoved Cosmic off the saddle as he clambered on. "Off like lightning, Mister Billingsley!" He said as he heeled the pony in the sides.

"Neigh!" agreed Billingsley as he reared up and galloped off to the amazement of the other prisoners.

Except Number Five who was still unconscious.

Righty yanked the reigns to the right, skirting the encampment and keeping in the edge of the forest. The other guards would be eating breakfast, fully confident that Cosmic's demeanor would keep the prisoners in check. He ducked to avoid any low-lying branches, resting his head on Billingsley's neck. "Good boy, there is a basket of carrots in your future." He patted the pony as it galloped along. "To the path, Billingsley!" After only a couple of minutes, Righty heard trumpets sounding behind him. He heeled the pony in the sides, "Almost there, Mister Billingsley. He patted the colt's neck. "I am thoroughly chuffed with myself and you as well."

Mister Billingsley let out a snort. As his hooves met hard path, he jutted out his legs and skidded to a stop.

Righty slid forward up onto the colt's neck. "What in the lands!"

"Neigh!"

"Ahh, that's a good steed," Righty looked down at the path.

The horns sounded again. They seemed to be farther away.

Righty looked off into the distance. "Yes, keep looking deeper into the forest. Who would ever head *toward* the Foreboding Elves border?" He patted the colt again. "Who indeed." He nudged the colt in the sides. "Off we go but keep to the left side of the path."

"Neigh?"

"The Elves own the path from the middle to the right side. If we keep on the Halfling side of the path, they should let us alone."

Mister Billingsley shook his head as he snorted. He trusted Elves as far as he could throw them. Not having arms, it was not far at all.

"I agree. Let's just hope they honor the armistice." He pressed his right calf against the colt's side. "And they don't recognize me."

Mister Billingsley obliged by moving to the far left of the path.

"There's a good boy," Righty said. "And we'll just keep on this until the first due south path then it's on to repay a debt to a Gnome."

"Neigh?"

"No; that was a euphemism; I'm going to kill him. Gloriously unabashed dealing of cold blooded death."

Mister Billingsley nodded approvingly. He was after all, a pony raised by Halflings.

Chapter 12
Sky Lighting

Harry looked down on the sleeping Opus Magnus von Opus. "He looks so peaceful down there." He tilted his head. "Like a little sleeping babe."

"That's cause he's a good twenty feet down," explained Grimbledung. "Up close, he'll give you the creeping willies."

The skeletons and Grimbledung peered into the skylight for a long moment.

"So how are we going to get down there?" Hausen whispered.

"I brought the rope, remember?" Grimbledung said. "We're going to slide down. Easy potatoesy."

"What if he wakes up?" Harry pointed at the sleeping man. "He'll identify us for sure." He tilted his head sideways. "I mean, with *this* majestic profile, I'm hard to forget."

"If he didn't wake up with all your racket outside…" Began Grimbledung.

Wilhelm ignored the Gnome. "That is true." He snapped his fingers. "We could knock him out."

Grimbledung looked down into the room. "Think you can slide down the rope and do that before he wakes up? It sounds risky."

"Did you bring an anvil in that pouch of holding?"

Grimbledung shook his head at Wilhelm.

Harry peered down at the man. "Well, you could toss me down head first at him. I'd lead with my fist and hit him right on the chin. He'd be out for sure then."

"Would that work?" Grimbledung looked at the sleeping man then the skeleton. "I mean, can you hit him hard enough to knock him out?"

Harry judged the distance to the man from the skylight. He considered that, his speed, weight and of course gravity; which was a constant. "Yeah, the numbers are good. It'll work." He looked down again. "Better than even odds, in fact."

"Really?"

"You want the math?" Harry peered at Grimbledung. "It's pretty straightforward, really."

Grimbledung looked down, worried. "But if he doesn't get knocked out…"

"Give him the math," said Hauser.

"Now there's math?" Wilhelm said. "Good thing Skeleton Two isn't here; he hates math."

"I'm not trying to start an argument," said Grimbledung.

Harry took a moment to go over the calculations again. "Don't worry; my math is good."[19]

Grimbledung frowned. "It's just that numbers tend to confuse me.

Harry patted Grimbledung. "Okay then, here's the easy explanation; I'd say we have a two out of three chance of it working."

"Two out of three? And if it doesn't work?" Grimbledung peered down at the sleeping man then he looked at the horizon. It had the faint glow of an approaching sunrise. "What then?"

"Plan B." Harry said flatly. "Now heave me down and aim for his head.

"His head?"

Harry stood and balanced himself on the roof. "Yeah, get me in that area and I'll punch him as I land."

Grimbledung exhaled nervously. "If you say so."

Hausen winked. "It'll work; you'll see." He looked into the window as well. "Just don't miss or that will complicate matters."

"You going to give me odds on that?" Grimbledung grunted at he picked up Harry. "You're pretty heavy."

"The odds of you missing the bed completely are pretty low."

"How low?" Grimbledung scooted to the window as the other two skeletons helped him balance on the sloped roof. "One in something?"

"Just heave me and we'll find out." Harry said.

Grimbledung prepared to heave Harry, aiming as well as he could for the sleeping Magnus' head.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

ROLL three six-sided dice (or one die three times).

If the total is less than 12, continue to the next chapter. If you rolled 13-16, go **to CHAPTER 50**. If you rolled a 17 or higher, go to **CHAPTER 51**. If you don't have a six-sided die, stop reading and go buy a board game for goodness sake! We recommend something that uses die. If you have no way to get to the store (or don't want to put on pants), print out the handy die at the end of this book (**Chapter 52**).[20] Then put it together. Every day should have a crafting event.

Chapter 13
A Room With a View

Harry fell headfirst into the room, directly toward Magnus. Realizing he didn't have room to actually swing his arm, he just stuck it straight out and aimed for the man's jaw.

With a clatter of scattering bones, Harry hit Magnus on the chin. With only a momentary twitch, Magnus went from asleep to unconscious.

"Did I get him?" Harry's head called up. "I think I got him! I got him, right?"

"You got him alright," Hausen said. "Now pull yourself together." He prodded Wilhelm. "Pull yourself together, eh?"

Wilhelm bonked Hausen on the head. "Stop with the puns already."

Grimbledung bonked him on the head as well. "I agree." He tied the end of the rope to the bar holding the skylight open.

"Is that strong enough to hold you up?" Wilhelm asked. He looked at the thin bar. "I mean you are a Gnome of rotund proportions."

"I went running earlier this week," Grimbledung countered.

"One run does not a slim Gnome make."

Wilhelm started to bonk Hausen on the head the decided it was more an observation than a pun. "How about I hold the rope while you climb down?" He took hold of the rope.

"Fine then, we just need to get down there quick-like." Grimbledung looked at the ever-brightening horizon. "The new sun is out on the porch of his nighttime retreat; he'll be walking across the sky in no time."

"What?" Wilhelm said. "You think it's a new sun every day?"

"Sure it is," Grimbledung said. He looked down into the room. Suddenly it seemed a lot farther down that earlier. "How else does it happen?"

"Don't even get him started on that topic," warned Hausen. "He's all about elephants and turtles."

"It seemed plausible the way it was pitched to me," Wilhelm said. "Don't be so close minded.

"You're close minded!" Hausen shoved Wilhelm.

Wilhelm teetered on the edge of the skylight and fell in. "Wil-helm!" He screamed as he fell.

"Why does he shout his own name?" Grimbledung asked.

"Beats me. Comedic relief at a point of high drama is what I think."

"*This* is high drama?"

"No. *This* is bogging down." Hausen pointed downward. "Get in there already."

With a nod Grimbledung grabbed the rope and began to slide down it. As he went, the rope began to sway.

"Stop swaying!" Wilhelm called from below. He moved around on the bed, arms outstretched. "Just go straight down!"

"Stupid Gnome!" Harry's upper torso said as he reached for a leg.

"I am going straight down!" Grimbledung said as he swayed back and forth. "I think this rope is defective!" As he swung out, the rope caught on the edge of large chandelier.

As the chandelier jerked against Grimbledung's swaying, it pulled Hausen off the ledge. Since he was holding the rope, he slid down it to the chandelier. When he hit, the whole affair jostled and Grimbledung lost his grip on the thin rope and fell.

"Grimble-dung!" Wilhelm screamed.

"It's not the same, really." Harry observed.

"Yaaa!" Screamed Grimbledung as he started to fall.

Hausen reached out and grabbed Grimbledung's feet.

Grimbledung swayed, arms outstretched.

Maca shook her head.

"Grab the rope and slide down!" Hausen said. "You weight a ton!"

"Hey now, that's getting personal." Grimbledung reached out for the rope. "Am I supposed to slide down head first?"

"I don't care how you slide down as long as you do it before my arms pull out of their sockets!"

"Well, I am now offended."

The thin bar holding both Hausen and Grimbledung aloft gave way. As the skylight slammed shut, it shattered.

Grimbledung fell head first toward the bed. "Checkers rematch," he said.

"Hausen!" Screamed Hausen as he fell.

Both Wilhelm and Harry covered their heads as glass, skeleton, and Gnome rained down on them. And the unconscious Magnus.

Magnus stirred as the bits of glass hit his face.

Wilhelm bonked him on the head with his femur.

"I thought I told you to stop hitting that man on the head!" Grimbledung said sharply.

"Did not. That's the first time you've ever mentioned it."

Harry nodded. "That is true depending on your point of view."

"Point of view?" Grimbledung asked.

"Sure; if that point of view is a fifteen or less."

"This is why I don't like numbers," Grimbledung observed. "Fine then; no more bashing him on the head."

"Unless he threatens Flora again, of course." Hausen said. He winked "I rolled a fifteen."

"Fine, Hausen, *fine*. Then all bets are off." Grimbledung shook his head. "Alright, get yourself back together, Wilhelm."

Chapter 14
House, Doctored

Wilhelm pushed the femur up into his pelvis. "Got it." He reached down and stuck the bottom half of his leg into place. "Done. Now what?"

Hausen stood. He adjusted his shoulder blade where it had wrenched out of place from the fall. "We do what we always do."

Harry nodded. "Spread out!"

All three skeletons moved in the same direction, bumping into each other.

"Hey, I was going that way!" Complained Wilhelm.

"I was going first!" Harry slapped at Wilhelm, who ducked- the slap hit Hauser instead.

"Nyuk, nyuk!" Offered Wilhelm.

"Why you!" Hausen poked Harry in the eye.

"Hey!" Wilhelm stomped on Hauser's foot. "Stop poking folks in the eye!"

Hauser hopped as he held his foot.

"Alright you three." Grimbledung moved between them. "Just see if you can find anything incriminating." He looked around the room. "And keep it quiet. And try not to make a mess so Magnus won't know anyone searched his stuff. And be quick about it."

"What was that middle one again?" Hauser asked.

Harry poked Hauser in the eye. "Just get to work!"

"Hey!" Hauser held his hand to his eye. "That could have blinded me!"

"You already don't have eyes you know!" Wilhelm poked himself in the eye repeatedly. "See? Nyuk, nyuk!"

"When you three are done acting like stooges," Grimbledung said, "go see if you can find anything incriminating in the rest of the place; I'll take the bedroom."[21]

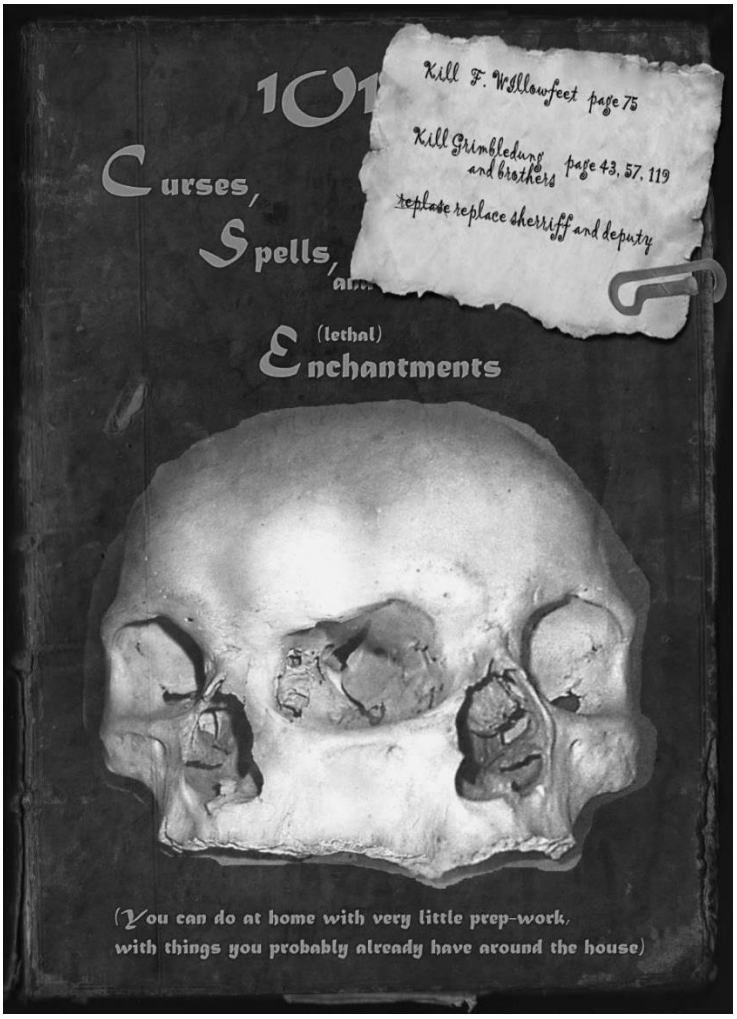
"We're on it!" Harry said. "Let's go!"

With that, the three skeletons moved to the door. After a brief shoving match, they all piled into the front rooms of Magnus' home.

Grimbledung exhaled loudly then looked around the room. "What are you hiding Mister Von?" He started coiling the rope as he walked around the room, searching for incriminating evidence he could use to ensure Flora's victory. On a dresser was a large leather bound book. It had what appeared to be a three-eyed skull on it. "Gross." Grimbledung slung the rope over his shoulder and opened the book. Grimbledung flipped through the thick parchment pages. They were filled with scribbles, diagrams, and symbols. As he flipped, he developed goosebumps. Finally, when he was halfway through the book, he was chilled to the bone.

"Gads!" He shut the book and glanced over his shoulder at the unconscious Magnus. "Mister Creepy von Creepy!"

As Grimbledung backed away from the book, he took the piece of tan (or perhaps greyscale 3) parchment clipped to the corner. "Wonder if this will be useful at some point," he said aloud. He continued to back away and when he felt he was finally a safe distance to put his back on the book, he turned to search the other side of the room. Across the room, balanced on a thin wood rod was a large conch shell.



Cautiously he approached it. Not feeling any ill-effects from being near it, he tentatively reached out and touched it.

Nothing.

Grimbledung gingerly picked the shell off the rod. He held it to his ear. "Where's the ocean?" He listened intently. Instead of typical ocean sounds, he heard whispering voices. The goosebumps returned. The more he listened the more he got.

Goosebumps that is.

whoooo are yoooou? One of the voices whispered out of the many.

"Who me?" Grimbledung pointed at himself.

where issss the other? The voice asked.

"Other what?" Grimbledung pulled the shell away from his ear as he looked around. "Other shell? They come in pairs like coconuts?" Grimbledung didn't see another one so he put the shell back to his ear and listened.

…i don't know. some buffoon has picked…

"What?"

…nothing…

"Were you talking about me?"

no…we were…

ordering take out. Interjected a second voice.

yessss… we were discussing ordering takeout. A Chorus of voices said.

"Did some inconsiderate oaf pick mushrooms for their half the order? Then the whole order smells of mushrooms! I hate people like that."

uhm… yes…. yes, that is it. who… is this?

"Grimbledung, of course."

ask him where the regular one is, said the other voice.

"Regular one what? I stay pretty regular thanks to all the alcohol I drink."

shouldn't it be fiber? A voice asked.

"Well, sure fiber is good too," Grimbledung admitted. "But on the whole I prefer my wheats and barleys alcoholized…"

that is not a word

"Now listen here," Grimbledung began.

where is the other man we usually speak to? The first voice interrupted, testily.

Grimbledung looked at the unconscious Magnus. "He's…indisposed at the moment. Is there something I can help you with?"

noooo! Said the cacophony of voices. *we have the other, we do not want to start over with youuuu*!

"Well I'm dashed." Grimbledung put the shell back on the pedestal. "Kind of rude, if you ask me." With a shrug, Grimbledung began pulling open various dresser drawers. As he rifled through them, he piled the clothes on the floor.

"Find anything yet?" Wilhelm said as he poked his head back in the room.

"Well, this creepy shell for one."

There was a crash from the other room.

Wilhelm pretended to not hear it. "Well, things are going well out here; we've found quite a bit of incriminating evidence."

The sound of a bookcase being pushed over could be heard.

"What was that?"

Wilhelm turned to look out of the room. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Just some stealthiness."

"Well, that is in order," Grimbledung said. "So what have you found on an incriminating nature?"

"He doesn't seem to have very good taste in art."

Grimbledung shrugged. "Well who does, really? Anything else?"

"He has a large cabinet full of potions, poisons, and a large, unopened bottle of what we have decided is thirty-year-old Scotch whisky."

"You sure?"

"Smooth as a skeleton's bottom."

"I meant of the poisons."

"Oh yeah. If I weren't dead, I'd be d-e-a-d. Dead."

"Well, would you consider that unusual? I mean Maca has a store *full* of things that could probably kill you if you ate or drank them."

"He has them labeled by townsfolks' names." He pointed at Grimbledung. "There's three with your name on it, in fact. Two for your partner."

"Well, that's not particularly neighborly." Grimbledung tut-tutted. "May have to speak to the Constable about that."

"He's got a beaker named after him as well. Caused a pretty nasty stain on the floor where it ran through Harry."

Grimbledung handed the piece of parchment to the Skeleton. "Use this to clean it up. Found it earlier."

Wilhelm read it. "Uhm… Where'd you say you found this?"

Grimbledung pointed. "On yon book with the three-eyed skull on the cover." He shivered. "Not sure I want to go near it again."

"Well, I'll grab it and then we can probably head out." Wilhelm walked over and picked up the book.

"So besides him wanting to kill a majority of the town, is there anything we can use against him election-wise?"

Wilhelm moved back to the door, book under his arm. "He hoards good scotch." He deadpanned. "*That* my friend makes him a black hearted scoundrel who shouldn't get anyone's vote."

"Honestly, I can see where that will cost him *my* vote. What'd the other's find?"

"Anything?" Wilhelm yelled into the other room.

"Nothing! We're checking the kitchen now!" Harry shouted back.

Another crash -this time dishes- echoed into the bedroom.

"Make sure he won't know we were here."

Wilhelm pointed at the pile of clothes and open drawers. "In that case, I'd suggest shoving all that under the bed so that...." Wilhelm's arm fell off. He looked down at where it still held the book. "Huh. That's a little disturbing."

"Gads. Does that hurt?" Grimbledung kicked the large pile of clothes toward the bed.

"No. It's just disturbing." Wilhelm picked up his arm which was still firmly holding the books. "I'll just carry it like this back to our lair."

Grimbledung dropped to his knees and started shoving clothes under the bed. "Good thinking. Finish up out there; we need to get going before he wakes up."

"Want him bonked on the head again, just in case?" Wilhelm held his arm and the book high in the air. "Kind of like a shillelagh. A disturbing one."

"No, no. Just finish up out there and meet me at the…" Grimbledung looked up at the broken skylight- it was completely out of reach. "Front door."

"Got it, Chief," Wilhelm disappeared around the door jam.

Grimbledung quickly shoved clothes under the bed. There were quite a bit of clothes and thanks to several boxes under the bed already, they all didn't fit. He looked around the room. "What a terrible lack of storage." He snapped his fingers. "Got it!" He moved to the dresser and pulled it away from the wall. Quickly, he moved back to the remaining clothes and threw them behind the dresser. After they were all behind it, he leaned over and pushed his shoulder against the dresser and shoved it back. It pushed back almost a foot but not nearly back to the wall. "Perfect!"

Another crash made Grimbledung look to the door. "What now?" He left the room, exiting into a quaint living area.

It was a complete ramshackle.

"Why is that couch upside down?" Grimbledung asked. "He keep it that way on purpose?

Harry stepped around a room divider. He was eating an apple. "What couch?"

Grimbledung pointed. "That there couch right there. Yon couch."

"Well, we had to check under it, of course." Bits of apple fell to the floor as Harry chewed. "Handy place to hide stuff. Or behind a dresser, of course. You check there?"

"Oh, there's nothing to see back there." Grimbledung said quickly. "Nothing at all."

Hausen came running out of the kitchen area. Wilhelm was right behind him straddling a broom as he ran.

Harry tossed the apple onto the overturned couch. "I think our work here is done."

Wilhelm moved the broom behind his back when he saw Grimbledung. "Yes. Everything looks good. Except for maybe that corner over there." He pointed behind Grimbledung.

Grimbledung turned to look.

Wilhelm tossed the broom into the opposite corner. It clattered noisily to the floor.

"There's nothing there," Grimbledung observed.

"Then we're done." Wilhelm said. He held up his now-empty hand. "Nothing to do except leave like shadows in the night."

"Where's your arm?" Grimbledung asked.

"It's by the door. Keeping a grip on that book."

"Well, that's convenient; since the skylight is out of reach we need to go out that there yon front door." Grimbledung frowned. "And it's broad daylight now so we're sure to be spotted."

Hausen snapped his fingers. "I have the perfect solution. Happens to us all the time." He waggled a finger at Grimbledung. "Follow my lead." He moved to the door. "Out we go... backwards."

Harry frowned. "When I suggest things like that, I get ridiculed."

"Well, it sounds silly when you do it," Hausen said. "Let's go!"

Harry and Wilhelm followed close behind.

"What are we going to do?" Grimbledung said as he moved beside the skeletons. "We're pinched for sure."

"Only the meek get pinched," Hausen said. "Here we go boys. Just like last time.

The three skeletons turned with their backs to the door. "Follow us out," said Hausen. "And don't say anything."

With a shrug, Grimbledung turned around and stood with his back to Hausen- who was the farthest from the door. "I don't see how this is going to work."

"Well not like that it isn't!" Hausen muscled Grimbledung behind him.

"Hey now!"

"All the way back to the front of the back, if you please." Now Harry grabbed the Gnome and worked him behind himself.

"I got it, I got it!" Grimbledung moved behind Wilhelm before that skeleton had a chance to grab him.

"Okay, everyone ready?" Wilhelm asked.

"I still don't know what we're doing."

"Open the door and back out, of course." Wilhelm said. He waved his hand over his shoulder. "Get to it!"

With a shrug, Grimbledung opened the door and backed out.

Wilhelm, Harry, then Hausen backed out right after them. When they got to the outside, Wilhelm pulled the door shut and knocked loudly with his arm which was still holding the book. "Anyone home?" he called as he pounded on the door. "Hellooooo!"

Several people stopped to watch.

Wilhelm finally stopped knocking and turned to Harry. "He must not be home. We'll try back later."

"Maybe he's out getting supplies," offered a helpful bystander. "Want me to tell him you came by?"

Wilhelm shook his head. "No need, kind Sir, no need. We will return later to surprise him in earnest."

The man nodded, waved, and left.

"Huh, wonder when he'll be back," Grimbledung remarked.

"Let's go," Wilhelm said.

With that, the three skeletons walked off. Grimbledung looked at the door one more time and said: "Oh well, we'll catch him next time," then followed the skeletons down the street.

After they were a block away, the skeletons began to run. They didn't stop until they were back in the larder of the Duck Inn and Dine.

Grimbledung stopped twice to catch his breath. And once to have a drink from a street vendor. When he arrived at the Duck in and Dine, he found the skeletons had tapped a keg and were drinking ale. The large puddles under them indicated they had been doing it for a while. "Hey now, Nulu's going to charge me for that keg!"

"You're good for it," Wilhelm assured Grimbledung.

"If you're not, you're good for nothing." Harry winked. "Eh? Eh?"

"Let's just get back to the treasure room, you three. I need to let Drimblerod know what we found."

"Can we bring the keg?" Wilhelm asked.

Hausen reached into his chest and hooked his mug on one of his floating ribs. "I'll get it." He squatted and bear hugged the keg. With a grunt, he picked it up. "Get the door, will you?"

"We can't just take that!" Grimbledung exclaimed.

"Now hold on a minute," Harry said, "if she's going to charge us for it, we are sure going to take it with us! Otherwise it's stealing."

"And that's plain wrong." Hausen said.

"Kegs are heavy, just to keep you all informed."

"I agree," said Wilhelm. He took a drink from his mug, adding to the puddle under him. "And if there's one thing I've learned…"

"For all pertinent tasks, use a hammer." Offered Harry.

"The longer you hold kegs the heaver they get."

"Well, yes to both of those," admitted Wilhelm, "there is that." He gestured at them with his arm, "But I have also learned that you *can* take it with you." He waved the arm which still held the book. "Case in point."

"That is a comfort, I suppose." Grimbledung looked from the keg to the secret door. "I guess just the one is fine. I'll leave a gold coin for her trouble."

"If one of you doesn't open that secret door," Hausen said, "I'm going to spill this all over the floor and it'll be your mess to clean up!"

"But you all spill it when you drink it," Grimbledung said as he started tugging on the secret door.

"That's different."

Grimbledung glanced at Hausen. "How so?"

"Intent and purposes."

Grimbledung nodded. "I've heard of those." He finally had the door open wide enough for Hausen. "In you go, bearer of the ale."

"I don't mind if I do." Hausen shuffled toward the doorway.

"Master Hausen Gamgee, Ale bearer." Harry bowed as his friend went by. "Truly you are the hero of the day."[22] He said as he fell in step behind him.

"I found the poison too," Hausen said as he disappeared into the darkness.

"Because you tried to drink it." Wilhelm pointed out.

Hausen nodded at Grimbledung as he entered the tunnel. "Oh; if Magnus mentions holes in his carpet, pretend like you didn't hear him."

"Okay, I suppose." Grimbledung as he yawned. "I think I need a nap."

"Naps all around!" Hausen said from the front of the group.

Grimbledung nodded and pulled the secret door shut. Completely forgetting to leave a gold coin.

As usual.

Chapter 15
A Game of Gnomes

Grimbledung slid down the bannister with a loud 'whoop'.

"So what's got you so excited today?" Drimblerod asked. "Even though you are now officially late for the start of today by a good four hours."

"Today is the day that I officially start…"

"Working?" Drimblerod interrupted. He waggled his ears for good measure. "Actual, honest to Gnomeses wand selling working?"

Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "Working on Flora's campaign."

"I'm sure she'll be pleased to hear that."

"You really think so?"

"Probably not."

Grimbledung unnarrowed his eyes. "But how will she win if I don't help her?" He scooted to the counter. "I've been snooping on that Opus von Magnus von Opus Magnus von fellow."

"I think that's one too many 'vons'," offered Drimblerod.

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Either way, Mister Von is definitely up to no good."

Drimblerod exhaled slowly. "Alright, Grim, what'd you find out?" He winced. "And how?" He shook his finger at his partner. "Nothing illegal I hope."

Grimbledung shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, during the after-mission review and drinks, the skeletons said everything was completely above board."

"Oh, please tell me you haven't been using those unstable skeletons as your snoopers."

"I haven't been using those skeletons as my snoopers." Grimbledung assured his partner.

"That's good to hear. The last time…"

"I've been using them as the militant arm of the Let's Get Flora Elected committee."

"Well, that's so much better." Drimblerod put his head in his hands. "You're going to get yourself arrested and Flora kicked out of the election."

"Pushaw," Grimbledung said with a wink. "She isn't involved at all. In fact, she doesn't even know about it."

"Afraid she'll wallop you?"

"Absolutely." Grimbledung sat on one of the stools. "So you want to hear what the skeletons found?"

"Absolutely." Drimblerod moved to another stool and sat. "That way when the inquiry happens, I can avoid saying anything incriminating."

"Good thinking." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "So," he started, "it seems that our esteemed…. Magnus isn't what he seems to be."

"He seems to be a jerk and a bully and a rabble rouser," offered Drimblerod.

"Then he's exactly what he seems to be," said Grimbledung without missing a beat. He leaned forward, "You know he's not even from Aution?"

"Well, no one really is since it's a new town," said Drimblerod. "From what I hear, some lunatic burned down a nearby town and everyone moved here from there."

"What?" Grimbledung leaned back on his stool. "That's outrageous! Who would do such a thing?" He looked around the room quickly and let his eyes settle on his partner. "It wasn't you, was it?"

Drimblerod ignored his guilty partner. "I mean, the one ones that are true Julesvilians… Julesers?" He shrugged. "Whatever they'll call themselves, are the babies that were born since the town was established."

"Right!" Grimbledung folded his arms triumphantly. "Exactly right!"

"Is that all your skeletons have found out?" Drimblerod raised an eyebrow. "I don't think that board of inquiry is going to have anything on you."

"So after breaking into his house..." Continued Grimbledung.

"Wait, you had those skeletons break into his house?" Drimblerod leaned back. "Well, now the board will have plenty to go on."

Grimbledung shook his head. "No, no; they most certainly did not break into his house."

"Plausible deniability?" Drimblerod tried.

"I broke into his house."

"Because that's so much better." Drimblerod said. He put his head back in his hands. "So how did it go?"

"Once we bashed him on the head to knock him out…"

"And assault gets added in…"

Grimbledung nodded, "And we rifled through all his stuff…"

"Keep anything?" Drimblerod asked even though he didn't want to.

"Nothing of worth, really."

"And thievery." Drimblerod added. "You know if they hang you, it will be almost impossible to get you to Prost Garrison to get you back to life."

"Pushaw," Grimbledung said. He gulped. "Hang you say?"

"We'll worry about your untimely death after it happens."[23] Drimblerod gestured at his partner. "Go on."

"Well, the finer, more humorous details will most likely come out in a flashback but the gist of it is…" Grimbledung leaned forward. "... That he's a jerk and a bully and a rabble rouser." He raised a finger. "And he's not from around here."

"Well, I hope that flashback is more exciting than the gist. Did you find anything incriminating?" He hesitated for a moment. "That you're willing to explain now?"

Grimbledung nodded. "It seems that he's just the front man for some sort of overarching evil plan to take over the lands that leads all the way back to the King's Vizier himself and that plan starts right here in Julesville and then spreads to the Jutes, then Aution

and from there it heads west to the Royal Court where machinations are already in motion that will topple the entire Kingdom!!"

"And you found all that out by breaking into his house?"

"Well, not exactly. I've had to fill in the gaps of information with supposition."

"What exactly did you find out when you broke into his house?"

"He's bald." Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "And he has this conch shell that he uses when he talks to people."

"And all that other stuff?"

"Supposition." Grimbledung put his finger on the side of his nose. "But I imagine it's all spot on."

"Anything else?"

"He hoards good scotch."

"That black hearted scoundrel," Drimblerod scowled. "That'll cost him my vote."

"Exactly."

"And a book."

"Well, books aren't a big deal."

"Wilhelm's arm fell off while he was carrying it."

"Yikes. So that supposition..."

"I imagine it's spot on. Mayhap a convenient flash forward will make that point." Grimbledung looked up at the ceiling, expectedly.

Drimblerod started to look up as well "Gads," he said. "I think I'll get to work instead of getting sidetracked." He walked to the sign in the window and flipped it to 'open'. All right door, let's see if we can do some honest selling."

Door rattled its latch absently. He had been stood up for a date and didn't feel much like helping sell wands.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This time Roll one six-sided die. If you roll an even number, skip to Chapter 17 and wait for book 26 *The Dragon, the Pixie, and the Wardrobe* to come out. If

you roll an odd number, just keep reading If you rolled a zero, you did something wrong along the way, so go back to Chapter 1 and start over because by this point you should have either A) Gotten some die from a game you already own, B) Bought a game that uses dice, or C) Printed out Chapter 52 *No Dice? Yes Dice!* And followed the instructions.

Chapter 16
(Flash Forward Fifty Years Later!)

Grimbledung pulled his spectacles down to the tip of his nose as he leaned forward. "Gads! The kingdom has fallen, Drimblerod." He lowered the Daily NEWS parchment. "I can't believe the kingdom has fallen!"

Drimblerod hopped to the table and leaned against it. He loosened the straps for his artificial leg and bent down to attach it- right below his knee. "What? You're kidding!"

Grimbledung nodded. "It's all right here!" He slapped the parchment. "Told you it would happen. I told you years… decades ago." He dropped the parchment onto the table. He looked left and right. "I need to tell Duchess Flora O. Willowfeet!"

Drimblerod stomped his leg to test it. With a nod, he moved to the chair and sat. "Are we going on another one of your quests?"

"It will be more of an adventure, I should imagine." Grimbledung considered their last outing. "Nope; not at all like last time. At all, even."

"That's what you said last time." Drimblerod shook his head. "Are we going to tell the kids or just leave a note… like last time?"

"A note should do."

"Do we really have to go?" Drimblerod pulled the parchment in front of him. "Maybe it will all blow over." He leaned over to read. "You really should have bonked him harder on the head when you had the chance. Or left him in that underground bunker in the desert "

"Well that time is gone!" Grimbledung declared as he stood. He poked at the parchment. "And let me tell you that I'm not going to sit here and let *my* hard-earned part of the kingdom fall just because the King has let *his* part go down the sewers. The kingdom is falling apart I tell you."

"Well, we did just get the north wall raised again. About time too."

"Right?" Grimbledung pointed his finger into the air. "And it's going to stay up as long as I'm the Grand Duke of the Northern Provinces![24] So get ready to ride."

"Well, as long as you don't bring Brutus or Terrance along…"

"Oh, they're *both* coming." Grimbledung moved to a battered chest and flipped the lid back. "If there's a time to bring a Pixie assassin and a bard Dragon, it is now. So they're *both* coming this time." He rummaged in the chest and brought out a gleaming short sword. "And Stink, my trusty sword is coming to."

"I've got a really bad feeling about this," Drimblerod said as he rolled the parchment. "But let's save the Kingdom."

"Again." Reminded Grimbledung.

"Yes, again."

Chapter 17
Spells, Hexes, and Curses. Oh My?

"Well?" Grimbledung stood on his toes trying to look into the book. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, what is it? What's it say?"

"You know at some point, you really should learn how to read," Maca said.

Grimbledung waved a hand dismissively. "Bah; reading's overrated. I've done well this long without it, don't see the need." He moved to his toes again. "Well?"

Maca tilted the book. She was the only one who would touch the book with her bare hands. Especially after it took the better part of the day to get Wilhelm's arm to stay on. "One hundred and one spells, hexes, and curses you can do with things you probably already have around the house." She smiled. "Nice, huh?"

"No! How is that nice?"

"Well, supplies are expensive." Maca stifled a smile. "For those who actually need supplies to cast hexes and curses." She lifted a hand and pointed a suddenly crooked and surprisingly ominous finger at Grimbledung. "As for me..."

"You know sometimes you give me the Creeping Willies. In a good way, though." Grimbledung said. He looked at the book. "Well what's that page say? And why does it keep changing what it says?" He ducked yet again as octarine colored sparks flew from the pages.[25]

"Grimbledung, just relax." Maca said yet again. "The words are staying the same..."

"But..."

"The best way to explain it is that just the spelling is changing." She turned a page. The words which were just written words a moment before she had turned the page, began to shift into different letters and various shapes.

"That's just creepy. What's that lizard doing to that hawk? I hope he bought it a drink first!" Grimbledung did another hop to try and look onto the table then looked around. "Don't you have any boxes in this place?"

"Over by the door is a nice tea box." Maca said. "Now hush!"

Grimbledung scooted to the door and picked up the tea box. As he walked, it slipped out of his hands and bounced off his toes. Of both feet. "Gah! Great heaping piles of Rolton Chips!" He hopped as he tried to grab both feet at once.

Maca, Nulu, and Drimblerod all turned to look.

Sternly.

Grimbledung noticed and ducked his head. "Sorry, sorry." He picked up the box and began to shuffle toward the table.

"So," said Maca as they all turned back to the book. "From what I can gather, this is some sort of ..."

"Gah!" Grimbledung dropped the box but managed to hop back so it didn't hit his feet this time. "Take that, stinking box!" He kicked it. "Gah!" He grabbed his toe.

Drimblerod, Maca, and Nulu all turned to look.

Harshly.

Grimbledung ducked his head again. "Sorry about that." He reached down to pick up the box and then stood back up, thinking better of it.

"It's a Book of Power, from what I can tell." Maca said as they all turned to look. More sparks were flying from the pages as she turned them. "Lots of powerful spells in here. Mostly..."

Grimbledung kicked the box, sending it skidding across the wood floor.

Nulu, Drimblerod, and Maca all turned to look.

Severely.

"Sorry!" Grimbledung ducked his head. "I've got it now."

As originally stated, Maca, Nulu and Drimblerod returned to examining the book.

"As I was saying," Continued Maca, "This is a serious artifact to have for a powerful Mage or Sorcerer. And it was with that annoying little man?" She asked Drimblerod.

"Apparently so..."

The lid of the box slammed shut.

The aforementioned trio turned to look.

Grimbledung had a piece of twine hanging out of his mouth. There was a small square tag on the end. "What?"

"Are you *eating* my imported tea?" Maca raised an eyebrow.

"Lands no!" Grimbledung shifted the tea bag to his other cheek. The twine did a little jig across this lips as it moved. "I'm just *sampling* it." He smacked his lips. "OgreJeeling is it?"

"It is." Maca said levelly. "And it's not meant to be enjoyed like run of the mill chewing tobacco."

"Of course not." Grimbledung smacked his lips again. "But, I must admit it is far smoother than even Longbottom LipWeed." His ears perked up. "Ever tried smoking it?" He lifted the lid and grabbed another tea bag. "I may just have to give it a try for medicinal purposes of course..."

"Nulu, if you please." Maca gestured at Grimbledung as he stuffed the tea bag into his belt pouch.

Nulu closed the distance between them in two large steps. She grabbed Grimbledung by the back of his collar and lifted him up.

"Hey now!"

With two more steps, she returned to the table and put Grimbledung down on it.

"Well, someone should have done that from the start."

Everyone stared at Grimbledung for a moment.

"Thank you, Nulu. As I was saying, this is not something an average person should just have lying about. It is full of powerful spells. Powerful but dark."

"Well that's unsettling." Grimbledung said. He reached out and poked the book. The octarine sparks jumped at his finger. They took the form of a small hand and swatted at him. "Gah! Most unsettling!"

"Well, what's more unsettling are the pieces of paper marking certain spells." Maca closed the book then opened it to the first bookmark. "For instance, this spell here turns ones organs into stone."

"Well that's unpleasant." Grimbledung said. He leaned over to look at the page. The words now seemed to be made up of symbols that looked like reptiles and flying creatures fighting with each other.

Maca pointed at a series of ancient-looking letters on the bookmark. "And this, for your information, Grimbledung, says Grimbledung."

"What? You said my name there twice." Grimbledung blanched. "Was that a mistake?"

Maca shook her head. "This spell was bookmarked with your name." She flipped to the next bookmark. "Do you like jelly?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Of course I do."

"This one turns your insides to jelly."

"Grape or Apricot?"

"Well, it really doesn't matter since jelly organs don't work very well." She smiled. "You'd be a tasty corpse for the worms, I'd imagine."

"Well, I'm dashed!" A thought came to Grimbledung. "It's like the potions!"

"What potions?" Nulu asked.

"There are potions...errr...ahhh..." Grimbledung hesitated. "Well, what I mean is that there are rumors that might be substantiated that inside Magnus' house are these potions that I have not actually seen..."

"Grimbledung, they both know you broke into Magnus' house." Drimblerod said. "So just spit it out without the subterfuggery."

"Subterfuggery?" Nulu tut-tutted. "He's rubbing off on you, old man." She patted Drimblerod's shoulder.

"Well crud."

"So you were saying, Grimbledung," coaxed Maca, "about the potions?"

"Magnus has these potions in his house with labels on them with people's names." He pointed at himself and his partner. "Mine and Drimblerod's and Akita's as well. There were others but I can't remember them."

Maca smiled. "It's alright... wait, how did you know what they said?"

Grimbledung looked at Drimblerod. "Do they know?"

"No, but they might as well." He looked at Maca. "Remember those skeletons guarding the treasure?"

"You brought those bobble heads with you?" Maca laughed. "I'm surprised the entire block doesn't know you broke in.

"Well," Grimbledung smirked. "I'll have you know that we left under the guise of supreme trickery so no one was the wiser."

"Flying carpet before it was dark?" Maca said.

"Oh, that would have been good. Saved us time with the rope as well."

"Inconspicuous Spell?"

"Bonked him on the head several times to keep him unconscious."

"Well, that can be effective," Maca shook her head, "assaulting someone."

"And no one saw you and the skeletons... How many did you bring with you?"

"Only the ones that are here, of course," Grimbledung said. "It's not like I put out an advertisement for more of them, of course."

"Of course," Now Nulu shook her head. "And how'd you get out?"

"We walked right out the front door." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Backwards so no one was the wiser."

"You've got to be kidding me." Maca said.

"Now hold on," Nulu said. "I've used that trick myself. You'd be surprised how many times it works."

"I'd be surprised if it worked even once."

Drimblerod kept quiet- he had in fact used it earlier in the week on Grimbledung. Successfully.

"In any case, we will deal with any rumors as they spring up." Nulu said. "Maybe I can start some of my own this evening around the bar. Preemptive rumor mongering, so to speak."

Grimbledung smacked his lips. "I feel vindicated." He rubbed his temples. "And a little woozy even. Who's your dealer for this stuff?" He tugged on the string. "I've got a serious buzz going on here."

"My *supplier* for my tea is a very respected Elf who I can assure you will remain anonymous so that you can't harangue her."

"Ahhh, so it's a her." Grimbledung smirked. "That narrows it down."

"So." Maca closed the book. "I think I will send this book to the Council of Elves for safekeeping."

"What about the Loyal Order of the Gnomes?" Grimbledung said. "It only seems right that since a Gnome found it..."

"There's no such thing." Nulu said.

"Now hold on right there." Grimbledung shuffled to his feet. Since he was on the table, he was actually able to look down on Nulu. "I'll not have you disparage the Loyal Order of the Gnomes." He flattened his ears. Nulu moved to her toes so she was even with Grimbledung. "It sounds absurd anyway. Who ever heard of..."

"It's a drinking club." Maca said out of the side of her mouth to Nulu.

Grimbledung did an angry hop. "It is a highly secretive and highly influential organization...and," He waggled his butt. "I'm a member. Grrrr!"

"They even have a song." Maca said matter-of-factly. "I've been to these supposed meetings which are really thinly veiled parties." She clasped her hands in front of her chest and sang:

First round's free
Then we run a tab with utter glee,
And The Order goes drinking along.

Proud of all we have drunk,
drinking till we smell like skunks,
And The Order goes drinking along.

Drimblerod put his hand on his heard and joined in:

Then it's hi! Hi! Hey!
The hors d'oeuvres are on their way.
Count off the olives salty 'n strong;

(Grimbledung interjected as they sang: 'Two Three Four!")

For wher'er the barrels roll,
You will always know
That The Order goes drinking along!

Maca giggled.

Drimblerod saluted.

"Yaaa! You're not supposed to sing The Song among civilians!" Grimbledung ducked his head. "At least you didn't tell them the secret..."

"Ack, Ack, A-dack," Maca said with a wink. "It's Gnomish for.."

"Drink. Drink as the water buffalo?" Nulu said- using her limited Gnomish.

"Yahhhh!" Grimbledung fell of the table.

Nulu looked down at him, "Are you alright?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Yeah." He tugged on the twine. "This stuff's pretty potent. I'm practically numb all over. Have your dealer drop off a second crate when they sneak through town next."

"Well, let's get back to the shop," Drimblerod said. "So we can at least get some work done today."

"I don't think I should handle money," Grimbledung admitted. "I'm kinda woozy in the noggin."

"What? What kind of excuse is that?"

"No, really. Maybe I can talk to customers but that's about it." Grimbledung swatted at a nonexistence Pixie.

Maca shrugged. "It's tea for Ogres, Drimblerod. I don't think he should handle money either." She giggled. "Or work any heavy machinery."

Grimbledung waggled his eyebrows at Nulu. "Wooo! I guess that gives you a pass for the evening." He swatted at the Pixie.

"Oh, I really want to pound you to see just how numb you are." Nulu cracked her knuckles. "Heavy machinery indeed."

The non-existent Pixie shook her little fist at Grimbledung.

"Let's go, Grim, before you get pounded." Drimblerod pulled his partner to his feet. He turned toward the front of the shop. "Go that way."

"Okay. Just go around that Pixie encampment." Grimbledung pointed at an apparently empty space on the floor. "Looks like there's a jamboree going on."

Drimblerod looked at Maca for help.

"It's tea for Ogres; they're five times his size. Honestly; I'm surprised he can even walk."

"Hey ho little fellas!" Grimbledung bent over and waved at the floor. "How's the dance going?"

"I don't think he should even be around customers," Nulu said.

Grimbledung turned to look at Nulu. He swayed as his eyes tried to focus on her. "Gads, that's one of the best looking...most wonderfully put together..."

"Well, he's not all that far gone, obviously." Nulu blushed.

"... Mistress Yeti I've seen in almost a week." Grimbledung finished.

Drimblerod stifled a laugh. Mostly.

"Take him home and put him away." Nulu said through clenched teeth.

"Yes, Miss Nulu." Drimblerod said simply- knowing how close *he* was to a pounding. He got behind Grimbledung and half guided, half shoved his partner out of the shop.

Maca put her arm around Nulu., "Remember it's the tea talking." She patted Nulu's shoulder, "But you are indeed well put together."

"That is true." Nulu said. "That's the only reason I didn't knock him for a loop."

"You know, I have to say, I have met some Yetis and they are..."

Nulu looked over at her friend. "Yetis. Real Yetis."

Maca smiled. "Sure. Why, I remember this one I got partnered with this Yeti named Graney..."

"What?"

"We were playing at the Elves' Seven Hundredth Annual Team Bunco Tournament..."

Nulu laughed. "Tell me about it over drinks. This sounds like a long, absurd story." She pointed at the front of the shop. "Did you two win?"

"I'd hate to spoil the story, but yes."

As the pair walked out, they walked around where Grimbledung said the Pixies were dancing. Just in case.

The Pixies appreciated the gesture.

Chapter 18
Elections Deus ExMachinations

Maca entered Pozzuoli's shop- she was hoping to catch the Dwarf alone to discuss the upcoming elections. As usual however, he was doing a brisk business.

"Welcome to-a my shop, Miss Maca," Pozzuoli said. He gave her a wink. "Whadda you look for today?" He clapped his hands. "Giuseppe, help-a Maca with whatever she looking for!" He called loudly.

A gangly Dwarf ambled in from the back room. He seemed to be tall for a Dwarf and made up of all arms and legs. All in all, he was an unusual sight.

"You napping back there?"

"No Uncle," said Giuseppe, "I was stacking boxes."

"Good. Now you help Maca."

Giuseppe looked over at Maca. Even his eyes seemed gangly. "What is it you looking for today, Maca?"

In a quick hop, Pozzuoli made it to the youth and smacked him on the back of the head- more for show than anything else. "What-a you call her?"

"Miss…. Miss Maca." Giuseppe's head swayed downward on his gangly neck. "Miss Maca, that is."

Maca smiled. “It’s all right. You can...” A stern look from Pozzuoli made her not finish her sentence. “You can help me out by helping out these other customers.” She looked around at the customers then gave the Pozzuoli a smile. “I was hoping for a quick chat with the Mister… Consigliore.”

Pozzuoli laid his finger alongside his nose then pointed it at her. “Ahhh, I see.” He clapped his hands again. “Giuseppe, help the customers while we talk….” He gave another wink. “Over coffee?”

Maca smiled. She was fully expecting to eat and drink something when she came into Pozzuoli’s shop. “Only if there are some pastries to go along with it.”

“That-a there is.” He pointed at her. “A wise woman indeed, *Miss* Maca,” he said, emphasizing the ‘miss’ for Giuseppe’s benefit.

The boy nodded while measuring out rope for a customer. His gangly arms allowing him to do it at a non-Dwarflike five feet at a time.

Pozzuoli gestured at the curtain. “Have a seat and I’ll get a tray.”

Maca moved toward the curtain, hair flowing just a moment behind her in typical fashion as she went.

Maca was bringing another chair to the small table in the back of the shop when Pozzuoli came down the stairs from the newly-installed second floor. “Ahh, thanks Maca,” Pozzuoli said. “We are-a short chairs since adding the table upstairs.”

Maca smiled. “No trouble at all, Pozzuoli.” She looked at the ceiling. “Nice you were able to add that floor and move in above your shop. Makes the commute easier.”

“And getting a home cooked meal.” Pozzuoli said as he slid the tray onto the table. There was a steaming pot of coffee on it as well as several types of pastries. “Sugar, cream?”

Maca laughed. “Mostly. Akita tells me that I like a little coffee with my sugar and cream.”

“So you and the Constabulatore...”

“Why do you use that accent?” She interrupted him.

“I can get away with the murder like-a this!”

“Really?”

“Well, the last time it was really an accidente, but normally, yeah.”

Maca dropped several cubes of sugar into her cup. “I see.”

Pozzuoli grinned. "What do you need that you need *my* help, Missus all powerful Maca?"

"Well, *all* powerful is an exaggeration."

Pozzuoli raised an eyebrow at her.

"But I'll accept the compliment."

"Cream you said…" Pozzuoli half-filled her cup with cream. "How's that?"

"Perfect." Maca topped off the cup with several splashes of coffee.

"Where I come from, they call that a *macchiato* because it's only stained with coffee."[26]

Maca stirred her concoction. "It's the best way, really." She held up her cup. "So what I need help with is the election."

"Ah yes." The Dwarf gave a knowing wink. "You want me to throw it?"

Maca laughed. "No…" She considered that. "Actually the opposite; I want you to make sure it doesn't get thrown."

Pozzuoli added one sugar to his black coffee. "I see. So who's running against who?" He jerked a thumb at the window. "That loudmouth tailor is in the race, I've heard. Are you backing *him*?"

Maca shook her head. "Not hardly. I was hoping to have someone level-headed in charge of the town."

"You?"

"No!"

Pozzuoli gaped. "Not… not that Grimbledung!?"

"Gads no." Maca looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "Although when the time is right, I have the feeling he'll make a fine leader."

"Grimbledung. Grimbledung Sixtoes." Pozzuoli scrunched up his face. "Esquire even. A fine leader?"

"That's the one." She smiled. "Give him a few decades to even out."

Pozzuoli nodded. "S-alright. Who are you backing then?"

"Flora. Flora Willowfeet." Now Maca jerked a thumb but in the opposite direction. "She works at the Duck in and Dine as a server."

Pozzuoli smiled. "Oh, that one. I know her well. She won't let anyone walk all over her. She reminds me of my daughter."

"You know she's in a relationship with Grimbledung Sixtoes, esquire even?"

Pozzuoli choked on his coffee. "Well, love she is blind." He winked at her. "So I've been told."

"It wasn't blind love in your case?"

Pozzuoli shook his head. "Not at all; it was a case of a world-class rack," he deadpanned.

"Pozzuoli!" Mamma shouted from upstairs.

"Oh, that-a Mamma!" Pozzuoli said, picking up his accent again, "She bonk poor Pozzuoli on the head for that one, I am sure!"

Maca laughed. "Well," she said loudly, "I would take it as a compliment."

"Quick, eat a pastry!" Pozzuoli gestured at the plate. "And tell her how delicious they are."

"Well, that's won't be a problem; they look great," she said loudly as she took one. "Too much?" she added sotto voce.[27]

Pozzuoli helped himself to a pastry as well. "So what do you think this Magnus is going to try?"

Maca shrugged. "He influences people unduly. He tells people half-truths to get people to listen to him."

Pozzuoli laughed. "Sounds like every other politician I know!"

"Well, yes, I suppose. But I want to make sure that only votes cast by actual voters get counted."

"Well, that's not very political. I'm sure he's already planning on registering all of Bekham's Benders to vote for him whether they live here or not, and as many dead people as are buried within a day's walk."

"Pozz, that's why I need your help." She popped the rest of the pastry in her mouth. "And these are truly delicious," she added.

"Well, I know a guy who has a friend who helps with this kind of thing that I can contact to see if she would be willing to come over and help the Constabulatore." He put the rest of his pastry in his mouth and said around it: "If you think he'd accept the help."

Maca smirked. "He's the one that sent me to see you."

"Plausible deniability?"

Maca nodded.

"Maybe Akita should run."

Maca leaned back. "No, no." She waggled a finger at the Dwarf. "Get that thought right out of your head. I don't see him enough as just the Constabulatore; as the mayor I'd see him even less."

Pozzuoli smiled. "Well, let me send a message to Deus and I'll let you know as soon as I hear back."

"Her name is *Deus*?"

Pozzuoli waved a hand dismissively. "It's the name of her business; Deus ExMachinations. She doesn't give out her name."

"She makes things happen. Fixes things that seem impossible."

Pozzuoli winked. "That's what you need, right?"

"Flora reminds you of your daughter?"

Pozzuoli's smile faltered. "Yes, she does remind me of her."

Realization hit Maca as the images flashed in her mind - a burning village and rampaging soldiers. Halfling soldiers. "Oh, Pozzuoli, I am so sorry." She reached out and took his hand. "I didn't realize."

"It's fine. It doesn't change the fact that she reminds me of Sophia."

"And…" She wasn't sure how to phrase her next question. "And you are alright with her choice in marriage? With what happened?"

Pozzuoli's face darkened. "Oh, the only reason I am alright with her choice is because he did not have anything to do with it." Now he turned his hand to hold Maca's. "Miss Maca, if my sources had reported that he had been involved *in any way at all*, he would not have survived his first night in the cell." He let go of her hand and spread his arms out wide. "And I can assure you that he would not have wanted to survive once I got started on him."

"He wasn't part of the Army then?"

Pozzuoli shook his head. "Oh he was indeed, but at the time he and his men were trying to take control of the Riatoh Bronze Mines to the south." He smiled. "And that did not go well for them at all."

"That was a massacre, from what I remember reading. Two dozen Dwarves repelled the entire legion of Halflings."

"Only two Halflings survived that day; Colossus and one other." He put his finger under his downward turned palm and twisted it. "And the other didn't make it out of the territory. Only Colossus remains of the mighty Five oh First Legion."

"Oh dear."

Pozzuoli waved his hand dismissively. "I have put most all of it behind me."

"Really?"

"Well, all those responsible are gone so…"

Maca chose another pastry and decided to change the subject: "So who's your friend's friend?"

"She's a fixer." He winked. "Of all kinds of things."

Maca took a bite of her pastry- this one was filled with raspberry. "Delicioso." She said.[28]

Pozzuoli nodded at the tray. "You should take some for your afternoon wine sessions with Nulu and Julie."

"Not much gets by you, does it?"

Pozzuoli held his hands up inquisitively. "Who-a me? Poor Pozzuoli do'na know anything."

"That's what I hear," Maca said playfully. "So it must be true." She pulled the tray towards herself. "Can I take the tray? I promise to get it back to you."

"Sure, sure." Pozzuoli waved his hand dismissively. "Go take some to your friends."

"So this fixer…"

"A fine Dwarfess if there ever was one. Tough as Troll nails and nothing gets by her."

"Has she dealt with anyone like Grimbledung?"

Pozzuoli laughed. "That I can't attest to, but I'm sure she will manage."

"Well, I'd love to meet her when she gets here." Maca smiled. "Any friend of the great Pozzuoli…"

"Oh no, you won't meet her," Pozzuoli interrupted. "You won't even know she's here."

"Really?" Maca raised an eyebrow. "Even me?"

"She tends to work under the scenes, so probably not. Not unless you really try hard."

"Don't you mean behind the scenes?"

Pozzuoli shrugged. "Well, she is a Dwarf after all."

"You're saying I shouldn't look for her? Would that cause her problems?"

"Not really; with her Unobtrusiveness spells enacted, she's almost impossible to notice. Or stop." He winked. "Even with the Grimbledung stirring up the mix."

Maca smirked. "I'll leave her to her work behind the scenes." She smirked. "Pulling strings most likely?"

"Keeping them from being pulled is what you've hired her for," Pozzuoli said. "Unless you want otherwise?"

"Let's keep it aboveboard for now."

Pozzuoli stood. "Then go meet your friends and let them know the election will run like it should."

Maca stood as well. "I appreciate it, really." She frowned. "I really don't want that man in charge of town."

"You want him… not able to run? Or walk even?"

"Let's make that Plan B."

Pozzuoli handed Maca the plate. "Sure, sure. Just give the word and those statistics about accidents happening in the home will catch up with him."

Maca took the plate. "I'm glad you're on our side."

"Of course; I only want what's best for the town." Pozzuoli lied.

With that, Maca took the tray of pastries and went straight to the Duck Inn and Dine.

Chapter 19
Meanwhile

"Caw! Caw!"

Caw jolted upright.

"Trolls, Caw, Trolls!"

Caw stood. "Trolls? Trolls I can deal with."

"Trolls!"

"Bert, would you *please* stop shouting?"

"A group of them. Heading this way." Bert said softer now.

"How many?"

"More than two?"

Caw straightened his sleeping tunic. "I really need to teach you to count at some point."

"Less than ten?"

"Fine, fine. Let them come." He moved to the fire and stoked it. As the embers came to life, he added some water to the copper teapot and pressed it down into the flames. "Tea solves all problems." He added several sticks to the flames to coax them higher.

As the fire made a larger circle of light around the campsite, a Troll came into view.

"A good evening to you." Caw said. Even though he was no longer the Lord High Priest of the Halfling Empire, he still felt he should be afforded some sort of honor. "You are welcome by the fire."

"We are, are we?" Said the Troll. "Hear that, Knocke? We're welcome."

"That's always good t'hear," said Knocke. He stepped fully into the firelight. Making the large club he carried plainly visible.

"Why don't you have a seat then." Caw said. He gestured at one of the large logs next to the fire. "There's tea on."

"There's a third one, Caw," Bert said as he flew in a wide circle just outside the firelight.

"Shaddap, bird," said another Troll as she stepped into the light. "Or I'll shaddap you up."

"That's not the right word," Bert observed.

"If we could all just act civilized for a moment..." Caw began.

"Well, wouldn't that be a treat?" Said the first Troll. He moved to the log and sat on it, making it look small. "You wanna act civilized, Betildatilda?"

The female laughed. "That mean I keep my pinky out while I wallop intruders?" She lifted her own club into view. It had several spikes hammered through its thick end. "And say things like 'pip, pip, that's a lot'a blood'?"

"Yeah, like that." Knocke said. He moved to the log but only stood by it. He looked down at the seated Troll. "Right, Spencer?"

"Spencer?" Caw said. It was a very unusual name for a Troll. And a famous one. Or, in relation to Halflings, infamous. "Spencer DustyBottoms?"

"Hey now." Spencer stopped the Halfling before he said anything else. "That was a long time ago." He waved a clawed hand dismissively. "You have my name, Halfling, and I don't have yours."

Knocke dropped his club has he laughed. "Yer reputation' recedes you."

"I think it's precedes," Betildatilda said. "And to think I was looking forward to some head bonkings. Pinky out even."

Caw straightened his sleeping tunic again. "I am Lord High Priest Caw Sprawlings the Fifth," he said with all the haughtiness he could muster standing before three Trolls in his sleeping tunic and bare feet. And he hoped that the Trolls would catch that his name was unlike any other Halfling name- it wasn't an augmentative. And he especially hoped that the Trolls had not heard the name of the new Lord High Priest- whoever that was.

"Ahh," Spencer said. "And I have heard of *your* ruthlessness, Lord High Priest." He leaned back. "What are you doing out here anyway?"

Caw didn't correct him. "It is a mission of utmost importance and secrecy. Tea?"

"Oh?" Betildatilda leaned forward. "What sort?"

"Halfling Breakfast Tea." Caw said.

"I think she meant what sort of mission," Knocke said.

Betildatilda shook her head. “There’s tea to be had. The mission of utmost importance and secrecy can wait for the tea to be poured.”

“Well said, Miss Betildatilda,” Caw said. “And possibly an evil plan can be thought up in the darkness to make my plans foolproof.” He shook his head. “Since I’m killing a fool.”

“Unter Schutz der Dunkleheit, eh?” Knocke remarked. “Only thing I like about them Dwarves.”

“And their ale.” Spencer said.

“And their ale.” Agreed Knocke.

“It seems I am short on milk.” Caw said. He took several large gold mugs from his backpack. “How embarrassing.”

“Fancy.” Betildatilda said as she took a mug.

“It’s good to be the Lord High Priest,” Spencer said.

Rightfully so.

“Just like it’s good to be a Grand Moff and the Troll King’s Vizier.”

Especially so.

Spencer waved a hand dismissively.

Hand wave notwithstanding, really especially so.

“Your campaigns deep into Gargoyle territory are well known and still talked about to this day.” Caw passed Betildatilda a tea bag. Troll or not- females were always served first. Of course, Spencer was served next.

After everyone had their tea bag steeping, Caw leaned forward. “I have this Gnome problem.”

“Gnome problem?” Spencer smiled. “Delightful. What’s the problem?”

“He’s living and I want him really most sincerely otherwise.”

Spencer gave a wink. “Well remember that vengeance is a dish best served swiftly. Plan long, act quick. Otherwise it is like bad lobster in a dark cellar.”

Caw scrunched up his face- he had had bad lobster in a dark cellar. “Right.” He said simply.

"This is a most excellent topic for tea." Knocke said. He bobbed his tea bag up and down in his gold mug as he crossed his legs. "So first you need to get his routine to anticipate his actions. Then pick up some nice, powerful poison."

"Those should be easy enough," Caw said. "Highly predictable, this one. Spends most of his time on a barstool."

Spencer nodded at the other Troll. "True, but if you want to be sure, and make a statement at the same time, what you really need to do is find an old bank safe and a good bit of rope."

"I prefer an upright piano, if you're going that route," offered Betildatilda. "Lethality with just a bit of whimsy."

"Yes, also effective." Spencer said. "Then what do you think about..."

The discussion went long into the night and into the end of a second cup of tea.

Until a gruesomely lethal plan was set.

Chapter 20
The Candidate's a Rat!

Rat sat back as he listened to the conversation and sipped his drink. When he felt there was an adequate pause in the conversation between Drimblerod, Grimbledung, and Flora, Rat jumped in: "I think I'm going to run." Rat said.

Grimbledung toasted him with his drink. "Run? Back to the shop, or out back?"

"No, not run. *Run*." Rat said.

"Run where?" Drimblerod asked. He put his tankard down and looked at Flora for help.

"You people." Rat said. He picked up his shot glass and took a drink. "Think you're better than everyone else. Think you're the only ones who can run."

"I've been running a bit of late," Grimbledung said. He winked. "Ran into Opus Magnus in fact. It was part of a cunning plan."

"It was, apparently," Drimblerod said. "A cunning plan that spiraled out of control with wanton destruction following close behind." He smiled at Rat. "You got a plan like that?"

Rat looked at Flora. 'You want in on the aspersions as well?"

Flora shook her head. “No, not at all, Rat.” She smiled. “So you’re going to run? That’s nice.” She fished, hoping Rat would explain himself.

Rat did: “Well, I’m glad you’re with me,” Rat said. “I am going to need someone to come with me to the council to verify that I am a resident to officially add my name to the ballot.”

“Ohhhh,” Grimbledung said. “Run, run.” He chuckled. “A rat on the ticket? What’s your platform; a block of cheese in every trap?”

Flora kicked Grimbledung under the table. Hard.

“Hey-ya!” Grimbledung exclaimed as he jolted in his seat. He reached down and rubbed his shin. He fully expected to see blood on his hand when he bought it back up onto the table. “What was that for?”

“I am sure we have discussed you being more supportive of your friends, Grimbledung Sixtoes.”

“We discussed something like that, Miss Willowfeet,” Grimbledung said. He rubbed his shin again. When he was upset, he forwent the ‘Flora O’ and referred to her as ‘Miss Willowfeet’. “Now that you mention it with such force.”

Flora nodded. “That means you should next ask...” She coaxed.

“Seriously?” Grimbledung guffawed. He raised his legs to the bottom of the table to keep them from being kicked. “A rat in public office?”

Flora glowered at him. “Do I need to go get Mister NineTails?”

“No, no! We do not need him here!” Grimbledung tugged on his ears. “Rat, I’m sorry. What are you running on?”

“Grimbledung...” Flora warned.

“It’s a valid question!” Grimbledung nodded at Rat as he leaned toward him. “Right? What’s your platform? Please tell me!” He wailed, fearful that along with Mister NineTails, the Wheel of Compliance was going to make a showing. “Rivendale!” He said loudly.

“You don’t need your safe word, Grimbledung Sixtoes,” Flora said, tersely. “Yet.”

“I know, I’m just making sure I don’t forget it... again.”

“Gads, and I thought my relationships were weird,” Rat said with a headshake. “I think I’m going to run as an In Dependent.”

"You mean an independent?" Drimblerod asked. Just in case, he stealthily moved his legs out of Flora's range. "I think it's pronounced 'independent' as one word."

"Independent is pronounced that way, yes," Rat said. "But I'm running on the In Dependent Party ticket."

"I can't say I've heard of that party." Drimblerod lowered his legs, figuring that the conversation -although confusing- was still amicable. "Who founded it? Has it been around long?"

Rat took another drink. "The In Dependent Party has been around for quite a number of years. It was started by a rogue dentist and a non-conformist reindeer."

"That sounds a little absurd." Grimbledung said. He looked at Flora. "I mean... how strange?"

"I have to admit I've never heard of them either," Flora said. "What do they stand for?"

"Well, it's really a live and let live kind of party; you can do what you want as long as it doesn't cause problems for others."

Drimblerod nodded. "Ahh, park a wagon in your front yard if you want. Smoke a mushroom or two and no one should bother you about it. Non-confrontational kind of people. Right?"

Rat nodded. "That's the gist of it."

"Sounds like a bunch of wishy-washy folks," Grimbledung said. "Do they actually have any influence to get their way?"

"They also believe that pulling the teeth right out of their adversary's head to pacify them is fair game. And shoving them off a cliff."

"Very nice! That's exactly the kind of strong-arm tactics I expect from a political party." Grimbledung toasted Rat. "What do they have for the regular, non-adversarial folk who prefer to keep their teeth?"

"Mis-made toys."

"What toys?"

"Trains that fly, fish with square wheels. That sort of thing."

"Well, I suppose that's better than having to gum your food," Drimblerod said. He took a drink. "I guess I could get behind them. But..." He looked at Flora. "But I don't think I can support two candidates at once. What about Flora?"

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "No trouble at all, partner; just vote for both."

"You can only vote for one person," said Drimblerod.

"Hold on now," said Rat, "he might be on to something."

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure, sure. Works great. It's the way Dad did it and it's the way we're going to do it."

"Do what?"

Grimbledung winked at Drimblerod. "Vote early, vote often."

"I really don't think that's legal, Grim." Drimblerod looked at Flora. "Flora?"

"He's my campaign manager and he seems to know what he's doing."

"But..." Drimblerod looked back and forth between the couple. "Have you ever run for public office, Grim?"

"No."

"Have you ever *helped* someone run for public office?"

"Nope."

"Have you ever even voted?"

"You mean in some sort of election?"

"That's usually when you vote, Grim," said Drimblerod.

"Not a once."

"Well, he seems perfectly suited to run a campaign," said Rat. "It'll be nice to run against someone with those kinds of credentials." He sipped his drink, "I'll buy you a drink after your concession speech."

"Oooh! I love concessions!" Grimbledung rubbed his belly. "Popped corn and roasted Marsh Mallows."

"Yeah, I'll bring you a roasted Mallow." Rat toasted Grimbledung. "I'm buying even."

Grimbledung leaned over onto Flora. "Don't you worry your cute little ears, Candidate Flora O. Willowfeet; if there's one thing I'm good at..."

"It's eating." suggested Rat.

"Drinking," tossed in Drimblerod.

Grimbledung pursed his lips.

"Loafing?" Tried Rat.

"Getting distracted?" Drimblerod chuckled.

Grimbledung furrowed his brow.

"Not paying for said drinking," snickered Rat.

"Being late for work when you sleep in the same house *as* your work?" Drimblerod guffawed.

"Forgetting to tip your girlfriend when she's working as your waitress?" Flora said, feeling obligated to at least add one comment.

Drimblerod and Rat gaped at Grimbledung. "No," they both said.

"I had a lot on my mind!" Grimbledung said defensively. "It was a long day. I needed to get home!" He fidgeted. "I had a friend coming from out of town! There was a flood! Rampaging Wildebees!"

"Fidgeting," Rat said.

"Making up critters." Said Drimblerod. "I think they're Wilde*beests*."

"Not when they fly!" Grimbledung offered. "And sting."

"Taking his life in his own hands," Drimblerod continued.

Flora giggled.

Grimbledung frowned. "Keep it up you three. When this is all over, you two'll both be amazed and awed by my ability to get Flora O. Willowfeet voted in as our next mayoress."[29]

"Oh, Grimbledung Sixtoes." Flora smooched his cheek loudly. "You're the bestest campaign manager a gal could have."

Rat looked at Drimblerod. "Want to put your endorsement behind me yet?"

"I'll waiting to see how the field pans out." Drimblerod said noncommittally. "Give me a few weeks."

"The election is in a few weeks," observed Rat. "How long are you going to wait?"

Drimblerod pushed himself out of the booth. "A good month or at least until after the votes are counted." He pointed at Rat, Grimbledung, then Flora, "I absolutely, positively do solemnly declare that I will not be drawn into any discussion that deals with my voting in any way at all."

"But what about..." Grimbledung started.

"Nothing. Not a word. Voting is a private matter between one person..."

"Or rat."

"... and their conscience. No bribery, begging, or threats..."

"*His* party pulls out teeth." Grimbledung pointed at Rat. "I should remind you."

"The current residence of my teeth is where they will remain." Drimblerod said flatly. "And there will be even less discussion about my teeth than there will be about who my vote goes to."

"So you're undecided," Grimbledung said. "Fine, fine; I'll win you over." He grinned. "Say, want me to fill up your drink while you're away?"

"I'm going home, Grim. In the morning I have a business to run. Remember that while you're out gallivanting about town and spending money that you aren't helping to earn."

Grimbledung took a sip of his drink. "Sounds good, Drim. Keep me posted on events as they currently happen."

Drimblerod shook his head and walked off.

Grimbledung winked at Flora. "I think he's on our side."

"Well that makes one at least." Rat said. He swirled his drink around his shot glass. "I've got hundreds... thousands of rats that will vote for me."

"I don't think rats can vote, Rat." Grimbledung said.

"And why not?"

"Because they're rats, of course."

"You saying there are certain species that can't vote?" Rat slammed his shot glass onto the table. "So what's the criteria? Is it size then? Can *Riverfolk* not vote because they're so small?"

"Well, no; they can vote, of course."

"Oh, so then it is because they look like small versions of humans?" Rat pointed a claw at Grimbledung. "Is that why *you* can vote; because you look like a short fat human with hairy ears? How small does one need to be to not count anymore? A Brownie perhaps? Or a Pixie?"

"Now just a grain of sand." Now Grimbledung slammed his tankard onto the table. "It's not that at all."

"A wise person said a 'person is a person no matter how small'," offered Flora.

"It is because they're animals?"

"Well that might..." Grimbledung said noncommittally.

"Or maybe it's because they can't read or write?" Rat twitched his whiskers.

"Ahh; okay," said Grimbledung snapped his fingers then pointed at Rat, "that might have something to do with it."

"Oh really? So that means *you* can't vote either. Fine then, there's one less vote for your candidate mister election manager because you can't read!"

"Not hold on, that's not what I said."

"So only things that don't look like you folk can't vote? Is it the fur?"

"Well fur could be..."

"I'll make sure to tell the *Constable* that he shouldn't bother going to the voting booth because his vote won't count." Rat stood on his hind legs. "I'll be sure to tell him *you* said that!"

"That's not what I said!" Grimbledung stood and pointed at Rat. "You're putting words in my mouth and I don't like it!"

"I should put words in your *lame brain*!"

"Hey now. I'm not going to..."

Flora looked back and forth at the pair.

"Oh yes you are!"

"I'll have you know..." Grimbledung began.

"Then you're probably..."

"Not in his lifetime!" Grimbledung hesitated then finished his sentence: "You rat!"

"You're a bigot!" Rat tossed at Grimbledung. Hard.

"Hey now!" Grimbledung leaned back. "Hey now!"

"Yes, Rat; that's not nice," Flora interjected.

"What's the racket here?" Nulu asked as she stepped up to the table. "What's the problem you two?" She narrowed her eyes. "Are you two not finishing sentences at each other again? I know we've discussed..."

"Well sure."

"But this time." Rat added.

"You're doing it again," Nulu said. "Stop it."

"What about females?" Rat lobbed toward Grimbledung.

"What?" Grimbledung looked up at Nulu.

"What?" Nulu asked.

"Can *they* vote?"

"Well sure they can. If they can run they can vote, of course."

"What?" Rat leaned forward toward Grimbledung, "*what did you just say*?"

"I said that if they can run for office, then they can vote!" Grimbledung shouted. "She could run so she can vote, you stupid rat!"

"Fine then." Rat picked up his shot glass and downed the rest of it. "Since I'm running for office that means that rats can also vote." He shook his shot glass at Grimbledung. "Hah!"

"Hold on a minute!" Grimbledung picked up his tankard and downed the rest of it. He shook his tankard at Rat. "That's not the same thing as permitting females to vote! Hah!"

"What?" Nulu said. "Who said anything about women having to get *permission* to vote?" She looked at Rat. "And who said animals *can* vote?"

"You calling me an animal?"

"Well, Rat..." Nulu paused to collect her thoughts. "When all is said and done, you are... at the end of the day... a rat. Right?"

"But I can speak and reason and," He glowered at Grimbledung with his good eye. "I can run for mayor."

"But, you're a special circumstance when it comes to rats," Nulu said.

"Right! You're special, Rat. You're not a stupid rat, you stupid Rat!" Grimbledung said. "Wait. Was that right?"

"So you can't vote if you're stupid then?" Rat twitched his whiskers

"Well now, let's not get hasty," Grimbledung held his hands up. "Most of the electorate is completely ignorant of the issues at hand. The only reason they vote for *any* particular candidate is because they saw a slick advertisement or someone smartlier than them told them to vote for a particular candidate, or they actually *believe* the lies candidates tell. Overall, the majority of the voting body is stupid people who shouldn't even be allowed to own sharp tools, much less be allowed the all-important civic responsibility of voting."[30]

"Well, if they will let a stupid Gnome vote, then they can let a stupid rat vote."

"Now Rat, that's a slippery slope." Nulu slid onto the bench. "Does that mean dogs and other animals can vote?"

Grimbledung clapped his hands once. "Well I know who Wonky is voting for!"

"Donkeys can't vote!" Rat shouted.

"Well if rats can, then donkeys can!"

Rat tossed his shot glass onto the table. As it clattered toward Grimbledung, Nulu slapped her hand on it. "Now Rat, be reasonable." Nulu righted the shot glass. "The issue is that you are a self-aware... animal." She held up her hand to quiet Rat. "And that affords you certain rights, and among those rights are the right to life, to be free to do what you want, and to pursue happiness."

"I agree completely!" Rat shook his claw at Grimbledung. "But that Gnome thinks he's better than everyone else."

"Well, Gnomes'r better than most folks, sure," Grimbledung agreed. "There's no point even arguing *that*."

"Racist!"

"Rat," Nulu said. "It's like Dragons and Minotaur. They are beasts but they reason and are self-aware. The same is true for Humans, Elves, Orcs, and even Gnomes." She smiled.

"And you, Rat. You are in that category as well." She put her hand out towards Rat. "And you have to understand that regular rats are mindless animals."

Rat frowned. "Well I'm insulted." He pointed a finger at Grimbledung. "First by him," he then pointed at Nulu, "and now by you! In-sulted!"

"Well that's convenient mister In Dependent Party!" Grimbledung slid his glass toward Rat. "I'll make sure I keep an eye on my teeth!"

"What?" Nulu deftly stopped the glass.

"I'd like to think you'd have a little more respect and thanks for the one that gave you such a great life." Grimbledung shook his head. "That's gratitude for you."

Rat moved to the edge of the table. "You're an idiot. And I'm going to get people to vote for me because I'm *not* an idiot." He nodded at Nulu. "Nulu, good day." He nodded at Flora. "Good day, Flora. I am sorry I have to run against you, but I feel like it's something I need to do." He purposely ignored Grimbledung, hopped off the table, and scurried out.

"Why are you so mean to him, Grimbledung?"

"He started it, Nulu!" Grimbledung pointed at the curtain Rat had just run under. "He called me a bigot! Me! I mean, can you just imagine?"

"Are Gnomes the bestest race ever in existence?" Nulu raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. And I appreciate the superlative you used to describe us."

"Well, I think you need to take it easy on him and not mention the election around him from now on."

"I think that's a good idea, Nulu. Right Grimbledung Sixtoes?" Flora put her hand on Grimbledung's shoulder.

"I suppose so." Grimbledung smiled. "You are indeed a wise Trolless, Nulu. A tribute to your kind, in fact." His smile got wider. "And I am glad to hear that I can count on your vote... and those of your noblest of noble TrollKind, for the wonderfully wonderful candidate Flora O. Willowfeet."

Nulu got up from the table and left without saying another word.

"I think she's onboard," Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"I don't know..."

"Don't worry; females are easily swayed. Especially when another female is running for office. You could leave a trail of suspiciously convenient dead bodies of your adversaries, lie

at every turn, and not even follow any of the rules of your own job and other females would vote for you because you're part of the secret sisterhood."[31]

"What about Rat?"

"He'll be the third wheel candidate; not enough'll vote for him because they will think he can't win so they will think they are throwing their vote away."

"That's terrible."

Grimbledung nodded. "The sad cold hard truth of the matter is that if all the people who didn't vote for the third candidate because they thought they were throwing away their vote *actually voted* for the third candidate, they would win by a landslide."[32]

"I'm not sure I like politics," Flora admitted. "Should I even run?"

Grimbledung patted her on the back. "Don't worry; once you're elected, you don't really need to do any sort of actual political work." He waggled his ears. "Until you are looking to get reelected, of course."

Flora finished the rest of her drink. She was certain she wanted to be a one-term mayoress with how the election process was going so far. "I'm not sure I'd want to go through this again."

"Pushaw," Grimbledung stood. "Running as an incumbent is even easier."

"How so?" Flora stood as well.

"There's a saying in politics…"

"Perjury is for peasants?"

Grimbledung blinked at Flora. "Well yes; that is indeed a popular saying with politicians. But the other is 'the devil you know is better than the devil you don't'."

Flora exhaled. "Alright then, I suppose Grimbledung Sixtoes. I think I'm going to get to work."

Grimbledung nodded. "And I'll head back to the shop and work on a campaign strategy." He waggled his ears. "And answers to the questions for the debate."

"How can you have answers if you don't know the question?"

Grimbledung smooched Flora on the forehead. "My dear Candidate Flora O. Willowfeet; politicians never give answers to the questions they are asked; they give the answers to the questions they *want* to be asked."

Flora nodded even though she didn't understand. "Fine then. See you tonight?"

Grimbledung moved toward the curtain. "Count on it Candidate Flora O. Willowfeet!"

"Really?" Flora perked up.

"Sure, sure," Grimbledung lied.

Flora stood and slapped her hands on the table. "Grimbledung Sixtoes!" She screeched. "You will be where you say you are going to be this evening or there will be… consequences!"

Grimbledung let go of the curtain. "Wha… what sort of consequences."

"*Consequences*." Flora said ominously.

"Well, just tell me where I am supposed to be and when and I will be there!"

"My place. Eight tonight. *Eight sharp*. If the bell tower stops chiming and you are not at my doorstep." She narrowed her eyes.

"I get another couple of minutes?" Grimbledung tried. He waggled his ears.

Flora interlaced her fingers and cracked her knuckles. "No."

Grimbledung's ears drooped.

"Want to guess again?" Flora said icily.

"Eight sharp it is!" Grimbledung gave a salute then returned to wrestling with the curtain to get past it. "See you then!" He shouted from the other side.

Flora smiled sweetly, dimples making little round divots in her cheeks. "Oh, that Gnome!" With a squeak of excitement, she turned and headed for the back room.

Several patrons took a deep, relieved breath when she had left.

Chapter 21
A Magnus Always Repays His Debts

Magnus rubbed his head as he sat up. "What a horrible dream," he said. He opened his eyes and looked around his room. It was a disaster. He threw back his sheets and hopped to his feet. Onto clothes sticking out from under his bed. "What the?"

With a scowl, he opened the door. His living room was an even worse shamble. "What the!" He wheeled and looked at the far corner. The book was missing. "Stinking lousy thieves!" A terrible thought came to him. Turning slowly, he looked to the pedestal on his dresser. The conch shell was still there. "Thank evilness!"

Magnus took the conch shell off the pedestal reverently. He breathed a sigh of relief as he held it to his ear.

where have you been? A voice asked.

"Someone ransacked my room! And..." He frowned at the sight of his clothes shoved under his bed. "They wrinkled my clothes!"

your clothes are wrinkled? that is what worries you? Another voice said, angrily.

"They're expensive, you know!" Magnus whined. "Now I have to pay to have them ironed and..."

SILENCE! Bellowed the voices in unison.

Magnus sat back roughly on his dresser. It wobbled behind him. "What?" He looked behind it. More of his clothes were stuffed there. "Stinking thieves!"

there was one.

"One what?"

thief, you fool! The first voice said. *what is missing?*

"My clothes are wrinkled!"

WHAT IS MISSING!

Magnus looked again at the pedestal where The Book used to be. "Hummm. You know… the place is a mess so it's hard to tell what is missing or just... just shoved someplace else. I think I should tidy up first before…"

he is stalling interrupted another voice. This one high-pitched.

"The Book isn't where it should be," Magnus said meekly. He cringed as he waited for a response.

There was none.

"Hello?" Magnus shook the conch shell. "Hello?"

No one answered.

After a long moment, he put the shell back on its pedestal. As his fear of the voices left him, his anger returned. "Oh, I will find who did this and they will rue the day they crossed Magnus Opus von Magnus!" He stomped into his living room, hoping to find a clue to who had robbed him.

In a stark contrast to their bumbling, the Skeletons left none.

As he stood in his living room, Magnus thought over who would have had reason to rob him. He had, in fact, tried to run his business as legitimately and customer-friendly as possible. Mainly because the voices told him to. Occasionally, he had a run-in with someone over a price or quality, but none stood out. He hated to admit it but overall, the townsfolk were mainly well behaved and polite. A tribute to the citizenship of a newly founded town. In fact...

"Hold on a second," Magnus interrupted. He punched a fist into his other hand. "Those Gnomes! Those stinking Gnome brothers!"

There were those Gnome brothers who had recently showed an interest in his business and the location of his home.

"Yes; those lousy Gnomes!" He started for the door then stopped himself- he was still in his bed clothes. "Oh, I'll find you!" He returned to his room and opened the drawers of his dresser.

They were all empty.

He picked up the conch shell. "It's those Gnomes! I will find them!" He shouted. He was unsure what to call the voices- they had never offered any names. Or even their location. Nevertheless, once he had discovered them, his business dealings and social status had greatly improved. "You can count on me!" He put the conch shell back on its pedestal.

Magnus began pulling his clothes from behind the dresser and tossing them onto the bed and floor. As he tossed another handful, something hard clattered to the floor.

"What?" He turned and looked at the pile. "What was that?" He said to the empty room. Cautiously, he moved to the large pile of clothes and began to put them on the bed a piece at a time. After several pieces, he came across a wand. He held it up to the late afternoon light.

"Well, well. A clue." He put the wand on the dresser and returned to pulling clothes from behind it. Finally, he found his black cloak. It was a wrinkled mess.

Angrily, he snapped it several times trying to work the wrinkles out. When he was satisfied, he pulled the clothes from under his bed, finding some black trousers and black shirt. He laid them on the bed beside the cloak. "Now to see whose wand this is." He frowned- he had no idea how to determine the owner.

"Wait." He said as he turned to look at the wand. "That wand shop across town!" He spread his arms out wide, fingers splayed at the ceiling. "Mwuaa haa haaa... eh?" He finished as he caught sight of his propped-open and broken skylight. "Oh, you will pay for this dearly!" He cackled. A feeling in his lower abdomen got his attention. "Once I pee, of course," he added matter-of-factly.

After his ablutions and righting most of his furniture, Magnus stalked out of his home. Wand in hand, he headed straight for Second Hand Sorcery.

Chapter 22
A Last Minute Customer

Grimbledung slid down the bannister- twice now he had fallen down the stairs so he was avoiding them. "Woop!" He called when he hit the ground. "How was today?"

Drimblerod was bent over the coins drawer, counting. "Give me a minute."

Grimbledung skipped to the sign. "Want me to flip it? Flip the sign?? Sign flippage? Flippin' signage? Fliperation?"

"Counting..." Drimblerod said.

"If you're still counting, it was a good day. We should close." He reached up and turned the sign to 'closed' just as Door opened.

Magnus stalked in.

"Sorry, Sir; we're closed," Grimbledung said.

"Seymour Butts?"

Grimbledung snickered.

Drimblerod glanced up then returned to counting.

"Not me." Grimbledung deadpanned.

"Ivan A. DogtaLick?"

"Nnnnnope."

Drimblerod looked up again. He shook his head and returned to counting.

Magnus exhaled angrily.

"Want to try again?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Please?"

"How about Louis Bowles?"

Drimblerod pushed the drawer shut.

"Not today, sorry." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"Grimbledung, what in the lands..." Drimblerod started.

"Ahh, Grimbledung then," Magnus scowled. "Most annoying."

"Yeah, that's me!"

Magnus looked to Drimblerod.

"That's him all right." Drimblerod locked the drawer then drew his wand.

Brinks and Mosler this Drawer.
Guarded with Pustules and Ichthyosis Vulgaris![33]
Keep it like this till our returnis.

He intoned as he waved his wand at the drawer.

"Returnis?" Grimbledung tut-tutted.

"Ahh; I am at the right place!" Magnus flourished his wand. "Hah!"

Drimblerod's eyes got large. The spell had not fully adhered to the drawer and moving it could cause catastrophically gruesome effects to its contents, or to him. Or both. "Grim!"

Grimbledung reached up his sleeve for his wand. It was not there. As he trained his eyes on Magnus' wand, he realized why his wand wasn't up his sleeve. "Rolton Chips!" With no other recourse, he leapt for the man's hand and bit it.

"Get off me you crazy Gnome!" Magnus hit Grimbledung with his free hand. "Get off!"

"Robberyefm!" Grimbledung said around Magnus' hand. "Thievereefm!" He also flailed because it seemed like the thing to do.

As the spell finished seeping into the drawer - locking spells were notoriously slow acting- Drimblerod raised his wand and aimed down it at Grimbledung.

Expectoramus Wandus
Patooie!

He intoned.

Grimbledung spat out Magnus' hand. The wand went clattering to the far wall.

"Gross!" Magnus said. He shook his hand, sending droplets of slobber flying. "What is wrong with you people!"

"We don't take kindly to thievery!" Drimblerod stepped around the counter keeping his wand trained on the dark man.

"Thief? ME?" Magnus snapped his cloak. "I'm a *customer*, you dolt!" He pointed at finger at Grimbledung. "And that's assault!"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Grimbledung. Grimbledung Sixtoes. Don't know anyone named Assault." He stuck out his hand. "And you are?"

"WE'VE BEEN THROUGH THIS SEVERAL TIMES ALREADY!" Magnus bellowed!

"What is it you want, Sir?" Drimblerod still had his wand trained on the man.

"I want to know if you can identify a wand." He spread his hands out wide. "This *is* a wand shop, is it not?"

"It is, is it yes." Grimbledung said.

Magnus stared at him.

Grimbledung scampered over and retrieved the wand. It was wet. "This here a water wand?"

"How should I know?"

"It's wet."

"Because you slobbered on it!" Magnus snapped his cloak again.

Grimbledung peered at the wand. "Well just calm down and we will see what we can do for you."

"For a nominal fee, of course," Drimblerod added.

Magnus exhaled. "Gnomes."

"What?" Grimbledung moved back to the man. "You got some anger management issues." He waved the wand around. Drops of drool went flying. "And coming from me, that's saying something!"

"Fine, fine. Could you tell me about the wand?" Magnus ducked to avoid the splatter. "Please," he added. He smacked his lips as if he had a bad taste in his mouth.

"That hurt, huh?"

"You have no idea."

Grimbledung slipped the wand into his sheath. "Well, no harm done." He smiled. "So what can we help you with again?"

Realization hit Drimblerod. "Oh no." He moved to his partner. "This gentleman wants to know about that wand." He gestured at Grimbledung's now-filled wand sheath. "That you have put beside your own wand... in your double sheath." He stared hard at his partner.

Realization hit Grimbledung. "Hey, aren't we having drinks with Nulu, Colossus, and Cherí later this evening?"

"Yes," Drimblerod said. He reached up Grimbledung's sleeve. "Once we determine where this wand is from." He yanked the wand out and turned to face Magnus. "So let's see..." He brought the wand up to his nose and sniffed it- not too closely, because it was wet. "Custom made."

"Yeah!" Grimbledung said. "It sure was."

"So do you know who bought it?" Magnus said. He rubbed his hands together. "Oh, the pain and suffering I will heap on the owner of that wand!"

"What?"

"Where did you find the wand? If you don't mind me asking." Drimblerod asked even though he minded asking.

"At the scene of a crime." Magnus said. He steepled his fingers. "And the criminal will pay for their deed."

"What?" Grimbledung said with a little hop. "Are you saying crime pays?"

"No; that is *not* what I am saying." Magnus fumed. "You know what I mean."

"Well, I am sure I don't know what you are talking about."

"Yes, keep it that way so when the authorities come asking questions, you won't have answers." Magnus said ominously.

"Well, from what I can tell, this wand belonged to an unstable fellow. A person at the end of his rope; a desperate man."

"Can you describe him?" Magnus leaned down. "In detail?"

"Well, I'm sure he strikes a handsome pose," Grimbledung said. "Dashing and well-dressed even."

"I don't see how that helps me identify the thief." Magnus straightened. "Anything identifiable about him?"

Drimblerod looked at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"I believe you are looking for a notorious Dwarf thief," Drimblerod said. "Red hair and beard, carries an axe and his own tankard for the copious amounts of drinking he does." He paused for the slightest of moments. "Probably hangs out at or near a mine, I would imagine. Or even a tavern with low-priced drinks."

"Mwuaaa haaa haaa!" Magnus bellowed. He steepled his fingers again. "When I find this man, he will rue the day he crossed my path!" With a flourish of his cloak, he stalked out of Second Hand Sorcery. Satisfied he had not only discovered the identity of this thief but also that he had stiffed the annoying Gnomes for the assistance.

Drimblerod tossed the wand to Grimbledung. "You oaf; I can't believe you dropped your wand while breaking into his house!"

"Well it wasn't on purpose, I can tell you that."

"Breaking into his house?"

"Well, no; that was on purpose of course." Grimbledung smirked. "And I can't believe you gave that description to him."

"What me? That was a perfectly good description, I'll have you know."

"Yeah; of mostly every Dwarf male... and a lot of the females as well!"

Drimblerod exhaled. "Well, it's over now so make sure you keep out of his house from now on."

"Sure, sure," Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Got all I needed to know from that caper already." He did another little hop. "Say, aren't we missing our evening dinner engagement?"

"Not yet." Drimblerod patted his trousers. "Let me grab some coins and run around back."

"Run around back for what?"

"Just give me a minute." Drimblerod said. "I'm going to run out back and I'll meet you out front"

"Ohhh. Can't you just go at the Mora Tau?"

"No," Drimblerod shook his head. "I need to go to the bathroom now."

"And you can't do that there?"

"No. Every time I go at a bar, when I come back, you've started a brawl and I don't get to even finish my drink."

"In my defense..." started Grimbledung

"Because you've smashed it over someone's head," Drimblerod interrupted.

"Well, it's usually not my fault you know."

"Whether it's your fault or not the result is the same."

"What's that?" Asked Grimbledung.

"I walk all the way there. Go pee. Then come home. That's not what I would call 'a fun time out on the town' by any stretch of the term."

"Well you are out and about."

"Only to pee," argued Drimblerod.

"See? Things do work out!"

"No. That's not 'things working out'. That's me going pee. 'Things working out' is me going to a bar, having a few drinks, enjoying my time there, then staggering home."

"Would you still pee?"

"Sure, sure; but only after a few drinks."

"Well..." began Grimbledung.

"Well nothing. I'll meet you out front."

"But."

"No. *Every* time I leave the bar, you start a brawl..."

"I can assure you that more often than not, it's not *my* fault!"

"...so I'm going here at the shop."

"Can I meet you there?"

"No! Go sit on the bench out front and I'll be right there." Drimblerod shook his head. "I'd have been done by now if I had left right away."

"You're just peeing, right?"

"Yes!"

"Fine, fine. I was just trying to figure out how long I was going to be sitting outside."

"Not that long. Just sit out there and occupy your time quietly."

"Fine."

"Fine!" Drimblerod left through the back curtain.

"Fine-er!" Grimbledung shrugged and stomped down the stairs.

After a couple of minutes, Drimblerod opened the front door of the shop and stepped into the cool night air. Grimbledung was crouched down behind the bench, spraying a passerby with a water wand.

"What are you doing?"

"This needs an explanation?" Grimbledung gestured at the wand with his free hand. "I'm keeping the kids off the lawn."

"We don't have a lawn. This is why the gargoyles left, if memory serves me." Drimblerod walked down the two steps to the bushes. "Give me that wand."

Grimbledung handed the wand to Drimblerod.

A very wet Human man stepped in front of Drimblerod. The female with him was also wet.

"Evening, good Sir. Ma'am." Drimblerod said. "How are…"

The man punched Drimblerod on the nose.

Drimblerod fell back on his butt.

"Hey now, that's not very sociable," Grimbledung said.

The man turned on Grimbledung, fists clenched.

"Squirting folks," Grimbledung finished quickly. "Bad form, that," he shook a finger at Drimblerod. He waggled his ears as well. "Tut tut."

Without a word, the man and his woman sloshed off.

"You just walked into that, didn't you?" Grimbledung offered his hand to Drimblerod. "You all right?"

"You're buying the first round," Drimblerod said as he let his partner pull him to his feet."

"Fine, fine."

Drimblerod wiped his nose. His hand was bloody. "And all the other rounds too."

"Just today, right?"

"That depends on how the rest of the evening goes," Drimblerod warned. He shook the wand at Grimbledung. "So stay on your best behavior."

"Bestest behavior is what I do best!"

Drimblerod tucked the wand in his belt and shoved his friend onto the street. "Let's go. You've got drinks to buy."

The pair walked down the street, Drimblerod with his head tilted back. Grimbledung helped with guiding him when he strayed close to the edge of the street. They ended up walking right past the Duck Inn and Dine. When they reached another bar, Drimblerod's nose had stopped bleeding.

"Alright then," Drimblerod said. "Just to go over it again…"

"Snakes come from lightning that strikes the ground."

"No."

"Dragons don't come from eggs of course; they are created by the ring of fire high above the Lands.

"No." A thought occurred to Drimblerod. "You know; you should just *ask* those two Dragons about that when you see them again." He hesitated. "We are going to see them again, aren't we."

It wasn't a question.

"Oh, I imagine so. One just does not turn down an invitation to tea when one is a Dragon." Grimbledung winked. "They're suckers for tea."

Drimblerod exhaled. "What I meant was… never mind. So you are on your…"

"Bestest behavior," Grimbledung finished quickly.

Another thought occurred to Drimblerod. "You know, a thought just occurred to me; when you say 'bestest behavior', what exactly is your frame of reference?"

"Frame of reference?"

"Yes; do you mean bestest for the day, week, month?" Drimblerod cringed. "*Hour*?"

"If I were to pin it down, I'd say just for the day. One can't pin oneself down too much."

"Well, pin yourself down to a least the week's bestest behavior tonight." He shook his head. "I can't believe you have me using 'bestest' in sentences."

Grimbledung opened the door and gave a short bow. "That's saying a lot, but taking recent events into account, I will do my best." He fought to keep a smile from his face.

"I can see you smiling."

Grimbledung fought harder.

"Well, that's better at least. But stop doing that face or you'll scare the womenfolk."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Womenfolk? They're just my type."

"Mine too, now that you mention it." Drimblerod entered the Mora Tau. As usual, Grimbledung crowded right behind and the two stumbled into the main drinking area.

"Down the stairs then?"

"No. We're meeting Nulu, Cherí and..." Drimblerod frowned.

"Colossus," Grimbledung offered.

"No; that's not it."

"Yes, we are. You said so yourself after I said so myself."

"We're supposed to be meeting them at the Duck Inn and Dine. How'd we pass it?"

"Your nose was up in the air and I think we coasted right past it."

"We need to get to the Duck Inn," Drimblerod said as he turned toward the door.

Grimbledung smirked. "Well, it would be bad behavior to just leave without a drink at all. Poor customership even. We are, after all, regulars around here."

Drimblerod considered that. "Fine, but just one drink."

"Sounds good, partner."

The two walked to the bar to have one drink.

ONE HOUR LATER

"When are those three getting here?" Grimbledung asked.

"What?" Drimblerod finished his drink- his sixth.

"Those three folks we're supposed to be meeting, of course."

"Drat it all!" Drimblerod fished a silver coin from his tunic. "We're late!"

"Well, if we're late, we might as well have a drink."

"Well, just one maybe." Drimblerod caught himself. "No, no; we need to get to the Duck Inn and Dine."

"What; now?" Grimbledung put out his lower lip.

Drimblerod nodded. "Sure. We can consider it a pub crawl."

Grimbledung put down his drink. "Well in that case." He gestured toward the door. "Lead the way."

Drimblerod marched out of the bar, his partner right behind.

"Aren't we supposed to be crawling?" Grimbledung asked.

"It's just an expression."

Grimbledung frowned. "False advertising that is."

"Well, maybe by the end of the night we will be."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"You sure? Last time we crawled home, you ended up dead."

Grimbledung frowned. "That is true. All right, then we'll do a Pub Stagger."

"Well, if you're going to capitalize it, then I guess I'm in."

With that, the pair marched to the Duck Inn and Dine. The staggering would be later.

Chapter 23
Meanwhile

The very hairy man half walked, half stumbled down the long hallway. He was stumbling because his feet didn't reach the ground all the time because the Orc moving him along didn't feel like bending over while he held the man by the shackle around his neck. Even so, he wouldn't look up at the guard. "You trying to kill me?" He said.

"Why, you want dead?"

The man had learned early on that the Orcs working as guards at the prison were missing whatever part of the brain allowed sarcasm to soak in, so he answered as plainly as he could: "No, I do not."

The Orc frowned. "Fine then." He brightened. "Oh! We just got a new window built. Real nice and new. You will be the first to use it. Nice, huh?"

Now he was sorry he had even started a conversation with the Orc. Orcs, in general were relatively intelligent and often prone to poetry and art. In general. The one currently half-dragging the man along was near the bottom of the relative intelligence quotient. Even

so, with too much banter, the man was worried the Orc might actually realize he was dragging the wrong prisoner along. "I feel a joke coming on," the man said.

"Why, you laughing?"

"Not till I get out The Door."

The Orc pushed the man forward. "Well, get to it then." As they got to the end of the long hallway, the door opened to a large room. Directly in front of him was a large oak double door. The Door. "Ahh," the man said reflexively. It was nice that the door is still there.

"That would be a bad joke to have it gone," the Orc said. "So go to the new window where no man has gone before."

"Well, it is new." The man kept looking down.

The Orc pointed at the window. "Get up there and tell the man your number."

The prisoner stepped forward to the window. When he got there, the Orc grabbed him by the metal collar and dragged him backward. "From behind the line" He growled.

Once his feet were back under him, the man straightened his prison tunic.

"What's yer number?" A very bored looking Human asked.

"One seven oh seven." The man lied. The number, in fact, belonged to a prisoner who was until recently his roommate. He was also set to be released today. After breakfast, he took a moment to ask his roommate in the nicest way possible if he would be willing to swap places. After smashing his coffee mug on his head. Since the unconscious man didn't say no, he took it as a completely selfless 'yes' and immediately swapped clothes with him. Saving himself a good year of his sentence. "That's me alright."

The man flipped the pages on his clipboard. Slowly. After he had flipped a dozen pages, he started flipping them back down.

"Look under one." The prisoner said. "Or seventeen maybe." He tried not to fidget.

The man began flipping them the other direction. "Hmmm." He added. Unhelpfully.

"Want me to look?"

"Tiberius?"

"No. One seven oh seven."

The man looked at the clipboard again. "Tiberius?"

The man startled. "Yeah, that's me. Sorry; I've been a number for so long." He looked at the floor again. "But that's me alright; Tiberius number one seven oh seven. Likes to read and do puzzles."

"Sign here." The man flipped the clipboard around.

The man glanced at the Orc. He was still there. He toed the white line and leaned forward. He put his arms out and caught himself at the ledge to the window. "Must be tough for the wee folk when they get let out." He adjusted his arm so he could grab the charcoal stick hanging from the ledge on a piece of twine. After he signed his name, he looked back at the line directly in front of his toes. "Is there an easy way for me to get back to that side of the line?"

"Nope."

"Got any suggestion?"

"Can you run fast?" The man asked. "Faster than an Orc?"

The prisoner knew that he couldn't. However, he did know that he could, at times, out think an Orc. "Hey look- a baby wolf!" He said as he looked over the Orc's shoulder.

The Orc obliged by looking behind himself.

The man bolted for The Door. As he reached it, he hoped it was unlocked.

It was.

As the man skidded to a stop across the street from the jail, he turned and looked back. The Orc was standing there, hands on his hips. "I'll get you next time, one seven oh seven! Count on it!" He shouted.

Not wanting to press his luck, the man just waved then walked off. "Yeah, Orc, the odds of you seeing one seven oh seven are actually pretty good." Ferty Nainer snickered. "Probably around dinner time but by then I'll be out of town." He turned right at the intersection and walked as quickly as someone wearing a prison uniform could move without looking suspicious.

When he got to the next intersection, he walked straight into the livery stable, stole a horse, and rode straight out of town. And headed toward Julesville.

Chapter 24
That Sub Plot Surfaces

Colossus carried several drinks to the table. "Drinks are up," he said as he lowered them carefully.

"Nicely done. You know, you could moonlight here," Cherí teased.

"Well, retired lawmen do often open bars," Julie said.

Colossus sat beside Cherí. "If I thought I could compete with Nulu."

"You can't," Nulu said. She took the largest mug. "But I'd take you as a partner."

"All I need is an ice wand," Colossus laughed, "right?"

"And reliable cooks, and a building that doesn't leak. There's a lot of capital involved in opening a bar." Nulu said. "I'm not sure why I do it most days."

"It's better than the alternative?" Cherí tried.

"Living a life of leisure in Australis is the alternative." Nulu said.

Several drunken patrons started arguing in a far corner. The three of them turned to look. "You'd be bored stiff in a week," Colossus remarked.

Nulu snapped her fingers to get Wil's attention. When he looked, she pointed to the loud far corner then drew her finger across her throat signaling that the patrons there were cut off.

Wil gave a nod.

"And of course, finding a good bartender," Colossus said.

"You need a bouncer?" Cherí asked.

"You trying to get me out of law enforcement?" Colossus asked.

"Well, with my background... And you in law enforcement..." She trailed off.

"I thought you were out of that line of work."

"What am I supposed to do; bake cookies all day?"

"Hey, cookies would be nice," Colossus said with a smirk. "Can you make cookies?"

"No."

"No?"

"No.

"No?"

"NO!"

Nulu watched as the pair stared at each other. "Well, what we are here to discuss, if I recall, is the upcoming nuptials of two folks who are madly in love." She tapped her fingernails -they were a dark shade of green- on the table. "With each other even. Right?"

Cherí smiled. "You are absolutely right." She took Colossus' hand. "Right dearest?"

"That's what I hear," Colossus said. "So... what's this going to set me back?"

"You can't put a price on love, right?" Nulu said. She smiled wide. When neither Colossus nor Cherí smiled, she pressed on, "But we can definitely keep it within one's budget!" She spread her arms out wide. "I believe that with food provided by yours truly, and a very nice place under the shade of the windmill provided by the esteemed Missus Big Julie, and flowers provided by the Consigliores..." She gave a wink, "And since all those will be given as our wedding presents, the total cost will be… nothing."

"Nothing? That's a good price to put on love." Colossus leaned away from Cherí as she balled up her fist. "Priceless! I mean priceless!"

Nulu laughed, "Well said, young man." She turned serious. "I was thinking of roasting a couple of goats and a heap of sausages, and bring out platters of cheeses and vegetables so the meat will be hot when we serve it."

Thanks to the copious amounts of alcohol they gulped down before they left the bar, Drimblerod and Grimbledung staggered into the Duck Inn and Dine.

"Well, a good fire will go well to keep the meat warm," said Colossus, "just don't let Grimbledung get involved or it will get out of control."

Nulu laughed. "I can make sure he behaves."

"Really?"

Grimbledung bumped into the table. "Sorry folks, we're looking for... Nulu!" He hugged Nulu. "And Cherí!" He hugged Cherí. "And Mister Col Ossus!" He hugged Colossus.

"You know, I'd wish you'd stop doing that," Colossus said with a frown.

"I agree." Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Do something else!"

Grimbledung smooched Colossus on the lips. Loudly.

Cherí laughed. "Well that was something else alright."

"Would you just sit down?" Colossus said. "You know you're an hour late."

"Well, there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for that," explained Drimblerod. He plopped into an empty chair. Cherí kept him from sliding out of it.

Nulu nodded. "Yeah, they were rushing to get here otherwise they'd be *two* hours late."

"Hey now." Grimbledung considered that. "Okay, fine; I accept your assessment." He held up his hand and waved it around. He looked at his hand then shook it. "Thing must be broken."

"Flora's got the evening off," explained Nulu. "Just give it a moment."

Grimbledung waved his hand around. "Alright. I'll keep trying."

Drimblerod put his hands on the table to steady himself. "What'd we miss?"

"We were discussing..."

"The election," Grimbledung said as he waved his hand. "Of course."

Colossus shook his head. "No, you buffoon; we were discussing something more important than that."

"More... important?" Grimbledung gaped. As he waved his hand over his head. "Not possible." He snapped his fingers. "Nothing's more important. It's right at the top; it's the election, stupid."

"It's the wedding, stupid." Colossus snapped.

"Well, that's not as snappy, but I suppose it will do." He panted and switched hands. "What's it take to get a drink around here?"

Nulu snapped her fingers. Once.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a Dwarfess sidled up to the table. "What'cha need, Miss Nulu?"

"Drinks! We need drinks, my good Dwarfess!" Grimbledung started to reach out and touch her long, flowing beard but then stopped. The last time he did that, he got beat up. And thrown out. By the Dwarfess. And to add insult (getting beat up) to injury (a black eye) he didn't even get a drink. "Your beard is looking especially lovely this evening, Miss Ophelia." He said instead. "The purple ribbons really set it off."

Ophelia glanced at Grimbledung. "Drinks is it?"

"Is it drinks?" Grimbledung said. "Drinks it is!" He waggled his ears. "That's all the combinations I have on me." He reached out for her beard again and once again stopped himself.

"Fine, just the once." She said.

Grimbledung reached out and ran his hand through her luxurious beard. "You have, without a doubt, the finest beard this side of the Riatoh Bronze Mines." He hiccupped then quickly covered his mouth.

Ophelia frowned at the Gnome. "You've already been drinking, haven't you?"

"We're on a Pub Stagger, my partner and I." Grimbledung winked. "So brin' us a couple'o drrrinks, lassie," he finished with a Dwarfish accent.

"I'm not sure; the last time..."

Nulu nodded at her. "If you would, please, and a snack. I'll keep an eye on him."

"Aye 'n thaa' too," Grimbledung said as his accent improved. "Ya faire dinkum beaut'!"

"It's gonna be a long night." Ophelia sighed. She pointed at Grimbledung, "And ya bett'r tip me accordin'ly tooo;" She said as she let her Dwarfish accent take over. "No' like ya do yer lass."

"Or what?" Grimbledung asked hesitantly. "For curiosity's sake."

"Is minic a bhris béal duine a shrón." The waitress warned in old Dwarfish.

"Rivendale!" Grimbledung said. And because he spoke a fair amount of Dwarfish, he covered his nose.

"What? That place with the stuck-up Elves? What about it?" Nulu asked.

Grimbledung brought his hands up as if they were shackled. "That word gets me out of a pinch." He smirked. "Or a tight spot."

"Ya gonna' just get a poundin' from the likes o'me. Elves or no Elves." Ophelia clenched and unclenched a meaty fist. "So save it." She walked off, tray on her hip.

"Yes, Mistress Ophelia," Grimbledung said. He perked up, "So what did I miss?"

"We were discussing roasting some meat for the..." Began Cherí.

Grimbledung hopped to his feet, knocking his chair backwards. "Woot! A good roasting." He dropped to a knee and sang:

Gonna roast some March Mallows
And a Cornish Pixie or two?

Oh yes, a Cornish Pixie or two-ooo?

"No more singing." Nulu said. "Or the drinks stop."

Grimbledung stood. "And even a large Billy Goat Gruff too." He said monotone. He righted his chair and sat at the table. "And I'm in charge of it, I'd imagine?"

"NO!" Everyone at the table said in unison. Even two nearby patrons joined in.

"Gads, you'd think that I'd mucked up the last one I ran."

"You *did* muck up the last one you ran." Nulu said. "All you get to do is sit and watch the ceremony."

"As a friend of the groom," Grimbledung gave Colossus a wink, "of course."

"What?" Colossus sat back in his chair. "Why me?"

"After that touching moment we shared, I can't believe you are even balking at the idea." Grimbledung said. "I'm hurt to even hear it."

"Touching moment?" Cherí tried to stifle a giggle. "You mean that smooch just now?"

"That's nothing. This was a while ago." Grimbledung waggled his eyebrows at Colossus. "Reeememberrrr?"

"Oh, do tell!" Cherí leaned forward.

"There has been no such event, I can assure you." Colossus scowled.

Grimbledung winked. "Oh yes there was; on his first night here, it was. In the jail. Remember?"

"I remember your absurd interrogation attempt."

"That worked, I might add," Grimbledung winked again.

"Stop winking at me."

Ophelia slid several mugs onto the table as well as a carafe. "There we go."

"Nicely done, ya' stout woman!"[34] Grimbledung reached for the carafe.

Nulu slapped his hand. "You get the mug, you silly Gnome. The carafe is mine." She pulled it to her side of the table.

Grimbledung put out his lip. "I'm dashed. First Colossus forgets our touching moment, and now I'm shorted on a drink."

"It'd just get warm before you finished it," Drimblerod said. "Just order another when that one gets low so they stay cold." He took a sip from his mug. "Ahh, nice and cool."

"What touching moment?" Cherí giggled. "I'm dying to know."

"Remember in the cell, Colossus?"

"I remember the cell but I don't remember a touching moment." Colossus took a drink. "Not at all."

"When we told you that Cherí was alive, you cried you were so happy." Grimbledung wiped a nonexistent tear. "Touching moment right there; tears of joy from a Halfling. If I could put it on a greeting card, I'd make a mint."

"You cried with *joy*?" Cherí poked Colossus in the ribs. "The mighty Corporal Colossus?"

"It was dusty in the cell," Colossus said as he looked away. "Real dusty. Motes flying everywhere."

Grimbledung winked at Cherí. "Sure it was." He put down his mug and clapped his hands once. "What should I give you as a gift?" He asked. He narrowed his eyes at Nulu. "Since I'm not allowed to run the grill."

"Oh, Grimbledung," Cherí said, suddenly serious, "you gave me the best gift of all."

"Who me? When?"

Cherí patted Grimbledung's shoulder. "Just now when you told me that Colossus cried for joy over me." She poked Colossus again. "Oh, I will treasure that information forever."

"I can only imagine," Colossus said. "It really was dusty you know."

"I know my dearest," Cherí now winked at Grimbledung. "I know."

"Well, while that is all good and well, I should give something a little more... substantial."

"Like what?" Cherí asked.

"Do not encourage him," warned Colossus. "The last thing we need is..."

"A garden shack!" Grimbledung exclaimed. He held up his drink and toasted them. "You're quite welcome too."

Colossus opened his mouth to complain then remembered the very nice fence Grimbledung had already erected at their home. "Will it be as nice as the fence?" He asked tentatively.

Grimbledung nodded. "Oh, garden shacks is what we Gnomes do best."

"What about the fence?"

"That was just a tossed together kind of job."

Colossus chuckled. "I can't believe I am hearing myself say this, but we'd be glad to have you build a garden shed for us."

Grimbledung toasted him with his glass then downed it in one gulp. He promptly started waving his hand over his head. "My pleasure."

"Gads, Grimbledung," Nulu sloshed some ale into his empty mug. "Stop with the waving and wait for Ophelia to come back around."

Grimbledung picked up his mug.

"Sipping the drink is what we are doing," Nulu said. She picked up her mug. "Like this... tip, tip, tip... small sip... put the mug down."

Grimbledung frowned. "I'm not sure that's the proper way to drink anything but tea, but I'll give it a shot." He tilted his mug towards his lips as he whispered "tip, tip, tip". He took a small sip then put the mug down. "Not as satisfying but it'll do."

Drimblerod meekly pushed his mug toward Nulu. "I'll pace myself as well if you'll get me back to where I started."

With a frown, Nulu sloshed some ale into his mug as well.

"So," Julie beamed. "Where are you two going for your honeymoon?"

Cherí and Colossus stared at each other for a long moment.

"You're supposed to be in charge of that," Cherí said.

"Well, I thought we'd just stay..."

Drimblerod shoved Colossus. "Just stay at the Lost Picman's Mine Amusement Park, and fly there on the magic carpet that Grimbledung is going to loan you. Like we already discussed."

Colossus did a double take at the Gnome. "Uhm, yes. Like we talked about yesterday, I think it was."

"Gah! It was definitely yesterday," Grimbledung said quickly. "I was with you all night yesterday and nowhere near those skeletons or anyone's residence who may or may not have spoken with the authorities."

"What?" Colossus asked.

Akita stepped up to the table. "Evening all." He smiled. "What'd I miss?"

"Apparently Grimbledung needs an alibi," Colossus said.

"Yeah?" Akita looked down at Grimbledung with glowing yellow eyes. "When?"

Grimbledung tipped his mug back slowly, eyes trained on the liquid inside. "Tip, tip, tip," he said softly. "Satisfying."

"So this carpet that Grimbledung is going to loan you," Drimblerod said. "Is really, really nice."

"When's the alibi for?" Akita pulled a chair over to sit beside Grimbledung.

"Tip, tip, tip. Sip." Grimbledung said.

"Earlier last week, I think it was." Grimbledung put his mug down roughly. "It was most definitely last week, now that I think about it. Around noon time even. Broad daylight it was, when I needed the alibi."

Akita tilted his head as an ear perked up. "And what's the alibi for?"

Grimbledung looked around the dining area. "Where's Flora?" he asked nonchalantly.

"It's her day off," Nulu said. "Why?"

"Excellent." He narrowed his eyes at the Constable. "I was buying something for Flora, of course."

"And you needed an alibi for that?" Akita pulled Grimbledung's drink in front of him. "For something as non-law-breaking as that?" He turned it and picked it up by the handle. "Not for say… a nighttime break in, perhaps?" He picked up the mug.

"Who me?" Grimbledung's eyes were trained on his mug. "Go out at night? Alone?"

Akita tipped the mug toward his mouth. "With some skeletons."

"I don't recall meeting any skele…"

Akita tipped the mug back and gulped it down all at once.

"Hey now!" Grimbledung waggled his butt in his chair. "Grrrr!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Akita put the mug down in front of Grimbledung. "Why don't we keep the breaking and entering down to a minimum from now on?"

"You mean like," Grimbledung picked up his mug and looked into it, "what, once or twice a month?"

"Once a year." Akita stood. "Starting now."

"So from now until a year, I am allowed one break in?"

Akita bent until his nose almost touched Grimbledung's. "Starting yesterday night so you're through for the year."

Grimbledung gulped. "Fine, fine Mister Constable Akita Finnish. No need to get all threatening and such."

Akita smirked. "Well, now that we have an understanding." He looked around the room suspiciously. "What'd you find out?"

"Ah ha!" Grimbledung thrust a hand in the air. "It seems that he's just the front man for some sort of overarching evil plan to take over the lands that leads all the way back to the King's Vizier himself and that plan starts right here in Julesville and then spreads to the Jutes, then the new Aution and from there it heads west to the Royal Court in EternCity where machinations are already in motion that will topple the entire Kingdom!!"

Akita looked at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod shrugged. "Well, at least his story isn't changing."

"And when is this supposed to happen? These machinations?"

"I'd say within a half century."

Akita shook his head. The shake worked its way down his back to the end of his tail. "I'm not sure why I chase him down these rabbit holes."

"Rrrrabits?" Grimbledung waggled his butt in the chair again. He let his tongue hang out. It seemed to hang out farther than it really should have for a Gnome.

Nulu laughed.

"Not tonight," Akita said, "I have a previous engagement."

Grimbledung rolled his tongue back into his mouth.

"How about tomorrow evening?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Sounds good, Akita!" He now bounced up and down in his seat. "A fun evening awaits."

Akita started to leave.

"You won't join us?" Julie asked.

"Not tonight; I have a previous engagement, remember?"

"Mistress Maca," Grimbledung winked. "Oooooohhh!"

"Your winking is out of control." Colossus said. "But, I imagine accurate this time."

"Well, have a good evening, folks." Akita turned and strode out.

"Must be a real pressing engagement."

Grimbledung shuddered. "Oh, I don't really care for those pressings."

"What?" Cherí asked.

"Well, you see…" Began Grimbledung.

"Absolutely positively adamantly decisively nothing at all." Drimblerod said. He banged his mug on the table. "A distinct subject change is in effect." He banged his mug again. "As of now."

"When's the wedding going to be?" Grimbledung asked. Since a subject change was in order.

"Errrm…" Colossus said. "Ahhhh." He added unhelpfully.

"Erm' Ahh? Is that between Lauday and Thraksday?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Already got eight days in the week. Not sure we need another."

Cherí stared at Colossus. "The wedding is when, *dearest*?"

"How about right after the election" Nulu offered. She raised her hand to get a fresh round of drinks. "Things will have calmed down and we can do it then."

"Well the voting is on Moonsday. So that afternoon?"

"No, Grimbledung, why would we have a wedding on Moonsday?" Colossus said. "Bad luck to do a wedding on Moonsday."

"We just decided to do it after the election, of course." Grimbledung's eyes got large. "Not Tyresday! A wedding on the day of the War God just makes for an embattled matrimony," he said. "That's why Orcs get married on that day."

"Yes, we know the saying," Cherí said. "We can just do it on Merchersday, silly. That's tradition anyway."[35]

"Fine, fine. I can make sure I've got the carpet by then." Grimbledung said. He smiled. "I'll even beat it to get it nice and clean for you."

"Oh, and I've spoken with the Justice of the Peace from EternCity to preside over the ceremony. I can send him a message when the ceremony is. It will take him a couple of days to get here." Nulu said.

"You think you can get him to come all this way just for a local wedding?" Drimblerod asked. "It's not like they're rich or nobility or anything."

"Oh, if I send a message to Eustis to stop by, he'll be on the first caravan coming this way."

"Eustis?"

"We've already talked about the impending wedding and has the ceremony all laid out. Or will have, I suppose."

"And he's going to preside over it as well?"

"Of course."

"Why?" Drimblerod asked.

"He was my third husband." Nulu rubbed her chin. "Or maybe the fourth."

"I see." Drimblerod coughed. "And you two are on good terms?"

"Oh yeah, the terms are good." Nulu smirked. "Real good."

"What?"

Nulu caught herself. "He survived the divorce proceedings, didn't he?" She asked noncommittally.

When no one said anything, Nulu continued: "And I can ask Maca to send word to the Lost Picman's Mine Hostel and Dance Hall to make sure there's a room available for what… four.. five days? Five?"

Colossus nodded. "That sounds reasonable if we can get there that afternoon."

Drimblerod nodded. "Oh sure; you can make it in a couple of hours if you don't mind being wind-blown. That rug can really move." He smiled sheepishly. "Not that I've been out joy riding on an unlicensed flying carpet or anything."

Ophelia slid a tray onto the table with a fresh round of drinks next to Nulu and walked off before Grimbledung could even make a comment.

Grimbledung stuck out his lower lip.

"Then it's settled!" Drimblerod clapped his hands once. "The wedding is on Merchersday morning around ten…"

"*Exactly* ten and I'm going to pick you up an hour early," Nulu interrupted.

Grimbledung stuck out his upper lip.

"And that gets you to the Hostel in time for an early dinner and dancing." Drimblerod finished.

"Done!" Nulu banged her carafe on the table then downed the rest of it. "Old business is done. Now on to new business."

Grimbledung raised his hand. "Point of order."

"The chair recognizes Grimbledung Sixtoes, esquire." Nulu nodded at him. "Your point?"

Grimbledung leaned forward and reached out his with hands. The newly-arrived tray was just out of reach. "All participants should take a drink to seal the deal."

"The point of order is well taken." Nulu said. She pushed the tray toward the center of the table so everyone could retrieve their mugs. She lifted the new carafe. "Everyone?"

Everyone raised their glasses.

"To Colossus and Cherí," Grimbledung said. He stood and raised his glass. Then he cleared his throat.

"Oh no." Nulu said.

May love and laughter light your days
And warm your heart and home.

May good and faithful friends be yours,
Wherever you may roam.

May peace and plenty bless your world

With joy that long endures.
May all life's passing seasons
Bring the best to you and yours!

Grimbledung said.

Colossus wiped his eye.

"More motes?" Cheri asked.

"Motes." Colossus raised his mug. "They fly right in your eye sometimes."

Everyone took a drink.

"Alright then." Nulu said. "On to other matters. I was thinking of setting up a practice debate to help Flora get the hang of it."

"Setting up a practice what for who?" Grimbledung asked.

Nulu exhaled. "Flora is going to have to debate Magnus and to do it well, I think she should do a practice one."

Drimblerod nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. When were you going to do it?"

"Tomorrow at noon, I think." Nulu pointed at the two Gnomes. "And you two should be there so you should make sure you close up shop on time."

"You can count on us," Drimblerod said.

"Sure, sure; definitely at the top of my list of things to do," Grimbledung lied.

"Well good then. We'll do it here with the afternoon crowd."

"Not an evening crowd?" Drimblerod asked Nulu.

Colossus shook his head. "No way; we should do it before folks get too drunk so they can actually ask questions."

"Well I can tell you that I am often told I am a questionable drunk," Grimbledung said.

Nulu laughed. "I am sure that is true. But the afternoon crowd would be a good starter for Flora. Are you in for tomorrow at noon. Say around…noon? The middle of the day even?"

"Sure thing. I'll be here for my candidate. I am her manager after all."

Colossus shook his head. "I can't imagine that is going to work out well."

"Drinks doing alright?" the Ophelia asked as she picked up the tray.

"So far, so good.," Nulu said to her.

"Pushaw, Colossus" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "When has a plan of mine not worked out?"

"I don't think we have enough time left in the day for that," Cherí piped in. She giggled. "Or maybe the week."

"I got you two together, didn't I?" Grimbledung narrowed his eyes.

"No, that wasn't you at all, you daft Gnome." Colossus snapped. He smiled at Cherí. "True love always finds a way." He smooched her loudly.

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "I'd like to think I had a part in it, nevertheless."

Nulu stood. "Then until tomorrow at noon."

Cherí and Colossus stood as well.

"Where you all going?" Grimbledung asked. "You just had drinks served. Bad luck to leave just served drinks!"

"Well, I have a tavern and inn to run," Nulu said.

"And I need to be on the job in the morning because Akita's got the night shift," Colossus said.

Cherí smirked. "And given the choice, I'm going home with Colossus."

"Don't you mean to put in a 'no offense' in there someplace?" Grimbledung tried.

Cherí pursed her lips. "No." She smiled. "No offense?"

"Hmmm. That's not where I'd have preferred it, but I'll accept it anyway."

The Dwarfess stepped up to the table and slid three mugs and a carafe onto the table." She looked at Nulu, Cherí, and Colossus. "Oh, sorry. I was expecting the other drinks to be gone already with the pace you folks had set. You folks leaving?" She started to reach for the carafe.

Grimbledung slapped her hand. "Let's not get hasty, Mistress Ophelia. My partner and I can deal with this outlying drinks."

Drimblerod waggled his ears. "That we can."

"If that is the case, I might insist on having my tip early. Before minds get sloshed and you confuse your coins."

"Mistress Ophelia, I am dashed." Grimbledung reached into his pouch and fished around in it. "Dashed indeed." He pulled out a coin and slapped it onto the table. "Will that suffice?"

Everyone looked at the platinum coin Grimbledung had just slapped down.

"Ahh, Grimbledung…" Nulu began.

"Hold on a grain of sand…" Drimblerod said at the same time.

"That'll do just fine." Ophelia quickly slid the coin off the edge of the table and into the pouch in her apron. "Just fine indeed."

"Well I think we should get another snack or two at some point," Drimblerod said. "All things considering." He shot his partner a look.

It missed Grimbledung completely since he wasn't paying attention.

"Sure, sure." Ophelia said. She picked up her tray. "Not a problem at all." She tried to keep a smile from her face. Unsuccessfully. "I'll even pay for those."

"That's nice of you." Nulu stifled a smile as well. "Just remember to make an early night of it since you need to close up shop before noon to be here at noon."

Grimbledung took a sip from the carafe. "Sure, sure. No worries."

"What my partner said," Drimblerod took a sip from a mug.

With a sigh from Nulu and headshakes from Colossus and Cherí, the trio left.

"That means we need to make a short night of it." Drimblerod said.

"But weren't we on a Pub Stagger?"

"Drat it all; I think we are." Drimblerod frowned. "I say we just stay here for a little bit then head home so we can plan to be on time tomorrow."

"I'm sure we always plan on being on time."

"Well, sure; that's the plan." Drimblerod took another sip. "What?"

"It's nothing, I'm sure." Grimbledung looked into the carafe. "Lovely things, carafes."

"Don't do it," Drimblerod warned.

Grimbledung clambered onto the table. He held the carafe to his chest, he raised his other hand over his head.

I think that I shall never see
A drink holder as lovely as this carafe served today, to me.

A carafe where a thirsty mouth is press't
Like against an earthy terra cotta sweet flowing breast;

"Are you sure we can say breast?"

Grimbledung nodded at his partner. "It's poetical art." He took a quick drink then continued:

A drink that sits in a barrel with hops galore,
'Till a bartender turns the spigot to pour;

Into the trusty carafe, the ale will sojourn
With a hearty head atop like snow, it is adorned;

Poems about them are made by fools like me,
But only a bartender can pour a drink, you see.[36]

Grimbledung toasted the room with the carafe then downed the rest of it.

A great deal of the patrons clapped then drank.

"Stop encouraging him," Drimblerod said. Then he meekly took a drink as well.

Grimbledung plopped back into his chair. "So we make a short night of it?"

"Absolutely."

"Absolutely!"

Seven Hours Later

Grimbledung squinted at the early morning sun. "I'm worried we're going to be late opening today."

Drimblerod shaded his eyes. "Maybe we'll take the day off."

"I agree." Grimbledung braced himself on his partner. "Hey, lookit that; we're staggering!"

"Then the evening was a success."

"I say we stagger home and take a quick short and not long at all nap."

"Agreed." Drimblerod said. "But we should still take the rest of the day off."

"I also agree to your agreement."

So the pair staggered home, and took the rest of the day off.

In bed.

Until about a quarter to one when a pounding on Door awoke them.

Chapter 25
Let's Get Ready to... Debate?

Flora cleared her throat. "I don't like this question. Well, uhm…I" She stammered. "…I really think that taxes shouldn't go up." She paused for a long moment. "Because well… we don't really see any benefit for what we already pay."

Several patrons nodded.

Akita leaned forward over his podium. It was identical to Flora's but seemed smaller because of his size. He smiled and let his tongue hang out- he was even more prepared for the question the second time. "Well sure, besides having the support and protection of the king, building our new sewer system, and making sure that the Trade Guild ensures we are listed on the routes, what do taxes do for us?" He leaned forward even more. "Am I right or am I right?" He raised his hands as most of the patrons laughed.

While Akita was coaxing on the crowd, Flora hopped down from the box she was standing on, briskly crossed the space between the two podiums and punched Akita in the ribs.

Again.

"Gah!" Akita grimaced. "Didn't we just discuss how that wasn't appropriate?"

Several patrons clapped.

Again.

"You got my vote!" One said.

Cherí stalked back to her podium. "Sorry, it's becoming habit."

"Habit?" Akita rubbed his side. "Well get out of the habit or Magnus'll have me arrest you."

Flora sighed. "I just get frustrated when your answers sound so much better than mine."

"Just take a moment to think about your answer," Nulu said. "And try to keep in mind the way it will sound to the people in the audience."

"Can I just say what Akita said?"

Nulu smiled at Flora. "You can if that question comes up and Magnus doesn't say it first." She moved to Flora's podium. "Just try to keep your cool because once he sees he can get under your skin; he'll do everything he can to get there."

"I'll get under his skin." Flora glowered. "With some skewers.

Several patrons clapped.

Someone spilled a drink in a far corner.

Nulu looked in that direction. "No refills for spillage."

A cloaked figure ducked low and scooted to the curtain.

"Grimbledung?" She called. The figure kept moving and ducked under the curtain. "Where is he anyway?" She scanned the room. "Hey, Lance, go get Grimbledung."

A youth at a table hopped up. He picked up his trusty slingshot, shoved it into his back pocket and left.

"Flora," Julie said as she moved to the Gnomess. "You can't just make threats… or promises like that." She pointed at the crowd that had been drinking the better part of the day. "Just because this crowd here finds what you say funny doesn't mean that regular folks will." She put her hand on Flora's shoulder. "And there are a lot more of them in town than these rabble." She looked back at the drinkers. "Thank goodness."

Flora exhaled. "I'm sorry. Let's do another couple of questions and I'll try my best."

"That sounds fine." Julie said.

"Two more?" Nulu asked Akita. "Then we call it a day."

"Sure, sure," Akita said. He narrowed his glowing eyes. "But I'll be watching you, Missy. You come off that box and we're gonna scrap."

Several patrons clapped.

"I promise to behave, Constable Akita." Flora grasped the podium and looked out at the crowd. "Are there any questions from the audience?"

Most of the patrons furiously avoided making eye contact with her.

After a long pause, one raised his hand- a Dwarf. Flora recognized him as the Dwarf she had hit on the head earlier in the week for his angry outbursts.

Flora steeled herself. "Yes, Mister Dwarf. What is your question?"

The Dwarf narrowed his eyes at Flora as he rubbed his head where she had hit him. "Do you think that Julesville should have its own prison, or should prisoners still get sent to the Kingdom's prison in EternCity?"

Flora narrowed her own eyes at the Dwarf who was obviously asking a question that the Constable could easily answer to get her to lose her temper again. She gripped the podium tighter- wondering if she could vault it and reach the Dwarf before Akita got to her.

With a smug look, the Dwarf sat. A murmur arose as the patrons began to discuss the question- many of them had made the trip to EternCity for minor violations, greatly increasing their sentences and putting them far away from family.

"I say keep sendin' them to EternCity," Akita said before Flora could answer "Costs a lot of money to run a prison. You need food, accommodations, guarding," he ticked off on

his hand, "and 'course you need a prison built, then you got to worry about break outs, riots." He raised his hands plaintively. "Remember a prison runs all day and night, bad weather and good. All the time; that's a lot of folks you need to hire to make it happen and that means more taxes for you all." He crossed his arms. "Better to let the King deal with criminals and such. If it bugs you, stop breakin' the law."

Nulu moved into Flora's line of sight and took several deep breaths. Then she smiled.

Flora nodded at her. She took several breaths of her own. Then she recalled her Uncle Hedwyyn Copperpotts. Hedwyyn had been sent to prison for stealing cleaning and other office supplies from the Goblin Bank where he worked nights. He had taken the supplies to help his brother's failing tavern-cleaning business. The Goblins had been furious that anyone dared to rob from them, causing not only embarrassment, but disparaging the name and reputation of the bank. Hedwyyn admitted taking the supplies and offered to repay the Goblins. Instead, they pressed for full charges and Hedwyyn was ultimately sentenced to a full year of hard labor for taking two mops, several sponges and a box of soap bars. She remembered how he had been a good-natured Gnome who had taken the supplies to help his brother's foundering business. Then, when he returned from the prison, he was cold and calculating. He was no longer the loveable uncle she had known. And never was again. She looked at Akita. "What a horrible thing to say." She looked out at the crowd. "Absolutely horrible. I have seen…" She hesitated not wanting to mention her Uncle by name, "First-hand how sending a petty criminal or someone who just made a bad decision to a full blown, hard-labor prison, changes them. *It changes them.* And it changes their entire family."

The murmur started up again.

Flora held out her hands to quiet them. "Now I'm not saying that violent criminals should be kept in our city jail; they definitely should go to a facility that can handle that type of criminal." She put her hands back on the podium. "No. What I am saying is that minor, nonviolent offences by citizens *of* the town should be taken care of *by* the town." She looked at Akita. "I know for a fact that if we only ask, we will be added onto the Route of the Judges. Yes?"

Akita nodded. "That is true." He said, suddenly sorry that he had blurted out an answer hoping to get a laugh from the crowd.

"So we petition the Royal Court of Judges to get on the route. Then what…" She looked at Akita. "Once every three days?"

"Yeah, I think it's three or four days dependin' on the weather."

"Then every three or four days," Flora continued, "a Royal Court Judge will come to hear whatever trial is set to occur. Then if the crime is judged minor, and the criminal not dangerous or habitual, they can serve out their time in the Julesville Jailhouse." She looked at Akita. "A proper jail run by funds provided by the Kingdom as they do in other good and proper towns." She spread her arms out wide. "Towns like ours."

Nulu smiled- Julie had suggested several times that Flora refer to the town as 'our town' partially because she wanted to make people associate Flora with the town, but also because she always enjoyed hearing others say it. "Here, hear!" Nulu said. Then seeing an opportunity for another question, she added: "And since the prison needs to be serviced and manned, then that provides jobs as guards, cooks, cleaners, laborers for repairs and upkeep. How many people do you think we would need to run a ten-cell jailhouse, Constable?"

Akita blinked. "Errmmm. I don't know…eight days a week with a five-day workweek… two guards per shift on three shifts…Maybe twenty guards, a couple of cooks, housekeepers…" He racked his brain to try and salvage his misstep with the question. "Masons and carpenters are always around so we don't need to have them on staff. Couple or three management folks." He shrugged. "Eh; thirty tops."

"So building a jail," Flora looked out at the crowd- who was mainly working class citizens- "which would require artisans of various types to even build and maintain, would then provide *thirty* good paying jobs to the town." She held up a finger, "Plus, you'd be in charge of it all, Constable Akita. And since you'd suddenly be responsible for thirty or so employees, you'd understandably request that raise we discussed earlier."

"Well sure I would; managing that many folks would require a raise. Sounds like a good plan to…" He caught himself. "Me." He finished meekly.

Nulu and most of the crowd clapped

"Well done!" Nulu exclaimed.

"Bah!" Akita said, "Ask the other question to give me a chance to not muff it up too." He gestured around the crowd. "Who's got a question!"

A Human sitting in the corner raised his hand. He wore a dark cloak with the hood pulled down so his face wasn't visible.

"There, the Ranger in the corner." Akita pointed at the man. "What's your question, Sir Ranger?"

The man stood in one fluid motion. "How do you feel about weapons in town?" He leaned on his bow. "Carried openly and otherwise?"



"We live in dangerous times," Akita said. "Responsible folk carrying weapons around town doesn't bother me none." He gestured at the man. "Pretty sure besides that bow yer carryin', ya got numerous arrows, and at least a couple of blades. Am I right?"

The man tilted his hand. "There may come a day when defending oneself isn't required. But that day is not today." he leaned forward in his chair. "One does not simply walk around unarmed."

"As long as you behave yourself, then there's no trouble. Weapons don't kill folks; folks kill folks. Never seen a crossbow load itself and go on a rampage while its owner was away." Akita looked at Flora, happy with his response this time. "Miss Flora, what say you?"

"Oh, I agree completely with the Constable on that. I know personally that walking the streets at night" She nodded at Akita, "Even with top-notch law enforcement on the job and mostly friendly townsfolk, I always feel better with a little personal protection."

Akita thought about the increase in pay he would receive if a jail were built, and Flora's answer. "Well drat it all." He frowned. "I suppose all that's left to say is that as Constable, I heartily endorse Flora O. Willowfeet as future Mayoress of Julesville."

Flora hopped off her box and walked to Akita.

Akita turned and crouched, hands out in front of him. "What? What now?"

Flora twisted past Akita's hands and hugged him. "Thanks for everything, Akita!" She turned to look at Nulu. "And you too."

Akita hugged her back. "Alright, alright. I got a reputation to maintain ya know."

"You softie," Flora said as she let go.

"Gads! Don't go tellin' folks *that*!" Akita let his tongue hang out. "Once word gets out that a Constable's gone soft, it's nothing but work, work, work all day long.

"Work all day long?" Nulu raised an eyebrow at the Werewolf. "Have you had a day like that yet?"

Akita shook his head. "Not since the invading Halflin's were defeated." He let the shake run down his back to his tail. "And I'd like to keep it that way, if you please."

Flora beamed. "So when is the debate with Mister Opus Pants?"

"Tomorrow evening, I believe. It is going to be on Sunsday because a lot of folks are off for the markets."

"Why not Satyrsday?" Flora asked.

"Because most folk go out drinking the night before and we'd rather have the debate in front of a non-hungover crowd." Akita said. He looked down. "And you're going to let go of me when?"

With a giggle, Flora let go of Akita and stepped toward Nulu. "Thanks so much for setting this up for me. This has really helped me out. I don't know what else could…"

Grimbledung shoved his way past the curtain. "What'd I miss?"

"Everything, you loon." Akita said. "Where you been?"

Grimbledung looked around. "Well, it just so happens that I was doing some very serious pre-electoral juxta positioning to ensure maximal participatronage at the polls when some young lad sent from here interrupted my preplannings by knocking loudly on Door.

"You just make up words as you go, don't you." Akita said flatly.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "It's how politicians talk, Mister Constable." He skipped to Flora. "I really think we're off to a good start."

Flora giggled. “Me too!” She gestured at Akita. “I think I had a breakthrough just now.”

“Well,” Grimbledung took her hand. “You should tell me all about it over a drink and a snack.”

Flora looked appraisingly at Nulu. “Just a drink?”

Nulu nodded. “Fine, I don’t know why I encourage his antics, but just clock in when you’re done.” She waggled a finger at Grimbledung. “One drink.” She held the finger up in front of his nose. “This many then she goes to work.” She poked him in the nose. “And you do too.”

“Well, I never!”

“That’s what Drimblerod says,” Nulu said. She put her arm around Akita. “Come on Constable, I’ll get you one for the road at the bar. Far away from his antics.”

“I thought I’d have to leave town to get that far away,” Akita guffawed.

“What?” Grimbledung did a little hop. “I’m dashed!”

As Akita and Nulu walked to the bar, Nulu called to Grimbledung. “One drink on the way, Mister Dashed. One. Then off with you.”

“I can have two though, right?” Akita asked, tongue hanging out. “For being extra helpful?”

Nulu laughed. “Fine; two drinks.”

Chapter 26
What? A Magnus! In and Out.

Magnus stalked down the street, conch shell to his ear. Passersby gave him a wide berth. Mainly because he was holding what seemed to be a one-sided conversation. At the top of his lungs.

The fact that he was holding a conch shell to his ear was incidental.

“I did so do what you told me!” Magnus shouted.

He paused for a moment.

“Oh yes I did! Oh yeeesss I did!”

He waved his hand in the air.

"I don't see why the book is so important!"

He looked at the ground as he stomped along.

"Well *you* should be able to do something about that if you're so all powerful!"

Magnus tripped over his own feet and sprawled onto his face. The conch shell slipped out of his hand and rolled several feet away.

He rolled to his back. "Oh, very mature!" He shouted at the sky.

He sat up, and started to put the conch shell to his ear again. When he realized it wasn't in his hand, he looked about quickly. "Oh no!" When he spotted it, he scrambled to it on his hands and knees in a panic. Carefully, he picked it up and examined it for damage. When he found none, he got angry again. "Oh, very mature!" He shouted into it. Then he held it to his ear.

He stood and started walking again. Instead of shouting, he nodded. And scowled. "Practice debate? Now?" He smirked. "That would be good to watch. Where is it?"

With another nod, he quickly walked to the Duck Inn and Dine. When he got there, he slipped quietly into the main dining area just as the debate was starting…

"So I'd really appreciate your cooperation," Nulu was saying. "And we'll try to move through the questions so we can get to some of yours at the end."

"Do we get free drinks while we listen?" A Human asked.

Nulu frowned. "You get one drink on the house for listening."

"But…" The human began.

"Or you can just get no free drinks." Nulu interrupted him.

"You mean we can leave?" The Human stood.

Nulu flexed her fingers and snarled. "Oh, you can *try*."

"One free drink sounds just fine." The Human sat back down.

"A round on the house, Wil." Nulu called over her shoulder. When she turned back, her smile returned. "So if you would please give your attention to Candidate Flora O. Willowfeet and her debate against the esteemed Constable Akita."

There was scattered applause as the pair stepped up to their respective podiums.

"I will be asking the questions." Nulu sat in a chair in front of the pair. "First for Miss Willowfeet then the Constable can respond, then I'll swap just to keep it fair."

When both Flora and Akita nodded at her, Nulu continued: "How do you feel the taxation is right now? And should it increase?"

Flora thought for a moment. She had no idea about the current taxation rate. "Well, I feel that taxes are pretty well off right where they are." She gave a smile. "So they should stay the same."

Akita did a double take. "Well, I for one," he jumped on the question, "would like to see *less* of my hard-earned money going to a faraway king who doesn't know what's happening in my town."

Several people clapped.

"And since I doubt the King is going to lower them any time soon, what I'd like instead is a good accounting of where my…our taxes go." He held out his hands. "I understand that my salary is paid by taxes but I can definitely tell you that my meager earnings aren't anything compared to what the King brings in in taxes."

More people clapped.

Emboldened, Akita pressed on. "So unlike my petite neighbor up here on the podiums, I'd like more accountability for what we pay and if we don't like how the accounting works…" He thrust his fist in the air. "Then I say we pay less!"

Several people stood to clap.

"And furthermore..." Akita leaned forward on the podium gripping both sides of it as he did. "I also feel..."

Flora hopped off her box, went straight to Akita and punched him under his arm. Hard.

"Hey!" Akita winced. "You can't do that!" He looked at Nulu. "She can't do that, right?" He rubbed his side.

"Sorry." Flora moved back to her podium.

"Flora, please stay on your side of the podium." Nulu said as she fought back a giggle. She cleared her throat. "Constable, how do you feel about the large influx of foreigners to the town?"

Akita glanced over at Flora. She seemed to be looking at the ceiling. Hesitantly, he began: "Well, with the Halfling War, many people's homes were destroyed and they need a place to live." He glanced at Flora again. She now seemed to be cleaning the dust off her

podium. One piece at a time. "And after all, we're all foreigners from someplace until we find where we want to make out home." He looked at Flora. "Right?"

"This is boring." Magnus whispered into the shell. "I know better answers to all these questions." He put the shell to his ear.

Flora continued to pick at her podium.

"Flora?" Nulu said. "What say you?"

"Kick the foreigners out." She said flatly. "Kick them out on their ears."

Several patrons behind Nulu began to grumble to each other.

who is asking the questions?

"Alright, Flora," Nulu said, "We'll have to work on that answer." The grumblings behind her rose in pitch. "Another free round, Wil!" She said loudly.

The grumbling stopped.

"That Trolless." Magnus said.

how are the answers going?

"Given a choice, I'd vote for the Constable between the pair. Just a moment; there's another question coming."

"Constable. With the increase in size of the town, do you feel that there should be more than two of you? Do you really feel that one Constable and one deputy is enough?"

"I know the answer to that one too." Magnus whispered.

"Well," began Akita. "That is something that I have thought about rrrecently." He gave a nod to the crowd, "With all the nice folks moving into the town…"

is she *there?*

Magnus straightened and scanned the room. Near the front, on Akita's side was Maca.

"Yeah, that witch or whatever she is sitting over on the other side of the room." Magnus' face scrunched up. "I don't like that one."

"So an increase in salary it probably justified," continued Akita.

you fool! if she is there, and the mayoress and the constable as well, you should be getting back The Book.

it is unguarded!

"Alright," Magnus said, "but I thought you wanted..."

taaake the booook!

"But I want to hear…"

GET! THE! BOOK!

The force of the command caused Magnus to jerk back, knocking over his drink. As his mug hit the floor, Nulu said "No refills for spillage.

"So what I think…" Began Akita.

As Magnus pushed past the curtain, Nulu interrupted Akita. "Okay, why don't we start from the top? Flora, how do you feel the taxation is right now? And should it increase?"

Chapter 27
Books and Potions and CoatRacks? Oh My!

Magnus sprinted down the street. He had given up trying to hold the conch shell to his ear as he ran because the voices were being anything but supportive. As was usually the case. Even the shell was jostling as he ran, they were still berating him.

Loudly.

"I can still hear you!" He said as he breathed hard. "I'm doing the best I can." He tried to get into a comfortable stride but since he had never actually been in one, he didn't know what it felt like. He ended up going right past it to an inefficient lope instead. "I don't think I'll be ready for the Inaugural Birthday Suit run." He lamented.

The voices all laughed.

"It is so a real thing!" He turned the corner. "Two more blocks." He stopped talking because with two blocks to go, a narrative was unnecessary. And breath-consuming. So an additional carriage return would just fill the space instead.

Magnus stopped running in front of *Herbs and More, Much More.* He continued to walk back and forth as he tried to regain his breath. The shell suddenly felt like it weighed twenty pounds so he put it on the stoop of the shop as he walked.

After several passes back and forth, he retrieved the shell. "Alright, so I'm here." He walked up the stairs and peeked into the shop. "It looks empty." Magnus tried the handle and the door opened. "Hello?" he called as he stuck his head in.

No one answered.

"Hello?" He tried again as he stepped into the shop. "Anyone home?" he added as he softly closed the door. "No one's here," He said into the shell.

find The Book and get out

and if you see anything else interesting, take that too.

"That's stealing." Magnus observed. "Sounds good." He tiptoed past a coat rack to a curtain that ostensibly led to a back room.

potions; those are hard to trace. if you see any colorful potions, pocket those.

and perhaps some medicinal herbs.

"What am I going to do with a potion?" Magnus slipped past the curtain into the back room. "Or medicinal herbs?" The walls were lined with potions and various artifacts. The large table in the middle of the room seemed to have several projects going on in different corners of it. A pot in the corner bubbled and steamed ominously as a large wooden spoon stirred it.

find The Book!

grab potions.

but get The Book first.

what's in the pot? is it... medicinal?

"Would you all just shut up?" Magnus moved to a bookshelf. "There're lots of books in here." He commented as he turned his head sideways to read the titles. He had to step around a coat rack as he went down the row. "How to sell invisible houses…The world's greatest lover…" He paused. "The what?" He reached for the book. "Hmmm…"

that's not the right booook!

does it come with a potion?

"Would you all just be quiet?" Magnus scanned the room again. "Hah!" In the far corner was a pedestal with a deep blue cloth with bright yellow stars covering it. The pedestal had the blue cloth on it. The cloth had yellow stars on it.[37] "Hidden in plain sight, eh?" As he walked to the pedestal, he pocketed a potion from the large table. "Happy?"

Magnus sidestepped a coat rack and stood in front of the pedestal. "How many coats does this woman own?" He commented.

As Magnus yanked the cloth off the book, CoatRack lifted a well-worn blackjack high in the air and brought it down on the back of Magnus' head.

look out! Was all one of the voices got out before blackness enveloped them all. Without Magnus' eyes, they were blind as well.

CoatRack hung the blackjack - a gift from a skeleton ~~acquaintance~~ ~~friend~~ ~~companion?~~ Fine: cicisbeo[38].

Magnus crumpled to the floor. As the conch shell hit the hardwood floor, one of the delicate spines broke off.

CoatRack bent over and grabbed Magnus by an ankle with one curved arm and the shell with another. She dragged the unconscious man to the front door. After just a pause, it opened for her. CoatRack did a half spin and tossed Magnus past the three steps all the way to the dirt street. He groggily rolled onto his back.

"What? Who?"

CoatRack tossed the conch shell onto Magnus- in a testament to her horseshoe tossing abilities, it landed squarely on his chest. And stayed. Since she was aiming for his prominent chin, she decided it was a 'leaner' and gave herself one point. Because that's what 'leaners' are worth. She put her slender arms back on her hips and marched back into the shop.

Helpfully, the door slammed shut behind her.

As Magnus laid on the street, a passerby reached for the possibly-valuable conch shell on his chest. A visible bolt of electricity arced to his hand, making him yelp more in surprise than anything else. Deciding the unconscious man was not that easy a target, he moved off.

A few moments later, Magnus stirred. He reached up and felt the back of his head- there was a large knot forming. "What the?" He sat up. His head felt as if it weighed twenty pounds. Alarmed he looked down at the conch shell. "Thank evilness you are still here." He glanced at the door. "Stupid shop." With a sigh, he lifted the conch shell to his ear and listened for what he expected would be a harsh rebuke for failing.

He heard nothing.

Magnus gave the shell a little shake. "Hello?"

Nothing.

Magnus held the shell out and peered at it. That's when he noticed the broken spine. "No. No-no-no-no-no-no!" He said over and over as he scrambled to his feet. "NO!" He

examined the shell- about a half-inch of one of the spines was missing. "Oh please no!" He took several calming breaths. "Speak to me, voices from beyond." He said.

Magnus held the shell up to his ear again.

so failed get book!

Magnus let out a relieved sigh. "Oh, thank evilness! You are all okay."

what you ?

"I'm only getting every other word." Magnus said. "What?"

i you was bad .

it's late we're with .

we to the back ?

we win it.

"I'm not getting half of what you say." Magnus said. "I didn't get the book. Can I win without it? I'm not understanding you very well."

turn shell and if get rest.

Magnus turned the shell over. "Okay. What did you all say earlier?"

told he a choice.

too now stuck him

need get book right?

can without .

"Well, this is going to get annoying." Magnus observed. "Just try to keep your sentences short.

Home!

"Fine." Magnus winced as he started walking- the lump on his head was now throbbing. After two paces, he stopped. "Hold on a tick." He turned and marched up the stairs of the shop. Tentatively, he opened the door.

CoatRack was standing by the counter, blackjack in hand. Metaphorically speaking.

"I take it you hit me, huh?" Magnus rubbed his head. "Well, I can assure you it was a complete misunderstanding. I was looking for an employee to speak to."

CoatRack spread two of her arms out wide.

"Well, you aren't the typical employee."

CoatRack brought her arms up inquisitively.

"I think I will discuss it later when my head isn't throbbing. But in the meanwhile, I lost a piece of my shell and I'd like it back."

CoatRack rubbed her top.

"No, not my head." Magnus held out the conch shell. "From *this* shell." He turned it so the damaged side was facing the rack. "This little piece here is back there by The Boo… the corner where you assaulted me."

CoatRack shrugged as much as a coat rack could. She pointed at him with the blackjack then shuffled through the curtain. When she came back out, she was kicking the piece of shell in front of her. With one final kick, she kicked it so it bounced off Magnus' foot.

"Ahh, yes. That's it." Magnus retrieved the piece. "Well. I will be going."

CoatRack pointed at the door then back at Magnus. With the blackjack.

"Fine. I'll wait for when that female … whatever she is… comes back."

CoatRack glared at Magnus. As much as a coat rack could. Which was apparently, very menacingly.

With a satisfied smirk, Magnus turned and walked off. He looked at the broken piece of the conch shell. "I hope this can be fixed." He held the broken piece in place then held the shell up to his ear. "I didn't get the book but I will."

that is not important ***CHICKEN!*** *now* A voice said.

"Chicken? Who's a chicken?"

who said anything about a chicken? you are beginning to infuriate ***RASPBERRY!*** *us.*

"What?" Magnus took the shell from his ear and peered at it. He held it back up without the broken piece.

we get book after election. right focus winning.

Magnus let out a sigh. "Most annoying". He put the broken piece in his pocket and made his way home.

To find some glue.

And open his shop to try and earn some money.

But mainly to find some glue.

Chapter 28
Kissing Hands and…

Grimbledung skipped down the street heading in the general direction of Second Hand Sorcery. He was feeling good about himself since he had stopped at only one drink at the Duck Inn and Dine. Mainly because, as Nulu promised, she had thrown him out.

Physically; he made it half way across the street before landing.

He was also pleased with his tuck and roll at the end of the toss.

As he walked in the general direction of the shop, he would occasionally end up on a side street because he was talking to a potential voter.

This was the case at the moment.

"I take it you're a potential voter then?" Grimbledung asked.

"Potentially," said the man. "I suppose."

"What'll it take you to vote?" Grimbledung looked up at him. "Potentially for a certain candidate?"

The man stopped walking. "Well for one thing, you can stop hounding me about it." He put his hands on his hips. "Frankly, the best way to make me *not* vote for whomever you have in mind it to hit me over the head with all sorts of accolades about them."

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "Well, all I can tell you is that you're better off… much better off voting for *my* wonderfully wonderful Magnus Opus von Magnus because he's the smartest fellow in town who knows what's best for you so your best bet is to vote for him. And don't call me Frankly." To help seal the deal he quickly took the man's hand and kissed it.

"What are you doing?"

"Kissing hands, of course."

"It's *shaking* hands."

"Listen, my candidate knows more than you, so just go with it." He stuck out his tongue. "It's gross, but it's what he wants." He pointed at the man, "And what he wants is your vote!"

The man's frown deepened. "Oh really? Well, I can tell you *Mister Gnome*, that I won't be voting for *your* candidate if he were the last one in town! I don't care who is running against him, that's who's getting my vote!"[39]

"Well you'll be sorry you did, buster!"

"We'll see about that. And don't call my Buster!" The man turned and marched off.

Grimbledung rubbed his hands together. "One more vote for us." After a moment to get his bearings, he continued in the general direction of the wand shop. "Next voter please," he said to no one in particular.

A very large female ambled onto the road Grimbledung was on. She was carrying a large basket of groceries in each hand.

Grimbledung scooted up beside her. "The nerve of some people!" He said. "The nerve!"

"What, me?" The woman said as she struggled with her baskets.

"You? Not at all, my fine, well-put-together lady." He smiled. "That ruffian that just turned away back there." He eyed her. "Need a hand with those baskets?"

The large woman looked down at Grimbledung. "I think they weigh as much as you do."

Grimbledung beamed. "Why that's the nicest thing I've had said to me all day! Now I just *gotta* help you."

The woman stopped and put the baskets down. She wiped her face on her apron. "I don't see how you can help with…"

"Ah ha!" Grimbledung flourished his wand.

The woman backed up several paces. "Robbery!' She shrieked.

"Gah!" Grimbledung spun in a circle looking for the would-be thief. "Where?" He backed against the woman, wand at the ready. "Stay behind me!" He paused. "And if you would, point them out to me as well." He looked up and smiled at her.

The woman frowned back. "What is it exactly that you want?"

"To help you with your baskets?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "And perhaps discuss that lout I met a moment ago."

"What lout?" She looked around.

"I'll tell you as we walk." Grimbledung waggled his wand at the baskets.

Light as a butterfly
Strong as a bee

The hands can carry
What the eyes don't see

He intoned.

The woman looked at the baskets. "What'd that do?"

"Made them light as butterflies, of course." Grimbledung stuck the wand up his sleeve. "And strong as bumble bees." He eyed her. "Weren't you listening?"

Tentatively the woman picked up one of the baskets. It was indeed so light it felt as if it wasn't even there. She picked up the other one. "My word!" She smiled at Grimbledung. "How long will that last?" She hefted the baskets up and down. "My word!"

"The better part of the day, I would imagine. Longer if you don't get them wet. Or stare at them." Grimbledung gestured down the road. "Shall we?"

"Of course," the woman said. "So the lout you were speaking about?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Seems he doesn't think women should run."

"What, in general? What if it's raining and you're in a white shirt?"

"Well, if that were the case, Madame," Grimbledung waggled his ears. "I'd hope *you'd* take your time."

"My word!"

"But what he meant was that they shouldn't run for office." Grimbledung shook his head. "To think that in these modern times…"

"To think." The woman said. "Uhm…" she hesitated. "There's an election?"

"Soon enough there will be. Couple of weeks in fact." Grimbledung winked. "And my girlfriend is running for mayoress so it would be nice if…"

"A female mayoress? Really? I don't get out much with my dozen kids."

"Dozen?" Grimbledung did a double take. "So you are not aware that the current mayor of the town is of the female persuasion?"

"Really? I thought it was run by a mobster named Big Julie."

"Well, it seems we're both right." He looked around. "Just don't tell her I said that." He laid his finger along the side of his nose. "Gnome's honor."

"They have that?"

"No. Not really." Grimbledung admitted. "It's just an expression like a politician under oath has to tell the truth. In any case, when it comes time to vote, make sure you vote for Flora O. Willowfeet." He winked. "She's the female."

"A human?"

"Sure." Grimbledung lied. "As far as I can say."

The woman nodded at him. "Well, thanks for the information." She hefted the baskets. "And the help."

"If you want that lightness to be a daily occurrence, come by Second Hand Sorcery and pick up a Levitation Wand." He beamed at the fact that he had not only gotten Flora a vote, but a potential sale as well.

"I will be sure to." With a wave of a basket, the woman cut down a side street.

"Ahh, very nice indeed." Grimbledung turned the opposite way toward the wand shop- just two blocks away.

When he reached the shop, he strode in proudly. "Ahh, Drimblerod partner of mine. How goes your day? Mine goes well, before you ask."

Drimblerod was behind the counter, fuming. "How goes the day? How goes the day?"

"Does it go round and round?" Grimbledung tried as he skipped to the counter.

"No. It does not. Do you know why?"

"Nope. Not a clue." Grimbledung hopped onto a stool across the counter from Drimblerod.

"BECAUSE YOU HAVEN'T BEEN HERE ALL DAY AND HAVEN'T DONE ANY WORK!" Drimblerod screamed.

Grimbledung leaned his stool back onto two legs. "Now hold on, I've done a heap of work I'll have you know."

"What, what have you done since we woke up at…" Drimblerod thought for a moment. "Around noon thirty, I think it was."

"Well, I had drinks with Flora O. Willowfeet to discuss her campaign." He put his hands on the counter. "Just one drink, I'll have you know. Just one if you can believe that."

"That is hard to believe." Admitted Drimblerod.

"True as true can be!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Then I walked back, convincing people to vote for her." He clapped his hands once. "And I think I got a lady to come in and buy a Levitation Wand! Hah!" He put his hands back on the counter. "Said I didn't work," he said to no one in particular. "My word!"

Drimblerod blinked at his partner. "Oh, that's right; there was a meeting or something." He thought back on the conversation the night before. It was a fuzzy blur of drunkenness. "Something about a meeting?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Yes; and I was there probably as close to being on time as I could possibly be."

"And you talked about voting to folks?"

"Three of them, in fact." Grimbledung beamed. "Or definitely most likely more than two."

"Three? That's never going to work, you know."

"What?" Grimbledung frowned. "I got people interested in voting."

"There are probably a thousand or more people in town. You can't just wander the streets trying to talk to them."

"What do you suggest?"

Drimblerod opened his mouth then closed it. "Never mind. Forget I mentioned it."

Both Gnomes turned as the bell above Door jingled.

A very pregnant woman with a child on her hip and four in tow came in.

"I'm dashed; what's with the baby boom?"

Drimblerod shrugged. "Wars'll do it. Same with natural or…" He glanced at Grimbledung "Gnomemade disasters."

"Oh?" Grimbledung looked at the ceiling. "Such as?"

"Citywide fires, perhaps."

"Well good day to you, my fine woman! I think I spoke to your sister earlier today." Grimbledung bowed at the woman then winked. "What'cha need, toots?"

"I am in need of a wand," she said.

"A Contra Ception Wand. Perchance?"

Drimblerod hopped over and slapped Grimbledung ears. "Gads!" He stepped between the two. "What can I help you with, Madame?"

"A what wand?" The woman said to Grimbledung. "I don't know what that is."

"Obviously." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

Drimblerod slapped Grimbledung's waggling ears. "What do you need help with, Madame?" He said as he alternated whacking ears.

"I need something to help with the cleaning."

"We've got some great water wands." Grimbledung laid his ears flat against his head. It was definitely not a Gnomelike look. "Just line the little tykes up and wash them all at once."

Drimblerod gaped.

"Well, that's about what I was looking for." The woman shifted the squirming child to her other hip.

Grimbledung winked at Drimblerod. "Show her a nice wand, partner, and I'll hold the wee one." He reached out for the baby.

The baby leaned back away from Grimbledung.

"Hey now, got something against Gnomes?" Grimbledung tut-tutted. "Com'ere you!" He took the baby and held it up high. "Up ya go!"

A tendril of drool started to form from the baby's mouth as she smiled.

Grimbledung moved the baby to the side as the tendril flowed past him to the floor forming a solid line of drool.

"This kid's going to dehydrate right here in the shop." Grimbledung lowered the baby and as he moved him to his hip, he gave him a quick snap outward, breaking the tendril. He stepped over the newly-formed puddle. "Well, that's better, now isn't it?" He bounced the

baby on his hip. Being a human child, it was nearly a third his size. "Big little tyke." A thought occurred to him. "I'll… just watch all your kids while you shop." He smiled. "That way you can do it in peace." He waggled his ears at the youths. "Want a tour?"

Seeing that her son was in what seemed to be fairly capable hands, and she was close by, she smiled. "Well, the break would be nice… I suppose."

"To the backroom kids! I'll introduce you to a wonderfully fun jousting dummy!" He started walking. "Adventure awaits!"

The woman looked to Drimblerod. "A jousting dummy?"

"He's a Magicked item and I suppose fun to watch." He gave a genuine smile. "And he's definitely the friendly sort."

"Off you go then," the woman said.

With whoops and hollers from everyone -including Grimbledung- they all ran to the back room.

"Well then." Drimblerod said. "As you were saying?"

"Do you have a nice wand that will help with bathing? Something with warm water perhaps?"

Drimblerod nodded. "I have just the thing. It's something I picked up from the Fhorian Village near the Lava Flows… Why I remember back when old Tsoren first gave me a map to the area…"

Chapter 29
and… Shaken by Babies

Grimbledung pushed through the curtain. "Hey-ho, Dummy! You busy?"

Dummy tilted a mitten hand back and forth.

"Yeah? With what?"

Dummy punched one mitten hand to where his heart would be. With the other he hefted a very menacing-looking pike. He jabbed it forward several times. Then he leaned the pike against the inside of his shoulder and put his mitt hands side to side. He opened them up and peered out.

"Door's betrayed heart is making you plan a gruesome murder, huh?" Grimbledung nodded approvingly. "A time-honored tradition, that." He turned to the kids. "Say kids, since Dummy seems to be busy setting up a capital crime of some sort, how about we do a craft?"

The four boys' shoulders sagged. "A craaaaft? Awwww." They all said at once.

Grimbledung skipped to the table and put the baby on it. "Sure, sure; you should do at least once craft every day; keeps you balanced."[40]

"Awwww…" said the kids in unison again.

"And after the craft, we'll all…" Grimbledung was at a loss.

"We get to ride on the Dummy's shoulders?" Suggested one of the kids.

Dummy shook his head. He poked the pike toward the child.

"Sure! Everyone rides on Dummy's shoulders!" Grimbledung agreed.

Dummy gestured to where his legs should have been, then shrugged.

"Wooo!"

"Yeah, yeah." Grimbledung reached under the table and pulled out several parchments. "So for the craft…"

"It is easy?"

"Is it quick?"

"Can we keep it?"

"Yes, yes, and no." Grimbledung peered at the last child- the youngest who was about seven. "You got one?"

"It this for a grade?"

"Yes. It's most definitely for a grade, young man. Excellent question." Grimbledung dealt out the parchments giving several to each child. "So make sure it's your best work."

"Math?" The youngest stuck out his tongue.

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue as well. "Not a chance."

"Wooo!"

Grimbledung slid several charcoal sticks toward the boys. "Alright kids, this will be quick and easy."

"Then we ride the dummy?" The eldest asked.

Dummy shook his head.

"Absolutely," Grimbledung lied as he scooted the baby to the edge of the table to make more room.[41] "So, what we are drawing today is going to be just a random person where any similarities between them and persons living or dead is purely coincidental."

"What?" The youngest boy asked. He nibbled on the end of his charcoal stick.

Grimbledung exhaled. "Alright, just to keep it simple- we're all going to draw a Gnome. A Gnome of the female persuasion."

"Female persuasion?"

"Yeah, they're pretty persuasive; females. Grimbledung cupped his hands in front of his chest. "Like this."

"Does she have The Arth Oh Ritis?" The second to oldest asked. "Gran-pappy has that."

"The what?" Grimbledung lowered his hands.

"The Arth Oh Ritis." The boy said again.

The next younger nodded. "Yeah, Gran-Pappy's hands are like that a lot." He held his hands up and hooked his fingers. "Like that."

"The girl has it too?" The youngest put out his lower lip. "That's sad."

"No, no, no." Grimbledung scowled. "She does not have the... Artha Ritis."

"Arth Oh Ritis," the eldest corrected.

Grimbledung ignored him. "She is a she, so she has…" He cupped his hands again.

The eldest boy giggled.

Grimbledung pointed at him. "Yes! Exactly."

The eldest boy nodded at his brothers. "Like Aunt Claudia."

"Ohhh.." the others replied, knowingly.

Grimbledung moved his hands up and down beside his ears. "And long flowing hair."

"Like Aunt Laurita," said the oldest again.

The others nodded.

"But a Gnome." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Don't forget the ears."

"Like Uncle Donald." The boy said.

"Wait, what?" Grimbledung said. "I'd be interested in seeing your family tree at some point." He smiled. "So you boys got it?"

With nods to each other, the boys bent over their parchments and began to sketch.

Grimbledung clapped with glee. "Woo! Those ballots are practically stuffed already!" As he moved to Dummy, he pushed the baby- who had wiggled to the very edge of the table- over a little bit. "And we'll head out before they complain about their rides." He hesitated. "Unless you *want* to give them rides."

Dummy stared at Grimbledung.

"Fine, fine." He leaned on Dummy and watched the children draw. "Two each, if you please." He said to them. "If something's worth doing, it's worth doing twice."

After the youths had finished their second drawings, Grimbledung gathered them up. "Excellent work, kids." He wrinkled his nose. "Excellent... uhm..." He looked at the oldest. "Was that you?" He wrinkled his nose again. "Fine work, I must say, but still a little warning would have been nice." He waved his hand in front of his face. "Wooo! That's ripe. What are they feeding you; rotten turnips?"

The eldest pointed at the baby- who was once again teetering on the edge of the table. "That was sissy."

"Well whatever you're feeding that child, you should check the expiration date or cook it more, or just switch to something else entirely." Grimbledung scooted to the baby and caught her just as she rolled off the table. "Squirmy little thing, aren't you?" He moved the child to the crook of his arm.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you," warned the youngest.

The others shook their heads.

"What?" Grimbledung bounced the child. "Do wha...." His mouth stayed open, eyes fixed on the child. He remained frozen but swiveled his eyes to the eldest child. "Why is my arm warm all of a sudden?" He said without moving his mouth.

"Uh oh." Said one of the kids. "It's time."

Another nodded solemnly. "Changies. It's time for changies."

"Why is my arm...." Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Awwww, come on! After all I did for you?" He moved to the eldest and held the baby out.

The eldest put his hands in his pockets. "Rules are whoever was holding her..."

"Or nearest," added another child, hands in pockets.

"Or smelt it first," said a third with pocketed hands.

"Or is allowed to play with pins," added the youngest with a smile, since he fortunately wasn't yet.

"Has to change her," finished the eldest.

Grimbledung looked at Dummy.

Dummy looked down. Since he didn't have pockets, he did the only thing left- he pointed the pike at Grimbledung and jabbed it at him several times.

"Say, can I borrow that thing?" Grimbledung asked as he stepped closer to Dummy. "Just for a moment?"

Dummy considered that for a moment then shook his head.

"I'm keeping the baby, just so you know." He glanced at her. "I just want...a buffer zone."

Dummy nodded. He flipped the pike around and offered it to Grimbledung.

Grimbledung took the pike and after just a moment's maneuvering, marched through the curtain to the front room.

"What are you doing, Grim?" Drimblerod said worried. "With that innocent baby?"

Grimbledung was walking with the child dangling on the end of the pike as if he were in a parade. "Innocent? *Innocent*?" Grimbledung swung the child around.

The child giggled with glee.

"This little innocent baby, as you call it seems to have demons…" Grimbledung's eyes got large. "*Actual* demons living in her digestive system. And when they poop, she poops! Poopage from the very bowels of the underworld!"

"I think you're exaggerating."

Grimbledung shook his head at his partner. "Oh no, not this time." He swung the pole around to put the child near Drimblerod. "This maniacal pooper…"

"She's not old enough to even know what she's doing." Interrupted Drimblerod. He reached out for the child then hesitated as it swung in front of him. "Honestly."

"Oh, I'm honest all right." Grimbledung affirmed.

A stench filled the area around Drimblerod. Drimblerod winced. "Ouch," he said.

"Smell that? That, my friend is exactly what the underworld smells like at low tide."

"What's it smell like at high tide?"

"The same." Grimbledung pinched his nose with one hand. "Oh, that just reeks." He looked at his partner. "She knows what she's doing, the little devil. And furthermore…" His voice trailed off as he looked at his sleeve. "It's soaked through to my arm before I knew what was going on!" He stuck out his tongue. "That was premeditative unwarranted poopage of the worst kind!"

"Better you than me." Drimblerod gestured at the woman. "I believe the child is yours." He stepped back- more to get away from the smell than to let the woman grab the child. It bobbed on the end of the pike, giggling.

Grimbledung hefted the baby high. "Oh, you're out of here, little miss!" He held the pole with both hands and cleared his throat.

Goblin King!
Goblin King!

Several Goblins, lurking in the walls turned to look.

Wherever you may be,
take this child of someone else far away from me!

Grimbledung declared.

The goblins all looked dejected, then went back to their business.

"I don't think that's how it works." Drimblerod said.

Grimbledung looked around the room. "Oh, it'll work alright. Just you wait." He cleared his throat again. A thin rivulet of brown ran down the wooden pole of the pike toward

Grimbledung. "Yaaa! Someone take this thing!" He held the pole as far away from himself as he could. "Take it awaaaay!"

The woman opened a satchel on her hip and pulled out a large white cloth. "Oh, the poor dear. Full, are we?" She held her hands up toward the child.

The child began to blow spit bubbles as she bobbed up and down.

"Full? That kid's completely empty judging how much is in that diaper! Yaaa! Now it's leaking out the top!" Grimbledung lowered the child to her mother. "This thing's leaking again. *Leaking*."

"Aww, poor little darling," said the woman. She took the child and holding it slightly away from herself turned to the door then back. "Can I use your counter for a moment?"

"Use what?!" Grimbledung did a little hop. "Our what?"

"Ermm…" Was all Drimblerod could manage. She had bought a rather expensive wand as well as a levitation one but even so, they did on occasion eat off the counter. "I suppose?"

The woman smiled. "I won't be but a moment," she said as she moved to the counter. With experienced hands, she flipped the cloth open and laid her child in the middle of it. "There we go." She seemed completely immune to the odors the child was able to produce.

"Don't hurry on our account." Grimbledung looked down at his arm. "Well I'm dashed. I think I need to find a wash bucket or perhaps some lye. Mayhap even a burn barrel."

"Please do." Drimblerod crinkled up his nose. "I'm going to open a window. And put that pike out…" He did a double take. "Where'd you get a pike?"

"Dummy. Seems he's got a beef with someone over Door's broken heart. Metaphorically speaking, that is."

"Well, maybe it will work out better now that he's pike-less."

"Perhaps." Grimbledung agreed. He did a little hop. "So my plans for getting Flora O. Willowfeet elected are going swimmingly."

"Swimmingly?"

"Well, to be accurate, there is no pool involved." Grimbledung's ears perked up. "Unless of course, you mean a pool of potential voters!"

"I'm not the one who mentioned swimming," Drimblerod said. He glanced at the woman- she was done changing the child and now held a very puffy diaper in one hand. "Do you need someplace to put that?" He asked her.

The woman shook her head. "I'll just wash it out this afternoon."

"At the river?" Grimbledung shook his head. "Those poor fish." He held the pike out as if it were a fishing pole. "I think I'll skip fishing for a couple of days."

The woman moved the child to her hip as she slipped the used diaper into her bag. "Well thanks for everything." She said sweetly. Suddenly her voice raised several octaves and tripled in volume. "BOYS!" She screeched.

Grimbledung ducked. "Gah!"

Drimblerod leaned back. "I say!"

The four boys piled out through the curtain. "Right here, mom," they said in unison.

The woman's normal voice returned: "Well then, thank the nice Gnomes for their help and hospitality and let's go."

"Thanks Mister Gnomeses." The boys said.

Drimblerod gestured at Door, who obliged by opening. "Any time. Stop by when you're in the neighborhood."

"But before you feed the little one." Added Grimbledung.

The woman and her sons filed out.

"Well, that was an experience." Grimbledung said. He looked at his sleeve. "I'm going to change. Then I have some election work to do."

"And put that pike outside." He stuck out his tongue. "I don't know if that will ever wash out."

"Well, I'll give it a try." Grimbledung looked down the pike at his partner. "It's a nice pike; I'd hate to toss it away."

Drimblerod nodded. "True." Then without thinking, he continued, "You know what you can do to really help the election?" Drimblerod's mind caught up with his mouth. "Never mind. It's probably not a good idea."

"What? If it will help with the election, I gotta know!" Grimbledung used the pike to bounce back and forth like a miniature pole-vaulter. "I gotta!"

"Alright, just try to keep calm."

"That's my middle name! Mister Grimbledung Calmness Sixtoes!"

"I thought you were Mister Grimbledung *Danger* Sixtoes."

"Well, it's hyphenated." Grimbledung did another hop. "What, what can I do?"

Drimblerod cringed. "You could hold a rally."

Grimbledung fell onto his butt. "A rally?" He bounced on his butt. "A rally!"

"Maybe we should just forget..."

Grimbledung rolled to his side and ended up on his feet. "A rally?" He thrust the pike in the air.

"Don't." Drimblerod said. "Please, don't." But it was too late.

Do you wanna have a rally?
Come on, let's go out and cheer!
I never see a rally anymore!
Come on out the door.

Grimbledung gestured toward Door.

Helpfully, Door opened.

"I don't believe I want to." Drimblerod replied.

Door closed.

Grimbledung frowned and continued:

It's like you've gone away
We used to have the bestest rallies
And now we're not.
I wish you would tell me why!

Grimbledung dropped to one knee, arms thrust above his head, the fingers on his non-pike-holding hand were waggling.

Do you want to have a rally?

Yes! We! Do!

"I'm sorry I suggested it." Drimblerod moved to the counter. He leaned over and sniffed at it. "I don't think the town is ready for you to run any sort of event."

"Well, it would be my first in Julesville, and I learned so much from the last one." Grimbledung dropped his arms but continued to waggle his fingers.

"What? What did you learn?"

"Brace the wood before setting it on fire?"

"No!"

Grimbledung stopped waggling his fingers. "Check the weather?"

"Well, that would be nice," admitted Drimblerod. "Having a rally in the rain isn't a good way to have it."

"So we're having it?" Grimbledung hopped back and forth.

"A small one." Drimblerod pointed at his friend. "With a stage no bigger than… the wagon. Flora can stand in the wagon"

"Can we put the wagon on something?" Grimbledung waggled his fingers again. "Something not too big?"

"No. We will not." A thought occurred to Drimblerod. "But, what we can do is have it move through town gathering folks as it goes."

"A hayride!" Grimbledung took a knee and cleared his throat.

Do you wanna have a hayride?
Come on, let's go out and drive!

"NO! NO HAY RIDES!" Drimblerod interrupted. "But you can have a banner on the side identifying Flora. And maybe a campaign slogan…"

"Vote early, vote often?"

"Actually, that is more a campaign strategy" Drimblerod gave a shrug. "That, in all dishonestly, is best left unsaid for legal purposes."

"Kind of like 'Wow, those pants make your hips look huge!' or 'No this *doesn't* taste at all just like the stuff we ordered in that restaurant that one time' or 'my Mom never cooked anything that tasted remotely like this'?"

"Yes; just like that."

Grimbledung exhaled. "I figure I'll get a wagon, a banner, and…" He snapped his fingers. "A flashy steed to pull it!"

"Well, *I'm* not pulling it."

Grimbledung banged the bottom of the pike off the floor. "Wooooo!"

"Wonky?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Of course not; while it's true he is a mighty steed, he's not a good fit for the job. I was thinking of something more… POW!"

Drimblerod narrowed his eyes. "What do you have in mind, exactly?"

Grimbledung waved a hand dismissively. "Nothing at all. Nothing to worry about. A simple beast… Rat, that is… to pull the wagon."

"Alright then, if it's Rat." Drimblerod said, unconvinced. "Though I doubt you can get him to do it since he's also running for office."

"Huh. Good point. Maybe I'll turn some other hapless rat into my puller then change it back afterwards."

"That would probably work better," Drimblerod said.

"When do we do this?" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "When, oh when?"

"How about tomorrow afternoon since it will be Satyrsday and the market will be going on?"

"Perrr- fect! Flora said the debate will be the next day in the market so that will mean that the rally will be fresh in everyone's mind" Grimbledung rushed forward and hugged his partner. "Oh, you won't be disappointed."

"Gah!" Drimblerod pushed his partner off. "Change your shirt first!"

"Fine, fine. Change the shirt, then decorate the wagon!" Grimbledung turned and ran at Door, who obliged by opening at the last possible moment. As Grimbledung skidded sideways through the opening, he called: "Ask Rat to come out so I can go over the finer details with him!"

"Spelling?"

"Spelling." Grimbledung affirmed. Then he disappeared around the corner.

Drimblerod shook his head. "Here we go again." A terrible, horrifying thought occurred to him. "No Mechanimation of the wagon!" He shouted.

Grimbledung acted as if didn't hear him.

Chapter 30
Rallying Brawling Voters?
Brawling Rallying Voters!

The next morning Grimbledung started down the stairs carefully. His recent run of clumsiness seemed to be over but he wasn't taking any chances. Especially today.

Drimblerod glanced up the stairs. "Have you made amends with the stairs?"

"I believe we have an armistice going on right now." Grimbledung put his hand on the rail just in case. "A tentative one."

"Well that's good to hear." Drimblerod chuckled. "It's better than hearing you bounce down them and spew expletives as you go."

"You didn't appreciate my expletives?"

"They are creative, I suppose."

Grimbledung, finally down the stairs, skipped to the counter. "It is an art, really." Grimbledung's stomach growled. "You know, speaking of food."

"We weren't," Drimblerod pointed out. "Not at all."

"Well we were talking about being an artisan and that's also a type of sandwich if I'm not mistaken."

Drimblerod nodded. "Fine then; we were circumstantially discussing food."

Grimbledung nodded back. "Right."

After a long moment Drimblerod said: "And?"

"And what?" Grimbledung leaned on a stool.

"And you changed the subject to food and then left it hanging!"

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Oh, I thought the rest was pretty self-evident." He waggled his ears. "We're out of food."

"It's just Gwenersday. The market's not even set up."

"Well not all of it but some of the early arrivals will be setting up later this afternoon." Grimbledung started for the door. "Want me to do the shopping then?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Well two reasons." Drimblerod held up a finger. "First off it's early in the day so you'd just wander around spending money and getting into trouble until the merchants were set up."

"Well, I don't..."

"And second," Drimblerod pressed on, "if you went alone, you'd be gone the rest of the day and probably the night."

"That's most likely an exaggeration," countered Grimbledung.

"The answer is no."

"So you're undecided then?" Grimbledung took two more steps towards Door. "Mayhap I can spy a good place to put the wagon while I wait."

"Or mayhap you put in an honestly not so honest day's work selling wands to unsuspecting customers."

"That's always a fun day." Grimbledung took a step towards the counter.

"And later after we close, we can *both* go down to the market."

Grimbledung took another step toward the counter. "Well, I suppose I could work a while..."

"Until we close," suggested Drimblerod.

Grimbledung let out a long sigh. "Until we close." He perked up his ears. "And then we go?"

"And then we go." Drimblerod affirmed. "Remember we are supposed to be running a used wand shop." Drimblerod shook a finger at his partner. "We don't seem to do that much anymore."

"Well, that's boring and leads to repetitiveness." Grimbledung raised his hands plaintively. "Or at least that's what the critics say."

"We have critics?" Drimblerod looked up and down the street. "Us? Are they good ones?"

"Well, they're mostly good. Some of them are complete Dorkfish who wouldn't know a good gag if it hit them in the face with a pie." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Say....".[42]

"We are *not* going to have a pie fight." Drimblerod said flatly.

"What if there're tables of them at the market today?" Grimbledung did a little hop. "Nothing beats a good pie fight!"

"We pick up a few supplies and get back home." Drimblerod pointed. "Around the corner and back again."

"Well, that'd be an unexpected journey." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Nice, huh?"

"I'd give it a four," Drimblerod said.

"Typical." Grimbledung deadpanned.

The pair worked the day selling wands to unsuspecting customers in a most repetitive natuve.

And then they closed...

Drimblerod rummaged through the coins in the drawer. "Alright, Grim, ready to go?"

"But I'm on a roll!" Grimbledung did a little hop. "Just a few more?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "I don't want to be out there at night trying to shop."

Grimbledung pouted. "Okay. If you insist that we close."

Drimblerod took several coins. "Let's go. You can lament about having to stop working..." He paused. "Well, actually you've never lamented about that so how about you keep doing it until we get to the market?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Nope. The feeling's passed." He skipped to Door. "Let's go cavorting."

"We're food buying. Stay on topic for a change."

"When have I ever…" Started Grimbledung.

"Every single time I send you alone." Drimblerod shoved the drawer shut.

"Who me?"

"Yeah, you. You and Rat." He looked around. "Where is he, by the way; it's been a while since I've seen him around. Has he just wandered off completely?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "He'll be back. Last I saw, he was working on his candidacy."

"He's serious about that, isn't he." Drimblerod smiled. "He is well spoken. He'll be hard to beat, I think."

"Pushaw!" Grimbledung gestured at Door.

Door obliged by opening.

"What's that rat got that I don't got?" Grimbledung scoffed.

"Courage."

"I thought that's what made the MuskRat guard it's musk. Or put the ape in apricot."

"That too." Drimblerod moved around the counter. "Let's go pick up supplies… *some* supplies and get back to the shop."

Grimbledung frowned. "Some supplies? You mean just one or two things or just a little bit of everything?"

"One or two things, Grim; if you're going to run a rally tomorrow you need to get home early."

The pair continued toward the market. When they were almost a block away, they had to weave through the masses of people.

"What gives?" Grimbledung ducked around another person. "Who are all these people and why are they at the market a day early?"

"I have no idea…" Drimblerod paused as he had to sidestep a woman and her three children. "I've never seen anything like this."

As they continued, the crowd seemed to move less and less.

"They aren't even trying to get anywhere!" Grimbledung complained. "Grrr!" He waggled his butt. "They're all just standing around, these loiterers!"

"Just stay calm, Grim. We'll pick up some meat and cheese and head back."

"Fine by me." Grimbledung ducked under a Troll's legs to keep up with his partner. The troll seemed to be standing as tall as possible to look over the crowd.

When the Gnomes finally reached what was the actual market, there was practically no room to walk at all.

"This is absurd." Drimblerod tapped a loiterer on the elbow. "Excuse me, Sir. What is going on."

"I'm a woman."

"Oh, sorry about that," Grimbledung said. "What's going on, ma'am?"

After a moment, the woman looked down. "Listening to a speech." She looked back up, toward the middle of the market. "Good one at that."

"Who's giving a speech?"

"Shhh!" The woman waved Drimblerod off. "He's still talking."

"You think it's Magnus?" Grimbledung asked as he moved beside his partner. "He's got these people eating out of his hand!" He added worriedly. "Stinking conch shell. I knew I should have kept it."

"Shhh!"

"Oh, shush yourself!" Grimbledung said. He pointed at a nearby wagon. "Let's get up there so we can hear what he is saying so Flora can rebut him tomorrow."

Drimblerod nodded and scooted to the wagon. He clambered on top then reached down to offer his hand to his partner. As he did, he looked toward the speaker. "Oh no." He said. "Oh, that's not good at all."

"What?" Grimbledung grabbed his partner's hand and climbed up the wagon wheel. "What's not good?"

"Shhh!" Said a man sitting in the wagon.

Drimblerod pointed. "*That's* not good."



"What's not…. Oh you… you… rat, Rat!"

"Shhhh!" The man said tersely.

"What'd he just say?" Drimblerod asked her.

"Blessed are the cheese makers, I think," the man said. "It's hard to hear from back here."

"What's so special about the cheesemakers?" Grimbledung asked.

"Well, I don't think he means it literally." Drimblerod offered. "I imagine he means any manufacturer of dairy products."

"That is a possibility," Grimbledung agreed. "But he is a rat, remember."

"Would you be quiet!" The man snapped.

"That is true." Drimblerod said. He perked up an ear and tried to listen to Rat.

"That reminds me," remarked Grimbledung. "We're out of asiago."

"If you two don't be quiet!" The man snapped. "I'll take you to the cleaners!"

"Are you calling us dirty?" Grimbledung crossed his arms. "Look, I bathe regularly. Gnomes are known to be fastidious…"

"I'm trying to listen to…" The man said.

"… The fact of the matter is, "Grimbledung continued, "that I took a bath just yesterday.'"

"If you two would just…"

"That is true," Drimblerod affirmed. "Blessed are the squeaky clean, I say."

"Hear, hear!" Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"That's your last warning!" The man balled up a fist and shook it at him. "I'll wallop your big nose if you don't…"

"Big nose? That's racist!" Grimbledung said. "How about if I rearrange your plain human face?!"

The man lunged at Grimbledung, knocking him off the wagon. He landed atop him and began trying to hit him.

"Help, help! I'm being repressed!" Grimbledung thrashed on the ground as the crazed man tried to punch him. "Grrr!" He added because he couldn't help himself.

"Stop hitting my partner!" Drimblerod leapt off the wagon in a classic swan dive, landing in a belly-flop on the man's back. He grabbed two handfuls of hair and pulled hard.

Another man, seeing Drimblerod jump on a fellow Human, and not seeing Grimbledung getting pummeled under him, immediately jumped on Drimblerod.

Seeing a fellow Gnome attacked, two Gnomes grabbed the man…

An Orc seeing the two Gnomes attacking the man, wanted to get in on the action so he punched the Dwarf beside him.

The brawl spread outward.

Quickly.

By the time it reached Rat, he was on his final remarks. In a testament to his speech, several people clapped.

Before joining the brawl.

With a headshake and a "I hope they remember some of that." Rat scampered off, very satisfied with his impromptu rally while in the back of his mind, he was already thinking about dropping out of the race.

Chapter 31
Meanwhile

"I'm so glad you let my sister come along with us," Mantodea said to the elderly Dwarf in the back of the wagon.

"Guhhh?" The Dwarf said as he yawned- the poison was starting to take effect. "Sommthnn wronnga." His head rolled back.

"Yes, yes. I agree completely." Bextra said. She reached back and patted the Dwarf on the shoulder. "You should try to save your strength." She smiled. "That my dear, is a nice way of saying 'shut up before wallop you on the head', by the way."

"Nhot get awwar wi thesss..." He yawned again.

"If I had a copper every time I heard that, Mister Sleepy" Mantodea said, "I'd have my own wagon." She smiled. "What am I saying? I *do* have my own wagon.

"Mahee Brothrssll feynd yoo."

"Shut it, Dwarf!" Bextra snapped. "Or you'll get the worst of me."

The trio rode along in silence through the long grass of the Northern Plains, heading in a southerly route.

With nothing else to do, the Dwarf comforted himself by watching the blue sky and clouds as they passed before his now-paralyzed eyes.

"Gaaaah," The Dwarf finally said a long ten minutes later.

Bextra hopped over the bench into the back of the wagon. "Out you go, Mister Sleepy." She rolled the now-dead Dwarf out. She dusted her hands then climbed back up front. "Nicely done and all under the nose of that pale princess."

"Stick to what works best." Mantodea snapped the reins coaxing the two horses to a trot as they came to a hill.

Bextra nodded. "So... poison then?"

"Nothing so peaceful will do for *him*." She snapped the reins again. "Deep in the belly terrified screams. And thrashing and wailing and moaning. That is what *he* will get."

Bextra nodded. "You want to drop a house on him?"

Mantodea thought about the mechanics involved as the wagon moved along. "Yeah, that's a good start." A smile came to her. "A real good start."

Chapter 32
Rat and Sore Ohse Sitting in an Alley.
C-o-n-s-p-i-r-i-n-g.

"Psssst!"

Rat slowed his scamper to a scoot. He didn't completely stop however. Even thought he was for all intents and purposes, immortal, he still was wary of the streets as the night approached. Just because he couldn't be killed didn't mean he couldn't feel pain. So he tried to avoid it at all costs.

"PSSSST!" said a voice from the shadows again.

Rat slowed his scoot to a walk. He looked into the alleyway to his left.

"PSSSST!" insisted the voice.

Rat stopped. "Are you in need of assistance?"

"No, friend," a voice said out of the shadows. Even though it was now saying words, it still sounded like a hiss. "Not I."

"Well then." Rat started walking again. "Good day to you, mysterious voice."

"Hold friend," the voice said. "What I meant to say was…*you're the one who needs assistance*."

"Oh?" Rat sat on his haunches. "Well don't let the half tail and tattered whiskers fool you; I'm just fine." He twitched what he had left of his whiskers for good measure. "See?"

"Well, I am sure you are." A cloaked figure stepped out of the shadows. "I heard you speaking earlier." The figure half-bowed. "Very eloquent you are."

"Well, I always make sure my words in the right order are." Rat twitched his whiskers again.

The figure seemed to stare at Rat.

Rat stared at the mysterious figure.

~~The figure now definitely stared at Rat.~~ Now the figure definitely stared at Rat.[43]

"Well, not that I don't enjoy a good prolonged silence, but I've got matters to attend to." Rat moved to his feet. "Just so you know, I think your attempt at mysteriousness comes across as just plain creepiness. You should work on it."

"Wait!" The creepy figure raised a pale hand. "Wait, please. I have an…offer to make you." A fit of coughing wracked him. He covered his mouth with his hand as he coughed.

"We're not going to have to shake on it, are we?"

"Just…a moment." The man coughed some more.

"You going to make it?" Rat sat back down. "An offer, eh? What sort of offer?"

"An offer of riches." The man wiped his mouth. "Riches indeed."

"Well, I have my health; that's riches enough. You seem a little short on that, if you don't mind me saying."

"Actually, I do." The man snapped.

"Well, as for me, I'm fit as an oboe. Or maybe a bassoon." Rat raised his hands plaintively. "Definitely some wind instrument in any case. So that's all I really need."

"Really?"

Rat tilted his head. "Well sure." He rubbed his claws together. "But I can see that you're not interested in my health. You looking to fatten my pockets?" He patted his sides. "Metaphorically speaking, that is."

"Yes…" Hissed the figure. "I have exactly what you need."

"From my vast experience dealing with underhanded underworld fellows… including myself, I have learned that there is no such thing as a free breakfast." Rat tilted his head. "What do you want in return for these alleged riches that I have yet to see? That probably need washed off if you've been handling them."

The figure reached into a fat belt pouch and pulled out a platinum coin. "I'll wager you've never seen one of *these* my little friend." He tilted it back and forth so it caught the light.

Rat chuckled. "If I had a copper coin for every platinum coin I've seen this month, I'd buy the election. With platinum coins."

The man opened and closed his mouth. "Well, I…" He was unused to people not being astounded at seeing the very valuable and usually rare coin.

"Tell you what…what do I call you again?" Rat asked with a smirk.

"I try to keep my name out of things." The figure said. He looked around. "You know, just work behind the scenes and such."

"For who's end?"

The figure straightened. "Mine of course." He tilted the coin again.

"Tell you what," Rat held up a claw. "You give me your pitch and I'll listen to it for that coin."

"Deal!" The man flipped the coin to Rat, inwardly he was filled with glee that he had bought yet another greedy weak minded fool for what they considered a fortune and he considered a trifle.

Rat caught the coin. "Alright then." He gnawed on the coin for a moment, then remembered the coughing fit and pulled it out of his mouth. "Yech." He pointed at the creepy man with it. "You're on."

"I want you to drop out of the election." The figure steepled his fingers. "Just drop out as of now."

"You think I'd win?" Rat examined the coin. "Is that it?"

"I think you'd… be a distractor that would serve my needs best by being elsewhere."

"So you want it between Flora and Magnus then?" Rat narrowed his one good eye. "Got something against rats?"

"Oh, no; not at all," the figure said honestly. "Some of my best friends are rats. I'll be speaking to that female next."

"You're backing Magnus then. What's he owe you?"

"Oh nothing. Nothing at all." The man leaned forward. "It's what he will owe *me* for winning." He tapped the ends of his fingers together. "Mwah hah hah!" He coughed and hacked again.

"You should get that looked at."

"Oh I have; it's much better now."

"Gads." Rat stuck out his tongue. "Well, that's sounds like a good enough plan and all." Rat put the coin down and wiped his hands on his sides. "So what're you giving me to drop out of a race that we're both pretty sure I'd win?"

"Well, that coin of course." The figure said. "As we agreed."

Rat moved forward and sat on the coin. "Listen, I'm not sure what sort of folks you're used to dealing with…"

"Powerful up and comers that I want to control!" The figure said almost too quickly.

"I figured that," Rat continued, "but see, here's the thing; I never agreed to accept your offer. I just agreed to listen to your offer for this round piece of metal. Which is what you offered me the coin for."

"I… uh…" The man went through their conversation in his head. When he got to the part where the rat agreed to merely listen to him, he pursed his lips. "Rat fart," the man cursed.

"You want one?" Rat sat up slightly and leaned to one side "Fit as an oboe, you know."

"No." The man looked down at Rat. "I do not."

"So, Mister tall, creepy, and phlegmy," Rat swiveled his hips back and forth on the coin like he was a chicken sitting on an egg. "What will you offer me to drop out of the race?"

The man glanced down at his pouch. It held a lot more coins but he had planned to use them to get rid of both candidates, not just one. "I suppose I could offer you another coin." He reached into the pouch. "*Two* platinum coins." He tilted the second coin. "What a treasure that is."

"Are you asking me?" Rat twitched his whiskers.

"No!"

"Because that sounded like a question with that leading interrogative."

"It wasn't, I was merely..."

"Well, I'll tell you anyway." Rat interrupted. "I sat on four of them just this morning so I could reach my porridge," Rat said nonchalantly. "Know why?"

"Why?" The man asked, genuinely interested.

"Because the fifth coin was on the other side of the table and out of reach." Rat pointed at the pouch. "So what you got in the pouch there… Mister Sore Ohes?"

The man took a step back. "Who? I uh… don't know who that is. Who? What makes you call me that name that is unknown to me."

"Lucky guess." Rat winked his milky eye. "When one spends times in the sewers one hears things through pipes. Handy things indoor plumbing. Visiting Mister Magnus Opus von Magnus yesterday, were we?"

"Who me?" Sore scowled at Rat. "What were you doing there?"

"Checking out my competition." Rat smirked. "What there is of it. And speaking to my constituents. Say, what's so important about that book?"

"That is none of your concern!" Sore dropped the coin back into the pouch then untied it. "Here are another twenty-nine coins. Take them and be gone!" He tossed the pouch at Rat.

The pouch landed with a jingle right in front of Rat. "So I'm tossing my morals down the proverbial outhouse for thirty coins?"

"Yes."

"It just seems… I don't know… disconcerting." Rat admitted. "Got one more to make it an odd number?"

"That's all I have with me, you vile rodent!"

"One more insult and you're going to have to double your offer," Rat pointed a finger at the man. "Or I'll run your candidate into the ground. Conch shell or not!"

"Take the coins and leave the race!" The man clenched his hands.

"Well, okay, but still thirty coins. Can you just take one back?"

"You're giving up a platinum coin just to make it an odd number?"

Sure thing." Rat backed up off the coin he was brooding. "I might as well give it away, you know." He smirked. "You know what they say, don't you?"

"What. Do. They. Say." The man seethed.

"You can't take it with you." Rat hefted the bag. "Unless of course you're an immortal rat." With that he turned and dragged the bag away with him.

"Ooooh!" Sore said after him. Even so, he was happy he had bought off one candidate. It would be easy enough to get more of his practically endless wealth to pay off the female. He smirked. She seemed less adept at haggling than the rat. He reached into his cloak and pulled out a miniature crystal ball. He waved a pale hand over it.

Within the city the wench I seek
walks unawares!
Where is she that we might meet?

The man peered into the tiny ball. As the smoke within it swirled, he saw Flora walking along a street. She was holding a riding crop.

Where? Where can I find you?

The man commanded.

Helpfully, the view in the crystal ball panned up to a shop sign. In what seemed to be early-morning light, he could see a sign advertising a second-hand shop. And a glowing moon. Sore scowled. "Bah. So, it is tomorrow that I can find you, my pretty!" He said as he shoved the ball in his pocket. "You and your little Gnome friend, too!"

Chapter 33
Rallying the Electorate

Flora opened the door to Second Hand Sorcery. She had been there until late the night before going over the plan for the rally. And eating. And drinking. Actually, more drinking than anything else. She squinted at the early morning light as she stepped into the shop. "Morning, Larry," she said. Door rattled its latch at her.

"They awake?"

Door rattled its latch.

"I'll just go wake them then."

Door rattled its latch. Again.

"Well, if you think that's a good idea, I'll wake Grimbledung first." She gave Door a quick curtsy and skipped up the stairs. When she got to Grimbledung's door, she knocked on it. "Grimbledung Sixtoes?"

"It's early! Come back in an hour." Grimbledung called back. "Or two."

Flora clenched and unclenched her fists. "GRIMBLEDUNG SIXTOES!" She screeched.

There was a thump in the room as Grimbledung rolled to the floor. After a short moment, the door creaked open slightly. "May I help you, Flora O. Willowfeet, mistress of the early morning terrifying awakenings?"

"We've got a rally to do." Flora said evenly. "I will go wake your partner."

Grimbledung started to close the door. "Sounds like a great plan to me."

"And I will see you downstairs?"

"Sure, sure. I will be downstairs, I am sure." He closed the door a little more.

"AND I WILL SEE YOU DOWNSTAIRS WITHIN TEN MINUTES!"

Grimbledung ducked. "Gads, woman. Aren't womenfolk supposed to catch malefolk with sweet smiles and well cooked meals of sugar and spice and everything nice?"

Flora smiled sweetly. "and i will see you downstairs!" She seethed as her smile became a sneer. "Or i'll snip your snail and yank off your puppygnome tail!"

Grimbledung stared at Flora. Emboldened by the early morning haze of a night of drinking he offered: "Oh yeah?"

Flora's eyes bored through Grimbledung's head, through the house across the way, arced to the other side of the street and knocked a bird off a chimney.

"I shall be down as soon as my morning ablutions are over." Grimbledung said. "In fact, I have already started peeing a little bit."

Flora gave a little curtsy. "See you soon, my dearest." She turned and marched to Drimblerod's door. As she pulled her hand back to knock on it, it opened.

"I'm up." Drimblerod shook his head. "Why don't you ever wake me up first so I don't have to listen to all that?"

Flora gestured at the stairs. "Door suggested I wake Grimbledung Sixtoes first."

"Stop listening to Door." Drimblerod rubbed his head. "From now on, you wake me up first. Okay?"

Flora looked from Drimblerod to the stairs and back again. "If you say so." She gave a curtsy and smiled.

Just to make sure she did, he added: "It would do my heart well to wake up first... to the sound of your melodious voice."

Flora squealed with delight then smooched Drimblerod's cheek. "If you say so."

Drimblerod rubbed his cheek. "Yes, well... In any case... Good morning Miss Flora O. Willowfeet." And because he knew what the reaction would be, he added: "Future mayoress of Julesville."

Flora did a little hop as she clapped her hands. She hugged Drimblerod then smooched him square on the lips. "Oh, I love hearing that!" She then ran down the stairs, squealing the entire way.

Drimblerod smirked as he rubbed his cheek. Until he saw Grimbledung staring at him. "What? You could get woken up this way too, you know." He raised his hands plaintively. "What?"

"You know."

"What do I know?" Drimblerod feigned innocence. "Me, the great unknowing Drimblerod Axebreath."

"And I know that you know that I know you know."

Drimblerod rubbed his head. "No, no; let's not ruin the mood by doing that now. How about over breakfast?"

"Fine then." Grimbledung marched to the POOPA. He opened the door and looked down into the shaft. He shook his leg. "That female." He remarked as he jumped to the pole.

"How he ever landed a female like that..." Drimblerod shook his head as he made his way to the pole. "And how it is she doesn't have a sister?" He jumped out and slid down the pole without even making sure his partner was clear of the landing pillow.

Flora got to the bottom of the stairs. "I thought you said Drimblerod preferred to have Grimbledung woken up first, you naughty door, Door."

Door rattled its latch uproariously.

With a headshake, Flora turned to walk to the backroom to unlock the door to the outhouse- which was now connected to the house as well as the sewers. Like many homeowners who had converted their outhouses to use the new sewer system, the Gnomes kept the lavatory behind a locked door to keep unwanted guests from sneaking in.

Rat scooted under the curtain as Flora got to the counter. "Flora, I'm glad you're here." He looked at the ceiling. "Did you hear that Drimblerod wants you to wake up Grimbledung first?" He asked as he twitched his whiskers.

Flora pouted. "Really? He must have changed his mind because I was just scolded by him for doing just that."

"Well, I'm sure he didn't mean it," Rat said. He sat up. "Do you have a moment?"

Flora looked past Rat. "Well, let me unlock the door first."

"I did it already." Rat said.

"Oh." Flora looked down at Rat then to the curtain, unsure if she was being tricked again. "Are you sure?"

Rat nodded. "Check it if you'd like." He smirked. "But the reasoning behind keeping the door to the lavatory locked is a sound one."

"How did you..."

"Well there are lots of ledges in the sewers and the pipes are put together in sections so there are grab-holds all along them to climb up."

"And the door?"

"You'd be surprised what a rat can squeeze under."

"I would?"

"Shocked, really."[44]

Flora gulped. "Well then.... what do you need?"

"I need to pay you off."

"Okay. Pay me off what?"

"I can see this would have gone all too easily for Mister Hacker."

"What's a hacker?"

"Someone who coughs a lot," Rat said. "Of course." He smiled. "Just hold on here for just a moment." Without waiting for a reply, he scampered back under the curtain.

Flora sat on one of the stools by the counter. She took the Dispel Wand off the peg and waved it around. "Pew, pew, pew!" She said.

Rat came back under the curtain.

Flora aimed the wand at him. "Pew!" She exclaimed.

"Whoa!" Rat ducked under the bag he had been dragging. "Don't ever do that! EVER!"

Flora put the wand on the counter. "I was just playing." She frowned. "I'm sorry, Rat." Her lower lip quivered. "Oh, I'm sorry! Don't be upset with me."

Rat peered over the bag. "Now don't go crying on me." He looked at the curtain. "Listen, it's all right. Don't cry."

"I'm so sorry, Rat."

Rat moved around the bag. "It's fine. It's just that..."

"What?"

"Well, my whole existence depends on the Familiar Spell that Grimbledung cast on me over a century ago. It keeps me tied to him magically." He sat on his haunches. "Nothing is able to kill me because the spell keeps me tied to Grimbledung."

"Well that's good."

"But if that spell were to get dispelled." Rat shuddered. "I think it would mean that I would instantly age those hundred years. And, in case you didn't know, rats don't live anywhere near a century."

"Oh!" Now Flora's eyes misted. "And you think that a Dispel Wand could separate the magic and you'd...you'd...!"

"Now, now." Rat said. "It's fine." He patted himself. "See? I'm just fine." He smiled again. "Here, this might cheer you up." He pushed the bag of coins toward her. "Put this on the counter."

As Flora picked up the bag and put it on the counter, Rat leapt onto it.[45]

"This feels like it has coins in it," Flora said.

"Oh, it does." Rat said. "But even better, it has a compliment in it as well."

"A compliment? I don't understand." Flora peered at the bag. "How can it hold..."

"Open it." Rat smirked. "Good thing you're sitting."

Flora opened the bag. "Oh, Rat!" She narrowed her eyes at him. "Rat!" She reached for the wand. "You...you... rat!"

"What?" Rat looked from the sack to the Gnomess and back. "What?"

"You took these coins from poor Grimbledung!"

"What?"

Flora aimed the wand at Rat. "How could you?"

"What? No." Rat shook his head. "Put the wand down, Flora!"

"What is this?"

"It's a payoff." Rat said without thinking. He put his claws over his mouth.

"Why you!"

Grimbledung ambled through the curtain. "Hey ho, all. Are we ready... Is this a private conversation?"

"No, Grimbledung. Stay!" Rat said. "Explain to her that I haven't taken any of your coins?"

"Have you?"

"Nope."

"He hasn't taken any of my coins, Flora."

"This bag is full of coins, Grimbledung Sixtoes," Flora said. She waggled the wand at Rat. "If he stole them from you, he wouldn't tell you about it."

"Sure, he would."

"Sure, I would."

"See?" Grimbledung smiled. "Told you so." He reached for the wand. "Let me have the wand, Flora O. Willowfeet."

"But..." Flora's lower lip started to quiver. "What if he's not telling you the truth?"

"He's telling me the truth."

"I'm telling him the truth!"

"See?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Told you."

"But..."

"Listen, since I cast the Familiar Spell on him, there is no way Rat can lie to me since he's my familiar."

"Well, unless we're playing cards," Rat offered. "Or Snakes and Ladders."

"Or talking about the weather."

"Right. The weather is fair game." Rat snapped his fingers. "And whose turn it is to buy drinks." As soon as he said it, he covered his mouth.

"What?"

"Nothing." Rat said quickly. "Lots of weather we're having this season."

"Well, sure." Agreed Grimbledung. "Wait. This bag is filled with coins?"

"And a compliment, he said," Flora said. "Which I don't understand."

"Ahh yes." Rat twitched his whiskers. "So I met this creepy man in an alley..."

"Haven't I warned you about that?" Grimbledung asked.

"And I haven't met any creepy men in alleys since that last time." Rat said. "This creepy man came looking for me."

"Good then." Grimbledung took the wand and hung it back on the peg. "On with the story."

"Well, he offered me twenty-eight coins to drop out of the election."

"Twenty-eight?" Flora said. "That's an odd number."

"Well, I tricked him out of one, so the grand total was twenty-nine coins."

"What… copper?" Flora opened the bag and dumped them onto the counter. She gaped.

"Nice job on the trickery." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Did you do the old 'agree to only to listen to the bribe' gag?"

"Yep. Works almost every time."

"Outstanding."

"These are platinum coins!" Flora pushed them in a pile. "Twenty-nine of them! This is a fortune!"

Rat shrugged. "I suppose."

"Want me to put them with the rest?" As soon as Grimbledung said it, he put his hands over his mouth.

"What?" Flora did a double-take at him.

"He said we're going to have some blustery weather later on in the year."

"Oh." Flora said. "Well what's the compliment? Did it come from that man in the alley?"

"It did indeed, Miss Willowfeet." Rat gestured at the coins. "It seems that this fellow is going to try and bribe you to get out of the race the same way be bribed me."

"You took his bribe to get out of the race?" Flora stacked the coins in piles of ten.

"Well, yes and no." Rat leaned on a stack of coins. "I knew that as a third party candidate, I would never win the election; I'd just get enough votes to probably ruin it for you. So when he offered me the coinage, I figured I'd take the money for what I was already going to do then give you half of it to convince you to stay in the race."

"You're going to just give me fifteen platinum coins?"

"Is that half of thirty?" Grimbledung asked.

"Yes," said Rat.

"That's exactly what he's going to do." Grimbledung said. "Great conniving, Rat." Grimbledung clapped. "I'm proud."

Drimblerod came through the curtain. He looked at the stacked coins. "You're applauding those things now?"

"Rat's giving me fifteen of them to stay in the race!" Flora said. She pulled fifteen coins to herself.

"Were you dropping out of it?" Drimblerod asked.

"Of course not." Flora snapped. "Are you calling me a quitter?"

"No... I was just..." Drimblerod shook his head. "I'm going to eat some breakfast. When your done with your craziness down here, come have some coffee." He marched up the stairs.

"Oh! What was the compliment?" Flora asked.

"Well," Rat said. "This fellow was so worried about you beating Magnus Opus von Magnus that he was going to bribe you to get out of the race. Like he did me."

"How is that a compliment?"

"He thinks you're going to win because you're the best candidate!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Wooo! We even have the backing of the unscrupulous." He winked. "That, I have to tell you, is a voting block that's hard to get when you're an above board candidate."

"Exactly." Rat agreed. "Make it twenty coins." He pushed another five over to the Gnomess. "Just to make it even." He pointed at Flora. "And you are absolutely positively to not listen to anything that man says."

"What should I do?"

"Give him a quick punch to the head," Grimbledung suggested. "Usually works on me."

"Don't you mean for me?" Rat asked.

"Nope."

"Huh." Rat said. "Well, keep the coins, assault the creep. It's a two-fer."

"Oh Rat!" Flora picked up Rat and smooched him on the nose. "You're the best."

"The bestest, even." Grimbledung said. He looked at the ceiling. "Let's go get some coffee."

"Sounds good, Grimbledung," Rat said. "Then we can get the rally wagon going. And I'll even pull it instead of that other rat."

"Excellent, Rat!" Grimbledung took Flora's hand and pulled her off the stool. "I knew you'd come around to this greatliest of ideas of mine!"

"I've actually been looking forward to it since you told me about it," Rat lied. He twitched his whiskers. "And you made the wagon like I suggested?"

"Fairly mostly about like you suggested," Grimbledung said. "A very close approximation with only minor artistic liberalities."

"Fine then." Rat said. "As long as it's exactly like I said. I'm surprised."

"I haven't seen it either, so it will be a surprise for me as well," Flora said.

"Then let's eat!" Grimbledung pulled Flora up the stairs with Rat following close behind.

After they had eaten, Grimbledung hitched Rat to the wagon. Rat was not pleased.

At all.

Flora was, as usual, completely in awe of Grimbledung's handiwork.

Chapter 34
Drinking And Debating

Inwardly, Magnus fumed as he gripped the sides of his podium; the debate was not going to go at all liked he hoped. Mainly because he wasn't able to keep the conch shell to his ear. Or even on his podium where he knew that if he bent down, he could hear the voices. Or that he was even having the debate because the Gnomess did not accept the bribe as he was told she would. She had in fact, punched Mister Sore Ohse in the head and dumped his bag of coins over his unconscious body. Thanks to the eagle-eyed citizens of Julesville, all the coins were gone by the time he woke up. As were his shoes.

With a scowl, he looked around the room. One word came to mind-'buffoons'. He shook his head; that was too kind. The glazed looks- maybe brought on by copious amounts of alcohol; maybe not- seemed to be on almost every face. *Why*, he thought with a smirk, *are these people even allowed to vote?*

"Well, Magnus?" a female voice asked gruffly. "We're waiting."

Magnus snapped out of his assessment of the tavern's patrons. Then returned to it: *These people are a drain on the very air in the room,* he thought. *It's as if...*

"Magnus! I've started the timer. Your time is running." The female voice said. Angrily.

Magnus turned to look at Nulu. "What do you want?"

Snickers popped into existence around the room.

"Oh, I don't know," Nulu snapped, "how about you pay attention to the debate instead of staring around the room with that creepy smirk on your face?"

The snickers evolved into outright laughs.

"Fine then." Magnus snapped back. He stared at Nulu.

Nulu stared at Magnus.

Magnus kept staring at Nulu.

Nulu kept staring at Magnus. And she crossed her legs. Then she glanced to her side then smiled. "Well Magnus, that's probably the best introduction I've heard in I don't know how long." She glanced at Flora. "Miss Willowfeet?"

The laughs developed hand tools and a written language. A loud one.

"I am Miss Flora O. Willowfeet." Flora curtsied. "I am a simple, working-class Gnomess who is trying to make her way in the lands. With hard work and dedication, I want to make the best life for myself that I can." She smiled.

"Hey, wait; I want to do that too! When do I get to say that?" Magnus said. His voice developing a high-pitched screech at the end.

The laughs developed large brainpans and hips that facilitated walking upright.

"And I want to make this the best town in a month's walk," she ad-libbed on the end of her prepared introduction. "A place everyone will be proud to call their home town."

The laughs became murmurs that developed art and sciences and started building a Wonder.

Magnus pursed his lips at the highly-evolved murmurs. "Yes, well, I..." He began as he regained his composure. He glanced at the conch shell- it was on a table to his left along with his drink. He was sure he could hear laughing from it. He took a breath. "You need to be aware that..."

"Mister Magnus," Nulu interrupted, "Now that introductions are out of the way, do you feel that the town should follow the lead of larger towns and have a minimum wage that all workers can expect to make starting out?"

Magnus smirked. He was expecting a labor-related question because of the amount of working-class ilk in the town. "Hah." He said as he pointed at Nulu. "Hah!"

"You have three minutes to respond," Nulu interrupted. "If you can manage that."

Magnus smacked his lips at her. "You..."

"Yes, yes; me. I get that all the time." She smiled and straightened the papers on the little table she had set up in front of the podiums. "When all is said and done, I am pretty overwhelming." She smiled. "Know what else?"

"What?"

She gestured at the hourglass. It was draining sand at what seemed to be an alarming rate. "Your time has started."

"You!" Magnus said again. Suddenly his mind was blank. Blank except for the rage he felt for the annoying Trolless sitting with a smile on her face. *Say something!* A voice in the back of his head shouted. So he did: "People should feel content with a day's labor and not put that much stock in the pay they earn. 'Hard work is its own reward', as they tell the dimwitted coal miner minors." He smiled at his joke.

No one smiled back. In fact, the murmurs returned. With gunpowder.

Nulu began to tap the top of the hourglass to make the sand fall quicker.

"So I say," Magnus was still speaking, "have faith in the business owners. They will be glad to pay their fair share to ensure you uneducated peasants get to eat so you continue your dismal, bleak lives. And that will make you as happy as your ignorance will allow."

Several patrons stood.

Nulu looked around at the very unhappy faces and turned the hourglass on its side. "Time!"

"Already?" Magnus asked. "I still have more to say about the uneducated masses."

More patrons stood.

"Okay then, moving on." Nulu ignored him. "Miss Willowfeet. What say you? Something, anything please?"

"It's actually pretty simple really; a minimum wage is helpful so you have some idea of what you can earn when you start out. Then with hard work you can increase your pay from there."

Nulu shook her head in what she hoped was inconspicuous.

"And," Flora continued hurriedly, "and...it is good for the people to be able to earn a decent living wage." She said as she got back on her memorized script. "Because when folks earn a good living, they spend that money in the communities...the towns they live in."

"Right?" Magnus said. "That's what I was going to say!" He nodded at Flora. "Even if you are so uneducated and you don't have the skills to put on your own shoes!"

More patrons stood.

"Time, time, time!" Nulu said as she stood as well. "Well, isn't this fun? How about we all take a little break and get a drink."

"On the house?" Someone asked.

"Sure, sure. One on the house." Nulu said begrudgingly. The standing, scowling patrons nodded and scowled a little less. "One at the bar and one at your seats," she said instead of having to deal with a tavern-wide brawl. One with Magnus at the bottom of it. She pointed at the bar. "Belly up to the bar, folks." As everyone moved that way, she quickly moved to the podium.

Flora smiled. "How'm I doing?"

"Fine, fine, Flora. Just fine." She looked at Magnus. "And if you could please stop insulting every single person in here, I'd appreciate it. This furniture is expensive you know, and I don't want it all broken up in a brawl."

"Who me?" Magnus pointed at himself. "What did I say?"

"Stop calling these people uneducated." Nulu gestured behind her.

Magnus looked around conspiratorially then leaned forward. "But they are, my dear Trolless!" he whispered sincerely. "You are intelligent enough to see that on a daily basis."

"Uneducated doesn't mean stupid," Nulu said. She pointed at him. "And you'll stop saying that around me."

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you have furniture in your home?"

Magnus hesitated then frowned "Well I *used* to have really nice furniture."

"You don't anymore?" Now Nulu was caught off guard; she was planning on asking him if he had made his own furniture. "Why not?"

"It now looks like it was moved by Ogres using several trebuchets."

Nulu adjusted her line of questioning: "Why don't you fix it?" She raised an eyebrow.

"If I knew how to fix furniture..." Magnus started. "I'd..."

"Are you too stupid for a simple task like fixing or making furniture? An intelligent man like yourself?"

Magnus stared at her for a long moment. "Touché" He cursed.[46] "I will do my best to not insult your patrons."

"Who are your potential voters, I might remind you." Nulu pointed at the bar. "Get a drink because I'm cutting everyone off after this free round."

Magnus nodded but went instead to his conch shell. As inconspicuously and nonchalantly as one can hold a conch shell to their ear in a tavern, he listened.

you're going to blow this whole thing! The voice that usually did the talking said.

just say what these people want to hear, said another.

yes. do that and you will be rewarded! Said the first voice.

"Fine, fine. Don't worry." Magnus said.

told you we should have pitched the rat, said a third voice.

"What?"

nothing.

that can be plan b.

good idea.

"What?"

nothing.

"Last call," Nulu said.

get back to work!

and don't screw it up.

Even though he didn't want to, Magnus put the conch shell down gently- he didn't want to knock off the newly repaired spiral. With what he hoped was a friendly smile, he turned and headed to the bar.

"Last call is done," Nulu said loudly. "The debate continues so everyone sit down."

Magnus' scowl returned. He trudged up to the podium then remembered he still had some of his drink left on the table. He looked at the drink and then at Nulu who was sitting down and straightening her papers.

"Alright then, where'd we leave off?" Nulu said.

Magnus made a mad dash for the table. He grabbed his mug with both hands and guzzled down the remaining drink. As it ran down his throat, the taste of mead was intermixed with another flavor. A distinctly non-mead flavor. A distinctly non-mead flavor with an acidic bite. He spat out what was in his mouth. "What is in my drink?" He slammed

the mug onto the table, breaking it. "Which one of you dolts is trying to poison me?" Suddenly his head felt ten pounds heavier.

"Magnus," Nulu said. "We have discussed the use of insults. Stop it."

Magnus' head swam. He held it with both hands. "What was in that drrrink," he asked- alarmed that he had slurred the last word.

Nulu looked at Magnus- he seemed genuinely upset. "Did anyone put something in that man's drink?" When no one answered, she stood. "Don't make me ask again." She threatened.

Finally a Human sitting at the table next to Magnus' raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"We just put out the last of our Toby SouthFarthing cigars in it is all." He looked at the other man at his table. "We thought it was a discarded drink."

"Unaffiliated even," the other man said.

"And definitely nothing poisonous." The first one said. "Honest."

"Nothing?" Nulu asked.

"Honest!" said the other man sitting there. "We just didn't want to put them out on the floor." He nodded. "Rude, that is."

"SouthToby Farthing?" Magnus said. He realized he had said the words wrong.

"Close. Try again," the man said helpfully.

"TobyFarthing South?" He tried again. He realized it was also not correct, but now he didn't seem to care.

"Sure, sure; something like that." The other man said helpfully.

Nulu cleared her throat.

"I'm in something of the middle here," Magnus said.

"You sure are." Said the second man.

Nulu cleared her throat louder.

"I think that Nulu wants you," the first man pointed over Magnus' shoulder. "Don't keep her waiting." He nodded knowingly. "She don't like that at all."

"Or folks putting their smokes out on her floor." the other man added.

Magnus turned to look. The room seemed to take a moment longer to make the turn than his head did. "Whaaat?" He said. "Is it?" He also said. "Nulu?" He added on the end as his sentence coasted to a stop.

"Get back to the podium, if you please." Nulu pointed. "So we can finish this debate."

"Sure." Magnus started for the podium. After only a moment, his feet did as well. Overall, most of him arrived at the same time. In fact, it was close enough to call it a tie.

"Well then," Nulu said. "Mister Magnus..."

"Yes?"

"I was going to ask you a question."

"Okay."

"So... Mister Magnus..."

"Yes?"

Nulu narrowed her eyes at Magnus. "Do you think that Julesville should have its own prison, or should prisoners still get sent to the Kingdom's prison in EternCity?"

"EternCity?" Magnus asked. The name was familiar to him but he couldn't place it. "Can't place it." He said. "In my head." He touched his head to make sure it was still there. He was worried it had floated off. "Toby's SouthFarthing took it."

"Hey, that's it!" The man at the table said. "Definitely no on the prison, though."

Magnus kept holding his head as he shook it. "No on the prison."

After a long moment where everyone expected Magnus to expand on his initial answer and Magnus expected his eyes to leave their sockets and watch the proceedings from the rafters, Nulu finally spoke: "I see. Well, that's better than insults I suppose." Nulu nodded at Flora. "Miss Willowfeet, prison or no?"

Flora curtsied. "I have seen first-hand how..."

Magnus snorted.

Flora glanced over as she continued. "... first-hand how sending a nonviolent offender to...

Magnus snorted again. Louder this time. He added a chortle to the end of his snort.

Flora noticed that Nulu was slowly nodding at her so she focused her attention on the Trolless. "... to a prison full of career criminals."

"It changes them. It changes them. And it changes their entire family. So..."

Magnus pulled his tunic collar out and laughed into it.

"Magnus, if you could kindly contain yourself while Flora is speaking," Nulu said. "After all, she gave you the same courtesy."

Magnus curtsied. "Like that?" He laughed into his shirt again. Then he snorted.

"What is the matter with you?" Nulu looked at Flora. "Continue, Flora."

As Nulu was looking at Flora, Magnus moved around his podium and made a dash for her. He made it half way to her and if it weren't for another snort, he would have caught her completely by surprise.

As it was, the snort alerted Nulu. And as Magnus made it to the little table she was sitting at, she punched him directly on the nose.

Magnus' legs wobbled under him as he saw black and white spots in front of his eyes. The black spots began to overpower the white ones and within a very short moment, they were all that Magnus could see.

Because he was flat on his back and unconscious.

"So, you see we should have our own prison," Flora said. "For incidences like this where we don't need to send people to EternCity."

Several patrons clapped.

Nulu shook her head.

Magnus snorted softly- the blood flowing from his nose muffled the sound.

"Well, that's it folks." Nulu said.

"Any more free drinks?" A patron asked.

"No, so I suppose if you want to..."

Every single patron in the Duck Inn and Dine drinking area made a mad dash for the curtain.

Flora put out her lip. "Well I don't think that went well at all."

Nulu smiled. “Sure it did.”

“Really?”

Nulu checked her nails. “I didn’t even break nail.” She looked at Magnus. “At least people will remember the debate tomorrow when they’re voting.”

“I hope so.” Flora said. She nudged Magnus with her foot. “What are you going to do with him?”

“Well, we don’t have that prison you talked about so I suppose he can just sleep it off in a corner.”

“I suppose.”

Nulu grabbed Magnus by the back of his collar and picked him up. As his feet left the ground, his head slipped into his cloak and he disappeared. He then crumpled to the ground leaving Nulu holding a now-empty cloak.

“Oh dear.” Flora observed.

“Yes; that’s kind of annoying.” Nulu looked at the cloak. “I suppose I can use it like a blanket and just cover him.”

“He does need covered,” Flora remarked.

Nulu looked down. “Oh, come on! Who doesn’t wear anything under their cloaks?”

“Apparently, Magnus.” Flora tilted his head. “Huh. Just when you thought you knew someone.”

“Flora O. Willowfeet; I’m dashed.” Nulu draped the cloak over Magnus then bent over and picked him up. “I’m going to put him in my office until he wakes up.”

“If I might suggest something...” Flora fought to not smile.

“Yes?”

“You should put his cloak back on so he doesn’t know he lost it.”

“That’s a good idea.” Nulu started walking to her office.

Magnus’ cloak slipped to the floor.

“Oh, come on!”

“I’ll get it, Nulu.” Flora giggled. “I’m right behind you so just go.”

With a sigh, Nulu walked to her office as inconspicuously and nonchalantly as a Trolless can walk in a tavern while carrying an unconscious naked human.

Chapter 35
Boxes and Sacks

The Sun rose. Unaware of the day it was bringing. And really, not caring one way or another- no one could vote *it* out of office so it didn't worry how it affected anyone's antics.

Drimblerod was sound asleep with a large pillow over his head. Because it sometimes helped to keep Grimbledung from waking him up with his early morning antics.

Grimbledung snored loudly. Because the sun had just come up and it was really early and if you get up too early you end up with a really confusing day because you think it's lunch time at ten AM because you had breakfast at six then brunch by eight and of course, elevensies at nine. So he was still blissfully asleep. At least for another hour. That's when he planned to start his early morning antics.

The Election Council was up. Groggy, but up. Each of the ten members sat in City Hall along with ten neatly stacked wooden chests. Yawning. The council members- not the chests; they were still closed. An elderly Dwarf dragged a large sack to the stack of chests.

"Alright then." Theron Skees, the self-appointed leader of the council, and rabid believer in the democratic system of government said after his own hearty yawn. "I'm locking 'em up." He removed a formidable looking lock from the sack and examined it. When he was satisfied with it, he looked in the chest to ensure it was empty. With another nod, he slipped the lock through the hasp. "And it shall stay locked until tonight for the official counting under penalty of death."

"Death? Come on Theron, that's a little much," said a Dwarf.

"Death." Theron assured. He snapped the large lock shut and turned to face the Dwarf. "Timmons, take your box and a sack then get to your station. Guard both with your life." He commanded as he moved to the next one.

Timmons rolled his eyes as he grasped the handle on the end of the chest and dragged it past a pile of sacks. Taking the looped string at the top of a sack, he dragged both out. Groggily.

"Fine, fine." Thereon said. He fished another lock out of the sack and examined it. "Good, good," he said in typical Dwarfish two-word sentences without subjects or verbs. When all was said and done, after treasure, Dwarves really loved their adjectives. He peered

into the chest- it was decidedly empty. “Boxfeet!” He called to the Gnome who was dozing off on the pile of sacks.

Boxfeet snored in response.

“BOXFEET!” Roared Theron.

Boxfeet rolled off the ballots. “Point of order!” He raised a finger even though his eyes weren’t even open yet. “Bedrolls should be filled with soft goose down; not crumply parchment.”

Theron opened his mouth, then decided that the point of order was actually valid. Then he remembered that there wasn’t a meeting going on. “We have not been called to order.”

Boxfeet looked around. “We have a quorum.”

Theron scowled. Of all the council members, Boxfeet was an absolute stickler for the Rules of Order. And he tried to use them to his own benefit whenever possible. If anyone usurped him, it would be Boxfeet. “Well, we are working on new business here, Boxfeet. Managing the vote. We do not... do not need to have a meeting right now.” He sighed, “But I will concede that bedrolls should be filled with soft goose down.” He waited. With Boxfeet, there was a lot of waiting.

“I concede the floor.” Boxfeet stretched then scratched his head. “And this new business entails...”

“Taking this voting chest and a sack of ballots and going to your appointed polling station and ensuring that citizens only vote once and if you do not recognize said citizen and no one else in the line that you personally know can vouch for them, then they must come here to vote because we are entrusted to ensure that only citizens of Julesville vote in elections dealing with the town.” He said in very proper Gnomish run-on sentence fashion.

“Well said,” Boxfeet agreed with the lengthy narrative.

Theron closed the box and snapped the lock on it. “And it shall stay locked until tonight for the official counting.” He declared. “Under penalty of death!”

Boxfeet gave a snappy salute then pulled a sack toward the chest, when he got there, he took it as well and dragged both out of City Hall and toward Bend and Reech’s Mattress and Lunch- his place of duty for the day.

Theron continued until only one box remained. Even though he was alone in the hall, he still took the time to officially examine the lock and ensure that the chest was indeed empty before locking it as well. “And you, Theron Skees, noble Dwarf,” he said to himself. “Are already at your post and well prepared to guard it to the death.” He looked at the clock on the wall- it was seven; the polling stations were not set to open for another hour. So partially because he had self-appointed himself leader of the council, but mainly because he was, when

all was said and done, an elderly Dwarf, he clambered onto the chest and almost immediately fell asleep.

Just Under One Hour Later.

Theron jolted awake as the box under him shuddered. "Who's there?" He called.

The hall was still empty. He could however, see that there were people lined up outside the frosted glass windows of City Hall.

A quick check of the clock on the wall- a horrific affair that seemed to be a Basilisk whose eyes moved back and forth opposite the swaying of its tail- and was relieved to see he still had ten minutes to spare.

Theron hopped off the trunk and marched to the door- as only the self-appointed leader of the Election Council could. "The voting doesn't start for another ten minutes!" He called through the doors. "And not a moment sooner!"

"Come on," a voice called back, "we got here early so we could open our shops. Why can't we vote now?"

Theron marched back to the chest and sat on it. And watched as the Basilisk's eyes moved left and right as its tail moved right and left. For ten full minutes.

Finally, when the Basilisk indicated it was exactly eight AM, Theron walked slowly to the door and even slower, unlocked it. Then in a move that made the other two seem fast, pulled the door open.

"Opan the door, I have meat to kaaarve!" A hulking man called down to Theron. He waggled his large thumb at him. "You will pay for my thumb lay-tah!"

"Don't I always Mister Richards?" Theron said sourly.

"No! Sometimes it is my pinky!" Guffawed Trent Richards- the butcher.

"Well isn't that nice." Theron said- he wasn't upset because he oftentimes paid his bill with counterfeit coins. "Now if you'll just let me put out the ballots..."

"What have you been doing for the past owah?" Bellowed the butcher.

Theron ignored him and walked slowly to the large sack by the table. He pulled several large charcoal sticks from a pocket sewn into it. He tossed them onto the table. One at a time.

"Fastah!" Trent hopped from foot to foot. "Gaaah! I want to break you in two!"

"Stop being a Grimbledung," Theron said with a smirk- he had spent the better part of the recent war in HalflingCity spying for the Gargoyles. "You can all fish out your own ballots and vote now." He gave a short bow and gestured at the table. "The voting station is now officially open."

In two large bounds, Trent covered the distance to the table. He picked up a charcoal stick and licked the end.

"That's going to get gross real quick."

Trent took a ballot out of the bag. He swiveled his head on his muscular neck to look at Theron. "So the City Council is up for reelection?"

"Did I mention I was looking forward to paying for your gloriously muscular thumb later today?" Theron deadpanned.

"With more worthless coins?" Trent gave a wide, toothy grin.

"How about I come over, buy some nice ham and pay for your whole hand? Call it an election day deal; two hams at once." He waggled his ears. "Yes?"

"Your levity is good. It relieves tension and the fear of death." The large man gave a wide, toothy grin. He examined the ballot then looked back at Theron, then back to the ballot. "Theron Skees. Yes, I know that fellow. A good fellow, I suppose. Who always settles his debts." He marked several spots on the ballot then put the charcoal stick down. "And the box, good Dwarf?"

Theron gave another short bow and gestured at it. "You are the first to vote; the honor is yours."

With a nod, Trent walked to the trunk. He folded the ballot over and slid it in. As he did, he looked into the slot. There seemed to already be a great deal of ballots in the chest. He decided Theron would be paying for his whole arm when he came to his shop today. "See you lay-tah, Theron Skees, self-appointed lee-tah of the Election Council."

"I look forward to it," Theron lied. He planned to be back at EternCity by the end of the next day if he did not win reelection. The Gargoyles were always looking for someone to spy on the Halflings.

"Hah!" Trent remarked as he strode out.

"Alright folks. Give me three nice lines to the table and make sure you don't steal my charcoal sticks!" Theron moved to the chest and stood behind it so he could identify the townsfolk and watch them as they filled out their ballots.

And so the voting commenced.

Chapter 36
Stuffing Early. Stuffing Often.

Earlier

Grimbledung snuck down the stairs of Second Hand Sorcery. As he crossed the space to Door, he held his finger to his lips.

Door rattled his latch quietly. Stealthily it opened just far enough to let Grimbledung out.

"Thanks, Door," Grimbledung whispered as he squeezed out. "I'm out to manage Flora's election so keep quiet so that Drim doesn't know I'm out."

Door rattled its latch again.

"See you later," Grimbledung whispered. When he got outside, he jumped the three steps to the street then ran off toward the Constabulary, which was his first stop. If all went well, he planned to go to The Assayer's Guild, Big Julie's and then Bend and Reech's. If all was still going as planned (which meant he hadn't been arrested) he would hit City Hall before voting began.

Door waited until Grimbledung was half a block away then it slammed as hard as it could. The entire of Second Hand Sorcery shook with the force. Door, like Grimbledung enjoyed interrupting Drimblerod's sleeping and took the opportunity whenever Grimbledung snuck out -or in- at various hours.

Grimbledung huffed and puffed as he jogged along. Thanks to the amount of jogging he had done lately, he moved along at a respectable pace. *Mayhap I* will *organize the First Annual Birthday Suit Run* he thought as he rounded a corner.[47] Things had been going better than he had hoped; not only was he not in custody, no one even seemed to know what he was up to. Bend and Reech's place was just ahead.

Bend and Reech were twin Gremlins who retired from organized crime. After a mere two weeks they became bored with retirement. So they opened a bed and breakfast. After a month of running it, they realized that as retirees, they weren't "morning folks" so instead of breakfast, they began to serve lunch instead. When patrons complained that they had been waiting most of the morning for something to eat, Bend came up with the idea of serving copious amounts of inexpensive alcohol so their patrons would sleep until a more appropriate hour. He promptly muscled in on a nearby distillery for the cheap alcohol and

purchased a bunch of very comfortable mattresses to ensure no one woke up early. He also commissioned a new sign.

While Bend was doing this, Reech (the more business-minded of the pair) hired several employees to cook breakfast, clean up after the guests, and to run the front desk. The only stipulation was that they had to be "morning folks." By the time four employees were hired, the new sign was delivered and hung.

After a heated debate, the pair deciding to combine their two ideas. Thanks to that decision, their place was more popular than ever. Which made it perfect as a voting station.

Grimbledung pushed through the swinging door.

"Morning!" Said a very chipper 'very morning folk' Human female. "How are you today? Welcome to the Mattress and Lunch!" She smiled. "Isn't it a lovely morning?"

"Gads, woman." Grimbledung said between heavy breaths. "Is the polling station set up yet?"

"Oh no." The woman smiled. "Not yet; I've been waiting for it since an hour before sunrise and they haven't shown up yet."

"Polling starts at eight, you know."

"I sure do!" She smiled again.

"Well, I think I'll have a drink and then wait for them outside behind some sort of cover."

"There is a very fine rain barrel beside the door that was used for an assassination just last week," the woman said helpfully. And cheerfully. "Happened nice and early too!"

"Well, don't worry; I'm not planning on killing anyone." Grimbledung said, building an alibi just in case. "I'm meeting a friend and he likes surprises. Especially early morning ones."

The woman's smile did not falter. "How wonderful!"

Grimbledung walked to the bar in the next room. "Morning! I think I'll start my day with an ale," he said to the bartender who was wiping out mugs. And smiling.

"Sure thing. You still here?"

"Sure am," Grimbledung lied. "Up in room two oh two like always." He pointed at the ceiling. After only a little trial and error, he had finally come upon a room number to use to get his complimentary first drink. Sometimes, he detoured to Bend and Reech's if he had somewhere else to go in the morning just to get his free drink. "Nice mattresses." He added for good measure. "We've all had a great night's sleep."

The bartended nodded and poured Grimbledung an ale. "Want something to go with it?" He continued to smile. "On the house for our long-term resident."

"Sure, what've you got cooking this wonderfully wonderful morning?"

"Scones with raisins."

"You got clotted cream?" Grimbledung raised an eyebrow.

The bartender's smile twitched at the sides. "Who would serve scones without clotted cream?" He slid a ceramic container toward Grimbledung.

"An uncouth scoundrel, I would imagine." Grimbledung said.[48]

The bartender's smile returned to full force. "Exactly." He moved to the end of the bar and picked up a couple of scones. "Watch out for folks like that." He put them on a small plate and offered it to Grimbledung. "Nice and warm still."

"Gads, Kenneth, you are truly a fine gentleman. Couth and cultured. Why, if I weren't dating this gal, I'd kiss you."

"The clotted cream is fresh." Kenneth raised an eyebrow. "I made in the early hours of this very morning."

"Quit tempting me, Kenneth."

"So your place still isn't finished?"

Grimbledung shook his head as he stuffed a scone filled with clotted cream in his mouth. "Things are looking good though," he lied. "Hopefully by the end of the month." He hoped to drag on his lie as long as possible to keep getting free drinks. And the occasional free breakfast snack. "I'm going to take this with, if that's okay, Kenneth. Today they are coming to measure for the window openings."

Kenneth nodded. And smiled. "Well, I hope they get them measured right. Not like when they measured for the wall thickness and got it wrong by almost a foot."

Grimbledung sighed. "They had to tear down the walls and start all over again" he said, confirming the lie that had gained him another week of free drinks.

"Well, good luck to you, Mister Watter Khans." Kenneth returned to wiping out glasses for the morning rush.

"I know I've asked; please call me Leakie." Grimbledung waved dismissively with the scone. "I mean, at this point in our relationship..."

"Good luck, Leakie," Kenneth said. With a smile.

Grimbledung hopped off the barstool and scooted out. As he passed the woman at the reception desk, he saluted her with the scone. "And a finest of fine mornings to you!"

The woman practically hopped with glee. "Thanks!"

Grimbledung stuffed the scone in his mouth as he left. He looked left and right as he stood on the covered porch. A Gnome dragging a chest and a large sack was approaching from a block away.

Grimbledung slipped behind the rain barrel and drew his wand. He moved to his knees as he pulled a wad of paper from his belt pouch. "Ahh, Mister Bangletongue Boxfeet. How nice of you to come my way." He held the hilt of his wand to his mouth and touched the wadded-up paper to the pointed end. He inhaled deeply and in a haze of blue light, the paper crumpled even more and finally disappeared.

Grimbledung smacked his lips to the taste of parchment. He sat patiently until Bangletongue was within a half a block. Grimbledung raised the wand to his mouth like a blowgun. He closed an eye and aimed at the chest. When he was sure of his aim, he blew out sharply.

Bangletongue dragged the chest along, panting hard. Bend and Reech's place was now just up the road. When he was first told he would be set up there, he was upset. Then when he remembered the inexpensive drinks, he decided the long walk to the eastern edge of town would be worth it. Especially since a wagon would pick him and the full chest to return him to City Hall. Even so, with just half a block to go, he was getting tired. He lost his footing as the trunk seemed to suddenly gain weight. He looked back at it. "Stupid rocks!" He said as he let go of the chest and the sack. He leaned against the chest, trying to catch his breath.

Grimbledung saw Bangletongue lean against the chest. "Bah!" He hopped up and scooted onto the street. "Bangletongue!" He called. "How nice to see you out this late night early morning. What's cooking?"

Bangletongue patted the chest as he tried to catch his breath. "Setting up the voting station."

"For what?"

"Today's voting day, of course."

"I'd forgotten," Grimbledung lied. He looked around. "So you're setting up here in the street? Ride-by voting? Pretty convenient, that."

Bangletongue shook his head. "Setting up in Bend and Reech's." He pointed. "Out of the weather and the drinks are cheap."

"Never been in there." Grimbledung lied again. "Need a hand?"

Bangletongue shook his head. "No one's supposed to touch the chest. Theron was quite specific about it. Fill out a ballot and drop it in. No chest handling."

"I will skip the inappropriate joke." Grimbledung said.

"Fine but I sure pitched you an easy one."

"You want some help?"

"Nope," Bangletongue reaffirmed. "No touching. Theron'll have my head."

"Well, you look stuck out here."

"Once I catch my breath..."

"Tell you what," Grimbledung interrupted, "how about I carry from the front so you can keep an eye on me and I'll help you out."

Bangletongue considered that. He knew that he had to get into the building and be set up on time. But he also knew that Gnomes were conniving and underhanded so if Grimbledung were helping, there had to be something in it for him.

Grimbledung gave a wink. "And I'll help you for one of those drinks you mentioned earlier."

Ah, so that's it. Bangletongue smirked. "Sure, sure. But I'm on official business right now. So I'll buy you a drink later," he lied.

"Deal." Grimbledung clapped his hands. He muscled the other Gnome to the back of the chest. "Let's go; I've got lots of things to do." He said very, very truthfully. "Honest to goodness honest things." He added as he defaulted to lying. Grimbledung turned around and picked up the chest with his hands behind his back. "Onward!"

Bangletongue picked up his end. "Go then."

"I'm going." Grimbledung led the way into the Mattress and Lunch. As he entered, he purposefully made eye contact with the woman. "Just helping out a fellow Gnome; don't need the cordiality again. Just smile and wave."

The woman smiled and waved as the Gnomes went past.

"Which way?" Grimbledung asked.

"To the right, opposite the bar; the big meeting room."

"Okay then." Grimbledung turned right into the large room. "Well, this is better than the street in any case. Ready? And?"

"Down." Bangletongue said.

Both Gnomes put the chest down.

"Well, I really need to get going," Grimbledung said. "I'll get that drink later."

"Deal." Bangletongue did not clap his hands. "See you then."

"See you then." Grimbledung scooted out the door. His last stop was Town Hall itself and the homicidally strict, Theron Skees. Grimbledung was sure that with the number of ballots he had already magicked into the voting chests, Flora was guaranteed to win. Just to make sure, he was going to City Hall. Then he was going to call it a day.

A very good day.

All before breakfast even.

Chapter 37
Swinging Grim Vote

Nulu sat in the middle of Town Hall, he was surrounded by empty chests- she had been counting votes as they came in. Under Theron's ever-watchful eye. "Rat's still getting a goodly number of votes," she remarked as he moved ballots into a large sack then put a hash mark on a clipboard.

"See?" Drimblerod said. "If the people who think voting for the third candidate would actually vote for that candidate, they'd win easily."

"Most likely," Nulu said. "Want to know how we're sitting?"

"Is that legal?" Drimblerod asked.

Everyone turned to look at Theron.

"I am not sure that is prudent."

Nulu shrugged. "Well, since we've all voted, it not like we can change anything."

"True." Julie said. "Besides, the voting place at my school closed twenty minutes ago." She pointed out. "Guthrie is counting those ballots now."

Everyone looked at Theron again.

"Fine, fine. But no one's hands goes in their pockets!"

"Deal." Nulu said as she dropped several ballots into a sack and retrieved her clipboard. "So where are we sitting with..."

Magnus Opus von Magnus barged in. "Ah hah! Tampering with the votes, I see!" He pointed at Nulu.

"She's the official counter, you idiot," Drimblerod said. "She's the only one allowed to handle ballots once they've been in the box."

"And I am making sure she's the only one. Under penalty of death!"

"Theron, please stop threatening to kill folks," Julie asked. "I know we've discussed this."

Theron scrunched up his face. Because it had been discussed.

"Couldn't we find someone who..." Magnus' voice trailed off.

"Was more honest?" Nulu asked. "Nope."

"Was actually willing to have the job?" Julie suggested. "Not likely."

"Was better looking?" Drimblerod offered. "No chance."

Nulu flashed a smile. "Aw, thanks."

Magnus pursed his lips. "Well then... how is the tally going?"

"Rat would have beat both of you."

"Would have?" Magnus rubbed his hands together. "That means he didn't. So..."

"The count isn't all in yet."

"But all the polling stations are closed." Magnus said.

"Except this one," Julie said. "We've got another half hour." She looked at the door. "But I think anyone who was going to vote, would have voted. Nulu?"

"What?"

"Who's winning?"

"Magnus at the moment."

"Muwaa haa haa!"

"How many more votes to count? How far ahead is he?" Julie asked.

Nulu looked at his clipboard. "He's ahead by two."

"Muwaaa haaa haaa!"

"Stop doing that." Julie warned. "How many votes to count?"

Nulu looked in the chest. "Oh. Four."

"Hold on, Nulu." Julie looked around the room. She spotted a chair and moved to it quickly. "Okay. Get to it."

Wil picked up another ballot and examined it. He made marks on his clipboard.

"Well?!"

Nulu looked at Julie. "There is more than just one thing being voted on you know." She picked up another ballot. "I've got to mark all contests and then double check them."

"Where are we now?" Drimblerod asked.

"In City Hall." Nulu said.

"Nulu!" Drimblerod bellowed.

"Magnus up by three."

"Muwaa!" Magnus lowered his voice. "haaa haaa," he added quietly.

Flora walked in. "How are things going?"

"I am winning you little fool!"

"Whoa." Julie stepped up to Magnus. "Hold on right there. I have had entirely all I am going to take from you." She balled up her fist and drew it back.

"What's happening?" Akita came in. "What're the counts?"

"No more folks allowed inside!" Theron commanded.

"I'm winning?" Magnus said meekly. "I'm glad you're here, Constable."

"How about you walk around the block once or twice?" Julie still had her fist cocked back.

"How about *all* of you go someplace else." Nulu said. "Anyplace else. Everyplace else even."

"What's with her?" Akita jerked a thumb at Nulu.

"I am trying to count votes!" She picked up another ballot and examined it.

Everyone stood still has he made marks on his clipboard.

He put the ballot in the sack then looked up. "Magnus up by two."

"Ahh." Magnus beamed. "And there is only one ballot left."

Wil looked in the chest. "One. Wait, no, no, let's see. Two. Two left."

"Shouldn't it be one left?" Drimblerod asked.

"Two were stuck together," Nulu explained. "Woopsie."

"Woopsie? Woopsie?" Julie said as she shook a fist. "Nulu..."

Magnus steepled his fingers. "Well, in any case, the odds are still definitely in my favor."

"How do you figure?" Flora said.

"Well, there are votes for at least three- you, me, and that rat fellow. Plus some oddball write-in votes. The best you could ever get is a tie. But any votes for anyone but you means I still win." He tapped his steepled fingers together. "So let's just sit and watch." He looked around- all the seats were taken. "I think I'll stand," he said.

Nulu let out a long breath as he looked over the penultimate ballot. After marking her clipboard, she said: "Magnus up by one. Flora down by one."

"Gaaa!" Magnus flopped on the floor. "Come ON! One lousy vote for someone else!"

"They are for someone else." Flora said. She waggled her ears. "Me!"

"Oh, that will be the first thing I outlaw when I win." He scowled at her.

Nulu picked up the last ballot.

"Do we know if there are people who still need to vote?" Akita asked.

Everyone looked at the door. It had been over half an hour since anyone came in.

"Everyone voted early." Drimblerod said. "It's like Grimbledung says; vote early, vote often."

"What?!" Theron bellowed. "Often?"

"Errr, it's just an expression. One that..." Drimblerod stumbled backward. "Oh no."

"Oh no what?"

"Well, Julie, now that I think about it, I'm not sure if Grimbledung voted."

"What?" Julie clenched her fists. "How can that be after all he'd been doing all this time?"

"Helping my campaign, obviously." Flora said with a smile. "What a Gnome."

"That Gnome." Julie looked at Drimblerod. "Nulu, are you sure Grimbledung didn't vote?"

"I didn't see him here." Nulu sighed then stood and went to a large pile of papers. "I can check the rolls from the voting stations but that will take a bit of time.

"Do you know where he is?" Julie asked.

"He left early this morning doing I don't know what and I haven't seen him since."

"He was stuffing ballot boxes," Nulu said.

"WHAT?!?"

"What?" Akita said at the same time at Theron.

Nulu gestured at a second sack as he flipped through sheafs of paper. "Well, I assumed it was him that put several hundred kid's drawings of..." He hesitated. "Well, I assumed it was Flora, but honestly- that was a reach."

"Oh, I'm going to..." Theron said under his breath.

"All in that one chest?"

Nulu shook her head at Akita. "They were spread around in four or five of them, I think. Including the one that was in here. Either way, I just tossed them to the side."

"Oh, painful death awaits that Gnome." Theron seethed. "Deathly death that will hurt the whole time it's killing him."

"I can't imagine Deux will be pleased about that." Nulu remarked.[49]

"Would you please keep your illegal threats to yourself?" Akita asked. "Gads!"

"Can you just count one of them as his vote?" Drimblerod asked.

"What? That's not a legal!" Theron said.

"That's true; it's a kid's drawing, not an official ballot." Nulu looked at the Basilisk clock. "You're got about fifteen minutes to find him if you want him to vote if he hasn't already. I'll look through the rolls for his mark if you like."

"No!" Magnus snapped his cloak. "No! Count the last ballot first!" He shook his fists. "Count it!"

"I agree." Theron said. "Finish the official counting first."

Nulu moved back to the chest. "Fine, fine. You know, next time I'm going to lock the door while I'm counting." She picked up the ballot and unfolded it. Once again, she examined it closely as she sat. she put the clipboard on her lap as she continued to look at the ballot and make marks.

"Well!?!"

"Theron stays on the City Council."

"Hah!" Theron rocked back on his heels. "As well it should be!"

"Nulu!" Everyone shouted at once. Except Theron- he was still basking in his victory.

Nulu ducked as she put the ballot in the counted-ballots-sack. "It's a tie. You and Miss Flora."

"Find Grimbledung!" Julie bellowed. "Akita, sniff him out. Drimblerod, check the bars! You've got..."

Nulu looked at the Basilisk clock. "Twelve minutes."

"Gaaa! Check the Duck, Flora!" Drimblerod ran out.

"Okay!" Flora ran out as well.

Akita raised his nose in the air and sniffed. "I'll find him while they're looking." He dropped to all fours and loped out.

"I don't like how everyone wants me to lose." Magnus observed. "I wonder why."

Nulu checked her nails.

Theron basked.

"Well, I suppose I'll just watch the clock." Magnus re-steepled his fingers. "When I'm mayor, you will all rue the day!" He looked around. "Even the ones that aren't here at the moment."

"And yet you wonder." Nulu said.

Chapter 38
Haranguing Grim

After just a few minutes, Akita came walking in. He was holding Grimbledung by the collar. "Found him."

"Where?"

"Drinking at a beer stand, next door."

Grimbledung hiccupped. "Whad I miss?"

"You didn't vote, you dolt!" Nulu said. "Where have you been?"

"Celebrating." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"Hate that ear waggling thing." Magnus said.

"I'm glad you made it."

"Course I would make it, Miss Nulu. Why would I miss it?" He looked at Akita. "What did I make?"

"You made it to the voting station on time." Akita let go of Grimbledung. "So go vote already." Akita cocked his head at the Gnome. "You haven't voted yet, have you?"

"Let me think..." Grimbledung rubbed his chin. "Nope."

"Five minutes." Nulu said. He was back to flipping through the voting rolls. "Do I need to keep looking? I mean, if he said he didn't vote..."

"How can you trust anything he says? He was stuffing the ballots!" Magnus said. "He shouldn't even be allowed to vote!" He pointed at Akita. "And *you* brought him here. Oh, your days are numbered, Akita Finnish. Numbered!"

"Course, they're numbered," Grimbledung said. "That's how calendars work, you know."

"Get in there and vote before time runs out!" Julie said.

"You know," Nulu said, "He's in the building before time ran out so he gets to vote no matter how long it takes him."

"How is that fair?" Magnus asked.

"Well, if there were a crowd of voters in here, or even in the line for that matter, they came to vote before time ran out so they would be allowed the chance to voice. That's how voting works." Nulu said. "In fact, that's how it works at theme parks as well. If you're in a line when a park closes, you get to ride the ride."

"Bah!" Was all Magnus could think of saying since Julie was accurate in her description of voting laws. And theme parks.

"Ballot please," Akita held out his hand.

Drimblerod burst in. "I heard you found him!"

"I did indeed." Akita said.

"That was a close call!" Drimblerod leaned back on the wall. "Three minutes to spare."

"There are official ballots in the booth." Theron said. "Fill it our accordingly."

"I need to go," Grimbledung said.

Nulu gestured. "You can go in there."

Grimbledung gave a little bow. "Don't mind if I do." He waggled his ears. "And a-waaay I go!" He walked into the booth and pulled the curtain closed behind him.

Nulu sighed. "Well that's a relief." A terrible thought occurred to her. "Drimblerod, did you by any chance go over what Flora's name looks like?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "Oh no!" He looked at the drawn curtain. "No, I did not." He took a step toward the booth.

"Stop right there!" said Theron. "Are you trying to influence that Gnome's vote?"

"You people..." Added Magnus.

"As if you haven't been doing that all week long!" Countered Nulu. "Not so tough without your conch shell, are you?" She balled up her fists. "I hate ruining a perfectly good manicure, but in your case, I'll make an exception."

Flora burst into the room. "Did you find him?" She asked breathlessly.

"Well… yes," said Drimblerod.

Flora looked around the room. "Where is he?"

Nulu pointed at the booth. "He's in there. He made it here in time."

"Well that's good," said Flora, relieved. "Once he got in the building, he made it."

"We covered that already" Julie pointed out.

"Oh, okay then." Flora smiled. "Great."

"He's been drinking." Julie hazarded.

Flora furrowed her brow. "On election day?"

"Said he was celebrating," offered Drimblerod.

"*Before* he voted?" Flora clenched her fists.

Drimblerod shrugged at the Gnomess. "Apparently. But…" He looked at the curtain. "The bigger issue is that, as you well know, he can't read."

Flora's eyes got large. "Someone's got to do something about that!"

"No one enters the booth!" Theron said.

"So, we'll see how this turns out," said Magnus smugly. He glowered at Nulu. "First thing I'm going to do is revoke your liquor license."

"You Humans have thirty-two teeth. Want to try for sixteen?" Nulu took a step toward the man.

"Just wait until you're out of business and I have you ridden out of town on a rail. We'll see how tough you are then."

"Do you think that my employment status is what makes me as strong as a Trolless?"

Akita stepped between the two. "You both need to calm down." He pointed at Magnus "I'll not have you threaten my friends, Magnus." He turned to Nulu. "And I'll not have you

pummel this man…" He fought to keep a smile from his face. "… while I'm around to witness it."

Nulu crossed her arms, biceps bulging. "Fine by me." She looked toward the curtain. "He's... been in there a long time."

"Grim?" Drimblerod called.

"You are not to influence his vote!"

Drimblerod glanced at Magnus. "You don't know Grimbledung that well, do you?" He held up a finger. "Grim! You asleep in there?"

"Can't a Gnome get a little privacy? These are private matters going on in here!"

Drimblerod gaped. "That is a VOTING BOOTH not a toilet!"

There was a long pause.

"You're going to need a new garbage can in here."

Drimblerod raised his hands plaintively at Magnus. "See?"

Magnus looked at Theron, who nodded. "Fine, explain it to him."

Drimblerod nodded at them. He turned to the curtain. "Grim, in the booth is a box that has a slot in the front."

"Urinal?"

"VOTING BOX!" Shouted Akita. "Gads. This is who is deciding the future of this town?"

"Alright, alright. No need to shout," Grimbledung called out.

There was a long pause.

"The mechanics of a slot on a urinal did cause me pause."

"Grim, on top of the box are sheets of paper." Nulu said.

There was a long pause.

"Remember that garbage can?"

"Yeah." Drimblerod cringed. "What about it?"

"There's only one sheet left."

"Grimbledung Sixtoes," said Flora. "Take that sheet of paper and the charcoal stick and mark..." She glanced at Theron. He frowned at her. "Mark one of the names in each of the large sections."

"There's lots of section, Flora O. Willowfeet. You sure you want me to mark just one in each?"

"Yes!" Magnus shouted. "Mark one of the names in each box you stupid Gnome!"

"Say now, that's not very politician-like. Aren't you supposed to be shaking babies and kissing hands? Insulting your constituents is bad form."

"Grim," Flora said calmly. "Just mark one of the names in each section very clearly. Make sure that when the vote counter looks at it, she will be able to tell which name you marked. But only mark one per section or your vote doesn't count. Then put your mark at the bottom of the ballot to show that it's your personal vote. Okay?"

"Okay."

Magnus nodded at her. "That's all the help he gets. If he mucks it up, then we'll have a run-off."

Flora sighed. "Oh, Grimbledung."

Everyone leaned forward toward the voting booth as the seconds dragged by.

Finally, Grimbledung stepped out and waved his hand in front of his nose. "Did I mention the need for a new garbage can in there?"

Nulu stepped forward. "That's fine, Grimbledung. I'll take care of that after taking care of your vote." She shook her head as she stepped into the booth. "This needs to be a paid position."

"Well, I am sure I can make that happen after I am elected," said Magnus with a broad smile. "Oh yes, I can make that happen."

Flora stepped up to the man. "What makes you think he voted for you?"

Magus shrugged. "I've been doing this for a long time and one thing I've learned is that stu… undecided voters tend to pick the first one on the list all the way down the ballot."

"Yeah? Well my name's Flora; yours is Magnus."

"If it were first names first, Miss *Willowfeet*, I'd be worried. But it seems to me that *Opus von Magnus* comes first in the alphabet."

Flora gaped as she thought back to the ballot she marked- Magnus' name was indeed listed before hers since the names were listed by last name. "Oh no!"

"Oh yes!" Magnus put his hands together, steepling his fingers. "Muwaaa haaa haa!"

"Grimbledung?" Flora stepped toward him. "How did you decide who to vote for?"

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Scientifically of course."

"How is that?" Flora moved her hands to her mouth.

"By picking the first ones on the list!" Grimbledung beamed.

"MWWUAAA HAA HAAAA!" Magnus pointed at Nulu. "Kiss that license goodbye! We'll see how long you stay in business when you can't even serve drinks to this town full of drunks!"

"Excuse me," said Nulu

"Well, that will have to go for a vote, so we'll see if you can get that passed, buster!" Julie clenched her fists.

"Everyone?" Nulu tried again.

"Akita, why don't you go get a drink at the Duck. I've got something I need to deal with." Julie stepped forward. "You can read about it in the parchments in the morning."

"Hey!" Nulu shouted.

Everyone turned to look at Nulu.

"What!?!" Said Julie, angrily.

"I officially deem this ballot valid and counted." She held up the piece of parchment.

"Well that's just *dandy*! Thanks for that Nulu. I'm glad you want to be unemployed. Not much use for a bartender when you can't…!"

"Julie, please!" Said Nulu. She pointed at her with the parchment. "This election is still going on until the final tally and that hasn't happened yet. And you're not helping matters."

"Well, what's left to do but declare me the winner?" Magnus tapped the ends of his fingers together.

"I swear; you do that again and I'm going to break every one of those fingers!" Julie snapped.

"That's a threat against an elected official, Constable," said Magnus. "I suggest you…"

"EVERYONE SHUT UP!" Nulu shouted. "You people!" She waved the ballot around. "If you will all just shut up long enough for me to officially declare a winner, you can get on with your insanity and pummeling."

"Sorry, Nulu," said Julie sheepishly. She looked at the ground. "Please go on."

"*Thank you*." Nulu took a deep breath then let it out. "After personally counting all the ballots and certifying that ballots were only cast by citizens of Julesville, I declare that…"

Everyone leaned toward Nulu.

"Flora O. Willowfeet is the new mayoress of Julesville."

"WHAT?" Magnus moved quickly to crowd Nulu. "How can that be?" He pointed at Grimbledung. "That dolt said he voted for the first name in every section. That means I won!"

Nulu shook her head. "He was looking at the ballot upside down." She held out the ballot. Grimbledung's mark was on the top of the ballot, upside down. "He voted for the last person in each section. Flora wins."

A cheer went up from everyone in the room.

"Well, he did say we'd be amazed and awed, didn't he?" Drimblerod said to Rat, who had been sitting quietly avoiding all the dialogue because after he heard that he would have won, had been imagining what his administration would have been like. It was glorious.

"What?" Oh." Rat nodded. "And I am indeed both." He looked at Magnus. "How about you?"

"I demand a recount!" Magnus shook his fist at Rat. Then Grimbledung. Then Nulu. "You stinking, hulking TROLL! You don't know what you're doing!"

"Hey now, that's getting personal," said Grimbledung. "You just don't call folk names like that." He shook his head. "Rude is what that is. Shows a poor upbringing. And I for one won't stand here and let you do that to a fine friend and wonderful person like Nulu." He balled up his fists and shadow-boxed. "Prepare for your pummeling, Sir!"

"Oh, Grimbledung!" Flora kissed him. "I knew you wouldn't let me down!"

"Told you I knew how to handle voting." Grimbledung said. As he shadowboxed.

Theron seethed at the Gnome. "Ballot stuffer... must... die." He said under his breath. "Deathly lethal death by dying." He rubbed his hands together as he stalked out of the room.

"She does realize it was a complete mistake on his part, right?" Akita asked Nulu.

Nulu shook her head. "Nope; that's why they're perfect for each other." She pointed at the pair. "See for yourself."

"You're wonderful!" Said Flora. She looked at Akita. "As Mayoress-elect, I would appreciate it if you would remove this very unpleasant man from the town hall, Constable."

Akita nodded at her. "Yes, Mayoress-elect Willowfeet. It would be my pleasure." He stretched to his full height. "Mister Opus, I believe it's time for you and your poor manners to go."

"You can't kick me out of town!"

Akita nodded. "That is true. I can, however, kick you out of this government office when the highest-ranking government official asks me to."

Magnus stalked to the door. When he got there, he turned and glowered. "You haven't heard the last of me!" He shook his fist at Grimbledung. "And you, you *Gnome*; you'll commit suicide if it's the last thing I'll do!" With that he exited the town hall and slammed the door.

"Well, now that that's over with, I suggest we get a drink."

Drimblerod slapped his partner's ear. "Your drinking almost mucked up this entire election."

Flora batted her eyes at Grimbledung. "But it didn't. And he voted for me!" She sighed.

"Several times, in fact."

"What?" Nulu said. "You mean the pictures? They were you!"

"Pretty tricky, that was." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

Flora kissed him again.

Grimbledung startled. "Hey, does this mean you're not going to serve me drinks anymore?"

Flora considered that. "Well, maybe I'll just work part time." She shrugged. "If nothing else, it will let me court my constituents on a regular basis."

Grimbledung nodded. "Hey, I'm your constituency now as well! Want to court me?" He waggled his ears.

"Oh, I'll court you all right!" She smooched him loudly.

"Nice, nice." Grimbledung clapped his hands together. "But first a drink or two."

"I could use a drink," Akita said. "Or that second one Grimbledung just mentioned."

"Well, I'd be glad to give you my second drink. I'll drink my first quick-like so you don't have to wait so long."

Akita blinked at Grimbledung. "No, that's not what..." He looked at Drimblerod.

"I'll get your first drink," Drimblerod told him.

"While everyone's discussing drinks, let's go get started." Grimbledung grabbed Flora by the hand.

"Onward and drunkward!" Flora said as he was pulled out of the City Hall.

Nulu watched them leave. "Those two are pretty much perfect for each other."

Akita snorted. "Yeah; I wonder how long until she kills him."

"Give it a month." Nulu said.

"A month?" Drimblerod did a little hop. "You think Flora's going to kill Grimbledung?"

"A month?" Nulu laughed. "That's generous. I wanted to kill that Gnome within the first hour I'd met him."

The trio turned to look at her.

"What?" Nulu raised her hands plaintively. "It's not like I actually did kill him." She fought to keep a smile from her face. "I did water down his drinks though."

"What?" Drimblerod gaped at him. "Just his drinks or mine as well when we were together?"

"We should get going," Nulu said. She moved toward the door. "Those two are getting away."

"Hey! You didn't answer my question!"

"I'd hate to miss that first round of drinks." Nulu pointed outside. "Let's get moving."

"Hey!"

Akita put his arm over Drimblerod. "Relax, it's not like you noticed if she even did."

"Not that I've admitted anything." Nulu held the door open. "Let's scoot, people!"

Akita started for the door, leading Drimblerod with him. "So you don't think that Grimbledung Annoying For the Sake of It Sixtoes won't get Flora Oh I have a Completely Dark and Dangerous Side and a Room in my Cottage to Act It Out In Willowfeet annoyed to the point of murder?"

Drimblerod considered it as the chapter ended.

Chapter 39
After Party Partying After

"If you put it that way." Drimblerod said as they walked."Is there a pool yet?"

"Just started one with Akita. Grunsday and Thraksday are already taken," Nulu said. "You want in? It's one silver."

"You doing day or night?"

"For another silver and it doubles your take." Akita said. "I picked morning."

"You think he's going to annoy her to death first thing in the morning?"

Akita shook his head. "No; he's going to annoy her at night but her plan won't come through until the morning."

Drimblerod nodded. "I see. That sounds reasonable."

"I went with nighttime figuring she'll do it as a spur of the moment kind of deal when he smarts off to her." Julie said.

"You know, you are casually discussing the death of my partner."

"Well, not *death* death, just death." Nulu said. "Remember he is a WereGnome."

"That's true. We just need to keep silver away from Flora and he'll pull through eventually."

"And I hate to say it, Drimblerod, but he's due." Wil said. "I mean, it's been a long time since he's been in the hereafter, right?"

"I figured it was just good luck." Drimblerod tried. "Or maybe he and Fate have finally made amends."

"Not likely," Nulu said. "You think Fate's going to give that Gnome a free ride?"

Fate shook her head. She had accompanied the two females to town.

"Well, we need to be prepared if it's going to happen," Drimblerod said.

The group turned at the intersection onto the road the Duck Inn and Dine was on.

"That's what the pool is for," Nulu said. She reached up and waggled her ear on one side then the other. She frowned. "Well, that's not nearly as effective."

"I think he means something more helpful." Akita said.

"Double if you pick the time." Nulu grinned at Drimblerod.

"How're things up at Prost Garrison?" Drimblerod asked. "Is that doctor still working up here, Akita?"

Akita nodded. "Doc Marone is still there, the last I heard." He hugged Drimblerod since he hadn't removed his arm as they walked. "But we don't need the good doctor. Remember that as long as he's not burned to a crisp or shot through the heart with a silver bolt, or silver tipped arrow, he won't stay dead." Akita held up a finger. "And once we pull out said silver, he'll work his way back to the living all on his own."

"All right then. Besides, I think the last time he revived him, Grimbledung got conscripted as payment." Nulu said.

Akita shook his head. "That was the first time. They tried it for a few days and when it didn't work out, they sent him back. The second time they just sent him back straightaway. He spooked even the Golems."

"That's not what Grimbledung told me. He said it was all a misunderstanding." Drimblerod said.

Akita let go of Drimblerod so he could look down at him. "And you're telling me you believe that it was a misunderstanding between Grimbledung and the entire of Prost Garrison that got him kicked out of it twice?"

Drimblerod pursed his lips. "Put me down for Merchersday."

Akita let his tongue hang out. "Market day. Good thinkin; there's lots of folks visitin' from out of town. So..."

Drimblerod exhaled. "Evening. Evening time."

"I'm holding the stakes, so I'll get your coins later tonight," Nulu said. She pulled a pad from her pocket and scribbled in it. "Got you down."

"Ahhh." Julie stepped forward and pulled the door to the Duck Inn and Dine open. "In we go. I hope we're not too late."

"Too late for what?" Drimblerod asked. "They can't be but a couple of minutes ahead of us."

"You don't actually watch your own antics, do you?" Nulu asked with a smile. "It's really a sight to see." She winked. "You'll see."

The group entered and went left through the curtain. There was someone singing. In a Gnomish.

"What in the lands?" Drimblerod looked at his partner. He was on top of the table, down on one knee. He held a mug in one hand high over his head, he had his other hand over his heart. The table had several mugs on it. "Did we take the long way here?"

"I'm telling you; it's a sight to see when you two get on a roll," Nulu said. "Hey, I know this one!" She waved at the bartender then held up four fingers. She pointed at Grimbledung's table.

"Do we always sing that loud?"

"Yes" Julie and Akita both said at once.

Nulu didn't answer because she had joined in the song. Which was already in progress.

Gnome loha 'Oe Ha`aheo ka ua
i nâ pali Ke nihi a`ela i ka

Gnome loha o'e Ha`aheo ka ua i nâ
pali Ke nihi a`ela i ka…

Oh it's been getting so hard livin' with these drinks...
He Gnome loha Mele he loha mele
Pretty hoku sending down a special little twi…

Grimbledung looked over at Nulu as he continued to sing. He toasted her with the mug as he stood.

Nulu moved quickly to the table and placed her hand on her heart as they both finished the Gnomish ditty.

Why you wanna drink my drink?
Sometimes we get drunk in the night
Sometimes we get drunk…

Nulu put her arm around Grimbledung as Flora leaned on him

Iiiin

The

Niiiight!

"Let's hope that's the last song we hear tonight." Julie said.

"Not likely." Akita pulled out a chair for her. "But at least we can drink through them. After you." He gestured at the chair then looked up at Grimbledung. "You fall off that table and spill our drinks, there's going to be... trouble."

"Who me?" Grimbledung judged the distance to the floor. He looked at Akita, the drinks, then the floor again. "Uhm..."

"Need a hand?" Akita asked.

"Perhaps so."

Akita obliged the Gnome by picking him up under the arms and placing him on the floor. "There ya go."

"Well, that was the most embarrassing thing that's happened to me in a while." Grimbledung flopped into his chair.

Nulu patted Grimbledung on the shoulder. "Let's just sit and drink for a little bit." He winked at Akita. "Until the good Constable is lubed up enough to join us in a song."

"Well," Akita straightened his tunic. "I have been known to sing a ditty or two."

"Sing a little ditty or two?" Grimbledung sing-songed as the smile returned to his face. "Oh yes, sing a little ditty or two-oooh!"

"We are not at that point in the drinking yet." Nulu raised her hand and waved it. "And, I am sorry to say we may not get to that point this evening."

"Whaaat?"

Nulu squinted at Akita. "You are supposed to be one of the adults at the table, *Mister* Finnish."

A waitress sidled up to the table and dropped off four drinks.

"Ahh, reinforcements," Remarked Grimbledung. He slid a drink toward Flora. "One for you, Miss Mayoress Elect Flora O. Willowfeet."

Flora clapped. "That does have a nice ring to it."

"A toast is in order." Nulu said.

"Well, I do appreciate the sentiment," Grimbledung tucked his thumbs in his armpits and thrust out his elbows. "Should have worn something with suspenders." He said.

"Not you." Nulu slapped his ear playfully, "you silly Gnome." She gestured at Flora with her glass. "To our new mayoress." She smiled. "I am sure that Julie will be expressing her gratitude as well."

"Oh, I do." Julie said.

Grimbledung elbowed Flora. "Ahhh... your first bribe. Nice."

Nulu slapped Grimbledung's ear. A little harder this time. "No! She'll be grateful that she can spend more time with her school now."

"Well, that's not as good as a bribe, but we'll take it." Grimbledung raised his glass. "To Mayoress Flora O Willowfeet."

Akita tilted his head to the side. "Say, what's the 'O' stand for?"

"Don't ask..." Nulu started to say.

Grimbledung hopped to his feet and burst into song

Oh what a beautiful Gnome-ess!
She's such a beautiful Gnome.

She's got such beautiful toe- oes!
Out at the ends of her feets.
Hey!
I hope she brings me a driii - iink!

And I hope she brings it today-aay.
I hope she brings it today.

Now Flora slapped Grimbledung's ear. "Didn't I tell you to stop singing that absurdly terrible song?"

"But it was a special request." Grimbledung pointed at Akita. "Was I supposed to just not answer him? Rude, that'd be."

"Well, now I know." Akita said. He raised his glass as well. "To Flora oh what beautiful toes, our new mayoress." He bent over and peeked under the table. "I suppose they are kind of cute."

After he came back up, Nulu slapped Akita's ear. "Do not encourage that Gnome, Mister Finnish."

Akita let his tongue hang out. "Won't happen again, Miss Bentknees."

Nulu downed the rest of her drink. "And as I was saying earlier, we need to make a short night of it." She raised an eyebrow at Akita.

Akita nodded solemnly. "I agree." He poked Grimbledung in the side.

"I agree too!" Grimbledung looked between Nulu and Akita. "What am I agreeing to, exactly?"

"Making a short night of it because tomorrow Cheri and Colossus are getting married and you will positively will not be late."

Grimbledung nodded at Nulu. "When have I ever been late?"

Nulu stood. "If I answered that, we'd both be late by the time I was done." She gestured at Flora. "If I can count on you to get him home so he gets to sleep at a decent hour, I can make sure someone wakes him in the morning."

"I can wake myself you know."

"You have a part in the ceremony," Nulu said, "and in case you've forgotten, Cheri is not only a trained assassin, but she's already had you on her list of folks to kill once already; if you muck up the ceremony, you'll be at the top of her list."

Akita stood as well. "That's if Colossus doesn't get you first." He pulled Grimbledung to his feet. "I'll make sure you're up in plenty of time."

"Awwww." Grimbledung put out his lip.

Flora giggled as she also stood. "Look on the bright side."

"What's that?"

Flora prodded Grimbledung. "You'll be nice and rested for the after-ceremony festivities."

"Woo! Good point." Grimbledung rubbed his hands together. "Free drinks, if I am correct."

Nulu tilted her hand. "Well, for a while anyway. I can't just toss all my profits out the window you know."

Grimbledung fished a coin from his pouch. He looked at it, put it back in the pouch and fished around again. With a nod at the second coin, he tossed it to Nulu. "Here, will that keep the free drinks going?"

Nulu caught the platinum coin. "I would say so!"

"But if you're paying..." Akita shook his head. "Never mind. Forget I even said anything."

"What?" Flora asked.

"Nothin' at all." Akita grinned. "I'll just partake in them free drinks as well."

"Then it's settled." Grimbledung clapped his hands once. "Free drinks for a long while."

Nulu clapped once as well. "Deal." She pointed at the curtain. "And now you're off to bed. Flora?"

Flora nodded and took Grimbledung by the hand. "See you all tomorrow."

Akita waved at the Gnomes as they left. "Those two."

"Yeah, think they'll get married next?"

Nulu shrugged. "Maybe after she kills him."

"On a Grunsday morning," Akita said.

"Thraksday evening," corrected Nulu.

"We'll just have to wait and see." Akita waved at Nulu. "See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Akita."

With that, the pair parted ways.

Chapter 40
For Whom the Wedding Bell Tolls

Eustis cleared his throat and looked over the crowd. Since he was a seven-foot-tall Troll, everyone quieted down quickly.

"Mawwiage. Mawwiage is what bwings us togethew today." He said in a gravelly voice. "Mawwiage, that bwessed awwangement, that dweam within a dweam. And wove…"

Nulu coughed. Loudly.

Eustis glanced at her as he continued. "And twue wove, wiww fowwow you fowevah…"

Nulu tapped the side of her mouth. Eustis startled, then rolled his eyes down to try and look at his mouth. "Sowwy." He said as he pulled the large BlackRoot stick from his mouth. "Sorry, Luv." He cleared his throat again. "As I was sayin'," he continued in a gruff voice. "True love will follow ya forever and ever." He pointed at Colossus. "So treasure yer love, and that's an order!"

"Yes, sir." Colossus fought the urge to salute the massive Troll. In his Justice of the Peace robes and ceremonial headdress, he was an imposing sight.

Eustis nodded once at the Halfling. "So…" He began in an official tone. "We are here today to join the fair lady Cherí Belladonna and noble Corporal Colossus Basher of the Clan of the Black Hand.

"I'll stick with Col," Grimbledung whispered to Drimblerod.

He nodded. "Shhh."

Eustis spread his hands wide. He was still holding the BlackRoot in his hand.

Nulu waved her hand at him. She waggled her fingers for good measure.

"They have asked you here to share in their joy, and to declare their love," Eustis' eyes swiveled to his hand. "Love for one another before you as a community." He finished as he casually tucked the BlackRoot behind his ear.

Nulu rolled her eyes. Eustis was, more often than not, maddening. When he looked at her again, she narrowed her eyes and scrunched up her nose.

Eustis winked at her as he said: "Colossus, are you here this day in pledged troth of your own free will and choice?"

Butterflies burst into existence in Nulu's stomach.

"I am, JP." Colossus answered loudly.

In the rehearsal, he had called Eustis 'Magistrate', 'Esteemed Sir', and even 'Your Honor' hoping to find a term the Troll approved of. Finally, Eustis snorted loudly and said "Just call me 'JP'; if it's good enough to put on my luggage, then it's good enough for everyone else!"

Colossus didn't even ask him why his initials didn't match his name- he just called him that from then on.

Eustis nodded at the Halfling. "Lady Cherí, are you here this day in pledged troth of your own free will and choice?

"I am, JP."

"In as much as this Mighty Halfling Warrior and Fair Lady Assassin have pledged their troth to be married this day, we call upon the heavens to bless this union. Therefore, if anyone can show just cause, why they may not be joined together, by the Laws of the Realm; let them now speak, or else hereafter keep silent for all time."

Cherí's insides froze. During the rehearsal, she had made a point to check to see if the blacksmith had come to watch the nuptials. With last-minute adjustments, she had forgotten to make one last check to ensure the angry Dwarfess had not come in. After what seemed to be an agonizing long time, the Justice of the Peace continued.

Eustis nodded. "Fine then. However, it should not be overlooked that there is agreement amongst the fair lady's associates that any such scurrilous objector that is later identified shall be beheaded at a feast for the entertainment and amusement of all in attendance."

Cherí's eyes got large. It was common knowledge among assassins that such an understanding was in place, but she had never heard it said out loud in mixed, non-assassin company. "What?" She asked. "Wait."

Colossus glanced at her- Earl had not said this latest statement in either of the two rehearsals and now Cherí's response had him worried.

Eustis bent down and winked at Cherí. "Rules are rules, Miss."

"What?" Colossus said.

"Beautiful. Just beautiful." Grimbledung wiped a tear from his eye. "I hope I am invited to the beheading; sounds like it will be a gala event."

Drimblerod elbowed his partner. Secretly, he hoped he was invited as well.

Eustis straightened and looked out over the audience again. "There being no objection to this marriage let us continue." He looked down at Colossus and Cherí. "Swear you now, on this sacred blade, that there is no reason known to you that this union should not proceed."

"Blade?" Colossus asked.

None of what was happening had been in the rehearsals. Eustis had gone from the 'or else hereafter keep silent for all time' to 'who has the rings?'.

Earl tilted a formidable blade in his hand- it was not there a moment ago.

"I do so swear." Cherí said. She had been to several assassin weddings.

Colossus looked from Cherí to the blade and back. "I also swear there is no reason."

"Is there any reason known to you why this partnership should not be made?"

"There is none." Cherí said. She gave a quick glance to Colossus.

Colossus got the hint and only answered: "There is none." Glad to have the now in unknown territory ceremony move along quicker.

In a blur, Eustis sheathed the blade behind his back. "Oh, creator of all things above, below, and beside. We humbly ask thee to bless this union, may these thy servants seek mainly goodness all the days of their lives, may they be strong in defense of what is right, may they be united as one against all enemies foreign and domestic."

"Hate them domestic enemies," Grimbledung said.

"May they be numbered amongst thy sheep. We humbly pray on their ancestors above, below and beside."

"So say we all," Cherí said.

Colossus was still trying to process what Earl was saying so he hesitated. Cherí elbowed him. "Yes; me too."

Eustis gave a smirk. "Do you, Colossus, take unto thyself as wife the fair Cherí Belladonna and pledge unto her before your ancestors and these witnesses to be her protector, defender and sure resort, to honor and sustain her, in sickness and in health, in fair and in foul, with all thy worldly powers, to cherish and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?

"What a lovely run on sentence that was," remarked Grimbledung.

Colossus' eyes got large- unsure how to properly answer. He looked at Eustis- only the smirk was there with no hint of assistance in the works. "I do?" he tried.

Eustis gave a curt nod. "That'll do. And you," he continued, "Cherí, do you also?"

"I will." Cherí said.

Now Nulu wiped a tear from an eye. Grimbledung's. "You softie," she said.

"The rings?" Eustis held out his hands. "If you please."

Colossus and Cherí each handed over a thick platinum ring.

Eustis did a double take at the rings. "Wow." He cleared his throat and continued: "Creator of all, bless these rings which Colossus and Cherí have set apart to be visible signs of the inward and spiritual bond which unites their hearts. As they give and receive these rings, may they testify to the world of the covenant made between them."

Earl crossed his hands as he handed each ring to the other. "Receive and wear this ring as a symbol of your partner's trust, respect and love for each other. This circle will now seal the vows of this marriage and will symbolize the purity and endlessness of their love.

Both Colossus and Cherí put the rings on each other's hand.

Eustis nodded at them. "We will now do the ancient Halfling hand fastening ritual where three cords will be placed over their joined hands.

"Nulu Bentknees will now place the burgundy cord to symbolize romance, partnership and happiness."

Nulu, expecting her cue, stood and quickly moved to the pair and wrapped the cord over their wrists.

"L'owen Brushwood will now place the ivory cord which stands for peace, sincerity and devotion."

L'owen slipped around the column he was leaning against and practically glided to the pair. He quickly added his to the burgundy one.

"Grimbledung Sixtoes will now place the gold cord which represents unity, prosperity and longevity."

No one moved.

"*Grimbledung Sixtoes* will now place the gold cord which represents unity, prosperity and longevity!"

Drimblerod elbowed his partner.

"Gah!" Grimbledung hopped to his feet. He twirled the gold cord over his head as he skipped to Colossus and Cherí. When he got there, he carefully laid his cord over the other two. "Time!" He said as he raised his hands in the air.

Eustis shoo'ed Grimbledung back to his seat. "I will now tie the cords together to signify the tying of the knot." He put his hands on the ropes. "As this knot is tied, so are your lives

now bound. Woven into this cord, imbued into its very fibers, are all the hopes of your friends and family, and of yourselves, for a new life together."

Eustis knelt down and tied the knot slowly and carefully. "May the vows you have spoken never grow bitter in your mouths. As any child discovers when they are learning to tie their own shoes, the first move is to cross the ends. The cross creates the 'x', which is the symbol of partnership and union. As your hands are bound by this cord, so is your partnership held by the symbol of this knot."

When he finished tying the ropes, Eustis addressed the audience again. "With the fashioning of this knot you tie all the desires, dreams, love, and happiness wished here in this place to your lives for as long as love shall last." He put his hands over Colossus' and Cherí's. "In the joining of hands and the fashioning of a knot, so are your lives now bound, one to another. By this cord, you are thus now and forevermore bound to your vow."

"Gads, not many loopholes left, huh?" Grimbledung commented.

"May this knot remain tied for as long as love shall last. May this cord draw your hands together in love, never to be used in anger."

"That's going to make it hard to go to the bathroom." Grimbledung observed.

Eustis shot Grimbledung a glance. It hit him squarely between the eyes.

"Sorry." Grimbledung said meekly.

"Two entwined in love, bound by commitment and fear, sadness and joy, by hardship and victory, anger and reconciliation, all of which brings strength to this union." He placed his hands on the pair's heads. "Hold tight to one another through both good times and bad, and watch as your strength grows."

Grimbledung wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"I shall now remove the cords." Eustis knelt down again. "You have pledged troth of your own free will and sworn upon the sword. You have exchanged rings and been bound together by the ritual of the cords." He slipped the cords off the pair's hands without untying the knot.

Eustis stood and raised the tied ropes over his head. "May it be granted that what is done before their ancestors and their friends here be not undone by anyone." He brought the knot back down and for the first time in the ceremony, he smiled. "But before I proclaim you joined thou must kiss three times on cue."

Colossus leaned toward Cherí.

"On cue, I said!"

"Sorry."

Eustis nodded at him. "Once for luck."

The pair kissed.

Pinky squeezed Big Julie's hand.

"Twice for love."

The pair kissed again.

Big Julie squeezed Pinky's hand.

"And thrice for long life."

Colossus and Cherí embraced as they kissed the third time.

Akita leaned over to Maca. "Gads, that was far better than I could'a done; glad Nulu brought in the help."

Maca startled and glanced over to where Big Julie and Pinky were sitting. "Yes, dear," she said absently.

"Marry me," Pinky whispered to Big Julie.

"By the power vested in me by the realm, I now pronounce you Mister Colossus Basher and Missus Cherí Belladonna Basher, husband and wife." He handed the knot to Colossus. "This must go in a place of honor in your home."

"Marry me, woman," Pinky whispered with some urgency. "Now."

Big Julie stood in a half-crouch.

Colossus wiped a tear from his eye as he took the knot. "It will, Sir. I will indeed."

Big Julie crab-walked to the end of the row. When she got there, she turned for a moment toward Eustis.

Pinky started to stand as well.

Then Julie sprinted off in the exact opposite direction of Eustis.

"Whoo hoo! Time for the party to begin!" Grimbledung hopped onto his chair. "When's the open bar opening?"

"Huh." Remarked Pinky as he sat. "Not the answer I expected." When the other attendees started to stand and mill about, he finally stood again and went in search of Big Julie.

The open bar opened soon after. After almost an hour, Cherí and Colossus flew off on the carpet, headed toward the Lost Picman's Mine.

Thanks to Grimbledung's donation the day before, the drinking and merriment went into the night.

As did Pinky's searching for Big Julie.

Chapter 41
Big Julie- On the Lamb

Pinky had started searching around the wedding area, figuring that Big Julie had just moved to the side to get some air. They had, after all been a couple for quite some time and Pinky had expressed his love for Big Julie on numerous occasions. With poetry in public and home cooked meals in private.

She had also reciprocated those expressions of love, Pinky mused. "Most confusing," said the large man.

As Pinky searched the ceremony area and the whole of the Duck Inn and Dine, his emotions ran from worry, to fury, and then throttled back to an annoyed concern. He then moved to Big Julie's school.

He had started with Julie's room, expecting to find her there. His search continued floor by floor, room by room until he reached the top of the windmill. He had started to become annoyed again- expecting to have to search the entire grounds to find her. When he found her, the agitation left in an instant.

Big Julie was sitting on the floor, feet dangling into open air, right behind the large blades. She didn't turn to look when the boards under Pinky's feet creaked as he approached.

Pinky stood behind her, waiting for some sort of sign.

After several moments, his smiled. "Maybe you misheard me," he said finally. "I said 'marry me' not 'want to play hide and seek?'." He moved beside her and after only a couple of grunts, sat. "I can see how you could confuse the two." He looked at her.

Julie had been crying.

Pinky put his arm on her, "What's wrong?"

"It's just that..." She started to cry again. "I just don't know..."

"Listen, if you don't want to get married, that's fine."

"No, it's not that." Finally, she looked at him. "I *do* want to get married."

"If you don't want that character Eustis to do it..."

"No, it's not that." Now Julie smiled. "Well, I'd prefer someone else, now that you mention it."

"Then what is it?"

"Have you ever been married before?"

"Who me?" Pinky leaned back. "Not as far as I know." He smiled again. "I've been to some pretty wild building openings though."

"I have."

"Oh."

"Twice."

"Ahh." Pinky searched for another interjection. He opted for a short sentence instead. "I see."

After another long moment, a thought occurred to Pinky. "You aren't still..." He said as his sentences grew in length.

Julie stared out across the night. The partying several blocks away could be heard.

"Julie," Pinky said as his irritation returned. "I will be more than a little upset if you are a married woman. That is definitely not the kind of thing I..."

"No," interrupted Julie. "I'm not married." Now there was an edge to her voice. "The first time was when I was really young." She exhaled loudly. "We were at EternCity for a family vacation and I... this guy... we..."

"How young were you?"

Julie gave Pinky a sidelong glance. "I was of legal age."

Pinky put his arm around Julie. "Weren't you always?"

"And if you've never been, EternCity is very easy to get caught up in. So we were married one day and then two days later, it was annulled."

"By the magistrate?"

"By my father."

"Yikes." Pinky squeezed Julie's shoulder. "Well, youthful indiscretions and all. And the other time?"

"I was quite a bit older."

"I thought you were quite a bit older now." Pinky squeezed Julie's shoulder. "Hah, hah?"

Her sidelong glance became a full-on one.

"Continue, if you please." Pinky said.

"It was a few years ago. He seemed like a good thing; well off, dashing..."

"Did he recite poetry? In public even?"

Nulu finally smiled. "No, he did not."

"He wasn't right for you." Pinky winked. "Continue."

"Well, it turned out that he wasn't as well off as he said he was and after we were married, he became well off."

"Oh?"

"After cleaning out my bank accounts and taking several expensive barrels of top shelf alcohols, he disappeared in the night." She said with a definite edge on her voice.

"Gads. Did you... try to find him?"

"Personally? No. I left that to the professionals." Julie answered.

"Ahhh." A thought occurred to Pinky. "Wait... are you concerned that I..."

"No, that's…"

Now Pinky's voice took an edge. "Because I'll have you know that not only am I well off, I am *damned well off*. In case you didn't know."

"That's not..."

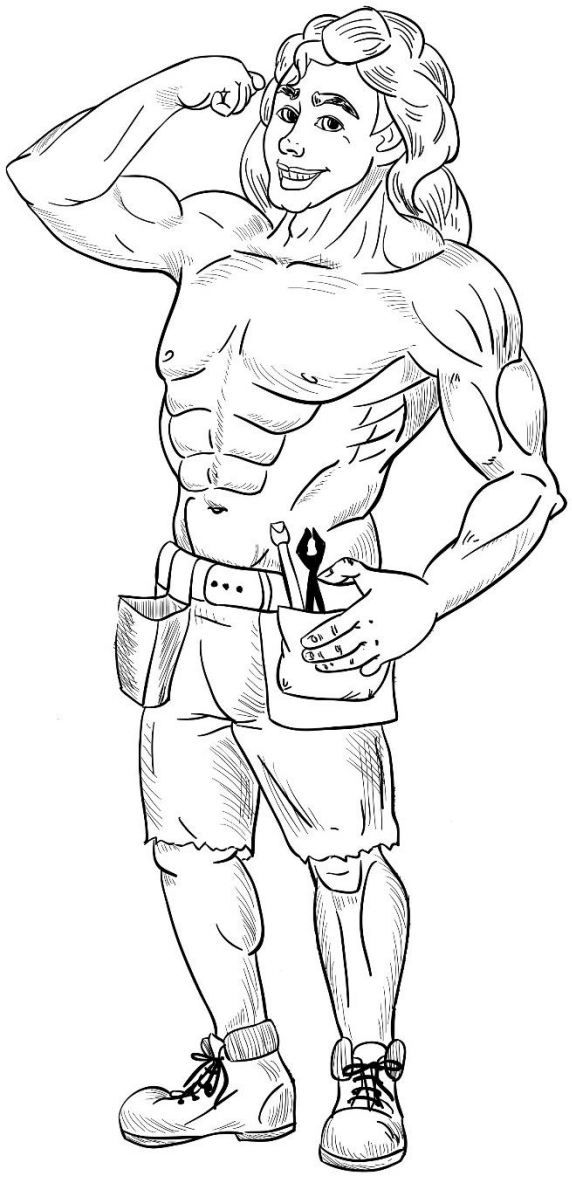
"You know who's rebuilding Aution?" Pinkly spread his arms out wide, muscles bulging as he did so. "You know who's building your namesake town?" He jabbed a thumb at his chest. "Yours truly, that's who." He leaned in on Julie. "Lady, when *Pozzuoli* needs money, he comes to me!"

A tear ran down Julie's cheek. "That's not it at all."

"Then what is it?" Pinky leaned in closer. "Tell me."

"I don't know. Cold feet? Worry that it's too perfect? Stupidity?"

Pinky stood and in one fluid motion that was all too practiced, pulled off his shirt. He raised his arms and flexed. Ripples ran across his abdomen as all his individual abdomen muscles popped out. "We'll go with that middle one, darling." He brought his arms down and clenched his fists tightly, his latissimus dorsi bulging out forming a wide 'V' as his biceps reached for the sky. "Yeah?"



"You know, if any young women down below can see you, you're going to scar them for life." Julie remarked as she giggled. And enjoyed the show.

Pinky turned around. The bulges on his back were as pronounced as the ones on his front. He peered over his shoulder and grinned.

"You're too much." Julie pulled herself up with the handrail, picking up his shirt as she did.

"Who me?" He picked up one of his heels as his calf muscles separated into two distinct knots.

"Honestly. Who has calves like that without wearing heels?"

"Stand on your toes on narrow scaffolding and you get the same effect." Pinky turned back around and put his hands on his hips. He became serious. "Julie no last name, I want to grow old and saggy with you. A hundred years of time together. Until all we can eat is soup and soft bread that our great-grandchildren serve us."

"Oh, Pinky." She held his shirt out to him. "I just..."

Pinky kissed her. "I will take that as an acceptance of my proposal." He held her at arm's length. He still hadn't put his shirt back on. "You now have exactly one month to make arrangements. In twenty-seven days, you will become the esteemed Missus Julie Carpenter. He wrapped his arms around her and dipped her. "And I will *crush* all enemies foreign and domestic and beside that give you grief. I will see them driven before us, and together will hear the lamentations of their women."

"You are such a romantic."

"You have me on top of the world, lady."

The pair kissed in the moonlight.

Chapter 42
A Flora, Darkly Grim

Grimbledung lay in bed, looking at the ceiling. "Flora O. Willowfeet, you are a most delectable Gnomess. What have you to say about my absurdly overwhelming successes of late?"

Flora propped herself up on one elbow. "I am agog."

"That is a suitable emotion for my amazingness." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Oh yes."

Flora smiled as she nuzzled Grimbledung's chest. "Mister Grimbledung Sixtoes..." She started then hesitated.

"Yes?" Grimbledung ran his fingers through her hair.

"What did you think of the ceremony today?"

"The merriment afterwards was definitely a fun time."

"The ceremony *ceremony*, not the after-ceremony ceremony."

"It was long enough to get the job done yet short enough to not become tedious?"

"I mean..."

Grimbledung tried again: "The flowers were nice?"

"Well, yes and no." Flora peered up at Grimbledung. "Did it make you want to... make a proposal of your own?"

"I do believe so."

"Really?" Flora smiled.

"Sure, sure. I recall distinctly that I said 'I propose the merriment starts post-haste' at one point."

"That's not what I meant." Flora exhaled loudly. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to spell it out for you." She sat up. "Males can be so oblivious at times."

"Well, there's a reasonable explanation for that." Grimbledung sat up as well.

"And what would that be?"

"Well, womenfolk are a bit too subtle oftentimes for the keen, honed like the edge of a razor mind of males to notice."

"Is 'keen' a different way of saying dimwitted?"

Grimbledung frowned. "I do not believe so, *Miss* Willowfeet. I get what you're trying to say, just so you know."

Flora giggled. "I am just teasing. I'm glad you finally came around, in any case." She hesitated. "And now that you have, I was wondering when you were going…"

Grimbledung pulled the covers up to his chest. "Uh oh…"

"Uh oh, what?"

"Nothing. Keep going." Grimbledung looked around the room, planning his escape in case Flora proposed to him.

"Well, as I was saying…" Flora's smile faltered. "I was wondering if you would be willing to show me…"

Grimbledung let the sheet drop. He waggled his ears. "Yeah?"

"Your treasure room."

"What treasure room?"

"The one with treasure in it, of course." She pouted. "I just wanted to see your treasures is all."

Grimbledung exhaled. He had promised Drimblerod that he would positively, absolutely, and under no uncertain terms ever take anyone to the treasure room. Ever. Not even once even. Not at all. "I don't know…"

Flora let the sheet on her side of the bed drop as well. It was down to her waist. "I was just hoping…" She sighed seductively.

Grimbledung considered the request for a moment then smirked. "Well, you have shown me *your* treasure room, so I imagine I'm obliged to show you mine."[50]

Flora pulled the sheet back up. "Well, not if you're going to be like that about it."

Grimbledung waved a hand dismissively. "Don't get all huffy. You're acting like a third wife all of a sudden."

"A what? You've had three wives?"

"It's just an expression is all." Grimbledung said, instead of answering the question. "Like calling a loud woman a fishwife is an expression. Or calling a...."

"Is it an expression because you have had three wives?"

"That's not where it comes from." Grimbledung didn't answer again.

Flora turned to face him. "Grimbledung Sixtoes, esquire, have you been married three times?"

"What; in a row? Sequentially even?"

"Mister Grimbledung Sixtoes!" She balled up a fist.

"I have not been married three times." Grimbledung finally said. Inaccurately.

"Well, that's a relief." Flora smiled.

"I've been married five times." Grimbledung tapped his chin. "Well, technically I suppose I'm still married to those last two… But *none* of them are fishwives, thankfully." He raised an eyebrow at Flora. "So far so good, it seems."

Flora slid out of the bed, taking the sheet with her.

"Hey! Now *my* treasures are showing!" Grimbledung waggled his ears.

Flora didn't see because she did not turn around- she marched straight out of the room, down the stairs and out the front door.

"Flora oh quick of feet?" Grimbledung tried. "Are you making me a sandwich, perhaps?"

Flora continued down the street towards her cottage, still wrapped in the sheet. She approached two Ne'er-do-wells who at first moved towards her, seeing the lone, obviously not-dressed female as an easy target for their ne'er-do-welling. When they saw the expression on her face, they thought better of it. The one she actually met eyes with as she went by decided to turn over a new leaf in life and devote his time to doing good deeds and saving lives.

Flora's plans involved exactly the opposite for one particular life.

She marched straight into her cottage and to the heavy door to her back room.

Chapter 43
Skull Pikery

"What is that smell?"

"That's not it," said RatShambler. "Try again."

Skeleton Two's face drooped. "I am sincerely and truly sorry for any inconvenience, public humiliation, and personal strife I have caused you and or any of your associates and furthermore, I promise to never again cause you any of the aforementioned difficulties for as long as I am magically alive or you cease to be, whichever comes first."

"And?"

"And I do solemnly swear and or affirm that I am no longer up to no good with any current, previous, or future romantic or otherwise companions of the esteemed Mister Jousting Dummy, namely Door." His eyes swiveled down and looked at Dummy from where his head had been stuck on top of a very menacing-looking and foul-smelling pike. "How was that?"

Skeleton Two's body gave a hopeful thumb's up.

Dummy gave a curt nod then patted RatShambler's flank.

"It's about time. That wasn't so hard, now was it?" RatShambler said.

"Is someone going to get me down?" Skeleton Two's head asked. His body gave another thumb's up.

Dummy patted RatShambler's side.

RatShambler started walking back towards Second Hand Sorcery with Dummy in their little cart. "Let's get home, Dummy. I'm looking forward to a nice quiet rest of the month," he added.

Fate put her arms over Providence and Chance then gestured at the upcoming weeks. All three smiled.

The End

Who will kill Grimbledung?

Will anyone actually win the pool?

What are the odds that Bill O'Reilly will sue?

BONUS QUESTION- If Bill does sue, will the adage "Any press is good press" still apply?

Find out in *Book 7- Killing Grimbledung*

Stop reading now or it will just get confusing.

We mean it. Go read something else.

Or leave a review.

Definitely go leave a review. Do that here: **REVIEW of BOOK 6**

Chapter 50
Missed It By *That* Much

Grimbledung tossed Harry headfirst into the room, in the general direction of Magnus. That troubled Harry since he should have been heading directly AT him instead.

Harry reached out and tried to strike at Magnus' head as he flew past, delivering a glancing blow to the man's jaw.

Magnus jolted awake as Harry slammed onto the hardwood floor. Bones flew in all directions.

"What?" Magnus said as he looked around the room- even though Harry was in fairly large pieces, he was still below the bed and out of sight of Magnus. "Who's here?" Magnus rubbed his jaw- it was definitely sore for some reason.

"Rolton chips!" Grimbledung whispered, "He missed almost entirely, that oaf!"

"You tossed him wrong, you dolt!" Hauser slapped Grimbledung's ear.

"Did not!' Grimbledung slapped Hauser across the face. "Did not!"

Wilhelm stood on the edge of the skylight. "Well, we need to do something constructive!" He looked down. "He looks pretty upset."

Hearing voices, Magnus looked around the room- it still looked empty and his bedroom door was shut. "Who's there?" A thought occurred to him. He started to look up at the usually open skylight.

Harry tilted up on the bottom of his spine, holding his head in his one remaining hand. He looked up at the window.

Grimbledung made eye contact with him and punched one hand into his open fist.

Harry nodded his head at Grimbledung then brought his arm down hard, hitting Magnus on the back of his head just has he looked at the skylight toward the sounds he had heard.

Harry's head flew out of his hand as it hit, skidding to a corner. "Did I get him? I got him, I think!"

Magnus' eyes rolled back in his head and he flopped back onto his bed, unconscious.

"You got him alright!" Wilhelm said. He clapped at his partner, causing him to lose his balance. He wheeled his arms backwards to keep from falling.

He was unsuccessful.

"Wilhelm!" He screeched as he fell backwards into the room. When he hit the ground, he shattered, adding his bones to Harry's general mess in the room.

"Well that's just absurd." Grimbledung shook his head. "Why does he shout his own name every time he falls? Most annoying."

"I think it's mandatory," Hausen explained. "Get out your rope so we can slide down; I don't want to get mixed up with those two." He let out a laugh as he elbowed Grimbledung. "Get it, mixed up with those two?"

"I get it alright," Grimbledung said. He pulled the Elven rope from his bag of loot. "Let me tie it off and then we can slide down."

"If you tie it off, how are we going to get it back?" Hauser watched him tie a substantial knot. "That's a pretty substantial knot."

"It's Elven rope; it will untie itself when I need it to." He thought for a moment. "And if I cut it with a normal steel blade, it will repair itself as well."

"Handy stuff." Hauser grabbed the rope in his hands and passed it through one of the holes in his pelvis, around his back and then back around front. He leaned back on the edge of the skylight. "On rappel," he said as he hopped of the skylight ledge into open space. He deftly rappelled to the ground. "Rappel off," he said as he removed the rope.

"I should have come alone," Grimbledung observed as he took the rope in his hands. He laid down and slid out over the edge into open space. After a couple of tries, he clenched the rope tightly between his feet. "Coming down!" He called (incorrectly) as he slid down the rope. When he hit the ground, he fell onto his butt. He waggled his ears. "Mission accomplished!"

"What's accomplished?" Hauser asked. "We haven't done anything but get in here, and these two boneheads have managed to get scattered all over the place."

"Gimme a minute and I'll be back to normal," Harry said. He held up a femur. "This mine or yours?"

"Yours," replied Wilhelm. "This your foot?"

"I believe so."

Hauser exhaled loudly.[51] "Any time you two want to get your act together." He waggled a finger at Grimbledung. "Act together. Hah, hah!"

"No." Grimbledung said.

"Not even a chuckle?"

"We haven't much time so we need to get to searching." Now Grimbledung waggled a finger, "and cut the antics."

"What, like fifty percent?" Hauser grinned. "Should we roll a die?"

"There may be some dying, now that you mention it."

"Ooooh, nicely done Mister Sixtoes." Hauser nodded at the Gnome. "Nicely done."

Magnus stirred on the bed.

Wilhelm bashed him on the head with a femur.

"He's not going to remember his name if you keep doing that," Grimbledung said.

"Wouldn't that solve the whole election issue?" Wilhelm raised the femur up again.

"We are *not* going to turn his brains into mush," Grimbledung said. "Well, not yet anyway; but if he threatens Flora again, then all bets are off." He looked at Wilhelm. "Would you please pull yourself together?"

Okay then. **Now go to Chapter 14- A House, Doctored**

Chapter 51
Missed It By How Much?

Grimbledung lurched forward as he tried to throw Harry headfirst into the room.

Harry reached out and grabbed the sides of the skylight. "Hold on! I think we should rethink this course of action."

"What's to think?" Grimbledung tried to pry Harry's hands off the edges of the skylight. "Knock him out and we'll all just go down."

"It's the plan, Harry." Wilhelm said.

"A fine, well thought out plan, in fact." Hausen said. "Chuck him Gnome. Chuck him now!"

"Now hold on!" Harry said.

"What?" Grimbledung finally stopped tugging on the skeleton. "What now?" He glanced over his shoulder. "We're losing the night you know."

Wilhelm turned and looked into the room. "It just seems to me that trying to throw me at his chin is not the best..."

Grimbledung kicked Wilhelm, knocking him into open air. "Then cannonball him!"

"Wilhel...err cannonball!" Wilhelm screamed as he pulled his legs up to his chest.

"I am not sure if that is a good change to the plan." Hausen looked down into the room.

Wilhelm crashed to the ground beside the bed.

"That wasn't even close," Harry said. "What a crappy roll that was."

Magnus sat up. "What is going on?" He swung his feet off his bed, right onto the remains of Wilhelm.

"Watch your step, pal," Wilhelm's skull said.

"Well this isn't good." Grimbledung drew his wand and aimed at Magnus.

"Who are you?" Magnus asked.

"What, originally?" Wilhelm asked. "Nyuk, nyuk!"

Deca!

Grimbledung intoned as he slashed his wand at Magnus.

Magnus disappeared.

"Where'd he go?" Harry asked.

"He's gone! Is he *gone* gone?" Hausen asked.

"He's fine," Grimbledung said. "Let's just get down there." He pulled the rope from his belt pouch.

"Where'd you send him?" Hausen peered into the room.

"This underground hideout in the Great Sandy Desert." Grimbledung tied the rope to the side of the skylight with a substantial knot.

"That there is a substantial knot," remarked Hausen. "So much for getting that nice rope back after we're done."

"You dolt," Harry said. "That's Elvish rope; when he needs it to, it will untie itself. He can even cut it with a regular steel blade and it would repair itself."

"Neat." Hausen said.

"Now climb down after me." Grimbledung edged off the skylight. "So we can get going."

"And Magnus is not anywhere near the room?" Harry asked.

"Not at all." Confirmed Grimbledung. "Not for ten minutes."

"Cannonball!" Harry screamed as he jumped into the room. He hit the bed and bounced off into the wall, leaving a large dent. In the wall.

"The neighbors will hear you!" Grimbledung said as he lowered himself. "Keep quiet! I should have come alone." Grimbledung said as he slid down the rope. As he went, he started swaying.

"Stop swaying!" Wilhelm called from below as his legs moved into position. "Why can't you just go straight down like a normal Gnome?"

"I am so a normal Gnome!" Grimbledung said as his swaying increased. "In fact," he said as he pushed off the far wall, "I am certain I am going straight down!"

"Maybe the rope is defective?" Harry said. "Is that Elvish *Swaying* rope perhaps?" He looked left and right as Grimbledung swayed.

Grimbledung's swaying finally put him on a collision course with the large chandelier in the middle of the room. "This might not work out well," Grimbledung said as the rope caught on the one of its arms.

As the chandelier jerked Grimbledung to a standstill, Hausen, who was leaning over the edge of the skylight to watch, lost his grip and he fell. As he did, he reached out and grabbed the rope, sliding down it.

"On rappel!" Hausen called as he slid down the rope.

Wilhelm – who was finally together- scrambled to grab the dangling end of the rope. "On belay!"

When Hausen hit the chandelier, it jostled, making Grimbledung lose his grip. For a split second, he seemed to hang in midair.

"Grimble-dung!" Wilhelm screamed

Hausen reached out and grabbed Grimbledung by the feet. "You daft Gnome! You can't be off belay if you're not on the ground!"

Grimbledung swayed, arms outstretched.

Maca shook her head.

"Grab onto something!" Hausen said. "My arms are going to pop out of their sockets!"

"This is just absurd," observed Wilhelm. "Grab the rope!" He shifted around the bed to put it within reach of Grimbledung. "Grab it now!"

Grimbledung grabbed the rope. "Now what?"

"Slide down!" Hausen said. "My arms are killing me!"

"But you're just bones!"

Hausen let go of Grimbledung.

"Grimbledung!" Grimbledung screamed as he slid down the rope. He landed on Wilhelm's head, sending bones flying in all directions. "Off belay?" Grimbledung said.

"Well, technically, that is correct." Wilhelm' skull said from a far corner. "But your form needs more work than mine does. Eh, eh?"

"No."

Wilhelm's eyes shifted upward. "Get down here, Hausen."

Hausen obliged by sliding down the rope. Even though no one was holding it, he still slid straight down. "Nothing wrong with this rope." He waggled a finger at Grimbledung. "Maybe it's allergic to Gnomes."

"That may be."

"So where is Magnus at the moment?" Harry asked. "Is the coast clear, as it were?"

"It were not," Grimbledung said. "He'd going to be back in the next few minutes so we need to keep an eye out."

"Can't you just leave him where he is?" Wilhelm crossed his arms. "I mean, can he get out of where he is?"

"Not a chance."

"So problem solved. Leave him there to rot."

"Well, I mean..." Grimbledung said. "I don't want him dead, I just want him to not win the election."

"But he threatened Flora, remember?" Hausen said. "He should be some nice warm toast for that."

"With jam even." Harry added.

"I'm not just going to kill him out of hand." Grimbledung said.

"What if he threatens Flora again?"

"Alright, Hausen, alright. Then all bets are off." Grimbledung shook his head. "Now let's just wait for him to reappear and when he does..."

"I get to bonk him on the head?" Harry rubbed his hands together.

"Yes." Grimbledung pointed. "He'll reappear where he disappeared so go stand by the top of his bed. As soon as his head appears, swing away."

"If you'll please provide some assistance." Hausen gestured at Wilhelm.

With a sigh, Wilhelm yanked off his leg. "Next time I do the bonking. He handed his leg over. "Don't scratch it up this time."

"He's not wearing armor." Hausen said. "Do you know if there's armor wherever you sent him?"

"No," Grimbledung said, without knowing if he was right. "Positively not."

"Well good then." Hausen hefted Harry's leg several times. "Where is the fellow?"

"He'll be here soon enough. You'll hear a little popping noise right before he appears." Grimbledung said. "Not that you should be able to hear since you don't..."

"Shhh! Hear that?" Wilhelm said. He snapped his fingers and waved frantically at Hausen as he hopped on one leg.

Hausen raised Wilhelm's leg high in the air.

Magnus appeared, sitting on the edge of his bed. He was looking down where Wilhelm's skull was. "Who are you?" He asked again.

Hausen brought Wilhelm's leg down hard, hitting Magnus on the back of the head.

Magnus' eyes rolled up into his head as he crumpled back onto his bed.

Hausen tossed the leg back to Wilhelm then pulled Magnus' blanket back up. "Nighty-night."

"What a chore that was. I hope the search goes smoother." Harry said.

"Well, how could it not?" Wilhelm fluffed Magnus' pillow.

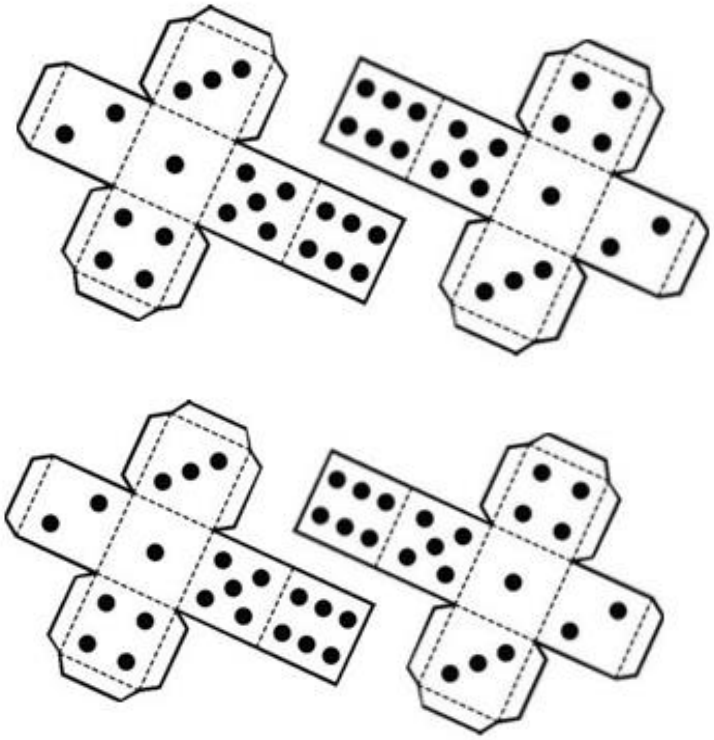
"All right, get yourself back together, Willie, so we can get to work," Grimbledung said.

Now go to Chapter 14- A House, Doctored

Chapter 52
No Dice? Yes Dice!

Sometimes stories make you roll die to see what's going to happen to add to the adventure. Some do it just to be annoying. We did it on a bet.

Don't even think about cheating and just guessing numbers in your head!



Carefully cut out the dice above. If you're young or accident prone, ask an adult to help you. After you cut them out, fold them along the dotted lines and tape them together into a cube.[52]

About the Illustrators

(There's not much more to say about the author that you don't already know. Try reading the first book in his Science Fiction series "Apple Declined" for a change of pace.)

Milena Vitorovic, is from Belgrade, Serbia (a lovely city that you should definitely visit if you have the chance). She earned a Master's Degree in Applied Arts at the Academy of Arts in Belgrade. She is devoted to working on her craft, creating illustrations, mosaics, and calligraphy. Visit her on Fiverr at https://www.fiverr.com/milenavitorovic



Sara Allen continues to draw while living in the lovely state of Ohio. She has recently started drawing pets on request. Not 'drawing on pets on request' as this sentence was first written- that would be weird. And not nearly as profitable, I would imagine.

If you have a pet and are interested in a sketch OF the pet, you should give her a look: https://www.facebook.com/SaraAllensArt/

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[1] It's the intention of the clap that determines if it's a regular clap or a Rat-summoning clap.

[2] It's the collective for rats. If you don't believe us, just ask Grimbledung on his blog.

[3] And there's a civics lesson for no additional charge.

[4] Yeah- that's about how it works. Grimbledung explains it better later on.

[5] Just imagine- by the time you get to Book 12, you'll be conversant in Dwarfish! Molto bene!

[6] We'll work on giving Wil a bigger part in the book as well as some zingers. Promise

[7] See?

[8] No, not just wee folk- everyone of a lesser societal stature. He's dark, but not that dark!

[9] Wonky's. This time, anyway.

[10] Fixing wands isn't like dusting crops, you know! Sorry; that joke was left over from Book 4.

[11] Honestly!

[12] Really- if you haven't tried it by now, do yourself a favor- run out and get a bottle. If you're over 21. Or over 19 for our Canadian readers.

[13] Death is always capitalized- even when pronounced. And when Death speaks, it's in all capital letters. He has lines in the next book. While playing checkers.

[14] No, we don't know how he does it without lungs either.

[15] We asked a sailor to confirm that. He nodded and bought us a drink so it has to be true.

[16] We will see what we can do. Since we don't outline anything, even we aren't sure if she's going to make it. Pinky's days are numbered, though. Count on it.

[17] It's true- go back and look if you don't believe us.

[18] We are firmly in the 'emotion' camp here at SixToes Publishing- subtitles be damned.

[19] Harry, a magically created skeleton, weighs 110 pounds or 49.89 kilograms. A downward throw from a second floor height (with the assistance of gravity) can easily reach 35 miles per hour, or 15.65 Meters squared. So where Force = Weight times Speed then 49.89 times 15.63 equals 780.77 Newtons, and Deuces are still wild because the sun isn't up, which means the odds are really good but not as good as if Kings were wild. Stuff's happening- get back to the story already!

[20] You're welcome.

[21] Too much?

[22] Oh we are firmly in the 'Gamgees are the real heroes' camp.

[23] Just wait until Book 7- Killing Grimbledung. It happens a lot in that one.

[24] Oh yeah, a LOT happens between this book and book 26 *The Dragon, the Pixie and the Wardrobe.*

[25]It's now my favorite magical color Mister Pratchett

[26] See? You're learning Dwarfish and you didn't even know it! Molto Bene!

[27] There you go- that's Dwarfish for 'quietly'. You're welcome.

[28] Dwarvish for 'really good'. Soon you'll be carrying an axe around and become a natural sprinter!

[29]It's hard to tell if he's right- remember we don't do outlines or plot layouts so we have no idea who's going to win at the moment. It's even money at this point.

[30] Civics lesson number two. Sorry.

[31] There is no foot note- we want our teeth to remain where they are. Go back to reading.

[32] Yep.

[33] We do NOT recommend looking that up. We were sorry we did during our research. Which is why we used it.

[34] This is a very nice compliment to Dwarfish women. You can try it at home. Results may vary. A lot.

[35] There you go- remember the days of the week for the next book *Killing Grimbledung*: Sunsday, Moonsday, Tyresday, Merchersday, Laudday, Thraksday, Gwenersday, and Sadornsday. He dies pretty much once each day for a week straight. Grunsday is colloquial for Gwenersday.

[36] Really and truly Joyce; that is a lovely and useful poem you have written.

[37] Not the other way around, of course.

[38] Ahh- another fine Dwarfish word for you! It's pronounced chee-chiz-bey-oh. Work it into your conversation at some point this week.

[39] Sorry about the Frank… and Buster. Honestly- we figured they'd never make it past the editors.

[40] We highly recommend doing some sort of craft every day. Even if it's making one of those paper lanterns where you cut the slits in the paper and then tape it into a circle. You don't have to give your craft to anyone- you just have to make it. Or paper chains. Those are great too.

[41] Calm down- it's fiction! Mostly….

[42] Hah, hah?

[43] Sorry- we got caught up in that word order thing too.

[44]Trust us on that. If rats creep you out, definitely do <u>not</u> look up how small of a space they can fit through, how long they can hold their breath, or how far they can jump. Don't do it.

[45]Yeah- a counter is an *easy* jump for a rat. Do not look up any other details!

[46]In Dwarfish.

[47] It will have to wait until Book 8. Book 7 is all killing.

[48]Oh yes- if someone tries to serve you scones without clotted cream, beware!

[49] She won't. And she'll be sure to tell Grimbledung in Book 7.

[50] Whoa, whoa, WHOA! Sorry about that, folks- it kind of slipped out. In our defense, since that movie about that big ship that sank, we have been hazy on the line between PG-13 and R.

[51] Nope- we are not going to explain the lack of lungs. If you had rolled better, it wouldn't even be an issue at this point!

[52] Tape not included. Obviously.