
DEATH COMES UNEXPECTEDLY
G
Killing Grimbledung
Rated M for Dubious Footnotes

Killing Grimbledung

Tales from a Second Hand Wand Shop
Book 7

As usual, no animals were harmed in the writing of this story. A certain German Shepard refused to stay out of the room and watched the author type day in and day out. In his defense, it was probably because the author tended to share Doritos with him.

At this point in the series, any similarity between the characters in this book and persons living or dead is definitely on purpose.
Deal with it.

By Robert P. Wills

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"Not all those who wander are lost"

- J.R.R. Tolkien (as Bilbo Baggins)

"Hey! Where the hell am I?"

- Robert R.P. Wills (as Grimbledung Sixtoes)

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Chapter 1
Love Is Mostly All You Need. Mostly

Grimbledung lifted his mug high into the air, even standing on his toes to get the most height possible. In one smooth motion he brought it down in a graceful arc to connect with the side of the Orc's head. The mug shattered, spattering ale over the Orc. It comingled with the blood that started spouting from the cut he had just received.

Satisfied, Grimbledung sat back down.

The Orc stood and spun around, looking for his assailant. When he didn't see one directly in front of him, he looked down. Down at the Gnome. The suspiciously satisfied-looking Gnome who was in a drinking establishment with no drink. "You look like a Gnome that's gotten tired of livin'."

"Yeah? And you look like an Orc that's gotten tired of his teeth!" Grimbledung stood quickly, knocking his chair to the floor. "All four of them."

"The other six are growin' back in." The Orc said defensively.

"How 'bout I make it an even five?" Grimbledung balled up his fists and let loose with a flurry of punches at the Orc's midsection. It was as high as he could reach.

The Orc sledgehammered the top of Grimbledung's head, knocking him onto his butt. "This is getting' plain ridiculous."

Grimbledung rolled to the side and back onto his feet. "Oh yeah?" He kicked the Orc in the shin. "You ain't seen nothing yet, you slack jawed knuckle dragger!" He kicked the other shin. "A matching set!"

The Orc looked around the room self-consciously. A few patrons were watching the action. Most had returned to their drinks- purposefully not making eye contact with him. Several shook their heads in disgust.

"Come on now." The Orc said. He reached down and grabbed Grimbledung's head holding him too far away to hit him. "Jus' stop it alright?"

"Your mother was an Urkai roadie and your father smelt of Goblin!"

Now more patrons turned to look. They knew that as the insults grew, the show got better.

"I'm warnin' ya." The Orc looked around again. He bent down and whispered. "Come on now, I'm getting a reputation as a bully for beatin' ya up every other day. Bug someone else, will ya'? *Please*?" He let go of Grimbledung and said louder for the benefit of the crowd as well as his reputation. "Now beat it!"

Grimbledung lunged forward and punched the Orc. It was well below the midsection.

Several patrons gasped at the faux pas.

The Orc winced. "M'kay, I've had jus' about enough of you." He reached down and grabbed Grimbledung by the arms, pinning them to his side. He picked Grimbledung up to eye-level- but not closer

because the Gnome was trying to kick him. "You need help, little fella. Ya really do."

"What I need is you to put me down, so your thrashing can continue!"

The Orc leaned in. "We've all had girl trouble's, Mate." He whispered. "Listen, *I get it*."

"Oh yeah? You're the girl around here!"

"Ya just gotta work through them." The Orc pressed on. "Get past it, *y'know*?"

The pair stared at each other for a long moment.

"I know." Grimbledung went slack in the Orc's grip. "What else can I do?"

"Getting' beat up isn't going to solve your problems. Go talk to that gal of yours. Let her know how you feel."

"I don't know." Tears welled up in Grimbledung's eyes. "I mean… I just don't know."

"Aww hey now, come on; don't go cryin' on me." The Orc hissed. "Folks is watching. We're both lookin' bad now!" He gave Grimbledung a little shake. "Pull yourself together, bub!"

"Yeah, okay. Okay." Grimbledung sniffed hard then looked around. "Say; can you at least throw me out? I've got a reputation too, you know." He whispered.

"Sure, pal. I kin do that for ya." The Orc whispered back. He raised his voice: "And I don't wanna see your ugly Gnome mug in here…" He considered for a moment. "For the rest of the week!" Which since it was Thraksday was only a day and a half away.

"It's a better sight than yours, that's for sure!" Grimbledung said back. "Folks are tryin' to eat you know!"

"Nice." The Orc stomped to the door and threw Grimbledung a very respectable albeit not lethal distance out the door. He watched as Grimbledung sailed almost fifteen feet and landed in a heap. Worried, he watched for several moments longer until Grimbledung raised a thumb at him. "And stay out!" Relieved, he shouted for good measure before returning to his table. "Hope that Gnome gets his lady problems under control" He said loudly. "Then all his troubles'll be over. Crazy little cuss." He thumbed toward the door. "Right as rain he'll be once they talk it through and she realizes her mistake. Amiright?"[1] (Please visit the foreboding footnote at your leisure)

Several of the patrons chuckled in agreement.

The ones that had woman problems of their own just returned to their drinks. Because they knew better.

Chapter 2
Magical Mystery Tourists-
All They Need is Hate

The raven haired Dwarfess gestured with her fork casually to her left. "There." She said without moving her lips.

The other Dwarfess sitting across from her picked up her glass and brought it to her lips. Before drinking she turned her head to the side, pushing her hair behind her ear. "I see him," she said as she brought the glass up to shield her mouth.

"You want to do something about him?"

"No. We'll just have to get there first. This town will be a hello-goodbye kind of place. We'll push out before daybreak."

The first Dwarfess nodded. "An extra day's rest would be nice but after all we've been through, there's no way I'm going to let some idiot with a doll ruin our plan. I say we get rid of him tonight just in case."

Mantodea shook her head at her companion. "Just be patient, Bextra; there's no way that idiot is going to get there before us." She pointed with her fork again. "Uh oh; he's at it again."

They both casually turned to watch.

So did the other patrons eating dinner. It was an unusual show.

The owner of the establishment- a hulking brute with two heads named Runion and Earl- peeked around the curtain from the kitchen area.

Or maybe Earl and Runion did.

Either way, it was Earl that spoke first: "What is going on out there? It's like an assassins' convention or something. Shady business, that."

"I noticed it too," replied Runion. "I swear I've heard them all talking about killing someone but none of them seem to know each other at all. At first, I thought it was a Penny Lane Crew," he said referring to a gathering of criminals, none of which knew who else was in the group so that if any were caught, the others could not be identified, no matter how much torture was used. "That one in the corner. That's who I thought was the Blue Jay," he said, referring to the one criminal who financed a Penny Lane affair and therefore knew the identities of the others in the collaboration.

Earl nodded. "He does look like the type. At first I thought that one over there was the Orange Tern." He said of the hulk of a human seated in the corner. He was bent over his meal, consuming it like a ravenous beast, all the while keeping an eye on everyone else in the room. "He's definitely muscle, either way." Earl shook his head. "Gads. Doesn't he know what a fork is?"

Runion grimaced. "Seems not. He's going to creep out the other diners."

Earl snapped his fingers several times. "Imran?"

After a moment, a haggard looking waiter shuffled up. "Bossss." he said. "Mornin'."

"Good morning. Could you please take a pass of the room and try to find out what these people are up to?" Earl said.

"Up toooo?"

"Yeah; they might not act like they're together but they're all up to something," Runion added.

"Uhhhg…Penny Lane folk? They creep me out." Imran shuddered- which from a Zombie, really meant something.

"I don't think so." Earl answered. "But Runion thinks maybe."

Imran looked out at the dining area. "How'm I supposed to do thaaat?"

"Well, go out there and find out what they're all doing while you wait on their tables."

"But don't *act* like you're finding out what they're all doing," Runion warned.

"Huhhh?"

"Serve casually."[2] Earl suggested as he gestured at the dining area. "I'll wait back here for your report."

"Me too." Said Runion because really, he had no choice in the matter since Earl was going to wait..

"Huhhh." Imran said. He grabbed a carafe of coffee as he shuffled out into the room. Hopefully in a casual, yet conversation-inducing manner as a Zombie waiter could. He started shuffling toward a tall pale Human who was sitting by himself. Yet still having a conversation.

An angry one.

"Oh yes I did!" The Human said. "Everything you told me to!" He nodded furiously. "To the letter!" He slammed his hand down hard on the table. When he pulled his hand away, a battered and beaten stuffed bunny sat crooked on the table. "Everything!" He hissed as he leaned in towards the toy.

Imran shuffled up beside the man. "Coffeeee?"

"What?" The Human looked up at Imran.

"You want y'rrr coffee freshened up?"

"Sure, sure. Thanks." The man didn't take his eyes off the doll.

Imran poured the coffee slowly as he tried to decide on his line of questioning. "Sooo… You talk to that toy?" Imran finished pouring the coffee and brought the carafe up. He grimaced. Since he was a Zombie, it wasn't out of the ordinary. "And it answers?"

"Of course not."

"Of course not." Echoed Imran. "Not at all what I meant."

"That would make me crazy."

"Probably." Agreed Imran. "So….the toy..."

The human leaned toward Imran. "The toy," he said in a conspiratorial whisper, "allows me to talk to the denizens of the Nether World."

"That's what I figured from the start." Imran leaned back from the man. "Seemed obvious." He lied as he sloshed the coffee around in the carafe. He looked around the room. Casually. "You here on business?"

"It's more like pleasure." The man rubbed his hands together. "Mwaaa haaa haaa! A pleasure to kill that Gnome! They called me a fool. But I'm the fool on the hill. Looking down at their ineptitude!"

"I can see that completely." Imran walked off, angling toward the two Dwarfesses. Who at least from a distance seemed normal.

"How far are we from town?" The auburn-haired Dwarfess asked as Imran approached.

"Less than a week I think," the dark-haired one answered. She looked up at Imran. "Yes?"

"Topping off coffees." Imran sloshed the coffee around in the carafe.

"I'm drinking tea," the auburn-haired Dwarfess gestured at her cup.

"Uhhh." Imran said. "You?" He sloshed the carafe at the dark-haired one.

"I suppose." She slid the cup and saucer closer to the waiter. "Thanks."

Imran poured the coffee as slowly as he could. "You know you're in town, right?"

"What?"

Imran gave a toothy smile (he just had them installed!) to the coffee-drinking Dwarfess. "You mentioned getting to town; you're in it already." He finished pouring the coffee and held the carafe up beside his face. "Hah hah?"

"I meant another town." The Dwarfess said as she took her cup. "Where those stupid Gnomes are."

Imran shrugged. "There are s-s-s-stupid Gnomes in every town. Most have s-s-s-several, in fact."

"Hah, hah." The dark haired Dwarfess said.

"That's no joke," Imran informed her.

"Yeah, I guess not." The Dwarfess replied.

"So it's more business than pleasure?" He fished.

"Oh no; killing those Gnomes will be a great pleasure," the auburn one said.

"Truly," agreed the other.

"Huhhh." Imran said as he shuffled off toward another table. Hopefully a more-sane, or at least less homicidal table.

He staggered toward the large table in the very center of the room. It was usually set aside for groups of eight to twelve. There was a Halfling sitting in the largest chair as if he were holding court. He was alone. Except for a black crow that was perched on the back of the Halfling's chair.

"Coffee?" Imran asked as he sloshed the carafe. "Freshen you up, Sire?" He figured since the Halfling seemed to be holding court, he should at least address him as such.

"I'm no Sire." The Halfling said flatly. He pushed his cup toward the Zombie. "I was much more powerful than a mere king."

"Caw!" The crow said with a nod of its head.

"Yes, that is true."

After dealing with the other patrons in the room, Imran just nodded, "Sounds true to me as well. Sir?"

The Halfling opened his mouth, then shut it. "Hmmmpf." He said instead.

Imran poured the coffee very slowly. "Ss-s-s-so you waiting for others in your group?" He asked, opting for no title at all.

"There is no one else in my group." He held his hands out wide. "I used to rule with a mighty fist all that I could see from the tallest tower. To the horizon, then that far again."

"Uuuuhhh." Imran said because nothing else came to mind. He finished pouring the coffee then turned to look to where Earl was peeking out of the curtain. He gave his boss a shrug.

Earl gestured for him to continue.

"What brings you to our above average establishment with below average prices?" Imran asked, using one of several management approved jokes.

"Passing through."

"Traveling salesman?" Imran tried, hoping he just had an immense area to cover.

"Only if I'm selling revenge!"

"Revenge does often come cheap," Imran noted. "And usually cold."[3]

"This will cost someone their life, so yeah; it's cheap."

Imran sloshed the remaining coffee around in the carafe. "I'm going to guess that you're going to kill a Gnome."

The Halfling looked up at Imran. "That would be an accurate guess, my good undead fellow."

"Caw!" The Crow warned.

"It's not like he cares, Bert," the Halfling said. He narrowed his eyes at the Zombie. "You don't care about some Gnome, do you?"

"Honestly, no. When human sized folk die, then I care. Especially if they have good knees." Imran flexed at the knees- they popped and cracked. "I could use an upgrade."

"If any athletic looking ones get killed as innocent bystanders, I'll send word."

"That's very neighborly of you," Imran said. He looked over his shoulder at the curtain. Neither Runion nor Earl were there anymore. "Going to finish my pa-ssss of the room." Without waiting for a response, he turned and shuffled off toward the last person in the dining room- a human wearing a brightly colored cloak- which made him a Magician of some sort. As Imran got closer and got a look at his face, he seemed familiar. "Good morning, good Sir," Imran said. He sloshed the carafe around. "Top off your coffee?"

"That would be nice, yes." The man said pleasantly.

Imran looked at the man's face. "I think I know you, Sir."

"Oh, that is likely. Most likely, in fact." The man said haughtily. "I am *indeed* quite famous."

While it was possible that this particular Magician was -indeed- famous, the odds were that he was merely a local minstrel or conjuror of cheap tricks[4]. Imran looked at the man's cloak hoping for a clue. There were the Magician-compulsory moons and stars sewn on it but also a few aquatic creatures. "Are you one of The Great Denizens?" He tried.[5]

"Indeed," said the tall, mysterious man, "I am The Walrus."

"Mister Pinniped? Right. I s-s-saw you perform last year at the Rascal Curves Theatre. Very impress-ssive."

"You got a little stutter there," Mister Pinniped observed.

"New tongue."

"Ahhh. Well then." He said unsure how to continue. He opted for the ever-useful sales pitch: "I'll be on tour next month. Make sure you come see my new act. It's riveting."

"More exciting than when you get swallowed by that walrus, it gets cut in half, and you appear in the box across the stage?"

"Oh yes- even more so than that."

"How?" It was, Imran remembered, a truly gory and exciting show where the Magician fought off the walrus with a chair and a whip until he was devoured whole. At that point, a Troll assistant fought the beast, finally cutting it in half with a massive scimitar, revealing the surprising lack of the Magician while at the same time, revealing the fully expected and unsurprising amount of blood and guts that were contained within the skin of an adult walrus. The most surprised were those in the first three rows of what were, as it turned out, inaccurately labeled merely a "Splash Zone".

"I eat red-hot rivets." Mister Pinniped stood and pantomimed spitting. "Ptooo Ptooo Ptooo! I spit them out and make them stick in a piece of metal across the room."

"How does that top the walrus being cut in half?"

"The piece of metal is behind my assistant…"

"Walrus?"

"Elf."

"Ahhh."

"And while she does bleed and blister while the act is going on, afterwards, she is fine." The magician bowed to a non-existent audience.

"I see." Imran said. Now he was unsure of how to continue. He opted for something that worked at the other tables. "So are you just passing through?"

"Yes." The man took another bow then sat.

"So you aren't here to put on a show?" Imran poured slowly. "Or something more lethal, perhaps?" He asked since it seemed to be a popular activity with the current patrons.

"Definitely more lethal. You are a mighty slow pourer."

"New elbows," Imran lied. He finished pouring the coffee. "Gnome?"

"Gnome elbows? I'd imagine they wouldn't fit right." He looked at Imran's elbows. Even though he wore a long sleeve shirt, and he was put together with random parts, his elbows seemed to be where elbows should be on a person his size.

"No; are you in the market to end a Gnome's existence?" Imran asked. Delicately.

"Oh yes. I am indeed." Mister Pinniped glowered. "His and the lives of a couple of wayward Magician Guild Enforcers who seem to have lost their way due to the aforementioned also-soon-to-be-doomed Gnome."

"That's an executable offense?"

"You get off the map, you get eaten by something." He picked up his cup. "Thanks for the top off."

"Gladly," Imran said as he avoided any S's. He turned and looked around the room. Hoping to find someone who was friendly, non-homicidal, and... actually non-homicidal was at the top of the list. Across the way, against the wall, a Dwarf was sitting. A friendly looking one, by Dwarf standards in any case.. He took several

shuffling steps toward him. “Need your coffee warmed up?” He asked as he approached.

“No.”

Imran looked at the table- the Dwarf had finished his meal. “Dessert menu?” He tried, even though Dwarves weren’t known to have much of a sweet tooth.

“No.”

“Aperitif?” He offered since Dwarves were known for their copious drinking.

“Nae, laddy.”

“Uhhh.” Imran was out of guesses. Another more final one popped into his mind. “Check?”

The Dwarf pointed to a silver coin on the table. “Again, no.”

“Okay; what the hell.” He said because, at that point, it was worth asking. “You going to kill a Gnome in the near future?”

“That’s it on the nose.” The Dwarf stood.

“Figured as much.” Imran said. “Because he...” he coaxed.

“Because he not only stole a bunch of treasure from me, but he caused my two main attractions to fly off. I’ve lost a fortune in revenue at my absurdly profitable tourist trap of a theme park because that stupid Gnome talked to my dragons.”

“You lost them? Dragons?”

“No, I know where they are but he told them about the treasure room so they never leave there.” He scowled. “ 'Course, he asked them to tea, if you can believe that. So I'm sure they'll wander off for that. But my customers never get to see them now.”

"They are suckers for tea." Imran pointed out. He looked over his shoulder. Earl was back at the curtain. He gestured for Imran to come over. "Well then, perhaps I could…"

"Good day to you." The Dwarf marched off.

"Uhhh." A relieved Imran said as he shuffled back to his boss(es).

"Well?" Earl asked when he got there.

"This is one tough crowd, Boss," Imran said. "Everyone is here to kill Gnomes."

"Are they in season?" Runion poked his head out of the curtain.

"Uhhh." Imran said. "If that's a straight line, Boss, I'm not sure how to handle it."

"Aim for the fences?" Runion offered.

"Yeah, make it good," Earl coaxed.

Imran considered it for a moment. "If death is the spice of life, then Gnomes are the reason for the season…ing?"

Earl tilted his hand back and forth. "Ehh; not bad."

"Seemed kind of forced to me." Admitted Runion, who could always turn a good phrase.

"New tongue?" Imran tried.

"That one's not. Sure; at least just to you." Runion said. "Tomorrow I'll go by City Hall and see how many tags there are for Gnomes." He hesitated for a moment. "I imagine they're short on Gnome tags."

"Nice." Earl said. "See if you can find anything else out at breakfast or dinner tomorrow[6]. I hope they aren't all after the same Gnome or they're going to be in trouble."

"I don't think these folks are going to stay much longer; they're all really intent on killing this particular Gnome or Gnomes."

"I hadn't considered that," Runion said as he turned to leave. "I feel sorry for whoever that is."

"Me too." Earl said as he too walked off. Because Runion had.

Imran shook his head. He planned to stay out of the entire mess. Conveniently, since the rest of the book takes place elsewhere, he actually manages to never even get mentioned again.

Chapter 3
Piano, Man

Magnus stood in the middle of the store appraising the instruments. "Hmmm." He said, unhelpfully.

The shop owner held up a tuba. "A brass instrument is definitely sturdy." He hefted it several times. "Solidly built and heavy. This then?"

"I want something more… substantial. What do you have in the way of larger, uncarryable in a parade type of instrument?"

The man gave a nod even though 'uncarryable' wasn't a word. Now he looked around the shop. "Well hey, I actually did get something delivered that fits that bill. Definitely, I do." He gestured at a corner. "Right over there; they call it a *piano*."

"A piano? What's that?"

The man thought for a moment. "It's a Dwarfish invention. It's like a harp that is inside a wooden case. And when you hit a little lever, a hammer strikes the string. By hitting the levers in patterns, you can make music with it. You can make it play loud or soft by hitting the levers hard or soft." He smiled. "The Dwarves originally called it 'Piano e forte' which is Dwarfish for soft and loud which is how the music comes out of it. Then over time, it was just shortened to Piano."[7] He explained, thinking the customer was a music aficionado and would appreciate the very accurate description.

The customer was not and did not.

"Is it heavy?"

"Quite. It takes two men just to move it." He pointed. "That's it over there. The large crate looking thing."

"In the crate?"

"No, it *is* the crate."

Magnus walked up to it. "Quite imposing."

"Yes it really makes great melod…."

"I'll take it."

"Do you want to hear it first?" The man had taken the time to learn how to play a simple song on it. "I'm actually getting pretty good with it. I think these things are really going to catch on." He stepped up to the piano and flexed his fingers. "How about I…"

"Nope." Magnus interrupted him. "That's not necessary. At all." He untied a money pouch from his belt. "What's it cost?"



Grimbledung walked down the street. "Morning!" He said to a passerby.

"I'm not going to argue with you." Said a woman that knew from past experience that even though it was indeed before noon, she could still be drawn into an argument about whether it was actually morning or not with this particular Gnome. Even if he started off saying it was morning to begin with.

Grimbledung waved over his shoulder. "It is, you know." He looked at another woman. "Before noon."

"Nope." She replied, not even breaking her stride. "Not again, sorry."

"Huh." Grimbledung continued down the street. Ahead he noticed a crowd gathering. "Neat!" He said as he picked up his pace to join in. "I hope someone brought torches and pitchforks."

When Grimbledung approached the crowd, he pushed his way to the front. Everyone was looking toward the sky so they really didn't notice him weaving between them.

"What's up there?" Grimbledung asked as he stepped to the front of the crowd. Next to where an 'X' had been scraped into the dirt. "Someone going to jump? Dragons? Falling Elves? Bird poop?"

An Elf looked down at him. "Why would Elves fall from the sky?"

"It can happen." Grimbledung said defensively. "Morning." He smiled at the Elf.

"A good morning to you, Gnome." The Elf said back. "I still don't think we would ever fall from the sky."

"Yeah, I suppose that's true." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "It would make a mess."

The Elf went back to looking upward.

"Hey, what's that thing up there?" Grimbledung pointed at the large box hovering in the sky. It was about halfway to the top of the Sal's Saloon- a three story building. "They delivering new beds? Those old ones were pretty lumpy."

"No, it's some sort of instrument, I heard them say," said a human next to Grimbledung.

"Medical instrument?"

"Musical."

"Medical musical? Never heard of such a thing. You're just making that up, I think."

The Human went back to looking at the sky.

"Are you named Grimbledung?" A young man asked.

"Yeah! That's me!" Grimbledung did a little hop. "That's me! That's me!"

The young man nodded. "Okay, okay; I was just making sure."

"You're making sure that was my name? It hasn't changed in a while. Unless…"

Right out of the blue, this case appeared to me. Like magic. Sure it wasn't a dame, but I'd be glad to take this youngsters money just as well.

Taking money is what I do. I'm Grim. Grim Noir, private investigator. I take money, solve cases, and have a celebratory drink. Usually in that order. "So what do you need, kid?" I asked the kid.

"Who me?"

"Yeah you." Kids. They act all smart but they aren't. Take my word for it. "Kid." I added just in case he'd forgotten who he was. "What's the case?"

"There's no case." The kid said back. He was looking confused.

They do that because they aren't smart like me. "I just wanted to make sure what your name was is all. Case? Case of what?"

Nuts.

"Yeah, that's me." Grimbledung said again.

"Okay then." The youth took Grimbledung by the collar and as he had been instructed (and paid), he muscled Grimbledung onto the intersection of the roughly scrawled 'X' on the ground.

"Hey! Quit shoving!" Grimbledung said as the boy shoved him into place. "What's wrong with you?"

"You're supposed to stand there." The youth said. "I was told you should have a front row seat."

The crowd gasped.

"Dang right I should." Grimbledung said. "Front row is where I belong." He looked up because everyone else was.

Everyone took a step back from him.

Grimbledung didn't notice because he was still looking up. "Is that thing getting bigger?" Grimbledung pointed at the large box as it got larger. "Someone Contra-Minisculate it or something?"

The crowd took several other steps away from Grimbledung.

The youth, realizing what was happening, turned and walked away, glad he had been paid in advance.

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "You know if I didn't know any better, I'd say that thing was fall…"

Chapter 4
Ready Player One

Grimbledung jumped forward and to the right over the black disk, then forward to the left over another one. He looked into the distance. "Is that a unicorn coming out of that Sulphur vent?" When the coast was clear, he then jumped backward to the left over another black disk. "Hah!"

WE HAVE DISCUSSED THIS. AT LENGTH.

"Who?"

US.

"Who us? You us or me us? Or us us? Us-es? Usi? What's the plural of us?"

IT'S JUST US.

"So it's like peas, chickens and beers."

THOSE ALL HAVE PLURALS.

"If you say so." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "So who is us this time?"

WE ARE US. WE TWO. THE TWO OF US. WE HAVE DISCUSSED IT.

"When?"

JUST A MOMENT AGO WHEN YOU DID THE EXACT SAME THING.

"Who, me?"

Death stood quickly looming over the board, black cloak billowing in the hot breeze. THIS IS ABSURD EVEN FOR GNOMES. She raised a black cloth draped arm and pointed a bony finger at Grimbledung[8]. THERE IS NO JUMPING BACKWARDS UNLESS YOU ARE KINGED! CHILDREN OF *ALL* RACES UNDERSTAND THAT ONE SIMPLE RULE. Behind her, lightning flashed dutifully. And ominously.

"Okay, okay." Grimbledung returned his piece to the space before he had jumped backwards. He did not return the extra piece he had captured. "Better?"

YOU SHALL RETURN MY PIECE TO THE GAME BOARD FROM WHENCE IT CAME. The lightning acted as the exclamation point.

"I was getting to it, I was getting to it," Grimbledung said as he put back the piece. "Just wait till I have a flying king..." He leaned back on the three-legged stool. It was a little wobbly but definitely better than the previous one he had used. By two legs.

Death shook her head. WHY I EVER AGREED TO PLAY YOU...

"Oh, calm down before your head pops off." Grimbledung smirked. "Again."

THAT WAS ONE TIME.

"Ri ri right." Grimbledung stammered. He looked around. The desolate landscape stretched on to the horizon in all directions. Ruined buildings and dead trees cropped up here and there between steaming Sulphur vents. Everywhere lost souls meandered about with nowhere to go and nothing to do. More-purpose-driven lost souls stood in a long line that snaked to the horizon and probably farther. The other

end of the line ended at a ramshackle pizza stand. It would not open until the second Grunsday of the month and stay open for exactly forty-three minutes. This happened to be that particular Grunsday. "Oh no! I was winning fair and square too!"

YOU WERE CHEATING UNFAIR AND ROUND![9] Lightning flashed again. This time much closer. AND WE NEVER AGREED TO FLYING KINGS!

"No, that's not not not... it." Grimbledung's vision blurred. He rubbed his eyes. "What's happening this time?"

LET US SEE. Death leaned over and smelled Grimbledung's head. SMELLS LIKE THE ENEMA OF REVIVIFICATION THIS TIME. MESSY BUSINESS, LIFE.

"Shouldn't you smell the other end to be sure?" Grimbledung waggled his ears.

Death stared at the Gnome with black, hollow eyes that seemed to lead to the very beginning of time. Even so, there was pain conveyed in the look. NOT ON YOUR LIFE.

Grimbledung pointed at the Mistress of the Underworld. "Ahh, I see what you did ther....ther....there." His vision got darker. "Ahhhh!"

WE WILL FINISH THIS GAME LATER, GNOME. Death said, ominously.

"You sure?" Grimbledung cocked his head to the side. He never actually expected to be revived from the dead (like most folks) and was always pleasantly surprised when it happened. As most folks would be. Grimbledung cocked his head to the other side. "Really? Rolton Chips. Soon even?"

OH YES. Death smiled. WE ARE GOING TO HAVE PLENTY OF TIME FOR GAMES. PLEN-TY. She steepled her

bony fingers and tapped the ends together. MWUAAA HAAA HAAA!

"Don't you dare move any pieces!" He waved his arms. "What an underworld, what an underworld!" Grimbledung said as he did every time he faded back to the Land of the Living. Which was often.

Death shook her head with disgust, then casually looked around. She picked up one of Grimbledung's disks from the board and slipped it into her pocket. Then, even though she didn't have lips, she walked away whistling. After a few paces, she angled toward the pizza line. Where she was going to cut to the front of the line, ask what all the specials were, end up ordering a large with the works, pay with an out of Underworld check, then on her way out, sneeze into the cheese bin. As usual.

Chapter 5
The Girls With Draygoo Ta'too

"So what's the fastest wagon you have, Mister…?" Mantodea's voice trailed off as she appraised the haggard looking man. He seemed as if he should be living behind a dumpster instead of running a stable.

"Ehhh?" The man turned his head, putting his ear closer to the Dwarf. "What's that??"

With a shrug, Mantodea shouted: "What's the fastest wagon you have, Mister?"

"Why're you shouting?" The man ducked slightly.

"You didn't seem to hear me the first time, mister."

"Ta'too."

"I don't have any, not that it makes any difference."

"That's my name," the man said. His eyebrows went up. "Hey, how about I check to make sure?"

"Check me?"

"For tattoos, honey." The man leered at her. "Want me to check?"

"Maybe you should check your underwear to see if that's your name." Mantodea crossed her arms.

"Don't wear any." Now his raised eyebrows lowered to where one eye winked. "You want to check to make sure?"

"The fastest wagon," Mantodea said tersely.

"Wagons ain't fast, darling."

Mantodea clenched her fists.

"She having a fit, freckles?" The grizzled looking Human asked the other Dwarfess.

"What?" Bextra had been looking around the area for any other useful items they might need for their trip. That she could steal.

"It wasn't important," Mantodea said. "Or tasteful."

"Oh."

"Listen, this is a fun conversation, getting to gawk at you two pretty gals and all, but I've got better things to do..." He scratched at the seat of his pants.

No one said anything for a long moment.

"Truly, nothing's coming to mind," the man admitted. "But I'm sure anything is better than this." He looked down at the two females. "Anything. Something. Something up close and specific even."

"What do you mean wagons aren't fast?" Mantodea tried ignoring the innuendo. She still had her fists clenched. "You're really annoying, *Mister* Ta'too."

"Listen toots," the man said. "A wagon is four wheels that sits around and does nothing until it's pulled. Whatever is pulling it makes it fast or not." He shrugged. "Smaller wagons have a *potential* to be faster but ya know, if you get a nag pulling a chariot, a full covered wagon with two young steeds would be quicker." He smirked. "So a bigger question would be; you two morsels want to get wet when it rains or not?"

"What did you just call us?" Bextra seethed- she had stopped looking around and was now paying attention.

Mantodea flexed her fingers- they were getting tired staying clenched. "Give us a minute." She put her arm around her partner and

led her away from the haggard looking man. "Bextra, have you ever driven a large wagon? A covered one?"

Bextra shook her head. "No, but how hard can it be? It's like a regular small wagon you just need to leave more space to turn, right?"

"I don't know..." Mantodea looked up. The haggard looking man was looming over them. "Can we help you?!?"

The man scratched the stubble on his chin. "Don't rightly think you can." He leered. "Mayhap the *two* of you could."

Mantodea ignored the lewd comment- she was already planning on killing the man. "It's rude to listen in on other's conversations, you know."

"Yep."

"And?" Bextra added.

"Oh. Yep... ladies?" The man tried. "Or gals maybe?" He scratched the seat of his pants again. "She-Dwarves?"

"Just give us a wagon that has the potential to be fast." Bextra snapped.

"Got a nice little Spyder I can let go of."

"A spider? Like the bug?"

"No; spyder with a 'y'. It's Elvish for 'the top comes down when you want it to'."

"We call that a 'Cabriolet' in Dwarfish," Mantodea pointed out.[10]

The man scratched his chin. "M'kay, I suppose. It's a Cabrio then. Say, you got mounts?"

"No."

"Headin' someplace?"

"Yes." Bextra answered again. Now *her* fists were clenched.

"Well unless you've got some neat magic tucked under those dresses," the man grinned wide, "which I suspect yas do in one fashion or another, you're gonna need some mounts."

"I say we just kill him right here and take whatever wagon we want." Bextra said.

"Hey now, ya know that's not polite to say things like that!"

"Yep," Bextra said.

"I agree. Let's just act all innocent until we do him in." Mantodea smiled.

"I can hear you talking, Miss She-Dwarf."

Mantodea looked up at the man and smiled. "We'll take a smaller covered wagon then, kind sir."

"Fine, fine." The man backed up to put some distance between him and the now potentially homicidal Dwarves. "I'll bring it around. Yeah, a small covered one that would fit your bill nicely." He pointed across the livery. "Go talk to Draygoo about your mounts."

"Draygoo? Who's that?"

"My son; he's in the barn."

"Great; another one of you to deal with." Mantodea said.

"What's the wagon cost?" Bextra asked. "Not that it matters," she added ominously. "I'm just curious is all."

"Ten silver?" The man said. For the first time, he sounded more unsure than snarky. "What'd'ya mean don't matter? I can do a bundle deal for two mounts and a wagon for twenty. It'll come with all the tack. Does that work?"

"Pull that wagon out and we'll go get a couple of beasts to pull it." Bextra snapped.

The pair turned and walked to the far end of the compound-towards a large barn.

"Are you really going to kill him?" Mantodea asked.

Bextra shrugged. "I'm fifty-fifty right now. It's not like we'll be coming back to this town again."

Mantodea nodded. Even though she had actually killed several males while being with Bextra, she still had not gotten used to it.[11] "Why don't we just take the wagon and go someplace else? Why do we need to go back to Julesville anyway? Just forget those stupid Gnomes and we can go someplace else. Like North Jute. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like you're going soft on me," Bextra said. "Those Gnomes. Grimbledung especially, deserve to die for sending us off the map."[12]

"But we're both okay," Mantodea said. "I just think that killing them... him… outright is going to cause problems with the law. Remember their Sheriff? That werewolf?" She shuddered. "And his girlfriend? Whatever she is."

"We'll be in and out of town before anyone knows what's going on. Just relax. I know what I'm doing."

Mantodea just nodded in return as the duo walked into the barn. No one seemed to be around.

"Hello?" Mantodea called. "Anyone here?"

"Be with you in a minute," a voice called amicably from inside a stall.

"So two mounts and a wagon are going to cost us twenty silver." Mantodea said. "That's almost half of what we've got." She frowned.

"I knew we should have cleaned out that account in South Jute when we had the chance."

"Just relax; that money will be there when we get back." Bextra said. "I say we take the wagon and mounts, and not lose any money on the deal."

"I'm not sure we should be killing..." Mantodea stopped when a young man exited the stall at the far side of the barn.

"What can I help you ladies with?" The youth asked with a smile.

"Draygoo?"

"That's me." The young man hooked his thumbs on his overalls. "What can I help you with?"

"We need two mounts." Bextra said. "The old man..."

"My Dad."

"Your Dad," Bextra shook her head. "Your Dad…"

The young man held out his hands. "Let me cut you off to say I'm just going to apologize right now for anything he said to you. Disrespectful, lewd, and probably insulting."

"Yes, well…he was a little..." Mantodea's voice trailed off.

"A little?" The youth smiled again. "That means you caught him on a *good* day. Usually he's *a lot*." He dusted his hands together. "So two mounts you say. Hey! I've got a couple of ponies that you two ladies would fit on nicely."

"No," Bextra said. "Your Dad said we needed two mounts to pull the wagon he's got for us. A spyder, he said."

"Fairly fast mounts would be nice." Mantodea gave a smile.

The young man nodded. "Then you want something a little bigger than Shireland Ponies. It's a shame because until someone the right size comes along, no one'll want them. Excuse me." He turned

and walked to a stall on the other side of the barn. "I'll be right back, ladies," he said over his shoulder.

Mantodea frowned. "He seems very nice. We don't have to kill him, do we?"

"Softie." Bextra drew her wand and moved it behind her back.

Draygoo opened the half-door and led out two smallish horses. "These two'll do you just fine. They're smaller so you can handle them okay, but still big enough to pull that wagon all day without any trouble." He smiled. "You two could even ride them if you had to. Just adjust one stirrup lower so you can..."

He stopped speaking because he was firmly webbed to the ground. "Mmmfff?" The young man said from under a huge sticky mess of spider webs.

Bextra sheathed her wand. "I hope that was a 'thanks for not turning me into puddle of Draygoo goo'."

"Mmmffkew." The young man said. "Fffttthrrr?"

"He'll be fine," Mantodea said. "I promise."

"You better get tough again before we get to town. Get the mounts. I'll take care of that dolt out there."

"Okay, just…"

Bextra let out a loud sigh. "Non-lethally." She stomped out of the barn, wand at the ready.

"Mmmffkew." The young man said again.

"I'm sorry about this, Draygoo" Mantodea said. "You do seem really nice but we're in dire straits and really need to get someplace." She leaned in close. "I'll send the money for the wagon and mounts next month. I promise."

The youth nodded as much as the webbing would allow.

Mantodea took the reins of the two small horses. “The spell will wear off in about an hour.” She said as she walked out.

Bextra was standing with her hands on her hips speaking at the ground.

“Bextra?” Mantodea said as she approached. “What’s going on?” She moved beside her partner, worried she had done something rash. Or at least lethal.

“And the next time you feel the urge to degrade a woman, I suggest you ignore it!” Bextra said to the puddle of a human on the ground. “Because the next time you might not get off so easy.”

“That spell always creeps me out.” Mantodea admitted.

“It seemed fitting.” Bextra nudged the boneless puddle of goo that the man currently was with her foot.

“Let’s get going then.” Mantodea held out the reins. “I can hook up the horses if you’ll hold one.”

“Fine.” Bextra gave the man more of a kick than a nudge. “We’re out of here.”

Chapter 6
It's Not the Fall; It's the Sudden Stop At the End

The battered and stained bunny doll stared straight ahead with lifeless eyes. Black lifeless doll's eyes. And of course floppy ears.

Obviously.

"Now?" Magnus whispered nervously- his math skills were quite limited; extrapolating vectors and acceleration were quite beyond him. He was however, a master of impatience. A Grand Master, in fact.[13]

The doll remained reticent.

"Now?" The man's voice was even more agitated this time. He hazarded a glance over the top of the wall, down to the street, four stories below. Getting noticed was the last thing he wanted to have happen. In fact, on the list of things he didn't want to happen, it was number one. Just below that was 'get arrested, tried and convicted', which he felt was a good place to have it. "It has to be now!" He whispered. "Right?"

The doll continued to stare across the vacant rooftop. Oozing Reticence.

Metaphorically speaking, obviously.

"He's coming out now!" Hissed Magnus as he craned his neck to put just one eye over the ledge. "Now?"

The doll's head turned slowly toward the man. And even though it was entirely made of stuff and fluff, it exhaled long and slow.

Magnus' hands tightened on the rope. He looked at the rabbit as he started to lean back, preparing to pull the knot out of it. "Yes?"

The doll stopped exhaling and its black eyes rolled over to white.

"Hah!" Magnus lurched back pulling the knot out of the thick rope. Immediately, the walk-in safe dropped from sight. He leaned back against the wall as terrible high-pitched screaming rose up to him from the street far below. Then he hazarded a look at the doll.

Its eyes were once again black.

"That'll show him." Magnus said. "I don't see how that piano didn't kill him but that safe sure will." He picked up the doll and scurried for the roof-top hatch. He had an alibi- he just needed to make sure he was there when the law came looking for him. Because they invariably would once they figured out he was in town. If things went to plan (and the editors keep their ruddy hands to themselves) they would show up probably around Chapter 9. Off screen, that is.

Chapter 7
Licensed and Bonded in Matrimony

An Indeterminate Amount of Time Later

(Footnote 51 will explain this later on)

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? Hmmm?" He turned his head and looked at the empty pillow. "Oh. Well, Miss Flora, you are a most annoying and infuriating Gnomess."[14]

It had been more or less about a month-ish since the wedding of Cherí and Colossus (they were due back the next day-ish) and he had still not seen Flora since that night she had walked out of his room. For apparently no reason whatsoever.

"Most annoying and infuriating. I mean, it's not MY fault that there may be one… or several former wives that I may still be shackled to with the iron-clad bonds of matrimony!" He turned on his side and fluffed his pillow. "If I break the bond, I don't get my money back! What say you of that?"[15] He scowled at the pillow. "That's what I thought!"

He shoved his now-fluffed pillow under his head.

"When you realize how stupid you were to take it out on completely innocent me, you'll come back. Oh yes; you'll come back." He rolled onto his back. "And maybe I'll take you back. Maybe I won't!"

He kicked his feet.

"Ooooh!" He added for unnecessary emphasis. "Do your worstest says I, Flora Ooooh Willowfeet. Do your most bestest worstest because I'm not going to worry about your silly antics any more Or less for that matter!"

Grimbledung closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

Grimbledung opened one of his eyes and peered around the room. He hopped out of bed, bolted his door, and then made a running dive back under the covers.

"I'm not scared of you." He said aloud, albeit softly. "Not in the slightest. Tomorrow's a new day and I'll be fine. Everything will be like rosewater and butterscotch."

"Mmm… Butterscotch…" Grimbledung drifted off to sleep. And like every night for the few weeks-ish, he had terrible nightmares where contrary to what is commonly believed as impossible; he experienced gruesome and horrible deaths.

Sometimes even twice in one night.

Always at the hands of Flora.

Chapter 8
Warrior is Hungry!

Grimbledung stalked down the street.

"Stomping mad is what I am!" He said to a passing female Human who really didn't want to engage him in conversation. At all. So she hurried past.

Grimbledung stomped down the street.

"Mad!" Grimbledung declared.

Grimbledung stomped madly down the street because he was mad.

"And Hungry!"

Grimbledung madly stomped down the street towards the Duck Inn and Dine because he was hungry and mad.

He stopped at the door and patted his vest pocket, making sure he had some coins with him. Given a chance, he'd try to get someone else to pay for his breakfast. He had learned however, that showing the potential *ability* to pay for one's meal made it more likely that others

would pay for it- it was the difference between a panhandler and a pothandler.[16] Sure that his vest pocket jingled enough to demonstrate the ability to pay, Grimbledung pushed his way past the door into the Duck Inn and Dine.

The place was packed.

Elated, Grimbledung rubbed his hands together and marched toward the bar where a lone stool was available. He clambered onto it and looked left and right. Everyone seemed to be eating breakfast. He became unelated when he realized the ones sitting at the bar looked to be workers of various sorts- if their tool belts could be trusted. He spun around on the stool and surveyed the room. The entire place was full of workers.

"Nuts." Grimbledung said.

"You want nuts for breakfast?" A voice behind him said. "No eggs or bacon?"

Grimbledung spun back around. "Eggs and bacon would be just fine." He smiled as he recognized the Elvish server behind the bar. "My dear Ellowyn."

Ellowyn raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "You planning on paying for your breakfast?"

"Not if I can help it," Grimbledung said honestly. "Bah!" He slapped his hands on the bar.

"What's wrong?"

"I just broke a three-day streak!"

"You mean like that time you ran around town naked for half a week?" Now the other eyebrow came up.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Not that kind of streak. I mean streak as in a series of related things all taking place sequentially." He said. Because that's what a streak was.

"Honesty broke your streak?"

"Yes, truth be told." He slapped his hands on the counter again. "Rolton Chips! There I go again. Twice in one scene even."

"You could try a streak of being honest." The Elf suggested. "For a change of pace."

"That sounds worthwhile. I think I'll give that a go." He waggled his ears.

"So two is the current record for truths told in a row."

"So far, it seems. Bah!"

Ellowyn reached under the counter and brought up a cup and saucer. "Maybe you can see how long you can go with telling the truth?"

"Sure, that sounds like fun." Grimbledung said with a smirk. "I think I'll give that a try."

"So that streak is once again broken."

"I suppose so." Grimbledung jerked a thumb over his shoulder as Ellowyn poured coffee. "What's with the rabble?"

"The rabble, as you call them, are workers from reputable guilds who are all going to put in a hard day's work for an honest day's pay."

Grimbledung leaned back. "Oh no; are we becoming a boom town? It's going to get rough around here if it is."

"No, no." Ellowyn shook her head. "The town is having sewers installed." She gestured out into the room. "And they're going to do it."

Grimbledung sipped his hot coffee. "Sewers, huh? Those'll never catch on."[17]

"All the big towns have them. It's the sure sign that a town is going places."

"Our town is going places?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "South for the winter would be nice."

"Metaphorically speaking." Ellowyn lowered her eyebrows at him.

"We're going to metaphorical places? I thought we were on our way to nowhere in particular."

Ellowyn pursed her lips. "It's the Mayor's first official act." She said. After she unpursed her lips.

"Mayor huh?" Grimbledung said sourly. "Those'll never catch on either."

"Oh, now I get it." Ellowyn smirked. "Trouble on the home front, Grimbledung?"

"It's no trouble a pile of scrambled eggs with cheese, some bacon, and perhaps some hashed potatoes won't fix."

"From what I hear, I figured you'd need alcohol to fix what's ailing you."

"And a large ale, now that you mention it."

"For breakfast?"

"From what I hear, if you stick an orange slice in it, it makes it breakfast-y."

"And the payment for this recently ordered meal to break your fast?"

Grimbledung jingled his vest pocket. "You hear that?"

Ellowyn stared at him. "I wasn't born yesterday. Or even yesterday five hundred years ago."

"From what you hear, you should know..." Grimbledung jingled his pocket again. "I'm good for it."

Ellowyn's eyebrow went up again. "*From what I hear*, you're good for nothing." She put her hands on the counter and waited.

"Oooh! Flora Rolton Chips O. Willowfeet!" Grimbledung slapped a copper coin on the counter.

"And an ale, you said?"

Grimbledung slapped another coin onto the counter.

"Casting aspersions at our newly elected Mayoress? That I won't..."

"No, no!" Grimbledung startled. "Not at all. Never."

"If word got back to her…"

Grimbledung put another copper onto the bar and slowly slid it across.

Ellowyn took the coins. "That's good to hear."

"I'm merely using her name as a curse to get past the censors." He took another sip of coffee.

"That's going to come back and bite you, I think." Ellowyn observed.

"Bite me? The ramifications do not worry me." He took another sip. "Nope; I am not even worried enough to use contractions."

"The ramifications will bite and even perhaps whip you." The Elf considered that for a moment. "For starters. Then there's the possibility of the opposite of a contraction taking place. With a large wheel and pulleys."

"What?"

She topped off Grimbledung's coffee. "You should make amends with your girl, is all I'm saying. Before things get out of hand."

"They can be out of *foot* for all I care. Flora O. Willowfeet it all to Niflheim!" Grimbledung cursed. "We'll see who's sorry in the end. I'm not the one who will end up with a monkey on my back! You'll see."[18]

Ellowyn shook her head. "I guess we will." She moved toward the kitchen to put in Grimbledung's order, topping off coffees as she went.

Grimbledung looked at the Dwarf next to him. He had a large pickaxe strapped to his back and a hammer hanging from his tool belt. "Am I right, or am I right?" He asked as he nudged him with his shoulder. "Master digger, what say you?"

The Dwarf looked at Grimbledung. "You know what I'm doing?"

"What, right now?"

"Yeah, right now."

"Talking to what is probably the most interesting Gnome this side of TreeTop City?" Grimbledung waggled his ears.

The Dwarf scowled at Grimbledung. "Opting to finish my breakfast instead of going to jail for murder."

"Well... If breakfast is the choice for life, eat on." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Willowfeet it all, that was poetic."

The Dwarf picked up his plate and coffee and walked off.

"Huh." Grimbledung returned to his coffee and took a sip. He looked to his left. There was a grungy Human sitting there. He had a shovel strapped to his back. "Some folk..."

The Human got up and left, taking his plate with him.

"Huh." Grimbledung took another sip of coffee.

Ellowyn put a plate in front of Grimbledung. She looked at the empty seats to either side of him. "I see you're starting early today."

"Well, the early bird gets the second cheese." He gestured at the cheese on his eggs. "That's a good start on the day, right?"

"Go find Flora and apologize to her for whatever dumb thing you did. *That* would be a good start to the day."

"It's not a matter of apologizing, really..."

"Uh oh."

"It's more a matter of annulmen-tizing."

"She's left you?"

"Left me?" Grimbledung shoved some eggs in his mouth. "No wayfm."

"Wait… Annulment?" Ellowyn leaned forward and said in a low voice. "You're... you're married?"

"That might be a strong word."

"Betrothed?"

"Now you're just being silly," Grimbledung put a large spoonful of eggs in his mouth. "Goodfm!"

"Grimbledung Sixtoes..."

"Esquirefmm." Grimbledung added around the eggs.

"Whatever. I can't believe you were carrying on with that sweet Flora woman while you were already married to someone else."

Grimbledung put another large spoonful of eggs in his mouth. Half of them were now gone. "Ifff mayfee more fan one."

Ellowyn stood upright. "Did you just say you were married more than once?"

Grimbledung reached for more eggs.

Ellowyn put her hand on Grimbledung's elbow, trapping it on the bar. "*More than once*?"

"Obviously I have been married more than once." Grimbledung scoffed at the Elf. "How'm I supposed to be married to several Gnomesses at once if I didn't go through the ceremony multiple times?" He shook his head. "Gads."

"Multiple... You're married to several females at the same time? Multiple females?"

"Well, who's counting?" Grimbledung reached for his coffee with his other hand.

Ellowyn put her other hand on Grimbledung's other elbow. "Flora for one."

"It's kind of a tradition," Grimbledung explained. "I'm sure there's a helpful footnote that can explain..." He looked around. "Huh. Guess the narrative just pushes on."

The Elf pushed down on Grimbledung's elbow. "You need to get this fixed, Grimbledung. Before something drastic happens." She pushed harder on his elbow.[19]

"Hey, that hurts you know." Grimbledung winced. "Drastic? Like what?" Grimbledung shook his head sadly. "Drastic like I lost her?"

"There are other fish in the barrel," Ellowyn said, referring to the well-known Gnomish proverb.

"But I want her in the worst way imaginable, Ellowyn!" Grimbledung wrung his hands.

"You mean like standing up in a canoe? I can't imagine there would be a worst way." Ellowyn smirked.

"Or standing in a hammock. The mechanics of it are mind boggling." Grimbledung wrung his hands some more.

"What about stilts?" Ellowyn said, getting off track herself. There was a reason they were an unlikely pair of friends.

"Dated a Half-Giant for a spell, stilts aren't as troublesome as you'd imagine." Grimbledung smirked. "There was this one time..." He startled. "Wait, we're off track!" He started wringing his hands again. "I've lost Flora, Ellowyn. Lost her! What'll I do?"

"Find her, fight to get her back."

Grimbledung shook his head. "I don't know. She knows a lot of different holds and knots. Last time we wrestled, it took me all day to get loose."

"I mean a metaphorical fight, not actually…"

"You mean like if I don't actually look at her, she won't really be there? Or I put her in a box and until I look in it, she doesn't exist?" Grimbledung interrupted.

"That's pretty metaphorical, but that's not..."

"Yeah sure. I can do that." Grimbledung looked around the room. "Great. So first I get me a box."

Ellowyn nodded. "Great." She said, hoping the conversation was ending because she wasn't sure where it would go next. "That solves…."

"But should I do really something drastic like that? How about something more subtle? What if I just try to wait her out? Wait until she realized the folly of her ways and came crawling back to me, begging forgiveness? What about that?"

"That could be a really long time. And your plan in the meanwhile?"

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "I don't know; maybe come in here every day and lament to you?"

"Then I'd do something drastic."

"Drastic like what?"

"Drastic like I'll make sure you can't eat here anymore." Ellowyn let go of Grimbledung's elbows. Her arms were getting tired by now.

Grimbledung rubbed his elbow. Just one of them since that's all he could reach at one time. "Now wait a minute; where else am I supposed to get my pickled red herrings?"[20]

"I'll ban you." The Elf shrugged. "You can go eat at MacGuffins for all I care."[21]

"Eeesh," Grimbledung said. He stuck out his tongue. "Okay, okay; I'll go down to City Hall and see what I can find out about this minor wives issue."

"Wait, what?!"

Grimbledung waved a hand dismissively. "Relax; that's just a figure of speech."

"Oh." Ellowyn said, relieved.

"They are all well over eighteen years of age, of course."

"They?" Ellowyn leaned in close. "Just a minute here; how many wives are... outstanding."

"All of them; otherwise I wouldn't have married them!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Right?"

"You know what I meant..." She balled up a fist.

"Three. There's three of them." Grimbledung held up two fingers then picked up his spoon. "I'll take care of it."

"Keep me posted on your progress." Ellowyn turned to leave. "Or else."

"Sure thing; you'll be the first to know." Grimbledung lied as he returned to eating.

Chapter 9
There's No Romance Like Bromance-
No Romance I Know

"Grimbledung!" Drimblerod shouted at the top of his lungs. "Get down here and get to work!" The patrons in the shop didn't flinch because it was the fifth time he had shouted.

"For the sake of Landru, get down here!" A Human shouted.

Several customers nodded in agreement.

Drimblerod gave him a thumb's up. "Thanks. I really need to pee."

"I was just tired of hearing you yell at your life partner over and over."

"Whoa there; he's not my life partner," Drimblerod said. "He's just..."

"Does he live with you?" Interrupted the Human.

"Well...Yes?"

"Are there any plans for him moving out?"

"Well...No?"

The Human pointed at Drimblerod. "Sounds like a classic Gnomeance." He held up his hands defensively. "Not that I'm judging; I'm just making an observation."

"You are mistaken. Greatly, absurdly, overwhelmingly mistaken." Drimblerod said.

"As a disinterested party," another customer said. "It's what it looks like to me as well. Most folks are of the opinion…"

"I can assure you..." Drimblerod interrupted.

"Eeesh." Grimbledung rubbed his temples as he came down the stairs. When he got to the bottom, he detoured to Drimblerod and slapped him on the butt. "Tagging you out, partner."

"Huh," the Human remarked. He looked at the other customer who nodded in response.

"Glad you made it downstairs," Drimblerod said, trying desperately to change the subject. "What took you so long?"

"I had to wash my face... and shave my tongue." He stuck his tongue out at Drimblerod. "Ahhhhhh!"

"That's not really a thing."

"And I shaved my face too." Grimbledung puckered his lips at Drimblerod. "I'm kissably ready for work. MMMM-Mmmmm!"

Drimblerod cringed.

"Maybe you should try taking it a little easier at night. Go to bed at a decent time instead of carousing until the early hours of the morning, leaving your poor partner..."

Grimbledung stared at the Human. "Maybe you should shut..."

"Will that be all, Sir?" Drimblerod interrupted as he sidestepped around the counter. He reached out for the man's Levitation Wand. "A fine choice, that one. Want it wrapped?"

"Please," the Human glanced at Grimbledung disapprovingly. "It's a gift for someone important to me in my life that treats me with respect, *Mister* Axebreath."

Grimbledung walked to the counter and put his head on it. "What a night. Will you rub my temples, Drim?"

"No."

"Fine, I'll do it myself." Grimbledung groaned. Then started rubbing his temples. "It's not the same when I do it myself." He tilted his head to the side, still keeping it on the counter. "Just like that other thing."

"Well then," the Human said. He raised an eyebrow at Drimblerod. "Not that it's any business of mine but... No one told you to go out and drink until the sun came up, Mister Sixtoes." He waggled his finger at Grimbledung for good measure.

Drimblerod shoved the man before heading back to the counter. "I don't need your help."

"It's tradition. It's not like I had a choice." Grimbledung raised his hands over his head. "On the one hand, I needed to be here early to support my partner." He picked his head off the counter.

"Yes, and..."

"And on the other," Grimbledung stood shakily, "Tradition!" He tapped his wrists together over his head as he started to dance slowly.

"Please no." Drimblerod said. "Not The Dance." He reached under the counter and pulled out a long black tube. "It's really early, Grim." He dropped the wand into the tube and folded the edges down, sealing it. "Two copper, Mister Topol."

Topol put two copper pieces on the counter and pushed them toward Drimblerod. "The dance? There's a specific dance?"

Grimbledung clapped his hands as he sidestepped. When be brought his knee up, he tapped his toe against the other leg's calf. "If I were a rich Gnome." Grimbledung began to sing. He switched to Gnomish: "Ya ba dibba dibba dibba dibba dibba dibba dum!" He

tapped his wrists together again. "All day long, I'd biddy biddy bum bum!"

"It's the tradition dance." Drimblerod said to the Human. He turned to look at his partner. "AND WE ARE NOT DOING IT THIS MORNING!" He handed the tube to the man. "Thanks, and come again, Sir."

Mister Topol tapped the wand tube to his head in a salute then left.

"Grimbledung, what tradition made you go out on a bender last night?"

Grimbledung stopped dancing. "Drimblerod Axebreath, I'm surprised at you. You of all people should be familiar with a Bachelor's Party and know it has nothing to do with a bender."

"I don't really care about the nuances of..."

"Because a bender is by definition, a drinking event spread over two or more days." He held up a finger. "I was just gone one night on a celebratory tour of the local drinking establishments for the end of my bacheloratory status."

"That's not a word."

"Spinsteralry?"

"That's not any better."

"Unattachedness?"

"*Unattached*? Grimbledung, you're married. Multiple times." Drimblerod said. "It hurts to even say it. Multiple females attached to you. It bothers me so."

A Dwarf put a wand on the counter. "For the sake of all that glitters, just take me money so I can go and get away from this uncomfortable bantering!"

"Two copper," Drimblerod said. "Need it wrapped?"

"Nae; but a sheath would be nice."

Drimblerod slapped a leather sheath onto the counter. "Another copper and you're set."

"Done." The Dwarf gave a curt nod, then squinted his eyes at Grimbledung. "You need to get your lady problems under control, laddy."

"Don't you worry, Mister Dwarf; that's exactly what we're trying to do." Grimbledung said.

"I'm pretty sure your partner said you're already married." The Dwarf pointed out.

"I'm not sure if that's entirely accurate," Grimbledung replied.

"You are, Grim. It's entirely accurate. You've said it yourself," Drimblerod said. "Multiple times."

"Maybe I was misquoting me," Grimbledung offered. "Myself? Us?" He tried.

"If that is true, what ya need to do..." The Dwarf threw up his hands. "Bah; you'll not get me tangled up in this. I'm off!" With that, the Dwarf stomped out, Door obliging by opening and closing for him.

"Thanks, Door." Drimblerod said. He turned to his partner. "Listen Grim, how can you be planning on getting married again? That's what's gotten you into trouble in the first place."

Grimbledung put his hands over his head. "Ah hah, but tradition!"

"Please don't do the dance."

Grimbledung lowered his arms. "You've been married, right?"

"A couple of times, sure. What successful well-about-town Gnome hasn't?"

"Well, think back to our Gnomish traditions. Did *you* marry more than once?" Grimbledung asked.

"*Not at a time*; that's a very old tradition, marrying gals in different towns. No one does it anymore."

"Ahhhh!" Grimbledung pointed at him. "Hah!" He finished.

"What?"

"There's an older tradition than that; ancient even. I read about it down at City Hall yesterday. In fact I'd completely forgotten about it."

"Three on a match is bad luck?"[22]

"No! Well, yes, but not that tradition."

Drimblerod put his hands on his hips. "Spit it out, Grim."

Grimbledung held a hand dramatically toward the sky. "Repeat after me from the Great Book of Gnome:

While married to one mate, a Gnome can say
'A mighty Gnome Empire can be built this way';
be with me too!'
A bevy of mates tis fine, but only Gnomes
or you've crossed the line!
Add another race and that day will you rue.
Lose them all, a dead lineage; back to zero go you!"

He recited.

"Yeah, yeah. I remember that. It's an archaic verse. No one with a right mind even follows it anymore." Drimblerod said.

"But it's still a standing law, isn't it?"

"I suppose. It's a narrow-minded, bigoted, absurd law."

"But still a law." Grimbledung pointed at his friend. "So if I marry outside the race, then *all* my marriages are therefore null and void, correct?"

Drimblerod opened his mouth then closed it. He considered what his friend said for a moment. "Well, I... suppose so. But it has to be a legally reported marriage. With an official ceremony with witnesses and everything."

Grimbledung winked. "Hence my night of revelry. By this afternoon I'll become unwed to anyone and everyone." He winked again. "By getting married outside our proud and noble race."

"But who would be stupid enough to marry you?"

Grimbledung frowned.

"What I mean is- who would be stupid enough to marry such a fine and noble Gnome as you when the marriage would be annulled as soon as its official?"

"That's a little better. I have just the person in mind. I'll be back before lunch. Footloose and fancy free." Grimbledung hesitated. "And single."

"I hope you know what you're doing." Drimblerod said, unconvinced. "Come right back afterwards, will you? Right afterwards."

"Sure thing, partner. I promise I'll come right back and tell you all about my overwhelming success." Grimbledung lied. Even though he would break that promise, it wasn't for the reason he thought.

Chapter 10
A Decently Indecent Proposal

"And that's how we solve the whole problem." Grimbledung tried furiously to not smile, but he just couldn't manage it.

"You expect me to believe that absurd story?" Ellowyn leaned forward on the bar. "Come on now; this is me you're talking to, Grim."

Grimbledung tried furiously to not look down at the Elf's ample cleavage, but his furiousness was just as unable with that endeavor as keeping a smile from his face.

"That's the stupidest, most backwards thing I've heard all week." She pulled up on Grimbledung's chin, bringing his eyes back up to hers. "And I don't think I have to remind you that I work in a place where people come in to get drunk and tell tall tales to attract the attention of females."

"Ask anyone here!" Grimbledung gestured out into the crowd. "Go ahead and ask!"

The Elf exhaled slowly. "I don't..."

"Do it! Call my bluff, Elf. *Call it*."

"Fine." She stood straight. "Can I have everyone's attention please?" She called loudly.

Most of the patrons near her stopped to look.

"Free round of drinks?" Tried a Dwarf.

"No."

The Dwarf returned to his conversation.

"I'm looking for a Gnome to answer a question."

"Good luck with that," a Human said. He returned to his conversation.

"These people."

"Offer a drink to any Gnomes in the place." Suggested Grimbledung.

"Free drinks for Gnomes at the bar!" Ellowyn bellowed.

There was a large commotion as the taller patrons were pushed back and forth. Within a few seconds a dozen Gnomes were practically climbing up on the bar.

"You people." Ellowyn said. "Okay, okay, calm down before you hurt yourselves. Or someone else."

"Someone said something about free drinks for Gnomes! Which is understandable since we're a proud and noble race, worthy of free drinks, you know." Said one Gnome.

"Well said, Sir. You are indeed a cornucopia of wiseness. Overflowing with knowledge and if you don't mind me saying, good looks as well." Another Gnome said.

"I third that motion on knowledge and looks." Said yet another Gnome. "The motion carries." He banged his mug on the counter. "Now on to the new business of free drinks!"

"I agree wholeheartedly," Grimbledung said.

"Let me handle this Grimbledung." Ellowyn held out her hands and motioned for the Gnomes to quiet down. "Thanks for coming, noble Gnomes. I have a question for you."

A Gnome raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Do we have to answer it correctly to get that drink?"

"No."

Another Gnome raised a hand.

"What?"

"Do we have to listen to a sales pitch about fractional vacation home ownership to get the free drink?"

"No."

Another Gnome raised a hand.

"Just shut up and listen and I'll pour you all *one* drink!"

The Gnome lowered his hand.

A different Gnome raised his hand.

"A standard size drink. I will *not* hand out any barrels!"

The Gnome lowered his hand.

"You people." Ellowyn shook her head. "Okay. Listen up. Are you all aware of the Gnomish tradition of marrying more than one female at a time?"

"What kind of dolt would do that?" The Gnome Wanting a Barrel asked. "Women aren't assets to be held."

"Whoa, whoa! Can I interject an inappropriate euphemism?" Grimbledung asked.

Ellowyn slapped Grimbledung's ear. "No."

"I agree." One Drink Clarifying Gnome added. "I mean, what are we; in the Fifteenth Century?"

"Well, in my defense," Grimbledung said, "there has actually been no mention of dates, or even actual seasons really, so technically it could be *any* century right now."

Ellowyn slapped Grimbledung's ear again. "Be quiet!" She looked at the Gnomes gathered around the bar. "May I continue?"

Several half-hearted nods let her know she was okay to at least try.

"Okay. Now does anyone know what happens if you happen marry outside the Gnomish race?"

The Gnomes all stared at her.

"That's indecent!" said Gnome Wanting a Barrel. "That marriage would be null and void as soon as it starts. Everyone knows that, of course."

"Fifteenth century thinking," One Drink Clarifying Gnome said with an eye roll. "Marry who you want says I."

"And it also voids all your other marriages as well; you have to start over as punishment." Added Gnome Extra #4 So He Gets Only One Line.

"Wow; maybe it *is* the Fifteenth Century," remarked One Drink Clarifying Gnome.

"Hah!" Grimbledung pointed at the Elf. "Told you so." He tapped his temple. "Brilliant mind right in here. That's what I've got."

"I still don't see how that's going to..."

Grimbledung clambered onto the bar and pulled a battered and mangled bouquet from his back pocket. He dropped to one knee and recited:

Ellowyn, oh Ello-wyn
what are you do---ing?
Serving cold beers
bringing good cheer
To me and others… in here.

Always serve--ing.

Never drink--ing.

Beersmaid but never the...

Beer?

Several Gnomes started snapping their fingers.

Grimbledung continued:

Ellowyn, cute Ello--wyn

As stacked as any Elf should be.

Stop doing this work!

Serving these jerks!

Come to City Hall

And marry.... me!

Grimbledung waggled the flowers back and forth.

Most of the Gnomes snapped their fingers quickly. Several other patrons even clapped.

"What?" Ellowyn said.

"Will you marry me, you well put together She-Elf?" Grimbledung cocked his head to the side. "Elfess?"

"Broad?" Suggested One Drink Clarifying Gnome.

Grimbledung shook his head. "Hey now; that's no way to talk about my betrothed."

"You are insane," Ellowyn said. "There's no way I'd marry..." Realization hit her. "Wait. So you're saying..."

"Ahhh!" Grimbledung pointed at her with the bouquet. Several petals fell onto the bar. "Ahh! Now you're getting it."

"Smart broad," One Drink Clarifying Gnome remarked. "Stacked too."

Grimbledung looked at him. "If you're looking to have the obligatory barroom brawl at this point, you're doing a good job of getting it going."

"It'd mess up the flow. We'll get to it later." The Gnome replied.

"You're talking about the tradition... the old law." Ellowyn said.

Grimbledung stood on the bar. He was just slightly taller than Ellowyn from there. "Right. Why, you don't think I was just doing that to get my way with you!"

"Well, the thought did occur to me," Ellowyn admitted.

"*You* are not the girl for me, Miss Ellowyn Homewrecker… whatever your last name is!"

"Sorry about that. I figured it was another of your schemes with how you proposition me all the time."

"Merely barroom banter. Nothing could be farther from the truth!" Grimbledung partially lied. "All I'm trying to do is stick with Gnome tradition and use its archaic laws to get me back together with Flora." He shook his head. "To think otherwise is..." He frowned. "Well it's....a decently indecent proposal."[23]

Ellowyn nodded. "I'm sorry. Yes, of course. For Flora." She hesitated. "Because the wedding would be null and void as soon as it is over, is what the law says, right?"

"Right. As long as we stick with the Gnomish traditions through the whole process. That's pivotal."

"I see. And what does that entail?" Ellowyn raised an eyebrow. "Are there matrimonial duties you would be expecting?" Her hands went to her hips. "Husbandly prerogatives?"

Grimbledung startled. "Gads no, woman. What do you take me for?" His arms dropped to his sides. "All I'm trying to do is get on Flora's good terms and this is what I get." He gestured at the Elf as he spoke to the Gnomes. "See the disparagementation that is sent my way, brother Gnomes?"

"Wow." Said Time-Share Gnome (He's spoken before, trust us. And we're not going to give a footnote about *that* scheme. You'll just have to sit through your own sales pitch. And get a free three-day vacation on a dilapidated cruise ship.)

"That must hurt," said another.

"Grimbledung, listen." Ellowyn started.

"All I'm trying to do is get back the delectable Gnomess that I love so dearly." Grimbledung wiped at his eye, trying to get a tear to form. "And when I come up with what is probably the best plan ever connived by me, I am disparaged for it."

"Grimbledung, I'm sorry." Ellowyn put her hand on his shoulder. "What do I need to do?"

"Well," The tear in Grimbledung's eye turned to a gleam. "I think a really quick, straightforward wedding is the best way to go." He ticked off on his fingers. "Get the Commissioner of the Peace to run through a quick and generic ceremony.[24] Have a witness confirm said ceremony." Grimbledung continued after the 121-word interruption. "Then have a Gnome declare it an abomination of Gnomish law, with another Gnome witness to confirm *that*, and we're both back here for

celebratory drinks completely unwed in half an hour including walk-times."

Ellowyn considered it. "That does sound pretty straightforward. It just seems odd that it is legal."

"It's not *my* fault our ancient forefathers were racists, but if I can use it to my advantage, then so be it." Grimbledung said. "So are you in?"

"Sure." Ellowyn shrugged. "I suppose so; I'm in."

Grimbledung sighed. "This needs to be a lawful endeavor that follows Gnomish tradition, Ellowyn, so I need more than a 'Sure, I suppose so' from you."

"Like what?"

"You need to say 'I accept your proposal for marriage' then say my name since there are Gnome witnesses here. Then I give the traditional response to officially betroth us. Then we can go straight to the courthouse."

Ellowyn dropped her hands to her sides and stood straight. "Okay, go. But no more singing."

Grimbledung nodded. "Fine." He cleared his throat. "Ellowyn, do you accept my proposal for marriage?"

"I accept your proposal for marriage, Grimbledung Sixtoes, esquire."

Grimbledung gave the traditional response to the acceptance of a Gnomish marriage proposal.[25]

Ellowyn punched Grimbledung squarely in the mouth. He teetered and fell off the bar, into the arms of his fellow Gnomes.

Who were cheering.

"What's the matter with you!" Ellowyn leaned over the bar. "Just when I thought you were becoming more decent and likeable."

"It's tradition!" Grimbledung rubbed his jaw. "One can't break with tradition!" He said as the Gnomes lowered him to the floor. "Come on, let's get to the courthouse!" He beckoned. "Come on; my Flora awaits!"

Ellowyn looked left and right. "But... I can't just leave. Flora's not working, Nulu is out of town. There's only two of us left to manage the place. And the cooks need to stay in the kitchen for the breakfast rush."

"But... Flora!" Grimbledung pleaded.

"I'll watch the bar for you," said One Drink Confirming Gnome. "I've worked many bar in my day."

"I don't know," Ellowyn said. "I can't just leave the bar with..." She hesitated because while it was common knowledge that Gnomes were as much drinkers as Dwarves, and also managed to be considerably less trustworthy than Dwarves, it wasn't something someone pointed out in pleasant company. "A non-employee." She said diplomatically.

"I give you my word, Ellowyn, on the Great Gnomish Council," the Gnome swore on something that didn't even exist. "I will run the bar to the same level of order as Nulu herself." He lied as he pointed at her. "If that's what it takes to get those two back together," he pointed at Grimbledung, "then that is what I will do." He finished with a trifecta of lies.

"Nicely done," Grimbledung said recognizing each one.

"Fine, Mister..."

"Plank. Plank Wallaby." Plank said. "I'll take the bar until your return, Miss Ellowyn." He said seriously. A smile played on the corner of his mouth. "Would you like to make it an official Gnomish transfer of authority?" He held his hands up, fingers cupped. He flexed his fingers.

"That's my betrothed you're offering to grope!" Grimbledung reared back to punch Plank.

Plank's fingers clenched into fists. "Whad'a'ya gonna do about it?"

"GentleGnomes!" Ellowyn bellowed. "If you would all keep in mind what this is for!"

"Flora?" Timeshare Gnome offered.

"Flora." Ellowyn confirmed. "So you'll have to have your brawl later. Preferably at the Mora Tau if at all possible."

"Fine, fine." Grimbledung said. "We'll all go there this evening for my betrothal, marriage, annulment celebration."

Timeshare Gnome rubbed his chin. "I remember my BMA celebration. It was a hoot." He cocked his head to the side. "Both times, in fact."

Ellowyn shook her head. "You Gnomes."

"Yes?" They all said in unison.

"You'll need to be there for the first celebratory drink, Ellowyn, just so you know." Grimbledung said. "To get the party started." He waggled his ears. "Hey, if you want, you can even throw the first punch at the unsuspecting Gnome of your choice to start the brawl!"

Ellowyn smirked. "Well, that does indeed sound like an honor I shouldn't refuse."

Plank climbed up on to the barstool, rolled over the top of the bar and crashed to the floor on the other side.

"Smooth," Ellowyn said. She reached down and offered her hand to Plank.

"Thanks, El," Plank said. His head barely showed over the top of the bar. "This may present an issue."

Ellowyn laughed. "Step back and I'll show you how Flora does it." She reached down and pivoted down a step that ran half the length of the bar. "There's another on that side. Just drop it down and you're set."

Plank stepped onto the step. He was now chest-high to the bar. "Very nice. Belly up to the bar, boys! Belly up!"

"Now hold on," Ellowyn said. "You promised."

Plank nodded. "Yes, my Elvish Beauty. After the one drink you offered us noble Gnomes for our assistance, everyone pays for everything."

"What?" Timeshare Gnome said.

"You heard me!" Plank pointed at him. "Everyone. Pays. For. Everything!"

Ellowyn untied her apron. "Fine then, the one drink only." She handed it to Plank. "We will be back shortly. Grimbledung?" She pointed at the door.

"I've got a free drink coming, my Betrothed."

"We need to get to the courthouse."

"Don't become a Harpy all of a sudden." Grimbledung elbowed the Gnome beside him. "Happens every time, right?"

Ellowyn put her hand on the bar and vaulted it in one very Elf-like fluid jump. She landed beside Grimbledung. Right beside

Grimbledung. Practically on top of Grimbledung. "When you are ready, future husband nonhusband of mine." She glowered down at him. "Who will be at the BMA Celebration where I get to throw out the first punch." She flexed her fingers. "At the unsuspecting Gnome that I choose."

"Yes, dear." Grimbledung said as he rubbed his chin.

The Gnomes burst into laughter.

Ellowyn took Grimbledung's hand. "Let's go." She reached over and grabbed Timeshare Gnome. "You too, buster."

"But I got a free drink coming as well!" He whined.

"You'll get two when you get back. I heard we needed *two* Gnome witnesses. I know the secretary for the Magistrate is a Gnome, so you're number two." She clenched her fist again. "Right?"

"Right, right, Miss Ellowyn." The Gnome ducked his head. "But it's two drinks when I get back?"

"Yes."

He shrugged. "I still think I'm getting the short end of the stick."

"You?" Ellowyn snickered. "I'm the one that's got to be married to this piece of work for a few seconds. If my parents ever found out." She shook her head. "Let's go, you two."

With his head held low, Grimbledung let himself be led from the bar. "I'll never live this down."

"Me neither," Timeshare Gnome said.

The Gnomes at the bar all started singing the traditional 'Gnome marries Elf, gets all other marriages annulled song', which surprisingly gets sung often enough the lyrics are well known:

There's just a few more minutes-
That's all the time he's got.
A few more minutes-
Before they tie the knot!

Grim's getting married this very hour!
Click, clack the Mag'strate's gavel's gonna sound!

So pull out the stopper!
Let's have a whopper!
A Gnome 'n Elf 'r gettin' bound!

"One drink for Gnomes only!" Ellowyn reminded as she left.

"You heard her, folks!" Plank said. "One drink for Gnomes only."

The Gnomes all crowded the bar.

"One drink for Gnomes," Plank repeated. "For helping those two get hitched."

The Gnomes cheered.

"And one for everyone else to celebrate said hitching."

Everyone cheered.

"Then of course, the marriage'll be annulled, so a drink for that." Plank rubbed his chin. "And of course, all of either of their past marriages will also be annulled. Anyone know how many that is?"

"A lot?" Offered a Human. "Elves live a long time, you know. And Gnomes tend to be the marrying kind. A proud and noble race,

Gnomes. Willing to share their love with many." He had been around Gnomes quite a bit and knew it didn't take much to get them going.

Plank pointed at him. "Very true and well said, Sir. Well said. We are indeed a proud and loving race. So since we are unsure of what that is, we'll just do three free drinks per person."

No one cheered.

"Now, if you could all please keep track yourselves when you reach that number because I'm not going to, I'd appreciate it!"

The cheering retuned.

Drunken mayhem followed close behind.

But not the bar fight.

Yet.

Chapter 11
Three Witnesses on a Marriage

Ellowyn let go of the two Gnomes after they got into the street. "Should we invite Flora to the ceremony?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "I don't know where she is; we actually haven't talked in a couple of days-ish."

"You two. Well, once this is done, you can go find her." She looked at Timeshare Gnome. "What's your name?"

"Elvinrude Lickspan," the Gnome didn't make eye contact with her.

"Elvinrude?" Grimbledung snickered.

"It's a family name."

Ellowyn thought for a moment. "Lickspan? Hey- the famous cookware family?"

"That's us; nothing sticks except the taste; everything tastes better in a Lickspan," he said, using the company's motto.

"We've got them in the kitchen."

"Nice." Elvinrude said. "Thanks for your patronage."

"Think you can get me a dis..."

"No." Elvinrude said flatly.

Ellowyn frowned.

The trio walked in silence to the courthouse.

"Are you sure they'll marry us? Really, if the immediate outcome is that it will be annulled, why would they even bother performing the ceremony?"

"Well," Grimbledung said, "unless a Gnome at the ceremony contests the marriage, then it stands. I mean you've seen mixed marriages before, right? There's plenty of them." He jerked a thumb to his left. "That's what Colossus and Chéri are, remember?"

"That's true. I guess it never occurred to me as something out of the ordinary." Ellowyn said.

"As well it should be," Elvinrude said.

Ellowyn opened the door, "After you gentlegnomes."

"Keep doing stuff like that and I'll just have to keep you around." Grimbledung waggled his ears as he entered the courthouse.

"You won't get a complaint from me." Elvinrude said as he too entered.

"You make this marriage permanent and I will kill you. Both of you. Before lunch."

"That would get in the way of my three free drinks," observed Elvinrude.

"Two." Further observed Ellowyn.

Elvinrude observed farther than the further. "Maybe she's not a keeper after all."

"Exactly." Ellowyn stepped into the courthouse foyer and pointed. "Commissioner of the Peace is that way. Let's get this over and done; there's no telling what that Plank character is doing back at the Duck Inn."

"I can assure you that that proud and noble Gnome is running the establishment as if you were still there." Grimbledung tried to assure her.

"I don't even want a cut scene to go there." She pointed. "There's the office; Commissioner of Peace- Summer Ada. Let's get this over with."[26]

Grimbledung scurried to get open the door. "I got this one! In ya go, Toots!"

"Toots?"

"I'm making sure it's believable." Grimbledung puckered. "Mmmm! Give me some sugar, baby!"

"That's even got my stomach rolling," said Elvinrude. He startled. "Oh! Not because you're an Elf, mind you."

"That's good to hear." Ellowyn said as she entered the office. "Stay on your toes, Mister Lickspan; the last thing I need is for this marriage to stick!" She guffawed. "*That* would be in bad taste!"

Elvinrude slapped his knee. "Ahh! Nicely done!"

Grimbledung shoved Elvinrude into the office. "Yeah, yeah. I don't see how this could get any worse."

"Can I help you... People?" Summer Ada said from behind her desk.

"Yes, Miss Ada," Ellowyn said. "We'd like you to perform a marriage ceremony."

Summer looked from Grimbledung to Elvinrude and back. "Sure, I suppose. It's not like it's the Fifteenth Century or anything."

Ellowyn stifled a chuckle.

"Hah!" Elvinrude slapped his knee again. "This gets better and better." He leaned over and smooched Grimbledung loudly on the cheek. "Com'ere darlin'."

"Gah!" Grimbledung did a little hop. "Hah, hah, Elvinrude. You sure are funny." He poked him in the ribs. Hard. "No; my *cousin* is just pulling your leg, Miss Ada. It's us that are getting married. Me and my lovely Elvish bride here. Won her in a game of Trufflidge. Three deuces and a trey." He gave a wink. "I'm going to be working without a net later, I think."

Ellowyn stuck out her tongue. "Ewww."

So did Summer.

"Anyway." Grimbledung pressed on, "If you could call your lovely assistant, we can get this matrimonial extravaganza underway."

Summer shrugged. "Well, it takes all kinds I suppose." She picked up a bell and rang it.

Within a moment what could have been the oldest Gnome in town, or even the region walked in. "Wad'a'ya want?"

Summer smiled at the hexa-centarian Gnome. "Miss Lyeh, we need a witness for a marriage."

Elvinrude did a double take at the ancient Gnome. "Lyeh? Are you? You can't be... *the* Arre Lyeh?"[27]

"Hmmpf" said the ancient. She looked from Elvinrude to Grimbledung then Ellowyn. "Yer marryin that youngster?"

"Yes, I..." Ellowyn started.

"Was talkin' to the fellow Gnome."

"Yes, illustrious Madame Lyeh." Grimbledung gave a short bow. As he came up, he winked. "You're looking spry this fine day, I must say."

"She ain't gonna interfere in our reg'lar checkers games, is she? 'Cause if she is..."

"Oh no, no, no!" Grimbledung said. "You are one of my two favoritest folks to play checkers with!"

"Huh. Prolly gonna play that other at some point."

"You can beat her," Grimbledung assured her. "Easy."

"Well, this is all fine and dandy, checkers and all, but I really need to get back to the Duck Inn." Ellowyn said. "It's probably on fire by now."

Arre peered at her through her wrinkles and wild eyebrows. "Huh."

"Well then." Summer said. "Let's get this show on the road." She moved around the desk and stood between Ellowyn and Grimbledung. "If you could stand over there with Miss Lyeh." She said to Elvinrude. "You can witness from there."

"Marriage. Marriage is what brings us together today. That dream within a..."

"The quick version would be appreciated." Grimbledung gave a wink. "Oh!" He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the now even more battered bouquet of flowers. "Here." He thrust them at Ellowyn.

With a sigh, Ellowyn took the flowers. "The things I do..."

"We are gathered to join these two in matrimony unless anyone has cause to disagree with said events."

"Wow, this is really bare bones," Ellowyn remarked. She looked at Elvinrude. "Now?"

He shook his head. "After."

"What?" Summer said.

"Stop interrupting, you ditzy broad." Grimbledung gestured at Summer. "Please continue."

"So if you take..." Summer gulped. "*Him* to be your lawfully wed husband, say so."

"I do?"

"And you, do you take this lovely, apparently unaware she is making bad decisions Elf as your lawfully wed wife?"

"You bet!" Grimbledung gave a little hop. He winked first at Ellowyn, then to Elvinrude. Then Summer.

Summer shook her head. "Then by the power vested in me by the Crown, I pronounce you Gnome and Elf."

No one said anything for a moment.

"Do I get a kiss?" Grimbledung asked. He puckered just in case.

"Ewww." Ellowyn shrugged. "I guess to make it official, I suppose so." She started to bend over to kiss Grimbledung.

"Hey! Hold on just one grain of sand! I just realized that I object to this...this Elf marrying this proud and noble Gnome!" Elvinrude piped up. "Object, I say!"

"Oh." Summer said. "I... um.. see? So why didn't you..."

"Huh," Grimbledung interrupted, acting surprised. "Do you also witness this objectification of the current proceedings, Madame Lyeh?"

Arre shook her head. "Why I ever helped write that absurd law."

"*You* helped write the most ancient of Gnomish laws?" Elvinrude gaped at her.

"I was young and dumb." She sighed. "Nevertheless, I duly witness said objection," she said, quoting the part of the law she had written personally: "to the unnatural marriage outside the noble and

proud race of Gnomes, sullying our ancient lineage and threatening our very existence. And because of this, I declare the marriage null and void. And furthermore, in punishment for his scandalous act, all other marriages of yours are also null and void." She clapped her hands once. "I declare it so."

"Hah!" Grimbledung pointed at Ellowyn. "We did it! Look at that!"

"We sure did. Brilliantly done!" Caught up in the moment, Ellowyn bent down and kissed Grimbledung.

Madame Lyeh pointed at the Gnomess who had just stepped into the room. "Three witnesses on a marriage? Bad luck, that."[28]

Flora stood in the doorway. She had been looking for Grimbledung in hopes they could talk through their troubles. She was planning on using her multi-bow to make him sit and listen to her grievances. After stopping by the Duck Inn and Dine and being told by the highly inebriated patrons that he had gone to City Hall to marry an Elf, she went to prove them wrong.

Ellowyn stood up from kissing Grimbledung. She looked from the bouquet of flowers in her hand to the Commissioner of Peace to Flora. And then to the oddly shaped crossbow she was holding. It had eight tiny bows set up in a star pattern around a large hollow tube. "Uhhh" She dropped the bouquet. "It's not what you think?"

"Here's the thing, two is okay; three's an issue." Summer said.

"Hey there, Flora! Guess what..." Grimbledung said as his last words.

Flora pulled the trigger, causing each bow to force a silver bolt out of the muzzle one after another. She gave a satisfied nod, dropped the weapon, and then stomped out.

"Huh." Was all that Summer was able to come up with to sum up the situation.

Chapter 12
Ex Grimbledung Sixtoes Machina

Grimbledung startled. He looked down at the board. "Is it my move or yours?" Grimbledung said, unsure. He leaned back in his chair- it was fairly plush and had legs of the same length. "Huh," he remarked.

OH, IT IS YOO...AHH... NOW I REMEMBER; IT IS MY MOVE.

"Were you going to say it was my move?" Grimbledung looked at the board. "I seem to remember the last time I was here, it was my turn." He looked at Death. "How long ago was that?"

TIME IS A VERY DIFFICULT THING TO DESCRIBE WHEN YOU ARE AN IMMORTAL. PERHAPS AN HOUR? SIX MONTHS OR A YEAR? Death crossed her legs and tapped her white bone chin with a similarly fleshless finger. OR MAYBE A HUNDRED YEARS. HOW LONG DO YOU LIVE? OVERALL THAT IS. YOU DON'T SEEM TO LIVE IN VERY LONG STRETCHES AT ANY GIVEN TIME, COMPARED TO OTHERS THAT IS. Death leaned forward. "YOU KNOW, MOST FOLKS I ONLY SEE THE ONE TIME.

"I'm certain it's not my fault." Grimbledung moved a checker to a side square.

I FIND THAT DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE. Death moved a checker in between two of Grimbledung's pieces. The one ahead was definitely going to get taken on her next move.[29]

"It's true! I am more often than not, minding my own business when current events happen around me and the next thing I know, I'm playing checkers." A thought occurred to him. "Say, is this the Fifteenth Century?"

I AM TIMELESS; I HAVE NO INTEREST IN CENTURIES. THEY ARE MEANINGLESS TO ME.

Another thought occurred to him. "Huh. Well do you by any chance know a Gnome named Arre Lyeh?"

WE HAVE NOT CROSSED PATHS, she gestured at Grimbledung, LIKE WE HAVE. Pain crept into her voice. OFTEN AND REGULARLY.

"But you do know her?"

I KNOW EVERYONE. Death waved a hand dismissively, SHE HOWEVER, IN ONLY A CURSORY SORT OF WAY.

Grimbledung moved one of his pieces safely past the one Death had just moved. He smirked. "Told her she could beat you."

YOU DID, DID YOU? WERE YOU TRYING TO BE NICE TO ONE OF THE ANCIENTS?

"I thought you said you didn't know her." Grimbledung moved his piece another space.

I NEVER SAID THAT. Death picked up the piece Grimbledung had moved twice. HOWEVER I IMAGINE SHE WOULD FOLLOW THE RULES OF THIS SIMPLE GAME. She returned the piece to the previous square. I SHUDDER TO THINK WHAT A GAME OF CHESS WOULD LOOK LIKE WITH YOU.

"I'll find time to be insulted later." Grimbledung bounced up and down in the chair.

ANTSY?

"Hah, no. I'm just kind of glad that hard stool is gone." He smirked. "Nothing's worse than a hard stool, you know. Why this one time, I had a really hard stool that…"

NO, DO NOT. Death interrupted. DO NOT CONTINUE.

"I'm just glad that you've picked up the place." He looked around. The entire landscape looked the same to him. Except for his comfy chair. "Locally, that is." He thought back to when he first encountered Death- he had stood the entire time. It was several visits later before a stool with one leg showed up. Later, a wobbly three-legged stool appeared. He leaned on the armrests- they were also padded. "Where'd you get the chair?"

COMFORTABLE, IS IT NOT? IT MAKES YOU NOT WANT TO LEAVE, I THINK.

Grimbledung considered that for a moment. "Well, the chair does add a certain charm to the overall gloom and doom around here."

YOU GET USED TO IT.

"Did you?"

LIKE ME, THIS PLACE HAS ALWAYS BEEN.

"You don't say." Grimbledung leaned the chair back on its back legs. He lifted his foot up and moved a piece with his toe.

DO NOT DO THAT. IF YOU RECALL THAT WAS THE FIRST RULE DISCUSSED.

"I thought it was just for that one… one… one game." Grimbledung shuddered. "Rolton Chips! And I was winning too!"

WE BOTH HAVE CAPTURED TWO PIECES; NO ONE IS WINNING.

"It'll be three soo...soo.." Grimbledung disappeared.

WE SHALL SEE, MY MOST ANNOYING GNOME. AND I LOOK FORWARD TO PLAYING THAT OTHER. He looked up at the dark, swirling purple and grey skies. I CAN ALMOST SEE YOU, ANCIENT ONE. YOU HAVE REMAINED HIDDEN FROM ME FOR LONG ENOUGH. As Death stood, she pushed Grimbledung's piece back to its original position. BUT FIRST TO MORE PRESSING MATTERS. Death loomed over the board, deciding what piece to move next when the Gnome inevitably returned. DAMNED GNOME.

Chapter 13
Reset, Player One

"What happened?" Drimblerod said with a sigh. "This time?"

"Seems that Flora found him marrying one of my barmaids." Nulu said.

"What?" Drimblerod stepped around the counter. "Why in the lands would he be adding *another* wife to his list of troubles? What crazy Gnome did he marry now?"

"She's the Elf. Ellowyn."

"Ellowyn?" Drimblerod cupped his hands out in front of his chest. Not very close to his chest.

"Males." Nulu rolled her eyes. "Yes; Ellowyn. They're taking him to the Herbs and More now."

"So that was his plan. Nice. I hope it worked." Drimblerod said. "Let's get over there."

Door opened for the pair.

"Stay closed until I get back," Drimblerod said.

Door rattled his latch.

"Why didn't they take him to the doctor?"

"She shot him with a bunch of silver crossbow bolts that had been dipped in wolfsbane." Nulu said. "Kind of like a tranquilizer dart only lethal. It seems that she is not only upset, she's been doing her homework on lycanthropy."

"Wow. She does sound upset. Can Maca fix him?"

The pair started up the street toward Maca's shop.

"His lycanthropy apparently makes him pretty durable. So once she can counteract the wolfsbane in his blood, he should be okay. The silver bolt will only keep him down while it's in him, if I remember correctly."

Drimblerod shook his head. "I can't believe he convinced Ellowyn to marry him."

"There's this ancient Gnomish law that says if you marry outside the race, it annuls the marriage as well as all other marriages."

"Right, right. I know that." Drimblerod said. "I just can't believe he got her mixed up in his antics."

"It was all going according to plan until the very end of the ceremony."

"I can't believe it didn't happen sooner."

"The scheme or its failure?" Nulu asked.

"It's failure. I mean, first you have to find someone willing to marry you who knows the marriage is a sham," he ticked off on his fingers, "then find someone willing to perform the ceremony who probably knows that it's a waste of their time, then get a couple of Gnomes to not only witness the ceremony, but then to object to the whole ceremony as soon as it ends."

"Grimbledung did all those things perfectly." Nulu smiled. "Except for one tiny mistake."

"What's that?"

"He didn't let Flora in on the scheme. And when she went into the courthouse looking for him, she saw Ellowyn kissing Grimbledung while holding a bouquet in front of the Commissioner of the Peace, she let him have it."

"Does she know now?"

Nulu shook her head. "No one knows where she is to explain it to her. I just hope she doesn't do anything rash."

"More rash than shooting Grimbledung with a bunch of wolfsbane dipped silver crossbow bolts?"

"Flora is a great gal, but let's face it; she is the queen of rash."

Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Want an inappropriate comment?"

"No."

Drimblerod stopped waggling his ears. "I just figured with Grimbledung out of action for a while, I should pull his weight as well."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd remain the stable one in the shop." She smirked. "Rat can continue as the brains of the operation, of course."

"Hmm."

As pair turned the corner towards *Herbs and More, Much More*, Drimblerod skidded to a stop. "What?"

Nulu coasted two more paces before she stopped as well. She turned to look at the Gnome. "What's wrong?"

"I just thought I saw... someone."

Nulu looked where Drimblerod was looking. "Who?"

"A Dwarf."

"Just a Dwarf in general, or a specific one?"

He shrugged. "It's probably nothing." He smirked. "Ahhh; you know all those Dwarves look alike anyway."

"Stop it."

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself. He looked familiar though."

"Well, while you figure out where you've seen him before, let's see how your oft-dead partner is doing." She cocked her head. "Have you two ever discussed what he does in the afterlife?"

"It's never comes up, now that you mention it. Honestly, what could he be doing? He's not learning how to stay alive, that's for sure."

"The next time he's at the bar, I'm going to find out. Grimbledung may be sitting on some cosmic secret of gigantic proportions and no one knows because no one has ever asked him."

"You just used 'Grimbledung' and 'cosmic secret of gigantic proportions' in one sentence, and I'm the one that needs to stay level-headed?"

"I'll let you know what I find out."

Drimblerod was thinking of the Dwarf he had seen walking into the Red Cock Inn, trying to remember where he had seen him before. All he could remember was they were not on good terms. Which, considering the general animosity between Gnomes and Dwarves, did not narrow it down.[30]

Nulu nudged him. "Okay?"

"Sure, sure." Drimblerod muttered.

"You okay?"

"I just have a bad feeling all of a sudden."

"What else is new?"

"Apparently my partner has the key to the cosmos." Drimblerod waggled his ears.

Nulu nudged him a little harder. "You laugh now- wait until I get those secrets out of him." She pointed at the shop. "They brought him straight here, hopefully Maca as a plan by now."

The pair entered the herb shop and went straight to the back room.

Maca was bent over Grimbledung, ear next to his mouth.

"Is he alive?"

Maca swiveled her eyes over to Nulu- she still had her ear to Grimbledung's lips. "No way. He's more dead than he's ever been. Unliving."

"Yes, I …" Began Drimblerod.

"Ceased to be. No longer existent." She swiveled her eyes back down. "The past tense."

"Okay, I get it."

She pointed at the numerous crossbow bolts sticking out of Grimbledung's chest. "At least not with those things still there."

Drimblerod moved to the table and stepped up onto a conveniently placed box. "Then what are you listening to?"

Maca shrugged as she straightened. "It's…technical."[31]

"Why don't you just pull them things out and leave the Werewolfing thing to..."

Maca yanked one of the crossbow bolts out of Grimbledung's chest. "Like that?" She let it clatter to table.

"Oh, well..."

Maca yanked out another. "Maybe this one?"

Drimblerod put his hands on the table. "I wasn't..."

"Let's try two." Maca pulled out two at once.

"...trying to tell you..."

"In a flurry!" Maca yanked out three more bolts- leaving just one in him.

"...how to do your job." Drimblerod frowned.

"You know, we have one smart-alecky resident already." Nulu said.

Maca smirked. "Well, with Grimbledung out of commission, I figured I could fill in for him."

"See? That's what I said!" Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Say, can you waggle your ears?"

"An Elf does *not* waggle their ears." Maca said matter-of-factly. "A raised eyebrow is the most you'll get out of us." She raised an eyebrow at him. "Like that. And perhaps a disparaging glance." She gave him a disparaging glance.

"Okay, okay. Elves." Drimblerod said.

"So how long do we have to wait before he's not any of those things you said earlier and back to alive?" Nulu asked.

Maca looked at Grimbledung. "Well, I'm going to need to jump start him, I think." She looked at her cabinet and held out her hand. Dutifully a hose snaked out from under it.

"What's that?" Drimblerod stepped to one side of the box, putting more distance between himself and the bewitched hose. "Uh oh. Where's that thing going to go?"

Maca reached down and picked up the writhing hose by the end. The 'tail' of it whipped around in the air. "It's the Elixir of Life." She pulled the final bolt out of Grimbledung.

"It's just a piece of hose," Drimblerod said. "How could it..."

The hose turned and looked at Drimblerod.

"Are you trying to annoy it?" Maca asked.

"No, no!" Drimblerod shook his head. "Not one bit."

Maca put the end of the hose in Grimbledung's mouth and pinched his lips around it. With her other hand, she pinched his nose shut.

"Oh, no. Please don't tell me..." Drimblerod stepped off the box. "Not that."

Flowing Elixir

Maca incanted.

Water fountained out of the numerous holes in Grimbledung's chest. As it arced back on to the table, it seemed to just evaporate instead of flowing to the floor.

"That's a really old gag," Nulu said.

"Well, when it works, it works." Maca observed. After just a couple of seconds, she removed the hose from Grimbledung's mouth. After another moment, the water stopped spurting out of his wounds. "Back you go." Maca let go of the length of hose and it slithered back under the cabinet. But not before making a detour to crowd Drimblerod first.

Drimblerod shoo'ed the hose away nervously. "How long until it works?" Drimblerod asked.

Grimbledung twitched.

"I see."

"Well, that's good he's fixed now." Nulu said.

Grimbledung's legs kicked.

"He's only *mostly* fixed." Maca said.

"Mostly fixed? Come on..." Nulu shook her head. "He's going to be fine, right? The arrows are out, so that's the thing, right?"

"It's the wolfsbane in his bloodstream that's the problem."

Grimbledung's arms thrashed.

"Will it work its way out?" Nulu stepped back from the table.

Grimbledung groaned.

"It really needs to come out sooner rather than later. The after-effects would be long-lasting if it sat around in him for that long."

"Whash happen?" Grimbledung slurred.

Maca put her hands on Grimbledung's chest. "Just lie still."

Grimbledung farted.

"Well, it's good to see he's back to his normal self." Nulu waved her hand in front of her face. "Gads, what does that Gnome eat?"

"I ish shingle."

"You're something on a shingle, that's for sure." Drimblerod said.

"Shingle. Nosh married." Grimbledung farted again. "Ahhhh."

"I suppose you are," Drimblerod said. "How do we get the wolfsbane out of his system?" He moved to the window and opened it.

"There are a couple of ways. The most straightforward is to just leech it out of him."

"How's that done?"

Maca turned and went to a cabinet. After rummaging around in it for a moment, she came back to the table and placed a very large glass container on it. It was full of a green liquid. And what looked like several dozen very large, squirming leeches. "Two jars should do it." She nodded at Drimblerod. "You'll have to apply them for an hour, every other hour alternating on his front and back. And you have to

squeeze the leaches empty before you put them back in the jar, of course."

"Eeesh!" Drimblerod shuddered.

"By hand."

"Gah!" Drimblerod's eye twitched. "By hand?"

"Oh, and don't get any on your clothes or the woodwork."

"Just telling me what I needed to do gave me the creeping willies."

"But only through the night. Does that help?" Maca offered.

Drimblerod grimaced. "Is there an alternate treatment?"

"I suppose he could sweat it out. That way would take only about three or four hours if he got good and sweaty."

"You mean from work?" Drimblerod shook his head. "I've never seen him work hard enough to break a sweat. Much less do it for three hours straight."

"Work shucks," Grimbledung mumbled. "Lee-shure better."

"Spoken like a true Gnome," Nulu said.

"Stick him in an oven on low? How big are your ovens, Nulu?" Maca asked.

"If word got out I was using an oven as a sweatbox for Grimbledung, I'd be out of business in a day."

"That's probably true." Drimblerod said.

Grimbledung farted again. Long and loud.

"Case in point." Drimblerod gestured at his partner.

"Hey; what if he just went down to the baths and sat in the sauna for the day?" Nulu suggested.

"That would also work. He needs to get good and dehydrated sweating out all the wolfsbane." Maca agreed.

"Want to go sit and do nothing for the day?" Nulu asked Grimbledung.

"Beats checkersh."

"What?" Nulu asked.

"I didn't even know he knew how to play," Drimblerod said. "Checkers?"

"Wash winning," Grimbledung said. He tried to get up again.

"You should take it easy, Grim." Drimblerod said. "You got killed, remember?"

Grimbledung furrowed his brow. "Wash get'n mar-red." He held his hands out in front of his chest, hands cupped. "El el el oh winsh."

"What?"

"I'll explain later," Nulu said to Maca.

"If you can help him to the baths, Drimblerod, the sooner he starts sweating the better." Maca said.

Grimbledung rolled off the table and onto the floor. "Owwah."

Drimblerod and Nulu helped Grimbledung to his feet.

"Tanksh." Grimbledung teetered as he stood on his own. "Ish I drink?"

"No, you..."

"Drank?"

"No, Grim."

Grimbledung leaned against Nulu's side. "Ish drunk?"

"No, Grim," Drimblerod said again. "You were poisoned with wolfsbane. We need to get you to the bathhouse so you can sweat it out." He moved under his partner's arm, tucking his shoulder against Grimbledung's armpit. "I'll help you get there."

"We gesh drinksh on way?"

"No, Maca said you need to get really dehydrated to sweat out all the poison."

Grimbledung held his free hand out in front of his chest. "El oh win ish like dish." He held his hand closer to his chest. "Maca ish like dish."

"How observant," Maca said. "Before this gets more in the gutter, why don't you get him in a sauna?"

"Ish funny." Grimbledung giggled. "I makesh funny."

"You're hilarious, partner. Can you get the door, Nulu?" Drimblerod started toward the door. "Thanks for your help, Maca. I owe you one."

"It's no problem…" Maca started.

"And Maca ish like dish." Grimbledung made horns on his head with his free hand. "Grrrr I ish dragon with boobiesh!"

"Oh yeah; now you owe me too." Maca observed.

"Wan know wash Nulu ish?"

"Noooo! Bye everyone!" Drimblerod practically dragged Grimbledung from the shop.

"That Gnome worries me." Maca said.

"What, just now" Nulu laughed. "Before he didn't?"

"He troubles me on a daily basis," Maca said. "But I mean I'm worried with how much time he's spending in the Nether World. It's not healthy."

"He makes it back each time, though, right?"

Maca tilted her hand. "Some of him never leaves there. Especially if he's fool enough to engage Death in conversation. Or worse, any games."

"He did mention checkers." Nulu said.

"I can't imagine Death stooping to the game of checkers."

Nulu frowned. "Does losing make it worse?"

"It can. I'm worried that he's going to reach a tipping point where what does come back isn't going to be Grimbledung anymore. I mean, he's died *three times* just this week." Maca pointed out.

"Then we need to talk to Flora. Maybe we can stop her from killing him again now that he's up and about." Nulu considered it. "How many more times can he safely die?" She shook her head. "That's a sentence I never thought I'd say."

"He's died an awful lot." Maca said.

"What, six, seven times? I know of five myself, counting the flurry of deaths this week."

"Just over three dozen over the course of his life," Maca said. "Is what I've seen peering at his soul."

"Three *dozen*?" Nulu gaped.

"Three dozen that I can see. There are probably another dozen or so that if I concentrated more, I could also see." She scrunched up her face. "But after a while of looking over Grimbledung's life, you kind of want to skip over big parts of it."

"I see." Nulu laughed. "So what do we need to do?"

"Keep him in the land of the living from now on."

"Or what?"

"Let me put it this way- retrieving his soul from the Nether World is a quest that is in a giant grey area. I would not be allowed to join in such a quest. But even if I did, I don't think it would help at all."[32] Maca let the crossbow bolt clatter on the table. "And you know what I am."

"Apparently a dragon with boobies." Nulu laughed again. She put her fingers on the top of her head like horns. "Grrrr!"

"You going to waggle *your* ears?"

"Not a chance. So we keep that Gnome alive from now on." Nulu said.

"Or just let him die permanently, of course. That would also solve the problem as well."

"Nah; I kind of like that little ball of crazy. Besides, replacing him this far along just wouldn't work If we just picked a different Gnome and started calling him Grimbledung, we'd get angry letters."

"True. And there's no way a bumbling cousin Bobby to take the focus off him would go over well either." Maca nodded.

"We'll make that Plan B. In the meantime, we need to find Flora."

"I really hate looking into his life." Maca sighed. "Just one more time real quick, I suppose." She looked up at the ceiling. "Flora's should be stopping by your establishment just after noon."

"Should be?" Nulu asked.

"As a wise guru once said 'always in motion is the future'."

"I figured the future would be fraught with emotion." Nulu replied.

"That was a debate for a while." Maca admitted.[33]

"Well, we can at least drink wine until she shows up." Nulu suggested. "If she does, great. If she doesn't we've at least gotten to drink some wine."

Maca nodded. "You said it, sister." She stepped around the table. "So, I say we start right away just in case."

"You said it, sister," Nulu echoed. She extended her elbow.

"And we can get Ellowyn's side of the tale." Maca said.

The pair left arm and arm toward the Duck Inn and Dine.

As usual, Maca's shop tidied itself without being asked. This time however, when CoatRack closed the shop up, she left- she had a hot date lined up.

Chapter 14
Black Widows

Mantodea leaned back and knocked on one of the uprights of the wagon. "We're in town." She said.

"M-kay," Bextra said sleepily. "I'll be up there in a sec."

Mantodea guided the wagon to the side of the street. Two men with a gurney ran across the road and into City Hall. "Weird," she said as she brought the wagon to a stop.

"What?"

"Two men just ran into City Hall carrying a gurney. Seems there's trouble afoot in the Halls of Governance." Mantodea watched the passersby for a few minutes.

Bextra stepped through the slit in the canvas and sat beside her partner. "That won't be the only death in town."

The pair watched as a sheet-covered corpse was carried out.

"I hope he wasn't rich and single." Bextra said. "Let's go get set up in a room then we can find out where that stupid Grimbledung is and what he's doing to pass the time." She smirked. "And stop him from doing it. Permanently."

Mantodea snapped the reins. "There's an inn up around the corner."

"Not the Duck Inn and Dine, right?"

Mantodea shook her head "The Red Cock. No one'll know we're here until it's too late."

"Nice."

As the wagon continued down the street, Mantodea took a deep breath, then another. "Hey, Bextra."

"Yeah?" She was looking at the townsfolk as they rode along, keeping her eye out for a wealthy yet socially inept looking male.

"Have you considered when we're going to stop doing... what we're doing?"

"Are you talking about retiring?"

"Well, I prefer that outcome over the law catching up with us." Mantodea looked at her partner. "Have you thought about it?"

"I've thought about it, sure. That final score that will set me up for life."

"Not a final score." Mantodea sighed. "I mean a real relationship that doesn't end with a loss of life or fortune."

"You're talking crazy." Bextra pointed at an elderly Dwarf. He was dressed quite well - even by non-Dwarvish standards. If the length of his beard was any indication (which it should have been), he was quite well off. He was standing in front of a shop peering into the window. "That fine fellow over there looks like he's ready for some picking. Probably deciding if he wants to buy the whole place."

A female Dwarf exited the shop, smiled wide and embraced the beaming male. If the length of her beard was any indication (which it certainly should have been) she was equally well off. The pair moved off, arm in arm, obviously quite happy to just be in each other's company.

"See?" Mantodea said as she bumped her shoulder against her partner. "Wouldn't that be nice to have someone who is that pleased just to see you?"

"Yeah, I suppose." She bumped her friend back. "Maybe after we kill Grimbledung, we can call it quits." She smirked. "At least for capital offenses. Deal?"

"Deal. Hey; we could open a gambling hall. That's about as close to a criminal activity you can get and still have a big sign out front. It's really the best way to get to ruin peoples' lives and have them happy to have you do it. Perfect revenge."[34]

Bextra laughed. "That does sound nice. A dancing and gambling hall. Some place with plenty of fights."

"For that, folks go to the basement of the Mora Tau," Mantodea pointed down a side street. "We should go classy. High end. *High roller*. Put on a floor show even."

"You've put a bit of thought in this, haven't you. Getting soft, are we?"

Mantodea shrugged. "I'm just looking for a more stable, less itinerate lifestyle. I really think that the Silent Woman would turn a good profit."

"Silent Woman, who's that?"

Mantodea nodded as she pulled to a stop in front of the Red Cock. It was a brightly painted four-story building that took up a full quarter of the block. She looked up at the equally bright sign depicting a majestic red-plumed rooster. "We'll have a woman with no mouth on the sign to signify that the women in the establishment will never have a disparaging thing to say to the patrons. And always be discrete."

"Ehh." Bextra considered it.

"And never have anything to say to the authorities about what goes on within our establishment."

"I like the idea but I'm not sold on the name."

"We can work on the name later." Mantodea pointed at the entrance to the inn, "Let's get settled then we can go out and find that idiot and see what he's up to."

Bextra hopped off the wagon and stretched. "Wow; I'm tired of being in a wagon all of a sudden. How about we get settled, get a massage and relax, and find that idiot tomorrow? It's not like he's going to get killed between now and then, right?"

Mantodea laughed. "Now who's getting soft?" She stretched as well, back cracking in several places. "But I think I'm going to agree with you." She looked at the large building. "This place is huge; it better have a place to get a massage and relax."

"Hey, maybe we can add that in our place," Bextra said as she tied the horse off to the hitching post. She looked left and right. "And a valet," she added with a frown.

"Well, if we're going to be high-brow, we'll need a valet. Someone in a uniform with a spiffy hat." Mantodea gestured up the three steps to the entrance. "Let's see what there is to see."

The pair entered the brightly painted building. In a striking contrast, the inside was quite dingy and worn. "Wow, it's nice from the outside but the inside screams 'Ehhh'." Bextra said. "You check in and I'll talk to the concierge about the wagon." She gestured at a counter off to the side where a bored looking Human sat.

"Okay." Mantodea stepped up to the front desk. As with most establishments, there was a series of steps rising along the front of the counter so that at one end, Orc sized patrons could stand, and on the far end, even a Brownie could stand and still be chest high. She moved to the third step- beyond where a Human and a Dwarf would stand.

She put her elbows on the counter and smiled at the Human. "Good morning. I believe I have a reservation."

"Isn't that nice," the bored Human behind the counter said. "Do you have a confirmation number?"

"Ten." Said Mantodea.

"That's not a confirmation number."

"Nine."

"Are you just guessing now?"

"Eight."

"That's not even close."

"Seven."

Bextra stepped up beside her partner.

"Does she have it?" The man said, gesturing at Bextra.

"Six." Mantodea continued.

"What are you counting?" Bextra asked.

"I'm counting down the seconds this man has to live." Mantodea said matter-of-factly. She looked at him again. "Five."

"Don't think that threatening me..."

"Four." Mantodea pulled her miniature crossbow from her hip holster and banged it on the counter. It was loaded.

"Now hold on!" The man said.

"Three."

"Ahhh, I'm sure it's in here!" The man said as he pulled a large book in front of himself.

"Two."

"It's for a suite," the man said quickly. "At the price of a single even!"

"Well, that's nice of you." Mantodea said. "The reservation is under Burmeister. Manifred Burmeister."

"Of course it is, Miss Burmeister." The man said unbelievingly as he looked at the reservation book. That name was indeed listed on the page. "Oh, well, look at that." He looked up at her. "Welcome to the Red Cock, Miss Burmeister. It is indeed a pleasure to have you and your associate..." He hesitated, waiting for Bextra to give her name.

Bextra stared at the man. "I was never here." She put a long dagger on the counter. The blade glistened from what was most likely poison. "Ever."

"It is indeed a pleasure to have you staying at our fine establishment all by yourself, Miss Burmeister." The man said. "Room Four Oh Twelve." He pointed at the ceiling. "Top floor." He pointed across the room. "On the west side." He gave a smile. "If that is okay."

"Yes; that will do nicely." Bextra said. "Especially since someone else is carrying up our luggage?"

"Most assuredly, Madame," the man said.

She smiled. "Please tell me this place has a masseuse."

The man's smile faltered. "Oh, I would really like to tell you that, but... I can't."

"Because she's not staying here?" Mantodea tried.

"Oh, no; that's not it at all. It's because we really don't have one." He pointed at a side exit. "But, if you go across the street over there." He pointed the opposite way across the room. "And then go east a block, there is a bathhouse where you can get a very reasonably priced massage and soak if you tell them you are staying here; we have an agreement. It's called the Manacled Masseuse. The saunas are quite

nice as well." He looked left and right then leaned forward and said in a loud whisper, "But I must warn you however; they are *co-ed*."

Bextra stifled a laugh.

"Oh dear," Mantodea feigned shock. "We do appreciate the head's up on the sauna."

"Well, it can be a shock for the unprepared," the man said matter-of-factly. "Believe you me." He wiped nonexistent sweat from his brown. "Saw my first naked Trolless that way. Yikes!"

Mantodea laughed. "Yikes indeed."

"Let's get settled, then we can head over," Bextra said. "Are the bags on the way up by now?"

"There is no way they are not." The man said matter-of-factly.

"Excellent," Mantodea said. "We'll just go up to my room to get a change of clothes then I'll give the Manacled Masseuse a whirl. Since I'm staying here alone."

"Of course." The man retrieved a key from a peg behind him without even looking then smiled. "I hope you both.... errr... you enjoy your stay, Miss Burmeister."

"She will." Bextra said as she took the key. She pointed at him with her dagger. "You're okay, you know that?"

Mantodea put her crossbow back in its holster. "Sure, now he is."

"Th... thank you!" The man said. He watched at the two women walked toward the large staircase. As soon as they left, he sat back down, relieved.

The pair walked up the four flights of stairs to their room. Their luggage was piled up against the door.

"I'm not so sure about this place," Mantodea said.

"We can't very well stay at the Duck Inn and Dine; and this is the only other hotel in town." Bextra muscled her way past the luggage and opened the door to the room. "The hallway is almost bigger." She said as she entered.

"Maybe we can have some rooms in that place you want to open. Even if they aren't as nice as the Duck Inn, they can be better than this." She peered over the luggage. The room barely held the two twin beds. "Does it go more left and right? Is the luggage even going to fit?"

Bextra came back into view. "Well, it's got a good-sized closet but that's about it. Apparently all you're supposed to do is sleep in here." She started pulling the bags into the room and putting them on the bed.

After the last of the eight bags were stacked in the closet- they had made shelves with the bed slats from under the mattress where their feet didn't reach- Bextra fell back on her bed. "That was a chore."

Mantodea lay down on her bed as well. "How about a couple-hour nap in a proper bed, then we head to the spa?"

Bextra moved her head onto the pillow. "Someone needs to tell the front desk we need a wake-up call in a couple of hours." She closed her eyes. "Not it?"

Mantodea let out a sigh. "I'll go tell that buffoon and catch up with you." She rolled out of the bed. "Hopefully he can handle that task without being annoying."

"Mmm-hmmm." Bextra said.

Mantodea padded out of the room quietly and down the stairs. Within five minutes, she was in her own bed, confident to be woken up in two hours.

THREE HOURS LATER

Mantodea felt something tickle her nose. Still mostly asleep, she swatted at what she suspected was a fly.

A warm breath flowed over her face.

She tried to ignore it.

After the third breath, Mantodea opened one eye. Cautiously.

There was an orangutan sitting beside her bed. His nose was practically touching hers. "Oook?" it said.

"Oh, come on."

The ape smiled a big toothy grin.

"You're the wake-up call? Really?"

"Oook." Assured the ape. "Oook, oook."

"Well, it's better than nothing, I suppose."

The ape patted himself on the head.

"Yes, you did a fine job of waking me, thanks." She opened her other eye. "It's been two hours?"

"Oooohh." The ape didn't make eye contact with her.

"Is it less than two hours?"

The ape shook his head. "Oook." He said defensively.

"How much past two hours has it been?" She looked at the window- it was still light out, and too bright to tell exactly what time it was. "A lot?"

The ape gave her a raspberry.

Mantodea wiped her face. "Can you even tell time?"

The orangutan shrugged. "Oook."

"More like three hours?"

The orangutan nodded furiously.

"Well, I hope you at least appreciate how calm I have been, what with waking up face to face with one of the Great Apes."[35]

He slapped his chest. "Oook!"

"Right, right. The greatest of the Great Apes. How silly of me."

The orangutan smooched Mantodea's cheek then loped out of the room, closing the door loudly.

"Was I dreaming or was there an orangutan in our room just now?" Bextra asked.

"There very well might have been."

"We're not having those in our place."

Mantodea sat up. "As far as wake-up calls, I've had worse. Oh; it's been three hours, not two. So it's pushing toward noon. Probably about eleven thirty."

"I needed a good nap." Bextra sat up as well. "But now I want that massage and some time in a sauna."

"I agree." Mantodea put her hand on the small of her back as she stood. "That wagon was going to kill me, I think." She pointed at her partner. "I'm telling you, we need to stop the road trips and settle down to some semi-legitimate business dealings. One that gives us nice soft beds to sleep in instead of a wagon."

Bextra stood as well. "Another night in this bed and I'll be convinced." She reached down and touched her toes. "Of course, we won't be able to stay in this town after killing Grimbledung."

"We already have a hefty bank account in Salt Flats."

"And both the Jutes," Bextra said. "We need to consolidate that all as well. Maybe pay a service to do that so we're not running all over the countryside in that wagon."

Mantodea nodded. "Someone else in a wagon; that's fine by me." She pointed at the door. "Let's get down to that masseuse. It's close to noon so I can't imagine they won't have sandwiches and drinks."

Bextra smiled. "I declare an official spa day. Let's go."

The pair left, heading for the Manacled Masseuse.

Chapter 15
Mostly Mayhem and Murder at the Manacled Masseuse

As they walked, Grimbledung regained more use of his legs- to the point where he was staggering along on his own.

"We ish going to teh hellshpah?"

"Yes, Grim; we're going to the spa. Maca said you had to sweat out the poison. Remember?"

Grimbledung shook his head, causing him to stagger even more. "Dish worsh drunk I've eber beensh. Eben when I wash killd."

"Yes, Grim." Drimblerod decided he would just play along after explaining what happened three times already. "You're really drunk. You need to sweat it off in the sauna."

"Mashanishal Mash shoes?"

"Yes, we're going to the Manacled Masseuse." Drimblerod turned at the corner. "There it is right there."

"Ish make it myshelf." Grimbledung pushed off his partner. "Shee youish laysher, parshner." His arms twitched. "Ish really drunk!"

"I can help you get there, Grim." Drimblerod moved beside his partner- who was still staggering towards the spa.

"Eyesh gosh ish. I ish Professhionalsh." Grimbledung waved him off. "Open shop. Maksh monesh show we can shelebrate laysher."

"I... I suppose." He reached into his vest and pulled out two copper coins. "Here; to pay for the sauna."

"Happish endshin?"

"Just soak in the sauna, Grim. Get better first." He held out the two coins. "We'll party later."

"Shokay." Grimbledung had to close one eye and try twice to grab the coins. "Shee youshl laysher." He held the coins in front of him and staggered toward the building.

Drimblerod stood on the edge of the street watching his partner zig-zag to the entrance. Once he was safely inside, he turned and started toward Second Hand Sorcery. "I'm glad that's over with."



Grimbledung staggered to the front counter. He hit the bell on the counter. "Yay!" He said, happy he had managed to do that on the first try. So he hit it again. And again. And again.

"Can I help you, Sir?" Said an Elf as he walked over. He seemed to be relieved there was a counter between him and Grimbledung. He patted the counter thankfully. Then pulled the bell away from Grimbledung. "With some sort of service."

"Shauna." Grimbledung winked. "Shauna."

"We don't have anyone here by that name, Sir." The Elf raised a well-manicured eyebrow.

"No; need to schwet out poishon." Grimbledung dropped the two coins on the counter. "Wanna schwet! Gotta schwet! Needta schwet!"

The Elf reached under the counter and brought up a towel. "One or two?"

"None ish fine." Grimbledung said.

The Elf stared at Grimbledung.

"I'll take one to be shoshable."

"You seem to have a pretty bad speech impediment." The Elf noted, both disparagingly and uncouthly.

"If that were true, it would be terribly rude of you to point it out," Grimbledung said. He beamed. "No eshes!"

"Indeed." The Elf pointed at the large staircase. "Down one floor then to the left." He held up his left hand and waggled his fingers. "This is left. Then through the first door. You know what first is, right?"

Grimbledung held up a finger. His middle. "Ish dish one?" He sniggered. "I ish funny!"

"Indeed," the Elf said again. "There won't be anything else, will there?" The Elf hoped.

Grimbledung waved his finger at the Elf. "Hah!" He staggered to the stairs and fell down the entire flight. When he righted himself he called up: "Ish okay!"[36]

Grimbledung worked himself to his feet and using the wall to steady himself, walked down the left hallway to the first door. He worked the latch and fell into the room. "Woopsh!" He looked up- it was empty. Without getting up off the floor, he worked himself out of his clothes, put them in a lower locker and crawled on his hands and knees into the sauna room.

With a sigh, he climbed onto the lowest bench, rolled over on his back then draped the towel over his head. Within less than a minute, he was sound asleep. Two minutes after that, he was sweating profusely.

An hour later

Bextra and Mantodea stepped up to the counter.

The Elf nodded at them. "Good afternoon to you, ladies. What are you looking for today?"

"We'd like a massage and some time in the sauna." Mantodea said.

"Might I suggest relaxing in the sauna first, then getting your massage afterwards?" He said, knowing full well that the apparently drunk Gnome had not left the sauna yet.

"Isn't it usually the other way around?" Mantodea asked.

"Well," the Elf tried pressing the issue without being too obvious, "our massages are booked up until one so you'd have to wait. You can go relax in the sauna for an hour, have a leisurely meal, then get your massage afterwards." He wanted nothing else than to put the two females in the same sauna as the naked, drunk Gnome.

"That works." Bextra said. "Put us down for the first two available massages and we'll go soak now. Can we get a call in about an hour and a half?"

"Surely." He said with a smile. "Down one floor, to the left, first door. That sauna is already up and running nicely."

"Thanks." Bextra said.

The Elf passed two towels over the counter to them. "I do hope you enjoy your time," he lied.

The pair took their towels and headed down the stairs.

"I don't see how this could get any better." The Elf moved to the side of the counter and opened a small cabinet. Inside was a peephole that thanks to the placement of several mirrors, gave a panoramic view

of sauna number two. He peeked into the room. The drunk Gnome was still asleep, towel over his head. “This will be great.” He said in anticipation.



“That was one of the nicest Elves I’ve come across in a long while,” Mantodea said as she folded her clothes and put them in a locker.

“Yeah, makes me want to see if we can wring some coins out of him.” Bextra wrapped her towel around herself. “Just for old time’s sake.”

“Spa day, not work day,” Mantodea reminded her.

“Fine.” Bextra pulled the latch on the door. “After you Miss No Work Today.”

Mantodea walked into the steam-filled room. “Ahh, this is... maybe we *can* work over that Elf.”

“What?” Bextra closed the door behind her. “Why’s that?”

Mantodea pointed at the naked, sleeping Gnome with a towel over his face.

The naked, sleeping Gnome with a towel over his face farted. Loudly.

“I hate Elves.” Bextra said. “I really do.”

Mantodea moved to the far side of the bench. “We’re here to relax; let’s not give the Elf the satisfaction of complaining.” She gestured at the Gnome. “He’s asleep anyway.”

"I wish we had a spare towel." Bextra moved to the opposite end of the bench and sat. It was thankfully the farthest away from the naked, gaseous, sleeping Gnome. She laid back and loosened her towel. "I declare the commencement of Spa day."

Mantodea lay down on the same bench, head about a foot away from her partner's. She too loosened her towel and let it drape down on either side of the bench.

Bextra let out a long breath. "Ahh, this is nice."

"I hate to bring up work." Mantodea began.

"But…"

"But," Mantodea continued, "when I went down to put in our wakeup call at the Red Cock, I asked that man at the desk why the hotel was so dingy on the inside. He said it was because the owners were tired of it and were looking at selling."

"And." Bextra coaxed.

"And we could buy the place for a song. A quarter of what's in North Jute. We spend another quarter in renovations and we'd be set. Knock down every other room wall and double the size of them and we'd still almost have as many rooms as the Duck Inn and Dine. And we'd have all the funds in South Jute and Salt Flats, and the rest in North Jute. Plus what we have in the bank here."

"The Red Cock?" Bextra said. She still hadn't opened her eyes. "The first thing to go will be that name."

"And?" Mantodea said.

"And I suppose we should see about putting in an offer." Bextra said with a sigh.

"I'm glad you think that."

"I thought a spa day was declared." Bextra said. "Officially declared even."

"We won't discuss it any further." Mantodea said.

"Good."

"Because I already put in an offer and had that clerk put in a request to have all our money moved to the bank here. We should own that building outright by tomorrow and all our funds will be here three days later."

"I officially declare an official non-work-related spa day." Bextra said.

"And you have it." Mantodea said. "As of right now."

"Officially?"

"Officially." Mantodea confirmed.

The two lay in the steaming air in silence for several minutes and fell asleep soon after.

Several minutes after that, the naked, sleeping Gnome rolled off the bench and onto the floor.

When he hit, he farted again.

"How much gas fits in one Gnome?" Mantodea asked sleepily. "Absurd."

Grimbledung startled awake.

The Elf sniggered as he watched.

Grimbledung worked his way to his knees then sat on the bench roughly. He rubbed his throbbing head. Suddenly unsure of where he

was, he looked around then remembered he was in a sauna working off a drunken binge he didn't quite remember. "Rolton Chips," he said. "What a hangover." He looked around the sauna then spied the two relaxing, naked females. Still in a fog, they looked familiar to him but he couldn't quite place where he knew them from. With a shrug, he decided he knew them from the Duck Inn and Dine, which made them practically family. He worked to a standing position- he was still groggy and unbalanced- and stepped over the bench toward them.

"Hello, ladies." Grimbledung said as he sat between the two females' heads- his butt cheeks touching each of them. "Fine day for a trip to the sauna, if I don't say so myself." He waggled his butt back and forth, jostling their heads. "Nice and cozy."

Bextra sat up. "What do you think you're... YOU!"

"Of course I'm me," Grimbledung said. He rubbed his head. "Gah; stop shouting you loud female."

Mantodea swung her legs around and sat up on the bench. "Hey buster... It's YOU!"

"We've established it's me." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "It's who I've been my entire life, in fact." He held his head again. "Now kindly lower your voices if you can subdue your female propensity to screech like harpies auditioning for the lead roles in the local production of The Real Fishwives of New Jarsie…."[37]

"What?" Said both females.

Just two minutes earlier

"Excuse me," a female voice behind the sniggering Elf said.

The Elf cackled. "Just a minute."

"Excuse me!" The female voice said, angrily.

"What? What is it?" The Elf turned, hoping to deal with the customer quickly before the melee mentioned in the previous footnote got fully underway. "What could possibly be…"

"I'm looking for a Gnome. An annoying male Gnome." The Gnomess interrupted. The Gnomess with the loaded crossbow. "I heard he was here and we need to talk."

"One floor down, go to the left, first door on the left," the Elf said without hesitating. "And make it quick."

"Right." The Gnomess stomped toward the stairs.

The Elf turned back to the eyehole. The brawl between the drunken Gnome and the two females seemed have devolved into a tug of war for towels. No one in particular seemed to be winning. The Elf sniggered again.

Flora burst into the sauna. "Grimbledung, I'm sorry. I really think we ought to..."

Grimbledung was holding onto the ends of two towels, one per hand. On the other ends were two naked -beautiful- Dwarfesses. Grimbledung was also naked.

"Wha- what?" Flora brought the crossbow up to her shoulder. "What is going on here?"

"This isn't what it looks like!" Grimbledung said. He looked left and right at the Dwarves. "Right, okay. Never mind; this is actually *exactly* what it looks like. But are you going to believe your eyes or the lie I just thought up?"

Chapter 16
It's Brief… But Without Briefs

Mantodea and Bextra sat quietly in the sauna as two large Humans carried the very dead Grimbledung from the room. Flora hadn't said a word to them after killing him; she had just stormed out, muttering something about needing a drink.

"Well, what do you think?" Mantodea asked.

"About what; sauna day usually being more calm and relaxing than this?"

"No; does this count for killing him?"

"Oh. Yes; that is a good question." Bextra adjusted her towel. "He *is* dead. So there is that."

"And while we were involved in him getting into that state, we weren't directly responsible." Mantodea pointed out. "So this will keep us from being on the lamb. It's really a win-win."

Bextra considered their situation for a long moment. "Yeah. Okay, it works for me." She stood. "Let's go get those massages. Then we can check out the rest of the inn we are going to be co-owners of."

"First thing we do is fire that Elf at the counter." Bextra stood as well. "After you, partner." She gestured at the door.

Chapter 17
Checkers, Mate

IT IS YOUR MOVE, Death said.

"Hmmm." Grimbledung looked over the board. "Wasn't I winning before?"

YOU WERE NOT.

Grimbledung put his feet up on the matching ottoman. He patted it. "Nice addition. Putting one's feet up is one of the great pleasures of life. Or death even." Then he moved his piece between two of Death's. "I'm pretty sure I had made that move already, now that you mention it."

I HAD NOT.

"Still…" Grimbledung tapped his chin. "Seems familiar nonetheless."

IF YOU HAD, Death said, THEN THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED EARLIER AS WELL. Death jumped Grimbledung's disk then a second behind it. AH-HAH!

"Didn't see that coming." Grimbledung looked over the board. "I must be slipping." He took a moment to survey the board. It seemed that all his pieces were inexplicably set up to be captured as soon as they moved. "This looks terrible. How did I let this... most annoying." Grimbledung moved a piece near the side of the board forward, directly into the path of an opposing piece. "Rolton chips." His only consolation was that he could return the jump in kind

afterwards with a piece on his base row even though he was reluctant to open a base row space. But to win, he knew he needed to start removing his opponent's pieces post haste.

Death moved a piece on the other side of the board behind another one of her pieces.

"Point of order, Miss Caretaker of the Underworld," Grimbledung said.

I KNOW I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT ROBERTICUS' RULES OF ORDER DO NOT APPLY TO BOARDGAMES.[38]

"Even so, there is a procedural matter that needs to be discussed." Grimbledung pressed on.

AND WHAT IS THAT? Death exhaled loudly. Even though she didn't have lungs.

"The Rules of Checkers specifically state that if an opponent has the opportunity to capture an opposing piece, they must make that move even if other moves are available."

Death nodded. THAT IS INDEED CORRECT, I APOLOGIZE. She jumped Grimbledung's piece and removed it from the board. A smile played across her lips. Metaphorically speaking, obviously.

"That's more like it," Grimbledung said as he jumped Death's piece, removing that piece from the board. "And since you won't get one over on me…" He moved Death's other piece back to its original spot.

I HAVE TOLD YOU TO NOT TOUCH MY PIECES.

"I shall leave your pieces in peace." Grimbledung raised an eyebrow. "If you'll play properly. I mean, honestly." He gestured at the board. "This is a child's game and you're having issues with it."

HONESTLY IS THE ONLY WAY I PLAY ANYTHING. Death said in what was undeniably the biggest lie of the century.

Grimbledung fell backwards out of his chair, upending the ottoman.

WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH YOU? Death frowned. I MEAN AT THIS VERY MOMENT, NOT ANY OTHER TIME.

Grimbledung worked himself to his knees. "Oh, it's nothing. It's just that that lie of centurial proportions bowled me over as it went by."[39] Grimbledung jumped another piece on the far side of the board. "There; I just need to get my feet under me and I'll be okay." He righted the ottoman. "And get my feet up of course." He brought a foot up over the table and waggled his toes, making Death look away. As he put the ottoman in place, he moved one of his pieces away from Death's so it couldn't be captured. "Gads, don't look now but I think I'm winning."

WHAT? YOU ARE DOWN SIX PIECES TO MY FOUR. Death moved a piece toward the empty space in Grimbledung's base row. In two more moves it would be there. IT IS A GOOD THING WE AGREED TO FLYING KINGS BEFORE THE START OF THE GAME.[40]

"I agreed to that?" Grimbledung surveyed the board. "Are you sure?" He moved a piece in the middle forward a space. "I never agree to that until at least half way through a game."

SEVEN TO FOUR NOW. Death captured the piece with one of her own. DEFINITELY. IT WAS RIGHT BEFORE YOU SAID YOU WERE GOING TO WIPE THE BOARD WITH MY PIECES.

"Well, that's familiar at least." Grimbledung moved a piece toward the side of the board, away from Death's pieces.

AND I POINTED OUT, Death continued, THAT WHILE YOU HAVE MANAGED TO SOMEHOW WIN OVER HALF OF THE GAMES WE HAVE PLAYED IN THIS TWENTY-THREE GAME TOURNAMENT, I AM ON A STREAK AT THE MOMENT.

"That also sounds familiar as well." Grimbledung moved another piece to the side of the board to a safe edge space.

WASN'T THAT YOUR SECOND MOVE?

"Don't be absurd; I've moved a bunch of times. Heaps of times even." Grimbledung gestured at the board. "Does this *look* like a game that is only two moves in?"

UHMM. Death said. NO? Because it didn't.

"Then it's your move, Bones."

I KNOW I HAVE TOLD YOU TO STOP CALLING ME THAT.

"I'm just ribbing you."

AND PUNS. I KNOW WE HAVE DISCUSSED THOSE AT LENGTH AS WELL.

"Yes, yes." Grimbledung nodded solemnly. "And I apologize for it." He moved another piece in the center of the board- it was now in a position to be captured. "Capture away."

Death looked at the board, fairly sure that the Gnome had moved more than once. FINE THEN, NOW I AM AHEAD EIGHT TO YOUR FOUR.

"That's only half as much." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "I think I'm gaining."

THAT IS NOT HOW THAT WORKS. She shook her head. TO THINK I AM ACTUALLY TRYING TO GET THIS BUFFOON HERE PERMANENTLY.

"What?"

WHAT?

"You just made a foreboding aside for the benefit of the narrative about me staying here permanently."[41] Grimbledung took his feet off the ottoman. "Hey! Is that what is going on with the increasingly comfortable chair?" He pointed at Death. "I demand a straight answer and as the Hostess of the Afterlife you are required to give it!"

Death looked to the horizon. I AM NOT SURE TO WHICH QUESTION YOU ARE REFERRING.

"Prepositions are perfectly fine at the end of sentences." Grimbledung pointed out.[42] "Doing otherwise makes you sound pretentious."

FINE.

"Well?"

Death let out a long sigh. I AM NOT SURE WHICH QUESTION YOU ARE REFERRING TO.

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "Death, I demand you answer: Are you trying to keep me here forever? You are required to answer truthfully when asked a direct question." He jabbed his finger at her again. "I am sure THAT has been discussed in the past as well."[43]

Death sighed. YES, THAT IS THE CASE. THE MORE COMFORTABLE THE IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS, THE EASIER IT IS TO BRING A NEW MINION ONTO THE PAYROLL.

"There's currency down here?"

METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING. A smirk played across her skull face. WHILE IT IS INDEED TRUE ONE CANNOT TAKE IT (she made quotes with her fingers) WITH THEM, THINGS THAT ARE ALREADY HERE CAN BE USED.

"This is all a ruse then!"

THERE IS NO RUSE; THE INTENT IS MAKING YOU ANOTHER MINION.

"Just a minion?"

LACKEY THEN

"Lackey?" Grimbledung frowned. "I think that's even worse."

CO-CONSPIRATOR?

"Well, that does have a nice ring to it." Grimbledung sat down. "But…I kind of like my life in the World of the Living."

LIFE IS OVERRRATED.

"So you have to beat me a bunch of times to keep me here?"

Death considered that statement. While it was inaccurate- losing at games was indeed a part of it to get the soul invested in The Underworld; the number of deaths was a bigger piece. IN A WAY she said in a non-committal yet non-rule-breaking way. SO TO SPEAK. She added just in case there was an inquiry later on.

"Well, that's not going to happen." Grimbledung moved to the edge of his seat. "Alright then- let's have at it." Grimbledung moved his piece away from the edge, toward one of Death's. "I now declare this game Rapid Fire winner take all."

Death moved her piece towards Grimbledung's. Being ahead so many pieces, she wasn't worried about losing one here or there, and according to 'rapid fire' moves, a player was obligated to move

immediately after their opponent otherwise they lost whichever piece the opponent wanted to take - kings included. AGREED!

Grimbledung moved a back piece to support his advancing side piece.

Death moved in front of Grimbledung's piece so that its capture would move Grimbledung's forward without any support.

"Hah!" Grimbledung jumped Death's piece.

Death returned the favor. INDEED.

"Wi wi winning." Grimbledung put his hands in the air. "No! I was winning!"

THAT IS NOT HOW IT LOOKS TO...ME. Death finished her sentence to a very comfortable empty chair because Grimbledung was once again gone. DRAT. WINNER TAKE ALL MEANT I ONLY NEEDED THIS GAME. She sighed. WELL, HE'LL BE BACK SOON ENOUGH IF CURRENT EVENTS ARE ANY INDICATION. She looked up at the rolling black clouds scudding across the red sky because when all was said and done, Death had no real sense of time. Or timing for that matter.[44] IN ANY CASE HE WILL MAKE A FINE UNDERLING, THAT ONE.

Chapter 18
While Checkering, the Body Moves

The two Humans propped Grimbledung's body against the counter. They rested the crossbow bolt sticking out of his chest on the counter to keep him upright.

"Where should we take him?" One man asked the Elf behind the counter.

"The dump." The Elf suggested. "I imagine that's where dead Gnomes usually get taken, right?"

"I would think friends or family take possession of them." the other Human said. "Who did he come in with?"

"No one." The Elf said. "He must have been a traveling orphan. We should take him to the dump. And by 'we', I of course mean you two slack-jawed, knuckle-dragging reprobates."

The first Human looked at Grimbledung. "I'm not sure that's legal." He looked at his partner. "Is it?"

"I think you need a permit to dump Gnomes. There's a law, I'm sure." Pointed out the first Human.[45]

The second Human nodded. "That sounds completely true."[46] He looked at the Elf. "We're going to just leave him here until you decide what should be done with him."

"What? You can't do that? He'll creep out the customers. More so than a live, loitering Gnome would."

The first Human patted the other on the shoulder. "Me and Berks are janitors; we aren't supposed to dispose of bodies."

"That is true," Berks said. "I mean, we'll sweep up, toss towels into bins, mop up the sweat and put it back in the steam reservoir, but that's it. Disposing of bodies, that's...that's..." He was at a loss for words.

The other Human snapped his fingers. "Hey! That's a job for the undertaker."

"Excellent. Take him there then." The Elf shoo'ed them away. "Go before he starts to stink. More than a Gnome normally stinks."

The first Human nodded. "Okay; that works for me."

Berks picked up Grimbledung and hefted him over his shoulder. "See you in a bit, Skunder," He said to the other Human. "You too, Oriole." He said to the Elf.

"An Oriole is a common bird. My name is Ori-olee," The Elf said tersely. "It means 'one with great compassion' in Elfish."

"I'm sure it does." Berks said. With a wave, he walked out the door, Grimbledung over his shoulder.

Berks walked down the street, waving and greeting passersby. The people he passed spent more time staring at the dead, naked Gnome over his shoulder with the large crossbow bolt sticking completely through his chest than actually waving back. After just a few blocks of zig-zagging through town toward the undertaker's office, he approached the town's Constable.

"Hello Constable," he said with a smile. And a wave of course. "A good day to you, Sir." He added amicably.

"Hey there," Akita replied. He gave a curt nod to the man with a Gnome on his shoulder.

Akita skidded to a stop as the man passed. *A dead Gnome on his shoulder*? He thought. "Excuse me," he called at the man.

The man waved at another pedestrian. "Hey, Floyd," he said. "Gonna stop by for a haircut later."

Akita jogged up to the man who seemed more intent on greeting passersby than listening to him. "Excuse me." Akita tapped him on the shoulder

"Oh, hello again, Constable," Berks said with a smile. "How can I help you?"

"I just want to..." Akita lifted the dead Gnome's head. "Nuts. That didn't take long."

"Constable?"

"I know this Gnome."

"Oh, I see. My condolences?" Berks offered.

"How'd he die?" Akita sighed. "This time."

"He was killed by a female Gnome down in the saunas. It was...abrupt?"

"With a crossbow?"

"Uhm...yes. How did you know?"

Akita growled.

Berks held up one hand - the other was still holding Grimbledung up on his shoulder- "Listen Constable, I didn't have a thing to do with it. I swear!"

"Yeah, yeah. That Gnomess is really getting' on my nerrrrves." He held out his hands. "Okay, hand him over."

"What?" Berks looked down the street- toward the undertaker's office. "But I was supposed to..."

"Do you have a license for that Gnome?" Akita asked with a smirk.

"What?" Berks looked from the Constable to Grimbledung and back. "I... uhhh. This isn't my Gnome. I was just carrying him for someone else."

"There are ordinances against openly carrying Gnomes without a license, you know."

"He's really not my Gnome, Constable." Berks tried again. "Oh man. And I just got out too."

"I'm kidding." Akita guffawed. "I'll take care of him." He gestured with his hands. "Rrrreally. He's a pal. Just hand him over."

"Oh, well in that case." Berks lifted Grimbledung off his shoulder and held him out for Akita. "Here you go."

~~Grimbledung~~ Grimbledung's body farted loudly.

"Wow, he's still loaded, huh?" Akita scrunched up his nose as he took the Gnome.

"The leaking has stopped." Berks pointed out. "So it could be worse."

"The things I do for this Gnome." Akita shook his head. He sniffed. "Crud; more wolfsbane! I gotta find that female." A growl started in the back of his throat.

"Constable?" Berks took a step back. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Akita waved him off. "I'm fine."

"Well," Berks went back to smiling. "If that's it, I guess I'll go back to work, Constable."

"Yep, that's it." Akita hefted Grimbledung to his shoulder causing a little more gas to escape as he was jostled around. With a headshake, Akita headed toward *Herbs and More, Much More*.

Akita made it to the second step of Maca's shop before he noticed the 'closed' sign in the window. He kicked the door several times with no reply. "Huh, even CoatRack is taking the day off." He looked at Grimbledung. "Yer most annoyin', Grrrimbledung." With a sigh, he turned and stepped back onto the street where he unceremoniously dumped Grimbledung's body onto the ground. "Guess there's only one place left to send ya." He drew his wand and barked what could have been an incantation.

Grimbledung's body disappeared in a flash of light.

Akita sheathed his wand then dusted his hands off. "That's enough lawman work for the day. Time for a drink." He looked toward the Duck Inn and Dine. "Or three."

Chapter 19
Read ***Before*** Eating. Then Burn

Doctor Marone sat in front of his office, feet on a stool, reading the daily NEWS.

"Want something to eat, Doc?" An intern said to him as he pushed open the door of the aid station and stepped out. "I was going to pick something up."

The doctor rolled up the parchment he was reading. "Sure, Hennis; something light would be nice."

"Okay Doc, I'll…" His voice trailed off as Grimbledung's body appeared in a flash of green light on the raised platform positioned near the clinic. "Then again, maybe not. Seems we have a dead visitor."

Doctor Marone looked out at the platform. "I don't get paid enough for this."

"Want me to stick around?" Hennis asked as he prayed to every single god he knew of for a simple 'No' in response.

Not a single one heard him; they were busy. There was a Croquet tournament going on.[47]

"Sure, you'll help make this go quicker, I think." The Doctor said as he stood. "Might as well get him inside so we can get started."

With a sigh, the intern quickly moved to Grimbledung's arms. Because he hoped that was the safer end to carry. "Okay then, Doctor."

The doctor hesitated, realizing what his intern had done. "Hmmm. Picking sides, I see."

"I'm here to learn, Doc. That's what I'm doing." Hennis reached down and grabbed Grimbledung's body by the forearms to pick him up. Hennis' hands slid completely up his arms and past his fingers. "Ewww! He's slimy!" He wiped his hands on the back of his pants. "Come on!"

The Doctor leaned over and examined Grimbledung. "Seems he's covered in sweat."

"He's definitely not covered with clothes," Hennis pointed at the naked Grimbledung. "Except for that fashionable crossbow bolt, that is. What's with this Gnome?"

"Poor life choices," the Doctor said. "I mentioned it a while ago. Maybe I'll try again." He grasped Grimbledung's ankles and picked his feet up to waist high. "Ready."

Hennis rubbed some dirt on his hands then grasped Grimbledung around the elbows. "Ready." Thanks to his feet being higher than is head, when he was jostled, Grimbledung let out a long belch. The intern turned his head to the side to avoid the acidic smell. "Gads. What is this Gnome eating?"

"I really don't want to find out. At this point I want him out of here before his first meal." The Doctor gestured toward the door. "In and out is what I'm looking at."

Hennis pulled the half-ajar door open with his foot. "You'll get no complaints out of me." He backed into the room.

"Head to the left, on his side."

"Got it, Doc." Hennis obliged and shifted around to put Grimbledung's head on the left end of the table- closer to the work

bench with the medical supplies on it. "So what do you think?" He said as he slid the body to center it on the table. Thanks to it being covered in sweat, it pushed around the polished steel table easily.

Doctor Marone flicked the crossbow bolt with his finger, making it vibrate back and forth. "Well, since it's definitely non-magical, we can use something simple."

The intern's eyes shifted to the enema bag hung in the corner. "How simple?" He cringed. "Something that would need redacted, simple? Or just a potion we pour down is throat, simple?"

Doctor Marone sniffed. "Smell that?"

"I'm trying not to."

Marone leaned over Grimbledung's chest and inhaled near where the crossbow bolt entered. "That's odd." He gestured at the body. "Give that a smell."

"I'd rather not."

"You're here to learn, remember?" Marone smirked.

"I suppose I am." The intern stepped in and sniffed the crossbow bolt. He looked up at the doctor then smelled the Gnome gain. "That's an odd smell but I'm not familiar with it. What is it, Doc?"

"Wolfsbane. It's a real particular odor." He wrinkled his nose. "You won't forget it, I'm sure."

"Not likely." Hennis said. "Why would someone use wolfsbane on a Gnome?"

"Why indeed." Doctor Marone prodded Grimbledung's body in several places causing the release of several 'toots' of gas.

Hennis shrugged. "Maybe wolfsbane smells better than Gnomes?"

"Most everything does, I imagine." Marone stopped prodding Grimbledung. "Well, that changes things."

Hennis looked at the enema bag. "So.... what are we using?"

The Doctor crossed his arms as he considered the Gnome. "Well, the wolfsbane is tricky. Tricky stuff." His eyebrows went up. "Unless." He reached over and pulled Grimbledung's eyelid apart and looked into his eye. "That's interesting." He then used both hands to pull Grimbledung's ear open. He leaned in and peered deeply into it as he stretched the ear out. "Just as I suspected."

"What, Doc?"

"Seems he's got Lycanthrope tendencies running in his veins... Real tricky, that."

Hennis stepped toward the enema bag. "Bedpans!. So it's the bag, then?"

"No; we need something stronger." The Doctor pointed at the door. "Go 'round back and fetch the bucket that's under the water spout."

"The barrel? You going to dunk him?"

"No, no; the metal one 'round back. I need the metal one. The bucket."

"Doc." Hennis blanched as he realized what was going to be done. "No, please."

"Just dump the water out of it and bring it in quick-like. I still want to eat lunch at some point today."

"Anything but Tetanus-Majoris, Doc. Anything but that."

"It's the only thing that'll get him out of here."

"We could just bury him out back. Grow some real nice roses on him?" Hennis said with a smile. "What do you say to that?"

Doctor Marone smiled back as he shook his head. "Sorry; he has a lawman for a friend. There'd be questions."

With numb feet, Hennis walked out of the clinic and around the corner to a small metal bucket- it was full of rainwater. And needles. Rusty needles. He carefully poured out the red-colored water. "Oh man." He walked back into the clinic. "I've only seen this done once. And that was from a distance. You sure about this, Doc?"

Doctor Marone nodded. "It's the quickest way to shock his system back into working."

"Well, he was sweaty so he was probably trying to sweat out the poison."

"Very astute." Marone said. "I hadn't considered that."

"What if it's all out of his system?"

"Are you suggesting that this Gnome was casually sitting in a sauna with a crossbow bolt sticking out of his chest?"

Hennis considered that. "Maybe? Maybe he was probably sitting in a spa, minding his own business when he got shot."

"Him? Minding his own business? Not likely." The doctor put the bucket on the table. "Not likely at all. But shortly we can ask him." Doctor Marone picked up a rusty needle. "Where's that chart of Gnomish Pressure Points?"

Hennis turned and look at the workbench. Along with a myriad of surgical tools, it had three long shelves of books and scrolls shoved in any nook or cranny available. He started looking at the tags hanging from the scrolls. "Elves... Humans... Gnolls?" He looked at the Doctor. "Will Gnoll work? Spelling's kind of close, right? Especially if he's doing that furry Lycan thing."

"I hope you're not being serious."

Hennis looked back at the scrolls. "I don't see Gnomes. You sure we have it?" He tapped one of the scrolls. "Hey, what's a Pigmaei, Doctor?"

"Oh, that means a Gnome. It's Gnomish for Gnome."[48]

"Why isn't Gnome Gnomish for Gnome?"

The Doctor sighed. "We can discuss linguistics over lunch. Now get that scroll out so we can be done with him."

Hennis unrolled the scroll at the bottom of the examination table- thanks to it being designed to handle soldiers as tall as Half-Orcs, there was plenty of space. He tucked the top edge of the scroll under Grimbledung's heel to keep it from rolling up. "Okay. Starting at the top?"

"Starting at the top," Doctor Marone confirmed. He carefully took a long rusty needle out of the pail.

"Right temple. To the first blood humor."[49]

"Same on the left."

Doctor Marone nodded as he twisted a needle in so that it barely even entered the skin. In fact, when he let go of it, the needle leaned precariously to the side. He did the same to the other temple.

"Oh boy. Two to the nostrils, to the Phlegm." Hennis purposely turned so that his back was to Grimbledung so he didn't have to look at the needles being inserted. "Done?"

"Done."

"That wasn't so bad." Hennis said. "Ready for lunch?" He turned and smiled at Doctor Marone. He still didn't look at Grimbledung; needles gave him the Stomping Jeebies.[50]

"I'm done with those two sets." A smile played across the doctor's face. "Are you trying to be... humorous?" He held up the

needle. "We're going to need a full twenty, twenty-five of them to get him up and going."

"Fine, Doc." Hennis looked at the chart again. "Nostrils… check... Okay, there are two to the eyes if you think they are necessary."

"Better safe than sorry."

"Outer edges..." He cringed. "To the yellow eye bile."

Doctor Marone took another needle "Right." He leaned over and carefully inserted it just past the edge of Grimbledung's pupil, opposite his nose. This time the needle remained upright since it was inserted almost a quarter of an inch.

Hennis shuddered even though he wasn't looking. He fought to keep his own biles under control. Especially the ones residing in his stomach.

"Next?"

The intern looked down at the chart. "Two in the gums. Upper. At the edges of his smile, one in each nipple." He cringed. "And one in his belly button."

"Damn it man," Doctor Marone cursed. "How deep? Which bile am I aiming for?" He put his hand on Hennis' shoulder. "How about I read and you insert?"

"Ahh! No!" Hennis composed himself. "No, Doctor. I've got it." He took a couple of breaths. "Sorry."

"Then from the top.... of the gums." The Doctor said. "I'm not enjoying this either, just so you know."

"Thanks, Doc." Hennis said. "Gums are yellow... Actually, they all are." He looked at the chart again. "Oh. Except the belly button is

to the black bile." He gestured over his shoulder in the general direction of Grimbledung's belly button.

"Fine." Doctor Marone inserted the needles, all about a half inch deep. Except for the one in the bellybutton; it went in a full inch.

After he was done, he took a step back. "How many more on this end?"

"None. Next are two more… netherly located."

"I figured as much." Marone said. After he inserted those two needles. "Any toes?"

Hennis looked over the chart. "There are three per side if you want to do them. ?'Big, ring, and little toes."

"Sub-cuticle?"

Hennis grimaced. "Yeah. To the white bile each one."

"Huh."

Hennis looked at the doctor. "What's wrong?"

"He seems to be missing a pinky toe." He shrugged. "I'll do big, middle, ring. Should still be okay."

"If you say so." Hennis made the mistake to look at the doctor as he inserted a rusty needle almost a half inch under Grimbledung's big toe nail. His stomach bile threatened to make an appearance so he looked away.

"Anything else?" Doctor Marone asked.

"I think that's it." Marris looked over the chart carefully. "Yeah, that's it Doc."

"Where does the instigator go?" Doctor Marone asked, referring to the one needle that was supposed to jump-start the entire process.

"Eeesh. The nose."

"Traverse or transect?" Marone looked at his assistant. "I'm really hoping for the first one."

"No luck, Doc. It's straight in for Gnomes."

"Phlegm." The Doctor said. "Here goes nothing." He eased the four-inch needle in almost half its length. When he finished he stepped back. "Okay, nothing we can do now except wait."

"How long does this normally take?" Hennis rolled up the chart as he looked at Grimbledung. "Have you done this with Gnomes before?"

Doctor Marone shook his head. "I've done a couple of Dwarves, and a Halfling after the horn battle. But that's it for Wee Folk." He gestured toward the door. "Mostly it's the soldiers here at Prost Garrison, which as you know is just human si..."

Grimbledung sat up and screamed.

Really, really, loudly.

He didn't stop for almost thirty seconds.

He took a deep breath then fell back.

"Wow. Was it this fast for the other smallers?"

Doctor Marone shot the young man a look. "What did you just call him?"

Hennis blushed. "Oh, I didn't mean anything by it. Really."

"Uh huh," Doctor Marone said, not sounding convinced.

Hennis looked at Grimbledung. He was breathing normally. "So with the other... Wee Folk, how long did it..."

Grimbledung sat up and screamed.

Really, really, loudly.

He didn't stop for almost another thirty seconds.

He took a deep breath then fell back. Again.

"Okay, that's going to get creepy. How many times is that going to happen?" Hennis said.

Grimbledung sat up again and opened his mouth. This time only a high-pitched whine came out. He looked at Doctor Marone with wide eyes. When his eyes swiveled down to look at the needle sticking out of his nose. "Eeeedle!" He said. The ones in his gums kept his lips from moving properly. "Eeeedle!" He reached for the needle.

"Ah, no don't do that." Doctor Marone warned. "They need to come out in the order they went in."

"Eeeeple!" Grimbledung pointed at the needle piercing his left nipple. He looked further down. Below his waist. "Iblets ave eedles!" He shrieked.

"Lie back and I'll get them." Marone gestured at his intern. "Get him down."

Hennis took Grimbledung by the shoulders and lowered him back. He kept his hands on his shoulders. "Doc?"

Doctor Marone nodded at him. "Hold him still."

"Oooooohng?"

"No; this will be real quick."

"Uuuuurt?"

"Ready?" Hennis said instead of answering.

"Ready." Doctor Marone said. Because he was.

"Nooooh," Grimbledung said. Because, in truth, he really and truly wasn't.

"Okay then." Starting at the bottom and working upward, Doctor Marone pulled out the needles quickly starting with the last one first tossing them into the pail as he went. Within moments he pulled the one out of Grimbledung's nose last.

During the entire time, Grimbledung said: "EEEEEEEEEE"[51]

As the last needle hit the pail, Hennis let go of Grimbledung's shoulders. "Better, Grimbledung?"

"Nobd. Itbd notbd betterbd." Grimbledung's eyebrows went up. "Heybd. Ibd gotbd speechbd impebdmedbdmedbtbd." He frowned. "Welbd Shibdb!"

"That's temporary." Doctor Marone assured him. "Just don't talk too much and it will go away faster."

Hennis looked at the doctor, his own eyebrows up.

Doctor Marone winked at the man. "Trust me."

"Okabd, Doc." Grimbledung said. "Hebd! Me conscribded?"

"No!" Both Doctor Marone and Hennis said together.

"Errr.. what we mean," Doctor Marone continued, "was that this was on the house."

"Onbd da houbd?"

"Absolutely." Doctor Marone drew his wand. "Speaking of houses, how about I send you back to your house right away?"

Grimbledung nodded at the man. "Telebordation wand?"

"Yup."

"Nice. One of ourbd?"

"Uhm" The doctor cleared his throat. "Errr…not exactly."

"Shibdb."

Before the Gnome could say anything else, Marone waved the wand over Grimbledung's head in a circle.

Returnus Domocillius

He incanted.

In a flash, Grimbledung disappeared.

"Whew," Hennis put his hands on his hips. "What a chore that was. Lunch?"

"Yes; lunch." Agreed Doctor Marone. "And I'll explain Naming Conventions."[52]

Chapter 20
Magically Undelicious

Liverioso peeked around the corner of the outhouse.

"See him?" Semfeld asked. From inside the outhouse.

"No." A thought occurred to Liverioso. Sort of. It was more a thought that a thought had escaped him but he couldn't remember it. "Who am I looking for again?"

"Grimbledung!"

"Right, right." Liverioso frowned. "Why don't we just walk normally to the shop and talk to him there?"

"Because... just a second..."

Liverioso took a step away from the outhouse because the wind had changed putting him downwind from it. "Can't I just meet you there?"

Semfeld stepped out of the outhouse. "No, I told you we can't." He stepped to the large barrel sitting on saw horses and turned the spigot, washing his hands with the bar of lye hanging from a rope next to it. "Okay." Semfeld shook his hands off to dry them. "We need to keep a low profile."

Liverioso jutted his chin out. "That Sir, is not the Magician's Way." He said haughtily, referring to the very thick and haphazardly written rulebook that Magicians tried to follow. Especially when it suited their needs. "Besides," His tone softened. "I can't believe that after all those two Gnomes have done for us, we should be helping

them without any hesitation at all. I shouldn't have to remind you that honor is also mentioned several times in the rulebook."

"It's…complicated. I told you." Semfeld said.

"I don't see what's complicated about helping out a friend when they are in trouble."

"How about when *we're* in trouble?" Semfeld said. "Do I have to remind *you* that our necks are on the line?" He stepped close to his friend and drew his finger across his throat. "Necks on the line. That hack Mister Pinniped is after us too in case you've forgotten."

Liverioso frowned. "Maybe we can just explain it to him. Maybe he'd understand if we…"

"Maybe we'll find our gullets full of hot rivets." Semfeld interrupted. He pulled his partner along as he started down the alleyway.

"Do humans even have a gullet?" Liverioso asked. "I thought that was just with animals."

"Trust me; we have them too." Semfeld said.[53] He peeked around a corner then scooted across the street, still pulling Liverioso.

"Either way, I don't see why we can't just talk to a fellow Magician and work our differences." Liverioso snapped his fingers. "Hey! We could invoke mediation."

"That's only for magicians in good standing. And we're not at the moment, remember?"

Liverioso frowned. "Well we sure can't just kill him, right? I mean, that would really make it hard to get back in the guild. Especially if he hasn't even stolen any of our gigs." He said, referencing one of the few sanctioned situations where killing a fellow Magician was acceptable.

Semfeld pointed diagonally across the intersection. "There's the shop. Let's go." He let go of his partner's sleeve and ran across the open area. When he reached the outside of Second Hand Sorcery, he pressed his back against the wall right next to the door. "Okay, so what we'll…" He looked back where he had just run from- Liverioso was still in the alley. Except now he was cowering.

Semfeld furiously gestured for his partner.

Liverioso shook his head.

Semfeld angrily gestured for his partner.

Liverioso shook his head again.

Semfeld furiously angrily gestured for his partner with both hands. Then shook a fist as an exclamation point.

Liverioso gathered up his Magician Robes® and sprinted across the street. When he got to the shop, he also splayed himself out against the front wall. Face first. Passersby gave them a look and a headshake. "Okay, we're in. Now can we go?"

Semfeld looked at his partner, decided against a reply and just pulled him toward the door. Which, since it was Door instead of just the door, courteously opened for them when they got close.

Semfeld leaned his head in and listened. 'And that's when I learned I was lactose intolerant', he heard Rat say. "Now we're in." He said as he pulled his partner into the shop right behind him.

"Be with you in a moment. Take a look around in the meantime." Rat said over the shoulder of the large man standing at the counter.

The large man wearing Magician Robes® with Magician-compulsory moons and stars sewn on it. And also quite a few aquatic creatures.

Semfeld skidded to a stop as he entered the shop- because he realized who was at the counter.

Liverioso stepped inside as well because as usual he was following close behind his partner.

Door dutifully closed behind them both as usual because that's what Door did for customers.

Semfeld turned to leave, running into Liverioso face first. "Get out." He hissed.

"But we just got here." Liverioso whined. "I even jaywalked for the occasion."

"Go!" Semfeld hissed again.

Liverioso wiped his face. "Did I mention we just got here?"

"Yes, do come in," Mister Pinniped suggested as he looked over his shoulder at the pair.

"Hello you two," Rat said. "How are things?"

"Semfeld and Liverioso. How nice of you to drop by." Mister Pinniped said.

Rat looked at the customer. "Oh, I see you know our two resident Magicians."

"Resident Magicians? Of course I do." Mister Pinniped said haughtily. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know all the rats in town," Rat pointed out.

"Ahhh." Mister Pinniped nodded. "Point taken." He turned slowly to face the other two men in what he hoped was both a dramatic and ominous way. "But you see I know them specifically because I was sent here to deal with them. Oh yes. Deal. With. The-em." He lowered his voice as he drew out the word 'them'.

"Did you just pick up a stutter?" Rat twitched his whiskers.

"It was for dramatic purposes and honestly it is rude of you to even mention it if it wasn't."

"Look at that, Liverioso; it's Mister Pinniped. How nice; we were just coming to see you," Semfeld lied.

"We were? I didn't think that was part of the plan at all, was it?" Liverioso asked, truthfully.

"Is there a convention going on?" Rat asked. Conventions - especially ones with magical themes- were good for business.

Mister Pinniped raised his hands out to the sides. "A convention of justice, perhaps." He turned his hands back and forth to show they were empty.

"Oh great; one of those." Rat twitched his whiskers. Those definitely did not increase sales of wands. Coffins yes, wands no.

"Can we explain?" Semfeld tried.

"There is no way you can explain your way out of this, you hack!" Mister Pinniped took a short bow. "Oh no, there is no way you can explain your way out of this." He pushed up his sleeves.

"Now it seems like you're padding your word count. Are you paid on commission?" Rat asked.

Liverioso stifled a chuckle.

"Can we explain?" Semfeld tried the direct approach. "I'm sure we can work this out." He hesitated. "Whatever this happens to be because we have no idea what it is, exactly."

"Hah!" Liverioso raised a finger.

"I will now perform the famous No Bones About It trick." Mister Pinniped drew his wand.

"Oh, I love that trick," Semfeld said. "I used it once on an Orc. No, twice."

Liverioso took a step back. Toward Door. He was prepared to shove his partner toward the other magician to help him make his escape. "Hold on now, we haven't been told what the charges are. I demand to know the charges!" He demanded.

Pinniped hesitated, hands above his head. He considered the demand for a moment then shook his head. "No. You aren't in good standing; you deserve no explanation."

"Did you just call us stupid?" Semfeld asked.

"I said good standing, *not* good understanding," Mister Pinniped said. "But now I'm not sure if both don't apply."

Bones to mush

He stared to incant

"I declare a mistrial of justice!" Liverioso tried a different -procedural- approach.

"No such thing."

Is the task at hand…

Mister Pinniped continued as he twirled the tip of his wand.

"Point of order!" Liverioso blurted out. "We are on Magical Ground, you cannot… *cannot* cast spells against anyone here!"

Mister Pinniped stopped twirling his wand. "Is this true, rodent?"

Rat twitched his whiskers. "It actually is, now that you mention it. Once we lost an entire day due to the magicalness of this place." He cringed as he used a Grim-ism.

"One lost day does not make a place magical." Observed Mister Pinniped.

"True," Rat agreed, "but the boxes in here tend to stack and unstack themselves when no one is looking. It's pretty disturbing, I have to admit. And fairly dangerous at night if you're not paying attention."

Mister Pinniped lowered his hands. "What about books? Are books stacked and unstacked?" It was in fact common knowledge that highly magical places did indeed cause boxes to stack and unstack. It was also common knowledge that books tended to get stacked by ghosts who were obviously not in the magical category. But these non-magical ghosts did sometimes stack boxes along with books.

"This place is not haunted; I can assure you of that." Rat said.

"Hermmm." Mister Pinniped said.

"Are you *sure* you're not picking up some sort of speech impediment?" Rat asked.

"Bah!" Mister Pinniped said in frustration. If word got back to The Guild that he had cast a spell on magical ground, his membership would be revoked. Which would have him no longer employable by the *The Great Denizens* magical troupe- a highly lucrative and competitive gig if there ever was one. "Bah!" He said again.

"So am I to understand you came here to kill these two fellows?" Rat asked.

"Well…" Mister Pinniped shrugged. "It actually wasn't my first task, no."

"Ahh. That again." Rat sighed. "Then I have to assume you are here after a certain Gnome."

"I am indeed. Where might this certain Gnome be?"

"No idea." Rat said without missing a beat. "I haven't seen him in a couple of days if you want the truth of the matter. He's probably out gallivanting on the Great Shambler Plains for all I know. He's often gone for a month at a time." He stacked his lies just because it was fun. "I honestly would not be able to tell you where he was because I haven't the faintest clue to his location." Rat's whiskers twitched from the delicious number of lies he was able to run together in such a short amount of time.

"I find that…"

Grimbledung fell down the stairs head over heels ending up splayed out on the floor in front of Mister Pinniped.

"Huh." Mister Pinniped said as he glanced at Rat.

"Or…. He could just be upstairs without my knowledge." Rat offered as a final, Grand Lie. He looked from Grimbledung to Mister Pinniped and back. "Well, that's it for me. I'll see you all at the grand finale."[54] Then scampered off.

Mister Pinniped narrowed his eyes at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung looked up at the man. "Are you squinting because I'm out of focus? Because I have to admit that I *feel* out of focus." He looked at Semfeld and Liverioso. "Am I out of focus?"

"You look great," Liverioso said. "Have you been working out?"

Now Mister Pinniped narrowed his eyes at Liverioso.

"I have indeed," Grimbledung said as he sat up. "It's kind of you to notice."

"Lifting weights? Running?"

Mister Pinniped put his hands on his hips.

Semfeld took what he hoped was an unnoticed step toward Door.

"I have been traveling to the Netherworld a lot lately." Grimbledung patted his belly. "I think that counts for exercise. There is a river I have to cross. And it's hot there so I tend to sweat a bit. I think it's a combined effect that's making me slim and trim."

"That's very interesting," Liverioso said. "Why this one time I took…"

"SILENCE!" Mister Pinniped roared. He pointed at Semfeld with his wand. "And not another step out of you, *Sir*!"

"I was just going to lean against the wall to get comfortable." Semfeld tried.

"Huh!"

"So anyway…" Grimbledung smiled at Mister Pinniped. "Thanks for the purchase, Sir."

"I did not purchase anything!"

"Mister Pinniped, if you'd just let me expl…" Semfeld started.

"There will be no more explaining." Mister Pinniped pointed at the door. "We will all go out in the street and continue this discussion there."

"In the street?" Grimbledung hopped to his feet and dusted his hands off. "That seems dangerous. Wagons and all. How about we do it over drinks?" He nodded at Liverioso. "I can tell you more about the Netherworld."

"He'll be able to see it for himself soon enough. You can even give him a tour."

"What?"

"He's here to kill you, Grimbledung." Semfeld said. "Then I think he's going to kill us, too."

"Oh, I see. So much for drinks then." Grimbledung said, let down. "Rolton chips." He put his hands behind his back. "Well, get on with it then. Kill away. It's me first, right? I'd hate to cut ahead of someone else if I'm not supposed to be first."

"What?" Semfeld moved behind Liverioso. He was planning on shoving him toward Mister Pinniped then making a run for it. Especially since Grimbledung seemed willing to die first.

Mister Pinniped smiled at the Gnome. "Well, that's very accommodating of you." While conducting magic on unsuspecting or unwilling people while on magical ground was illegal, if the persons were willing participants, all bets were off.

"So let's see what you've got." Grimbledung rocked back on his heels then his toes. "You ham-fisted *buffoon*. You purveyor of cheap purchased-via-mail parlor tricks." He lowered his voice. "*You hack*."

"Why you!" Mister Pinniped raised his wand high. "I shall now perform the always spectacular Puddle of Ooze spell!"

Grimbledung yawned wide.

"Notice I have nothing up my sleeves." Mister Pinniped dutifully pulled back each sleeve to show there was indeed nothing up them.

"Bored. Boring show." Grimbledung rocked back on his heels. "Barely even moves."

Semfeld put his hands on Liverioso's back and braced his feet, ready to give the shove of his life.

Mister Pinniped glowered at Grimbledung as he brought his hands back together. He aimed the wand at Grimbledung and twirled the end.

Where once was flesh and bone…

Began Mister Pinniped.

Grimbledung whipped his wand out from his wrist sheath and slashed it at the man.

*Ka **Blam**!*

He incanted.

In a flash of light, Mister Pinniped vanished. Only his gaudy cloak and wand remained.

Grimbledung re-sheathed his wand as he smiled at Liverioso. "I don't see how any Magician could ever win any sort of duel with that kind of wind up. He practically started it a week ago."

"Wait…" Semfeld stepped out from behind his partner. "Is he… dead?"

Liverioso clapped his hands. "Who cares; he's gone, right? Well done Grimbledung! I especially liked the part at the end. Well done, indeed."

Grimbledung took a bow. "Thank you, thank you. It was nothing really."

Semfeld walked over and looked where Mister Pinniped had been standing. There wasn't even a pile of ashes. "He's completely gone."

"Well sure." Grimbledung shuddered. "It would have been messy not to send *all* of him away. What would I do with a finger or a foot?"

"Wait…" Semfeld said again. "Did you send him to that place in the desert? Where you sent us?"

Grimbledung nodded "It's my go-to place to send people. It's in the middle of nowhere; no one ever gets out of there."

"But we got out of there." Semfeld said. "Twice."

Grimbledung opened his mouth then closed it.

"So did Garibaldis," added Liverioso.

Grimbledung pursed his lips together tightly.

"But just once." Observed Semfeld. "So there's that."

"Oh! And so did Chéri." Semfeld pointed out.

"Messrs Semfeld and Liverioso, if you are going to cast aspersions on my magic, I would appreciate it if you did it elsewhere." He crossed his arms.

"We apologize," Liverioso said. "It was a nicely done bit of magic."

"Nicely done? It was *perfect*; since I didn't actually kill him I won't have to talk to Akita about it. Especially if you don't mention it to him."

"He won't hear it from us." Semfeld assured the Gnome.

Liverioso rushed Grimbledung and hugged him. "Thanks so much, Grimbledung! I can't tell you how much this means to me!"

"Then don't." Grimbledung said. He nodded at Door. "You are welcome to buy me a drink though."

Dutifully door opened.

"Wow, I have to say that was done very efficiently." Semfeld remarked. "I just hope he doesn't get out of there."

"Not a chance, I haven't sent anything useful there in a long time." Grimbledung tapped his chin. "Let's see… the last thing I sent there was this hornet's nest that had set up shop under Pozzuoli's eaves."

"When was that?"

"Last week."

Semfeld nodded. "Well if he does make it back, don't tell him where we live now."

Liverioso nodded. "Right. The last thing we need is visitors in Cuticle. We're looking at settling down and relaxing there."[55]

"It's a nice quiet place." Semfeld said.

"Don't you worry one bit." Grimbledung said. "No one'll bother you there." He rubbed his hands together. "Now about that drink."

Semfeld nodded at the Gnome. "We shall each buy you a drink for your help before we head out of town."

"Deal." Grimbledung said. He gestured toward Door. "After you, buyers of said aforementioned drinks."

Chapter 21
Two Gnomes Diverged in a Mood

Grimbledung walked back from the Fat Blue Mooned Tyre. He kept a fairly straight line because as Semfeld and Liverioso had said, they each bought him just one drink.

When it was his turn to buy, Grimbledung bought just one drink for each of them. So there were currently only three drinks sloshing around inside him. With the amount of alcohol he normally consumed, three drinks was a mere pittance and not even worth a mild buzz.

"Thirsty?" He asked a passerby. Hoping they would say yes, then he could get them to buy him a drink. Even with his newfound wealth, Grimbledung still appreciated a drink paid for by someone else more than one self-bought.[56]

The man didn't even answer. He knew from the last time that *any* sort of answer would end up with him losing half the day and paying for three-quarters of the drinks. He wasn't sure why the math ended up like that but he definitely wanted to make sure it didn't happen again. He even picked up his pace to make sure.

"Huh." Grimbledung said. With a shrug he turned a corner, heading toward the Duck Inn and Dine. And ran headlong into Drimblerod.

"Grimbledung!" Drimblerod said, surprised.

"Drimblerod!" Grimbledung said, thirstily. "You thirsty?"

"What?" Drimblerod put his hands on his hips. "No! What are you doing out here? You are supposed to be tending the shop!"

"Well, I was indeed partner. Until I managed to stop a homicidal act."

"Homicidal? And how did that get you out on the streets?" Drimblerod asked. He was glad that Grimbledung wasn't dead- he had been part of the discussion with Nulu, Maca, and Flora. "Instead of tending the shop." A thought occurred to him. "Is Rat handling the counter?"

"He said he was gone until the grand finale. Whatever that is."

"It's the big BANG! at the end of a show." Drimblerod explained.

"There's a show?"

"I honestly have no idea. I just live pun to pun, usually relegated to handing out straight lines."

"But it ends?" Grimbledung tapped his chin. "I wonder how it ends."

"With a young boy and a snow globe is my guess. It's a hell of an ending."[57]

"What?"

"Nothing." Drimblerod said. "So… why are you out on the streets? And don't say what you've already said."

Grimbledung nodded. "There was this fellow. A magician. He came into the shop…"

"What'd he buy?"

"Nothing. He was looking for information and we weren't selling that." Grimbledung answered. "So while Rat is trying to get him to go away without giving a straight answer…"

"Business as usual." Drimblerod tossed in.

"Semfeld and Liverioso came in." Now Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "And apparently it turned out this fellow was there to kill not only them but *me* as well. What are the odds of that?"

"Lately, pretty good." Drimblerod said. "So how'd you resolve the… Are they dead?"

"Who the magicians? No. Well, not those two. The other fellow was a magician. Did I mention that?"

"Yes."

Grimbledung nodded. "Well, he's not dead either. Not yet anyway."

"Well that will keep Akita out of the mix. So what did… Oh, no; you didn't send him to that place did you?"

"It was either that or that dragon's lair under the amusement park."

"That would have been a quicker ending, I would think."

"If the dragons are actually there." Grimbledung said. "Otherwise, that would have meant I sent that lummox to a cave full of unguarded treasure. And If I'm going to do that to any lummox, it would be me!"

"I see what you mean. Good thinking." Drimblerod said. "Was that gigantic hornet's nest the last thing you sent there?"

"Yup."

"Well, hopefully that will be the end of… what was his name?"

"I never caught it." Grimbledung replied.

Drimblerod exhaled slowly. That usually meant that Grimbledung wasn't paying attention, not that the man didn't say it. "I'll just ask Semfeld."

"They said they were leaving. Going to the Devil, or something."

"Devil's Thumb. It's where Liverioso's girlfriend has a shop set up." Drimblerod explained. "So why aren't you in the shop, exactly?"

"Well, as a reward for saving their lives, they each offered to buy me a drink on their way out of town."

"That makes sense."

"And now I'm on my way back."

Drimblerod pointed. "Except the shop is that way and you just turned toward the Duck Inn."

Grimbledung looked around. "Really? Well that's unusual. I don't think that's ever happened to me before."

"Uh huh."

"Well, in any case, all's well that ends well, so…" Grimbledung started off. Toward the Duck Inn and Dine.

Drimblerod reached out and grabbed his collar. "Hold on, you're supposed to be running the shop today. I have the day off, remember?"

"You have the day off? We should celebrate with a drink!" Grimbledung tried to walk away but Drimblerod hadn't let go of his collar yet. "Gah!! I've lost my traction!"

"Back to the shop, Grimbledung Sixtoes." Drimblerod muscled his partner around. "And tell you what, I'll go tell Flora you're in the shop alone so she can come for a visit. You two probably still have some talking to do."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Oooh!" He tried to walk away again. "Lemme go!"

"Fine." Drimblerod said. He let go and his partner started walking. "All the way back to the shop with no detours or stops."

"Got it!"

"And no talking to anyone until you're inside Second Hand Sorcery!"

"Right!" Grimbledung waved a hand over his head.

Drimblerod watched him walk off. Once Grimbledung turned the next corner -toward the shop- he turned and head to the Duck Inn for a late lunch/early dinner. "Supper, I believe it's called."

For supper.

And to send Flora toward Grimbledung.

Chapter 22
There Goes that Loving Feeling

Flora pushed past the curtain into the dining area carrying a tray with a broiled chicken, some vegetables and a large ale. She angled toward the table where Drimblerod was seated.

"Ahh, that looks delicious." Drimblerod snapped his napkin and tucked it into his collar. "De-licous."

Flora frowned at him. "So you left Grimbledung running the shop. Again?"

"I don't believe it is again; *since it's his turn*." Drimblerod said. "He's spent more time in the afterlife than the businesslife here recently you know."

Flora's frown continued. She was sure that Drimblerod continuously tricked poor Grimbledung into working extra hours in the shop, and thanks to Grimbledung's good nature he just allowed it to happen. "I'm not sure when the last time was that he came in here to eat when you were tending the shop is what I'm saying."

"That's because when he's off, he goes straight to the Fat Blue Mooned Tyre." Drimblerod replied. "You can ask him if you like; he's at the shop."

"I think I will." Flora looked around the dining area. It was fairly empty because it was between lunch and dinner. She looked toward Wil. "Can I get a couple of hours off before the dinner rush?"

Wil looked around the room. There were only three groups of patrons seated –eight people in all- and two groups had already finished their food. Drimblerod was the only one just starting a meal and he was pretty self-sufficient as a customer. "Yeah, I suppose I can take care of this group. Take a couple of hours."

With a curt nod at Drimblerod, Flora moved to put her apron and serving tray away. A couple of hours with Grimbledung would be nice. Plus she could check in on him to make sure he was safe. Nulu and Maca had talked to her the better part of an hour the night before, explaining the condition of Grimbledung's Being and how he could not afford to die any more times.

Since she hoped to one day be married to him, she decided to stop killing him. Of course she still hit him; just not with anything sharp or heavy. The problem was that lately, it seemed there were a great many people who had not made that decision. As she pushed out the door, she ran headlong into a Halfling. "Oh, excuse me." She said with a smile.

"It's fine," said Righty. He stepped to the side, still holding the door open to let her pass. "Out you go."

Flora looked at the Halfling- he was quite muscular and actually big for a Halfling. "Are you a soldier?"

"Not anymore. Not for a long time."

"Just passing through?" Flora asked hopefully. Halflings were one of the folks that seemed intent on killing Grimbledung.

"What are you, some kind of busy body?" Righty snapped.

Flora clenched her fists. Large Halfling or not, she did not let people speak to her that way. A thought occurred to her: *even before she*

was elected Mayoress. "No, I'm the Mayoress of this town. What business do you have here?"

"You?" Righty smirked. "In charge?"

"That's right." She looked left and right, hoping that Constable Akita would wander by.

"Who are you looking for; the *actual* mayor?"

Flora frowned at the annoying Halfling. "I was hoping the constable was nearby." She narrowed her eyes. "Or his deputy, Corporal Colossus Basher of the Clan of the Black Hand."

Righty's demeanor changed. He had heard that Colossus had married and settled down someplace, but that was all the details he had. "You're bluffing, Gnome."

"Okay, *Halfling*." Flora said. "I'll make sure I mention it to him when I see him next. Which is often since I'm the mayor of this town. There can't be too many 'rightys' in town at the moment. I'm sure he'll find you pretty quick like. Either him or our *werewolf* constable. Or both!" She said since it was common knowledge that the largest of Halflings were right-handed degenerates. She shoved past him, deciding that she would definitely let Colossus -and Akita- know. But first she was going to spend time with Grimbledung since she still had an evening shift to work in a couple of hours and then the next day she was in the mayor's office all day. "I'm sure it can wait a couple of hours." She said to no one in particular as she stomped off towards Second Hand Sorcery.

Flora opened the door to the shop. "Grimbledung?" She called. When no one answered, she stepped in letting Door close itself.

"Grimbledung?" She pressed further into the shop. Grimbledung was lying down behind the counter, face down.

"Oh, that rascal Drimblerod works you so hard you just fall asleep right out front. My poor Gnome! Grimmy?" She stepped closer and nudged him with her foot.

Grimbledung didn't wake up.

"Grimbledung?" She kneeled down and shook him.

Grimbledung still didn't wake up.

"Grimbledung!" She rolled him over. His eyes were wide open and his mouth agape as if he were screaming.

"GRIMBLEDUNG!" She screeched.

Even though it was an ear-piercing screech, Grimbledung did not hear it since The Afterlife was a good distance away and in an altogether different time zone.[58]. And also he was at that very moment, uproariously, raucously winning at checkers.

Flora looked around the shop- it seemed to be empty. She drew her dirk and moved to the back room. Dummy was testing wands. "Dummy! What happened?"

Dummy raised his hands plaintively.

"What do you mean you don't know? Grimbledung is out there dead! How long has he been dead?"

Dummy tapped his mitten hand against his chin. Then brought his hands up plaintively again.

"Your own friend dies out there and you don't even notice?"

Dummy brought a hand up and cupped it around his ear.

"Didn't hear anything?"

Dummy shook his head.

"Well… Did anyone come through here?"

Dummy shook his head again. He pointed at the front of the shop then pointed the wand he was holding at his head.

"No; I don't know what killed him. It could have been a wand I suppose since there isn't any blood."

Dummy covered his eyes.

"There's no gore to see at all. He's just…" Flora's eyes teared up. "Gone."

Dummy put his hands on his hips, then pointed toward the front of the shop several times.

"Yes. I'll go get help. Will you keep an eye on him?"

Dummy gave a salute with the wand. Then pointed to the front of the shop.

"Okay. I'll drag you out there." Flora sheathed her dirk as she walked over to Dummy. She grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out into the main area of the shop. When she got there she righted Dummy.

Dummy put his hands back on his hips then started tapping his fingers.

"What? You're out here, right?" Flora said.

Dummy shook his head then glanced at Grimbledung then covered his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Flora asked.

Dummy gestured at Grimbledung without looking.

"Oh, I see. Here, I'll close his eyes. He's not staring at you, I'm sure of it."

Even when she closed Grimbledung's eyes, Dummy wouldn't look at him. He pointed at Door.

"Yes. I'll go get help. You keep an eye on things."

Dummy saluted again then started panning the wand around the room looking for a target.

"I'll be right back." Flora moved to Door. "Just wait here." She said sadly. From what Maca had told her, there was no telling when a death would end up being the one that put Grimbledung over the edge. "Oh dear." She said as she stepped out into the street.

There were people walking left and right along the street. None of them looked familiar.

Flora wrung her hands as she looked back and forth, deciding where to go. Finally she decided on the Constabulary since a murder had taken place.

Chapter 23
Successfully Checkered

"Hah!" Grimbledung was standing on the ornately carved arms of a very large chair. "Hah, I say again. Hah!"

Death looked at the horizon.

"I spy with my Gnome eye a board covered in white checker pieces because pretty much all the black ones are gone!"

THAT IS NOT HOW THAT GAME WORKS. Death kept staring in the distance.

"Checkers?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Oh I must disagree with you, dear woman; that is exactly how checkers works."

I MEANT THE GAME EYE SPY Death still wouldn't look at Grimbledung.

"How many pieces is that, Bones? I have trouble counting such a hugely largely number." Grimbledung hopped down from the arms of the chair onto its plush seat. He bounced on the coil supported cushion.

Begrudgingly Death looked down at the board. The begrudge quickly became annoyance; she had but one piece left and the infuriatingly annoyingly stupid Gnome had two. And they were both kings while hers was not. IT IS TWO. TWO IS TOO LARGE OF A NUMBER FOR YOU TO COUNT? WHAT A SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS THAT IS.

"Oh, I can count to two; I just wanted to hear you say it. Two. That's more than one isn't it? I'm pretty sure it is." Grimbledung leaned forward. "So do you want to resign or let this massacre of epic proportions continue to its tragic, gruesome end?"

Death thought back on the game. She was sure that the Gnome had cheated several times; moving more than once, and at one point she suspected he had actually eaten one of her pieces. I RESIGN. She said simply.

"Hah!" He bounced on the seat. "Wha wha wha…" Grimbledung raised his fists in the air. "No, not now! I was win win winning!" He pointed at Death. "You resigned so I won! No takebacks!"

Death held up her hand. Her fingers were crossed.

"Too late! Too late! What an underworld, what an underworld!" Said Grimbledung as he faded from sight.

Death let out a long breath. HOW EMBARASSING. She looked at the board again and shook her head. HE MUST BE CHEATING; I WAS UP FIVE PIECES. THAT ANNOYING GNOME NEEDS TO GET HIS COMEUPPANCE. A thought occurred to her. YES. COMEUPPANCE INDEED. She looked up and snapped her fingers to summon a trusted, malicious crony.

The crony- a massive, twisted and bent winged creature landed at Death's feet. WHAT IS THY BIDDING?

I REQUIRE A DEATH.

ONE DEATH? The crony asked. WHY WOULD ONE MERE DEATH EVEN BE WORTH YOUR WHILE MY MISTRESS? LET ME KILL TEN THOUSAND FOR YOU. The crony wheezed out a laugh. A PLAGUE. ALLOW ME A GLORIOUS PLAGUE.

JUST THE ONE.

BUT… WHY?

HE TASKS ME. Death said. HE TASKS ME.[59]

Chapter 24
Can We Work It Out?

Akita put his hands on his hips. "Okay, here's the deal. I…"

"There's a deal?" Bextra interrupted.

"There is no deal." Akita corrected.

"The deal is no deal?" Mantodea said with a smile. "That sounds like an absurd game."

The pair had been eating a light meal at the Crooked House. After their relaxing massage... after their not so relaxing witnessing of Grimbledung's murder, the two had moved into the Crooked House's one extra room while their new establishment was being renovated to avoid all the noise and dust.

"Listen you two," Akita said. "I try to run a respectable town here and I'll not have you two muck it up because you're on a murderous rampage."

"Who have we killed, Officer?" Mantodea said innocently. She ate a sliced cucumber. "Here in town." She added as a clarification.

Akita frowned. "No one. I just wanted to catch you two…"

"Well, that's that then." Bextra interrupted again. She looked at Mantodea. "You've been saying it for years."

"What?" Akita asked.

"Yes; what?" Mantodea echoed.

"We've been caught." Bextra gave Akita a wink. "And I thought we'd gotten away with it all."

Akita let a growl start in the back of his throat.

"Sheriff?" Mantodea said nervously. "Pay no attention to my friend. She's joking, obviously."

Akita let the growl continue to wander around inside his mouth for a while longer.

"Yes, of course I was joking." Bextra said. "I'm a real kidder, I am."

"She is." Mantodea affirmed.

"We." Bextra pointed back and forth between the pair. "Both are."

"Listen you two." Akita finally said. "We need to have a talk before this gets out of control."

Bextra held up a finger. "Okay, if I can interrupt just one more time."

The growl in Akita's throat got tired and just sat down near a molar. "Go ahead."

"We have no intention of killing anyone. Grimbledung included. We are actually looking at settling down." Bextra said. "Go legitimate."

Mantodea nodded. "Yes, in fact, we've bought the Red Cock Inn."

"That's true. We're going to turn it into a bed and breakfast with a full-service spa." Bextra added.

"I see." Akita said. "And you've discussed this with the Mayor?"

"No." Bextra said.

"Or the Sheriff?"

"No." Bextra said again. She frowned. "What we did was put in an offer with the legitimate owner of the Red Cock and made an

appointment to meet with the city council later this week. If she wants to talk to us, she should show up at the meeting."

"I haven't heard anything about a change of ownership." Akita said. "Are they selling of their own volition or are they being coerced by you two?" Akita swished his tail. "I wonder."

"Oh, I get it." Bextra narrowed her eyes. "That's what this is." She said to her partner.

"What?" Mantodea said. "What is this?"

"A shakedown." Bextra put her hands on the table. "So what's it going to cost for us to be in business." She gestured at Akita. "Obviously he gets a cut from the old owners and now he wants to make sure the deal hasn't changed."

"Disgraceful." Mantodea said with a headshake.

"Sure, Sheriff Akita talks a good game about being above board and fair but when it all comes down to it…"

"This is *not* a shakedown." Akita interrupted.

"He's better than all the rest of them put together is what he tells folks. But he's really just the same." Bextra continued without missing a beat. "I don't see what that crazy Elf witch thing sees in him."

"Hold on a minute." Akita said. "I'll not have you speak about Maca that way. She is definitely not a witch."

"No?" Bextra said. "That's what I heard."

"Errr. No." Akita shuffled his feet. "She's more a Djinn, really."

"Oh, well that is better." Mantodea said as she nudged her partner. "Definitely."

Akita barked at the pair. They both sat back in their seats. "You two need to stop right now. I'm trying to have a friendly, polite

conversation with you two and all you're doing is being annoying and aggravatin'."

"Sorry Akita." Bextra said. "We didn't kill that Gnome, you know." She added. "You know that right?"

"Innocent bystanders. We were just relaxing in a sauna when he tried to steal our towels, then that crazy… *other* crazy Gnome came in and shot him."

"Speaking of that, are you going to charge him?" Mantodea said.

"With what? Flagrant dying? Littering with his corpse?"

"Thievery; he was trying to steal our towels." Mantodea said.

"Technically, the towels belong to the Manacled Masseuse; you were just in fact borrowing them. So if anyone wanted to press charges for that, it would be the establishment. And so far I haven't heard anything from them. Probably because the towels never left the premises. So there is nothing for them to complain about."

"He was keeping us naked! That's assault." Mantodea shook her head. "Respectable town indeed."

"Yes." Akita said, trying to ignore the fact that Grimbledung was indeed in a tug of war with the females' towels when Flora arrived on the scene. "I am aware that in this particular instance, you were not the guilty party." He held up a paw. "But I do know that you two are in fact wanted for questioning in the suspicious disappearances *and deaths* of a large number of males. Then taking over their businesses and liquidating them. Which is why I have reservations about the sale of the Red Cock." He swiveled the paw down to point at the pair. "So don't go acting all innocent with me."

"Those are just unfortunate coincidences." Bextra said. "I'm sure."

"Sure." Said Akita. Really very sure they weren't.

"Then we're in agreement." Mantodea toasted the sheriff with another cucumber. "Are we done here?"

"As I said, Miss Hesperus." Akita pressed on. "You are wanted for questioning in the suspicious disappearances and deaths of several males. And you two had issues with Grimbledung and then he turns up dead."

"Well, it wasn't us this…" Bextra began.

"So," continued Akita as he pointed back and forth at them. "There won't be a single disappearance of any males of any type in this town while you are here, or you'll be the ones coincidentally disappearing soon after."

"Listen, Sheriff," Mantodea began. "My… friend and I are looking at settling down. Like we said, we're buying a business here in town. A large unmovable, four-story business."

Bextra nodded. "That is true. We were discussing it in the sauna when everything…"

"Fine." Akita cut her off. "Fine. A new leaf."

"Yes." Bextra said. "Yes. We will be co-owners of the Red Cock. We will be renovating and renaming it…"

"The Rubdown?" Akita let his tongue hang out.

"No." Bextra said flatly. "What we were considering…"

"I don't think the constable needs all the details of our business." Mantodea interrupted. She looked at Akita. "It will be above board and high-class, I can assure you of that."

Akita moved his tongue to the other side of his mouth. "A massage parlor that's above board?"

"We'd be glad to give you a free massage once we're open so you can see it first-hand. To allay your fears."

"Errr, no. No thanks." Akita said, suddenly nervous. "I don't go in for that sort of thing. Take my own baths, scratch my own back, as it were."

Bextra smirked. "Come on now, a little pampering is nice once and a while."

"I'm way too ticklish for that sort of thing." Akita said. "Way too ticklish."

"Wait." Mantodea said, "Did you just threaten us a moment ago?"

"When?" Akita asked. His hands went back to his hips.

"When you'd say you'd make us disappear."

"I never said that." Akita said.

"I think you did." Mantodea now pointed a finger at him. "I really think you did."

Akita smiled. "Oh no; what I said was that you would coincidentally disappear soon afterwards. It would be of your own volition of course."

"Really? Our own volition?" Bextra snapped. "I find that…"

"Because once I bite you, word would get out that you two might be infected and having a pair of WereDwarves in town is something folks wouldn't be happy with."

"Were… dwarves?" Bextra's tone softened. "I didn't think that was possible, sheriff."

"Yup. Seems I am contagious after all. Specifically to wee folks, it seems. And the town puts up with Grimbledung because they've known him for a long time." Akita shrugged. "He's pretty harmless

and lately seems to buy folks drinks. You two however- no one in town knows you two at all. And it would be a little late for you to roll out the red carpet. Business or not."

"Well, I can assure you that we are here to open a business and nothing else." Mantodea said. The stigma of lycanthropy rated about even with leprosy with townsfolk. So even the suspicion of an infection would be enough to have them leave quickly and quietly in the middle of the night. Before the townsfolk armed with torches and pitchforks showed up.

"I'm glad of that." Akita said, his smile returning. "Friendly business owners paying their taxes that go toward my salary is what I like around here." The smile faded. "Because I don't do kickbacks from *anyone*." With that he turned and loped off, deciding that the mincemeat pies that Pozzuoli left him were him being neighborly instead of actual payoffs.

"He's contagious and they still keep him around?" Bextra said. "That's crazy they allow it."

"Who's going to tell him to leave town?" Mantodea said. She gestured to where Akita had been standing. "And really, it's not a surprise what he is. I mean, he's *always* a Werewolf. The folks in town are used to seeing him that way. And apparently Grimbledung. And he does seem to keep crime to a minimum."

"He's got me reconsidering it" Bextra took a deep breath as she gathered her thoughts. "So we'll set it up a nice, cozy reputable business. Right?"

"Settling down would be nice you know." Mantodea pointed out. "Find nice gentlemen."

"That's what we've been doing." Bextra smirked.

"Yeah, but this would be on a more permanent basis." Mantodea said. She wanted nothing more than to settle down and start a family; she knew if they continued on the path they were on, the odds would catch up with them they'd end up in the gallows. "Having a family would be nice, I think."

"Fine, we'll try it your way." Bextra said. "But if this town gets boring, I'm out of here. And I'll kill that stupid Gnome on my way out."

Mantodea picked up her tea. "Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Akita stood on the other side of the door with his ear to it. He nodded and shook his head as the two spoke. He was content the two would behave as well as could be expected. Whether he was only contagious to wee folks was up for debate but if that rumor grew on its own, he was fine with that. His motto of 'less work is better' was still in full force.

Chapter 25
A High Priest, a Politician, and a Stuffed Rabbit Walk Into a Bar

Wil the bartender looked up from wiping down the bar at the group who had just entered. He smiled as they approached. "Why the long faces?"

"No, I'm afraid not." The High Priest said.

"Oh?" Wil said.

"We are not here for idle chit chat, banter, bad puns, or whatever else you have available."

"Drinks?"

"Those will be acceptable." Magnus Opus von Magnus said.

The Halfling gestured. "A table in the corner?"

"Yes, we have those." Wil smiled. "Four in fact."

"We want a table in the corner." The High Priest snapped.

"Well, this is a 'sit where you want' establishment," said the bartender as he gestured around the room. "Corner, straightaway, wherever you like." He raised an eyebrow. "Frankly, I'd even be okay if you sat at the bar down the street at this point."

"Huh!" The Halfling turned and walked to an empty corner table. The other followed him there.

"What am I bringing for drinks?" Wil called to them as they sat.

"Two large ales." The Halfling replied as they sat.

"And for you, sir?" Wil said with a smile. He gestured at the battered and beaten stuffed bunny. "Plus a small carrot juice perhaps?"

Magnus stood angrily. "I've asked you to stop doing that. They find no humor in it at all."

"Sorry; sorry. You did tell me that." The bartender said. "Two drinks coming up."

Magnus sat roughly.

"So let me get this straight," the High Priest said. "You saw him killed?"

"Oh, more than that; I did the deed personally. I dropped a safe on his head from the top of the bank. That's from the *roof* of a three story building, mind you."

"It sounds messy." Said the High Priest. "Unappetizing even."

Magnus shrugged. "Oh, I don't think so; I had a hearty celebratory breakfast afterwards."

"Still, it apparently wasn't effective, was it?"

"It should have been. I figured…" Magnus frowned at he looked at the stuffed rabbit. "Oh yes it should have!" He paused for a moment. "Oh yes it should have!" He paused again. "Why don't you make me!"

"Here you go." Wil slid two drinks onto the table. He gestured at the rabbit. "Did I mention the 'no pets' rule."

"He's not a pet." Magnus said. He tossed two coins at the man. "Now leave us alone."

The bartender caught the coins. "You know those aren't magical glasses so if you want them refilled…"

"We're fine for now." The High Priest said. When Wil had left he turned to the man. "So a safe?"

"I tried that after I dropped that piano on him." Magnus said.

"I heard about that. I didn't even know what a piano was." The High Priest admitted. "And I heard that it only worked for a day." He took a drink. "The issue is that you leave a body that can then be revived by that thing that runs the herb shop."

"That she-Elf?"

"Oh, that's no she-Elf," The High Priest said. "She's some sort of demon or something wearing an Elf skin suit."

"Oh. I didn't know." Magnus frowned. "That piano was expensive."

"The safe wasn't?"

"I stole the safe." Magnus said. "And since it was just outside the bank when I was done with it, no one came looking for me." He looked at the bunny. "No they didn't!"

"Yes, yes." The High Priest said. "When we kill him next time there needs to be no body."

"So how do we do that; carry him off?" Magnus asked. He picked up his drink. "Pitch him in a chest and send it to EternCity?"

"Nothing so expensive." The High Priest said. "We obliterate him." He stood up. "Disintegrate him!" He picked up his drink and downed it in one gulp. "We rid the lands of every speck of his being! Grimbledung will be no more!"

"Everything okay over there?" Wil called from the bar. "Seems kind of excited over here."

"Ahh, yes." The High Priest put down his mug. "Fine, fine."

"I'm afraid to ask but do you want another?"

"Sure." The High Priest sat. "One more."

"And you?" Wil asked Magnus.

"Yes, please." Magnus said to the man. He looked at the High Priest. "So how do we do it?" He asked.

"I have come into possession of a most unique and rare item." The High Priest said. "It is an Abyssmal Box! He'll be gone for sure when…" His voice trailed off as Wil approached with fresh mugs.

"Okay you two; let's keep it toned down over here okay?" Wil smiled as he put both mugs on the table. He turned one handle toward the Halfling, and the other toward Magnus. "You're worrying the other patrons with your abysmal behavior." He smirked. "Nice, huh?"

Magnus nodded. "Well played."

"I will be my own council on my behavior!" The High Priest snapped.

"That'll be five copper."

"Five copper for four drinks?" Magnus said.

Wil tilted his head. "Well yes; it's three for the drinks and two to keep me from just tossing you crazies out on the street right now."

"You are going to toss me out?" The High Priest gestured at Wil's missing arm with his mug. He chuckled as he took a sip. "Singlehandedly?"

"Oh." Magnus said. "I say, that's not very…"

Wil straightened. "And you're out." He looked over his shoulder. "Nulu!"

Nulu leaned out from the kitchen where she had been baking scones. "Wil?"

"Clean up on table six." He said. He jerked a thumb toward the door. "If you please."

Nulu moved out from behind the door. "What's going on?"

"Uh oh." Magnus said. He took a long drink. "You better finish that up."

"Those two?" Nulu stepped around the bar. "Hey!" She said, recognizing one of them. "What gives? You're acting up in here?"

The High Priest thought she was speaking to him so he stood (Magnus knew different so he worked harder on emptying his mug). "I'm okay *anywhere*. No stinking bouncer is going to lay their paid-by-the-hour hands on me!"

"Uh, H-P?" Magnus tried.

"Oh." Nulu smiled. "That won't be the case, Sir." She put her hands behind her back as she continued to move forward. "This bartender causing trouble?"

The Halfling nodded. "He sure has." He gestured at him with his mug then he took another sip. "This one-armed fool thinks he can order me around." He put down the mug. "And no cook is going to either."

"Oh dear." Magnus fished two copper from his pocket. "I'm paid up." He said as he scooted his chair back away from the table.

"That won't be the case either, Sir." Nulu said. As she leaned on the table, she grasped it with both hands.

"Errr…" Magnus said. No matter what sort of devious politician he was, or who he was trying to kill, he still felt that a certain level of civility needed to be maintained when dealing with people who worked in the service industry.[60] Insulting the bartender for something completely out of his control was over the line. So he slipped out of his chair and pushed it in.

"That is what I expect, *cook*. Now go find a manager so I can have you both fired! And while you're waiting, go boil some eggs if

you can manage it." He raised a hand. "You obviously don't know who you're dealing with!"

"I'll see myself out." Magnus grabbed his bunny. "Sorry, Wil. Truly." He said as he made for the door.

Wil turned and gave the man a nod. While he was infuriatingly annoying, he did pay his tab and tended to tip well. And his insults were never personal. His choice of company needed improvement however.

"So go scurry off and find…" Continued the High Priest.

Nulu brought the table up, hitting the Halfling in the chin with the edge of it. It knocked him back into his chair, dazing him. "The owner just showed up and she's not in a good mood, it seems." She let go of the table and grabbed two handfuls of the Halflings shirt.

"Unhand me this instant!" The High Priest squirmed in vain.

"In a moment I sure will." Nulu stood, bringing the Halfling with her. His feet dragged across the top of the table as he went. "Wil?"

Wil jogged to the door and held it open.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready to take my hands off you, *Sir*." Nulu took three long bounds toward the door and when she got there she spun in a circle and threw the Halfling like a Dwarfish Hammer into the street.

Wil leaned out to look. The Halfling flew almost twenty feet, landing in a heap right in the middle of the street. "Nice form, Nulu. Real nice."

"I've been practicing."

Wil looked at her wide-eyed. "Tossing wee folk?"

"Bags of flour; they're about the same size." Nulu said. "That Magnus is a pain but at least he has some class." She shook her head. "That Halfling is just…"

"Halfling-ish." Will suggested diplomatically.[61]

"Yeah. That's the nice way of saying it."

"Oh!" Wil said, remembering the Halflings rants. "It seems he's planning on obliterating Grimbledung."

"Who isn't these days?" Nulu shrugged. She looked toward the door. "Still, I'll let Akita and Colossus know."

"Apparently they've got an Abyssmal Box. That's an important piece of information I think." Wil smiled

"An Abyssmal Box? Where'd those two idiots get one of those? They are pretty rare."

"Grimbledung has one. So they can't be that hard to get. Or steal, I suppose."

"No, it's Drimblerod that has one. He got it from the Gremlins when they took it from some Wizard that was behind on his protection money. Grimbledung just uses it for absurd purposes."

"Ahh, I see." Wil chuckled. "That crazy Gnome. I'll clean up their table while you let the authorities in on current events."

"Thanks." Nulu dusted her hands together. She looked down. "I broke a nail."

"Oh man." Wil smiled. "That Halfling's making some powerful enemies."

"You said it, bub." Nulu started toward the door. "Be back in half an hour. For the dinner rush."

"Thanks, Boss." Wil gave a genuine smile. "Really."

Nulu just nodded at the man then left. The fact that Wil was missing an arm because he put himself between an Ogre and a dozen wounded soldiers wasn't a well-known fact. But Nulu knew.

Chapter 26
Boxed in

Magnus walked up to the High Priest. "I thought we were trying to keep a low profile." He looked back at the Duck Inn and Dine. "Didn't you know she owned the place?"

The High Priest swiveled around so he was now sitting in the dirt. "Obviously I didn't know that. Stupid Trolls."

"She's actually pretty nice." Magnus said. "I mean, she still lets me come in there after everything."

"She is probably desperate for the business."

"And Wil, he's…"

"Wil? Wil who?" The High Priest worked his way to his feet. "Who is Wil and why do I care about him?"

"The bartender back there. He's a good fellow as well." Magnus frowned. "And mentioning his missing arm; bad form that." He shook his head. "Embarrassing is what that was." He was aware of the heroic incident thanks to the banter from other patrons of the Duck Inn who witnessed it firsthand. It was the stuff of legends.

"Whatever." The High Priest said. "Maybe we'll shove him in the box after that infernal Gnome."

"Yeah, and I…." Magnus said, suddenly unsure of this new partnership. He pulled the rabbit from his pocket. "And don't you start with me."

"You need to keep that stupid toy out of sight." The High Priest said. "Now t*hat's* embarrassing."

"Toy?" Magnus gestured at the rabbit. "You think this is a toy I just carry around?" He held it out to The High Priest's ear.

The voices began to whisper.

"What?" The High Priest's eyes got large. "How did you…?"

The whispering continued.

Magnus tried not to listen; he knew what the voices could be like when they were perturbed. The things they knew about one's darkest secrets and insecurities. And the exact words to use that cut through a soul like a wickedly curved falchion. A flaming wickedly curved falchion.

The High Priest knocked Magnus' hand away from the side of his face. "Keep… Keep them away from me."

"Yeah sure, I'll keep my *toy* away from you."

"Why don't you throw that thing away?" The High Priest worked to his feet. "Lord High Me, those voices."

"You think that I keep this thing around because I *want* to?" Magnus put it back into his cloak. "If only that were true. I don't even want to tell you what happened when I tried pitching it into a river." He let out a long sigh. "Well, now…" He paused to collect his thoughts. "So you have an Abysmal Box? Where'd you get that? I hear they are very hard to come by. Where are you keeping it?" He asked since the High Priest was living in the backroom of a retired couple near the edge of town. "Those old folks are okay with that thing being in their home? Those boxes make folks uneasy, I've heard."

"Oh, they aren't even happy with me living there." The High Priest said. "But they really don't have a choice in the matter."

"What?" Magnus said. While he didn't know the LeVarks personally, he had seen them in several establishments having meals. They were always engaged in lively conversation with each other and people who walked by would often stop to say hello to them. "You just moved into their home?"

"It beats paying for a room in an inn with paper thin walls, now doesn't it?"

Magnus began to seriously reconsider his association with the Halfling. "So you moved in to their home uninvited and are keeping an Abyssmal Box there?" He shook his head. "I don't think that's very…"

"I don't actually have a box." The Halfling shrugged. "And really, I don't even need to."

"How can you pitch that Gnome into an Abyssmal Box when you don't…" Realization hit Magnus. "You're going to use their own Abyssmal Box? That's probably not a good idea because..."

"Get out of the road you two idiots!" A man in a wagon shouted at the pair. "My taxes paid to have sidewalks put in, so use them!"

Magnus and the High Priest turned to look. They were indeed still standing where Nulu had tossed the High Priest; into the middle of the road.

"Sorry," Magnus said. He gestured at a bench on the sidewalk. "Let's go over there before someone runs us over." He waved to the man as he started in that direction.

"Thanks for not letting your wife run over us," The High Priest said as he gestured at the mule pulling the man's wagon.

"What?" The man stood on the buckboard of his wagon. "Get out of the road, shorter or I'll run you over *personally*!"

"I'd like to see you…" The High Priest's voice trailed off as the man hopped out of the wagon. The very large and muscular man.

Since the wagon was almost on top of the pair, he made it to the High Priest in two steps. "Observe and learn." The man grabbed the High Priest by the collar and shoved him over. As the Halfling fell, he grabbed the High Priest by the seat of his pants. He spun in a circle and tossed the man toward the bench. He only got him about fifteen feet.

The High Priest landed in a heap and rolled to his side, then onto his feet. "Oh, you're making a powerful enemy! A powerful enemy!"

"You mean the former high priest of an empire that got its collective tiny butts handed to them by a ragtag army that was hastily pitched together? Yeah; that's got me quaking in my boots!" The man took a step closer. "How about I just pound you into the ground, *Caw Sprawlings*? I'll bet I'd get a crowd cheering me on after the second swing!" He clenched his fists as he took another step.

Magnus had stopped in front of the bench to watch the interaction. As the man took another step toward the High Priest, he was torn between helping him, or as the man had said 'cheer on the beating'. Deciding that a spectacle in the center of town with someone he was associated with wasn't what he needed at the moment, he hurried to the man. "Listen Gary." He said. "Sorry about that. Really. I'll get him out of the road."

The man was focused on the High Priest until he heard his name. He startled then looked at Magnus. "What? Oh! I didn't recognize you."

"I'll get him out of the street, Gary." Magnus said again. "Sorry."

The man calmed down. "Yeah, yeah, okay." He smiled. "Thanks Opie," He said, using the nickname Magnus used in personal situations. He stepped in closer. "You really need to change who you hang out with, Opie. He's…" He looked at the High Priest who was standing with his hands on his hips. "He's not in your class. At all."

"Thanks, I appreciate that." Magnus said with a smile. After trying to the steal the election and run roughshod over the entire town and losing, he had had no other prospects or plans. So he had decided to stay in town and open a clothing shop. During that time, he had gotten to know a good number of the citizens of Julesville, many closely.

"Why don't you two just get a room!" The High Priest shouted.

"Oh man." Magnus shook his head, embarrassed.

"Magnus Opus von Magnus," Gary said. "Brenda will be quite upset if you continue to associate with ilk like that." He looked around Magnus at the High Priest. "And if he insults Brenda, he will get that pounding, no matter who is around."

Magnus smiled. "Well, we can't let Brenda down, now can we?" He said. Gary's wife, Brenda worked in Magnus' shop as a seamstress and salesperson. She and Gary had both become good friends. "See you." He turned and walked toward the High Priest. "Over to the bench. Now!" He snapped as he pointed.

"Oh, upset are we?" The High Priest said as he stomped over to the bench and hopped onto it. His feet didn't reach the ground. "Stupid bench."

"There's one that's lower over there." Magnus pointed. When benches had been put around town, it was decided that every other one would be lower to the ground so that WeeFolk would have a non-

demeaning place to sit. As Pozzuoli had pointed out. “Sitting with your-a feet swinging is for the kids!”

“This is fine.” The High Priest said. He crossed his legs so they wouldn’t swing. “What’s got you all upset, Magnus?” He gestured at Gary who was now riding off with his wagon. “Me being mean to that dullard peasant?”

“Gary.” Magnus said. “His name is Gary.” He sighed. “Listen, I’ve got to live in this town so I can’t have you just running ramshackle over everyone you meet.”

“They’re peasants; they’re bred to be run over.”

“Gary runs a very busy, successful smithy. He has three apprentices and his wife works for me in my shop. She’s an excellent seamstress and manager. I think she could easily open her own shop if she wanted to and take half my business with her.”

“You’ve gone native.” The High Priest turned his head and spat on the ground. “I just threw up in my mouth a little bit. The mighty Magnus Opus von Magnus, a native.”

Magnus decided to just change the subject. “So... about that Abyssmal Box. You can’t just use Drimblerod’s box you know.”

“No, I don’t know. What do you mean by that? It’s an Abyssmal Box, what more do I need to know?”

“Well.” Magnus paused for a moment. He thought back to how Drimblerod explained it to him. “Abyssmal Boxes are unique. You know that, right?”

“They’re rare, I know that.” The High Priest shrugged. “Same thing.”

"No, not really." Magnus said. "Abyssmal Boxes are built as portals from one place to another." He considered that for a moment. "They're like doors; each one goes to one specific place and that's it."

"Magic Doors don't." The High Priest pointed out.

"Yes, that is true. But we're talking about Abyssmal Boxes, which is actually a misnomer." Magnus explained. "They don't really exit into an abyss. They exit someplace else."

"Someplace else that's not an abyss? What else is there?"

"Places." Magnus shrugged. "Actual places; EternCity, Brownsville, Sparkles. Just places, but far-off places. They should be called Gateway Boxes, now that I think about it."

"So you're saying the box that those Gnomes have goes to some actual place that isn't here. Someplace far off?"

"Yes." Magnus confirmed. "That's it exactly."

"Then that's still fine; I'll chuck those two dimwits into that box and send them to some far off, probably inhospitable place with no extra clothes, no money, no nothing. That would get them dead. Or at least permanently stranded in some strange land."

Magnus sighed. "Yes, I suppose it would." He had also had quite a few interactions with Grimbledung while living in town. Usually over drinks that Grimbledung paid for, in fact. He smirked. More accurately it was usually over drinks he tricked Grimbledung into paying for.

The High Priest looked at the smirking Magnus. "I see you approve. That's good enough for me as well. I'll just make sure they aren't carrying any wands."

"What?" Magnus asked. "What was that?"

"I said, I see that with your smirk, you approve."

"Oh. Well…" Magnus considered how he had heard the tale of how Chéri had tripped and fell into the box into a strange land. It took her a while but she made it back here safe and sound to her true love, Colossus. The box that Drimblerod had definitely did not lead to a place of certain death. He shrugged. "Right." A thought occurred to him. "How are you planning on getting into the shop then getting them into their back room where they keep the box?"

The High Priest looked at the man. "You've been in their shop?"

"For drinks." Magnus said before catching himself. "They uh… gave me a drink in the back room after I bought a wand there." He lied.

"Couple of drunkards." The High Priest nodded. "We'll just do that again. There's no way they'd suspect, the dimwits."

"Right." Magnus said again. "So, when do you want to do this?" He paused for a moment. "Tomorrow maybe?" He said, hoping the Halfling would agree so he'd have time to warn the Gnomes.

"Tomorrow works great for me." The Halfling replied. "I'll meet you at the shop at eight."

"Fine, eight tomorrow evening." Magnus said as he stood. "See you then."

"No, in the morning; I'd like to start my day off with getting rid of those two." The High Priest hopped off the bench. "What a great way to start the day; get rid of them, then put this town behind me."

"That won't work." Magnus shook his head.

"And why not?"

"They don't usually open until ten. And if one of them has been out carousing, it's often closer to noon." He smirked. "It's usually noon."

"Lazy Gnomes." The High Priest scowled. "Fine then. I'll meet you there at eight. I'll say I'm in the market for a wand then when they take me to the back room for a drink, you can help me toss them into their own Abyssmal Box. That's actually even better. You know what they say; revenge is best served ironically." He cackled.

"I thought it was best served cold."

"Who ever heard of cold revenge?" The High Priest snapped. "We'll toss those two dimwits, then I'll take all their inventory with me just because I can."

"What about Rat and Dummy?"

"Who?"

"They have a talking rat and a jousting dummy that also work in the shop."

The High Priest looked at Magnus. "How much time do you spend in there?"

"I've only been there once," Magnus lied again. He had actually been there dozens of times thanks to Grimbledung's clothes buying antics. "They were all in the back room together."

"Well, I'll just stomp on the rat, like we do back home and that jousting dummy is going to get burned up along with the rest of the shop." He narrowed his eyes. "Any other issues?"

"A fire?"

"It's one of my favorite things." The High Priest said.

"What if the fire spreads to other shops? It's right next to several other ones. The entire town could get destroyed like Aution."

"It will give the sunrise a nice color." The High Priest said. "See you at eight; do not be late."

"No. No, I won't." Magnus said now planning to stop by the shop on his way home to warn the two Gnomes.

Chapter 27
Boxed Out

Magnus walked into Second Hand Sorcery. It was almost six in the evening, practically dinner time. He had stopped by several times and no one had been in the shop since the day before. He was getting worried he would not be able to warn the Gnomes before the High Priest arrived. "Open finally, I see." He said to Drimblerod. "Thank goodness!"

"Oh no." Drimblerod looked at Magnus. "He didn't buy more clothes, did he? He's got three wardrobes in his room already."

"No." Magnus smirked. "Three wardrobes? He is usually wearing the same outfit when I see him."

Drimblerod nodded. "He's got several sets of those. The other stuff he tries on every so often, then decides he's not wearing them out, then just puts on the same old outfit again."

"I see." Magnus said. Even though he didn't.

"So are you in the market for a wand then?"

Magnus shook his head. "No, actually." He answered. "It's actually a serious matter."

"Grimbledung bite you?"

"No."

"That's good to hear; he's getting better about that." Drimblerod smirked. "So what's the serious matter?"

Grimbledung walked in from the back room. "Ahh, Mister Von Magnus. How nice of you to stop by. Are you here for a measurement?"

"You know since you're adult size and have stopped growing, I don't have to measure you for every article of clothing." Magnus said. "I have your measurements written down."

"But you have to measure me every time so the clothes are bespoke." Grimbledung said. He scooted around the counter. "Measure my leg, it might be longer now!"

"Grimbledung, he's here about a serious matter, not to measure your leg." Drimblerod said. "Or any other part of your body."

"Yes." Magnus said. "It's kind of important." He looked over his shoulder. "And since you weren't open earlier, I really need to tell you before it gets much later."

"Who wants to kill him now?" Drimblerod asked.

"It's the former Lord High Priest of the Halfling Empire." Magnus replied.

"Caw?"

"That's him, Grimbledung."

Grimbledung chuckled. "Old Caw is out prowling. Why should I be worried about him?"

"Because he plans to toss you and Drimblerod into your Abyssmal Box." Magnus looked out the window. "And soon too. Eight o'clock to be exact."

"How is he going to manage that?" Drimblerod said. "He has an Abyssmal Box?"

"He's going to use yours."

"That's just rude." Grimbledung said. "And a little cheeky, if I don't mind saying so."

"That's his plan." Magnus said. "I'm not really sure how he's going to make it happen but he'd going to do that, steal all your inventory, set fire to the shop, then leave town."

"Well, if he hasn't come up with some sort of plan, I don't see how he's going to get rid of me and Drimblerod." Grimbledung said.

"He has a plan. Didn't you just hear it?" Drimblerod said. He smiled at Magnus. "And thanks for letting us in on it."

Magnus shook his head. "He seemed fairly stable at first, but now he's just vindictive and mean."

"You don't know very many Halflings, I'm guessing." Drimblerod guessed.

"No, actually. He's the only one."

Drimblerod nodded. "They're all kind of like that." He clapped his hands once then rubbed them together. "Okay, so we need to make this of his plan not work."

"Want me to bite him when he gets here?" Grimbledung waggled his butt. "Grrrr! I can do that!"

"No. We've talked about not biting folks." Drimblerod said. He looked at Magnus. "So how is he going to do it?"

"He's going to buy a wand then afterwards ask for a celebratory drink."

"Oooh! I'm okay with that part of the plan." Grimbledung raised his hand. "I say we do that part. Where are we drinking?"

"I think he wants us to invite him to our back room where the box is, Grim."

Magnus nodded. "Exactly. So whatever you do, do not invite him in the back for…"

"Or," Drimblerod said. "Forewarned is forearmed.. Let's get him in the back and pitch him into the box instead."

"That's a good plan," Magnus said. "If you think…"

"Ohh!" Grimbledung interrupted. "Here he comes." He pointed at the window. "Right there."

"Oh no! He'll know something is up if he sees me here early!" Magnus said.

"Come over to the counter." Drimblerod said as Door opened.

Drimblerod held up a wand. "And this is our standard fire maker wand. An Incinerator. I suggest that or the Emberstick you tested earlier." He said loudly as Magnus walked in. He looked at the Halfling. "Come in and look around. My partner will take care of you."

"Who me?" Grimbledung said. He was still standing out in the open part of the room with his leg out. "Wasn't my leg going to get measured at some point?"

"No." Drimblerod snapped. "Tend to the customer while I deal with this man." He held the wand out. "Give this one a wave, Sir."

Magnus took the wand and waved it around. A small flame appeared on the end leaving a little smoke trail as it moved around.

The High Priest narrowed his eyes at Magnus. "Good evening. Buying a wand, are we?"

"Something to use when I'm camping." Magnus said.

"Like a tent? We don't sell those." Grimbledung said.

"No, more like a wand."

"Can't sleep in a wand you know."

"Grimbledung," Drimblerod interrupted. "Sell that Halfling a wand."

"So what're you looking for?" Grimbledung said. He had finally lowered his leg and moved beside the High Priest. "A wand?" He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the counters. "Personally I'm not in the market for a wand." He gave the Halfling a shove. "Want to just skip it and go get a drink?"

"Grimbledung," Drimblerod warned. "It's a workday, not a drinkday."

"Right, right." Grimbledung nodded. He grabbed the High Priest by the elbow and muscled him over to the counter. "What are you looking for? An incinerator? A water wand?" He said as he pushed him along the display case. "Oh!" He shoved him to the next counter. "Perhaps an Emberstick! Doing a lot of camping now that you're no longer living indoors?"

"What?" The High Priest snapped. "Who said I was homeless?"

"Itinerate then, I suppose." Grimbledung tapped his chin. "A priest without a diocese."

"I'm not that kind of priest." The High Priest said.

"I see." Grimbledung winked. "Not too keen on the celibacy part, eh?"

"Honestly, no." The High Priest said honestly.

"Good call." Grimbledung said with a wink.

"Grimbledung, he's here to buy a wand, not have a religious discussion. The last thing we need is an argument."

Grimbledung nodded at his partner. "Absolutely. Which is why I was talking religion. Everyone knows if you want to have a civil discussion, you should stick to the topics of religion or politics."

"I'm not sure that's the case." The High Priest said honestly again.

"Fine then." Grimbledung appraised the High Priest. "Well, since you're so short how about a Levitation Wand? So you can grab things above your wee little head."

The High Priest seethed inside. He wanted nothing more than to pitch both Gnomes into the box as soon as possible, so he agreed. "Yes, that's what I need; a nice Levitation Wand."

"Great! Levitators!" Grimbledung grabbed him by the elbow and jostled the High Priest to the wall where they were on display. "How much you trying to pick up?" He winked again. "One of those aforenotmentioned uncelibate Halfling females?"

"Grim." Drimblerod said, hoping that would be enough.

It wasn't.

"Or something a little more substantial, like an Elvish barmaid."

"I'm not sure…" The High Priest began.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Dated a Half-Giant once. The mechanics of it are mind boggling." He gave a wink. "I lived in her hat for six months. The last two were after we broke up and she didn't know I was there."

"Just a middle of the road wand is fine." The High Priest said. "Then we can celebrate with a drink." He added, hoping the infernal Gnome would want one.

Grimbledung looked around then said in a theatrical whisper. "Here you go, High Itinerate Priest, to lift those lovely ladies off their feet." When the Halfling opened his mouth, Grimbledung put his finger over it. "Shhh, it will be our little secret." He took a wand from the middle of the display.

"Uhm…" Magnus said, because he was really and truly lost for words.

"I uhhh." Drimblerod said; he was in the same predicament.

Grimbledung tossed the wand at the High Priest. "Catch! Drinks on me!"

"Grimbledung." Drimblerod said in vain.

"Hah! Look at that! I finished my sale before you did and my customer came in afterwards. Heaps afterwards!" Grimbledung stuck his hands in the air and did a little jig as he started to sing.

Nobody sells wands better!
Makes me feel sad for the rest.
Nobody does it half as good as me.
Me-eee, I'm the best!

"Grimbledung, it was one Levitation Wand, we don't need a full-blown…" Drimblerod said futilely.

Grimbledung continued with a second verse.

I wasn't really looking but somehow I found it,
I tried to hide it from the Drimblerod.
But like the Heavens above me
The Halfling who loved me
Is keeping all my secrets safe to-night!

"I most sincerely do not love you." The High Priest honestly said. This was the most honest he had been in six months.

"Shhh." Grimbledung put his finger on the Halfling's lips again. "Don't spoil it." He said as he tossed in a third verse because he had it ready.

Aaa-nd nobody does it better.
Though sometimes I wish someone could.
Nobody does it quite the way I do!
Why'd I have to be so good?[62]

Grimbledung was on his knees, hands above his head for the last two lines of the song.

"Lord High Me." The High Priest said. "Is he like this all the time?"

"That will be two copper," Drimblerod said, wanting desperately to change the subject.

"Fine." The High Priest took out a silver coin and put it on the counter. When Drimblerod went to make change, he leaned in close to Magnus and whispered: "What are you doing here? Warning them?"

Magnus shook his head, "Two wands will definitely warrant a drink." He turned to Drimblerod at the far end of the counter. "I'll take this Emberstick, Mister Axebreath."

"That's two copper." Grimbledung said as he stepped between the pair. He also looked at Drimblerod. "None for me, thanks. Three on a sale is bad luck."

"That's not how…" Magnus started.

The High Priest hit him on the shoulder. "Do not encourage him."

"Do you need these wrapped?" Drimblerod asked as he returned with the High Priest's change.

"Not I." The High Priest replied. He put the wand in his waistband. He glared at Magnus.

"No." Magnus said. "No thank you."

"Well then, that's it then." Grimbledung said. He walked to the door and opened it. "Good night gentlemen." He winked. "Good luck picking up chicks."

The High Priest let out a long sigh.

So did Drimblerod. He was fairly certain that Grimbledung had paid attention while he, Grimbledung, and Magnus discussed a plan to deal with the High Priest. Tossing him out of the shop immediately after the sale was not part of the plan at all. He cleared his throat. "Errr. How about a drink for the road?" He said.

"None for me," Grimbledung said. "I'm trying to cut back."

Drimblerod shot him a glance. It missed completely.

"Just a moment ago, didn't you suggest we go out for drinks instead of buying a wand?" The High Priest asked.

"Nope. You must have me confused with some other Gnome." He narrowed his eyes. "You saying all Gnomes look alike?"

"What? I never said…"

"Well I've had a long day," Magnus interrupted. He smiled. "I'll not pass up a drink if you're offering." He looked at the High Priest. "How about you?"

The High Priest narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "I… suppose." He looked at Drimblerod. "One, perhaps."

"Last one there gets the dirty glass!" Grimbledung said as he scooted to the back room.

"I'm not sure I want a drink." The High Priest admitted. Between Grimbledung's antics, and Magnus being there before him he was overly suspicious.

Drimblerod smiled. "There are no dirty glasses. I have to apologize for my partner; he's been having a rough month or so."

"The entire month?" The High Priest asked.

Drimblerod gestured at the back room. "Well, about that. It's an indeterminate amount of time, truth be told."

"I see." The High Priest said even though he didn't. He started for the back room. "You coming too?"

"Why not? I'll have a free drink before calling it a night." Magnus said.

Drimblerod ducked under the curtain.

"What are you up to?" The High Priest snapped.

"Just laying the groundwork." Magnus said. "The rat is out of the shop and the dummy can't move. So maneuver them close to the box and I'll shove them in."

"You two coming?" Drimblerod asked as he poked his head out the curtain.

"Sorry," Magnus said with a smile. "I thought I recognized him." He jerked a thumb at the High Priest, "and we were playing the 'where have you been' game."

"Understandable." Drimblerod said. "I hate to rush you but trying to keep Grimbledung on a single task is… difficult."
"I can imagine." The High Priest said as he started toward the curtain.

Chapter 28
Out Boxed

Magnus and the High Priest stepped into the back room. Grimbledung was holding a large bottle of liquor. A large green bottle.

Drimblerod handed the pair glasses.

"What's that?" The High Priest asked. He checked his glass; it was indeed clean.

Grimbledung gave the bottle a long hard stare. Finally he said: "It's green."[63]

"That's good enough for me." Magnus said. He held out his glass. "Errr... Is it a whiskey type drink, gin or something else?"

Grimbledung took a sip from the bottle. He swished it around in his mouth, clenched his eyes tight and swallowed hard. "It's something else," he wheezed.

"Is that the Elvish Rum?" Drimblerod said. "I thought we were out of that stuff."

"It's the last bottle." Grimbledung stepped forward and poured some in Magnus' glass. "Don't get it on your boots."

The High Priest sidestepped to put himself closer to the Abyssmal Box, which was sitting on its side in the room, colors swirling into the center of it. "I've heard of Elvish Rum. They don't trade it or sell it; how did you get a bottle?" He held out his glass as he

stepped back so that Grimbledung would have to step in front of the box to pour. "I thought it was illegal outside of Elvish lands."

"We got a case of it by accident," Drimblerod said. "Mixed up shipments."

Grimbledung nodded. "Yes, and I'm sure those Elves were not nearly as pleased with their case of Hobgoblin spit."

"What?" Magnus said. He sniffed the drink- it smelled like old shoes that had been left in a flooded cellar. That also was used to stable donkeys.

"It wasn't Hobgoblin spit." Drimblerod said. He moved to Grimbledung so now the pair of them were in front of the Abyssmal Box. He held out his glass. "It was just Ginger Beer."

"Ginger Beer?" The High Priest said.

"Don't let the name fool you," Grimbledung poured some of the green liquid into his partner's glass. "There's no alcohol in it at all. None. Zip. Nothing. You might as well drink lemonade but made with ginger." He stuck out his tongue. "False advertisement that is." He put the bottle on the floor then raised his glass. "To your soon-to-be complaining bowels." He held up his glass.

"What?" The High Priest looked into his glass. "Is this safe to drink? For non-Elves, that is?"

"We are down to this one bottle from a case of twelve." Drimblerod said. "Oof!!" He shuddered. "Finally."

"Why do you drink something you don't like?" Now the High Priest smelled his drink as he stepped to the side, putting Grimbledung and Drimblerod between him and the swirling opening of the box. "Gads, that smells like the underside of a barn."

"Right?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Take a sip then I'll sing you a song I made up about this stuff." He raised a hand. "Actually, it's better if you just down it all at once. Like lemonade." He gulped his drink down then flapped his arms like a bird and stomped his feet. "Whoa! That gets you going all the way to your toes!"

Drimblerod followed suit. Except his hands went to his belly as he stomped his feet.

Magnus and the High Priest exchanged glances.

With a shrug, Magnus drank the Elvish Run. It actually tasted far better than it smelled- it was sweet with hints of clove and mint. "Huh; that really doesn't taste that bad." He admitted. "It's actually pretty good."

The High Priest drank his drink. It seemed to coat his mouth with a smell like old socks. He was half tempted to spit it out but swallowed instead. The liquid burned all the way down his throat and when it hit his stomach, his lunch from earlier in the day threatened to make a reappearance. "Gads! That's horrible."

"Only to wee folks." Grimbledung said.

"That's actually pretty good. The clove and mint on the back end are a nice surprise." Magnus said. Suddenly the room did a complete 360 degree turn and he felt dizzy. "Whoa! Now I'm dizzy, is that normal?"

Grimbledung nodded then shuffled his feet to keep his footing. "Yes, it will go away in an hour or so. Or once you pee."

"Which will feel like you're peeing fire." Drimblerod said. "Nice, huh?"

"Gah!" The High Priest grasped the sides of his head. "My head is on fire!"

"Totally normal." Grimbledung said as he stepped closer to the Halfling. "You'll be okay. Let me steady you." He reached out and took the Levitation Wand from the High Priest's belt.

"Hey, that's mine!" The High Priest said. The room was tilting back and forth.

"Go ahead, Magnus." Drimblerod said as he gestured at the box.

"What?" The High Priest said. He tried looking around but the room was still swimming back and forth in his eyes. "What is going on?"

Magnus shoved the High Priest into the Abyssmal Box. He disappeared head first.

"Thanks. I'd have fallen in myself if I'd have tried that." Grimbledung moved his feet farther apart to steady himself. "Gads that stuff is dangerous."

"Why do you drink it?" Magnus said as he steadied himself on the side of the box. "I almost fell in myself."

Drimblerod sat down on the floor. "I'm glad that's over with."

Magnus rubbed his eyes. "Me too. Wow that packs a punch."

"No, I meant the business with that crazy Halfling."

"That too, I suppose." Magnus said. "He really wasn't a nice person." He looked at the box. "Will he make it back from there?"

"Not a chance." Grimbledung said.

"But that Halfling gal, the one married to the deputy; she did."

"She had a wand to break her fall." Grimbledung said as he waggled the Levitation Wand. "Otherwise, it's a really long way down." As he waved the wand, he got dizzy and sat down as well.

"A long way?" Magnus asked.

"About a thousand feet." Drimblerod said. "With nothing but hard-packed dirt to break your fall."

"Wow, okay then." Magnus said.

"A drink to celebrate!" Grimbledung reached over and picked up the bottle. "One more for the runs."

"I think you mean the road." Magnus said, holding out his glass.

"No. No, he doesn't." Drimblerod said.

Magnus put his glass on the table. "Then how about we go drink something normal? Over at the Duck Inn?"

"That sounds like a good plan." Grimbledung worked himself to his feet.

"You sure he won't be coming back?" Magnus said. He offered a hand to Drimblerod.

Drimblerod let himself get pulled to his feet. "It's a long way down."

"But it won't be the fall that kills him." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"Right." Magnus said with a smirk. "Shall we?"

Chapter 29
Bedeviled Wagon

Grimbledung hopped down the steps of the shop and turned to face it- Magnus and Drimblerod were just coming out of Door. "So what'll we drink to?"

"Grimbledung," Drimblerod started down the stairs. "We'll be drinking to the High Priest not killing us. And while we're at it, we should be drinking to you not getting killed anymore. That's pretty important too, according to Maca."

"Wait, all I needed to do was drink more and I wouldn't have died so much?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "So that's the secret of life."

Magnus chuckled. "Binge drinking is not the secret of life." He started down the steps.

"Speaking of secrets," Drimblerod said. "With all of this dying you've been doing, we've been wondering what the afterlife is like. Do you remember?"

"Oh sure!" Grimbledung said as he turned and started to walk across the street. "It's actually kind of …"

A wagon barreled down the street and ran over Grimbledung. Both wheels on its right side hit him.

"Where did that thing come from?" Drimblerod shouted. "Hey you!"

The person in the wagon- someone hunched over and wearing a black cloak just wheezed out a laugh. And never stopped.

"It came out of nowhere!" Magnus said. "What in the world was that?"

Drimblerod rushed to Grimbledung. He was crushed flat. "Oh no!"

"Want me to get the sheriff?" Magnus asked.

Drimblerod sat back and sighed. "Nah; a wagon is pretty straightforward. Let's just give him a couple of minutes."

"What?"

"I'll explain while we wait." Drimblerod said.

Chapter 30
Natural Selection Selecting

"It's all bright colors with pretty clouds that move really fast…" Grimbledung pointed up. "Hey, just like those!" He looked across the horizon. "And there's volcanoes and mountains just like that." He frowned. "Weird."

WELCOME BACK, GRIMBLEDUNG.

"What?" Grimbledung did a little hop. "I was going out for drinks! Then perhaps some carousing. That's just plain rude."

THERE WILL BE NO MORE DRINKING OR CAROUSING. Death said. FROM NOW ON YOU WILL DO WHAT YOU ARE TOLD.

"Or what?"

Death snapped her fingers and suddenly Grimbledung was engulfed in flames.

"Yaaaa!! I'm on fire!!" Grimbledung hopped around swatting at the flames. They didn't go out. "Okay, okay!"

Death snapped again and the flames disappeared as fast as they had appeared. NOW THAT WE HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING.

"Well, only until they revive me again." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "They're getting pretty good at that up there." He pointed upward. "Or maybe it's over there." He pointed to his left. "Either way, Death old girl, I'll be out of here faster than you can lose a game of checkers."

OH NO THAT IS NOT THE CASE. Death grinned wide. THAT ONE DEATH WAS *THE ONE DEATH*.

"One death?"

THE ONE DEATH THAT PUT YOU OVER THE EDGE. THERE IS NO MAGIC THAT CAN BRING YOU BACK FROM HERE. NONE. NO POTION, NO MAGIC, NOTHING. NOT EVEN THAT DJINN FRIEND OF YOURS; SHE IS POWERLESS NOW.

"Nothing?" Grimbledung said. "I don't really believe in absolutes you know. There has to be something. Like maybe old bees wax, or a wet willie from a twice widowed Dwarf."

NO, THERE IS NOT.

"Huh. So nothing? You've got all the bases covered?" Grimbledung said worriedly. "Oh man."

Death shrugged. THE ONLY THING THAT I AM UNABLE TO CONTROL IS NATURE ITSELF. BUT THERE IS NO REASON FOR NATURE TO TAKE INTEREST IN A MEASLEY DEAD GNOME. She laughed EXCEPT FOR THE WORMS PERHAPS. AND THEY ARE THERE TO HELP THEMSELVES; NOT YOU. She laughed again. OH, I CAN TURN A PHRASE CAN I NOT?

"Most annoyingly, it seems." Grimbledung admitted.

SO YOU ARE HERE PERMANENTLY. Death laughed loudly. Lightning cracked behind her. MUAA HAA HAAAA! YOU STUPID ANNOYING LITTLE GNOME! OH HOW I WILL TORMENT YOU!

"Don't call me stupid!"

THAT WOULD BE LIKE SAYING 'DO NOT CALL THE LAVA HOT' WHEN THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT IT IS. I CAN CALL YOU A STUPID LITTLE GNOME. Death crossed her arms and loomed over him. BECAUSE THAT IS PRECISELY WHAT YOU ARE.

"You know, you're really starting to get me upset!"

YOUR FEELINGS DO NOT MATTER TO ME, LACKEY.

"Lackey?" Grimbledung did a little hop. "Lackey? Grrrr!" He waggled his butt.

IF THERE WERE A POSITION LOWER THAN THAT I WOULD APPOINT YOU TO IT. BUT I HAVE NONE. Lightning crashed behind her again. ON THE GLORIOUSLY HORRIBLE TASKS I SHALL GIVE YOU. She pointed across the way to the line at the pizza parlor. FIRST THE BATHROOM NEEDS CLEANED.

"Bathroom? There's just the one?" Grimbledung perked up an ear. "One?"

MUA HA HAAA! Lightning crackled again.

"Grrrr! I'm really getting angry at you!" Grimbledung said. Hair started to sprout from his ears.

I AM SURE EVEN A SIMPLETON LIKE YOU CAN MANAGE CLEANING A BATHROOM.

"GRRRR!" Grimbledung leapt at Death, newly formed fangs bared. "ROWERRRR!" He growled mid jump.

WHAT IS GOING ON? Death took a step back. She had no experience with a lackey -or even a minion for that matter- attacking her. I COMMAND YOU TO STAY BACK!

Grimbledung bounced off Death's chest, falling to her feet. He started gnawing on her leg bone. The tibia, to be exact. "GRRRRR!"

He looked up at her. "AAAOOOOOO!!!" He howled as his face finished its transformation.

WHAT? NO, THAT IS IMPOSSI… Death didn't finish her sentence because GrimbleWolf disappeared.

Lightning cracked all around.

FINE. THAT'S HOW YOU WANT TO PLAY IT? FINE. Death snapped her fingers again, summoning a different minion. A full-fledged Demon, in fact. OH THAT IS FINE BY ME, GRIMBLEDUNG. THAT IS THE GAME YOU WANT TO PLAY? WE SHALL PLAY IT.

The Demon appeared before her. Immediately afterwards, the Demon's crony.

I HAVE AN IMPORTANT TASK FOR YOU BOTH. I SHALL EXPLAIN IN DETAIL. Death began explaining. In detail.

Chapter 31
Everybody's Got Something To Hide
Except Me And My Monkey

Grimbledung let out a long sigh. "It sure is quiet today. I hope Drimblerod gets back soon so we can play sitting or standing." He glowered at door. "Because someone won't play open or closed with me."

Door remained quiet- it knew if it did anything, the game would begin.

WELL HELLO THERE GRIMBALDUNG. Said the Demon after he appeared in a cloud of red smoke.

"How you know my name?" Grimbledung asked. "Wait, actually I have a point of order…"

SHE SAID YOU WOULD SAY SOMETHING LIKE THAT. The Demon smirked. THERE IS NO QUORUM SO YOUR POINT OF ORDER IS…

"So either you are looking for someone else, or you need to say Grim-BELL-dung, not Grim-BALL-dung." Grimbledung pointed out. "I hope you just have my name wrong due to a typographical error and not because you're a complete idiot and came to the wrong shop."

Flames erupted around the Demon. IT IS CLOSE ENOUGH FOR THE TASK AT HAND!

"Sloppy is what it is." Grimbledung said. "In any case, continue… Minion or lackey?"

I AM NEITHER.

"And what's with the monkey?"

"Eeeek!" Said the Chimpanzee.

"Chimpanzee." Grimbledung corrected himself. He furrowed his brow. "Oh wait, you're not a *crony* are you?"

The creature chuckled. OH YES, YOU HAVE WARRENTED A *CRONY*. A MOST VILE ONE IN FACT. DEVIOUS AND VILE. FEARED BY ALL WHO HAVE THE MISFORTUNE OF CROSSING HIS PATH.

"It's kind of goofy that you're speaking about yourself in the third-person." Grimbledung leaned on the counter. "And really, it kind of takes away from your imposing look." He shrugged. "Makes you seem kind of crazy, is what it does."

I AM NOT THE CRONY, YOU FOOL; I AM A FULL-FLEDGED DEMON; HE IS THE CRONEY. The Demon pointed at the Chimpanzee then shook his head. SHE TOLD ME HOW YOU WERE BUT I THOUGHT SHE HAD TO BE EXAGGERATING. He looked at the Chimpanzee. YOU WERE RIGHT, IT SEEMS.

"And what's with the lack of contractions?"

WE DO NOT USE THEM.

"Eee, eeee, eeep!" Reminded the Chimpanzee.

YES, I CONCEDE YOU WON. A HUNDRED POUNDS OF PEANUTS AS AGREED. BUT FIRST TO BUSINESS.

"Eeep." Agreed the Chimpanzee.

"Listen, it's pretty busy here today," Grimbledung gestured around the empty shop. "Real busy. So, if you two just came here to have some sort of nonsensical conversation, I have to ask that you go

do that elsewhere." He narrowed his eyes. "You're not here playing games are you?"

GAMES? THERE WILL BE NO MORE GAMES.

"Well that's good because I feel badly about beating your boss over and over again. It must be pretty embarrassing. I can't imagine you're any better."

The Demon picked up the Chimpanzee and hurled it at Grimbledung.

"Hey now!" Grimbledung ducked.

The Chimp landed on the counter.

"What're you doing tossing a Chimp around like that?" Grimbledung said as he stood. "You could put out an eye or something!"

"Eeee ahhh!" The Chimpanzee declared. Then it jumped onto Grimbledung.

"Get off me! Rat! Rat! Oh wait, he's gone until the finale. I hope this isn't it! Drimblerod, get this Chimp off me!" Grimbledung screeched as the Chimpanzee grabbed him around the chest tightly. "HELP! I'm being hugged by a Chimpanzee without my permission!"

SHUT UP! The Demon said. LET'S GO.

"Ah ha!" Grimbledung pointed at the Demon. "A contraction! I knew you had them in…"

Grimbledung disappeared in a cloud of red smoke.

AHHH, THAT WENT RIGHT ACCORDING TO PLAN. SLOPPY INDEED.

"What plan?" Drimblerod asked as he stepped into the shop. "Wait, what are you and where's Grimbledung?"

HE IS WHERE HE BELONGS! The demon disappeared in a cloud of red smoke and a crack of thunder.

Nulu walked in from the back. "What was all the racket? I thought Grimbledung was having some sort of nightmare or something."

"A nightmare?" Drimblerod asked.

"Yeah, he was shouting about a Chimpanzee giving him unrequested hugs."

"Oh man, a Demon and a Chimpanzee." Drimblerod shook his head. "That's not good. Not good at all."

"A Demon?" Nulu shuddered. "What was he doing here?"

"Kidnapping Grimbledung, it seems."

"Well we need to talk to Maca to see what she knows about this. And how we get Grimbledung back." Nulu said. "She was worried about this. And I'm afraid getting him back will be treacherous."

"That's not good. Even with Maca helping?" Drimblerod opened Door. "Stay closed for now, Door."

"She said she couldn't go into the Underworld to get him." She shook her head as she stepped out of the shop. "I can see this being a convoluted, lots of backtracking type of adventure."

Drimblerod shook his head. "Worse than that, if Maca is too scared to come, I can see this adventure being dangerous. One wrong decision could kill us all. Let's go, Nulu."

"Right behind you."

The pair left to go find Maca.

Chapter 32
A Sudden Stop At The End[64]

Will be puddles and goo!

Mister Pinniped incanted.

He looked around "What in blazes? Where am I?"

He was standing in what seemed to be a very well apportioned library.

"Pardon me!" A man angrily said as he aimed his crossbow at Mister Pinniped. "Who are you and what are you doing here? Did you send those hornets?"

"I am not sure, to be honest." Mister Pinniped admitted.

"Well if you can't be honest, I have no use for you." The man fired the crossbow. The bolt hit Mister Pinniped in the heart.

"Errp!" Said Mister Pinniped as he collapsed in a very dead heap.

"Hold on a moment. I think I may have missed a comma there." The man looked at the very dead Magician. "Sorry about that old chap."[65]

Sort of an Endish

Chapter 33

A Bounce After the Sudden Stop

Rat scampered into Second Hand Sorcery. "Okay, what'd I miss?" He looked around. No one seemed to be there. "Hello?" He hopped onto the counter and sat on his haunches. "Come on; it was one lousy comma!"

Really Ending Now.

About the Author

Robert continues to write and live in Central Florida. Simultaneously. Along with plans for book eight in this series- which if you haven't heard yet will be a classic 'Choose Your Adventure' style story- he has branched out into other genres. Giant apes, Sasquatch, Science Fiction, and more.

While waiting for book 8 (which will honestly take some time because he has never written a 'Choose Your Adventure' book) you should read some of his other works.

His giant ape *King Gor* and Big Foot stories *Sasq'ets* are part of his 'Alternatives' series- along with his Red Brick Road visit to Oz. He has an inspirational science fiction trilogy *The Prodigals* and a stand-alone novella in that same universe *Vesta*.

In his writing 'Queue' as of the writing of this sentence, are the following four books, which are all over fifty percent done:

Easy Street Unpaved. This is the story of Hugh the vampire. Robert is expanding it (finally!) from the short that it is into a full length novel.

The Top-Secret Missions of Ghost Team Six. This is the story of the highly classified group of pilots that works out of Area Forty-Six in Nevada. A crack team of pilots fly alien space craft (with the help of friendly aquatic extraterrestrials) to thwart the efforts of The Greys to steal Earth's resources.

Lassoing Love: Book 2 in the Summer Schauers Mystery series. Summer and Maxine are covering a rodeo when a bronco rider is killed!

Poppins von Trapp: This book is part of his Alternatives series that deals with alternative history, or a different look at a subject. This book shows (definitively) why Mary Poppins and Maria von Trapp are the same person. After all, they both look alike, sing, and seem magical. It's practically nonfiction!

[1] The Orc is not correct. At all.

[2] This was in our opinion, one of the best lines in that particular movie. Just a casual, throw-away line without any big explosions or hoopla. And it pretty much sums up how 'the gang' operates; by the seat of their pants.

[3] We know what you're thinking, but this is not actually a Wrath of Khan reverence even though he does say it; this is attributed to a gentleman named Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, He was a French author who used it in his 1782 novel "Dangerous Liaisons ("Les Liaisons Dangereuses"). Pierre was definitely right about it. We will discuss Wrath of Khan later.

[4] This line in the Lord of the Rings movie only carries the weight it should if the viewer had read the books. They would then know that Gandalf saying "Don't take me as a conjurer of cheap tricks!" when he is actually a divine spirit in Human form and over 55,000 YEARS old, is the understatement of The Age.

[5] Traveling town-to-town to put on entertaining shows is a long and noble profession. However, as with many professions, only a few 'bad apples' can make it hard for an honest entertainer to make a living at it. To counter this, Magicians (as well as other traveling troupes) would often band together under a single name to show they were legitimate performers. The Great Denizens was a group of about nine magicians who performed aquatic-themed magic shows. Their shows were very popular with children and people who had never been on the seas and therefore had never seen sea creatures. The farther inland they traveled, the bigger the crowds.

[6] Runion and Earl's establishment is half-board; folks need to find their own lunch elsewhere. Unless of course they are like us and they take a bunch of cold cuts, bread, and fruit from breakfast and eat that for lunch.

[7] If you readers had just taken notes of all the Dwarfish words we've provided for you, you'd be practically fluent in it. We're hoping some of you did because it would be, as the Dwarves say "Molto Bene".

[8] Death's gender is discussed later. Get back to reading.

[9] This term was as common as 'fair and square' when The Plagues wandered around the countryside, wreaking havoc on the population. With the large number of deaths, standard rectangular, six-foot deep graves were temporarily laid to rest (nice, huh?) while more efficient and easier to dig, round holds were adopted by grave diggers. Large augers sitting on tall wagons powered by two mules -who also pulled the wagon around- could dig two dozen cylindrical holes in the time gravediggers could dig just one large square one. As the practice continued, villagers would dread the arrival of the mule-powered auger as it meant that their friends or neighbors - or even possibly themselves- would be taken from this world (unfairly) and buried in a deep (round) hole. After the plagues settled down and took a break (they went to EternCity to gamble on the Shambler races, and thanks to the

complimentary drinks, haven't left), the term fell into disuse and 'fair and square' came back into Vogue. And of course all the other towns as well.

[10] Dwarfish- you're almost speaking it now!

[11] The term 'Black Widow' was coined by a judge in the mid-[redacted] century in the Halfling town of Crawdads (which was not named after the crustacean but won't be explained right now because this footnote will already be too long). A Halfling named Sallyford Majestic had been brought into his courtroom that had been accused of killing her husband. The judge presiding over the case was the famous Halfling Magistrate, Latro Dectus Majorus- a dedicated drunkard and philanderer. Under oath, Sallyford tearfully swore that her husband was still alive and well but on an extended business trip for an indeterminate amount of time in an undisclosed location. Many witnesses were brought forward by both the prosecution and defense as the trial dragged on for weeks. It wasn't until Spring turned to Summer that the smells from Sallyford's basement broke the case wide open. With her husband's body brought in as a character witness for the prosecution, Sallyford finally admitted that her husband was in fact, on an extended sales trip to the underworld that she helped arrange. The judge, having built a relationship with Sallyford during the previous weeks, immediately dismissed the case. Later that evening, Latro took the Halfling out for drinks. He was never heard from again and the term "LadroDectrused was added to the Halfling lexicon as a term for a stupid man who gets beguiled by an obviously dangerous, money seeking woman. Thanks to the judge's name being very similar to the Elfish word for a certain spider that eats its mate, the term jumped from Halfling vocabulary to Elves, then Humans. Which is surprisingly, exactly how croutons became a widespread addition to salads. But that's a different footnote.

[12] Our artist was busy working on another project at the time so she wasn't able to add that little ramshackle town onto our map- which has gotten quite big at this point.

[13] At the latest World Championship of Impatience, he had shown up a full two weeks before the event started, managed to figure out and complete all the events, and then leave within two days. Twelve days early was a new record for the WCI. Once everyone else arrived (a week early) he was awarded his Grand Mastership in absentia. Of course, by then he had already had a plaque made and had it hung over his fireplace in the space he had selected three months before.

[14] This is not a case of merely Grimbledung speaking to himself. It is a trait held by Gnomes, Dwarves, and even Hobbits if one can use a copyrighted term in a footnote (if not, then just consider them River Folk). This trait originated due to the one-sidedness of conversations those of diminutive stature had with those races of non-diminutive stature. Relatively speaking that is. Actually, when routinely ignored by Giants, Humans also pick up the habit of having entire conversations with themselves. In fact, married men of all races have been known to do this. We'll just leave it at that.

[15] While many races hold to the belief that one should only be married to one other individual at any given time, Gnomes do not. And not just the ones that are sailors or even traveling brush salesmen…err salesgnomes. One would like to believe that the reason for this is rooted deep in the psyche of Gnomes. It is not. The practice came about because of their inherent traveling nature. And the fact that oftentimes, once a Gnome had been traveling for a while, they were too tired, lazy, or otherwise engaged (see what we did there?) to return home. Hence the belief that multiple spouses were not necessarily a bad thing to have. Furthermore, being progressive (or as progressive as a diminutive race can be) the practice was actively practiced by both sexes.

[16] The term 'panhandler' has been around for over fifteen hundred years and originated from an enterprising and thoughtful vagrant in Southern Picistan who realized that his smell kept potential donors from putting loose change directly into his grimy hand. After several trials and errors, he found a small frying pan with a bent handle in a garbage bin. Straightening the handle, he came upon the idea of using it to allow passersby to give him coins without getting too close. Once he started using it, he came upon the also-brilliant idea of adding 'feed change' to the pan so that citizens would feel more obligated to give- since it made it seem like others already had deposited a coin or two and they didn't want to look cheap. This practice immediately spread to tavern piano players and bartenders. And soon after, politicians. Concerning the term 'pot handler'-- seeing the benefits of larger donations, politicians tried using pots instead. However the sight of a pot completely full of coins looked less like a donation (which it wasn't) and more like a payoff (which it was) so they returned to the smaller, less likely to be investigated by the Election Commission, pans. We will NOT further lengthen this footnote (or make a footnote within a footnote which would really rub the Editors the wrong way) with a discussion of a certain organization that actually uses caldrons to collect donations at a certain time of year. In any case…deep pockets never went out of style however and were referred to by the Orcish word for deep pockets- 'Lob-E'ist'. This caused the term 'pothandler' to fall out of use. But not 'Lob-E'ists' which sounded better than 'deep pockets'. (Especially to those that didn't speak Orcish.)

[17] There is far, far too much to write about sewers. Much of which is unappetizing to say the least. We suggest you look up 'The Great Stink' when you have a moment to read up on why Londoners (in this particular instance though it applies to most other cities as well) thought sewers were a good thing to have.

[18] As it turns out, he will only be half right.

[19] Foreshadowing is a common literary device that writers use to build anticipation for an upcoming event within the narrative. Of course, when the title of said writer's work implicitly states what is going to happen- such as the popular, 'Dwarves on a Mine Cart!' or 'Trollnado', writers' use of foreshadowing is as subtle as a sock full of rocks to the head. Of course, other times, the literary device of 'sideshadowing' is used to show that a title

has no particular relevance to the plot. At all. Such as in the not-as-popular literary work 'I Know What You Did Last Autumn But I'm Going to Buy Some Shoes Before I Tell you.' or 'The Hangry Games'. We won't even mention 'Red Herrings' or 'MacGuffins' except to say we'll only use them to bolster word count. Or annoy our editors.

[20] We figured the editors would catch that and delete it. They didn't so we're glad we wrote it.

[21] After the first draft came back and that 'red herring' reference was untouched, we just had to add in 'MacGuffins' before the final editing. After completion, we asked our editors about the references and received an eye roll and 'if you want to sink to that level, we only care that your spelling is right and you don't mix up your characters' names. Again.' We do want to point out that several fart jokes were removed and there was a full-on groping by Grimbledung that was also crossed out with an exclamation point added over it. We'll put a 'Wink' footnote where it used to be after the editing and before publishing so you'll know where it was. We thought it was funny and fit the scene nicely. We will let you be the judge.

[22] It is. You'll have to look up why yourself. We were already practically out of bounds with that 'London' reference according to our Editors even though the town is an ancient one that may actually exist in this universe.

[23] That's a one-off. Characters aren't going to start saying the titles of chapters like other popular literature and serials.

[24] A Commissioner of the Peace and Justice of the Peace are often used interchangeably in this indeterminate century. This appointed-by-the-crown position is in charge of maintaining order of not only a legal sense by overseeing misdemeanor trials, infractions of local ordinances and bylaws; but also with regards to things such as the construction of roads and bridges and managing food supplies. They also work closely with the elected City Council when issuing building permits and variances. Being appointed by the King or Queen, they can also conduct marriages. The authors would like to point out that among *all* the footnotes, this is the only one that was actually researched and provides 'surprisingly more fact than fantasy', as our editors call it.

[25] Wink!

[26] Look her up; she actually was one! See? That makes TWO factual footnotes!

[27] It's a real reach we know and probably won't mean much to most anyone, but those that have read the esteemed Mister Lovecraft will get it. If you haven't read H.P's work, we highly recommend it. Especially since at the time of writing this footnote, this is currently the last book in the series.

[28] It is! Okay, fine. Don't bother looking this one up. This is one of those more 'fantasy' than 'fact' footnote. It's more for comedic effect. Hopefully.

[29] While grammatically, 'death' is indeed a female noun, it is personified as a male by many -but definitely NOT all- cultures. And, since we are endeavoring to keep our footnotes more entertaining than factual, we will leave it at that, except to point out that since Death is always on time, never

wrong, and always gets its way, it absolutely positively *has* to be a woman. Prove us wrong.

[30] While it would seem to the casual observer, that like sized-races would inherently get a long, this is not the case. The Thousand Year War, (as it is now called since it went over the millennial mark) between Pixies and Brownies has experienced several armistices and cease fires- the most notable when Brownies and Pixies joined forces against a massive Sprite invasion. After that three-decade campaign of course, Pixies and Brownies returned to warring. As far as Dwarves and Gnomes (which was the reason to even come to this footnote) are concerned, Dwarves see Gnomes as frivolous and childish. Which in the defense of Dwarves is generally true. Gnomes on the other hand see Dwarves as greedy drunkards. Which, in the defense of Gnomes is also mostly true. This animosity has never led to open conflict between them - mainly because both Gnomes and Dwarves appreciate a drunken good time. It has been suggested that if Brownies and Pixies would just start drinking together, they would be able to put their differences behind them. Or at least stop killing each other as often.

[31] It is indeed technical. Trust us.

[32] Close Encounters of a Grim Kind. It's book 8 and we've actually started on it already just in case folks buy a bunch of copies of this one. Which, strangely enough, folks seem to do regularly. So- thanks for that.

[33] When Yoda first said this line, there was a great discussion about it because it was in a theater- without the benefit of subtitles. So the line was heard two ways: "Always in motion is the future" meaning that the future is constantly changing due to rational decisions people make daily; and "Always emotion is the future" meaning that the future is constantly changing due to the emotional decisions people make daily- just like Luke running off to save his friends. To make matters worse, thanks to Yoda's dubious use of word order, either fit. So there was The Discussion. If you keep in mind that this movie came out in 1983- long before there was an inexpensive, available-to-everyone internet, the only way to figure out the line would be either try and locate a script, call Mister Lucas, or watch the movie a dozen times. NONE were viable options. Yes- including number three. Why you ask?? Because there were TOO MANY GREAT MOVIES to watch. Don't believe us? Here is just a partial list of the movies that also came out in 1983: Cheech and Chong Still Smoking, Monty Python's Meaning of Life, National Lampoon's Vacation, Risky Business, Trading Places, A Christmas Story, Uncommon Valor, The Keep, Mister Mom, The Man with Two Brains, High Road to China, Bad Boys, All the Right Moves, The Right Stuff, DC Cab (Mister T!), War Games, Scarface, Christine, Octopussy, Krull, Splash, Never Say Never Again (TWO James Bond movies in ONE YEAR!), Twilight Zone- the Movie, The Dead Zone, Superman 3, Cujo (TWO King movies in a year!), Strange Brew, 10 to Midnight (Charles Bronson and 2 James Bonds in one year!), Something Wicked This Way Comes, Psycho 2, Eddie and the Cruisers, Easy Money, The Pirates of Penzance, Amityville 3-D, Stroker Ace, To Be or Not to Be (Mel Brooks!), The Star Chamber, The Blade Master—

AND MORE! Yes- 1983 was chock FULL of great movies. Today's kids have no clue. Oh, we also saw Baby Sister which we only watched because Phoebe Cates was in it because Fast Times at Ridgemont High came out in 1982.

[34] It's what the Seminole Indian Tribe in Florida is actively doing right now.

[35] They are indeed one of the Great Apes. The greatest if you ask them. If you ask a Gorilla, you won't get the same answer of course.

[36] The Elf did not hear him because he had left. However, even if he had heard, he wouldn't have cared. Elves are like that. This one especially.

[37] No, we have nothing to say about that show. And we are definitely not going to mention a thing about female voices being shrill and at times grating because several of our editors are not only of the female persuasion, they live close by. Really all we were just going to point out in this footnote was that an out-of-view-of-the-narrative melee ensued during the upcoming change of scene. So: A melee ensued.

[38] Roberticus' Rules of Order are a very powerful, all-encompassing set of procedural rules that help you to run roughshod over any sort of meeting you are attending. Nothing annoys a homeowner's association board member more than when during said meeting to discuss home colors, decorations, or any other egregious violation of communal living, you bring up a motion, point of order, or ask if there is a quorum for a measure. Do yourself a favor and pick up a copy of the more modern 'Robert's Rule of Order' and have fun with it. Especially when you try to use them in board games as well.

[39] While it is common knowledge that one cannot 'cheat death', the opposite is absolutely true.

[40] Flying Kings is a variation of checkers not played very often because it is held in the same esteem as 'slop' (justifiably) in billiards or (definitely unjustifiably) 'word wrap' in Scrabble. However, for the sake of the narrative, we shall explain: Flying Kings are kings that are able to move along a diagonal row as many open/free spaces as are available much like a bishop in that mythological game 'chess'. And, if a Flying King can make a capture along its path, it is allowed to jump and capture that piece. Such a capture then ends its turn.

[41] It happens often in popular literature. Trust us.

[42] See? That sentence is pretentious! Don't be one of those 'no prepositions at the end of the sentence because that's wrong', because in Modern Standard English, that is definitely not the case. Yes, we're a little argumentative today. It happens.

[43] This is indeed a hard and fast rule that Death must abide by. Keep that in mind if you are ever in the situation where you need a straight answer from the Overlord of the Underworld.

[44] As a firebrand preacher once said (before becoming watered down by a happy-go-lucky kid before she loses the use of her legs and becomes a curmudgeon when she tried to avoid her aunt Polly by climbing a tree to her

attic bedroom then she drops her new doll then falls off her window ledge when she tries to grab it. Death comes unexpectedly!

[45] It is an undisputed truth that the first city dumps were developed right after the first cities. It was on a Tuesday, in fact (Fine; that may be disputable). Once the dump was established (by the second citizen of the town deciding he had walked far enough from home with a dead yak) city ordinances were established soon after. That was on the following Monday. It would have been sooner but the city was established in early spring, so it was fairly cool. Historians are pretty sure that if the town were established in the middle of summer, the ordinance would have been established by Wednesday. As it was, Monday was the day. And that ordinance specifically stated that any livestock or pets had to be taken an hour's walk from the edge of town. Thanks to the foresight of one of the new townsfolk, it also included a clause that citizens of town were under no circumstances to be taken outside of town for disposal without first speaking with the constable and undertaker (who happened to be the same person since at that point, there were only fifteen people living in the town) and receive proper authorization to do so. It was later the following week, when a citizen was run over by a cart (pulled by a young and easily-spooked yak, ironically) that the town's cemetery was established. In any case, that particular ordinance has remained in place even when there are several constables or undertakers. So says the historian we asked, anyway. We dare you to dispute that!

[46] Damn right it does.

[47] It is a well-documented fact from folks who have returned from near-death experiences that in Valhalla, the residents play Croquet or Bocci since both are friendly games played by those of good moral character. Darts and of course checkers are played in Niflheim.

[48] We're right and we can PROVE it! Just take a look: https://www.dictionary.com/browse/gnomish .That makes THREE well researched and accurate footnotes! We will not be providing any more sources. If you don't believe us, do your own damned research.

[49] We are spot on with our 'humors of the body' reference here. There are actually four humors: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. And we'd like to thank Mrs. Thanski our tenth-grade humanities teacher for this bit of information. See? We did learn something Mrs. T!!

[50] Yes, the Stomping Jeebies- not to be confused with the Heebie Jeebies or Shuddering Willies. Of the three, the Stomping Jeebies are the worst.

[51] The history of using capital letters for emphasis is an interesting one: When primitive people first started using pictures of animals and other everyday things to convey messages (we think it was on a Thursday but that's not important even though we're pretty sure it's accurate), the drawings were all the same size. Probably because scale had not been invented yet (also accurate). Even so, this was a good way to depict herds of animals that would be good to hunt, nearby volcanoes with the potential to erupt, and other helpful facts like which female primitive was bustier. After a while, there came

a need to have part of the images represent a more pressing danger. So circles and arrows would be drawn around the pressing danger of a bear, lion, or erupting volcano. However, this would sometimes make it difficult to get the entire message on the limited space of cave walls. To alleviate this problem, an enterprising primitive (named Korg in 70,000 BC, if our Saturday-morning research is correct) decided that drawing the potential threat slightly larger was a simple way show they were a more hazardous or imminent threat than the other items in that particular story. Or that while Tala was dedicated and all, at the end of the day she looked a lot like Shelly Long, while Lana (who looked like Barbara Bach which is the exact OPPOSITE of Shelly Long) was the bustiest primitive gal in the area and should be drawn as such. Because she definitely was. Once (And, oddly enough here is a footnote within a footnote: This isn't the only Barbara Bach footnote you will read). In any case, once pictographs were replaced by letters of an alphabet. (We believe that took the better part of two weeks thanks to the helpful Phoenicians. Which is also why it was named after them- the Phonetic Alphabet. Our editors doubted these undeniable facts even though we explained to them that we are absolutely sure of this particular fact as we have seen T-shirts thanking the Phoenicians specifically. And the fact that a local theme park has a very slow-moving ride inside a huge ball dedicated to them). In any case, back to the footnote at hand: That's why capital letters are used for emphasis. No matter what our editors say. NO MATTER WHAT OUR EDITORS SAY!

[52] Naming Conventions are convened whenever a new race, animal, or plant is discovered or a race would like to change their name. All the races that aren't doing anything more important come together to discuss the new name to decide if it is acceptable. Once when trying to rebrand themselves as a kinder gentler race, Orcs petitioned to change their species name to something that is almost universally liked: Peaches. They were outvoted.

[53] The Magician is right- humans do have a gullet. Get back to the story.

[54] Sometimes when an author has a lot of characters involved in the plot, it is beneficial to remove some of them from the action so that the story doesn't get watered down by too many characters being in one place at a time. Sometimes editors will even ask to have some characters removed to make a story move along better. In fact, in the first version of Murder on the Orient Express, there were twenty-six murderers involved. Then at the behest of her editor, Agatha lowered it to a much more manageable twelve. It also made for a much less mangled body. The same was true for Twelve Angry men, but for a different reason. Reggie (as his friends and fellow writers called him) Rose was in his thirties when he wrote that story so he had not been in a civics class in over fifteen years. During that time, he had forgotten that juries for capital crimes had twelve jurors and wrote it with fifteen, figuring it was a good odd number. With all that being said, Rat is just off having an adventure that will be explained in the Tales from the Mora Tau Bar-- if we ever get around to compiling all those stories into a single book. Fan mail will definitely help that side project along.

[55] Did we mention that Close Encounters of a Grim Kind was going to be book 8? That takes place mostly in the Devil's Thumb and the nearby town of Cuticle. All of the action takes place there. Don't tell the Magicians. Oh- it's going to be a "Choose Your Adventure" story as well because—why the Hell not!

[56] This is also true for meals. If you have a significant other in your life who does the domestic chores in your household, you should take them out to eat often so they don't have to cook and clean up afterwards. Or you could just help out once in a while and make a meal, or even do the dishes afterwards- they aren't your SLAVE you know!! (We are sure that last sentence was added by our editors and we're too afraid of them to remove it.)

[57] We are sorry to say we are definitely leaning toward that ending. Either that or we'll just fade to black as a crossbow fires.

[58] Underworld Standard Time (UST)

[59] Another favorite line in a great movie by a great arch enemy; Kahn. If you are inclined to watch any of the Star Trek movies, make it Wrath of Khan. If you decide to watch ALL of them, just watch Wrath of Khan thirteen times. Conversely, if you are planning on watching the Star Wars movies, just watch Empire Strikes Back twelve times. We will fight you on this!

[60] If you're ever with someone who treats waiters, waitresses, bartenders, or anyone else in the service industry poorly, stop associating with them; they are black-hearted dung heaps.

[61] We writers of Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop are never sure what curse words will be accepted by our editors and which will get a big red "X" dawn through them, often with an exclamation point. While we are sure that the Seven Dirty Words are definitely off the table, there are a good dozen other minor ones that also seem to irk our editors. We have been informed that our fart jokes already push the boundaries of good taste to their limit.

[62] We've been a little remiss with the number of songs Grimbledung sings so we figured we would toss one in here. It fit the narrative well and to be completely honest, we just watched The Spy Who Loved Me, so that song was in our head. It's a really fun James Bond episode because you get not only the famous submarine Lotus Esprit, but Barbara Bach as a Russian agent! (See? We told you there would be a second footnote on her!) For those of you that disparage Roger Moore, he was doing the best he could with the material he was given. Honestly, The Man with the Golden Gun has UNARGUABLY the best car stunt ever performed- a corkscrew jump in an AMX Hornet Hatchback. No wires, no CGI, just a curved ramp and a steely-eyed stuntman. In a Hatchback!! And what did they do?? They added a slide whistle sound effect to it, cheapening it to the lowest level of cheap. It should have had the James Bond theme played during the jump. Disgraceful. On a side note, if you want to see him being a serious action hero, watch his The Saint series. He breaks the fourth wall speaking to the audience during the intro, but besides that it's straight action. Oh! AND we didn't mention this earlier but we are also pleased to have a Barbara Bach reference because many

of the chapters, and especially the first one referenced Beatles songs and Barbara Bach has been married to Ringo Starr since 1981! This is the third well researched footnote, by the way -so that puts us at a solid 5.7% for researched versus un-researched footnotes. That's right up there with Bill O'Reilly… if you count the footnotes HE PERSONALLY researched as opposed to his team of lackeys. Do your own work Bill!

[63] We admit we have a lot of Star Trek references throughout this series. We don't consider this one (or any of them) anachronisms because in this case the drink is truly green and we don't call it "Romulan Ale" or something similar. Grimbledung needed to describe the drink somehow and "It's green" fit nicely. The same with the bar fight in an earlier book- it was from the highly acclaimed episode "Trouble with Tribbles" where Scotty gets into a brawl with a bunch of Klingons. In this one we again have Scotty (our favorite character from the series) making an astute observation while trying to get a Kelvin that's taken over the ship drunk in 'By Any Other Name'. Then later, when Scotty makes an appearance in TNG in "Relics" (also a highly acclaimed episode), Data says it to Scotty in Ten Forward. We were going to have the currency in the Afterlife be Quatloos, but we felt that was a bit too much so we just went with an unnamed currency.

[64] No, not that one. The High Priest's demise happens off camera. We do try to keep a PG-13 rating with these books.

[65] Sorry readers; you can just blame our editors for that abrupt ending to this character. And the book as well, really. Instead of just putting the comma in there and not mentioning it, we writers were subjected to a rather lengthy talking-to about commas and dangling participles, and probably something else. Conjunctions or where to get Lolly's Adverbs. Perhaps even how tough it is for a Bill to become a Law. To be honest we stopped listening after a little bit. But, the result was that everything that happened after that sentence was rewritten into the extremely sudden death of Mister Pinniped because without the comma, he really is making a completely different statement. Originally he was going to talk his way out of the library after a bit of really fun banter. He'd even get a traveling pack and some extra supplies for his haughtiness and the book would end on a much more suspenseful note back at *Herbs and More. Much More*. But unfortunately, that's all gone now. He's dead and all you've got to look forward to book 8 "Close Encounters of a Grim Kind". Which if you missed the other footnote, will be a 'Choose Your Own Adventure' style book. We sincerely hope you didn't miss any of the footnotes with the amount of time we put into them! Reading them at the end instead of with the narrative will make a lot of them confusing.