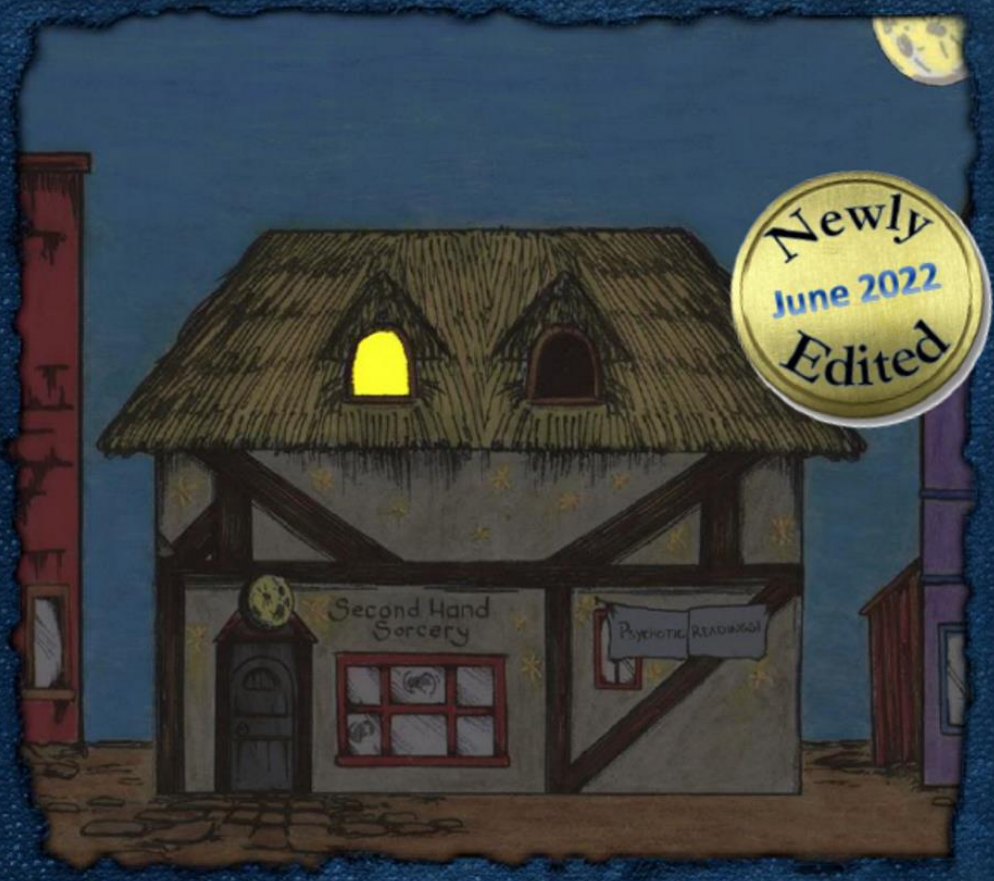
BEST TRILOGY SO FAR!

Here's Looking For You, Grim



TALES FROM A SECOND HAND WAND SHOP: BOOK THREE

Robert P. Wills

RATED M FOR FROG LICKING, MUSHROOM SMOKING ELVES

Here's Looking for You, Grim

Tales From A Second Hand Wand Shop, Book 3

Any similarity between the characters in this book and persons living or dead (or undead) is purely coincidental. Especially the people from my everyday life that I specifically try to make fun of. That's definitely a coincidence too! (Author's Note: Oh yes, there are consequences to annoying an author.) In any case, the author has made an effort to avoid using the names of real places or businesses in this tale. Again, similarities with like-named businesses or places is purely coincidental. The battles too. Mostly.

No animals harmed in the writing of this book. Several even had their bellies rubbed during the process.

Written By Robert P. Wills

Some Illustrations by Rio Taylor (the really good ones)

Most of the Other Illustrations by the Author.

Thanks for the 'shrooms, Cory

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

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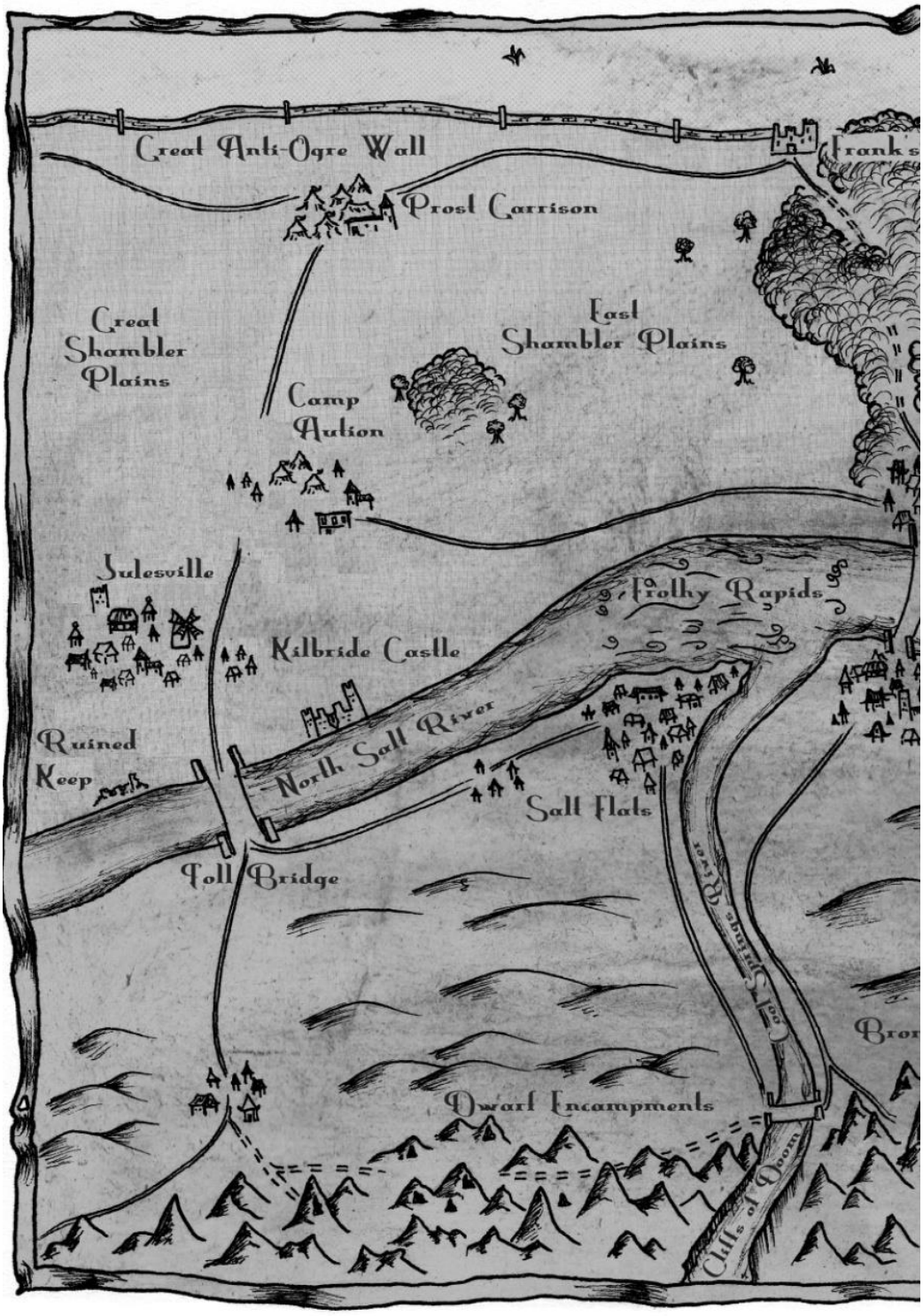
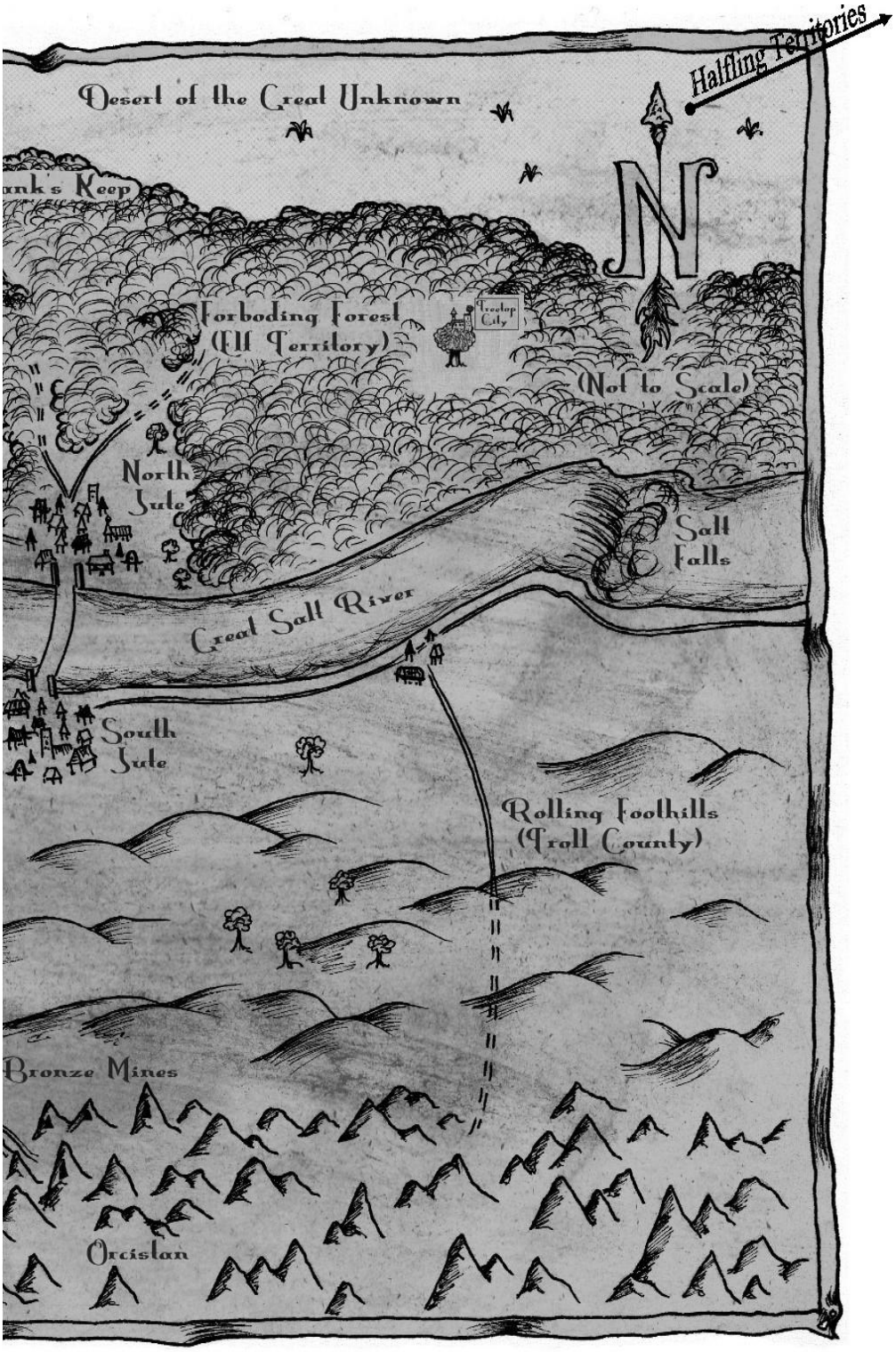
Drimblerod and Grimbledung- Just About There


Great Anti-Ogre Wall
Frank's
Frost Garrison
Great Shambler Plains
East Shambler Plains
Camp Aulon
Julesville
Frothy Rapids
Kilbride Castle
Ruined Keep
North Salt River
Salt Flats
Toll Bridge
Dwarf Encampments
Cliffs of Doom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Desert of the Great Unknown
ank's Keep
Forboding Forest
(Elf Territory)
Treetop City
(Not to Scale)
North Jute
Salt Falls
Great Salt River
South Jute
Rolling Foothills
(Troll County)
Bronze Mines
Orcistan

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Chapter Zero
~~Grim~~ Grimbledung Prognostications

"My army advances?" Asked the Lord High Priest of the Great Halfling Empire. "To absurdly overwhelming glory?"

The conscript was on his knees, peering into the mouth of the Goat of Scrying. "Yes, Lord High Priest. They are at the keep of that Frank fellow. Your army prepares to overrun it."

"Who guards the keep?"

There was a long pause as the conscript squinted into the goat's mouth. One never wanted to take too close a look at the future. Especially when that future was of the person doing the looking.

"Maaaaaa?" Asked the goat. It was not pleased with its lot in life, but at least it was the game of gazing in on the future, instead of looking up the past. That was a game that it dearly did not like. The conscript didn't care for it either.

The conscript gripped the goat's ears tight as he gazed into the swirling colors that were to be his future. Since the future was always in motion[1], the images swirled and coalesced this way and that. At the moment it seemed as if the soldiers in the keep were leaving it. En mass. "The soldiers are abandoning the keep. Those taller cowards!"

"All of them?" The Lord High Priest leaned forward in his chair. "Without even putting up a fight?"

There was another long pause as the conscript put his head farther into the goat's mouth. Since he had not released his tight grip on the goat's ears, it went along with it. "Two remain to guard the keep," he finally said.

"Two?"

"Gnomes."

"Two… Gnomes?" He moved to the edge of his chair, hands grasping its arms tightly. The back legs of the chair picked up off the ground.

The conscript recoiled "Oh no. Not *him*."

The Lord High Priest's eyes narrowed. That was all the description he needed to know who his conscript saw. In a very short period of time, that one Gnome had managed to become infamous. Infamously maddening. In some parts of the Great Empire of Halflings, in fact, his name had even been added to the vernacular; 'Don't be a Grimbledung' was sometimes heard from a parent scolding a child acting in a contrary, or whining manner. "*Him*?"

The conscript nodded at the Lord High Priest, "Yes, Sire. Him and that other one." He shrugged. "They're usually together."

"I wonder about them."

The conscript turned and looked back into the goat's mouth. "The word is they're just friends. They've been known to go carousing together, in fact." He glanced at the Lord High Priest. "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

"I never said there was." The High Priest stood and waved his hand as his elaborate chair clattered back onto all four legs. "It is no matter to me, and soon enough, to anyone else. We'll have their heads on pikes for all the lands to see. One right beside the other for six months straight." He rubbed his hands together. "I don't mind saying that two Gnomes against my entire army aren't good odds. Not at all." He rubbed his hands together again. "Oh yes, we'll be rid of Grimble*dung* and his partner soon enough."

The conscript looked back into the swirling shapes of the future. Things *were* in motion- that much was certain. He let go of the goat's ears without making eye contact with the Lord High Priest.

Much to the relief of the conscript, the Lord High Priest turned, and with a flourish of his robes, left the balcony with only a "Splendid. Get that goat back in its pen," over his shoulder to dismiss him.

The conscript bowed to his leader's back. "Yes, Lord High Priest." Events were moving along. Splendidly? Things were never too sure when dealing with that particular Gnome. Splendidly? Unpredicatbly was more like it. "If you say so," he added unconvinced as he untied the goat.

"Maaaa!" Said the goat, as it licked at the taste of butterscotch - the taste of the future- on its lips. It wasn't convinced either.

Chapter One
Drimblerod & Grimbledung
vs. the Great Halfling Army

"This is the pinch huh? I'm not too sure I like the pinch."[2] Grimbledung gulped as he looked out at the army poised to overrun the keep. "Did I mention I think it's more like a pucker?"

"You did, yes. Poor pun, that."

The two Gnomes watched the army mill about in the darkness. Fights broke out here and there. Once, a trebuchet was even fired at a nearby formation. Several heads were put on pikes as a warning to other units that all attacks should be directed *towards* the keep.

It was still dark as Captain Frank snuck up beside the Gnomes- dawn was more than an hour away. "Almost everyone's out and moving except for me and these few guards." He gestured toward the men. "We've got the fastest horses left to get us caught up with the main force. But we need to go before the attack starts so we can be in position in time."

"See, Drim? This is that Unter dem Schutz der Dunkleheit thing. It's not just the Dwarves that do it."

Drimblerod glanced at his partner. In the pre-dawn darkness he was unable to see his face well. He could however, see that his ears were waggling.

Captain Frank nodded at the Gnome, "Right. We'll be set up on the Great Shambler Plains. Just lure them all out and we'll take care of the rest." He hazarded a peek over the wall. "We need to make sure we're out before they see us leaving." He had had an unnerving, overwhelming feeling of being watched. For the better part of two hours, the hairs on the back of his neck had refused to lie down. He wanted nothing more than to be out of the immediate vicinity. "Gads," he said under his breath.

"Captain Frank, I don't mind saying that two Gnomes against that entire army aren't good odds. Not at all." Drimblerod rubbed his hands together worriedly. "Is anyone staying back to help?"

Captain Frank ignored the question. "So any questions?" He started to stand.

"I just had one and you didn't answer it."

"Right," said Captain Frank as he avoided the question yet again. Thinking better of making himself an easy target, he crouched back down behind the parapet. "That's it then?"

"Hey, I've got one!" Said Grimbledung as he raised his hand.

"You don't have to raise your hand to ask a question."

"Maybe you do to get one answered."

"So when do you think the attack'll start?" Asked Grimbledung.

Suddenly, the air was filled with flying arrows, ballista bolts and even hurtled Halflings - each screaming its high-pitched cry of doom. The men on the wall scattered as Halflings crashed to the floor of the Keep. Some made it all the way to the courtyard, striking hapless stragglers there.

Drimblerod slapped his partner's ear. "Stop doing that!"

"Well, let's get this plan into action!" Said Captain Frank as he quickly moved to the stairs. He paused as he got to the top of them. Silhouetted in the torch light from below, he took a deep breath then looked back at the Gnomes.

For a split-second, Drimblerod thought he had reconsidered the entire absurd plan and was going to stand and fight. "Yeah?" He asked hopefully.

"Retreeet!!" Captain Frank shouted over the din to the remaining soldiers as he pointed with his sword towards the castle gate. "FOLL – LOW MEEEEEE!!" With that, he bolted down the steps two at a time. As he went, the remaining soldiers fell in behind him.

"Wow, he must really like my plan, huh Drim?" Grimbledung smiled broadly at his partner. He ducked behind the parapet as a ballista bolt soared by and clattered into the courtyard.

Drimblerod shook his head. "This is nuts."

Rat scampered up to the Gnomes, "What in the lands is going on? I thought I saw you two up here! We're all leaving you know!"

"We're staying here to slow them down," offered Grimbledung.

"What kind of insane plan…"

Drimblerod gestured at his partner.

"…oh well, then it makes perfect sense then." Rat stood on his hind legs, "Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire. You get off this wall right now!" He shook a claw to show he meant business. He looked down at the Keep's gate- Captain Frank was astride his mount. He seemed to point at the three of them and said something. Rat didn't hear him over the racket. Captain Frank pointed out the gate and nodded. "Let him stay and fight. It's his Keep after all!" He remarked as he pointed an accusatory claw at the Captain and nodded back "Stinking human!" He shouted at him as he nodded back.. "I really think we need to get going, Grimbledung. That human has left us here high and dry." The Captain nodded again, gave Rat a thumbs-up, and rode out the gate. "Well, that's just great."

"Not yet, Rat. We need to give the soldiers time to regroup and be ready to attack." Grimbledung winked, "Then we'll high tail it out of here on our trusty RatShambler!"

Rat twitched his whiskers. "*When* exactly are we riding out on this trusty steed of yours?"

"When the Halflings are overrunning the keep," explained Grimbledung.

Rat gestured around him. "This looks like overrun to me." There were several Halflings on the wall; two more (that survived the impact) were in the courtyard battling the soldiers who seemed more intent on getting on their horses than anything else.

The three soldiers remaining on the wall dispatched several Halflings as they made their way towards the Gnomes.

"Glad you're staying to fight. Mighty noble of you," said Drimblerod. He pointed down the wall, "We'll hold this area here, if two of you move down that…"

"We got those; you got the rest," interrupted one of the soldiers as they hurriedly moved past the Gnomes.

"What?" Asked Rat.

"See you on the plains," said the last soldier as he ran down the steps behind his compatriots. Helpfully, he kicked a Halfling off the wall as he went.

"What kind of plan is this?" Asked Rat angrily.

"We're to slow them down so that the soldiers can get onto open ground where the Halflings will be easier to defeat."

"So why aren't we…"

Drimblerod pointed at his partner again.

"… right, right. Wait. Who put him in charge?"

Drimblerod considered that, "Yeah! Who put you in charge?"

"I'm in charge? Really?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Whoo hoo!"

Another Halfling bounced onto the wall. In a flash it was on his feet. "They went thataway!" Said Grimbledung as he pointed.

The Halfling nodded as it turned toward the stairs. After two paces, it stopped and turned around. "Hey YOU!!"

In a flash it was gone.

"This time it wasn't me!" Said Grimbledung defensively.

Drimblerod nodded, "No. That time I took care of the little cuss."

"Desert?"

"Great Salty Ocean. I took a boat ride a few years back."

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Bon voyage!" He waved at the empty air. "Hope you like the ocean!"

Actually, it would turn out that the Halfling did.[3]

Another ballista bolt clattered by. "They're getting closer."

"You think?" Snapped Drimblerod.

"I just had a great idea."

"It was one of your great ideas that got us here."

"You know where we should go from here?" Asked Grimbledung.

"I don't want to know."

"Can't I tell you?"

"No."

The two engaged the attacking Halflings for a few moments.

"Australis. It's an island out on the Great Salty Sea, just out from EternCity off the coast. They speak Common and everything."

"I didn't ask."

"I figured you secretly wanted to know, so I told you," explained Grimbledung.

Drimblerod drew his sword. "You're not helping."

Grimbledung drew a second wand. "Well, let's see what we can do about slowing these Halflings down." He smiled broadly. "Rat, I should change you now so you're ready to go." He jabbed one of the wands at Rat. In a flash RatShambler towered over the parapets. Thanks to the torches and the still dark sky, he became an easy-to-aim-at, full-sized, Shambler silhouette.

"Delberger's Hand! I'm out in the open!" RatShambler's hooves clopped on the stone as he struggled to turn on the now too narrow wall. "You're going to be the death of me," he snapped as he made a run for the stairs. As he went, a ballista bolt glanced off his shoulder, knocking him off the wall. He fell the four stories to the courtyard, landing in a heap.

"Rat!" Drimblerod moved to the edge and looked into the courtyard.

"That really hurts you know," he called up as he stood gingerly on healing legs. There was a large dent in his shoulder. Thanks to the spell, it slowly pushed back out to where it was moments before. "Crazy Gnome!" RatShambler moved to the now-open gate of the now-vacated keep. He sat on his hind quarters to wait. "Ready when you are."

Grimbledung and Drimblerod continued to blast Halflings as the sky finally began to develop a purplish tint. At one point, they had to resort to using swords to deal with them.

"I think we're winning," offered Drimblerod. He hazarded a peek over the wall. Thanks to the brightening sky, he could now make out the moving mass that was Halfling Army. There seemed to be over a dozen ladders moving towards the walls.

"Are there less of them there?" Asked Grimbledung hopefully.

"No."

"Then how are we winning?"

"There's not less of *us* here." Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Think the soldiers have enough of a head start?"

Grimbledung nodded furiously, "More than they deserve and then some!"

"You ready to go out in style?" He gestured toward where RatShambler was waiting. Grimbledung didn't see him point because he was blasting a ladder as it clattered against the wall of the keep. The top portion of the ladder exploded in a shower of splinters. As it fell back onto the hoard of Halflings, several curses could be heard wafting back up at them.

"Yeah!" A wild look came to Grimbledung, "Now you're talking!" He tightened the straps holding his helmet of *What's This?* Channeling then clicked its horns into the 'down' position. Standing up, he clambered onto the parapet. He stepped over so he was straddling two of them. "I am Grimbledung Sixtoes. ESQUIRE! Hear me roar!" He shouted to the mass of Halflings. He brandished his wands.

*Ka **BOOM**!*

He intoned.

Chapter Two
All in All, it's Just Another Grim On The Wall

Immediately, arcs of *What's This* crackled up both sides of the walls of the keep and into the tips of the horns. His helmet took an out-worldly glow. He aimed his wands at the masses below him. "Drimblerod is here! I am here! But soon *you* will not be here! Grimbledung Sixtoes has come for your SOULS!" He bellowed.

"Grim?"

Great bolts of blue power sprang from his wands as he moved them back and forth. It was as if he were channeling the azure blue of the ocean's depths up through the ground. Except instead of water, destruction was being sprayed out. Generously.

"Delberger's hand, Grim! I just meant it was time to go!"

Grimbledung's wands crackled and sizzled above the almost-continuous peals of thunder as all the magical energy in the area was rapidly channeled through his helmet and down into his wands. Several crossbow bolts sizzled ineffectually as they struck the cage of energy popping and snapping around him. Even a ballista bolt bounced off harmlessly. He glowered down at the mass of Halfling soldiers below. A lone Halfling caught his eye "You! Yes! You behind the ladder! Stand still, laddie!!"

Not expecting to be addressed directly by the occupants of the keep, the young Halfling soldier did.

Grimbledung blasted him.

Drimblerod was in awe. He leaned back against the wall and watched the show. He hazarded a look over the wall. There actually *were* less Halflings near the Keep's walls. The unexpected onslaught of magical devastation had caused them to pull back to regroup. "You're pushing them back, Grim!" He called to his partner.

Grimbledung looked over at his partner, his smoking wands still doling out blue destruction to all in front of him. He smiled. "Whoo hoo!" He said as he

took a little hop. When he came back down, one of his feet almost missed the edge of the parapet. "Woops!" He said as he put out his arms to try and regain his balance. Blue arcs of magic shot out in both directions. Drimblerod ducked down. Grimbledung leaned precariously forward as his arms swam backward furiously. He looked at his partner just as he reached the tipping point.

"Drim?" He said. Before falling off the wall.

Drimblerod gaped at the space that used to contain his friend only a moment earlier. He stood and leaned over the Keep's walls, oblivious to the arrows and crossbow bolts clattering on all sides of his exposed head. "GRIM!" He called down.

Grimbledung's fall seemed to have been broken by landing on a group of Halflings. Several of them grabbed his arms and others wrestled his wands out of his hands. He looked up and made eye contact with his partner. "DRIMBLEROD!" Another two Halflings grabbed his feet as another wrested his helmet off. Together they all hoisted the helpless Gnome into the air. "*DRIM*!"

Drimblerod watched as his partner bounced off, held aloft by half a dozen Halflings.

"COME GET ME!" Grimbledung called up at his friend.

"I'LL FIND YOU!" Drimblerod called back. An arrow cut a shallow groove in his shoulder. Drimblerod became acutely aware of the number of projectiles coming in his direction. Instinctively, he ducked down. Several arrows passed where his head had been moments before.

"DRIIIIMBLE ROD!" Wafted up to him from below. A ladder clattered against the parapet where he was crouching, another, two down. Then a third and a fourth. Now that the magical attack had stopped, the Halflings renewed their efforts to scale the walls of the keep. Unable to do anything else, Drimblerod kept low and made for the stairs.

He took them two at a time as he heard other ladders clatter against the keep's defenses. "Rat!" He called. "RAT!" Drimblerod jumped the last five steps. "Rat!" He called as he ran towards the front gate. An arrow stuck in the ground beside him as he went. "*RAAAT*!"

RatShambler turned to look at Drimblerod running across the courtyard. Arrows and crossbow bolts seemed to spring from the ground around him as he

zigg-zagged toward him. RatShambler stood up and ran for the Gnome. "Drim!" He called. He reached the Gnome and bent down for him to get on.

"Go!" Drimblerod dug his heels into RatShambler's side. "GO!"

"Where's Grim?"

"He fell," said Drimblerod as he fought back tears.

"He's dead?" RatShambler gaped at the Gnome as he turned to look at him.

"No. It's worse than that."

"What's worse than dead?"

"He was captured," said Drimblerod. "He fell off the wall and they got him."

RatShambler shook his head. "Well, we gotta get him back." He turned in the courtyard and started for the stairs "We can't leave him."

"No! First we need to lure these Halflings to the Army that's waiting for them! Head for the plains Rat! HEAD FOR THE PLAINS!"

RatShambler galloped out of Frank's Keep at full tilt. Drimblerod looked back at the gate as they went. There were no Halflings in sight. "Slow down Rat!"

"Slow down? Are you crazy? The whole of the Halfling Army is on our tail and you want me to slow down? You think we can talk them out of this invasion?"

Drimblerod looked back again. "If we outrun them, they'll never chase us to the plains and that was the plan. Grim's plan."

RatShambler slowed down, "Well if we don't outrun them…"

Drimblerod drew his wand. "I know, I know. Just turn around and I'll blast a few of them. If I can get them angry, they'll follow us."

"*Get* them angry? I think they're already plenty angry." RatShambler's pace had slowed but he still had not turned around.

"Come on, Rat. Otherwise it will be for nothing."

RatShambler nodded. "For Grimbledung," he said as he picked up a gallop and turned in a broad arc, heading back toward Frank's Keep. The sun popped above the horizon on their left as they went. Behind them would have been better, but so far, no one had gotten the Great and Mighty Sun to come up anywhere but where it wanted. And plenty had tried. "Get ready." RatShambler galloped over the drawbridge without slowing. Just as they reached the portcullis, several Halflings stepped into view. RatShambler lowered his head and crashed headlong into them. Halflings went flying as RatShambler skidded to a halt.

Drimblerod blasted two more Halflings. "Take that stinking Halflings! Is that all you've got?" He looked around the keep's courtyard. There were several Halflings moving about but for the most part, Frank's Keep seemed empty. "Can't those stupid Halflings even get into an unprotected castle?" He asked no one in particular. "Pathetic."

"Uhm, Drim…" began RatShambler.

"Come out you stinking shorters!" Drimblerod blasted another Halfling that had turned to look in his direction.

"Drimblerod?"

"Yeah?" Snapped Drimblerod, "what?" He took aim at another Halfling. This one had his sword out and was moving toward them. "Yeah, comm'ere you stinking Halfling!"

"Look up."

Drimblerod looked up out of the courtyard. The upper levels of the Keep were filled with Halflings. Hundreds of them. Many with bows drawn. Others, crossbows. The rest held swords. All were glowering down at him. In a torrent, they all began to pour down the several sets of stairs leading down to the courtyard.

"Time. To. Go." said Drimblerod without moving his lips.

RatShambler quickly backed under the gate tower as dozens of arrows stuck in the ground in front of him. When he was under the portcullis, he turned and galloped across the drawbridge.

"Well, I think that worked." Drimblerod hazarded a look back. Halflings were pouring out of Frank's Keep like angry ants. Ants with swords and bows. "They're on foot so don't go too fast," warned Drimblerod. "We can still lose

them." A blue light flashed through the gate. It encompassed the entire Keep and the Halflings surrounding it.

For a moment, RatShambler was able to see his shadow directly in front of him. "What in the lands?"

The Halflings kept pouring out of the castle. As Drimblerod looked, they seemed to grow larger. "Rat, maybe you should pick up the pace a little."

RatShambler lowered his head and sped up to a full gallop. Drimblerod had handfuls of fur trying to hold on. He looked back. The Halflings seemed closer. Unknown to Drimblerod, had his partner not leached most all of the *What's This?* Out of the area, the Halflings would have overtaken them in moments. As it was, there was only enough left for a marginally-powerful mass-spell.

"Rat, I don't want to alarm you or anything but…are you running as fast as you can?"

"I'm not as young as I used to be you know," huffed RatShambler. "Why?"

"They're gaining on us."

"What? How?" RatShambler craned his neck around to look at the Halfling hoard behind him. Their little legs were blurs. "Well, that's just not fair!"

Drimblerod twisted around and blasted into the mass of Halflings. "I can't get them all. And before you ask…"

"I know, I know. This is Grimbledung's enchantment so you can't do anything to add or take away from it." He looked back again. There were less than two hundred yards between them and the Halflings now. "This isn't good. How far ahead are those soldiers?"

A sinking feeling developed in Drimblerod's stomach. "They didn't say where exactly they would be setting up their ambush."

"What?"

"Grimbledung made the plan! He said the Shambler Plains."

"This is *all* the Shambler plains!"

Drimblerod looked back again. Another twenty five yards had been lost. "Keep heading straight. I can't imagine that they would have gone left or right."

"Unless they just scattered and left for good, that is." RatShambler wheezed.

"Save your breath and keep looking forward," suggested Drimblerod. He turned and blasted several other Halflings. They were close enough now that he could aim at them individually.

"We should have headed into the forest; we'd have had a chance of losing them there."

Drimblerod looked around. Their pace seemed to have slowed markedly. "What's wrong Rat?"

"Uphill."

Drimblerod nodded. "Maybe at the top of the hill we'll see the soldiers." Drimblerod stretched up to try and see over the hill. The crest was still a good 100 yards away.

RatShambler bucked.

Drimblerod lay down to keep from falling off. "What's wrong?"

"Arrow!"

Drimblerod turned and looked back. An arrow stuck out of RatShambler's rear shank.

"Pull…out."

Drimblerod nodded, "I'll try." He leaned and twisted backward and grasped the arrow with his hand. He tugged on it but it stayed firmly in place. "I think it's in the bone."

RatShambler grunted. He was out of breath. He let the injured leg only hit the ground every other time, dropping to an almost skip. Another arrow whizzed by. This time it almost stuck in Drimblerod's shank. "Delberger's Hand!" He cursed.

Drimblerod looked forward again. The hill's crest was less than fifty yards now. If nothing else it would afford Rat a downhill run for a little while. Drimblerod twisted around again but this time he flipped his legs around so he was seated backward. He reached down and grabbed RatShambler's half-tail for support. Rat was too out of breath to even complain. Steadying his aim, Drimblerod began to blast the Halflings. They were less than fifty yards away

now. “We’re not going to make it,” said Drimblerod. “Oh, Grim. We’re not going to make it.”

RatShambler reached the crest of the hill. Unexpectedly, it was a steep drop on the other side; more a min-cliff than a hill sloping on all sides. He took to the air in a last-moment jump. “Hang on!” He called to Drimblerod. He steeled himself for the inevitable jarring he knew would come when they hit. It looked to be almost seventy feet from where he lept to where his forward momentum would carry him. RatShambler’s vision tunneled as he focused on the ground ahead of him, flexing his front legs to try and keep them from breaking as they landed. “This will leave a mark.”

Drimblerod lay down along RatShambler’s back. He felt his stomach move up to his backbone as they took to the air. He gripped the tail tightly in his hands and closed his eyes. “Sorry, Grim,” he whispered.

RatShambler’s front hoofs dug into the soft grass as he landed, cracks spiraled up both of them. He stretched out his rear legs in an attempt to absorb some of the impact. It felt like a lightning bolt sizzling down his spine. His legs - all four of them- went numb as his back broke in two places. Even so, he bounded and was back in the air again momentarily. Then he landed heavily again, still at a full gallop. He turned his head back to see if Drimblerod was still hanging on since he couldn’t feel anything past his shoulders. And ran into a seated Gargoyle. Blackness enveloped him as he hit the one and a half-ton stone creature, coming to a death-inducing halt.

Drimblerod fared a little better. Momentarily anyway. Drimblerod careened off RatShambler’s suddenly stopped back. He saw ground, then sky, then ground again as he flew. For a moment he caught a glimpse of soldiers. And a Golem. *I know that Golem,* he thought right before he hit the ground and blackness enveloped him as well.

“They’re here!” Yelled Captain Frank as he drew his sword.

Soldiers stood and the Golem turned to look at the cliff. “Halflin’s” it said.

“Attack!” Captain Frank shouted as he drew his sword. Just as hundreds of Halfling soldiers poured over it.

Earlier…

Chapter Three
This is the Hour of the Gargoyle's Discontent

Pollux turned to look at the Golem that was leaning against him. Even though it was dark, he could still make out the large mass that was the Golem. They had been waiting for hours and the Golem had almost immediately gotten bored. "You awake?"

"Golems don't sleep," it replied.

"Yeah, neither do Gargoyles, really."

It sighed loudly. "Booorrrred," it lamented once again.

"That's what I hear, Gus," said Pollux as he stood. "Me too." The Golem straightened up so he didn't fall over. "Are we going to the battle any time soon?" He called to the Sergeant at Arms, "we really need to get going, you know. It's going to be light soon!"

The Sergeant at Arms glowered down at Pollux, "We'll go when the General says we go. That's how things work in the Army!"

"Work? This is your idea of work?" Pollux looked around. He had gathered nine other Gargoyles with him, including his brother Castor, to help repel the invasion. The array was impressive by any standard; five dragons (they were the most common), a bear, two lions, and two goats. More so, since the goats were the smallest in the group and yet they stood five feet at the shoulder. They were all sitting and waiting as they had been the better part of the night. Several bored looking Golems trudged here and there. "What're we waitin' for?" He snarled at no one in particular. Pollux moved to his brother, "Castor, this is gettin' absurd. Why are we sittin' around?"

"Waitin' on orders, I suppose." Castor shrugged his stone shoulders as he stood. "Not much we can do except wait."

"For what?"

"Orders, I suppose."

Pollux shoved his brother, "Listen, we showed up to help; not lounge about. It's going to be light within the hour."

"What ya wanna do?"

Pollux practically hopped in anger. "I want to go help defend our home from those stinking Halflings!"

Castor sat back down roughly, "So what ya wanna do? You know I'll follow ya anywhere and anyhow. Just say what we're doin'."

"We're goin' t'join in the battle."

Castor nodded approvingly. "Love me a good scrap"

Pollux smirked, "Well, there's a good one brewin' with your name all over it." He looked around. A thought occurred to him. An absurdly over the top thought. "We're leavin' and takin' some Golems with us." He moved toward a lounging Human soldier. *Was everyone just lounging around?* "Hey soldier. I need me some rope."

The soldier didn't move from his slouch. "Why?" He asked without even looking at the Gargoyle.

With speed belying his bulk, Pollux crowded the soldier, " 'Cause if I used yer guts, there might not be enough to go around." He narrowed his eyes as he put his face right up to the soldier, "So go get me some rope," he snarled. "Thick rope."

The soldier gulped. "How thick?"

He looked away noncommittally. "Oh, I don't know. Enough to hold a Golem in place." He said as casually as he could.

The soldier rushed to his feet "Yes, sir." Involuntarily, he saluted as he moved off in search of some very thick rope.

Pollux turned back to his brother, "Go tell the others we're leavin' and tell 'em to pair up with a Golem that can be talked into going." Pollux looked up at the Sergeant at Arms; he was lounging on the wall. "An' keep it quiet like."

"Why's that?"

"I don' think these folk are particularly interested in joinin' in the battle."

"What?"

"They're going to sit this one out."

"Well, it's horses for courses, I suppose."

" 'Xactly. So get everyone paired up with a Golem 'cause we're goin' to make a break for it with them."

Castor winked at his brother. "Leave it to me."

Pollux turned back to Gus, "Hey Gus, how do you feel about a ride?"

Gus frowned. "Got t'carry ya?" He shrugged as he tried to guess the gargoyle's weight. "Suppose I could."

Pollux chuckled, "No Gus; I'm going to carry *you*. We're goin' to go to the invadin' Halflings and give them a sound thrashing."

"Whut?"

Pollux shook his massive head, "You know the Halflings are invading, right?"

Gus nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, we Gargoyles're supposed to go fight them.

"Yeah."

"An' we're want to take you Golems with us to join in the fight."

The Golem's brow furrowed as it thought- it was an uphill battle because it literally had rocks for brains. And some moss for padding. Finally, the Golem seemed to understand. "I git to knock sum heads clean off?" Gus stood slowly, using a huge red oak club to help itself up. The club had been carved from the center of a massive oak tree, and then highly polished. There were several dents and gouges in it from years of heavy-handed use. Thick, black leather straps were interlaced down the handle to provide grip when dealing crushing blows. The straps were tied in a loop at the bottom that Gus had his wrist through. The eight inch spike stuck through the fattest end of the club seemed like overkill. "Yeah?"It said it reached his full seven feet of height. It hefted the four foot club onto its shoulder effortlessly.

"Oh, yeah," agreed Pollux.

The Golem smiled a broad grin. He seemed to have dominoes for teeth. Apparently his creator had a sense of humor; the double-twelve was front and center.

The Human approached Pollux warily. He had a dozen feet of inch-thick rope hung on his shoulder, another dozen or so trailed behind him. He slouched to one side as he walked. "This is the thickest we've got." He held up one end of the rope. "It's pretty new so it's nice and strong."

Pollux leaned in and looked at the rope. "That's perfect. Now tie some of it around my neck and cut off the rest. Then do the same to the others."

The soldier saluted again and proceeded to play out several feet of the rope. Pollux leaned his head in as the soldier looped it around the stone neck. He cut the remaining rope away and skillfully tied a water knot in it. "How's that?"

Pollux nodded, "That's a nice knot. Now do the others." He narrowed his eyes at the soldier to make sure the order would be carried out "And be quick about it."

True to the command, the soldier moved from Gargoyle to Gargoyle, tying a length of rope around each neck. Within minutes, the work was done. The soldier turned and looked expectedly at Pollux from across the courtyard. Pollux jabbed a thumb to his original location to show his work was done. The soldier saluted and returned (gladly) to his loafing.

Pollux casually looked around the keep. Soldiers were lying about here and there; no one seemed to have taken more than marginal interest in the rope-tying antics of the soldier. He made eye contact with the Gargoyles one at a time. Each nodded in response. Pollux was glad to see there was a Gollum standing by each one. "Ready, Gus?"

"Yeah."

Pollux nodded as he crouched down so the Golem could climb onto his back. Tossing his leg over Pollux's back, Gus swung into place. The Golem grabbed hold of the trailing end of a thick rope that had been tied around Pollux's neck and raised the club over his head. With a quick flip of his wrist, the rope twisted twice around it, securing him to his mount. He let out a snarl. "Clean off" he said.

Several soldiers turned to look at the unusual site; none had ever considered asking a Gargoyle to carry a Mark III Golem. They had heard of Mark IV

Golems that were used as mounted troops, but word was that they rode Wooly Buffalo- although none had never actually seen one do it. "Hey, you!" The Sergeant at Arms called down at the Golem, "Get off that Gargoyle! Most irregular, that."

"Nuts." Dejected, Gus began to swing his leg off.

"Stay put, Gus. We're going for a ride." Pollux cantered towards the gate, "Follow me!" He called as he broke into a gallop. Gus let go of his club, letting it clatter against Pollux's side as he frantically used both hands to hold onto the rope. Being a Mark III Gollum, this was something completely unfamiliar to him. Excitingly unfamiliar.

Pollux heard a commotion within the keep as he cleared the gate. No soldiers had been close enough to the portcullis to keep them from running off. He hazarded a look back and was rewarded to see several Gargoyles also bounding out. After a few moments, Pollux slowed to a trot, then stopped. He turned as his comrades approached him.

"What in the lands are we doing Pollux?" Asked Hefty- a large bearish looking Gargoyle. "They sure weren't too happy with us stealing their Golems you know."

Pollux smiled, "We'll bring 'em back. As soon as the battle's over."

"You were in on this, Castor?" Asked another Gargoyle - a stocky, wingless dragon. What it lacked in wings, it more than made up for with long talons and a spiked tail.

"Seems this battle gots my name written on it, Reuben." Castor shrugged. "It'd be impolite not t'show up."

The Gargoyles turned as a bugle was blown angrily inside Prost Garrison. "*That's* not a happy sound."

"They've two choices, really," began Pollux. "Stay put and wait for their Golems to be brought back or follow us to the battle." He looked at the keep. "I think they're hopin' we come back, 'cause I sure don't see anyone comin' out for us."

"I think Golem thievery is a hanging offence," offered another dragon-looking Gargoyle. This one was sleek with a long, slender tail and wings.

"Be serious, Nancy. It'd take all of them just to get you off the ground." Castor (as well as several others) chuckled.

Nancy's eyes widened- then narrowed. "Did you just call me heavy?" She unfurled her wings. Although they too were made of stone, they stretched out twenty feet each. The two-fingered claws at the leading ends opened and closed menacingly.

"No ma'am, I did not."

Unconvinced, Nancy eyed Castor. "I say we get going." Another bugle sounded inside the keep. "If nothing else, to get away from the racket."

The Golem on her back nodded. "Head bashin'," he suggested.

"Clean off," offered Gus.

"I'm with them," said Cerise- another stocky looking dragon. "Some good old fashioned Halfling bashing." She stood on her hind legs making the Golem on her back lean forward and wrap its arms around her neck. "That'll get the old blood flowing." She paused and smiled, "Figuratively, that is."

Reuben nodded back at her, "That's my gal." He looked at Pollux, "This is your show. Where we dealing with these Halflings?"

Pollux looked between his fellow Gargoyles, "I don't really know. I expected the soldiers at Prost to know where the battle was going on; that's why we went there." He looked back at the garrison. "I don't think they'll tell us now." He frowned, "I figured they'd be attacking Prost Garrison."

"Where else could they be? I didn't come all this way just to look at the scenery," objected a large goat.

The other goat nodded as well, "Not much to see out here anyway."

"Well Koza and Gafr, if they weren't coming to Prost, then they'd have to be attacking Frank's Keep, right?" Said Nancy. "So I say we head east from here until we find them." She flexed her wings, "Honestly, how hard could it be to find an entire Halfling army?"

The two lions nodded their approval. "Sounds good to us. Pollux?"

Pollux shrugged his massive shoulders. “That’s as good a plan as any.” He pointed with a stone claw, “East it is. It’s almost light now anyway, so they’ll be on the move soon.”

“I’ll see what I can do about spotting them from above.” Nancy beat her stone wings and lifted straight into the air. The Golem on her back howled in terror as he hugged her long neck. “East!” She called down as she flew a shaky circle around the group and headed off into the red-tinted sky. The Golem continued to howl as they left.

“I sure hope that Golem gets used to flying or she’s going to just dump him off,” said Reuben as he began to walk. He bumped his shoulder into his mate as he made his way, “Just like old times, eh love?”

Cerise nodded “Is there anyone else you’d want to fight beside?” She asked playfully- already knowing the answer.

“If you could see my heart you’d know it’s true. There’s none for me, Cerise, but you.” The two stout dragons took the lead in the group, brushing shoulders as they went.

“If you two start singing, I’m going to find my own battle,” warned Hefty. “It’s a battle, not a carnival you know.” He shook his head as the rest of them fell in step behind the pair.

Within half an hour, with the sky turning from its pre-dawn red to a daytime blue, Nancy swooped down on the group of Gargoyles. Her golem was missing. “Found them!” She said as she bellowed out her wings and landed.

“Where’s your golem?” Hefty asked.

Nancy smiled at him. “Hefty, you old softie, you. I sent him ahead to let them know we’re coming.” She pointed south, “They’re set up at Littlehorn, less than fifteen minutes from here and...”

Pollux nodded. “Nice work, Nancy,” he interrupted, “we can meet you there if you want.”

“You didn’t let me finish. They’re set up at Littlehorn. The Halflings are on their way there now. And from the looks of the dust cloud, there’s a lot of them.”

"How long 'til they get there?" Asked Castor.

"Less than ten minutes. They seem to be moving magically quick."

"Let's go then!" Said Pollux. Without waiting for the others, he turned and began to gallop towards the small cliff. The others quickly followed suit.

Nancy took to the air. "I'll go warn them," she said as she beat her wings to gain altitude.

Chapter Four
Little - Big Horn?

Earlier than that other earlier…

Captain Frank bolted down the steps two at a time. As he went, his remaining soldiers fell in behind him. "Let's get going men!" He commanded as he swung up onto his mount. "Head out to the Shambler Plains!"

Dutifully his men mounted their steeds and bolted from the Keep.

Captain Frank halted at the gate and looked up at the two brave Gnomes he had left behind. The rat was looking directly at him. "Head south to towards Littlehorn!" He shouted at the rat. "We'll be waiting there!" He pointed to make sure the rat knew he was talking to it. In the back of his mind, he was fairly sure that between it and the Gnomes, the rat was the smartest of the three. The rat pointed back, said something, then nodded. *Good; they know where to go.* He gave a thumb's up. "See you there!" He shouted as he turned and drove his horse through the portcullis.

Captain Frank rode across the drawbridge and almost headlong into his men. "Why are you stopped? The Halflings are coming!"

"Over all that racket we didn't hear a word you said, Sir," said one of the men. "Where are we supposed to go?"

The Captain pointed southwesterly, "I told you people; to Littlehorn. We'll hide out on the other side of it."

"Littlehorn? Where's that?"

Captain Frank exhaled angrily, "It's that little cliff that's not but three leagues southwest of here. It's practically along a straight line from here to where Aution used to be. It looks like a feather headdress from the south side." He pointed southwest to make sure the men knew the direction. "That way!"

"I know that place. It's called Littlehorn?" Asked another soldier, "I thought that was Bighorn."

A third soldier shook his head, "That's farther west of here towards Prost Garrison along the road. It's where sometimes bandits try to set up to attack people on the road because it gives them the high ground."

"I thought *that* one was Littlehorn."

Captain Frank shook his fist at the man, "Lieutenant, that's Bighorn!" He pointed westward. "Is that where you sent the soldiers?"

The Lieutenant shrugged, "I didn't tell everyone that, if that's what you're getting at."

"I know that a bunch of the soldiers said they knew where Littlehorn was and were heading south," offered the other soldier.

The third decided to just stay out of the conversation- he had never heard of either outcropping called those names. His parents had called them Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse - south and west respectively[4].

Captain Frank took a deep breath. "Fine. Fine. We need all the soldiers at Littlehorn." He pointed southwest. "So Lieutenant Paul, get over to Bighorn and round up any soldiers along the way to let them know that the Halflings are coming to Littlehorn. Got it?"

"The Halflings are coming. To Littlehorn. Got it, Sir," said the Lieutenant. He saluted smartly to emphasize the point. "Everyone to Littlehorn." With that he turned and rode westward.

Captain Frank turned his steed around and looked at his keep. "I hope those two can hold them off for a few hours. I don't mind saying, two Gnomes against the whole of the Halfling army isn't good odds at all." He gestured at the remaining two men, "Let's get going."

The three rode quickly- covering the leagues to the cliff in a matter of minutes. When they arrived, Captain Frank rode to the top of the cliff and looked down. To his relief there was a substantial amount of men loitering there. "What's the situation?" He called down hoping that someone had taken charge.

Chapter Five
Littlehorn It Is!

The Sergeant at Arms waved as he moved closer to the small cliff face, "Sir! I'm glad you're here. We've have a mix up in where the men were supposed to meet!"

Captain Frank held up his hand to silence his second in command. He pointed to one end of the small outcropping that stretched almost one hundred yards in either direction. The Sergeant at Arms nodded and began to jog in the direction his commander indicated. Captain Frank coaxed his horse into a gallop to meet him there.

Captain Frank rode to where the outcropping began to even out - it was still steep, but not so much a horse couldn't run down it. He circled back to where his Sergeant at Arms would be coming from and reached the out of breath man.

"Glad you came my way, Sir," said the man with a smile.

Captain Frank shook his head, "What a mess." He dismounted from his horse and let go the reins. The well-trained horse relaxed and began to graze. "How many men you have with you?"

The Sergeant at Arms looked back to where the men were sitting in the pre-dawn darkness. "About six hundred."

That was almost half again as many men as he had at the keep. "Six Hundred?" The Captain gaped at him, "Where'd you come across the extra men?"

The Sergeant at Arms shrugged. "When we got here, there was a group of men moving towards the Keep. They're from Julesville, Salt Flats, Jute." He paused for a moment, "Both Jutes, actually. It was by sheer luck too."

"How so?"

"The folks from the Jutes were heading to Prost Garrison and the folks from Julesville and Salt Flats were heading to us at the keep. They saw each other's torches and were here discussing…" He paused again. "Well, they were

arguing, really, where they should go when we got here. I just took control of them all not a little before you got here."

"How many of them are there?"

The Sergeant at Arms looked back at the group of men. "From the surrounding towns? About four hundred."

"Wait, so we're missing almost a hundred of our men?"

The Sergeant at Arms shrugged, "That's about right, Sir." He looked back at the men again. "They're all a little agitated. It might help if you talked to them," he suggested. His eyed widened. "I never made it up on the wall. How many Halflings we talking about?"

"Five thousand give or take."

The Sergeant at Arms took a step away from his commander. "What?"

Captain Frank nodded. "Yeah." He took his horse's reins and began to lead the animal as he walked with the Sergeant at Arms.

"How long you think we have before they get here?"

The Captain considered the question. "I can't imagine those Halflings will attack until daybreak, so if those two Gnomes can hold them off for an hour or so after that, we've got a good two hours before they storm the Keep. Hopefully a half hour to regroup, then probably a little less than an hour to cover the short three leagues here." He paused and considered that for a moment. "That is if they come in this direction."

The Sergeant at Arms whistled. "Around three hours to get this group working together?" He smiled at his commander, "You make that happen and they'll write songs about you."

Captain Frank put his hand on the other's shoulder, "I just hope we're around to hear them, Ollie."

The two soldiers approached the gathered men spread out in the shadow of the cliff.

"Let's see if we can get the men moving in the right direction." Captain Frank turned to address the men. They were dressed in various types of armor- the ones in armor- and seemed to be congregated in groups of ten to twenty.

Small fires had been started here and there. “Can I get everyone’s attention!” Captain Frank called out. “Everyone!”

The men turned and looked at the Captain. “Who are you?” Someone called out.

Captain Frank turned and mounted his horse. It not only provided a better vantage point to address them; it also gave him a little more authority. “I’m Captain Frank!” He shouted. His horse paced back and forth as he spoke, “It does my heart proud to see you all here ready and willing to protect your lands!”

Men here and there nodded; Captain Frank and his Keep were well-know. “How many Halflings are we dealing with?” It was the same man who had called out a moment ago.

“You have my name, Sir. Now give me yours.” Captain Frank said loudly. Having more than one person trying to lead the men in a crisis situation would have it spiral out of control quickly.

“The name’s Mink,” the man called back. “Head of the Civic Patrol for North and South Jute.” Many men around him nodded their approval.

Captain Frank breathed a sigh of relief; at least it was a professional he was speaking with instead of just a loud-mouthed foot soldier. He kept his voice high for the benefit of the rest of the men, “I’m glad you’re here Mink. We’ve got a lot to get organized and just a little bit of time to do it.” He narrowed his eyes at the man hoping he would realize why he hadn’t answered his question.

Mink nodded back. “Well, I can tell you this, Captain. The Jutes are here to fight!” He raised his sword in the air and a cheer erupted from the men around him.

Perfect thought Captain Frank. Having established leaders make things that much better. Now a knot developed in his stomach. *Hopefully the other towns have someone in charge I can talk to, to get orders out*. “Who’s in charge of the men from Julesville and Salt Flats?” He shouted.

There was a long pause as the men from the towns looked at each other. Finally, a man in - of all things- bright red armor stood, “I can speak for Julesville, if no one objects,” said Edward. Since most of the men had seen Edward in the bank, he was easily recognized. The bright red armor didn’t hurt either. Between that and no one else wanting to be in charge, no one else spoke up. Reluctantly, Edward stepped forward, “What’s the plan, Captain?”

Off to his right, a hulking mass of a man stood. He wore bear skins and carried a large double-bladed axe. He looked like someone had turned a Dwarf into a Giant to make him. "Joachim. I speak for Salt Flats!" He raised the massive axe into the air.

"Fine then!" Captain Frank called out, "let's have the leaders come up for a quick discussion while the rest of you men get something to eat and get your gear ready!" A thought occurred to him, "And get a good fire going!" More men stood and began to shuffle around as the appointed leaders made straight for him.

Captain Frank dismounted his horse as the three men approached him and the Sergeant at Arms. The Captain led them closer to the forty-ish foot cliff face, away from the men. "Gentlemen, this is Ollie, my Sergeant at Arms." The men all shook hands and exchanged greetings.

"Captain, now that we have that out of the way, how about answering my question," said Mink.

Captain Frank shrugged at the man, "About five thousand."

Joachim shifted his axe from one hand to another. "I'm not a scholar or anything. Far from it. But I know enough cipherin' t'know that we don' have that many men sittin' here in the shade o' this 'ere cliff." He looked at the Captain, "How many we got?"

"Six hundred or so," said Ollie. "But we've got another hundred coming from Bighorn and there's talk of Gargoyles from Prost," he added quickly.

"Don't think hund'ert gonna make any sort of difference."

"We have Gargoyles coming?" Asked Mink, "I know they don't get along with Halflings, so that's definitely a good thing. How many?"

Captain Frank shrugged, "I have no idea. I don't even know *if* they're coming." He looked up at the lightening sky. "But it'll be light soon and the Halflings will most likely attack then. If the Gnomes in my keep can hold them off for an hour, we've got about three until they arrive."

"So what's the plan?" Asked Edward. He looked around the group. They were all in steel colored armor. His was bright red; his security guard uniform. The contrast was glaring. *Who in their right mind would put their security in bright red? I'll be the first target they'll notice!!* Edward decided then and there that if he survived

the battle, his new security uniform would be a less obvious golden-tan, or even perhaps calming blue. He noticed the other men were looking at his bright red breastplate. When he spoke, their eyes raised to meet his.

"Well, this little cliff will be handy in keeping them from attacking from all sides," began Frank, "but what we need to do is bog them down." He pointed to one end of the cliff. If we till up that end of the cliff. "And if we have enough water wands, we can make a muddy mess out there for that side. If they get bogged down in that, our archers can pick them off pretty easily. If we have archers."

"That's a lot of 'ifs' in your plan, Captain," said Mink. "I have a few archers with me. Maybe a dozen. I know I've got a water wand and there's sure to be some others out there as well. Handy things."

The Captain nodded. He reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a deep blue wand. He handed it to Mink. "There's two to start with. Get going on that now. Your men will be responsible for that flank so they don't get around us."

"Don't?"

"Well, at least not as easily."

Ollie chuckled, "It's going to be a hell of a song, Frank." He slapped the hulking warrior on the shoulder, "Looks like it's you and me taking the other flank."

The Warrior nodded at Ollie. "They call me Tiny."

" 'Course they do," said Ollie, "let's go see what we can do about that far flank."

Edward self-consciously shuffled his feet. "Listen Captain, , I've got a few men and it's not like I want to be in charge, but there's not much I can do about it right now, so what do you want us to do?"

Captain Frank put his hand on the other's shoulder, "Hold the middle. If things look bad on one side or the other, send men there. You're the reserve force to fill in the gaps. That's the really important mission."

Edward raised an eyebrow at the Captain, "I know I'm in red armor and all, but that doesn't mean I'm an idiot" he said angrily. "This is my *work* uniform. I came as soon as I heard there was trouble." He shrugged from under the Captain's hand. "I'm here to help you know."

Captain Frank took a step back, "If the Halflings break through either side, we're surrounded. *Your* men will make sure that doesn't happen. It's *your* men that will make or break this battle." He put his hand back, "So don't think for a moment that I don't respect you for what you're doing, because I do." He smiled broadly, "But there's one thing you really should do first."

"What's that?"

"Rub some mud on that armor of yours or you're going to look like a porcupine before this is all over."

Edward shook his head, "Yeah, it looks pretty and official in the bank, but out here…"

Just then a Gargoyle swooped over the top of the cliff face. It flared its wings and settled as the men scattered from under it. "Who's in charge?" It asked loudly.

Captain Frank let go of Edward and ran to the Gargoyle. "I am…"

"Nancy"

"…Nancy. I hope you've brought some friends with you," he asked the large stone dragon expectedly.

"Well…"

A howl interrupted her.

The men all looked up as a Golem flew in an arc towards them, arms flailing as it fell. It landed in a heap beside her. It stood shakily and staggered back several steps. Men moved out of its way in case it fell over. "Flyin's bad," it said.

Nancy did a double take. "What took you so long?"

The Golem looked up at the sky. "Don't like bein' off the ground."

Murmurs moved throughout the men as news of the imposing reinforcements spread outward.

"Well," began Nancy, "there's nine other Gargoyles coming and each is carrying a Golem so you're up ten each in those categories. But there's a problem with that."

"What's that?" Asked Edward.

"They're still almost five minutes out."

"That's not so bad," offered Frank.

"Yeah, but the Halflings…"

Just then, a Shambler crashed into Nancy. Nancy didn't even budge as the Shambler bounced off and lay motionless. It's neck obviously broken. The Gnome on its back cartwheeled off and also landed in a heap.

"What in the lands?!" Exclaimed Edward.

"They're here!" Yelled Captain Frank as he drew his sword.

Soldiers stood and the Golem turned to look at the cliff. "Halflin's" it said just as hundreds of Halfling soldiers poured over it.

"Attack!" Captain Frank shouted as he drew his sword. It was the only plan, and the only order there was time for at the moment.

Or ever would be.

Chapter Six
Wherein the Big Battle of Littlehorn Begins

The Halflings poured over the top of the cliff, expecting a hillside on the other side. Instead, they found themselves falling just over forty feet straight down. Over two hundred Halflings fell to their deaths before the mass of soldiers changed course and pealed left and right around the decidedly lethal drop.[5]

"Guard the flanks!" Captain Frank called as he broke into a run, "Follow me, Jutes!" He called with Mink close behind.

"We got the other side," said Joachim as he prodded Edward, "stay sharp, Red."

Edward frowned as he turned to address his fellow Julesville volunteers. "Keep an eye out!" He shouted over the rising din. "If one side is having trouble, move there to help! Don't let them circle around us!" The men drew their swords and began to mill back and forth. As the Halflings encircled the small cliff, the men moved farther and farther back to engage them to keep them from circling back to the cliff face.

Nancy looked at her Golem, "Want to ride or fight on foot?"

"Flyin'?" It asked nervously.

"Yeah. That's what I do."

The Golem shook his head. He reached into the nearby fire and pulled out a four-foot log. "Nope," it said flatly as it hefted the still-flaming hunk of wood. "Stayin' down here." It pointed at the ground.

"Good luck to you," said Nancy as she unfurled her wings and took to the air with a swift downward stroke.

The Golem grinned widely as it moved forward to join the soldiers. Several men gave him a wide berth as he began to swing the flaming log with both hands, hurtling Halflings to and fro. Within two swings, even the Halflings gave the creature a wide birth. Or at least they tried to.

RatShambler came to as his neck popped back into place. The battle was raging around him. Everyone seemed to ignore the obviously dead Shambler. Gingerly he staggered to his feet. Bones popped and cracked as they moved back into position. "Drim!" He called as he scanned the area. There were Halflings, and unfortunately, Human and Dwarf bodies all around. "Drim!" He searched frantically for his friend. As just a beast of burden, neither the attacking Halflings nor the defenders paid him any mind; they both assumed he was a confused, riderless beast running to and fro as it searched for its rider. It was a fairly accurate assumption.

Captain Frank hacked and slashed as he stood his ground. He was well aware that every single soldier under his command would have to kill ten Halflings just for the battle to end in a draw. Unfortunately, he had seen many of his men die after causing far fewer -or no- casualties. To make matters worse, the battle had only been raging for five minutes. The man to his right, obviously not a soldier, already seemed to be tiring; his swings were far less enthusiastic. "Make sure you breathe!" He called to the men around him. "Move back if you need a moment, then get back up to replace someone else! Pace yourselves!"

He parried yet another thrust- for what they lacked in reach, the Halflings easily made up for in numbers. The story books were full of tales of a hero fighting hordes of villains who conveniently lined up to fight one at a time. Real battle was completely different; soldiers were surrounded and attacked from all sides. Often the wounding or killing blow came from an unseen foe. He spun madly as he fought; hoping to delay what he knew was the inevitable. Frank staggered back as the ground under him shook. He turned to see what sort of creature the Halflings had managed to bring with them- *Rhinoceroses perhaps*? Another Gargoyle crashed to the ground at the base of the cliff. Frank's spirits lifted as he turned to run to the reinforcements, batting swords out of his way as he went. Unable to get them all, a Halfling's thrust finally found its way between his breastplate and back plate, sticking in a full eight inches. Frank turned and staggered towards the Gargoyles as the blade pulled out leaving a trail of blood. His breath left him as he tripped back against a squat looking dragon. The Halfling advanced on the wounded Captain, so focused on finishing him off, he ignored the Gargoyle he was leaning against.

Reuben crashed down on top of the Halfling. "Gads! I hope that was one of theirs!" He said as he looked down at the unrecognizable heap under his feet.

"It was," gasped Frank. He reached around and used Cerise to steady himself.

"They need a sign up there," said Reuben. "*Damn*!" He stepped forward, "You in charge?"

Captain Frank put his hand to his side. Blood flowed between his fingers, "For a little while longer at least." He managed a smile.

"What've we got?" Asked Reuben. In battles, it was often difficult to tell friend from foe; armor was often procured after previous battles and was selected by serviceability, not by style. Often warriors on two sides of a battle wore identical armor making it difficult to know who was on whose side.

"Humans, Dwarves, couple of Half Orcs..." Frank's voice trailed off.

"What've they got?" The Gargoyle interrupted.

Frank nodded weakly. It was a better question. "Halflings, just Halflings. No Mercenaries in this group." His breathing became labored. "Glad you folks happened by."

Reuben was taken aback; it was a rare human indeed that didn't call Gargoyles 'beasts' or 'creatures'. He nodded at the man then stood on his hind legs, "Only Halflings!" He bellowed over the din of battle. "Cerise, get him to the wall, love. I'll meet you out there." With that, he turned and, with a roar entered the fight.

Cerise gingerly walked towards the cliff face. As they went she was alarmed that Frank held on less and less. "Hang on, dearie," she coaxed him. When she got there, she shrugged from under his arm. "Stay here. We'll be back for you once it's over."

Frank leaned against the stone then slouched down into a seated position, yet still managed a chuckle. "Sure. I'll just watch the show from here."

Cerise nudged him over so his injured side was down, "That'll make it easier to breathe. Just keep breathing, you!" She said as she too, turned to join the fray.

After several labored breaths, Frank disobeyed the nice Gargoyle he had just met.

Chapter Seven
Gargoyles, Gargoyles Everywhere, and Oh the Halflings Did Shrink

Nancy banked sharply and once again nosed down into the rear lines of the Halflings from three hundred feet up; at the front of the battle, the lines were so intermixed she dared not attack there; that was for the ground forces. She closed her wings tight against her body. No longer aerodynamic, she gained speed quickly- for all intents and purposes, a falling one-ton stone. Within twenty feet of the ground, she flaired her wings out wide and swooped in low. She left a forty-foot wide, fifty-foot long swath of destruction through the Halfling ranks. Most did not move after she plowed into them. The ones that did only thrashed on the ground after having been hit at shoulder-height by the leading edge of her stone wings at well over eighty miles per hour- an unheard of speed by anything but dragons, gargoyles and a handful of other flying beasts.

The Gargoyle flared her blood-stained wings and beat them down to regain altitude for another pass- what would be her third and probably her last; the Halflings were overrunning the defenders and soon it would be impossible to swoop down on only Halfling soldiers. Her wings strained as she fought for altitude to give her momentum. Foregoing the last hundred feet, she turned and began her dive. It was slower than her previous two, but time was of the essence. Closing her wings, she pointed her nose in the direction she wanted to go- even without her wings out, she could still guide her fall somewhat. Not nearly at the speed her previous dive, she nevertheless opened her wings wide and leveled out her flight at a mere two feet from the ground- legs tucked up tight lest they drag. As she cut the Halflings down she saw ahead and to her left, a Halfling turn and look wide-eyed at her. He was holding a large, granite battle hammer. *What an odd weapon for a Halfling* she thought. With no time to react, and too low to the ground to maneuver right or left, she braced for the impact of the turned Halfling. Instinctively, he brought up the hammer to shield his face. Nancy grimaced as the war hammer connected with the leading 'bone' of her wing just outward from her talon; where the wing tapered smaller significantly. As the spar of her wing broke, the unsupported wing around it shattered. Suddenly missing a full quarter of one wing, she dipped precariously on her left side. Even tucked in, her claw dragged on the ground, further pulling her down. She tucked in her wings and rolled through the Halflings. At least a dozen more were dispatched as she rolled through them like a one-ton barrel.

When she came to a stop she quickly raised her head. Directly above her was a Halfling. As Nancy turned her head, he raised a granite stone hammer, *Another one?* and swung it down at her. She flinched her head and caught the blow on her ear. The relatively delicate structure exploded into tiny fragments. In a rage she pushed her legs under her and stood as the Halfling wound up for another strike. Twisting her serpentine neck, she grabbed the Halfling in her mouth- legs on one side, arms and head on the other. He dropped the hammer as she bit down hard on his armor. A tooth broke. Then another. Finally the Halfling's spine gave way. She shook him several times to be sure he was done for, then tossed him at two other Halflings, knocking them to the ground. She moved over and crushed them before they could stand. With a roar she entered the battle, keeping an eye out for any hammer-wielding Halflings. She did not know it, but there were a total of four of them- brothers all. The other two had already been dispatched by Reuben.

But only after they had managed to cripple Cerise.

Pollux and Gus, with Castor beside, came barreling down the slope to the right of the cliff. After seeing their compatriots go over the edge, they had turned sharply, teetered on the edge, but managed to keep their balance as they turned. The other Gargoyles had gone left and entered the battle from the other side.

"When this is all over and done with, you know what's the first thing I'm going to do?" Castor called to his brother as they galloped along the cliff's edge.

"What's that?"

"Put a damned sign at the top of this thing!"

Pollux laughed heartily, "If Cerise and Reuben don't beat you to it first. You should'a seen their faces as they ran into clean air!"

Castor guffawed back at his brother.

"We there yet?" Asked Gus impatiently.

"Yeah," agreed Castor's Golem. "Bored."

"We're there, boys." The pair turned down the evening-out cliff and began down the steep hill to the battle. When they reached the bottom, the two skidded to a stop. "You want to ride or walk?" Castor asked.

"Walkin'" said Castor's Golem as he dismounted. He lifted his club high to one side and began a back and forth sweeping motion with it. The Halflings

before him were crushed as they were tossed in both directions. He waded into the fracas, oblivious to the numerous -ineffectual- stabs the Halflings delivered.

"Wanna ride" said Gus. He hefted his club and pointed. "Gonna knock heads clean off."

"Can't argue with that," said Pollux as he winked at his brother, "see you after the show." With that, Pollux bounded into the fray, swatting Halflings left and right with his paws and horns as we went. The Halflings around the pair moved away from the twelve foot tall conglomeration that was Pollux and Gus. Gus leaned out and began to conduct his own swatting. It was an unfortunate, gruesome twist of Fate for the Halflings that Gus' swings from atop the Gargoyle, seemed to meet Halflings at just about head-height.

Gus, on the other hand, was having the time of his life.

Fate looked over from where she was observing three travelers as they snuck through the mountains of Orcistan and nodded approvingly at the Golem.

Castor moved behind his Golem and began to bite off the numerous Halflings that seemed to be trying to scale it to reach its head in hopes of taking it down. Whether it noticed or not, or appreciated the assistance or not, was anyone's guess. Either way, the brothers and their Golems had a devastating effect on the Halflings.

Frantically, RatShambler moved back and forth around the battlefield. Only once was he stuck by a Halfling and he had rewarded it with a skull-crushing kick. Finally, a familiar-looking shoe sticking from under a pile of bodies caught his eye. He moved over to it and gingerly grasped the leg in his mouth and pulled. Drimblerod's motionless body appeared from under the dead Halflings and Humans. "Drim!" Said RatShambler, relieved as he grabbed the Gnome's leg and began to pull him towards the cliff face. The area had become an impromptu medical station. Although, in all actuality no one was being treated; it was more a pile of wounded and dying soldiers. The Halflings that had died falling from the cliff had been hastily pushed into a gruesome wall, providing a modicum of protection. If nothing else, it forced attackers to move to the gap in the barrier to gain access to the wounded.

As RatShambler dragged the Gnome, he slid past battling soldiers. At one point he seemed to back into a solid object. He turned to look and saw a Golem swinging a Halfling as a flail. One of the Golem's arms was missing at the elbow

and it's body was battered and missing several pieces. Even so, it continued to swing at opponents. It turned as RatShambler bumped into it, raising the Halfling high overhead.

"Stop! I'm on your side! I'm with Captain Frank!" Pleaded RatShambler as he prepared for what would be a devastating blow.

"Yeah?"

"Yes! We were at Frank's Keep. I'm trying to get my friend to the wounded at the cliff."

"That a Halflin'?"

"No, no! It's a Gnome."

The Golem turned and swung the Halfling at another Halfling sending both flying. The Golem looked at the leg still in his hand.

"Delberger's Foot!" Said RatShambler. Nothing else came to mind.

The Golem looked around, looking for another weapon. It crouched down and swung at a Halfling that wisely moved out of reach. There was a veritable calm in the storm around the Golem.

"Help me get my friend to the cliff! Please!"

"Kay." said the Golem as he picked up Drimblerod. By the legs.

"And don't swing him at anyone! He's a good guy!"

The Golem frowned. "Kay." Dejected, he trudged to the cliff face. Halflings moved even further from the Golem now that he appeared to be armed again.

When they reached the cliff, the Golem dropped Drimblerod. "Yeah?"

RatShambler, following close behind him, scooted behind the Halfling-corpse wall. There were dozens of men in the area. Several moaned as they tried to apply pressure to their wounds. There even seemed to be a Gargoyle that was missing a front leg lying against the cliff face. RatShambler looked back out into the battle and saw two Halflings approaching. Ostensibly hoping to dispatch all the unarmed wounded that were so conveniently gathered together. "Get those two Halflings, Mister Golem!" Commanded RatShambler.

Used to taking orders, the Golem turned to face the approaching Halflings. They spread out, swords at the ready. The one on his missing-arm side smiled. "Keep it occupied" he told his fellow Halfling.

The two approached warily as the Golem flexed his remaining hand. He looked from one to the other. Seemingly confused.

"Don't let them in!" Pleaded RatShambler. Behind him, to his great pleasure, Drimblerod moaned.

In a flash, the Halflings charged the Golem. The one on the Golem's 'armed' side feinting a strike as the other tried to slip past under its stump.

"Look out!" Warned RatShambler.

The Golem reached out and took the approaching Halfling by the head. Picking up the Halfling, he turned to swat at the other one with him. The other Halfling ducked as he moved behind the barrier. The Golem dropped the Halfling he was holding and then picked him up by the feet. While he did, the other Halfling advanced on RatShambler, weapon at the ready, "Stinking collaborator! Just you…" he began as he suddenly exploded into a dazzling display of blue light and gore.

The Golem held the lifeless Halfling up to his face to shield his eyes.

RatShambler turned back and gaped at Drimblerod. He was sitting up.

Drimblerod blinked as he tried to focus on RatShambler. Blood streamed down his face from a gash in his forehead. "Did I get him?"

"Yeah, you got him all right."

Drimblerod nodded then fell backward. "Good."

"Stay here and guard the wounded." RatShambler said to the Golem.

The Golem nodded. "Yeah."

For the rest of the battle, several dozen Halflings tried to get past the one-armed Golem to gain access to the wounded. None succeeded. While he stood guard, RatShambler busied himself by ripping clothing from the dead Halflings for the wounded to use as bandages.

Chapter Eight
Red Armor? Not the Best Idea
Sorry

Edward turned just as another Halfling tried to stab him in the back. Thanks to his armor, most of their attacks bounced off ineffectually. Unfortunately, *thanks* to his armor, every Halfling in the area seemed to notice the bright red man and decided they would be the one to take him down.

"Watch it, Red," warned Joachim as he savagely kicked a Halfling approaching Edward from his blind side. He dispatched the Halfling as it struggled to his feet with a swift downward slash. "Hate these guys!"

"Edward"

"How'd you know its name?" Asked Joachim as he slashed at another Halfling.

"*I'm* Edward. Name's not Red," panted Edward. The battle had been raging for over thirty minutes and he was severely out of breath. *It's a good thing bank robberies don't last this long.*[6]

A dozen men followed behind the two, hacking and slashing as they went, doling out far more punishment than they received. Even so, numbers were on the side of the Halflings; for every one that was cut down, several moved in to replace them. With the Humans, this was not the case. A large bear-looking Gargoyle moved into the open area in between the men. "You gents need a hand? Or two?" Asked Hefty as he reared up and flexed dish-sized stone paws.

Edward turned quickly to look up at the Gargoyle. "We'll take all we can get!" He said. As he looked back out, a Halfling thrust upward with his sword, trying to get it above Edward's codpiece and under his breastplate, into his vulnerable abdomen. Instead, it skidded up the breastplate and jabbed him under the chin. Edward's head flinched back as the sword tip made its way into his mouth. He kicked out harshly, catching the Halfling in the face. Its nose crushed under his boot as it fell back. For a moment, its sword hung from Edward's chin, then dropped off. A torrent of blood poured out from his chin and out his mouth. Edward staggered back as a man caught him.

Hefty stepped forward and swatted the Halfling as it started to get up. He looked over at Edward. To his relief, the man was still standing on his own. "That's gonna leave a scar with character," he said with a stony grin. "You all right?"

Edward shook his head to clear the fog. He spat out a mouthful of blood, then chuckled. "Great, now I'm even *brighter* red." Blood continued to stream down his chin and neck. "My wife's going to kill me."

The men around him all laughed as they continued to slash at the Halflings. "You're a nut, Edward" said Joachim as he swung his axe in a broad stroke in front of him. With the mood lightened, the group fought their way through the Halflings. Suddenly, they were surprised to not have any Halflings in front of them- having moved through the entire force.

"Back towards the cliff then?" Asked Hefty. He looked down at Edward. The bleeding had only slowed a little and now the man's eyes darted back and forth. He seemed to be in shock. "You want a ride?"

Edward looked up at the Gargoyle, "I think I'm fine down here." He smiled a bloody smile.

"Laddie, if a Gargoyle offers you a ride, and you're bleedin' like a stuck pig, you take it." Joachim pushed Edward towards Hefty, "Get on there so we can start back." He gestured with his axe at the ongoing melee. "We're missin' out."

Hefty crouched down as Edward clambered on. "Grab the rope and start swinging," offered Hefty.

Edward looked down at the rope. There was a puddle of blood on it from when he looked down at it. He wrapped the free end of the rope around his arm several times. "I'll scrub this off when we're done," he said, "I promise."

"Ya better!" Warned Hefty as he moved to the front of the formation. "Here we go!" With that the group made their way back into the fracas leaving a wake of dead and dying Halflings as they went.

Reuben turned and charged into another group of Halflings. Since his beloved Cerise had been cut down, he had been ruthlessly dispatching Halflings on his own. He crushed three Halflings who were looking the other way- they were working together to bring down a Half-Orc wielding a double-balled flail.

"Tanks!" Said Pike as he turned to engage another Halfling.

Reuben nodded in return. As he stomped over the dead Halflings he almost ran headlong into another Gargoyle. "Ri! Doin' all right?" There was a bloodied soldier on his back as well. He didn't look better off than Edward.

Ri shook his massive head, "Brenin's down."

"Brenin too?"

Ri narrowed his stony eyes, "What ya mean *too*?"

"Cerise is down."

"For good?"

Reuben shook his head, "Lost a leg. Brenin?" He asked anxiously.

"Front legs. I told him to lay still so they don't pound him into dust. Koza and Gafr are still causing trouble"

Reuben bit down on a Halfling and spit out the remains. "Those two old goats'll give them what for. How you doing up there, soldier?" He asked the man on Ri's back.

"I think we're winnin'," said the soldier. His eyes were glassed over and he barely held onto his sword.

"Well, thanks to soldiers like you."

The soldier didn't seem to hear him. "I think we're winnin'," he said again. His sword fell from his grip. "There'll be songs, so says the Captain."

As if on cue, the two stone goats plowed through with their heads down, bloody horns thrashing back and forth as they went. There was an impaled Halfling helmet on one of Koza's curved horns. Its former owner's head was still in it. "Stinkin' Halflings!" Koza called over his shoulder as he went.

Ri nodded as he raked sharp granite claws across an approaching soldier. "Hope no one goes down for good." He cleaned his claws on the downed soldier. "Wanna stick together?"

Reuben nodded as he turned beside the lion. "Let's go."

The two stepped over and around piles of corpses as they began to look for more targets. After a moment, realization struck. “Where’re all the Halflings?” Asked Ri.

Reuben looked around. Here and there, he saw an individual Halfling sparring with two or three Humans, and one vainly trying to defend against a Golem who was trying to grab him. The Golem finally managed to reach down and gasp the Halfling. He squirmed in its grip, repeatedly stabbing it in the forearm as it picked him up. With a grunt, it heaved the Halfling a good hundred yards. The soldier spun head over heels, cart-wheeling as he went. It landed on a very large pile of fallen Halfling soldiers, it remained still- the area had apparently been the Golem’s target for most of the battle. The Golem nodded with approval and turned to search out more projectiles. He smiled a broad smile- metal spoons for teeth gleaming in the sun.

“Gads, Reuben, I think we won.” Ri looked left and right. There were no more moving Halflings around them. Fifty yards away, he spotted Hefty. There was a soldier slumped over on his back. Hefty looked in their direction and began to walk gingerly toward them. The soldier swayed dangerously as he went.

Reuben and Ri moved toward their friend. “Hefty, I think we won,” said Reuben when they were close to each other.

“Told ya,” said the Soldier. “Next come the songs.”

Reuben nodded, “Yeah, I think we did. Any of us down?” He looked around, “For good?” He added nervously.

The other two Gargoyles shook their heads, “Not as far as we know,” said Ri. “Let’s find the others.” He looked at the Human on his back, “I think that fellow needs some medical attention.” The front of the Sergeant at Arms was smeared with blood- unfortunately mostly his own. His head lolled back and forth. Even so, he kept a grip on the rope to stay in place. “Head back to the cliff and we’ll keep an eye on him.”

With that, the two Gargoyles moved to each side of their friend, walking close so that if the soldier did fall over, it wouldn’t be to the ground. As they approached the cliff face, a Golem stepped forward to block their path. It was covered in blood and missing an arm. In the other it held a length of rope. Tied to the end was a bundle of helmets- an impromptu flail. Judging from the damage to the helmets and amount of blood on them, a well-used impromptu

flail. It looked from the Gargoyles up to the bloodied soldier and back down. “Is we winnin?”

“Yep,” said the soldier groggily. “Songs come next.”

Chapter Nine
The Best Laid Schemes of Halflings and Mercenaries Go Awry

"CONSCRIPTS!" Bellowed the Lord High Priest. He was on his knees, peering into the mouth of the Goat of Scrying. Furious.

"Caw!" Screeched the crow. "Disaster! Disaster!"

"Shut *up!"* Snarled the Lord High Priest. He turned to stand as two conscripts approached, "You, get this goat out of here and down to my royal coach," he pointed at one of the Halflings. "You go get my armor!" He commanded the other. Without waiting for them to even acknowledge him, he turned and shouted back into his chambers, "Guards!"

The clattering of armor let him know they were on their way. He spun around, "Bert!"

"Ya?" Squawked Bert, "whatayawant?"

The Lord High Priest narrowed his eyes, "I want you to go to that cursed town with the windmill and find out who is responsible for this catastrophe."

"Now?"

"Yes, go now!" He pointed at the open window, "Away with you!"

The crow did a circle of the room, cawing as he went and flew out the window just as two guards entered. There was an Acolyte close behind them.

"Lord High Priest," said the guards as they bowed. "What is your bidding?"

The Acolyte skipped the pleasantries. "There's no time Lord High Priest. We've got trouble."

"Trouble?"

"There's talk of a bobbing."

"A bobbing? Who's talking about the Rite of Bobbing?"

The guards looked from the Acolyte to the High Priest and back as they spoke.

"Everyone. Most everyone. It's time to get going."

The Lord High Priest clenched his fists. "Abdicate?" He looked around the room that had been his sanctuary and source of great wealth for the past five years. "Blast."

"We need to go before the Pool of Reflections is filled and blessed, Lord High Priest."

Lord High Priests were elected for life. The process of choosing a new Lord High Priest had been in place for almost five hundred years- prior to that, Lord High Priests put *themselves* into the position. Usually with the backing of whatever army they put together. During a long period of peace, an especially pious Lord High Priest declared that their election should be left to the hands of gods as opposed to the swords of mortals and The Rite of Bobbing was established.

When time came to elect a new Lord High Priest, the Pool of Reflections - a pool thirty feet long, wide, and deep - was emptied and refilled with fresh water, then blessed by a priest. All prospective acolytes were taken to the pool, tied to a large weight with identically tied knots. The stone was then lifted over the center of the pool and dropped in. The first acolyte to bob to the surface was believed to have had their hands guided by the gods, and therefore the new rightful Lord High Priest. All those that bobbed up afterwards were offered the chance to become the new Lord High Priest's personal acolytes and guards. The ones that didn't surface had obviously been found not worthy of either position by the gods and allowed to drown, opening positions for others to fill. The rules were simple, and obeyed by all. The only other rule was that there could never be a Rite of Bobbing while there was a Lord High Priest still in power.

It was a simple and time-tested method of election, and had, on only one occasion required a Holy Do-Over when an entire crop of acolytes apparently found disfavor from the gods.

"How soon until the holy pool is empty?"

"Within the hour, Lord High Priest. We should leave now. They've even started the ovens for the celebration." Following the selection of the new Lord High Priest and establishment of his personal acolytes and guards, an empire-wide celebration was held. At the pool, there was drinking and merry making,

and thanks to having to empty the holy pool that was stocked with trout and bass, plenty of fish to fry.

The guards looked at the Lord High Priest anxiously. The three standing before the Lord High Priest were the only other survivors from his Rite of Bobbing.

"Our bags are already packed," said the Acolyte. "All of ours." He gestured at the two guards.

"Fine, fine. I'm glad to have you with me." He smiled a genuine smile. "Grab anything else you think we'll need and meet me down at my royal coach in half an hour. I'll settle up here."

With a quick bow, the three left the Lord High Priest alone. With a howl of rage, the Lord High Priest kicked his chair over. "Blast!" He looked around the room. Over the course of five years, he had accumulated quite a number of important and religious items. He moved to his closet and pulled out a large cloth sack. Quickly he moved around the room selecting important and religious items that held the greatest meaning for him. They were all made of gold.

Dropping the bag to the ground, he took a second bag and shoved clothes in it until it would barely close. Tying it shut, he dragged it to the first bag. "Conscripts!"

Dutifully (he was still Lord High Priest, after all) two conscripts entered his room. "Yes, Lord High Priest?" Asked one.

"Pick up my bags and follow me," he commanded. Without looking back, he stormed out of his holy chambers, stopping only to pick up one last statuette of a Wooly Shambler. A gold one.

"Where are we going, Lord High Priest?" Asked the conscript carrying the clothes bag- the other was straining too much with the weight of his bag to speak.

"To my royal coach. If you want to come, you are welcome. Otherwise..."

"Sire?"

"You can stay behind."

The Conscript let out a relieved sigh. "I think I'll go along with you, if that suits you, Lord High Priest."

"That it does. I have a certain Gnome to kill and I want to make sure it gets done this time."

"As you wish, Lord High Priest".

The other Conscript managed only a grunt of approval.

The trio made their way to the lowest levels of the castle, having to stop twice to allow the Conscripts to swap bags. Finally, at the door to the holy stables, the Lord High Priest turned to the two sweating Conscripts. "We're leaving here today and nothing is going to stop us. If anyone gets in our way, we cut them down. Understand?"

"Yes, Lord High Priest," the two said. "We're with you all the way."

With a curt nod the Lord High Priest lifted the latch on the door and pushed it open. He stepped into the room. "Let's get going before...," he began. His acolyte and two guards were sitting on the floor, shackled. Around them stood a dozen guards and the General of the Army.

"I demand you release my servants and allow us passage. I am on an official mission of extreme importance."

"Don't be a Grimbledung," said the General. He looked at his men, "Let's get this over with; I want to be cleaned up and back in time at least for the fish fry."

With hardly a word, the soldiers pounced on the Lord High Priest and the two hapless acolytes. Thanks to their training and efficiency, they all made it back in time to see the new Lord High Priest bob to the surface.

He wasn't any better than the last one.

Chapter Ten
The Quick (Wounded) and the (Slow) Dead

The Golem stared expectedly at the Gargoyle, waiting for an answer.

"I think so," said Hefty. "You look like you could use some work though."

The Golem nodded as it looked down to examine itself. "Yeah."

"You should take a break," suggested Reuben.

"Yeah," agreed the Golem. It sat down roughly but still did not let go of the rope.

RatShambler moved beside the Golem, "Bert here has been keeping the wounded safe." He nodded toward the resting Golem, "And doing a fine job of it if I don't mind saying so."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, Bert." RatShambler nudged the Golem. "Take a break for a little bit. You've earned it."

The Golem dropped the end of the rope over his lap, finally letting go of it. "Yeah."

"Do we even have any doctors here?" Asked Reuben.

RatShambler shook his head, "Not a one. I've been passing out bandages, but that's about it. They're mostly helping each other." He paused as he looked back, "The ones that are able." He looked at Reuben, "We really need to get these folks some help. What's closest to us here? I wasn't paying attention how far I ran."

Reuben shrugged, "Frank's Keep is not three leagues north of here."

At the sound of the name of the keep, the Sergeant at Arms startled awake. "Where's Captain Frank?" He slurred through blood-encrusted lips.

"We'll find him," assured Reuben.

"I haven't seen him, if that helps," lied RatShambler.

"That's a good sign," Ri agreed unknowingly. "Let's get these soldiers down so we can move out and see what we can see." He turned and put his forelegs on Hefty's back.. "Sergeant, let go of the rope and I'll get you down". He said as he nuzzled his head under the soldier's arm. "You're next," he said to Edward.

Groggily he unwound the rope from his hand and slouched over onto the stone lion. "I think blue armor. Blue armor is the way to go," he said weakly with a chuckle.

"Our favorite soldier in red is changing his colors?" Asked Reuben, looking at Edward.

When Edward was settled on the ground, the three Gargoyles spread out to search for and retrieve other survivors, enlisting their fellow Gargoyles as they went.

RatShambler looked back at the men. There were only about fifty of them alive. The sad fact was that even if they fell injured in battle, the Halflings did not grant reprieve and just finished them off. It was only those that could move to the safety of the base of the cliff on their own, or were dragged by a friend, that survived. "We need to do something."

Tiny stepped forward, "I say we put them on horseback and take them all back to Frank's Keep. There's a doc there, right?"

The Sergeant at Arms stood shakily. "There was. Everyone's scattered. There's no telling where Doc Liston is. Old Bobby is pretty light of foot." He paused and smiled, "And knife, of course." He looked at Tiny through hazy eyes, "An empty infirmary won't help them."

"Then Prost," offered RatShambler. "It's the next closest then."

The Sergeant at Arms shook his head, "We're a long way from Prost. A long way . These men can't survive the trip there." He pointed at the grouping of horses two hundred yards away. "Those beasts are useless."

"Well we have got to get these soldiers some medical attention," snapped RatShambler. "Or all we've done is help pile them up while they wait to die!"

The Sergeant at Arms crouched down, "I agree with the Shambler. I'm of a mind to have a seat myself. As Sergeant at Arms of Frank's Keep, I duly grant myself a day off." He sat back roughly on his behind. The jar caused the wound

in his side to begin to leak anew. "Maybe tomorrow too," he added as he looked down. "Just in case."

"It's a good thing you can give days off," offered RatShambler, trying to raise his spirits.

"Days off, town passes, promotions. All the important stuff."

RatShambler perked up, "Say, recruiting isn't one of the jobs of the Sergeant at Arms, is it?"

Ollie looked up at RatShambler, "Want to enlist? Didn't think I should try a recruiting pitch right after a battle, surrounded by casualties, but I'll take ya." He smiled weakly. "Your well-spoken for a Shambler" he slurred.

RatShambler shook his head, "That's not what I meant." He moved beside the Sergeant at Arms. "Back in town we have this constable…"

"Akita? Scary fellow."

Tiny moved forward and pressed a cloth against the man's side. The Master at Arms flinched as he did so but didn't stop him.

RatShambler shrugged, "He's not so bad once you get to know him."

Ollie just looked back at the Shambler.

"And he has this wand that he uses to send people away. When my friend got killed," RatShambler paused for a moment, "a couple of different times, he would send him to Prost Garrison for the doc there to fix him up."

"Doc Brown"

"That's his name?"

Ollie shrugged, "In Common it is. In his native tongue, it's Marone. I call him 'Brown' just to push his buttons. You know this one time I was up there picking up a young troop, he was ranting about needing a goat to look down at the future. Or up the back at the past."

Tiny shook his head, "He's losing it."

"Something like that anyway."

"Fine, fine," RatShambler interrupted the increasingly delirious soldier. "What I was getting at is the Constable has this wand that he uses to send people to Prost Garrison."

Ollie groggily reached into his belt and pulled out a wand as he now interrupted RatShambler, "Got one imbued like that myself." He pointed toward the wounded men with it. "Hadn't occurred to me," he mumbled.

RatShambler gestured towards the wand. "Someone get that wand and start sending all the wounded to Prost Garrison!"

Joachim stepped forward, "I can do that. I've used a teleportation wand before." He reached for the wand. "If you'll loan me your wand for a moment, Sergeant, I'll get these men some care," he said softly. He held out his hand, not wanting to startle the obviously groggy Sergeant At Arms.

The Sergeant at Arms nodded knowingly as he held the wand out for the other soldier. "Have at it." When the wand left his hand, he passed out.

"Him first, I should think." Joachim pointed the wand at the now unconscious sergeant.

"Wait!" RatShambler moved in between the two. "Wait, you can't just send him."

"Listen Shambler, you just said to send everyone there," protested Tiny as he cradled the now unconscious Master at Arms. "What's the issue?" He snapped.

"Well, we can't just send a bunch of injured soldiers to Prost Garrison out of the blue without first sending someone who can be in charge on that end."

Joachim opened his mouth then closed it.

"Send me over," suggested Tiny.

Reuben nodded, "Send the two of us." He stepped close beside the still kneeling Tiny. "With our size, we will get things going on the other end." He looked at the large human. "It'll only take us a moment to make sure they're amenable to the deal."

Joachim nodded as he leveled the wand at the two of them.

Ziggy, Zaggy!

Ziggy, Zaggy!

Prost! Prost! Prost!

He intoned.

In a flash, the two were gone.

"Right, now let's get the most injured first," suggested Joachim. He looked around at the numerous wounded men. A sigh escaped him. "Or I can just start here and work my way down." With that he aimed his wand at the men and prepared to send them to Prost Garrison as quickly as he could. "What should I give them? A count to a hundred maybe?"

"That's probably as much as we can spare," said RatShambler.

And so, after a count to a hundred, Joachim began to send soldiers as quickly as he could to Prost Garrison.

After half an hour, thanks to the Gargoyles and soldiers dragging all the wounded to the base of the cliff, the only remaining ones were uninjured soldiers, Gargoyles, and Golems. As well as Drimblerod and RatShambler.

RatShambler looked at the smoking wand in Joachim's hand. "I think that thing's done for."

Joachim nodded, "Well, that got all the wounded there. What should we do about the dead?" He looked around.

"Leave the Halflings to the scavengers, but not our men," said Hefty.

"Agreed," said Joachim. "Let's get everyone on horseback and head to Prost. By the time we get there, they should be done with the injured and we can see what they can do about these folk." He gestured at the three hundred or so dead. While Joachim had been transporting the wounded to Prost, the remaining soldiers had busied themselves with retrieving the horses from the impromptu corral. And moving the dead into piles. He turned to address the men, "Let's get the dead on horses…" he realized there were more dead soldiers than horses. A

great deal more, in fact. He pointed at the several trees in the area. "Let's get some travoises lashed together. We're not leaving anyone behind. Everyone goes as best we can," he continued, "and we'll get them to Prost Garrison as quickly as possible." He looked around. It was an almost impossible task. *There's too many of them. Curse the god that created Halflings, there's too many.* "Strip the dead!" He commanded.

Several men closest to him gaped. "Sir?"

"The weight of their armor will mean less can fit on a horse or a travois. Naked and alive is better than clothed and left for the buzzards!"

The men nodded in agreement.

Dutifully the men began the task of lashing frames together, tying them to horses and loading them with four or five corpses each. Two -and sometimes three smaller fighter thanks to having no armor- were strapped to the horses that weren't strapped to a travois. As they went, soldiers were even added to those horses.

"While you're doing that, I think we're going to make for Julesville," said RatShambler.

"You're not taking him to Prost?" Joachim pointed at Drimblerod. He still had a dazed look in his eyes but the bleeding had, for the most part, stopped.

"We've got a doctor in Julesville and we really need to let someone know about Grimbledung."

"Grimbledung?"

"He's the other Gnome's partner. They were holding the Halflings off at Franks' Keep while the soldiers got in position out here."

"What happened to him?"

"He fell."

"I'm sorry to hear about your friend's death." Joachim offered. "I wish we could have gotten to him."

"Oh, he's not dead. Hopefully he's not dead." RatShambler shook his fur. "He fell off the wall and the Halflings carried him off. If we've any chance of

rescuing him before they get him to Halfling City, we need to get a raiding party together."

Joachim nodded. "I understand wanting to go after your friend. I wish there were some way we could help."

"Think that wand can wrangle out a Gazzelitis spell?"

The man looked down at the smoldering wand. There was smoke coming out of its hilt and a crack had developed in its shaft. "Not a full charge. Sending those Gargoyles over really finished it off. I could maybe give you a good half hour, three quarters, tops."

RatShambler nodded, "That'd get us almost there."

Joachim raised an eyebrow at the animal.

"Remember, I can still run as fast as a Shambler." He nodded towards the Golem, "Especially since he was kind enough to pull that arrow out of me. Plus I'm not pulling a wagon this time."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Joachim pointed at Drimblerod, "He's kind of woozy. We're going to have to lash him down."

RatShambler nodded. "Then let's get this going. We've got a friend to find." He crouched down as two men commandeered Bert's rope and lashed Drimblerod to his back.

"That should about do it. Ready?"

RatShambler nodded at the man. "Thanks for your help."

"No, thank *you* and your Gnome friends. I owe you a couple of drinks some time down the road."

"Deal" RatShambler smiled a toothy grin. "On your marks." He crouched down as if he were ready to start a sprint.

Joachim raised the wand

Swifter than Eagles.

Faster than a bear!

Some Gazzelitis will get this Shambler there!

He intoned.

"Nice."

Joachim didn't respond lest he damage the incantation. Instead, he slashed the wand at RatShambler. A dull gold glow infused into his legs.

"Whoo hoo!" Said RatShambler as he sprung forward at incredible speed.

An hour and a half later, RatShambler was galloping into Julesville. Drimblerod had thrown up twice along the way.

On RatShambler.

Back at the cliff, Joachim looked around at his men. Many were kneeling near a dead soldier, prepared to pick them up personally. *All of the dead are going home.* He sighed with relief. "Excellent work. Relay my thanks to all the men," he said. "Let's get to Prost Garrison and see how things have fared there."

Chapter Eleven
Drimblerod and RatShambler
Return to Julesville

RatShambler galloped into Julesville –at his normal, non-magical pace. Drimblerod had begun to stir in the last few minutes but had not regained consciousness enough to even complain about being tied down. It was only midday yet the streets were deserted; everyone was fully expecting the Halfling army to overwhelm Captain Frank's forces and then, roll over the town as well. He looked left and right then decided to go to Big Julies'; not only was she in charge of the town, she invariably had a plan of action that was worth doing.

As he got to the door of the windmill, he paused and looked at the two empty pedestals where the Gargoyles had been perched for so long. He had seen at least two Gargoyles succumb to the blows from a dozen Halflings but wasn't sure what it really took to kill something made of stone. *I hope they can just put them back together again.*

With a sigh, he banged his hoof against the door. After a few moments, he stepped back and looked up at the structure. "Hello!"

After another long pause, he snorted and moved towards the cafeteria. "Should have gone here first," he said to the deserted street. When he got to the door, he lowered his head and pressed against the swinging doors. They were locked. Once again, he hit his hoof against the door. Harder than before. "Hello!"

"That you Rat?" he heard a voice from behind the door.

"Yes, it's me!"

"Who else with ya?"

"I've got Drimblerod and he's hurt. Open the door and go get Julie!" He hit his hoof against the door again. Even harder.

RatShambler could hear several hasps being drawn back. Finally, the door pulled open. A young Dwarf stuck his head out and looked around. "No one else?"

RatShambler pushed past the student-cum-guard. “Guthrie, go get the doctor and make it quick,” he said to the youth as he entered the main cafeteria.

“Lunchtime?” Murmured Drimblerod as he looked up. “I’ll just have something light.” His head slumped down again.

“Julie! Klank! Bonk! ANYONE!” RatShambler called as he moved back and forth.

Julie burst through the door to the room above the cafeteria. “Rat!” She took the stairs two at a time. “I was so worried! Is everyone...” Her voice trailed off as she saw Drimblerod lashed to his back. Her eyes got wide. “Is he...”

RatShambler shook his head, “No. I sent your door guard for the doctor. He’ll be all right. The problem’s with...” RatShambler’s voice warbled.

“Where is Grimbledung?”

RatShambler lowered his head. “He fell.”

“He’s dead?” Julie staggered back and sat on a stair. “How?”

“He fell from the wall of Frank’s Keep.”

Julie wrung her hands together. “The fall killed him?”

RatShambler raised his head as he realized what Big Julie was asking. “No, Julie, that didn’t... He’s not dead.”

“Not dead?”

“At least not yet.”

Julie stood back up.

“Where is Grimbledung?”

“He fell off the wall and the Halfling’s got him. The last time Drimblerod saw him, they were carrying him away as their prisoner.”

Julie sat back down again. “That’s probably worse.”

RatShambler nodded. “Listen, Julie. I don’t want to be indelicate here, but,” he gestured with his head towards Drimblerod. “I’d really like to get him off me.”

Julie nodded as she moved beside him and started to untie the ropes. Her hands recoiled. "Oh my."

"Yes. He had a little accident or two on the way here."

"I'll get a couple of buckets of water and meet you out front," suggested Julie.

"I would appreciate that." RatShambler turned and pushed his way through the swinging doors. When he got to the street, he saw the Dwarfling leading the town doctor in his direction. He let out a sigh of relief. A wave of exhaustion washed over him. He sat back on his haunches. The doctor made it to him just as Julie pushed past the doors sideways with two very large buckets. Water sloshed out of them as she waddled toward them.

The doctor moved to RatShambler. "Don't work on beasts."

"I'm just the means of delivery, Doc. The patient is lashed to my back." He eyed the doctor. "Beast?"

The doctor shrugged. "Four legs bad, two legs good. That's my rule."

"What about Minotaur? And Golems? And Trolls?"

Now the doctor eyed RatShambler. "Oh my. Shouldn't you be mute? Never heard of a talking Shambler before."

"I'm usually a rat."

"Right, because that explains everything." The doctor shook his head and moved to RatShambler's side. "Well, looks like this fellow was well fed." He looked at Big Julie. "Might I relieve you of one of those buckets?"

"Here you go doctor. I'll go find some students willing to give Rat a good bath and brushing."

The doctor shrugged. "If that's what you want to do."

"You don't have much of a bedside manner, Doc."

The doctor didn't look at RatShambler as he examined Drimblerod. "Quiet animals. That's what I like," he muttered as he took a step back and heaved the bucket at Drimblerod. Not letting go of the handle, the water sloshed at Drimblerod with a bit of force. It hit him from the waist up, washing off most of

the vomit. Without ceremony, he dropped the bucket and repeated the process with the other one. "Good enough," he remarked. "Now..." He leaned in close and began a thorough examination of the Gnome.

After a few minutes, Big Julie came out with several students in town. "Got a crew to get you looking sharp, Rat." She paused. "Wouldn't it be better if they washed you as a rat?"

"No Grimbledung."

"Drat. Sorry, Rat. I wasn't thinking." She turned to the students. "This fine animal is a very good friend and he's been through a lot, so if you would walk him over to the stables and give him a good scrubbing and brushing, I'd be most appreciative."

The students - four of them- nodded. "Sure thing Miss Julie," said another Dwarfling.

"So do you give them extra credit for doing this? Like maybe to their house or something?"

"House?"

"Yeah, you know; you sort the students when they arrive into different houses so they compete against each other for different things. Earn credits and demerits. That sort of thing."

"Right, because I don't have enough problems with bullying and cliques without making up my own reasons to have them torment each other right from the start." She shook her head. "I can't imagine that working out well. Former heads of rival houses showing up, causing problems, trying to take over the place. Kids would get hurt. Or worse."

"You two done discussing how schools should be organized and want to hear what I have to say?"

"Sure, Doc, sorry."

"You know that's not my name, right?"

"What?"

"My name's Bernard. You keep calling me Doc."

"Well, you are a doctor. I was just shortening it to be amicable."

"Should I just call you Head then?"

Big Julie frowned. "What's the prognosis, Bernard."

"Broken arm. Broken leg. Both the left ones. Some ribs seem kind of squishy. Head seems okay though."

"So nothing too serious then. That's good to hear."

"Well, a broken leg can be fatal. Lots of veins in there that can get cut by broken bones. Folks bleed out on the inside and you never see it coming. It's a good thing he was tied down tight."

Big Julie blanched. "Gads!"

"Don't worry, *Head*. I can take care of your friend."

Big Julie narrowed her eyes at the doctor. "You know, I know this really big guy who'll do pretty much anything I want..."

"What? He gonna beat me up?"

"He'll stuff you under the foundation of one of the buildings he's putting up here in town." Big Julie gestured around. "Lots of construction going on. Plenty of foundations going in, *Bernard*. So get my friend back together and send me the bill. And be quiet about it."

"Quiet as a beast," offered RatShambler.

The doctor harrumphed as he dropped the bucket. He drew a dagger with one hand and a wand with the other. "Cut him loose as I keep him stable. I'll float him over to the clinic nice and steady like." He offered Big Julie the dagger hilt first and aimed his wand at Drimblerod. With a flick of his wrist, Drimblerod lifted slightly off of RatShambler. "Ready."

Big Julie cut the ropes holding Drimblerod in place. "All set. Kids? Can you take care of this mighty Shambler?"

"Will you tell another tale of high adventure while we're washing you?" Asked Guthrie.

"That I can."

With squeals of delight, the kids and RatShambler trotted towards the stables. “I’ll catch up!” Said Guthrie.

“Here you go Doc. Please take care of my friend. He’s been through a lot.” She flipped the dagger over in her hand and offered it back hilt first.

Out of habit, the doctor wiped it on his pants before putting it back in its sheath. “I’ll have him up in a couple of days. One if he’ll be willing to use a crutch.”

Big Julie nodded at the man. “Good.” She noticed that the doctor still hadn’t addressed her by her name. “Bill me, Bernie.”

“You got it, Jules.”

As Big Julie turned and walked back into her school, she was wondering if her two go-to artists, Danni and Nikki, would be willing to make up signs advertising for a new town doctor. And if Pinky was working on any buildings with especially thick foundations. “Where are the friendly, caring doctors you always hear about?” She said as she pushed through the swinging doors. Julie looked down at the Dwarfling that had followed her back in. “There any doctors in your family?”

“Got six uncles, Miss Julie. I think one of them is a Doc.”

“Tell him we’re in the market. There’s got to be a competent and friendly doctor out there somewhere.”

“Sure thing, Miss Julie,” the Dwarfling fidgeted.

“Go get your story, Guthrie; I’ve got the doors.”

With a ‘woop’ of glee, the Dwarfling scampered in the direction the others had just gone.

“Kids.” Julie shook her head. “Not sure if I’m ready for those.”

Chapter Twelve
Doctor Doc Marone

The Corpsman paced back and forth; he had been doing so since first light. He would have been doing it since the Gargoyles and, as he had heard, several Golems had ridden out of Prost Garrison, but he had been fast asleep then. Until casualties arrived, medical personnel were allowed to sleep so they would be rested when they were called upon. Since he had woken up however, he had been on high alert. A flash of light drew his attention to the hastily erected platform that acted as a predetermined target for the *Evacuata Corpsus Delicti* spell. "Doc! There's a human out on the platform. A huge one!"

"You don't say. With the battle that's supposed to have happened, just one?"

"There's a Gargoyle with him," added the Corpsman.

"A Gargoyle? Dammit, I'm a doctor, not a mason. Whad'm I supposed to do with a Gargoyle?"

The Corpsman leaned into the window of the small infirmary. "No, these two look healthy. Maybe you should get out here."

Doc Marone put down his parchment and drank the last of his coffee in one swallow. He stood shakily. "Some fresh air *would* be nice." He stretched his hands to the ceiling as he made his way to the door, walking on his tiptoes. Well, one tiptoe and one pegleg toe "And maybe some more coffee as well." He reached down and pulled the door open. As he stepped through, a very large human crowded him.

"You the doc?"

"That's me," said the doctor as he squeezed by the man. As soon as he got past him, he bumped up against a stone wall. "What the?"

"There's casualties coming, doc," said the stone wall. "You the doctor?"

Doc Marone looked up. "Gads. I've never been this close to a Gargoyle." He craned his neck even more, "They run out of stone making you?"

Reuben chuckled. "Not completely, doc." He stepped back several paces to give the human some breathing room. "Sorry."

"Doctor Marone..." began the Human as he put his hand on the man's shoulder.

"The name's Doc," corrected Doc Marone.

Tiny blinked. "It's short for 'doctor' though, right?"

The human shook his head. "No. My parents just named me Doc. Liked the sound of it, I suppose."

"But you *are* a doctor, right?" The Gargoyle asked again. "We don't have time to go looking for a doctor." It glanced nervously at the platform.

Doc Marone nodded, "Sure, sure; I'm the doctor here. But I was called that long before I was ever planning on being a doctor. It just kind of worked out well for me." He shrugged. "I just don't want any confusion when people call me Doc, that's all." He stretched again. "So what can I do for you two fellows?" He looked over the large Human. He looked haggard and bloodied but overall, in decent enough health. "You look in decent enough health," he remarked. Accurately.

"Not the ones coming" Tiny put his arm on the doctor's shoulder and led him to the platform where he had just appeared. "There's wounded heading this way."

"Wounded?"

"Lots of wounded. The dead will take a little longer to get here 'cause they're coming with the troops."

The doctor looked at his Corpsman. "Lots," he repeated in case the man hadn't heard. "Round up the volunteers." There were a dozen soldiers who had been tasked as bearers to ensure that if the need arose, there were people prepared to accomplish the task.

With a nod the Corpsman hurried off.

"Right, Doc, and we have to make sure that we're prepared to move them to where they can get helped. Some are in bad shape."

"So, what a dozen or so? How many..." A flash of light interrupted him. The trio looked at the platform. There were five bloody Humans on it. One moaned as he tried to roll off the platform.

The doctor let out a relieved sigh. "Is that it then?"

Tiny shook his head. "We need to move them before the others arrive." He jumped onto the platform and pulled the men off one at a time. When he had them off, Reuben grabbed them with a claw and dragged them farther away. "We got hundreds coming, Doc. So you better get to your work."

"Hundreds?" The doctor gaped at the wounded men. That would tax his small infirmary to its limits. He turned towards the Garrison's Sergeant at Arms who had moved to see who the two interlopers were. "Get *all* your men down here!" Ordered Doc Marone. "We've got hundreds of wounded showing up and they're all going to need help!"

The Sergeant at Arms stepped back. "Hundreds?"

In a flash, the platform was filled with another five wounded. Tiny and Reuben dragged them off.

"Yes, hundreds of wounded. Hundreds out there. None in here." He narrowed his eyes at the Sergeant at Arms, not trying to hide the accusation at all. "And the *dead* are coming after!" He said as he turned to the Gargoyle. "I'm going to do my work out here, Mister... ahh, Sir..."

"Just Reuben is fine," offered Reuben.

"Reuben. So get them lined up and we'll see what we can do for them." He looked around quickly "Corpsman!" He shouted. "Line them up and keep them still. And do not give them anything to drink. I'll be right back." He turned and ran into what had just become a woefully inadequate infirmary. Hurriedly, he gathered vials and sacks of medicinal herbs and potions. "There's not nearly enough," he said to his empty room. He looked around helplessly. "Nowhere nearly enough." He moved to the door and squeezed through it- it had pushed partially closed but not completely. "Corpsman!" He yelled again. He turned to look at the platform as it flashed again. Another five men -apparently that was the limit of the spell that was being used- appeared on it. "Corps..." he started as he turned to look along the building. There were at least fifty wounded laying side by side along the wall in the morning shade. Some were moving, others only moaning. Still more were alarmingly still. The site took his breath away. "We need help." He said to no one in particular.

"Doc! We're going to start a new row with space in between them," said Reuben. "Is that all right?"

The doctor nodded weakly. It was definitely not all right. All these wounded, with the dead not yet arrived and yet, hundreds of perfectly healthy soldiers sat in the Prost Garrison. "Hundreds of perfectly healthy soldiers." He scowled.

"What's that Doc?" Reuben asked.

Doc Marone looked at the Gargoyle. He had stopped moving wounded himself and was now directing several soldiers in the task. Painfully aware that they had been spared a similar fate, the soldiers had come down to assist any way they could. They had been helpless to leave to assist their fellow soldiers in a battle they knew was taking place somewhere. Thanks to their leaders, they felt they too wore a brand of cowardice.

A large flash on the platform caused several soldiers to reel backwards. A huge statue of a goat lay on the platform, its front legs smashed off just above the knee. "Ya gotta move me so that the others can follow," the statue said. Recovering from their initial shock, two dozen soldiers swarmed to it and hefted it off the platform- news of the Gargoyle's assistance in the battle had traveled throughout the garrison from the first several soldiers.

Those unable to get close enough to help were standing watching from the edges. "We've got a couple hundred perfectly healthy soldiers here."

"We could have used them today, Doc."

Doc nodded. He glanced where the Sergeant at Arms had been standing. He wasn't there anymore. "I know."

"So how does that help us now?"

"An Evening spell."

"It's not but midday, Doc." Reuben looked at the sky.

The doctor shook his head, "Not evening as in when the Sun is going to its underground lair. Evening as in splitting something equally between two other things."

"I don't follow."

The doctor nodded. "You'll see." He looked around again. "CORPSMAN!" He shouted angrily. This time, the men (as was taught to soldiers early in their career) echoed the call throughout the garrison.

The Corpsman came running from around the infirmary's corner. "Moving!" He shouted as he rounded it. He was struggling to run with a very large sack hugged against his chest. It was dripping water down his legs. He dropped it on the ground next to a soldier. "Take this and use it to pack the wounds. This moss has healing properties so use it on the most severe cases."

With a curt nod, and glad to finally be able to provide even a semblance of assistance, the soldier picked up the sack. He turned to a group of soldiers. "Put some of this in the most severe wounds," he ordered.

The men nodded and moved to grab handfuls of the moss.

"Sorry, Doc." The Corpsman was out of breath. "I had to go out to the south wall where the spring bubbles up to get that stuff. It was all I could carry in one load."

The doctor nodded. "Excellent idea. I hadn't thought of the Sphagnum Moss. That's going to save a bunch of lives today."

The Corpsman smiled. "Thanks Doc. What else can I do?"

The doctor nodded at the man, "Get the herbs and potions out and start working on moderately severe ones. The ones that will die in a couple of hours if we don't do anything. Use the moss on those that aren't hurt that badly."

"What about the most severe?" The Corpsman looked worriedly at the now triple line of wounded. A great many fit into that category. "Can't we do anything for them?"

"I'll take care of them, you tend to the rest." He patted his subordinate on the shoulder then turned to the watching soldiers. "Men, I need your help to save some of your fellow soldiers. But it won't be pleasant."

The men nodded at each other then they looked at one man in particular. He stepped forward "I'm Sergeant Campagna. What do you need from me and my men?"

The doctor motioned him forward. "Sergeant," he began in a low voice, "this is a very serious matter that I am going to ask of you."

Campagna nodded at the doctor. "Go on."

"I want to use an evening..." He shook his head. There wasn't time for a complete explanation or discussion. "A spell that transfers some of the wounds from these men to your healthy men. If we can spread the most severe injuries around, we can save some lives."

"Like an Empath?"

"Sort of, but unlike an Empath, the ones receiving part of the wounds won't be able to heal themselves. They will just have to recover normally."

"But, Doc," said the Sergeant, "if they die, can't you bring them back?" He gestured to the platform. "That's why we have that, right?"

The doctor shook his head solemnly. "Yes and no. I do revive people to conscript them to the Army, but only one or sometimes two at a time." He looked around. "There's fifty here that won't make it to the moonrise and another several hundred dead already on their way here. I could save maybe ten of them."

"Ten?"

"Maybe a few more. Maybe. Look, I'm just not set up for that sort of thing." The doctor grabbed the sergeant by the shoulders. "All those dead coming this way, except maybe a handful are dead and gone. And we're going to have half of these that way too unless we do this."

The Sergeant exhaled loudly. "We should have been out there with them." He looked around angrily. "We could have made a difference."

"It's too late for talk like that now. Right now, we need to do what we can to save what soldiers we can. Here and now. And do it quickly. Talk to your men. Only volunteers and tell them what's going to happen. *Tell them.* I'll get that wand if any are willing."

The Sergeant nodded. "Leave it to me." He turned and approached the anxiously waiting soldiers. After a moment's conversation, several of the soldiers looked past their leader at the doctor then back to their leader. With a nod, they each stepped forward, grim look on their face.

The doctor moved quickly into the infirmary and took a gnarled wooden box off a high shelf. This was a wand of last resort as it was often impossible to find volunteers willing to be subjected to its horrible magic. Steeling himself for

the worst, he pushed back through the door. It stopped halfway and he bumped his head on it because of it. With a curse, he slipped through the opening. "What is going on..." He began. His words failed him as he saw the line of Prost Garrison soldiers that ran between the ranks of wounded soldiers and around through the open area. The soldiers in the line were looking at the wounded soldiers or at the ground, lips drawn tight in resolve.

Sergeant Campagna was at the front of the line. "Everyone is a volunteer and up to the task." He motioned toward one of the severely wounded soldiers. "Ready when you are Doc."

With a nod, Doc Marone led the Sergeant over to the wounded man. "Lay down beside him and put your hand on him." The soldier had a long gash that ran from his collar bone to the opposite hip. The white of the bone showed through the wound revealing collar bone, several ribs, and the tip of his hip. It was apparent that the damage wasn't caused by a single slash but instead at least four or five vicious strikes. The soldier's eyes were glazed over and the wound seemed to barely ooze blood- the soldier was almost out of it. There were also several smaller gashes in his arm where it looked as if he had tried to ward off his attacker after he was incapacitated. All in all, it seemed as if his leather armor had saved his life, or at least kept his attacker from killing him outright. The truth of the matter was that the Halfling standing over the soldier had been ready to drive his sword through the incapacitated man's chest when he was impaled on a large, stone goat horn as it passed by.

"Just about half of that Sergeant Campagna."

The Sergeant nodded as he closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. His jaw muscles stood out on his face.

"And some blood so you're going to feel weak. You might even pass out."

"Here's hoping, Doc." The sergeant clenched his teeth again.

The doctor slashed the wand in a large circle that went across the wounded man and the Sergeant. A deep red beam of light leapt from the wand, surrounding both men at once. Sergeant Campagna pulled his lips into his mouth, then finally let out a scream. It only lasted for a moment because he passed out. The doctor dropped the wand to his side and the red glow immediately vanished. The gash in the wounded soldier was nearly closed; no bone even showed. It almost nearly matched the one on the sergeant. Both were leaking precious blood. "Get some moss in that wound!" The doctor

commanded to no one in particular. Both men were now pale and bleeding. But they were alive and definitely going to survive. He closed his eyes and thought back to a long-past promise: *I will keep them from harm and injustice.*

Doc Marone shook his head as he looked up, expecting the line to have half the number of men it previously had now that they had witnessed the gruesome spectacle.

"Who do you want me with?" The next soldier in line said. His eyes were large and he held his hands at his sides, but he looked determined. "Who's next, Doc? Let's get this show going."

The doctor nodded at the man through misty eyes. "Right this way, young man," he said as he motioned to a man with two mangled legs. "Just lie on the ground beside him and put your hand on him."

So it continued...

Doc Marone moved among the severely wounded, spreading their injuries to the waiting soldiers- sometimes using two for particularly severe wounds. Several men moved behind the doctor, packing moss into wounds and setting broken bones as they cracked into existence in their comrades.

By the time the sun was finally moving towards its nightly resting place and the sky just started to take a darker tint, all the soldiers were stable. Every bit of the Sphagnum Moss along the south wall of Prost Garrison was gone.

Doc Marone leaned against the infirmary wall. "What a mess"

Reuben moved beside him. "You did one hell of a job here Doc. All those men are going to make it thanks to you."

"Thanks to me?" He pointed at the soldiers still milling around, tending to what had become double the amount of wounded. "Thanks to them is more like it." He reached up and put his hand on the Gargoyle's shoulder. "And thanks to you, there's not as many of either dead or wounded that we had to deal with. You and your friends."

Reuben nodded at the man. "It was the least we could do. Hate them Halflings, you know."

Now the doctor nodded. "Your friends. I don't know what I can do for them. I mean, we don't even have a stone worker here. How do you fix a Gargoyle? Can you even fix a Gargoyle?"

"It's tricky but it can be done. We just need to get the master stonemason who created us to do it. It was his enchantment that brought us to life and only he can repair us."

"Gads. I hope he's a long lived fellow."

Reuben shrugged his massive shoulders. "He's not a Giant, or an Elf, unfortunately. He's a Human." He looked down at the doctor, "No offence, Doc."

Doc Marone shook his head, "None whatsoever taken. So how can you find this fellow? Is he still... around?"

"We've already called to him."

"Oh?"

"Yes, we have a connection with our maker so he can feel it when we've been injured. And, we feel it when he gets injured. Or dies. One of our own has gone out to let him know we're in need of his help and where we are. He'll be coming to collect us in a couple of days, I imagine."

"So are any of the wounds life threatening?"

Reuben shook his head. "It's all or nothing with us; there's no internal organs to injure, or blood to lose. If we get too battered up, the enchantment just leaches out of us and that's it."

"Wait. He's coming to collect you?" The doctor looked at the group of Gargoyles. There were five of them huddled together and adding in the one next to him, it amounted to an enormous weight. "What? Is he sending a horde of Giants?"

"Honestly, I don't know how he'll do it, but he's pretty crafty so I'm not worried." Reuben smiled. "A little bird told me he'd be collecting the ten of us, so I imagine it will be a sight to see."

"Ten? So there's more on the way? Well, you're welcome to wait in any way that is most comfortable, my friend." The Doctor patted the Gargoyle on the shoulder. "I'm going to make what will be the first of many rounds."

Reuben moved to his compatriots to sit and wait. A lively banter recounting the battle sprung up among them within minutes. The talk spread to the soldiers who were able to speak and the mood lightened considerably. Curses and 'don't make me laugh!' were heard as the men recounted and teased each other.

It was then that the macabre train of dead soldiers arrived.

Shortly after that, the limited ability of Doc Marone to revive the dead had made its way to every soldier. After tallying his resources, and checking them twice to be sure, and cutting them as thin as he dared, a gruesome lottery was held to determine which twenty five soldiers would be brought back.

Fate glanced over at the nervous young soldier as he was selected to draw the chits. Over and over he reached into the bag and a name was called out. Friends sighed with relief. More often, friends sighed with sorrow at yet another loss. Finally, on the last pull, Fate smiled as she guided his hand.

Captain Frank's chit was the last pulled.

Chapter Thirteen
Corporal Gigantus? Fate. Fate? Corporal Gigantus.

As the battle raged on, an astounded Corporal Gigantus surveyed the massacre. They had begun the engagement outnumbering them by almost a hundred to one- more than enough to assure an absurdly overwhelming victory. The arrival of the Gargoyles and Golems had swung the odds against them dramatically. Over half his fellow soldiers had fallen to these mere twenty. When all seemed lost, he moved quickly, ordering the remaining soldiers to pull back behind the cliff so they could retreat to safe territory.

It was a cruel twist of fate that had he and his 96 soldiers remained, the battle would have swung in the Halfling's favor. As it turned out, their retreat doomed the remaining Halflings to death.

Fate shrugged. It happened.

After almost a hundred Halflings arrived, Corporal Gigantus began to lead them north. "Keep off the road!" Commanded the Corporal. "And keep a sharp eye out!" The haggard group trudged up and down hills, moving ever northward.

After an hour, Gigantus, at the head of the formation, turned and looked at the soldiers. *Less than a hundred.* He himself was so exhausted he didn't even have the strength to consider the possibility of a Criminal Incompetence Assessment. Above all else, they were still within enemy territory. "Take a few moments to gain your strength!" He called to the soldiers, "in case we run into anyone."

Out of strength and morale, they obliged by staggering into a group and collapsing on the side of a particularly steep hill. Their arms were too tired to even shade the rising sun from their eyes.

"Another hour or so and we'll be at the wall! Then we've just got to get over it and we're safe!" Said the Corporal from higher up the hill.

Several Halflings turned to look at the Corporal. "It's not going to be that easy, I don't think pal," said a foot soldier as he looked up at him from lower down on the hill.

The Corporal glowered down at the Private, "Remember who you're speaking to, Private! I'm still a Corporal in the Army of the Lord High Priest of Halflings!" He said angrily. "And I'll bring you up on charges!"

With a chuckle, the Private shook his head, "It's not going to be that easy, I don't think, *Corporal* in the Army of the Lord High Priest of Halflings." He pointed past his leader.

The Corporal turned to look over his shoulder. Along the crest of the hill stood a larger number of soldiers than the Halflings laying on it. Even if they had been equal in number, it would not have mattered; the Human soldiers were well rested and fed and attacking from the high ground. This would be their first skirmish of the day. "Attack!" Yelled a Lieutenant Paul from near the front of the formation as he raised his sword.

In a testament to their stringent training and bloodthirsty history, the Halflings stood to meet their attackers as they charged down the hill at them. Even so, they didn't manage to kill even one Human.

Chapter Fourteen
The Search For Grim

"We've got to do something!" Said Drimblerod yet again. This time he stood up and waved his crutch around for emphasis.

"We heard you, Drimblerod," said Julie. "Again. But what can we do? We have no way of knowing where he is. Where do we even start to look for him?"

Drimblerod opened his mouth. Then closed it. He thought for a moment. "He was going north the last time I saw him."

"We don't even know if…" began Nulu.

Drimblerod turned on her, "Don't even say it, Nulu. If there's any Gnome who can keep himself alive, it's Grimbledung."

"Drimblerod's right," said Julie.

Drimblerod nodded, "See?" He looked at Julie, "What?"

"Sure. I mean he's a wanted Gnome. I imagine they are purposely keeping him alive so that he can be taken before the Lord High Priest. Then they'll kill him."

Drimblerod flailed his arms. Nulu ducked the crutch as it went by. "Then we need to get going!" He stood on his chair. "We've got to do something!" He leaned forward with his hands on the table. "Who's with me?"

The rest at the table stared at him. "Drimblerod," began Akita, "the Halfling invasion's been broken, but there're still probably bands of them runnin' around causing mischief and mayhem like that one group that got cut down north of the main battle. The town's in shambles and we don't have the gold to hire those mercenaries to protect us. Havin' that baner flyin' is nice and all, but you know as well as I do it's just for show. Therrrre's no way I can just leave. There's even rumors there's a group of Halflin's coming this way."

"And I have a school to run. Kids are still coming to class, and with everything going on and I need to make sure they are safe," said Big Julie.

"Nulu?" Drimblerod asked hopefully.

Nulu looked around the table. Twice. "I have a pretty good manager that can keep an eye on things for a while."

Drimblerod did a little hop, almost falling off the chair. Using the crutch for balance, he carefully got down.

"*For a while*," she emphasized, "But where do we even start?"

RatShambler pushed through the doors and walked to the table, "What'd I miss?"

"Rat! Have you heard anything?" Drimblerod sat down and leaned towards RatShambler expectedly.

RatShambler sat on his haunches. "Did you know that it's hard to convince a rat to talk to a shambler?"

"What did you hear?" Drimblerod asked again. This time testily.

"Let's see. What's the latest you've heard? Did you hear he's still alive? Because he is." RatShambler said.

"See?" Said Julie, pointing at Drimblerod, "told you so."

RatShambler nodded, "They're taking him to see the Lord High Priest so they can try and execute him."

"See?" Said Julie, "told you so."

"Don't you mean try and if he's found guilty, then executed?" Drimblerod said hopefully.

RatShambler blinked at the Gnome with his good eye. "A Gnome in the Halfling court system would have almost no chance of being found innocent of anything. Grimbledung in the Halfling court system is pretty much guilty before they even get him there." He bent down and ate a muffin off the table. "He's done for."

"Rat!"

RatShambler flinched. "What I mean is, until we rescue him." He peered at Drimblerod, "That's what I meant. I mean, just look at me. You think I *want* to stay like this?"

"Well, yerrrr gonna need a tracker to follow him."

"I got a nose too, Akita," said RatShambler. "It may not be as good as yours but should be good enough to find and follow a Halfling trail tainted by Gnome. It should just reek of him."

"Hey!" Snapped Drimblerod.

"I meant that in a good way," offered RatShambler.

"I don't see how you can use 'tainted' and 'reeks' in any way but bad."

Rat sighed. "It's good enough to find and follow a stinky Halfling trail improved by the fragrance of Gnome. Better?"

Drimblerod nodded, "Much."

"Fine," said Big Julie, "but with you out looking, your shop won't be up and running. I can't imagine Dummy being able to handle sales. What are you going to do about that?"

Drimblerod frowned. Business had been improving as the town grew. As luck would have it, travelers on their way to the Dwarf Encampments and mines were swinging by, since the shop was now closer to the Toll Bridge. A month -or more- off could put them out of business. Once word got out that Second Hand Sorcery was shuttered, people would begin to look elsewhere for wands and never look back. "I didn't consider that."

"Drimblerod listen; Rat and I can handle this," said Nulu. "Rat can track them and I can question anyone we come across." She smiled at Rat, "We'd make short work of it. Besides you're hobbled right now."

"And, you're going to need to keep the shop up and running so we've got a place to stay when we get back," added RatShambler. "I need a prosperous shop around me so I can return to my life of leisure."

Drimblerod's eyes got misty, "Well. That's about the nicest… I really don't…. What I mean is…"

Nulu put her arm around the Gnome, "Don't you go and cry on me. I'm liable to join in." She sniffed, "And that, I don't have to tell you, is no way for a Trolless to behave."

Akita stood quickly. "I've gotta go." With that he loped out of the cafeteria.

A long sorrowful howl pealed through the night air.

Julie chuckled, "What a bunch of softies we are." She wiped her nose.

"So you want to wait until first light or just head out now?" Rat asked Nulu.

"I can see in the dark just fine. All I need to do is pack a knapsack, let my manager know he's got the keys, and I can head out."

"Then I'll meet you in front of the Duck Inn in an hour," said RatShambler. "I just got to let someone know I'm leaving too."

Big Julie raised an eyebrow, "Why Rat, is there a Missus Rat that you've been keeping secret?"

RatShambler shrugged as he stood, "Listen, when all is said and done, I'm still a rat." He winked at Julie, "Half the rats in town should call me Pops. Some more, Gramps even." With that he loped out of the cafeteria.

"Well, I'm dashed." Drimblerod shook his head. "You think you know a Rat and something like that comes out. I think I'm an uncle!" He also stood. "Well Ladies, I think I'm going to head back to the Shop. If I'm running things on my own for the time being, I need to make sure I get plenty of rest." He shrugged, "At least I can have Dummy handle the backroom stuff." He smiled at Nulu, "I'll see you soon then." His eyes misted up again, "Rolton Chips. I'm leaving." He got up and hobbled to the door.

Nulu waved, "See you soon, Drim."

Almost as quickly as Akita, Drimblerod made his exit.

Big Julie leveled a look at Nulu, "Do you actually think you'll find him?"

Nulu shrugged as she picked up a muffin. "Well, they only have a day's head start on us and I'm hoping Grimbledung is up to his usual antics and costing them time…" She popped the muffin in her mouth to buy herself some time.

Big Julie hadn't changed her expression; she wasn't buying it.

"… but what I'm really hoping for is that he's escaped and on the run, heading back this way."

Big Julie blinked at that. "You know, I hadn't considered that." So she stopped to consider it.

Nulu waited.

Big Julie sighed. "Well, that would make it better because then he wouldn't be moving farther into the Halfling Territories. Of course, you'd still be looking for one Gnome in a whole lot of wilderness. And if he's on the lamb, he will be keeping a low profile."

Now Nulu returned the look.

"Well, as much as Grimbledung can keep a low profile, that is. You really need to find him before he gets to the Halfling Territories. You'd practically be off the map by then "[7].

"I know. I'm really hoping he's in the Foreboding Forest."

"You're *hoping* that's where he is?"

Nulu shrugged, "Plenty of cover in there. I hear the Elves there are peculiar and mostly keep to themselves and probably wouldn't even want to interact with a Gnome if they even saw one scurrying along…"

"Much less Grimbledung," interjected Julie with a smile. "But what about the Grand Heard of Minotaur?"

"No one's seen them in years. They've probably moved off." Nulu shrugged. "I won't worry about them until I have to."

"Hopefully it stays that way. So the Halflings would consider the forest safe for them and they would probably just go through it from Prost Garrison instead of the long way around if they were heading to Halfling City. I can't imagine an armed group of Halflings would feel threatened by quirky Elves."

Big Julie nodded. "Well, with a day's head start, they should be right in the middle of the thing."

"I'm sure the Elves would be more than happy to put the word out that there's a Grimbledung running amok in their forest and we're there to rid them of the pest."

Julie raised an eyebrow.

"Well, that's how I'll pitch it anyway. With any luck, the Elves will arrest him and I can just go collect him from the jail in TreeTop City." She smiled

broadly, "If he finds his way there on his own, their constable will arrest him and I can just go collect him there."

"Why would the constable just arre… never mind. It's Grimbledung we're talking about." Julie laughed. "The way you say it, it should be a walk in the park."

Nulu stood. She shook her head, "Not exactly. You're forgetting that while they currently have a day's head start, it will take me the better part of two days hard riding just to get Frank's Keep. That makes three days they have on me. I'd love a walk in the park but I'm expecting to slog my way through the Halfling Territories." She raised an eyebrow, "Got any of that Silesian Bug Juice left?"

Big Julie shook her head, "Used the last bit to get Grimbledung and Drimblerod up to Frank's Keep. That stuff's hard to come by."

"It was worth a shot. Hopefully it will be a quick trip up to the forest," she said hopefully. "With not any unpleasant encounters to slow us down."

"So you're bringing the Please Stick?" After several days of Nulu using her tree-cum-weapon as a way of demonstrating various forms of punctuation (usually an exclamation point), several of the locals had jokingly started calling it the Please Stick. Thanks to Nulu tending to point it at people when she said things like, 'I really think you ought to (insert action)', the nickname stuck. The fact that it rolled off the tongue easier than 'Shillelagh' didn't hurt either.

"It makes a fine walking stick, among other things. I need to get going if I'm meeting Rat in an hour. I've got a pretty good manager but if you could swing by the place to see how things are going, I'd appreciate it."

Big Julie nodded. "Either Pinky or I will. It's the least I can do." She also stood. "Good hunting, my friend." She hugged Nulu.

Nulu wiped her eye. "Disgraceful pair, we are." With a smile and a wave, she also made a quick exit.

Bonk approached as Julie shook her head as she gathered the plates and cups left on the table. "Next time, there'll be one more place setting," she said to the Gnoll.

"Definitely," he agreed. "I'll get this. You should get some sleep. Ya got a lot t'do between this place, the Duck (everyone shortened the Duck Inn and Diner differently) an' th' wand shop."

"Listening in?"

"Gnoll ears. I kin usually even hear ya from upstairs w'thout tryin'."

"Really?"

Bonk nodded. "Yep. Klank'll meet those two at the Duck." He winked an eye at Julie, "Don' tell Akita but we're better sniffers th'n Werewolves ev'ry day o'the week, 'cludin' Grundsdays. We were *born* with our noses."

"I won't tell." Julie promised as she moved off. She was well aware that Akita was born with his current nose as well, but didn't dare question Klank's abilities to find Grimbledung. "Good night, Bonk." With that she also made a hasty exit.

Glad to be alone, a misty-eyed Bonk cleared the table.

Chapter Fifteen
A Gnome in the Hand is Worth Nothing When He's in the Bush

Grimbledung took a deep breath. Then another. It wasn't impossible to breath; just difficult. From what he could tell, the burlap sack had been on his head for two days. On the bright-side, they *had* put food in the bag for him to eat. On the dark-side, they had hung him by his feet that he could only barely reach the vegetables that they dumped into the sack. Onions mostly but also a couple of juicy tomatoes, so the issue of not being given anything to drink wasn't at crisis levels. Yet. As an expert eater, Grimbledung had been only mildly inconvenienced by having to eat upside down. It wasn't, by any means, the first time he had done it. Of course this time, there wasn't any money riding on the feat.

Where the Halflings were taking him was anyone's guess. *They're taking you to Halfling City so the Lord High Priest of Halflings can deal with you personally* Grimbledung frowned. *I hate to break it to you, buddy, but there's a public execution in our future.* He was pretty much fed up with listening to himself. "I told you; if you don't have anything constructive to say, don't say anything at all!"

"Stop having conversations with yourself, you crazy Gnome!" Ordered a Halfling voice. The kick to his side let him know that once again, 'Righty' was on watch.

"Hey Righty," Grimbledung chuckled.

Another kick let him know he was correct. For the most part, Halflings were left-handed. 'Righties' as they were called, were often looked down upon as being not quite right as far as Halflings were concerned. The irony was not lost on other races. Nevertheless, many a Halfling parent had forced their younglings to use their left hands lest they be teased for their 'wrong handedness'.

"Are we almost there?" Grimbledung asked. "I don't know if there's mixed company out there or not, so I'll be delicate about this…" He paused, waiting for some sort of response. None came, so he pressed on. "At some point in the near future. And getting nearer by the hour, mind you, I'm going to need a little bit of alone time. Just me. A shovel, and perhaps a piece of parchment or two. With

the amount of onions I've been eating, probably two." He paused again. Still nothing. "If you get my meaning. Otherwise. Things are going to get ugly around here. For everyone."

Again, he was greeted by silence. Except for the creaking of the wagon, it seemed no one was around.

"Hello?" Grimbledung tried again, "I'm not kidding about that alone time. I mean, it *has* been a couple of days that I've been… your guest of honor. And I have been patient about the whole thing, you have to admit."

Silence.

"One doesn't just skip their morning constitutional without some effort on their part."

"We heard you, *Gnome*" said a voice that wasn't 'Righty'. "We'll stop in a little bit."

"Thanks! You won't regret it, really."

"But first, we need your solemn oath as a Gnome that you won't try to escape."

Grimbledung stifled a chuckle. Thanks to the burlap sack, the smile came out wide and bright. "Solemn oath?" He waggled his ears.

"Yes. Swear on all Gnomekind that you won't try to escape."

"When?"

"What?"

"Well, you want me to swear an oath saying I'm not going to try to escape *ever*? That's a pretty big oath. Or do you mean in just a little while when we stop, which is far more reasonable?"

"Well…" began the Halfling voice.

"Making me swear to stay put when we stop in a little bit is reasonable, but trying to get me to swear to never try to escape is absurd. That's an awfully big thing to ask of a prisoner. Would *you* just promise to never escape if the Great Gnome Army captured *you*?" Grimbledung waggled his ears again. *Just lie to the*

Halfling like you're going to anyway and stop pestering him! Said his mind. "Let me handle this!"

"I didn't say anything," said the Halfling voice, "handle what?"

"He's talking to himself again," explained Righty, "stop talking to yourself and answer the Lieutenant!"

Lieutenant! "I can't answer until I know which one he means," explained Grimbledung, "I won't agree to the second one, but that first one sounds reasonable, El Tee."

"The first one then," snapped the Halfling Lieutenant.

"OK."

"OK."

There was a long pause, broken only by the occasional squeaking of a wheel.

"Well?" Asked the Lieutenant.

"Well what?"

"Well are you going to swear that you won't try to escape when we stop in a little bit!"

For Delberger's Hand, just agree with the Lieutenant so we can get on with this. You know as well as I do that there's no great Gnome Oath. We're a bunch of liar-liar pants on fire Gnomes, when it comes right down to it. "That's true."

"What's true?" Snapped the Lieutenant. "You really are a disturbed Gnome, you know that!"

"That's true," agreed Grimbledung.

"Who are you talking to?"

"To the Lieutenant," said Grimbledung. He smiled again. "Fine, fine. I do solemnly swear to not try to escape for the entire rest of this day and make such oath on the heads of the entire Gnome Council and the wonderfully wonderful race of Gnomes." *That sounded absurd. He'll never buy it.*

"I accept your oath and will hold you to it, Gnome," declared the Lieutenant. He clapped his hands three times. As far as Halflings were concerned, that was end of negotiations.

Grimbledung's hands were bound behind his back so he was unable to clap them. He clicked his heels together three times to show his end of the bargaining was over as well. "There's no place like home," he tried.

"What?"

"Nothing. You never know when that will work," said Grimbledung, "so the deal is set. I really appreciate it."

"So keep quiet until we stop," said Righty.

It was another hour before the wagon finally came to a halt. Time was drawing short for Grimbledung. "Are we stopped yet, Righty?" He asked, "Dee-hour is rapidly approaching and there's not much I can do about it at this point."

"Dee-hour?" Righty asked nervously. "What's the Dee stand for?"

"It rhymes with 'big turd'. Mayhap even several. Or maybe just a large squishy pile o' crap thanks to those onions."

"Gads. Give me a couple of minutes to find a shovel and some parchment, and then we'll go," said Righty. Being not only the lowest ranking, but also a 'righty' he was sure any sort of 'cleanups' would fall on him to take care of. "Got it?"

"Sure thing. Righty." Grimbledung smiled broadly. "I'll wait right here."

After another nearly half an hour, Grimbledung felt his legs being cut free. He tucked his head as he crashed to the floor of the wagon. His hands were untied as well. They flopped to his sides useless. Two days of being tied behind his back had left them completely numb. He twisted his body and his arms flopped back and forth with it. He giggled. "That's just plain weird. Does it look as weird as it feels? Because I hope it does."

With a rough tug, the sack was pulled from his head. The bright light made him squint.

Grimbledung turned and looked at the Halfling that had untied him. For a Halfling he was large. They were practically the same height. Width wise, the

Halfling was wider, thanks to bulging muscles. His head seemed to just sit on his shoulders his neck was so thick. "Righty?" Grimbledung asked nervously.

The Halfling nodded at him. "That's me." He held up his right fist and shook it at Grimbledung. It was the size of a large potato- easily twice the size of a regular Halfling fist. The glove he was wearing had spikes on the knuckles. Worn-down spikes. "So don't give me any grief."

Grimbledung gulped. It was a good bit of irony that since right handed Halflings were constantly picked on throughout their younger years, that by the time they became adults, they were far more muscular and much better in a fight than a typical Halfling. It was because of this that when 'righties' were adults, Halflings tended to pick on them in groups. "Fine by me." Grimbledung flexed his fingers. The feeling was beginning to return- now instead of just feeling numb, it felt as if dozens of needles had been stuck in them. He flapped his arms around. "Gah, that is not pleasant at all!"

Righty nodded at Grimbledung. "Just make sure you keep to your word, Gnome." He placed his hands on his hips. Onto two sword hilts. "Trying to escape is a capital offence."

Grimbledung smiled, "That's a coincidence. It's also a capital idea!" He waggled his ears.

Righty stared at him. Angrily. He pointed at the flap of the wagon, "Get going. We're only stopped for a little bit."

Grimbledung nodded and moved to the flap. He was still flapping his arms. "Sounds good to me. I've got business to attend to." With that he ducked under the flap of the covered wagon and down the three steps to the ground. Looking around he saw they were in a forest. How big it was, he had no idea. Where it was, he had no idea. Which direction home was, he had no idea. *Surrounded on all sides by the unknown; it's the perfect place to escape from!* Grimbledung nodded. Because it was.

Righty put a hand on Grimbledung's shoulder and led him to the front of the wagon. When he got there, the driver offered down a short-handled shovel and a copy of the some sort of parchment. "Can you read?" The driver asked.

"No," Grimbledung said honestly. "Why?"

The driver smirked, "Figured you could catch up on current events to see how dire your situation is."

"The only current events I'm interested in are the events currently going on around me." He snatched the shovel and parchment from the driver's hand, "And I don't need a parchment to tell me they're dire."

"Let's go," said Righty. Once again, he put his hand on Grimbledung's shoulder and led him out of the circle of wagons.

The forest seemed fairly dense and ostensibly, large. *Perfect!*

After just a few dozen paces, the Halfling pulled Grimbledung to a halt. "Here's good a place as any." He pointed to a tree. "Get to it."

Grimbledung stared at the Halfling. "Now just a minute there, Righty. There's no way I'm going there."

Righty narrowed his eyes. "All you've been doing is complaining about needin' to go. Now you don't?"

Grimbledung hopped back and forth, "No no, I really need to go. I just can't go when someone's watching. It's private business, doing one's business."

Righty exhaled. Truth be told, he was not looking forward to having to watch the 'upcoming events'. "Fine. I'll give you a little privacy. But just a little." He pointed to a tree another dozen paces away. "Use the other side of that tree and I'll wait right here. I expect you back shortly." He crossed his arms -biceps bulging- and leaned against the tree.

"Thanks Righty. You know, it's embarrassing enough, just to have to ask permission to go," Grimbledung said honestly. "I'll be right back," he lied. He began to walk towards the designated tree. When he was halfway there, he turned to look at Righty. He was still leaning against the tree and keeping a watchful eye. "Oh, and please don't talk to me while I'm behind the tree. That just creeps me out."

Righty nodded. "Yeah, me too," he admitted.

Grimbledung shuffled behind the tree. When he got there he peeked around it and waved to Righty, "I'm here safe and sound!" He called. Righty just stared back. *A shovel and a parchment! That's a start. Now you just need a bag to carry your loot in!* Grimbledung nodded. "That's next." Carefully he turned so the tree was directly in front of him. He began to take slow steps backwards, keeping the tree between him and Righty. "That poor Halfing's gonna get beat on account of me." *It'll take half a dozen to do it and I'm sure he'll get his licks in as well. Don't go soft on*

me now! "I'm not. He just seemed to be an all right guy. As far as Halflings go." *Just shut up and keep moving!*

Grimbledung kept moving backwards. Thankfully, he only had to squeeze by a tree that was directly in his path once; the others he was able to sidestep without any difficulty. After a few minutes, there was almost a hundred yards between him and his original tree. Hoping it was enough, he finally turned and jogged away. "Time to put some real distance between us," he huffed as he went.

After five minutes of running, he stopped to catch his breath. And take care of business.

Righty leaned against the tree. "What a rotten duty to pull," he said to no one in particular. Keeping his eye on the tree, he slouched down and sat. "Stinking rotten duty." He was unable to see around the tree. Thankfully. Even so, he was sure the odd Gnome was still there. After all where could he go? He had a perfect field of view of the tree and the surrounding forest. "Hurry up you!" He called. It wouldn't be long before the wagon train of loot would be on the move again. The Lord High Priest always looked forward to fresh shipments of loot during an invasion. This train -with its notorious captive- was even more anticipated. He'd finally earned his place in the wagon train, or at least a good a place as a Righty could, and he didn't want a stinking Gnome to muck it up.

*Another few minute*s, he thought. They *had* been feeding him an awful lot of onions. He smirked. They had plenty of other vegetables, as well as meat but in a unanimous vote it was decided that a diet of onions and tomatoes was all the infamous Gnome deserved.

After another few minutes, Righty stood. He stared at the tree. He had not seen any movement at all. *Strange.* He stood up and looked harder. Nothing. Hesitantly, he began to approach the tree. "Hey Gnome. Are you done yet? We need to get back," he called to warn the Gnome. The last thing he wanted to do was to catch him with his pants down. Figuratively and -more importantly- literally. "Hey," he called as he arrived at the tree. Steeling himself, he stepped to the side and looked down. His stomach fell to his knees. Dizziness washed over him. "Hey!" He called as he looked around, in a vain hope that the Gnome had merely chosen a different tree. A knot formed in his stomach. "HEY!" He shouted into the air. The forest spun around him as he looked around. A large black bird squawked at him, mockingly. It then flew off. Purposefully.

Righty put his hands on his hips as he spun around. "Stinking Gnome! I'm going to KILL you!" He called in the hopes the Gnome could hear him.

He couldn't.

"I'll track you down and stick you like a pig!" He tried again. With that, Righty turned and ran back to the wagon train as fast as he could. They would need to organize a proper tracking party. As he went, he grimaced at the hard time the other Halflings would give him for losing the Gnome…

They would.

…But any luck, they would have him back in custody by nightfall...

Fat chance.

... and he would never have to face the Lord High Priest concerning the entire incident.

That, it would turn out, would be the least of his problems.

Or the High Priest's.

Chapter Sixteen
20,000 KiloSmoots Above The Plains

Doc Marone moved around the men who were lounging in the sun. Even though there were those that said otherwise, he firmly believed that fresh air and sunlight was important in the recovery of a wounded soldier. Because of this, he moved all the soldiers -even the most seriously wounded- out into the courtyard to get some fresh air and sunlight. Bandages that could be pulled back to allow wounds to air dry were pulled back. By the third day, more and more soldiers were finding their own way to the courtyard. To keep morale high the newly appointed leadership (the previous Sergeant at Arms had disappeared the evening the wounded first arrived) moved around the men, passing out food and water, and encouraging words.

Thanks to the actions of certain soldiers during the Halfling Battle of Big Horn (as it was now being called), the garrison was now under the command of the newly promoted Captain Ollie. To ensure the Cartographer's Guild didn't get upset, the name "Prost Garrison" was kept.[8]

Several soldiers were posted on the walls, keeping an eye out for any rogue Halflings. On two occasions, bands of five to ten Halflings had tried to attack the garrison. Unsuccessfully. And although they tried, the soldiers were unable to take any of the Halflings as prisoners to find out just how many were still marauding across the countryside.

"ALARM!" One of the soldiers shouted. Alarmed. He pointed eastward. And strangely, upward. "Everyone to your posts and may the gods save us!" He staggered backward. He turned and bolted to the end of the wall, hiding in the watch tower. "To your posts!"

The soldiers in the courtyard looked up at the hysterical man. Soldiers quickly moved to climb the stairs up the wall as Doc stepped forward. "What's going on up there?"

As the soldiers made it to the top of the wall, they too looked eastward and also staggered back.

"Corpsman!" Doc called. "CORPSMAN!"

Dutifully the Corpsman came running up. "Moving!"

"Stay with the wounded and I'll see what I can..." His voice trailed off as a huge shadow covered him.

The Corpsman's eyes were large as he looked over the doctor's shoulder. "Delberger's left nut!"

Steeling himself, Doc Marone turned, half expecting to see a fast approaching, full grown dragon. With perhaps a Halfling or two riding it.

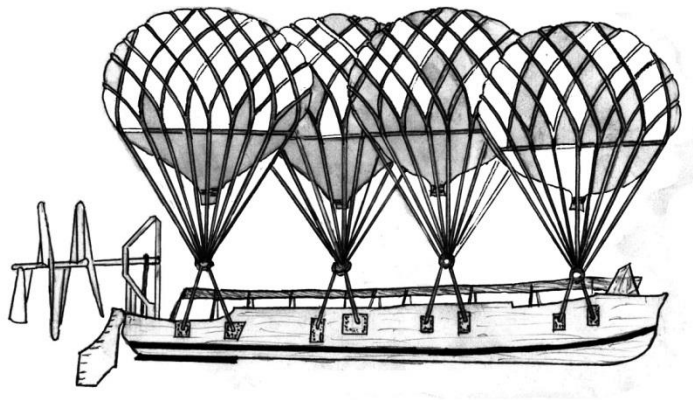
He was equally amazed.

The monstrous dirigible moved silently several hundred feet above the planes directly towards Prost Garrison. With a eight gigantic bladders – four per side- seemingly stuffed into sturdy netting, bulging out the holes in the net, they blocked out a large swath of the sun's morning light. Currently the light that was being blocked was the light destined for Prost Garrison. The net had ropes that lead down like a massive tentacles grasping a long, flat-bottomed vessels that looked remarkably like an open, single-deck river barge that had tents set up on them. Mainly because that was what they had previously been and currently were. It created a hundred foot long, forty-five foot wide platform under the bladders. It swayed slowly as a large corkscrew spun rapidly at the back end of the structure.

"And his right one too," agreed Doc Marone.

Steps could be seen in the trailing edge of the rudder as it suddenly turned to the side. The entire vessel pivoted and began what appeared to be a sideways slide towards the garrison.

"They're club hauling to give us a broadside!" One soldier shouted. Several who had spent some time at sea ducked down in anticipation of what would most likely be a devastating barrage.



Reuben bounded up the stairs to the parapets. "Everyone calm down. They're here to pick up us Gargoyles. They don't mean any of us harm!"

Even though the Gargoyles had been wholeheartedly accepted by the soldiers, they still continued to look up nervously. Most of the men had never seen anything larger than a great eagle in the air- with its mighty twelve-foot wingspan. A scant handful had seen a full-grown dragon in flight. None had ever seen two river barges floating across the sky. Soldiers who were inside came out to gawk as word spread of the once-in-a-lifetime display.

Thanks to its size and height, from the ground it seemed to be moving fairly slowly, but from the deck of it, the terrain below passed as a reasonable, fast as a horse could run, pace.

A haggard looking man ran to the front of the vessel- long grey hair flowing behind him as he went. "Prepare to descend!" He ordered as he peaked over the forward rail. "We're just about there!" He turned and bolted back amidships where he could better control the crew.

Ten deckhands jumped to action. The deck of the ship was broad and open. Twenty weight-saving tents of various sizes were erected on the deck. The only solid structure was a ten-foot wide bronze trough that ran almost the entire length of the vessel, straddling where the two barges met. It was positioned twenty feet above the deck on thick poles spaced evenly on either side. The deckhands clambered up ladders to the top of the trough. They looked down at the man "Ready Captain!" They shouted as they each grabbed a large lever on their particular section of the trough. They were all leaning back on their ladders to keep from the extreme heat being given off by the red-hot coals that filled the two foot-deep trough.

"Steady," said the Captain. "Steady." He peered over the leading edge of the vessel as it skidded sideways at the garrison. "We're two hundred feet out. Cut the outers!"

Dutifully, the deckhands at the forward and rearward section of the trough pulled their respective levers. As they pulled the lever, a large, leathery sheet flipped from one end of the trough to the other, covering the fire. The men leaned forward as the heat was almost immediately cut off. The bladders above them seemed to lose a little fullness.

"Ready two and nine!" Said the Captain. "Hundred fifty to go!" He looked back at the pilot. "Keep her steady!"

The Pilot was looking into one of several large tubes that, thanks to their expertly placed mirrors, gave him a perfect view to the front and side of the vessel. He nodded without looking up from the tube.

"Two and Nine!"

The two sailors matched the previous pair in their actions. Almost immediately, the vessel began to lose altitude. It now seemed on a collision course with the large stone garrison.

"Cut the screw!"

As the screw ground to a halt, the forward momentum of the vessel dropped as well. It was now creeping towards the stone wall at a leisurely, just faster than a walk, pace.

Not knowing what to expect, the soldiers on the wall hurried down to the courtyard.

Not wanting to be hit, Reuben followed close behind.

The large vessel continued to descend as its side passed over one corner of the garrison's wall by a mere twenty feet.

'Steady!' the soldiers heard a voice call. A face haloed by grey hair leaned out over the side of the ship as it passed - even more slowly now - over the courtyard of the garrison. "If you wouldn't mind in manning the ropes?" He called down.

The soldiers looked at each other. Ollie, having spent some time at sea understood immediately. "Cast away!" He called. He turned to look at the soldiers. "Grab the ropes and hold tight," he ordered. "Ready!" He called up.

Like many vines, a dozen thick ropes were tossed over each side of the large vessel. The ropes were thick as a man's wrist and the soldiers jumped out of the way as they slapped hard on the courtyard stones. "Lash them to something," Captain Ollie ordered. He looked around the courtyard. Being a courtyard, there was nothing to lash to. "Well that's just inconvenient. Pull hard men!"

The soldiers grunted as they pulled on the ropes. Even though the large craft had slowed to a crawl, it still pulled the men across the courtyard.

"Everyone on the ropes!"

Soldiers nodded at their new Captain as they grabbed hold and began an epic tug of war. For a moment, it looked like the craft would creep right by the garrison, but finally it ground to a halt just before the rudder struck the outer wall.

The old man in the floating vessel leaned out from the railing. "Pull us along until the rudder is touching the wall, if you please," he called down.

With grunts and heaves, the men inched the vessel forward until the rudder hit.

The old man's head pulled back out of view. 'Douse five and six' was heard below. Within a moment, the large vessel lowered until the bottom of the barges rested on the parapets. With only minor creaking and groaning, the entire mass finally came to a precarious rest on two adjoining walls. The soldier in the guard tower peeked out at the massive vessel not five feet from him. Not knowing what else to do, he swooned.

The man peeked out again. "You can let go of the ropes. We'll be fine unless the winds pick up." He looked at the horizon. "We should be fine for a while, I think." A smile came to his face. "Permission to come aboard?"

Ollie chuckled. "Permission granted, Captain. Come on down and bring any crew that wants a little time on land."

The man disappeared again. After a short moment, he stepped over the railing onto the steps in the rudder and nimbly made his way to the top of the wall. With a ceremonious hop, he landed on the stones with both feet. "Ahh, land," he remarked. He looked left and right. When he spied the stairs leading down, he beckoned for his crew to follow.

Captain Ollie was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. "Welcome aboard. Or maybe ashore, I think."

The man smiled. "That works for me." He put out his hand. "Phileous Verne. Captain of the Nemo." He gestured upward. "Please call me Phileous."

"Pleased to meet you Phileous. I'm Captain Ollie." He frowned. "As an orphan, I never did find myself a last name. Just call me Ollie." He gestured with both hands as he smiled back, "I'm the commanding officer of this once mighty garrison you have now turned into a dry dock."

Reuben moved to the two men. "Phileous. It's really good to see you." He looked up. "As usual, you make a grand entrance."

Phileous patted Reuben. "Is there any other kind worth making?"

Reuben shook his head. "Not when mad sorcerer masons are involved, I don't imagine. Where'd you come up with the idea for that thing?"

"I was watching a fire and saw bits of paper float above the flames. It gave me an idea."

"That's one huge idea." Reuben took in the ship. "A huge idea".

"So you came all the way from EternCity? You made good time; that's a couple hundred thousand Smoots," remarked Ollie.

"More or less."

"That's amazing," said Captain Ollie.

Reuben nodded, "That's typical." He smiled at his friend. "What, you couldn't make anything bigger?"

"It's just about the right size for carrying the likes of you, old friend." Phileous patted him on the shoulder. "And your compatriots as well. I hear you gave those Halflings what for."

Captain Ollie nodded at Reuben. "Your friend here saved a bunch of lives."

"Well, it was a group effort." Reuben looked at the men who moved down the stairs behind their captain. "New crew?"

Phileous shrugged. "There's folk that will work for a sorcerer, there's folk that even like working for a mason, and there's folk that like sailing in the air. Apparently they aren't necessarily the same folk."

"Well, let's get your men something to eat while we figure out how to get some injured Gargoyles on your ship." Ollie pointed at Sergeant Campagna. "Sergeant, can you see about getting some refreshments wrangled up while the Captain visits with our injured guests?"

The Sergeant saluted smartly and as he moved toward the cantina, he gestured for Phileous' men to follow. "This way gentlemen." He paused as he looked at the crew. "Pardon me, and ladies." He nodded at two female crewmembers. "Right this way."

Several soldiers fell in step behind them as they went- soldiers and mealtimes were conducive for the telling of tales (tall and otherwise) and they greedily wanted to hear of exploits in the skies.

Phileous looked around. "If anyone wants a get aboard the Nemo, there's a couple of crewmen tending it that would be glad to give a tour."

Several more soldiers hurried up the stairs to the ship's rudder, broad smiles on their faces.

Reuben smirked at his old friend and creator, "Always the showman."

"That's me." His voice took a serious timber. "So who's hurt and how much?"

Ollie pointed to a far corner of the courtyard. "If you want to take him over, Reuben, I think I may take a peek at that monstrous craft while I have the chance." With a smile growing across his face, he moved to the stairs and took them two at a time.

Reuben and Phileous moved to the corner of the courtyard that had been turned into an impromptu Gargoyle lair. All joviality was gone from the man as he inspected his creations with love and care. The stone creatures were more than just whimsical items to be made, enchanted, and then forgotten; they were true and close friends.

Captain Ollie was out of breath by the time he had clambered to the top of the garrison. When he had to climb the rail-less stairs carved into the rudder of the Nemo, he held his breath more than anything else. Finally, when he reached the top, a sailor offered a hand to help him over the railing.

"Welcome aboard, Sir," the sailor said with a snappy salute.

"Thanks..."

"Mister Biggs," the sailor offered. "I'm Chief of the Boat."

"Boat?"

"Well, it's a title so even when it's a giant thing that flies through the air, it stays the same."

"I see. Thanks, Mister Biggs. I'm Captain Ollie, commander of the garrison you're currently docked to. Captain Verne said there was a tour to be had." He looked around the deck- it was clear of clutter with tents set up in several locations. A long trough seemed to run the length of the ship. "Tents?"

"Lightweight accommodations," explained Mister Biggs. "Weight is a premium on a craft that rides in the air." He smiled. "That's why you never see fat dragons."

Ollie nodded because he had, in fact, never seen a fat dragon.

"Let's join the others." The sailor pointed to where a group of Ollie's men were standing near a young-looking sailor who was standing half-way up a ladder leaned against the long trough.

The pair walked over as the sailor spoke.

"... and that's when I learned I was lactose intolerant," the sailor said. He stuck out his tongue to emphasize the point.

Several of Captain Ollie's soldiers looked around nervously. It was *not* the tour they were expecting.

"Ahh, I'll take it from here Calvin," Chief Biggs said quickly. "You can go back to tending the fires." He motioned for the youngster to climb down the ladder. "Up by Five, if you please."

The youth jumped down the ten rungs he had climbed up and jauntily moved to a ladder near the center of the vessel. As he passed, the soldiers gave him a wide berth.

"Sorry about that..." he paused and looked at the group. "Gentlemen," he continued, "he's new to the crew and still learning the ropes, as it were."

Several soldiers nodded knowingly.

"So." Chief Biggs clapped his hands together once. "As you'll notice the decks are free and clear of any heavy items, with tents used for accommodations, cooking, and the like." He gestured all around. "You will also notice the very large brass trough that runs almost the length of the ship."

Several soldiers nodded- it was hard to miss.

"That is the secret of flight."

"Brass?" Asked Ollie.

"Fire." The Chief pointed upwards. "The fire heats up the giant bladders of air which makes the ship go up. When we light all the sections of the trough, the ship sails up hundreds of feet. When we want to come down, we douse some of the sections with sheets of dragon wings. Usually two at a time so that we come down on an even keel."

"How does that work?"

Chief Biggs shrugged. "No idea. We think that maybe the air doesn't like to be hot so it tries to run away from the fire but since it's caught in the bladder, it just pushes the bladder up. Kind of like wind in a sail."

Captain Ollie considered this for a moment. It seemed reasonable. "Sounds reasonable to me."

All the soldiers nodded in agreement. Several secretly thought it had to do with Elfin Magic, but they went along with the crowd anyway.

"So the brass..." Began Captain Ollie.

"The brass just keeps the fire contained. Once you're up a few hundred feet, the last thing you want is a fire on deck."

"I agree with that," said a soldier. He was at the moment, the highest he had ever been off the ground and even then, having a fire on the deck was something he didn't relish.

"So let's move to the tents and I'll show you where we sleep, eat, and play." Ollie gestured towards a large tent. "So this one here is the mess tent..."

After another thirty minutes, Captain Ollie and his men began the harrowing task of going down the steps in the rudder. It was quickly decided that only one man would be on the stairs at any given time, and because of this it took another fifteen minutes for them to make it safely to the walls of Prost Garrison.

Glad to be back at a comfortable altitude, Captain Ollie took a deep breath when he reached the ground. He looked around to see how things had progressed while he was away. Phileous and Reuben were now standing in the middle of the courtyard with the rest of the Gargoyles. "I hope everyone is well enough to travel."

"Well and ready, Captain Ollie," said Reuben. "Not that we don't like your company, of course," he added quickly.

"Of course." He looked up at the Nemo. "So how are you going to get them up there?"

"We'll hoist them up using the forward, starboard capstan."

Captain Ollie was still looking up. "Forward starboard?" He looked at the Captain and smiled. "How convenient then, that that's where you are all sitting."

"Very convenient." Captain Phileous stuck out his hand. "We appreciate your hospitality, Captain Ollie. If you're ever in EternCity, I'd love to repay it in kind."

Captain Ollie took the other's hand and shook it. "Well, I'm not sure when I'll make it way out there, but if I do, I'll take you up on that offer."

"Reuben? You want to walk up or ride the capstan?"

Reuben looked at the narrow steps set in the rudder. "I'm in one piece and I'd like to stay that way. You should just haul me up."

The sailors and soldiers exited the cantina, drinks in their hands. They were still talking and laughing as they spied their respective Captains and angled in their direction. "Then I'll see to it," said Phileous. He turned to the Sailors. "We'll hoist them up. Shouldn't be too much of a problem. We'll just have to do them one at a time. We'll load them on dollys then move them around the ship to balance it out before we get going."

"Even out the ballast, huh?" Captain Ollie chuckled.

"I'd like to think of myself as more than ballast, thank you very much," Cerise said.

"My dear, you're the best looking ballast to ever grace a ship," assured Reuben.

"Thanks, Dearest," said Cerise.

With that, the sailors and soldiers parted company- sailors going up the rudder-stairs to their tasks, the soldiers sat to watch the operation.

After nearly an hour, all the Gargoyles were loaded and positioned on the Nemo. As the task was done, the ship noticeably settled and creaked but stayed angled across the two walls.

Captain Phileous leaned over the railing and looked down. "Time to go! Stay safe!"

"Farewell Captain Phileous. Safe travels to you as well!" Ollie called back.

Phileous' head disappeared back over the railing. "Stoke the fires and get that air running good and hard! We got some extra... cargo holding us down!" The soldiers heard him shout.

Within moments, the ship slowly gained altitude. When it was almost fifty feet above Prost Garrison, the screw at its stern began to turn. With the rudder turned to one side, the Nemo executed a wide turn over Prost Garrison. When it was a hundred yards away, a loud horn blow carried back from it to the soldiers.

Sergeant Campagna moved beside his captain. "I wonder if we'll ever see those characters again."

"Only if we make it from here to EternCity."

"And back again?"

"There's always a chance."

"Yes, Sir." Sergeant Campagna watched the Nemo as it gained altitude and speed. "Well, it's good those Gargoyles are getting taken care of. I think, all in all, they fared well against those Halflings." He turned to his Captain. "Say, Sir. What happened with that one Gnome I heard about that fell off the wall at the start of the battle?"

"Seems the scuttlebutt was that he had made it back to his friends in town, safe and sound," said Captain Ollie.

"All's well that ends well."

"Seems that way."

Chapter Seventeen
Scuttling Butt

Grimbledung huffed and puffed as he scuttled through the forest. Occasionally he would hear a Halfling war-dog bark. Every time he did, they seemed closer.

Gasping for air, he leaned against a tree for support. "It's no use. I'll never lose them. I'm sorry Drim."

In front of him, the leaves covering the forest floor began to move. Then they began to rise.

Grimbledung gaped as the mass rose higher and higher, above his head and then some. Finally at twice his height, the protuberance of leaves stopped moving. "Hello?" Tried Grimbledung.

The leaves dropped off in a single motion; they had been attached to a tan colored cloth. A dirty and haggard looking Elf turned to look at Grimbledung. "Hey, man," said the Elf slowly.

"Hello, Mister Elf," said Grimbledung. "You hiding under there or what?"

"No, man. I wasn't hiding." The Elf said in a slow drawl. He looked up and scanned the treetops.

Grimbledung turned to look as well. There was nothing to see. "What're we looking for?"

"What?"

"What are you looking for?" Asked Grimbledung again. He heard the dogs bark again. They were definitely closer.

The Elf looked down at Grimbledung. "Nothing, man." He seemed to stare off into the distance.

This time Grimbledung didn't take the bait. "Well, nice meeting you, Elf, but I got to be going." Grimbledung took a step away from the tree. And away from the strange Elf.

"No, man. You can't do that." The Elf pointed at Grimbledung. "You can't."

"Can't what?"

"What?"

The barking was closer still. "You said I can't, so I asked 'I can't what?'" tried Grimbledung anxiously. "What can't I?"

"Leave, man."

"Why?"

"You're under arrest, man," explained the Elf. He looked up at the trees again.

"For what?" Grimbledung took another step away from the Elf.

"Trespassin'."

"Trespassing? Trespassing into where?"

The Elf looked down at Grimbledung. He seemed to notice him for the first time. "Trespassin' *here*, man. That's what yer doin'. Yer trespassin'. That really brings me down."

"Trespassing where?"

"The forest, man."

"So you're a forest guard then? Part of some sort of forest army?"

"No, man. We don't have an army," the Elf said slowly. "I'm just on guard duty today. Normally I am… normally I got a band." He nodded. "I got a band."

The barks were close enough Grimbledung could tell there were three dogs involved in the search. "I see mister… mister" he paused in hopes a name would be provided.

"Teeth."

"What?"

"Teeth, man. My name's Teeth," said Teeth. The Elf smiled a big, toothy grin. Apparently the only things clean on the Elf were his teeth; they were typical

Elfish evenly-spaced, bright white teeth. His dreadlocks and rags-as-clothes were another story entirely.

"I see, great teeth you got there," offered Grimbledung as he took another step away from the Elf.

"Thanks, man. You know that's what they say…" the Elf stared off into space.

After a long moment, Grimbledung spoke up, "What do they say?"

"What do who say?"

"The people. About your teeth," offered Grimbledung.

"People talkin' about my teeth? Man," said Teeth. "That's rude."

"No, no, you were saying something about your teeth!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Remember?"

"I was talking about my teeth?" Teeth asked incredulously.

"Yeah!"

"Really?" Teeth nodded. "Wow." He paused for a moment. He reached into a pouch on his belt and produced a large, blue and green colored frog. There was a swirl of bright orange that started on a rear leg and spiraled up over its back to its nose. "You want to taste my frog, man?"

"What? No, I'm not really hungry right now, thanks."

"What? No, man you don't eat frogs." Teeth pulled his frog closer to him protectively.

"You don't eat them?"

"No man, you just *taste* them." Teeth nodded again.

"No thanks."

"Well, all right I guess, man," said Teeth as he put the frog back into its pouch. He licked off his fingers afterwards.



"You know I'm a Gnome, right?"

"Yeah, man."

"Then why do you keep calling me a Man?"

"Who's calling you a Man, man?" Teeth looked around. He seemed to hear the Halflings and the war dogs for the first time. "Man. Strange things are afoot in the forest today."

"You know, I'm really enjoying this conversation and I'm sure you could keep this level of absurdity up for a week straight if you had to, but I really need to get going." He hopped back and forth again. "There's people chasing me and I really don't want to have to deal with them."

"Well, why don't you come with me." said Teeth.

"Well, you seem nice and all Teeth. Even for an Elf, but I really got to get going." Grimbledung started to turn away from the unkempt Elf.

"Naw, man. See, that wasn't a question," Teeth rasped.

"But it started with 'why'," objected Grimbledung.

"What?"

"Why!"

"Why what, man?"

Now Grimbledung could hear several Halfling voices. "This is getting absurd even for me!" Complained Grimbledung, "I really got to get going!"

"Naw, man, you can't go." The Elf slowly slung a bow from his shoulder. Like him, it was dirty, dingy and battered. He pulled an equally abused arrow from his quiver- it was missing an entire row of feathers on one side. The point however, was gleaming with oil and sharp.

"Can we discuss this?" Tried Grimbledung. He prepared to make a run for it.

"Well, no man. You see, the way it works is…" Teeth stopped to think. And look up at the treetops for a long moment as he thought back to the morning's instructions. He nodded. "Ok, yeah. So. Either you come with me or I shoot you in the head with an arrow, man."

"That's not much of a choice!"

"Let me think a second," said Teeth. *Very* nearby, a Halfling horn could be heard blowing. He looked up into the sky again.

After a long moment, Grimbledung nudged him, "Hey Teeth!"

"Yeah?"

"So what are the choices?"

"Choices for what, man?"

A thought came to Grimbledung. "You said I had three choices. I either go with you…" he waggled his ears. "Or you shoot me in the head." He smiled broadly, "Or you let me go! So that's the one I pick. That third option."

"Let you go? No man, that's not one of our… That's not one of the choices, man." He nodded slowly. "It's either I shoot you in the head…"

"Yeah, yeah, I got that one! I'll pass! Hard pass on getting shot in the head."

"You come with me."

"Right, right! Maybe that one. That's a definite possibility. Or I just leave."

"And I shoot you in the back as you're runnin' away!" Teeth smiled triumphantly as he remembered his three rules.

"Oh, well in that case, I'll go with the middle one. How about I just come with you?"

"Come with me? Far out, man."

Grimbledung heard another horn; it had to have been within a hundred yards. "Great, great. Let's go" he gestured into the forest. "Which way? Where are we going?"

"We're going to TreeTop City, man! That's where I live." Teeth nodded knowingly. "I got a gig tonight, man." He pointed into the forest and began to walk. Slowly.

"So you've got a gig huh? You and your band?" Grimbledung easily fell in step beside the Elf.

"Yeah, man. We're the Acoustic Mayhem. We got a gig for sundowners."

"Sundowners? Is that a tavern?"

"No, man. It's to play as the sun goes down. It's gonna be nice and mellow." A thought came to him. "Hey, did I ask you if you wanted to taste my frog?"

"Yeah, you asked me that." Grimbledung blanched.

"What'd you say, man?"

"I said no, I didn't want to taste your frog."

"Oh, yeah.. Well how about now, man?"

"No, I'm still holding out on that. Thanks for asking though." Grimbledung shook his head. "So is it far?"

"Far to where, man?" Asked Teeth.

"TREETOP CITY!" Grimbledung screeched. "*We're going to TreeTop City!*"

"All right, man," said Teeth, "you know you need to relax if you're going to stay at TreeTop City. Or things aren't going to work out, man."

"What happens then?" Grimbledung asked worriedly.

"Well, we'll just have to cook you and eat you, man," said Teeth matter-of-factly.

"What? You eat Gnomes?"

"We eat pretty much anything we come across or comes across us. As long as it came from the land, you know." He looked down at Grimbledung. "Hey, man, where were you born?"

"In a barn, so I've been told."

"A barn? Far out, man. That's like out on the land and stuff."

Grimbledung moved a little bit away from the Elf. "Well, I'll try to behave myself then."

"All right, man. If that's how you want to play it."

Grimbledung looked over his shoulder. "Hey Teeth"

"Yeah, man?"

"Is this top speed? I mean, I am trying to avoid a bunch of Halfling warriors here. I'm used to Elves being a lot faster when it comes to moving in a forest." He considered his next comment carefully, "And maybe a little cleaner. Maybe. Just a little."

Teeth shrugged, "We're a different kind of Elf out here, man. We're not all uptight and stuff like they are."

"Yeah, tell me about it!" agreed Grimbledung.

"They're uptight."

Grimbledung stared at the Elf, "Yeah, I got that. You didn't have to tell me that again."

"Well, why'd you ask, man!?"

"Never mind, Teeth. Let's just get there."

"Right, man. Did I tell you I got a gig?" Teeth asked

"Yeah, you told me."

Teeth opened his mouth.

"And I don't want to taste your frog."

Teeth closed his mouth.

The pair moved on in silence into the depths of the woods.

To Grimbledung's relief, it seemed the Halflings had (inexplicably) lost their trail.

For the moment, anyway.

Chapter Eighteen
The Search Party Heads Out

Nulu stealthily came down the stairs from her room into the Foyer. There was a human asleep at the desk. There was a bell by his head. Resisting the wicked urge to ring it, she crept out of the Duck Inn and Dine. RatShambler was already outside waiting for her. He was hitched to a wagon. "Nice. I was afraid I'd have to ride you all the way up there."

RatShambler shook his shoulders, "That would have been a tough ride."

Nulu leaned forward on her stick, "What are you saying, exactly?"

"Well, just that I have no saddle so it would be a tough ride," RatShambler smiled a toothy grin. "What'd you mean?"

"It's way too dark out," warned Nulu.

RatShambler grinned again, "Fine, fine. Are we ready then?"

"We're waiting on one more." Nulu looked up and down the street. "He should be here shortly."



"What? I thought Drim was staying to run the store. Who else is coming? Not Akita?"

Nulu moved to the side of the wagon and placed her Please Stick in the back. Beside it, she placed a large backpack and an equally large sack.

"Traveling light, I see."

"A female needs her things," said Nulu defensively. "Besides, I have my armor with me as well."

Out of the night, a dark figure soared over RatShambler's head. He ducked but it was already too late. The figure landed in the wagon. A throaty chuckle came from it.

"Klank!" Said Nulu.

"Ready and waitin', Nulu."

"You're going to explode my heart, you crazy Gnoll," said RatShambler as he turned to look at Klank.

"Just makin' sure you're awake, that's all." Klank showed his long, white teeth. They were also quite pointed; it may have been jovial, but it sure didn't look it. He hefted a large backpack off his shoulders and dropped it heavily onto the wagon.

"What are you carrying? Hearthstones?"

Klank shook his head at RatShambler, "Spices and cookin' utensils. Mostly spices. Maybe a couple of pots Some dry stock, cured ham for soup, hardtack. Things like that."

"Oh Klank. I love you most of all."

Nulu moved to the front of the wagon, "All right you two. Let's get going. You can bond on the way."

Another dark shadow approached the wagon.

Nulu took a step backward.

"Bonk! Come t'see us off?" Asked Klank.

Bonk nodded, "Figured you could use a snack to get you through the day. Y'll make better time thataway." He tossed another large backpack into the wagon. It also landed heavily.

"Oh Bonk, I love you most of all."

Klank squinted at RatShambler. "Fickle."

"Thanks Bonk," said Nulu, "and don't worry; we'll get your brother back to you in no time."

"Ya better. I'm takin' his cookin' duties while he's out galavantin'." He smiled at his brother. "Safest travels that can be had, Brother." With that, he loped back into the darkness.

Nulu smiled at Klank, glad they were bringing a renowned cook as well as tracker. "I'm glad you're here, Klank."

RatShambler nodded as Nulu climbed onto the wagon. "Me too," he said, "now if we have to deal with any Elves, we at least have a chance."

Klank hopped up beside Nulu, "Elves? Them's the least of your worries." He glanced at Nulu, "Ya didn't tell him?"

Nulu raised her finger to her lips, "No, no. I figure I'll bring it up only when we have to."

"What? What will you bring up?" RatShambler asked nervously. "No secrets you two!"

Nulu took the whip from its cradle beside her. She cracked it over RatShambler's head. "Hiyah!" She said loudly.

RatShambler stared at her. "Seriously?"

Nulu smirked mischievously. She cracked the whip again, this time coming in contact with RatShambler's hind end.

"Hey!" Complained RatShambler as his hindquarters hopped. "Cut that out!"

" 'ave we left yet?" Asked Klank.

Nulu raised the whip again.

Without looking ahead of him, RatShambler began to walk, "Oh, just you wait till I'm back to being a rat." He narrowed his good eye at Nulu.

Nulu laughed as she returned the whip to its cradle, "I'm just teasing, Rat. You know the way to the Foreboding Forest, right?"

RatShambler nodded. "Yes," he said testily. With that he turned to look ahead, "I know the way."

"Grrrreat. I'll just take a nap for a while." Klank let his tongue hang out the side of his mouth, "It's not 'ealthy to see the sun come up."

Nulu nodded, "You know, that's what I've heard too!"

The two quickly rolled into the back of the wagon. Each took a large backpack as a pillow and were snoring only shortly after leaving town.

"Seriously?" Complained RatShambler to no one in particular. Particularly because anyone who could hear him was snoring contentedly.

Rat continued to walk as the sun rose from its underground resting place and began to crawl up the sky on RatShambler's right. When it was even with his shoulder he turned and looked into the wagon. Both Nulu and Klank were still asleep. Now however, Klank was acting as a pillow for Nulu's head. Neither seemed to have noticed the change in sleeping arrangements. RatShambler's stomach let out a loud growl. "Hey you two!" He called angrily. "Wake up!"

Nulu bolted upright "What?" She looked around groggily, "Trouble?"

RatShambler nodded his head, "Yes there's trouble! I'm starving to death up here and you two are cozily napping."

Klank continued to snore throatily.

"Wake up that Gnoll and have him whip up something to eat."

Nulu stretched her arms out wide, biceps bulging. "Gimmie a minute here." She arched her back as it popped and cracked. "Not the best place to sleep." She twisted side to side then finally stood up.

"Starving."

"You sound like Grimbledung," tut-tutted Nulu. She reached down and patted Klank's shoulder, "Klank, time to get up."

Klank rolled onto his back and stretched out, almost all of his legs sticking out the back of the wagon. "Not the best place t'sleep," he commented as he yawned widely.

"You should try doing it while walking!" Said RatShambler. "On an empty stomach." As if on cue, his stomach growled again.

Nulu laughed as she stepped over onto the seat of the wagon. Moving the reins to the side she sat down roughly. "Poor Rat. Starving to death." She reached forward and patted Rat's hind end, "Klank? Got anything for our poor starving beast of burden?"

Klank rolled onto his feet. "Just the thing!" He rummaged in his backpack and pulled out a feedbag. "This's the best thing 'round. The kids love it!" He hopped off the side of the wagon as RatShambler came to a stop.

RatShambler looked at Klank and the feedbag. "No." he said flatly. "It can't be."

"It's th'latest craze. The kids love it!" assured Klank as he moved forward. "It's called…"

"Mixed Trails," interrupted RatShambler.

"Yeah!" Klank reached into the feedbag and pulled out a handful of nuts, berries, bits of chocolate, and toasted bits of cracker. He popped the mix into his mouth. "They're grrrreat!" He said with his mouth full.

RatShambler shook his head. "Fine, fine. Don't eat it all you crazy Gnoll." He turned his head toward Klank and lowered it.

Dutifully, Klank hung the feedbag over RatShambler's snout. "There ya'go." With one bound, he jumped onto the seat beside Nulu. "Want some too?"

Nulu shrugged, "I'm more a meat and potatoes kind of Trolless. Light on the potatoes."

Klank winked at her as he leaned back into the wagon. He dragged the backpack his brother had dropped off up to him. Untying it, he rummaged for a moment before presenting a Cornish hen with a flourish to Nulu. "How's that?"

Nulu took it. "I love you boys." She smiled as she took a bite of the cold, yet still delicious bird.

"Hey! There's meat?" Complained RatShambler, "I get meat at my next meal. Fair's fair."

Nulu nodded as she pulled a browned wing off the chicken and popped in her mouth bones and all. "Deal."

The trio ate in silence as they passed by the ruins of Aution. Several tents had been erected in the town's ashes. "Looks like someone's takin' up shop," said Klank.

Nulu nodded, "Seems like an odd place to do it." Here and there, wisps of smoke could be seen rising from the ground, "Seems odd that things would still be smoldering." Nulu reached beside her and not-so-casually rested her hand on her Please Stick.

"Well, therrres plenty of space an' no one t' tax you for usin' it." Klank moved beside the wagon, "Might not be all that odd." Even so, he raised his nose into the air and breathed in deeply. "Nuthin smells out of sorts. Mainly just burnt things."

"Get this feedbag off me in case I need to run," said RatShambler as he also looked around, "this place is creepy." Here and there dark trails of smoke rose from mounds made in the ground. A very large pile of partially burned wood took up a good portion of what used to be the center of town. "I vote we keep moving." RatShambler began to walk tentatively. "Anyone disagree?"

"We'll check out old Aution later. Right now we've got someplace to be," said Nulu as she hopped off the wagon. RatShambler obliged and stopped as she removed the feedbag. "Let's get going before this delays us."

Klank turned his head to the side and perked an ear upward. "Hold on," he said as he clambered up and stood on the bench of the wagon. He raised his ear even higher. "I 'ear somethin' comin' from th' woodpile."

All eyes turned to the large pile of wood. It easily stood fifteen feet high, and was forty feet across; a good three blocks of the town was represented in it. A figure, arms loaded with wood, moved around the pile and into sight. His face was obscured by wood and he gingerly stepped to avoid the loose planks around the bottom of the pile. He was whistling a jaunty tune.

Klank looked at Nulu and raised two clawed fingers. He pointed at the approaching figure, then at the pile. As if on cue, another figure –similarly loaded down- appeared and began to follow the first.

"Let's go" Nulu whispered into RatShambler's ear. "I don't think they've spied us."

Klank nodded at the Trolless.

Quickly the trio moved past the burnt out town, seeing wisps of smoke where it seemed large mounds of dirt had been piled up over whatever was burning.

"I wonder what sort of operation they've got going," said RatShambler as he moved to put the long pile of wood between them and the pile of wood carriers.

"No idea. Now's not the time though," said Nulu.

"I agree," said Klank.

As the trio moved off quickly, they did not notice the woman sitting atop the large pile. She looked at them as they moved off. A scowl came to her face. "So the innkeeper and the constable are out for a jaunt." She looked towards Julesville. "Where are you coming from? The Encampments or that magic school?" *I wonder who else from Aution ended up there.* "Where have you gone, Grimbledung?" She put her hand on her dagger as she looked southward. "Where have you gone?"

Chapter Nineteen
Grimbledung Has Escaped His Halfling Trackers

Kind of…

Grimbledung looked over his shoulder. He could hear the tracking dogs. "Is this a long way? I think they found your trail."

"To where?"

"TreeTop City."

"Is that where you're going?"

A long howl rose in the air. If they had found his trail, it wouldn't be long now. "Yeah!"

"Far out. Me too. Do you live there or are you just visiting? Don't remember any Gnomes living there."

Grimbledung flailed his arms. "I'm going with *you* to TreeTop City you daft Elf!"

Teeth stopped walking and turned to face the angry Gnome. "You're bringing me down, man."

A closer howl worked its way through the trees. Grimbledung stopped flailing. "Sorry, Teeth." Even the barking seemed nearby. "It's just that I'm so excited to get there is all."

Teeth nodded. "Yeah. I'm excited to get back too. Hungry too." He looked around. "Well, you need to calm down little fella. We're going there now." He began to walk again.

Grimbledung noticed that they were now walking in a different direction. "Hey, aren't we going in a different direction?"

"Different direction to where, man?"

"Gah!"

As Teeth continued to walk, he took a bright blue frog from his belt pouch. The frog seemed to have suckers on its feet and was bright green. Iridescent green. There was black swath that started near its snout and snaked its way back, ending at the tip of one of its hind legs. He popped it into his mouth.

"How many frogs you carrying? You don't even cook it first?"

Teeth moved the frog into his cheek. "Cook it? It's my pet, man. Why would I cook it?" He smiled widely.

The frog peeked its head out from Teeth's cheek. "Ribbit" it offered.

"Fine, fine. Let's just get there quick like."

"Where?"

"TreeTop City!"

"You going there too? Hey man, you want to run there? The black and greens always make me feel like runnin'."

Grimbledung heard voices. Angry Halfling voices. "Yes, let's run there". Normally, there was no way that a Gnome could ever expect to match an Elf for speed, but after his interaction with the strange Teeth, Grimbledung felt confident he could do it. For a while at least.

Teeth looked around.

"TreeTop City," coaxed Grimbledung.

Teeth nodded. "Sure. Say, you want to run or ride?"

Grimbledung didn't even consider the question. "Ride, of course." It was his default mode of transportation for any trip.

Teeth swooped down and in one motion grabbed Grimbledung around the waist. He twisted him in the air and half-sat, half-tossed the Gnome onto his shoulders. "Ready?"

"Sure?" said Grimbledung. Unsurely.

"Not you, man. What you got to get ready for? You're *riding*."

"Ribbit!" Said the frog. Because it was ready.

"There he is!" a Halfling shouted.

"Hey you! Put that Gnome down, you stinking Elf!" Shouted Righty.

"Gah! Go, go, go!"

Teeth looked around then began to run in a totally different direction. It was, Grimbledung noted with relief, at least away from the Halflings who continued to shout. Grimbledung leaned back as the Elf picked up speed. True to his race, Teeth practically flew through the forest- jumping logs, ducking under branches; all without breaking stride.

Grimbledung expected the initial starting sprint to transition into a long-distance pace. After several minutes, he realized *this* was the long-distance pace. For another few minutes, he enjoyed the passing trees and vines. Twice they emerged into and through sun-filled clearings. Teeth ran straight through them without a look left or right.. Grimbledung had no idea where they were going, but they were making good time! Even so, the jostling was becoming a bit too much. "Getting sick" he warned. Twice.

Finally, Teeth turned onto a wide path that he suddenly encountered and after a few more paces, slowed to a jog, then a walk. Grimbledung slipped off Teeth's shoulders and slid down his back to the ground. "Wow," was all he managed to say. He paused a moment, hands on his knees as he took several deep breaths.

Teeth whirled around. "Hey! You following me, man?" He backed up a few steps. "You sure are fast for a Gnome!"

Grimbledung was unsure how to even answer the accusation so he ignored it hoping it would fade into the drug addled memories in Teeth's head. "Say, you going to TreeTop City?" He asked amicably instead.

"Yeah?"

"That's where I'm going, man. Want to walk there with me?"

"Sure, man," said Teeth. A confused look on his face. "Do I know you?"

"Ribbit," offered the frog.

"Right, you're running from those Halflings." He pointed but not in the direction they had just come from.

"Yeah. You said you were going to take me to TreeTop City."

Teeth nodded. He spat the frog into his hand. "Yeah." He smacked his lips as he looked at Grimbledung. Then he licked them.

"That frog taste funny or something?"

Teeth looked down at the frog. "Not more than usual." He put it back in his belt pouch. He licked his lips again. Then his stomach growled.

Grimbledung took a step back.

"Running makes me hungry, man." He looked around, then at Grimbledung, "So does tasting my frog." He reached out to grab something in front of his face. There was nothing there.

"You all right?"

"Yeah." He tried grabbing the phantom object again. He looked in his hand and frowned, disappointed. "Fairies."

"Sure there are. Hey, let's get going so you can get a proper meal in you," said Grimbledung. He was sure there was a nice, safe distance between him and the party of Halflings. After just days of onions, he was ready for a proper meal as well.

Teeth put his hand on his stomach. "I'm starving, man. Let's go." He picked up a faster than normal for him walk. "Let's go."

Grimbledung looked at the Elf. The Halflings were far behind. He was safe from them probably forever. Teeth had all but said he was going to eat him. Still, a proper meal... With a shrug, Grimbledung scooted to catch up with the departing Elf. After all, with only some dimwitted Elves to deal with (if Teeth was any indication), he was in less danger from them than those Halflings. Whom he would never see again. He waggled his ears. "Piece of cake!"

"Cake?" Teeth whirled on Grimbledung. "You got cake?" He frisked the Gnome frantically. "I want some cake!"

"I don't have cake, Teeth."

"Well, I gotta eat something, man. I'm starving!" He grabbed Grimbledung by the shoulders.

"Wait, wait! You don't know where I've been!"

"Where you been, man?" Asked Teeth.

"Lots of places! Lots!"

"Far out."

"Yeah, far out places! So you shouldn't eat me, cause you don't know what I've picked up!"

"You picked up something?" Teeth grimaced as he recoiled.

Grimbledung blinked at the Elf. There was no way it could be this easy. After all, the only people to actually survive a trip to TreeTop City were drooling vegetables. "Well, let's just say I did pick up something. Then what?"

"Well, we'd perform the Rite of Faug-a-Ballagh."

"That sounds fun. Is there eating involved? And music?"

"Sure, man."

"So just a ceremony to..." Grimbledung trailed off, hoping Teeth would end the sentence.

"To clean you out. For your own good, man."

"What's involved with that?" Grimbledung asked nervously. He was not pleased that Teeth finished his sentence and he wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

Teeth shrugged his shoulders, "We stuff you full of mushrooms we've rubbed all over the frogs out here."

"How does that clean me out?"

"How does what?"

"That?"

"That what?"

"For Delberger's Hand, just eat me!" Grimbledung said exasperated. "It'll be quick anyway."

"Really?"

"Well, once we get to TreeTop City, like we agreed," offered Grimbledung. "Remember?"

"Sure man, I remember." Teeth lied. He turned and began to walk. In a completely different direction. "Let's go."

Grimbledung followed close behind- the thought of a bunch of mushrooms had his stomach growling as well.

There's no way this is going to turn out well. "Quiet," hissed Grimbledung. To himself. "I'll get a meal then make a break for it. How hard can that be?"

He didn't answer himself. From past experience, he was well aware that Reason hadn't a chance when there was a free meal involved.

Chapter Twenty
Add a Dash of Halflings To Suit Taste

"Damn that Gnome!" Cursed Righty yet again. He sheathed his sword as he and the two remaining Halflings (that managed to keep up with him) turned to head back to the wagon train. "I'm going to kill that stinking Gnome."

"First you gotta find him, Righty," said one.

The other shook his head. "That's not the hard part." The other two turned to look so he continued, "Not getting killed by the Lord High Priest when he finds out you lost him, that's the hard part."

Righty redrew his sword. He was a full head taller than the pair. "What's this troll dung you're talking about? It seems to me *you're* the conductor of this wagon train. You'll be right there beside me at the CIA."

The conductor considered that for a moment. Criminal Incompetence Assessments invariably involved more than one individual. Being in charge of the overall operation gave him a front row seat to the proceedings. "So what are we gonna do?"

Righty slammed his sword back into its sheath. "That Gnome was with an Elf when I spotted him. That means there's only one place we need to look."

The first Halfling shook his head, "No way. Those Elves eat anyone they get their hands on. There's no way I'm going to actually go there on purpose."

The other Halfling nodded, "I'm with Vast on this one."

Righty shook his head. "At least with the Elves, you've got a chance with fighting back and escaping. It's real hard to fight back when you're stuck on a pole up to your neck." He pointed deeper into the forest. "No. Our only chance is to sneak in, grab that Gnome, and sneak out."

"What if that stupid Gnome puts up a fight?" Asked Vast.

"I can't see that happening. By the time we show up, he'll know he's being served up as a meal. He'll be glad to see us by that point."

The other two looked at each other, considering the hazardous plan.

The third option of just deserting was not even considered.

"OK," said Vast, "we're in. But we need to at least let the others know what we're doing."

Righty nodded. "Agreed. Let's get back, grab some supplies, and head out." He looked at the conductor, "Can you get the train to move slowly until we catch back up, Skies?"

The wagon train conductor nodded, "Sure. I'll have Savannah take charge. She's pretty persuasive."

The three returned to camp, made the necessary coordination, and began on their quest into the forest within half an hour.

"Think they'll wait for us?" Asked Righty.

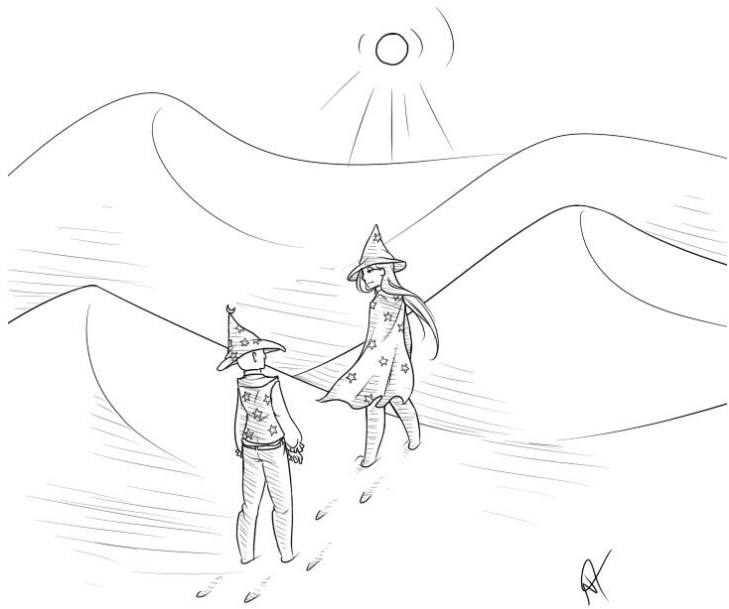
"Don't worry," said Skies, "Savannah and I have been together for two years now. She'll cut down every one of them that she has to, to keep the pace slow." Skies didn't know it at the time, but the actual number she would end up killing to slow the train's pace was two. Theirs was a good relationship. "The only thing we need to worry about are those ravenous Elves."

"Overwhelming success awaits us," said Vast. "No one stands in our way."

Meanwhile, in a subplot, far, far away...

Chapter Twenty-One
Semfeld and Liverioso…
Fifty Shades of Hopeless

The Pics milled about under hastily erected tents. As traveling merchants, mercenaries, and marauders (the three M's of the desert) they were well prepared to make stops even in the mid-day sun to ply their trade. Or, in this case, torment hapless stranded travelers who may or may not have something of value (that's falls under the third 'M'). As usual, the sun was blazing down on the rank and file but this time the rewards didn't seem worth the effort to most of them. Granted, the tormenting *was* amusing, but out on the middle of the Great Sandy Desert, it took more than a little amusement to keep rank and file Pics happy.



"Come out and we'll kill you!" Shouted the Pic Warrior. Several of the other Pics nodded their approval of the current line of negotiations.

"Whath? Donth you mean *OR* we'll kill you?"

There was a long pause as a discussion broke out among the Pic Warriors concerning conjunctions and their use in threats and-or negotiations. One Pic

even diagramed the sentence in the sand using the end of his wickedly curved falchion. Nomadic lifestyle notwithstanding, grammar couldn't just be thrown to the wayside; they might have all been societal cast-outs, misfits, and miscreants but that didn't mean they weren't civilized! Finally the Pics came to a consensus...

"Come out *OR* we'll wait till you're dead and use you bones for flutes!" Bellowed the Pic Warrior past a wide smile. He didn't know it at the moment, but this particular bout of negotiating would be the high-point of his month.

"Over our dead bothies!" Liverioso bellowed back. He waved a frying pan at the trap door in the ceiling. Weakly.

"That's not what we'd call a good negotiating tactic!" The Warrior grinned. "Youth enth upth death either way!"

"Ooohhh!" Fumed Liverioso. It was bad enough that the Pic Warrior wanted them dead, but to make fun of him while he waited? That was just mean spirited.

Semfeld leaned back against the wall, exhausted. "We're done for, Liv. Stop taunting the Pics." The Webber stew, pie, jerky, and finally meatloaf (it's always last) was long gone. In fact, it had been three days since the last of the Shambler flea soup and sawdust bread had been eaten and he was famished. "Let's just sit in peace until we die." He weakly raised a hand at his partner, "So quit answering that Pic."

"Whath you thay in there?" Bellowed the Pic Warrior as his fellow Pics laughed uproariously. Since discovering Liverioso's lisp, they had all been having a high time with it.

"Oooohh!! I hate you tho much!" Yelled back Liverioso as the laughter increased outside. He turned to look at his partner, "Hang on Themfeld. We'll get out of this. All we need is thom bargaining power."

"That's all?" Semfeld answered for what had to have been the tenth time. "Like I told you, we have nothing to bargain with." His head lolled to the side. "We're done for. Put down that frying pan and quit pestering that Pic. If we're nice to him, maybe he'll give us some water before he finishes us off."

Suddenly a Halfling Warrior appeared in the room. "DIE you!" He snarled as he swung at an opponent that wasn't there. "What?" He squeaked suddenly confused and off balance.

"That's all we need," remarked Semfeld as he gazed upon the Halfling. The Halfling's eyes narrowed as he turned his attention to Semfeld. "Oh, great…"

"Oooohhh!" Cheered Liverioso. With strength he didn't know he had, he raised his frying pan high above his head and brought it crashing down on the side of the Halflings head (the top had a double bladed axe attached to it). With a resounding '*Gong*', the Halfling crumbled to the ground. "Ahhh haaa!"

Semfeld's eyes grew large. "What in the lands?"

Liverioso raised his frying pan in triumph. "Bargaining power!" He cheered. He turned to address the trap door.

"Let me do this Liv. Otherwise it may not work," said Semfeld as he straightened up. He too turned to look at the trap door. He cleared his throat. "OK, You stinking Pics! You have us beat!" He shouted. A cheer arose from the Pic warriors outside. "We will trade you for our lives!"

The cheers and laughter died off instantly. Insatiable traders, Pics were unable to pass up any offer at bargaining.

"What have you got to trade?" Shouted the Pic Warrior. "We don't need a frying pan!"

"For our lives, we will trade you our…" Semfeld thought for a moment for the correct way to describe their new-found companion. Laughter could be heard outside. "Our…," he continued. "Highly trained, absurdly lethal Attack Halfling!"

The laughter outside died off again. Attack Halflings were highly prized and very difficult to get. Especially alive. "You're bluffing!" Shouted the Warrior. Several of the Pics rested their hands on their weapons. Since the word 'Attack Halfling' had come out of the underground way-station, the tension had raised two notches. Attack Halflings were not something to be taken lightly.

Semfeld worked his way to a standing position and moved over to the crumpled Halfling. With a grunt he picked up the Halfling -careful to avoid all the pointed and sharpened parts- and moved to the ladder. With another grunt, he hefted the Halfling up to the trap door. "Liverioso, hold this thing up while I work the door," he said.

Liverioso moved up the ladder as well and rested the Halfling on his shoulder – careful to avoid the foot long scythes attached to its feet, and the spikes on its knees. And its thighs.

Semfeld flipped the latch on the trap door and peeked out. There were over a dozen Pics outside. Things didn't look good. "Here he is!" He called out. With that he raised one of the Halflings hands out the trap door and waved it around. There was a twisted black dagger tied to it. It glistened with poison.

"What's that? We can't see what that is!" Said the Pic Warrior. "That could be anything!"

Semfeld scowled, "Do you think we'd try to trick mighty Pic Warriors?"

The Pic Warrior laughed at Semfeld. "What was that I just heard?" He turned and shouted over his shoulder, "What's the first Rule of the Pic?"

"The First Rule of the Pics is we do NOT talk about the Pics!" a (new) Pic Marauder shouted immediately. He was rewarded with a slap to the back of the head.

The Pic Warrior turned around to look at the rapidly blushing Marauder. "What's the first *not secret* Rule of the Pic?"

In unison all the Pics shouted in return, "Flattery is the first sign of capitulation!"

"And the Second Rule?"

"You DON'T talk about…" began the new Pic Marauder as he was again hit in the head.

"WE HATE CAPITULATION!" Shouted the rest of the Pics.

"But you're buyers and traders!" Said Liverioso, confused, "how could you hate capithulation?"

The Pic Warrior turned back around and glowered at the trap door, "That's *capitalism you dolt* We love capitalism- it's the best thing since Free Trade Agreements. Capitulation is…" He paused and frowned; "Now you're just stalling! Weapons at the ready!"

"No, No!" Said Semfeld, "We've got an Attack Halfling, really!" He looked down at his partner, "Liverioso, push this thing up higher."

With a grunt Liverioso pushed the still-unconscious Halfling up into the opening of the trap door. The Halfling flopped out and onto its side. Semfeld picked up its head and turned it toward the Warrior.

"That thing looks dead!" Said the Pic Warrior.

Semfeld feigned offense, "Are you saying our Attack Halfling isn't what it ought to be?"

Now the Pic Warrior was on the defensive, "No, it's just that… it's not very active, that's all. Is he still in the land of the living?"

"We keep it unconscious until we need him. These things can be pretty dangerous you know!"

The Pic Warrior shrugged, "I suppose so. *BUT* if we conclude negotiations, and later find out that your Halfling is not of the living, the entire deal is off." He narrowed his eyes menacingly, "And your heads as well." His eyes grew wide, "Unless of course, he's a Zombie Attack Halfling…"

"Gads no!" Semfeld shuddered at the thought. "That'd be a Doomsday Weapon!"

"Fine then. As long as your Halfling has not ceased to be, we will deal."

"And you're authorized to make decisions for the entire group?" Semfeld asked suspiciously. He had heard where unscrupulous Pics (and Pirates) often had just a rank and file member deal with negotiating and if things did not turn out well, the age old 'that guy didn't know what he was talking about' defense was played.

"I am the current leader of this group of Pics," said the Pic Chieftain. "Elected by a show of hands so it was all on the up and up. My term runs until the end of the month so you have a good ten days before anything I say is no longer valid."

The other Pics all nodded in agreement. As far as elections went, the Pics were the most above-board groups in the lands.[9]

"Agreed then!" agreed Semfeld as he clambered up, dragging the Halfling with him. Now that official negotiations had started, there was no imminent danger. With Pics, negotiations were an automatic cessation of all hostile activities; during the negotiating process, Pics were downright pleasant to deal with.

"So…" began the Pic Chieftain with a courteous bow.

Semfeld hefted the limp Halfling into a standing position, "Here's what you get."

"Ahh," said the Chieftain as he moved forward. He motioned for one of his men to bring water, "Standard Attack Halfling with battle axe helm, scythe footings, and double daggers on the hands. Poisoned I see. Light armor and spikes on all joints, able to be catapulted, tossed, or otherwise shied at enemies." He bent over and examined the Halfling closely. "Fairly young so no chronic injuries to contend with…" He smiled broadly, "And I even like the color of its armor." He stuck out his hand.

Semfeld carefully lowered the Halfling to the ground (there were a lot of pointy objects it could have easily skewered itself on and thereby negated the entire deal) and then slapped the Pic's hand.

"You will have mounts. Food. Water. Weapons. And a Writ of Safe Passage to the edge of the Great Sandy Desert." He slapped Semfeld's hand back and smiled broadly. He was now the *only* Caravan Leader to have his own personal Attack Halfling. Not only would it help his reelection at the end of the month, at the next Pic Jamboree, he was assured a place of honor. Or else.

A Pic Marauder handed Semfeld a Thrakskin full of water. Liverioso came up behind his partner and slapped him on the back, "Thee! I thold you things would work out!"

The two Magicians Guild Enforcers moved to the shade of the tent. Oddly, there was a Wooly Shambler under it. Even more oddly, there was someone tied to the back. "What'cha got there?" Asked Semfeld as he pointed at the figure.

"We found her wandering the desert. No food. No water. On the verge of death. So we grabbed her." The Pic Warrior shrugged, "You never know what you can trade a Gnomess for. She might be worth a wagon." He lifted her head and examined her face, "Or maybe another Wooly Shambler even."

Semfeld nodded, "Sounds like easy pickings."

The Pic got a far-off look in his eyes as he thought back on the incident. "She got four of us before we realized what was happening. Whoever she is, she's very skilled."

"With a weapon?"

"With a water skin."

"She killed four *Pic Warriors* with a water skin?" Semfeld gaped at the unconscious figure.

"Well, it *was* full," said the Pic defensively as he moved off.

"I see." Semfeld looked at the unconscious figure with newfound respect.

"Think the Pics will hold up their end of the bargain?" Liverioso whispered into his partner's ear as he sidled up to him.

Semfeld glanced over and shook his head solemnly. "Not a chance."

"Whath are we going to do?"

Semfeld gestured casually at the unconscious female. "She might be our best hope. If we can get her free, she might be willing to help us all escape." He shrugged, "Or she may just kill us along with everyone else in her way."

"Whath? Whath kind of plan ith that?" Liverioso peered at the unconscious Gnomess. "She'th thath dangerouth?"

Semfeld nodded as he put his arm around his partner and guided him to a far corner of the tent, "Let's just keep cool until we know what our situation is. You never know with Pics."

"Whath youth tooth talking abouth?" The Pic Warrior pushed between the two Magicians, putting his arms around both of them.

"We're just wondering where we're going from here."

The Warrior squeezed the two men's shoulders. Hard. "We're sticking together for now. We're one big happy family you know."

"Are you gonna keep making fun of the way I talk?" Asked Liverioso.

"Yeth" guffawed the Pic as he slapped the two on their backs then moved off, leaving them under the tent alone.

The Gnomess stirred groggily. Semfeld gaped at her. "Liverioso, go out there and distract those Pics while I try to make some inroads with this Gnomess."

"Thure thing!" With a wink, Liverioso moved towards a group of Pics. "Thay fellas. How are things?" He asked loudly.

Quickly Semfeld moved to the side of the Gnomess. He bent down and peered into her face. It was twisted up in rage. "You okay?" He asked.

The Gnomess muttered something unintelligible.

"What?" Semfeld moved closer to her mouth, "I can't understand you."

She muttered again.

Now Semfeld's ear was practically at her mouth. "What?"

With a quick twist, she head butted Semfeld just above, and in front of his ear -where, thanks to her Assassin training, she knew the sutura sphenosquamosal joint ran. One of the better places to crack a skull. White spots danced before his eyes and he staggered back. "Hey!" He complained as he grabbed the Wooly Shambler's harness to keep his balance.

The Gnomess smirked at Semfeld, "Did ya hear *that*?"

Semfeld moved quickly to the Gnomess' face again. "Stop that, you fool! We're captured too and I was trying to see if you wanted to join us when we tried to escape! We could just leave you here you know."

The Gnomess eyed the Human's upside down face suspiciously. "Prisoners too?"

Semfeld nodded furiously. "Yeah. My partner and I are Magician Guild Enforcers with the full weight and authority…"

"Right, right. Get to the part where you untie me," the Gnomess interrupted him.

"As soon as we figure out where we're going and how many Pics there are total and…"

"There's twelve left," interrupted the prisoner.

The upside down face moved closer. "…but first we need your assurance that you're not going to do anything to me and my partner when we untie you. I want you to understand that the Pics are our common enemy."

"You aren't who I'm interested in," said the Gnomess, "help me out of here and we can go our separate ways."

"Promise?"

The Gnomess narrowed her deep green eyes. "I give you my word as a Grand Master Assassin. You are not my target."

"Do you mean now, or ever?"

The Gnomess struggled against her bonds, "You're getting on my nerves, Human."

"Semfeld"

"You're getting on my nerves Semfeld. Don't press your luck."

Semfeld nodded. "Fine then. I'll keep you posted and let you know when we're going to make a break for it…" He paused expectedly.

"Chéri"

"Chéri. So, be ready. It'll be sooner not later."

Chéri nodded at the upside down Human. There were indeed other more pressing targets on her hit list. With a certain two Gnomes occupying the uppermost positions. "Okay."

One Week Later

Chéri glowered at Semfeld from across the campfire. Her feet were bound and one arm was tied to a stake that was driven deep into the ground. With her free hand, she fed herself. Without utensils. The Pics had learned very recently that although not lethal, a spoon *could* be hurled with enough force and accuracy to put out an eye. At least by this particular prisoner.

"Are we going to be in town soon?" Semfeld asked.

The Pic Chieftain smiled broadly. He turned to look directly at Liverioso. "Which town?"

Liverioso frowned, pressing his lips together.

"Which town?" Coaxed the Pic.

"Cool Thpringths" Liverioso said sourly.

The Pics broke out in laughter. "That never gets old, does it?" Said the Chieftain. He looked at Liverioso. His face was red with a combination of anger and embarrassment. "I'm going to miss you two. Really I am."

"You're going to leave us at Cool Springs then?" Asked Semfeld anxiously.

The Chieftain nodded. "A deal's a deal," he lied. He gestured at the Halfling Warrior. He also had his feet bound and one arm anchored to the ground. All of his armor had been removed as well. "You two are easily worth that little devil." He tossed a piece of meat at the Halfling.

It caught it and quickly stuffed it into its mouth. "Kill!" It said when it was done chewing.

"Whaths going to happen with the Gnometh?" Liverioso asked. He wasn't going to let ridicule keep him from the conversation.

"Oh, we have plans for her," said one of the Pic Warriors. The one who, due to recent, unforeseen cutlery events, was wearing an eye patch. "Definite plans." He narrowed his remaining eye at the Gnomess.

Semfeld nodded solemnly. "You have to admit; she's a crack shot with a spoon."

Now the eye patch wearing Pic narrowed his eye at Semfeld.

Liverioso smiled at his partner for the jab.

"We'll be there tomorrow," said the Pic Chieftain. Without realizing it, he gestured towards the town. He did not notice, but Chéri drew a line in the sand in the direction of his gesture.

"That's good to hear," said Semfeld.

"Something wrong with our company?" The Chieftain said, suddenly annoyed.

Semfeld shook his head quickly, "Oh no, not at all" he said honestly. "The legendary hospitality of the Pics when involved in negotiations is well

represented by you all. It's just that we have someone to kill you see. It's nothing personal."

The Chieftain leaned forward. "Do tell! There's nothing like a good tale of revenge around a campfire."

Semfeld shrugged, "There's not much to tell. There are these two Gnomes who run a wand shop…"

Chéri looked in Semfeld's direction.

"… and we went there to dole out some Magician Guild Enforcer punishment because of their Mechanimated antics. You know, pots, pans, a door. Even this jousting dummy..."

Chéri stopped eating.

"… and thanks to one of those contemptible, unstable Gnomes, we wound up in that hidey-hole you found us in. But now..."

Chéri put down her plate. (it was a barely stiff piece of leather cut unevenly so it wouldn't even fly straight).

"… once we get back to Cool Springs, we'll contact the Magician's Guild to get us a line of credit so we can rent some fast animals…"

Chéri leaned forward.

"…and once and for all rid the lands of Grimbledung and Drimblerod."

Chéri screamed.

The Pics turned to look at their normally quiet, usually hazardous captive.

"What in the Lands," asked Semfeld. "Has gotten into you?"

Chéri saw red before her. Red sky. Red sand. Red Pics. Red! RED! **RED!**

"Quiet you!" Commanded the one-eyed Pic. He stood and stalked toward the still-screaming Gnomess. As he went, he bent down and took a burning branch from the fire. He held it out in front of him as he approached the Gnomess. "You only speak when spoken to!"

Chéri continued to scream. It was the howl of a tormented beast. As the Pic approached, she pushed herself into a standing position. Her bound feet made

her unstable but she leaned forward, making the rope anchoring her to the ground tight. As she pushed with her legs, her feet sank in the sand, giving her more stability.

"Shut up!" The Pic raised the flaming branch high over his head as he approached. Embers fell from it, falling to the sand like tiny flaming snowflakes.

Chéri's scream turned into a guttural growl. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, she sat back and crumpled in a heap and began to sob. She brought her hand to her face and waves of sobbing wracked her body. Her feet were still buried in the sand. The once-taught rope now hung slack.

The one-eyed Pic reached Chéri and paused. This was not something he had expected from the usually-angry, always-dangerous captive. He lowered the branch and bent down to address her. She was, after all, a female, and the Pic's mother had raised him right. "Wait now, I didn't…" he began

In one fluid motion, Chéri kicked her feet up, spraying the Pic's face with sand. Reflexively he dropped the burning branch and tried to clear his lone eye. The branch landed at Cheri's feet. She scooted her feet over the fire and let it work on her bindings.

"Look out!" Said the Chieftain, as he began to stand.

Chéri reached out with her one free hand and grabbed the eye-rubbing Pic by the chest. She pulled him down to his knees as he tried to get the fine sand from his remaining eye. "Fight, you fools!" She snapped as she pulled her legs apart as the ropes burned through. Jumping to her feet, she knee'ed the Pic in the face. He crumpled to the ground unconscious.

Several other Pics stood up, reaching for their weapons as they went.

Liverioso drew Garibaldis' wand and aimed at the first four Pics that had managed to get to their feet.

Monkeys… Go Pop!

He intoned. (It was a nice, non-lispable intonation)

The incantation hit three of them. Immediately, they flashed into monkeys. Very confused Howler monkeys.

"Wooooop!" Complained one of the monkeys. The other two nodded in agreement.

Two more Pics rolled to their sides, drawing their weapons as they got to their feet. They kept low so the fire was between them and the lisping, and apparently armed Magician. Two others moved to try to restrain the Gnomess who now seemed to be in the possession of a Pic ceremonial dagger. At almost twelve inches long along its curved blade, it was not just for show; Pic ceremonies sometimes got out of hand. The two Pics circled just out of reach of the Gnomess as she jabbed the dagger at them.

"Where do you think you're going?" Taunted one of the Pics. He leaned in smiled broadly at her.

Chéri took two steps back and cut the rope anchoring her to the Great Sandy Desert at sand-level. "Wherever I want to," she snarled as she swung her arm, and accompanying rope over her head. It almost cracked like a whip as it struck out at one of the Pic. She kept it twirling over her head as she advanced, ceremonial Pic dagger first.

Monkeys… Go Pop!

Intoned Liverioso again.

Another confused monkey joined the fray.

"WOOOP!" He complained. Rightfully so.

"There's seven left!" Said Chéri as she twirled the rope over her head, corralling the two Pics farther from the fire. "Where are they?"

Bazinga Monkey!

Intoned Liverioso.

"One more down!" Liverioso said.

The Halfling Warrior looked back and forth at the action, hoping someone got close enough for him to grab them. However, even in the melee, no one lost their presence of mind that much.

"Everyone hold!" Commanded the Pic Chieftain, angrily.

The Pics all turned to look at their leader. He was standing ramrod straight. Behind him was the non-lisping Magician. He was also apparently armed.

"Drop your weapons!" Semfeld commanded.

The Pics all sheathed their weapons.

"I said *drop* them!"

"You drop your weapon in the sand!" Said one Pic, "I work hard to keep my weapon sharp, clean and oiled. There's no *way* it's going on the ground. It'd be like telling me to let it clatter onto a stone floor. Absurd. And honestly, it's just plain rude to even suggest it." He shook his head, "Drop them in the sand. I mean *honestly*." Several other Pics nodded in agreement. "We'll put them away but that's the best you're going to get." Even a monkey nodded this time.

"Well, I want them on the ground so that I know I'm safe."

"Really?" Said the Pic. "Why? Because they are just sooo hard to pick back up again? As soon as you run off, you know we're all just going to pick them up and come after you."

"I could kill you!"

"Sure. But then it doesn't matter if our weapons are on the ground or in our sheaths now does it?" Argued the Pic. "No. They go in the sheaths and you'll just have to deal with it." He crossed his arms to show he was through debating the issue.

"Errr…" said Semfeld. "All right then." He gestured with his wand, "Over there."

The Pics all moved to the far side of the fire.

Liverioso moved beside his partner, "Very nice!" He smiled broadly at the Gnomess. She was moving toward him. She still seemed angry. She was also still very much armed. "Nice work, Chéri!"

Chéri moved to the two Humans. "We don't celebrate until we're far away from here." She gestured towards the Monkey-Pics. "How long does that spell last?"

Semfeld shrugged, "About three or four hours." He tilted his hand back and forth, "Or so."

Chéri nodded. "Perfect." She glared at the remaining Pics. "Do them too."

"Gladly!" Liverioso aimed the wand at them.

The Pics looked wide-eyed at him. "Sorry about the teasing," said one. "If it makes any difference."

Liverioso beamed, "It thure does! Thankths!"

Several Pics giggled at him.

MONKEYS … ***GO POP!***

Snarled Liverioso as he slashed his wand at them.

"Woo. That batch might be like that until tomorrow," remarked Semfeld.

"All's the better," said Chéri. She turned to look at the lone remaining Pic. The Chieftain. "All right, Chiefie Wiefie," she said. "We're going to have some quick and easy negotiations. You'll love it."

The Chieftain raised an eyebrow at her, "If you're hoping for some begging. That's not going to happen."

Chéri moved in front of the Chieftain and looked up at him. "Negotiating. That's what we're doing here." She pointed the dagger at the Chieftain's chest.

"I'm listening." Even in such dire circumstances, the chance to negotiate was still overwhelming. "What's the offer?" He said hopefully.

"We don't kill you all. And you don't pursue us."

"How's that negotiating? That's more like a threat." Let down, the Chieftain scrunched up his face. "You need to work on your negotiating skills."

"I'm an assassin. Those are the skills I work on," said Chéri. "So the other side of the coin is that you can say you don't accept those terms and we kill you all. Right now, you'll just be a monkey for a while. That shouldn't be very lethal. Even in the Great Sandy Desert. I assure you, the alternative is *very* lethal."

"That's still not very good negotiating," whined the let-down Chieftain. "But I suppose I accept those terms." His face brightened. "With one exception!"

"Pics." Chéri rolled her eyes. "What's the exception?"

"Make me a *big* monkey."

Chéri nodded at Semfeld who had taken control of Garibaldis' wand when Liverioso picked up a free weapon. "Fine."

Kazaama Kong!

Apeasaurus

Intoned Semfeld.

In a flash, the Chieftain became a fifteen foot tall, black ape. It stood upright, and towered over the two Humans -and especially the Gnomess-. "Was that really a good idea?" Chéri asked as she took a step back.

The ape looked up at the sky and growled. Glowering down at Chéri, it beat its chest. It sounded like claps of thunder.

"I really think it's time to leave," suggested Semfeld. His eyes got wide. "Which way is town?"

The giant ape laughed a deep throaty laugh. It sat roughly. The ground shook as it did. The PicMonkeys moved over to their leader. One hopped onto his back and began to search for nits. The others followed suit. The ape looked down at the trio. It laughed again as it spread its arms out wide.

Chéri turned her back on the ape and moved to where she had started the melee anchored to the ground. The flaming branch was still there. She picked it up and after only a moment's searching, found her line in the sand. "It's that way," she said as she pointed. The giant ape narrowed its yellow eyes at her. "All we have to do is keep the Western Star over on our right shoulder and we'll be fine. Once the sun comes up, we keep that at our backs. Which should be really easy to do."

"We'll be walking on our shadows!"

"Calm down Liv that's just an old wives' tale," said Semfeld. Nervously.

"Either way, leth's get going while ith's cool out," suggested Liverioso.

One of the monkeys chuckled.

"Good idea, Liv," said Semfeld as he moved to the Shamblers. The ape growled at him. "We'll take just two," he said cautiously. Animals were not in the original negotiations and pressing their advantage could have the entire situation spiral out of control. "How's that?"

The ape flailed its arms over his head. A Howler monkey went flying in the process.

"We'll take that as a 'yes' then," said Chéri as she also moved to the animals. Even so, she kept an eye on the large, now sulking ape.

Liverioso hung two water skins on one beast while Semfeld hung one on the other. "That's all we should need. We'll be there before noon tomorrow." He swung himself into the high saddle and reached for Chéri. "Up you go."

Chéri stared at him. "Not a chance."

The ape chuckled. It sounded like distant thunder. "Oook! Ooook!" He teased.

Semfeld mounted the other beast, "Ride with me then."

"I want my own mount."

The ape chuckled again.

"Listen Chéri," began Semfeld, "it's just doesn't make good sense. We're both big so we should be on our own mount. You're…"

Chéri raised an eyebrow.

"Oh now, come on. Are you one of those people who are somehow unaware of their size? You're a *Gnome* for Sheeba's Teats. You're less than half our weight. Having two of us on one mount and you all alone is absurd. We'll make much better time if you alternate between the two mounts."

The ape grunted his approval.

"You stay out of this!"

"Besides, I can athure you that our intenthions are completely honorable," offered Liverioso.

Chéri raised an eyebrow.

"Right! What can be more honorable that going to dole out some swift, cold justice!"

"Fine. If you put it that way." Chéri grabbed Semfeld's hand and he pulled her easily into the saddle in front of him.

"Let's go while the sun's still sleeping in its underground realm." Liverioso kicked his mount in the sides and it moved off at a slow trot.

"Bye monkeys!" Said Semfeld as he too coaxed his mount into motion. He swung around in front of the Ape Chieftain, "And keep your stinking paws out of our tracks, you damned dirty Ape!"

The Ape covered its ears. "Bah," it said. Rightfully so.

With that Liverioso, turned and went to catch up with his partner.

The ape narrowed his eyes at the backs of the two Humans and the Gnomess. *And* his two mounts. Oh yes, swift cold justice was on the menu. He twitched his back. But first there was a nit that needed attention. "Oook!" He commanded as a monkey moved to track down the pesky hitchhiker.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Foreboding Forest- Not Really as Nice as it Sounds

"Finally. The Foreboding Forest," said RatShambler. "Now we just need to find one solitary Gnome inside a massive forest that just happens to be dark and foreboding because it's filled with cantankerous Minotaur, quirky Elves, and who knows what other horrible creatures."

"Yeah. We need to get Grim out before he ruins the place."

"All right you two," said Nulu. "We'll just go in, ask around, and someone's liable to know where he is."

None of them moved.

The dense forest spread out before them in both directions. Tall trees stood a hundred feet above smaller ones, then shrubs and bushes. Vines seemed to interconnect the layers. Sunlight barely made it to the forest floor. The path they were on continued into the twilight that was mid-day in the forest. It was, as its name suggested, quite foreboding. And creepy thanks to the fact that the way the forest started; abruptly. Most forests started out as a few trees here and there, and gradually built in density to the middle, then thinned out as one left. This was not the case with the Foreboding Forest; there was open green plains all around, then a solid line of forest interrupted it as if the entire thing had been dropped into place by some malevolent god who probably didn't get invited to the millennial god jamboree and field day because they were just a little too creepy, but they showed up anyway, which really made the other gods uncomfortable. That kind of god. Even the low grass seemed to end in a neat line at the edge of the forest as if it weren't disturbing enough to be allowed inside the forest.

"So let's go in and find Grim," said Nulu.

None of them moved.

"Right."

None of them moved.

"Bah! I'll go in first." The Gnoll stepped forward into the shadow of the forest. Suddenly a stiff breeze assaulted him. Dry leaves whipped about as the temperature even dropped several degrees. A crow cawed in the distance. Angrily. He took a step back. The sun was shining down on a clear, calm day on the Great Shambler Plains. "Ahh, you two comin'?" He asked hopefully.

"Where have you been?" Said Nulu, alarmed.

"What?"

"You've been gone three days!" Exclaimed Rat.

"What?!"

"Just kidding," teased Nulu. She winked at the Gnoll. "Had you going though, right?"

"Sure." He shook his head. "You two…"

"Really, we're right behind you," assured Nulu.

"This time, definitely," added Rat.

None of them moved.

Klank turned to look at the two. "That's enough of that. Let's get in there for goodness sakes!" Klank steeled himself and stepped forward again. This time Nulu and Rat joined him.

A leaf whipped around and slapped against RatShambler's neck. "They should call this place the Creepy Forest."

The three continued along the dimly lit path. Much to their relief, the breeze died down after a few moments. It was as if the forest had accepted them. It was still dark and cool however, and the forest seemed to be teeming with life. Unseen birds called to each other from all directions above, hidden beasts of indeterminate size grunted and foraged out of sight in the thick underbrush. Even the angry chatter of monkeys up in the topmost parts of the trees filtered down to them.

"So what's the plan, Nulu?"

Nulu shrugged at Rat. She pointed deeper into the forest with her please stick. "Let's stay on the path so we don't get lost. Then we..."

A howl interrupted her. The entire forest fell silent.

The three froze.

"What was that?"

"A grrrey wolf," said Klank. "An Alpha."

"Are you sure?" Asked Rat again. He looked around nervously.

Klank nodded. "That's what he said. Seems the inhabitants know we're here." He smirked. "At least the canine population." He tilted his head upward and let loose his own howl.

"I hope that was a 'we're friendly and not looking for any trouble and we'll be on our way just as soon as we find our friend' howl."

"That would be a good howl," agreed Nulu.

"I just said hello, you two. I think we're safe from the wolves."

"Wolve*sss*?" Asked Rat.

Klank sniffed the air. "Or at least I am, anyway. So that's a good thing."

"Yeah, good thing *you're all right*. I was getting worried." RatShambler narrowed his one good eye. "About you."

"Look on the bright side, Rat," Klank said, "at least I'll be able to plead our case to the pack. Oh..." A thought occurred to him. "We should make sure we dig holes to piss in."

"Why?" Asked Nulu.

"It would be bad."

"I'm kind of fuzzy on the whole good - bad thing, being a rat," said Rat. "Why would that be bad?"

"Look at it this way," Klank said, "People you don't know, who you didn't invite, show up and come into your house. They start writing their names on all

sorts of your stuff and even on the doors to your rooms. How would that make you feel?"

"I suppose I'd be royally annoyed," said Rat.

"And that's how every single wolf in the forest would feel when you just peed on something."

"OK. Good safety tip." Nulu nodded, "Thanks Klank." She pointed into the forest. "We want to be as neighborly as possible. And as quick as possible so let's get moving."

The three stayed on the path for the better part of the afternoon. At least they assumed it was still afternoon; it seemed to be perpetually twilight in the forest. At one point, they took a relief and snack break. Dutifully digging holes.

"You know, I can't really tell any difference between this part of the forest and where we first came in."

"Oh, Rat?"

Rat nodded, "Right, I mean, usually you can tell when you're getting deeper into a forest as you walk, and different things live at different places in it." He looked around. "This looks the same all the way through."

Nulu looked around as well. "It would be easy to get lost in here."

Klank shook his head, "I know which way we came from." He pointed in a direction that was generally behind them. "We came from that way so when it's time to leave, I'll just sniff our way back the way we came."

"Really?"

"Sure. I'm sure our trail'll last for a good couple of days so as long as we find him by then, we're fine. Unless..."

"Unless what?" Rat looked around again. "Unless what?"

It started to rain.

"Well, that, for one thing."

Rat shook his fur. "Come on! This is about the most unwelcoming forest I've ever been in."

Nulu reached under her pack and pulled out a rolled poncho. She slipped it over her head, letting it drape to her knees. It looked to be made of very thin leather and had been oiled many times through years of use. The rain dutifully ran off it. She flipped the hood up, masking her face.

"I see you're prepared for any occasion."

Nulu did a little hop as she pulled the poncho down on her back and around her pack. The hem in the back was a little higher than the front because of it, but even so, she was almost completely covered. "There's no reason to be uncomfortable if you don't have to be."

Klank shook his fur. "Let's keep moving." He looked up into the treetops. The rain was coming down steadily under the triple canopy of the forest so outside, it must have been storming. "Maybe this will let off soon." He pointed deeper into the forest, "Thataway."

"How are you sure where you're going? Have you ever been here before?" Rat fell into step beside the Gnoll.

Klank shook his head, "Nope. But that way is towards the middle of this forest, and that's prolly where the Elves live."

"We're actually *trying* to find the Elves?"

"Well, if Grimbledung acts like Grimbledung, the odds are that the Elves already have him." This was Nulu. "All we have to do is find them, and hopefully they will be reasonable enough to let him go."

"Reasonable Elves?"

"Elves are usually reasonable." Nulu chuckled. "They're haughty as this forest is dark, but they are reasonable."

"What about the other inhabitants of this place? You think they're reasonable too?"

"Most creatures are just trying to get along in life so they're not looking for anything that will disrupt that. Eat something tasty. Sleep somewhere comfortable. Make little babies. Repeat. That sort of thing."

"You make it sound so nice." Rat grinned at her. "For a Trolless."

"We Trolls are a misunderstood race."

Klank laughed at this. “You should run for mayor next, Nulu. You really have the gift.”

That was when a Minotaur showed up. He was not pleased. Mainly because that was how he felt on any given day. Even when he got a good night’s sleep, ate a good meal, and made a baby. Or two.

Chapter Twenty-Three
It was One Fine Day in the TreeTop City-
Until Grimbledung showed up

"Are we there yet?"

"Man, if you ask me that one more time..."

"Ask what?"

"Are we there yet, man."

"We'll get there when we get there!" Grimbledung guffawed. "Get it?"

"No, I don't get it." Teeth frowned.

"Maybe we should play a different game."

"Sure." Teeth shrugged. He was seriously considering putting Ribbit back in his mouth, even though he knew that would lead him to eating the Gnome there and then. "Pick something fun, man." If he had not already been scolded for doing that very thing with a wayward Halfling he encountered the day before. Or was it the day before that? Either way, he was told to bring prospective meals back. Intact. It was becoming a hard request to follow. The Gnome seemed to be talking again. It did that a lot. Teeth focused his attention on the strange creature.

"Simple, right? I'll go first so you can see how it works."

"Sure, man"

"I spy with my beady eye..."

"You're a spy, man?" Teeth whirled on Grimbledung, "That's not cool!" He un-slung his bow with lightning speed and notched an arrow just as quickly. "Spyin's is definitely not cool." He pulled the bow back and aimed at Grimbledung's head. Right between his eyes. With how far he had drawn the bow, and how close he was, the arrow would easily go straight through the Gnome's head and exit (messily) out the other side. "Who you spyin' for?"

Grimbledung's knees got rubbery. "What? I'm no spy." He took a step back. Now his bowels felt rubbery.

Teeth took a step forward. "Yeah you are. I heard so myself." He looked left and right, "That's the word on the street, man."

Grimbledung looked down. They weren't even *on* a street. "What street?"

The muscles on Teeth's slim arm bulged as he drew the bow even further. His other hand trembled from the tension. Two fingers grasping the thin piece of sinew stood between Grimbledung's life and death.

"Who you spyin' for, man?"

Grimbledung's brain reeled. If he said someone the Elves didn't get along with, he was dead. But how was he to know who that was? Who did regular Elves not like? Pretty much everyone! He took a breath as a thought came to him; maybe if he were a spy for whomever these Elves aligned with, he would be safe. But how was he to know who that was? *Pick something vague but not too vague! Something likeable. And friendly! Why would friendly things have spies.* *They were friendly!* "Gah! I don't know!"

Teeth had been sighting down his arrow with one eye. He picked his head up. "You don't know, man?"

Grimbledung blinked at the Elf, trying to whip up some tears. "No?"

"How do you not know?"

"Know what?"

"What?"

"Right!" Said Grimbledung. He was grasping at straws.

Teeth slacked the bow. "What don't you know?"

'How far we are from TreeTop City' was the first thing that popped into Grim's head. So he said it. "How far we are from TreeTop City." See?

"We're there, man," said Teeth. He pointed upward with the arrow.

Above them, Grimbledung saw long bridges connecting the trees, soaring balconies, and even entire structures attached to branches hanging precariously in open air. It was all a full 100 feet above. "Gads, that's amazing," he said. When

he looked back down, something caught his eye. He looked down at the ground. Alarmingly, the ground was littered with bones from various creatures. "What are all these…"

"Let's get up there. I'm starving." Teeth interrupted him as he eyed Grimbledung hungrily. "We go up over there." He pointed at a massive oak tree. There were two Elves standing at the base of it.

"So how do we get up?" Grimbledung craned his neck to look far up into the trees instead of the alarming amount of bones on the ground. "That's going to be a serious climb."

"We ride up. It's quick and easy. Climb? What are you, some kind of savage?" Teeth shook his head. "Get in, man." He gestured at an intricately made wood cage.

Grimbledung looked around as they walked to the contraption. The ground along the way was even littered with bones. When they stopped, Grimbledung looked at the cage nervously. It was half again as tall as an Elf and looked as if quite a few could stand in it at once. Unlike a regular cage (Grimbledung had been in several) the front door to this one only came up halfway. "In there?" He pointed.

"Yeah, man. Don't be a Herman." With what was in between a friendly push and a not-too-friendly shove, he pushed him in.

"Hey," complained Grimbledung as he stumbled in. "A little more hospitable, if you please."

Teeth ignored him as he also stepped into the lift. "Let's go," he said to the two Elves.

With a nod, they grasped ropes hanging down beside them and began to pull. As they pulled, the lift gained altitude. Rapidly. "Hey! Not so fast!" Grimbledung grabbed the side of the cage to hold on.

"Don't look down, man," suggested Teeth.

Reflexively, Grimbledung looked down. The gaps between the interlaced branches that looked small on the ground, now seemed to be as wide as his feet. "Gah!" He said as he repositioned his feet on the intersections of branches.

Teeth laughed. "Relax man; it will all be over soon."

Grimbledung's eyes got large. "What will?"

"The ride."

"That's a relief. You had me worried there."

Teeth smiled at the Gnome. An almost friendly smile.

As the lift continued its upward journey, Grimbledung hazarded a look upward. They were almost halfway to the top. "You know, you should have a Brownie in here playing a lute or something to make the ride more enjoyable."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. Some nice relaxing song."

Teeth looked around the lift. "Don't know if I'd want to be stuck on this thing with someone singin'."

"No, no. Just some music. Nothing with words."

Teeth shrugged. "I'll bring it up." He glanced at Grimbledung. "After the feast."

"Sure! That's a good idea. If you want, I can bring it up after we're done feasting."

Teeth stared at him.

"If that's all right with you."

Teeth continued to stare at him.

The silence became awkward.

Finally, the lift bumped to a stop. "Finally." Nervously, Grimbledung moved behind the Elf.

An Elf approached them. "You're back early." He could have been Teeth's twin.

"Yeah, man," said Teeth. "Found something."

"Shrooms?" Asked the other. "Could use some shrooms."

"Me too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

The two stared at each other for a moment. Grimbledung peeked out from behind Teeth. "Hey there. I ran into my old friend Teeth in the forest and he invited me over." He stepped out of the lift onto the wide balcony. There were several structures on the tree- all spaced out along the wide balcony. Elves moved here and there, paying no attention to the trio at the lift. "Just to look around is all."

"And come to the feast?" Asked the Elf.

"Oh, only for a bit. I really need to get back to town." Grimbledung paused for the slightest of moments. "For my next treatment, you see."

Both Elves took a step back from the Gnome. "Treatment?" Asked Teeth.

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Don't worry. It's not contagious."

"What?" Said both Elves in unison. They both took another step back.

"Putsi flies." Grimbledung said in a loud whisper. "Lots of them."

Teeth stuck out his tongue. "Sorry, Leaves."

"Aww, man," said Leaves.

Grimbledung blinked. "Leaves as in doesn't stay?"

"No man. Leaves as in grows them, dries them, then..." He squinted at Grimbledung. "You the law?"

"No way."

"Sure?"

"Yeah, sure. I'd have to tell you otherwise."

Teeth nodded. "And sells them."

"Far out," tried Grimbledung. Both Elves stared at him. "So," he pressed on, "I really can only stay for a bit. Maybe just for a snack. And a drink." He

began to walk towards the largest of the buildings on the tree. "Where's the tavern?"

"Putsi flies?" Leaves said to his partner. "This far north?"

"You think he's lying?"

"Let's have doc check him out."

The two nodded at each other.

"So, where's the tavern?" Grimbledung called to them.

Teeth winked. "This way." He pointed to a long rope bridge that led to another tree. "Follow me, man."

The three moved to the bridge. "Is this thing safe?"

Teeth looked down at the Gnome. "You questioning Elf construction? That's not cool." Once again he shoved Grimbledung out onto the bridge. The shove was well past the limits of friendly.

Grimbledung stumbled out onto the bridge as vertigo washed over him. He focused on the far edge of it as he moved. It was too wide for him to grab both sides, so he held on tightly with one hand and stuck the other out for balance.

Things are not looking good. Who could have guessed that? "Quiet, you," muttered Grimbledung. Hoping he'd listen to himself for a change.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Minotaur Poetry - It's (not) as Bad as It Sounds

"What you folk doing here?" Asked the Minotaur. He had been trailing the strange trio for almost half an hour. Just as he was about to approach them, they took a call of nature break. He then patiently waited for them to return from their ablutions. There was no sense in being rude about it. "A Trolless, a Shambler, and a Gnoll. That's quite queer."

Nulu hesitated. *Was the rhyme some sort of test?* She looked at her companions. Truth be told, they were a queer mix. *I'll just test the waters.* "It's not queer at all; you see we're looking for our friend. We're hoping we don't have to search this forest from end to end."

The Minotaur snorted. *What's this? A challenge?* "I may be able to help you seek. Otherwise, you might be in here for weeks." *Settle down. Don't force it.*

"We would appreciate your help, good Minotaur," began Nulu. *Oh no! Minotaur?*

The Minotaur shifted his war hammer in his grip and scratched the ground with large, black hooves. As he did, a glint caught Rat's eye. He looked at the creatures hooves. They were shorn. Two long steel spikes stuck out from under each of his hooves. Rat realized that Nulu hadn't finished her stanza and the silence was becoming more apparent. Rat was torn; a good rhyme was creeping around in his head but he was unsure of the etiquette of barging in. Maybe if Nulu gave him a look. Once she resolved her 'Minotaur' rhyme.

Nulu glanced at Rat.

Rat startled at her. *What? That blasted Trolless!* "With darkness approaching, we haven't the time to search nearandfar." He offered.

Klank sat on the back of the wagon. Gnolls had no propensity for poetry or song. Interpretive dance was *their* medium.

"One at a time, if you please," said the Minotaur, addressing the minor faux pas.

Nulu exhaled loudly. She gave a respectful bow. “I concede.”

The Minotaur nodded his acceptance.

“We could still use your help though, if you’re willing.”

“What sort of help does this odd fellowship require? Is it just a passing fancy, or something sinister and dire?”

“Really?”

The Minotaur smirked as he hefted his war hammer to his shoulder. “Had it ready. Hated to waste it.” He twitched a long black ear festooned with a large gold ring. “What ya need?” He eyed RatShambler. Talking Shamblers were definitely something new. “Near and far. Very nice.”

“We’re looking for a band of Halflings,” began Nulu. “They were coming from Prost Garrison or thereabouts.”

The Minotaur nodded.

“And they had a Gnome as a prisoner.”

“Yer friend?”

“Yes,” said RatShambler. Because he was.

The Minotaur let out a deep, hearty laugh. “Your crew gets more and more motley looking as we go.”



Nulu nodded. “I suppose we are a sight to see. So have you heard of the Halfling party?”

“They split up.” He lifted his war hammer and pointed . “Most went thataway towards the road to Halfling City. Nice and slow like they’re waiting for stragglers to catch up.”

"Stragglers?"

The Minotaur pointed his hammer in the other direction. "Most likely the three of them that went that way towards TreeTop City."

"I don't know which is worse."

"I agree, Rat," said Nulu.

"Rat? Your Shambler's name is Rat?"

"It's a long story," said Rat.

The Minotaur's ears perked up. "Does it rhyme?"

"No."

The Minotaur let his hammer drop to the ground. He leaned on its thick handle with one hand, and fiddled with the huge gold ring in his ear with the other. "Bah."

"So do you know which direction the Gnome went?" Darkness w*as* approaching.

"Talked to a Centaur. Said there was an Elf running with a Gnome on his shoulders towards TreeTop City. Damnedest thing he'd seen in a month." He grunted wistfully. "I'd have liked to have seen that. Practically writes itself, that scene."[10]

"Centaur? What doesn't live in this forest?" Rat asked.

"Errm. Dragons?" Offered the Minotaur. He pulled on the long hairs under his chin. There were beads threaded in them. "No. We got one of them. Haven't seen a Troll in an age." He smiled. "Present company excepted, 'course."

"So we need to get to TreeTop City?" Klank asked from the back of the wagon. The others turned to look at him. ."How far away is it from here? Going to be dark soon, you know."

"The cover of darkness might help us out."

The Minotaur nodded at Nulu. "That's true. Once those Elves get their feast on, they don't pay attention to much else."

"Which way is it?"

"Well, little Miss, if you follow this path along, you'll be there in half an hour."

Rat looked where the creature pointed. The trees did seem a little thinner along that route, but only barely. "That's a path?"

"Sure. One of the better marked ones."

Klank hopped off the wagon. "Well, we need to unhitch this thing if we're goin' that way." He moved to Rat's harness. "Shame to lose a good wagon."

Nulu smiled at the Minotaur. "You in the market for a wagon?"

The Minotaur stood his hammer on its end and moved to the wagon. He picked up the entire back end of it. Easily. "Sure?" He dropped it back down roughly. "What you want for it?"

Nulu looked between him and the wagon. She had no idea. "I'm not sure. What do you have?"

"How about some nice Elvish climbing rope?" He reached into a small sack on his belt and pulled out a large coil of thin, silver colored rope. "Couple hundred feet or so."

"Sir, that wagon's not worth twenty feet of that stuff," Nulu pointed out.

"Got it for a dozen mushrooms. I'm going to see how high I can trade. Wagon's a good jump. Puts me half way to a flyin' carpet."

Klank finished unhitching the wagon. "It's all yers. Daylight's fading, folks. Hate t'rush but..."

The Minotaur passed the rope to Nulu. "Good luck to you and your unusual band."

Nulu smiled. "And with your trading."

"Well," the Minotaur smirked, "th' sky's the limit."

Nulu shook her head as the trio moved onto the austere path. As they went, the path seemed to alternate between being obviously present, and completely gone. At times they stopped while Klank smelled trees to decide where the path was. All the while, the twilight of the forest grew darker and darker. Finally, thanks to his Gnollish vision -and nose- Klank took the lead permanently.

After an hour of stumbling (and cursing) in the dark, lights from fires high in the trees caught their attention. At first, they almost looked like fireflies, but soon they grew into what had to be large fires. Up to a dozen of them, with smaller ones apparently lighting bridges between trees with how they seemed to float in mid-air.

"TreeTop City," said Nulu as they stood under a particularly large tree. "Now to figure out a way to get up."

"Toss the rope up there?"

"Toss the rope up there? What? As a peace offering? We should have counter-offered for a grappling hook."

Klank nodded. "Well, there's gotta be a way up. Let's look around and see what there is to see."

After only a little while, Nulu found a rope hanging down from an open hatch high above. In truth, she thought she had cleverly discovered a spider web and after shrieking several times, discovered it was merely a rope. Unfortunately not before Rat and Klank had come to her aid.

"OK, Rat. Keep an eye out and when we find him, we'll make a quick getaway." She looked up the rope that disappeared into the darkness above. There were knots tied regularly in the rope, but even so, it was going to be an arduous climb. "Let's get up there, Klank."

Klank also looked up the rope. "Shouldn't I stay an' keep an eye out with Rat?"

"Sure, sure. That sounds fine by me." Nulu eyed the Gnoll in the darkness. "That's just what I'll tell your brothers what you did when we get back."

Klank did a little hop as he moved to the rope. "Meet ya at the top." He began to clamber up the rope, ~~hand over hand~~ claw over claw.

"Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say." Nulu grasped the rope and hefted herself up. Unlike the Gnoll, she put her feet on the knots to help her climb. "Keep an eye out, Rat."

Rat nodded as the pair moved up the rope. For the first time in a very long time, he was glad he was a shambler.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Halflings in the Midst

"I'm really getting tired of this stinking forest," said Skies as he yet again stumbled on an unseen branch. Since it had gotten dark, the threesome had slowed considerably. "You sure we're going the right way?"

Righty squinted into the darkness. Here and there he saw flits of light from fireflies (white) and firepixies (red). Then he noticed some lights that seemed to hang in place high up in the trees. Yellow ones. Fire yellow ones. "I think we found it," he said.

"That's what you said the last time," snapped Skies.

"And the time before that," added Vast.

Righty pulled the two close so they could see each other in the dimness. "Look up there." He pointed high in the trees. The two Halflings followed where he was pointing. "That's a lot of lights up there. That's got to be it."

The other two nodded.

"We need to be careful; the last thing we need is someone sounding the alarm," continued Righty. He reached over his back to his sheath and grasped a smooth wood handle that was sticking out of it. He pulled the thick black club out and hefted it a few times. "I keep this for close encounters." He gestured with the thick club. It had steel studs hammered into it in tight rings. Several were missing. He threaded his hand through the worn leather loop. "Ready?"

Vast drew a dagger. His preferred choice of weapon for close-quarters combat. "Ready."

Righty gestured at the knife. "Got anything less lethal?"

"What? Like strong language?"

Skies snickered.

Righty grabbed Vast by the shoulder. "Listen idiot. We want to snatch that Gnome away, not get involved in a blood feud. If we knock out a couple of

Elves while we're doing it, some of them might chase us but only for a little bit. He's only one Gnome after all. We kill a couple of Elves, and we'll have every one of them on our trail. Out for blood. At night in their home territory. Those aren't good odds." He let loose of the Halfling. "So get something less lethal."

Skies nodded at the other Halfling. "Makes sense to me, Vast."

Vast slammed his dagger into his sheath and also went about finding an appropriately debilitating weapon. Soon, he had a club of his own.

With a nod, Righty led the trio towards the lights high up in the trees. Soon they were below a large tree with what looked like torches lining a balcony. A long suspension bridge led to an even larger tree and balcony. It was bathed in light. "This looks like a nice quiet spot to get up there."

Skies looked around the smooth trunk of the tree then back up at the bridge. There were two figures carrying a third one that did not seem to be keen on being carried moving along it. "That's odd," he said to no one in particular.

"Well, we found TreeTop City," said Vast. "Now we just need to find a way up."

Again, after only a little while, the three found a rope ladder.[11]

"We'll go up," said Righty to Skies. "Keep an eye out down here so we can make a quiet getaway, Vast."

Vast nodded. "Just make sure you come back down this same ladder."

With nods all around, the two Halflings moved up the rope ladder as the third kept watch.

Chapter Twenty-Six
It's All in the Presentation

Grimbledung made his way along the bridge, focusing intently on the far side. To his side, the rope he was holding was over his head and the guide ropes running down from it were spaced out more than his body-width. For all intents and purposes, he was out in open space. "You Elves really need to make your bridges more hospitable for wee folk."

"They never stay that long," said Leaves. He was walking directly behind Grimbledung, hurrying him along.

"Short visits only?"

"Sure, man. Call it that."

Grimbledung turned around cautiously. "What are your intentions, Elf?" He asked tersely.

"They're honorable, man," said Leaves.

"Sure!" agreed Teeth. "What do you take us for? Savages?"

"So, you're not planning on eating me?"

Leaves shook his head. "No, man. We're planin' on eating you all right. We'll just do it honorable like."

"How do you honorably eat someone?"

"We use all sorts of spices and herbs so you taste real good."

"And," added Leaves, "we kill you first."

Grimbledung dropped his hands to his sides. "Well, it's hard to argue with that."

"So you'll come peaceably and stuff?"

Grimbledung took a step back.

"And not make a fuss, man?"

Grimbledung took another step back.

"Don't do it," warned Leaves.

"Gah! Help! Help!" Grimbledung screeched as he turned to run.

Leaves lurched forward and grabbed the Gnome by the back of the collar. "Quit squirmin'." He put his hands under Grimbledung's armpits and picked him up, swinging his legs towards his partner. As he hung over open space above the ropes of the bridge, Grimbledung grabbed the Elf's hands and froze. As soon as he was back over the bridge, the flailing resumed.

"Gah!" Grimbledung added.

Teeth grabbed Grimbledung's thrashing legs in a vice-like grip. "Stop that!"

The two Elves carried the struggling Gnome in silence back to the main platform. "Keep it up and we'll tenderize you something good!" Warned Leaves.

"Over my dead body!"

"No man, you're alive when we tenderize you," said Teeth as he looked back over his shoulder. When they got back to the large platform, 'The Commons' as it was called, the two made for one of the smaller structures, just to the left of the largest one.

"Let's get him going, then we'll let the Chief know."

"Sure thing, Leaves."

Grimbledung picked up his head to look where they were going. "Where we going?"

"Kitchen, man," said Teeth. "For preppin'."

"Ohh. You know what you should do?" When neither Elf answered, Grimbledung pressed on, "Fatten me up. That way I can feed more of you folk."

"How long would that take?"

"I don't know. Give it a couple of years?"

Teeth shook his head. "No way man. Why do you think we're not farmers and we live up here instead of down in the dirt?"

"For the view?"

Grimbledung nodded, "Yeah! What Leaves said! For the views!"

Teeth shook his head. "No man. It's cause of the views."

The pair pushed past the curtain into the dimly lit enclosure. There was a large platter in the middle of a lone table. Evenly spaced rings were attached to its edge. The walls were lined with shelves filled with all manner of jars and sacks. The cacophony of smells from all the spices intermixing was overwhelming. As they moved to the platter, they flipped Grimbledung over so he was face down.

"Hey now!"

The two quickly lashed his arms and legs to the conveniently placed loops. Grimbledung was tied in place on all fours. "This isn't very comfortable"

"Go tell the Chief, then get the chef. I'll get started," said Leaves.

Without even looking back at the Gnome, Teeth left the room.

"Can we talk this over?" Grimbledung craned his head around to get a look at the remaining Elf. "Maybe work out some sort of deal?" He wasn't able to see the Elf. For the slightest of moments he thought he too had left. Until he heard the unmistakable sound of a knife being dragged across a leather strap. "Hold on now!"

Leaves pulled off Grimbledung's shoes and tossed them aside. Placing the knife between his pants and his skin, he slid it upwards- neatly cutting the pants all the way up one side.

"Hey! Those were practically new!"

Leaves dropped the knife on the platter and with a stout tug, yanked Grimbledung's pants off.

"Hell-O!"

"Would you be quiet, man? I'm trying to work." Leaves picked up the knife and moved to Grimbledung's head.

"I'm sure I appreciate..." began Grimbledung as the Elf slipped the knife up his sleeve. With another upward thrust, he cut Grimbledung's shirt off from the wrist to the shoulder on one side. "... being in this predicament," he continued as Leaves worked on the other sleeve. Within moments, Grimbledung's shirt was reduced to a tunic. Leaves once again dropped the knife noisily on the platter. "... so if we could talk this over..." Leaves yanked the remaining bit of Grimbledung's shirt off. "... I'm sure we can come to an arrangement." The Elf turned to a full shelf, then back to the Gnome. "... that's mutually beneficial?"

Leaves turned back to the shelf and rummaged in a bin. When he turned back around, he had a large, red apple in his hand. "Could you keep quiet?" He said testily as he shoved the apple into Grimbledung's open mouth. "Finally." He turned back around to peruse the spices and herbs. "MAN!"

Grimbledung masterfully maneuvered the apple around with his lips and tongue, eating it as he went. His most recent meal, after all, had been just a couple of overripe onions. And that had been *hours* ago.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Grimbledung ala Elf?

Leaves turned back with a jar in each hand. His eyes narrowed as he saw the apple was missing. "Man, you're really asking for some tenderizing."

Grimbledung smacked his lips. "I was hungry. What's a Gnome to do?"

"Stop eating the garnish, man," warned the Elf. "I'm warning you. It's garnish!"

"Just one more apple? My stomach's growling with all this talk of feasting." He waggled his ears, "Just one more and I'll be good for a little bit. Promise."

Leaves put the jars on the table. He reached down below the table and took a large wooden mallet off its peg. He lifted the mallet into Grimbledung's view. The head of the mallet was rounded from years of use, and alarmingly, stained dark. "You're bringing me down, man."

Grimbledung gulped. "That one apple was plenty."

Leaves tossed the mallet onto the table. It clattered against the platter the Gnome was on. "It better be, man." He opened one of the jars and poured half of the thick, dark liquid in it onto Grimbledung's back. He put the jar down and began to massage the oil in.

"That feels great," admitted Grimbledung as he relaxed. "Very nice indeed."

"Tastes good too."

Grimbledung was shocked back to reality. He was on the verge of getting cooked and eaten! *Focus, Grim! You're in a tight spot!* Tight spot? *Tight spot!* Grimbledung waggled his ears. "You know the best part of a pig when you cook them?"

Leaves continued to massage in the spiced oil. "What part of a pig *isn't* good? They're made of bacon, man."

"True enough. But if you had to pick a favorite, what would it be?"

"Ribs of course."

Grimbledung shook his head. "Fatty and take a lot to cook right. And they don't got a lot of meat on them. Want to guess again or you want me to tell you?"

Leaves let out a loud sigh. "Which has you talkin' less?"

"The one where you don't guess."

"What, man?"

"The knuckles."

"Knuckles?"

"Well, that's just my opinion, but I have to tell you, the meat there is real tender and they don't have a lot of fat, and you get to eat them with your hands which is always a fun part of any meal, when you actually are supposed to eat with your hands, which is what you get to do when you eat pigs knuckles because you really can't eat them with a knife, which is why I think they are the best part of a pig." He hazarded a glance at the Elf.

"Really?"

"Yeah! It's true."

"No, man. I meant really that was the shorter of the two?"

"Sure." He smiled at the Elf. "It's just an opinion, mind you, but we Gnomes are known for our cooking abilities too. When I'm roasting a pig, I baste all the knuckles first because that's the part I'm eating."

"Yeah. That's true. I always do the back first because I like ribs."

"You're missing out, not trying a knuckle or two."

Leaves looked back and forth from the Gnome's back to his hands. Then he looked at the Gnome's feet. "Knuckles, huh?"

"It's the way to go you know. Ask around. You'll see."

Leaves thought this over as he continued to rub the oil in, now working down the Gnome's back.

Teeth peeked his head into the prep-room. "Hey, man. The Chief said she's gonna stop by in a little." He glanced back. "So make sure you're ready." He snapped his fingers, "Oh, right. She said to make sure you have his knuckles good and seasoned. That's her favorite part, man." With that, he ducked back out of the room.

"See? Told you."

"Oh, man. I never knew." Teeth bent in and examined Grimbledung's wrists.

"Look tasty don't they?" He winked. "That's 'cause they are."

"Sure man. They gotta be if the Chief called a dibbance on them." He frowned. "Now I wanna try a knuckle."

"Well, you're in luck, Leaves," said Grimbledung. "Because I have four of them. So just season up my hands, wrists, feet and ankles and you're bound to get one, right?"

Leaves considered this for a moment. "Yeah." He moved to the shelves and picked up a medium-sized pouch. "So I got to use the royal stuff for that, man." He turned around, holding the bulging pouch reverently.

"What's that?"

"Royal spices." He held up the pouch. It was in a worn leather sack. The tiny stitching holding it together seemed to be silver. An equally worn strap ran through the opening of the pouch, which when it was closed, was long enough to be hung around the neck. There were small glass beads spread evenly on the strap. "Real hard to get so we only use a little bit at a time." He turned his attention to Grimbledung's hands and wrists, massaging the oils and sprinkling miniscule amounts of the royal spices on them

"That's all you use?"

"It goes a long way, man. And like I told you; it's really rare and really valuable. It's our most prized possession. Now for the haunches."

"Legs and feet, if you please. I may be a meal, but I'm not a beast."

"Legs and feet, man." Leaves corrected himself as he moved to the Gnome's feet. "Then I'll get the rest of you."

"For them that aren't in the know." He waggled his ears again.

"Right, man. Thanks."

"What are meals for?"

The Elf worked in silence as Grimbledung twisted his wrists back and forth. Originally tight, the oil had not only soaked into the rope and loosened the knots, it had made his wrists slick.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Little Known Fact- Elves Can See in the Dark
Halflings? Not so much

Righty peeked over the edge of the balcony he had climbed up to. The coast seemed clear. "Let's go, Skies," he whispered over his shoulder as he rolled onto the deck. He remained prone as Skies followed suit and rolled beside him.

"Where you think we should go?" Asked Skies. "We're going to get spotted if we just wander around."

Righty looked behind them at the structures there, then the ones in front of them. "They have to be holding him near the center of town."

"There's more lights that way," Skies pointed behind them as he lifted himself up on an elbow. "Of course, the middle of town is going to be crawling with stinking Elves."

"Well, we'll keep to the shadows until we get close. Hopefully we'll spot him before we get spotted. Just remember we don't want to kill any of them."

"It still sounds crazy. Not killing someone."

"We can't kill them all," said Righty as he moved to a crouched position, "so we'll not give them reason to come after us." He looked down at his companion. "Right?"

"Right, right, I get *why* we're doing it. It just sounds crazy." He smiled back at Righty. "You're all right, Righty. They're gonna write songs about us."

"As long as they aren't posthumous, that works for me." He slapped the other's shoulder, "Let's go."

The two crawled to the bridge. Being Halflings, they were also much smaller than any of the Elves –except for the younglings – and moving low to the flooring kept them out of anyone's line of sight. Even so, at one point, they had to hang under the bridge to allow a trio of Elves to move past. They clambered back atop the bridge and made their way quickly to the other side. "I say we never do that again," said Skies.

"Fine by me," agreed Righty. "That's a long way up to be hanging." The two crouched in the shadows at the edge of what looked to be the commons for the town. There was a large table set up in the very middle of it, surrounded by torches. "That's pretty bright out there."

"Well," said Skies, "that stupid Gnome isn't out there yet, so he has to be in one of those buildings on the far side, there." He pointed at the structures at the other side of the large platform. He looked to his side. "Keep to the edge and I think we can skirt the edges to get there."

Righty nodded. "Right behind you."

The two scooted along the edge of the large platform, hiding behind railing posts and barrels as they made their way to the back of the first building.

"Stick your head in and see what this place is," suggested Skies.

Righty nodded. He stood and pressed his back against the wall. He sidestepped his way towards the front of the building. The front was fully exposed to anyone who happened by. To make matters worse, it was awash in torchlight. Cautiously, he made his way to the window. Grabbing the edges of it, he pulled himself up to peek in. It was empty, containing only bags and barrels. Quickly and quietly, he retraced his path. "It's some sort of storeroom. No one is in there."

Skies nodded. "Next one, then." The pair moved along the backs of the buildings freely- thanks to them being in near darkness.

An Elf, one level higher and behind The Commons sat on the edge of the platform, feet dangling in the breeze. He had his chin resting on a rope railing as he watched the two Halflings with amused interest. He didn't know what they were doing, but knowing Halflings, it was probably not friendly. He frowned as he pulled himself upright. At least they hadn't tried to kill anyone. Yet. He heard someone approach from behind him. "Say, MoonBeam," he called behind him. He was still watching the two Halflings as they snuck around the larder and prep-house. Word had spread about the interlopers quickly. They were now the most amusing thing happening in the entire of TreeTop City and were gaining quite an audience.

"How you doing?" Asked Moonbeam.

"Bored. Not too much going on. Getting hungry too."

"Feast'll start soon."

"There's a pre-show now."

"Yeah?" Moonbeam moved beside the male.

"Yeah."

"Are you… What sort of show, Love?"

"Well, it's kind of a show. Sort of."

"What?"

"Couple of Halflings sneakin' 'round in The Commons. It's funny."

"That is funny." said MoonBeam as she nudged him. "Want to see something else funny, Love?"

"Sure," said Love.

She held up a sack. It was bouncing around.

"What're you carryin' in that sack? Seems upset t'be in there."

MoonBeam watched as the taller of the Halflings made his way back from the front of the larder. The taller one had stepped forward when she had held up the sack. He was now staring straight at her. She and Love stood still. In the darkness, they were invisible to regular eyes. She looked over at her mate. She could clearly see his wide grin. Finally, after a short discussion, the other one made their way to the front of the prep-house and the tall one stepped back into 'the shadows'.

"Anyway," she continued, "I came across a Halfling hiding in the shadows over by Lovers Ladder. I figured I'd bring him up." She watched as the Halfling pressed himself against the back of the prep-house and tried to remain in the shadows. With her Elf-ears, she could hear snickers here and there. She giggled as well. "That *is* funny."

"Yeah."

"Say," began MoonBeam, "let's go bring this one to them ones. Put all our Halflings in one basket."

"Like a fryin' basket?" Love raised an eyebrow. "I'd love a fried Halfling toe. Or three."

MoonBeam shrugged as she tossed the sack over her shoulder. The Halfling in it grunted as he bounced on her back. His mouth had been gagged with several wraps of rope. "Who's the Cuisinier tonight?"

"Leaves."

"Leaves? Really? Wasn't he the Commis just a month ago?"

"He's got the touch." Love gestured for his wife to lead the way. "Let's see what he can whip up with some Halflings."

MoonBeam nodded as she moved toward the bridge that ultimately would lead to The Commons. Being a level above and to the side, there were several bridges to cross and even a set of stairs. The two kept their eyes on the Halflings as well as they could as they went.

Righty stepped away from the building and looked up at the trees. He thought he had seen movement above him. He stared intently into the darkness but saw nothing.

"You see something?" Asked Skies.

"No. Must have been a bird or something. Check this building so we can get off this level. Someone's bound to spot us sooner or later." Skies obliged by slipping behind his partner-in-crime and began to move towards the front of the building. Righty stepped back into the safety of the shadows. He tightened his grip on his club- just in case. "Make it quick, Skies" he hissed to his partner as he moved out of sight.

Skies moved along the building's wall, taking care not to rub against it. The last thing he needed to do was alert anyone inside of his approach. When he reached the corner, he looked out into the open area where the table was. There was a lone Elf carrying a large basket. He was placing knives down at each place setting. His back was to Skies. *Perfect!* Skies quickly scooted around the corner and peeked under the curtain. The room had shelves of spices and jars lining the walls. In the middle was a large wooden table with a large oval pan on it. And a well-worn mallet. Skies looked down at the branch he held in his hand. Suddenly, it looked completely ineffectual. With a shrug, he ducked under the curtain and

grabbed the mallet. Moving back to the curtain, he peeked out. The Elf was near the edge of the long table (it sat at least fifty per side) and getting ready to start the other side. *Now or never!* He dropped his stick in a bucket by the door and squeezed by the curtain, then around the corner before the Elf turned to face him. Stealthily, he made his way back to Righty. "He's not in there. Want to check the other building?"

"Say either of you have a towel?" A voice asked from the shadows. "Or a spare set of breeches?"

Both Halflings jumped as they turned toward the voice of the interloper. It was not who they were expecting. At all.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Grimbledung- Slipperier When Wet

Leaves finished oiling down Grimbledung. "That felt great. You know, you should open a place where folk could come for a hot oil rub-down. Add some steam baths even. No eating them at the end though. That'd really hurt your repeat customers. You'd have people coming from all 'round." He waggled his ears. "You could call it the Elvin Treatment."

"Man, I'm going to put an apple in your mouth and I want it to stay there." Teeth reached for the mallet again.

"Fine, fine. Just trying to be helpful is all," said Grimbledung quickly. "I'll sit here quietly with an apple in my mouth." To show his good faith, he opened his mouth wide. "Ahhhh" he said.

Teeth took a large apple from a basket- a dark green one this time- and shoved it in. As it stuck, Grimbledung's teeth broke the skin and the juices ran into his mouth. "at's art!"

Leaves narrowed his eyes but left the mallet in place. "I'm checking on the oven. Just sit and marinate, man."

Grimbledung nodded furiously at the Elf. He wanted nothing else than for him to leave.

With a nod of his own, Leaves ducked under the curtain.

As soon as the curtain fluttered back into place, Grimbledung bit down on the apple, letting half of it fall onto the platter. As he chewed, he worked his hands back and forth. After only a moment, they slipped out of the ropes. He grabbed the apple and took another bite. He pushed himself onto his knees and untied his feet. Finishing off the apple between one and the other. "Sorry Leaves, I hate to eat and run, but it's better than eat and get eaten." He picked up the small sack of royal spices and hung it around his neck. "Thanks for the spices." He swung off the table, the platter clattering under him as we did so. He looked back at the mallet. It was, for all intents and purposes, a potentially lethal weapon. He shrugged and selected two apples instead. Peaking under the curtain

as he bit into an apple, and seeing the coast clear, he moved around the building. In the opposite direction of Skies who came around the corner just has he ducked behind it.

Love and MoonBeam stepped onto the large platform that was The Commons. The Elf setting the table turned and waved to them. He held up three fingers then pointed between the larder and prep-house.

MoonBeam nodded at him. "So now there's three of them? What'd we miss?"

"I heard that there's a Trolless, a Gnoll, and a Shambler over at Yakoub's rope-ladder." He pointed toward a platform just off The Commons, not thirty paces away.

"That sounds like the start of a joke," said MoonBeam.

Love nodded. "Yeah. So you see, there's this Trolless, and a Gnoll, and a Shambler, and they're standing by this step ladder that leads to a trap door."

"Yeah?"

The two padded across The Commons towards the larder. "And the Gnoll says, 'should we knock or just go on up?'"

MoonBeam glanced at her mate. She had no idea where the joke was going.

Love chuckled. "And the Shambler says 'Either is fine by me; I just want to get going. This whole situation kind of makes me sad, standing by this stepladder like this'."

"Oh, man," said MoonBeam as she braced herself for the punch line.

"And the Trolless says 'why does it make you sad to be with this stepladder?' And the Shambler says 'Well I got this nice stepladder, but it's sad that I never knew my *real* ladder.'" Love grinned.

MoonBeam shook her head. "Oh, Love." She pulled the curtain of the larder back and tossed the sack in. It thrashed on the floor but stayed in place, thanks to the Halfling being hogtied *and* inside the sack. As she let the curtain drop, she held a finger to her lips. Love nodded. She pointed between the larder

and the prep-house. Love nodded again and moved between the two buildings, MoonBeam close behind. When they got to the corner they stopped to listen.

"Say either of you have a towel?" Grimbledung asked. A better idea came to him. "Or a spare set of breeches?"

Both of the Halflings jumped as they turned toward him.

"You!" Said Righty. "Grab him!" The two Halflings lurched forward to grab their wayward Gnome. Their hands slipped off his oily skin. "Lord High Priest, what is going on?" He tried again and again but wasn't able to get a grip.

Grimbledung ducked and pushed against the Halflings. Their hands slipping off his oily marinade. Somehow in the process, he ended up with a mallet in his hand. His other still held an apple. "Hah!" He said as he thrust his hands in the air. "Well, I'd love to stay, but I really need to get going." He swung the mallet at the Halflings, making them duck.

The two Halflings tried in vain to hold on to the Gnome but it was no use. Between his oily skin, and the swinging mallet, they were helpless as he turned and ran from them. "I'm going to kill that stinking Gnome," said Righty. He wiped his hands on his breeches. "Let's go after him."

Love and MoonBeam stepped around the corner in between the escaping Gnome and the two Halflings. *After all, where's a naked Halfling going to hide?* thought MoonBeam. She reached down and grabbed the taller of the two Halflings by the collar. "Welcome to TreeTop City. We'd love for you to stay for dinner. Love?"

Love grabbed the other Halfling as he turned to make a break for it.

The two Elves easily picked up the flailing Halflings and turned towards the front of the prep-house.

Leaves crossed The Commons on his way back to the prep-house. The oven was roaring. All that he needed to do was put the Gnome in. Things were looking up. He nodded at the Elf who was placing napkins on the table. "Bad news, Leaves" he said.

"What, man?" With his Elf ears, he didn't need to move to his fellow Elf to converse with him. He had heard rumors of some intruders but since he was on kitchen duty, he didn't spend a lot of time listening. There was a certain Gnome that needed roasting.

"That Gnome?"

"Yeah?"

"He's made a break for it."

"Centaur Tails. I'm back to bein' a Marmiton if I lose him. Where's he gone, man?"

The Elf pointed towards the larder as MoonBeam and Love stepped around the corner of it. They were each holding a struggling Halfling.

"Say. Things might be looking up." Leaves waved at the place setter and jogged over to the couple. "What's going on, man?"

"The Gnome's making a run for it. Can't expect he'll get far," said MoonBeam.

"Centaur Tail Soup." Cursed Teeth.

"But we got ya some Halflin's that you can start with while we go collect your Gnome."

"Really? Man! Let's get them inside. The fire's already going. I'm going to lose the flames if I don't get something in there quick." He pulled the curtain back on the prep-house. There was a bag trashing on the floor. "Wow," he said. "I love you two." As the trio of Elves stepped into the building, Leaves searched for his mallet. It was missing. "That was my favorite mallet!" He looked around the room and spied a substantial stick in a basket by the door. It was well on the way to becoming a nice club after a little shaping and polishing. He shrugged as he picked up the unfamiliar stick and beat the sack several times with it. The sack stopped moving. He turned to the two wide-eyed Halflings.

"Can we talk this over?" Asked the larger of the two.

"No way, Man. That's how this started in the first place," he said to the Halfling. He looked at his fellow Elves, "Hold them still while I prep some Sesos." He raised the stick high above his head.

Skies couldn't help but smile when he recognized the instrument of their demise.

Grimbledung ran frantically. He wasn't sure where he was going, but any place was better than back with the two Halflings. As he turned onto a bridge, he kept to the middle of it, mallet in one hand, apple in the other. As he exited the end of the bridge, he almost ran into an Elf. "Good evening, good Elf," he said as he skidded to a stop. "Here's an apple," he handed the apple to the Elf- who had been watching him gleefully the entire time. Grimbledung waved and ran off.

"Thanks naked Gnome dude," said the Elf. "It's like an appetizer being served by the main course! Cool." He took a bite of the apple as he watched the once-again-running Gnome. "Hey! Bouncing Gnome butt!" He pointed. "Hey naked Gnome, look out where you're going!" Called the Elf helpfully.

Grimbledung looked around him. There were enough torches going that he could just barely see in front of him. There seemed to be another bridge ahead. He lowered his head and tried to pick up speed. Suddenly, the wood planking disappeared from beneath him. The Gnome-sized Grimbledung fell easily through the Elf-sized hatch. As he tumbled through the air, his hand brushed a rope. Twice he almost grabbed it as he went. Finally he threw his mallet downward and flailed with both hands for the rope. At last, he got the rope in his hands. Thanks to the oil on them, his decent didn't slow. He swung his legs down and wrapped them around the rope. He slowed slightly as the oil burned off his hands and thighs. He braced for a bone-jarring impact. "Look out!" He heard a familiar Gnoll voice say. "Three on a rope's back luck." The rope bucked. Twice.

"Hey!" He heard a familiar female voice from below.

He hazarded a look downward as he sped down the rope. Nulu came into sight just as he crashed directly atop her head. She was holding a mallet and rubbing her head. His momentum knocked the two of them to the ground. Grimbledung on top. Much to his delight.

"Where in the blue teats of Sheba did *you* come from?" Nulu looked up at Grimbledung. "And what are you covered in?"

Grimbledung grabbed Nulu's shoulder armor and slid back and forth on her breastplates. "Pretty neat huh? I'm all lubed up!" He got a glint in his eye. "*All* lubed up."

"Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire!" Said RatShambler, "stop molesting Nulu!" He turned to the Gnoll. "Klank!"

Klank obliged by reaching down and grabbing the still-sliding back and forth Gnome. His hand slipped off Grimbledung's back. "What? Who oiled you down?"

"The cook," said Grimbledung. He had stopped sliding around, but was still laying on top of her. Nulu raised the mallet and took aim at his head with it. He slid off her. "Said I was supposed to marinate in it. Seemed like a nice enough fellow. When he wasn't trying to cook me."

"Anyone follow you?" Asked Nulu as she stood. She tossed the mallet to the Gnome. "You forgot your hammer."

"Hey you! Stand still!" an Elf shouted from above.

"When I say things like that, I get my ear wacked. Why does she get away with it?" Grimbledung waved his mallet at Nulu. "Double standard, that."

"I say it is time to go," said Klank. He was looking up at the hatchway. "They're comin' down."

The rope began to buck and sway as Elves clambered onto it.

RatShambler crouched down, "Nulu, Grim, get on, you two!" He looked at the Gnoll, "Are you going to be able to keep up?"

Klank dropped to all fours and loped off, "It's the other way around!" He called over his shoulder as he disappeared into the darkness.

Nulu climbed on then reached down for Grimbledung's hand to pull him up. It just slipped out of her hand. "For the love off…"

Grimbledung tried to climb onto RatShambler- he was too slick to get any sort of footing. "Gah! I can't get up!" He wailed. "I can't get up!" He dropped the mallet and tried with both hands. "I CAN'T GET UUUUUP!"

Nulu dropped off RatShambler and got on all fours, "Use me to get up!"

Grimbledung took a step forward, then froze in place.

"What?" Nulu looked up at the Gnome. His eyes were locked on her. Breastplates, that is.

"Wow."

"Get up there!"

Grimbledung obliged by hopping onto Nulu's back. Between that extra height and RatShambler kneeling down, he managed to get onto his back. "Ooohh! I'm up! Let's go! LET'S GO!!"

Nulu hopped to her feet and climbed on as well. "Yes; let's go!"

Chapter Thirty
Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Forest?

"Say, shouldn't I be riding in back?" Grimbledung waggled his ears as he looked back at the Trolless.

Nulu slapped him on the head, "Not a chance I'm going to let you get a free groping! It's bad enough we aren't able to get you clothed before making a run for it."

Grimbledung giggled. "Really and truly, it's the Elves fault. They took my clothes you know. It wasn't voluntary!"

"I'll bet."

"Honest! They made me all nakedly and I had no part in it."

"No part?"

"Well, besides getting personally nakedly and all. But I had no part in it."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Well, now that you mention it..." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"I will stop and let those Elves eat us all if this conversation doesn't end right now!" Warned RatShambler.

RatShambler lowered his head and moved to a full gallop. After a little, he caught up with Klank. "Told you… you'd …one… keeping up," he said breathlessly.

Klank looked over as he loped along easily. "I slowed down for you. Truth be told, I thought I'd lost ya." Klank gave a wide grin. "You're not bad for an old Shambler, but that don't mean much to a Gnoll in his prime." He didn't even seem to be breathing hard.

"Hey! Maybe I should ride Klank so you can run faster!" Offered Grimbledung. "Since I'm just riding over here," he added sourly.

Klank shook his head. "Last thing I need is a naked, oiled up Gnome on my back." He made the distance between him and RatShambler a little more as he ran.

"Say, we goin' the right direction?" Nulu asked.

Klank looked around. "Looks like it. We're heading back the way we came, so that's a good thing."

Nulu craned her neck around. "Anyone following us?"

"I'll go have a look-see," said Klank, "just keep goin' straight. I'll catch back up." He suddenly veered to the right and doubled-back without losing hardly any speed at all.

"Show off"

"You're doing great Rat!" Said Grimbledung. Thanks to the oil, he wasn't able to get a good grip on RatShambler's mane, so he slid back and forth on his back.

"I think I'm going to need a long bath after this."

"Me too," said Nulu. "Any time you want to relax, Grim, would be fine by me."

Grimbledung giggled again. "Naked and oiled up, bouncing along against you? Not likely!"

The three moved in silence for a while, as RatShambler concentrated on the path ahead of him- which was more like a path that had been cleared off years ago and the forest had since begun to reclaim it.

Klank appeared suddenly at RatShambler's side. "They aren't following us."

"So I got away fair and square. Think they're the types to hold a grudge?"

"Grim, if I were you, I'd not come to the forest again for a good fifty years," offered Nulu. "So why are they giving up on us so easily? They have to have mounts?"

"I heard one say he was going back to eat. Seems they have three Halflings cooking up."

"Well nuts. You know, Righty wasn't so bad. We should go back for him."

"Grim, he was taking you to Halfling City so you could be impaled for all to watch."

"Well, that doesn't make him a bad person. Maybe he'd made a great neighbor. Or something."

"I'm not… turning …around," panted RatShambler. "We slow down?"

Klank chuckled at the Shambler, "I think we can," he said. He still wasn't breathing hard- much to Rat's annoyance.

The two slowed to a walk. "Better," said Rat as he took in deep breaths.

Klank tilted his head back and let out a long series of howls.

"What was that for?"

"I'm asking the wolves to keep an eye out for any Elves moving our direction," he said to Nulu. "Just in case."

"Good plan," said Nulu. She slipped off RatShambler's back.

"What'd you do that for?" Whined Grimbledung.

"Because I think you've bounced your head off my breastplates enough for one day."

Grimbledung frowned, then brightened. "Wait. For today? So tomorrow's still open?"

She shook her fist at the Gnome. "I'd wring your neck if you weren't so slippery right now." Then she smiled genuinely at him. "I am glad we found you. When you went over the wall at Frank's Keep, Drimblerod thought the worst happened."

Grimbledung nodded. "It would have too. I was about to become a delicious feast, you know. Dee-licious."

RatShambler shook his shoulders, "You a delicious feast? That's got to be some marinade. I'd expect you to be all gamey and full of gristle."

Grimbledung licked his fingers. "I think I taste great." He licked his arm. "You know, it's been a long time since I had a proper meal. What've we got to eat? Anything good?"

Klank moved over and nipped at Grimbledung's heel. "Anything good? *Anything good?* I'm part of this band and you ask if there is anything good to eat?"

"What I meant was, is there anything already prepared that I could perhaps nibble on. I've had some old onions and two apples for most of a week."

"Well, once we're in a safer part of the forest, we'll stop and see about making camp." Nulu glanced over at him. "And see if we can't get you something to wear."

"I'm all right." Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Communing with nature. And all that stuff."

"You can commune with nature while you're dressed."

"I'm with Rat," said Nulu. She looked at Klank. "If we pass a spot you think would work out, we should stop. Rampaging through this forest at night is just going to attract attention that we're not looking for."

Klank nodded. He raised his snout and sniffed. "There's a stream up ahead a little ways. There's usually something to eat around water. Plus…" He smiled, "Grim can get cleaned up. Or…"

"Or?" Grimbledung peered at Klank.

"We could just finish what the Elves started and cook the little Gnome. He's all marinated. I'd hate to waste a good marinade."

Nulu laughed. "I'm in the mood for something a little less gamey."

Grimbledung frowned. "So now it's all funny huh? I was almost killed. And you know…" A thought came to him. "Say, did we win the battle at Frank's?"

Nulu nodded, glad to change the subject. "Not at Frank's Keep, but Drimblerod and Rat lured the Halflings out on the plains and they were beaten there."

"Thanks to me and Drimblerod," said RatShambler. "I played a key role, along with Drim. The two of us, you know."

"There's no doubting that," assured Nulu. She turned her head. She heard water running. "I think that stream's getting close."

Klank bolted ahead of the group, disappearing into the underbrush and dark.

RatShambler picked up his pace. "Here we go again."

Within moments, the group emerged into a clearing straight out of a storybook- there was close-cropped grass interspersed with flowers of several colors and variety. Clover-covered spots made darker patches as if soft green blankets had been laid about. Through it ran a burbling brook.

"Nice, Klank. I could put a winter cottage here," said Nulu. "Klank?"

Klank ran into the clearing from the far side. "There's blackberries and raspberries over here." He loped to the water's edge. "And some nice looking mushrooms here that would fry up nice. But only the ones on the far bank."

Grimbledung clapped as he slipped off his friend's back. "What are we waiting for?" He ran to the stream and gingerly waded across. On the other side, he scooted to the blackberry bushes.

"He really does need some clothes," said Nulu.

"Don't look at me," said Klank. "I travel light in that department. I got one apron."

"I know, I know," she said as she took her pack off her back. "I suppose I could cut off the bottom half of one of my traveling dresses." She had brought several for the journey. She began to rummage through it.

"Got anything with flowers?"

"Why, Rat?"

"Cause if you're going to make him wear a dress, it might as well have flowers." He guffawed. "That would almost make this trip."

Nulu produced a tan sundress that had white daisies embroidered on it. "How's this?"

"Perfect!"

"Well, daisies are such happy flowers."

Klank hopped over the stream, arms full of mushrooms. "Found some rocket and watercress as well. It'll be a nice Elvin meal."

"Elvin?"

"They're vegetarians." He looked back in the direction they had come. "Most of them anyway." He shrugged out of his pack. "A small fire is all I need to make it happen. Say!" He looked at RatShambler. "Didn't you bring his wand with you in case we found him?"

RatShambler did a little hop. "That we did! Give that Gnome his wand so he can change me back for a while! It's been ages since I was just a rat. Thanks for reminding me, Klank."

Klank shook his head, "No, I figured he could start the fire so I wouldn't have to mess with my tinderbox."

"Good idea." Nulu turned to look where Grimbledung was picking berries and eating them as fast as he picked them. "Grim! Come back over for a moment, will you? And save some of those for us!"

Grimbledung came jogging back to the group. He put his hands on his hips. "Yes?"

"Gads. Klank, give him the wand while I do some quick tailoring." She sat down hard. Pulling a knife from her boot, she began to work on the dress.

"Hey, Grim. Want your wand?"

"Do I? Do I?" He asked, "Does an Elf like the taste of Gnome?"

"We'll never know."

"Well, fine. I'll take my wand anyway." Grimbledung moved to Klank. He still had his hands on his hips.

"You should go see Nulu while I dig it out. I think it's settled to the bottom of the pack." Klank began to remove cooking utensils, spice jars, and even a large skillet from his pack. "I'll get to it." He glanced at Grimbledung with a grin. "Shortly."

"Hey now!" Grimbledung smiled as he walked over to Nulu. She was hunched over a dress, working on it with a knife. "What'cha doing, Nulu?" He peered over her shoulder. As he leaned against her.

Nulu raised her head. She had combined all her gear since abandoning the wagon and was using the extra-full pack as a worktable. "Grimbledung, if you

don't stop leaning over me, I'll take this knife and we'll be having a Bris with dinner."

"Ohh, I love that stuff! The meat is all tender and juicy" said Grimbledung as he moved around to the front of Nulu. His hands were still on his hips.

"No, that's *a bris*ket. A Bris is… Neveryoumind. You probably don't want to know," said RatShambler.

"Here, put this on," said Nulu as she held up the severely shortened dress up to Grimbledung. "It's just about your size. I'll even make a belt from the hem."

"What do I need clothes for?"

"YOU NEED CLOTHES!!"

"All right you three. You don't all have to shout at once." Grimbledung yanked the dress from Nulu. He eyed it suspiciously. "Isn't this a dress?"

Nulu hesitated. "Uhm. It's a tunic. A summer tunic."

Grimbledung started to pull it over his head.

"Wait! You should wash off the marinade first," suggested Nulu.

Grimbledung froze, hands over his head. "You're probably right. I'll just stay nacke…. I mean let me go get washed off and I'll be back as soon as I'm done."

Nulu maintained eye contact with the Gnome. He was still standing with his hands over his head. "Great. Go get cleaned up. Then you can get dressed." She couldn't help but giggle at him, "You mighty Gnome, you."

"Right?" Grimbledung strutted to the stream. As he passed Klank, he stopped. "I almost forgot. You should try some of these royal elf spices I picked up". He took the sack off his neck and handed it to Klank. "It seems a little goes a long way." He smiled and made a dash for the stream. When he got to it, he jumped high in the air and grabbed his legs around his shins. "Cannonball!" He shouted.

"What's a cannonball?" Asked RatShambler.

Grimbledung stood up. Thankfully, the stream was waist deep on him. "I have no idea. But they feed infantry to them."

"What?"

"They're cannon fodder"

"Are you sure that's what that means?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "I dunno. It sounded like something good to yell anyway." He grabbed a handful of loam from the riverbank and began to scrub himself with it by the handful.

"When you're presentable, I want to go be a rat for a little bit."

Grimbledung nodded as he worked on his shoulders. "Anyone want to do my back?"

None of the others made eye contact with him.

Grimbledung frowned. He took to rubbing against the bank to get the hard-to-reach spots.

"Found it, Rat!" Klank held up Grimbledung's wand. "You'll be back to scurrying in no time." He stood up. "I'm going to get some of those berries to make a nice dressing for our meal." He waved his saucepan at RatShambler. "You should be a rat when you eat, so you don't need as much since you're smaller. Then we'll make you big again, but you'll still be full."

RatShambler opened his mouth, then closed it. It was hard to argue with that. It really didn't make sense, but kind of did at the same time.

The quartet of travelers ate a hearty meal of fried mushrooms in blackberry sauce, and, thanks to a remaining apple in Klank's pack, and some found nuts, a tasty salad with raspberry vinaigrette as well.

After eating their absolutely delicious meal (thanks to the Elven spices), the group sat in silence watching the fire burn down. The last couple of hours had been exhausting. Without much else said, they fell asleep, one by one.

The sun crested the trees, bathing the sleeping travelers. Nulu sat up quickly, knife at the ready. She looked around. The clearing was empty except for

two deer who were busying themselves with blackberries. Rat had opted to spend the night in his natural form. He was still asleep, on his back, legs spayed out towards the brightening sky. Grimbledung was in a matching position. Also, au natural. Nulu shook her head at the sleeping Gnome. Even though he was unstable and unpredictable, he had shown -according to Drimblerod's accounting of the tale- unbelievable bravery in the face of overwhelming odds at Frank's Keep. It was either that, Drimblerod said, or a complete misunderstanding on Grimbledung's part. Either way, he had put events in motion that thwarted the Halflings' invasion plans. Nulu chuckled; that was another place Grimbledung couldn't go to anymore. If he kept up this pace, the only safe place for him would be Julesville.

Grimbledung turned over and farted at the sky. Long and loud. Twice.

Klank rolled to his feet. "How does one Gnome produce so much gas?" He asked as he stretched. "Something's not right inside that creature's innards."

"I don't think it's limited to just his innards." Nulu giggled.

"I'm not asleep, you know."

Rat continued to snore.

Grimbledung made his way to his feet. Like Klank he stretched, hands high over his head.

"Delberger's Hand, Naked Gnomes is not how I like to start my day. Hot coffee, eggs, and some pancakes. That's how you start a day."

Grimbledung shrugged, "What do you want me to do about it?" He grinned and waggled his ears.

"Clothes. On." Said Nulu. It sounded nothing like a request.

Grimbledung reached down and picked up the dres… tunic. He slipped it over his head. "Better?"

"Only barely," said Klank. "I'm going to wrestle up some breakfast to make it better." He smiled. "Then we can get out of this forest."

Grimbledung nodded. "I'm going to step to the tree line while you do. Want me to bring back some berries?" He looked over. "Or maybe a deer?"

"We are *not* having a deer for breakfast."

"Well not all of it of course; just the tasty parts."

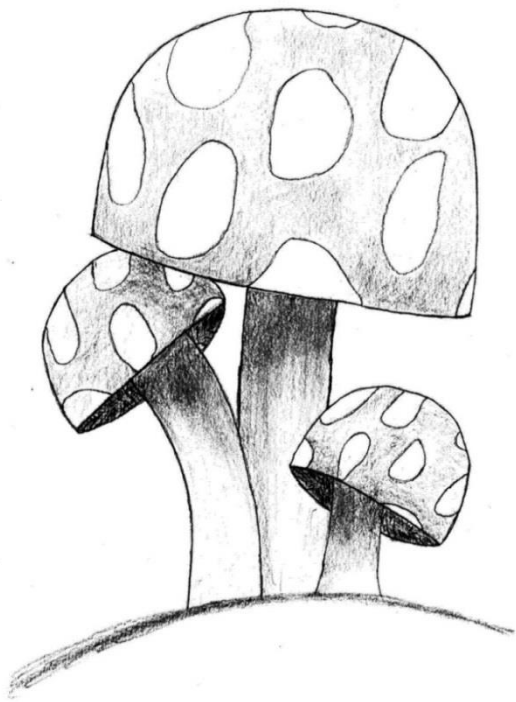
Klank just narrowed his eyes at Grimbledung.

"Fine, Miss Nulu No Deer Bentknees." I'll just bring back some berries." Grimbledung moved to the stream, picking up his tunic as he daintily crossed it. Once he got to the other side, he flapped his arms and charged the deer, squawking as we went. They ran off before he got halfway to them. "Berries is mine!"

Nulu shook her head. "It's good to get him back." She looked around the forest. Even though they were in a bright, open clearing, the forest all around them formed a dark ring. A dark foreboding ring. "This place gives me the creeping willies."

"Yeah," said Klank. "Lemmie go see if I can scrounge up some eggs to use on those mushrooms." He loped off in a different direction than Grimbledung. By the time Klank returned, Grimbledung had a fire started and Nulu had packed up their remaining gear.

"Nice fire, Grim," said Klank as he put six large eggs on the ground next to the fire. "Go grab me some mushrooms while I get the eggs started. Far side only."



"Sure thing. I have some berries as well if you want to use them too. And that Elvish spice. That stuff is hard to beat."

Klank shook his head. "I want to save that stuff for special occasions." He grinned. "And I want my brothers and me to have a chance at making it ourselves."

Grimbledung cackled as he moved to the stream "Maybe you can sell it to the Elves when you figure it out. Leaves said they didn't have a lot of it."

"Did you take the last of this royal spice?" Nulu asked.

Grimbledung waved a hand dismissively at her. "It's some lousy spices. It can't be all that valuable. They probably won't even notice its missing. Who ever heard of spices being worth anything?"

Just then, the air was filled with the sounds of Elvish horns. War horns.

Nulu picked up a rock at threw it at Grimbledung.

"Now hold on! If *you'd* have said that, no one would have raised an eyebrow!" He ducked below the stream bank as he quickly picked mushrooms.

From the side nearer the group. "I hope they don't spoil breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day, besides brunch, lunch, tea, dinner, and supper". He stood back up. The fire was out and Nulu, Klank, and Rat were all standing at the ready. "Oh come on!" He hopped up and down.

"Bring the mushrooms. You can eat them along the way. Change Rat so we can get going," said Nulu. Another round of horn blasts broke the morning silence. "Quick like."

Grimbledung half walked, half stomped to Rat. He pulled out his wand (the ~~dress~~ tunic had pockets) and waved it at Rat.

Rodentus Grigio

Transmutis Completus

Shambles Verdes

He intoned half-heartedly.

"Better?" Grimbledung asked.

"Yes. We need to make good time, so hop on Klank, and I'll ride on rat."

"Whoo! I get to ride on a Gnoll. How many times do you get to say that?"

"No farting," warned Klank.

Nulu looked up at the sky. "We need to head due west to get out of here nearest Frank's Keep."

"North Jute is closer," said Klank.

"You know the way?" Nulu swung onto RatShambler's back. Another blast of horns filled the air. "Either way, we need to get moving."

Klank shook his shoulders. "I know the way. Used to go up there for some spices on a regular basis." He winked, "Till we figured out the mix on our own."

"Lead the way," said Grimbledung as he popped another mushroom into his mouth. He put the remaining mushrooms in his dress's pockets (it's a dress, okay? It's not a tunic). . "Excitement always gives me an appetite."

"Everything gives you an appetite," said RatShambler.

"Not everything."

"Everything."

"Not asparagus. Nasty things, asparaguses. Asparagusi?"

"I think it's like fish," offered RatShambler as he craned his neck to look back.

"No, that can't be. I like fish."

"I don't think this conversation is going to end any time soon," said Klank.

He was right.

TWO HOURS LATER

"What about Spargle?" Asked Rat.

"Now you're just being silly," countered Grimbledung.

Just as Nulu was about to threaten them both with egregious bodily harm, *The Incident* as it would be called from then on happened.

ONE HOUR LATER

The group moved along in self-imposed - and Nulu enforced- silence. Grimbledung walked alongside RatShambler, who had decided he would stay a rat so Grimbledung wasn't even tempted to ride him for the rest of the journey.

And perhaps also for a few weeks after they got back. "No, for the last time, I'm through carrying you. Keep your incantations to yourself."

"I swear, I'm all better now. It was just a bad batch of mushrooms."

"No."

"No."

"I even cleaned out Klank's fur! That's got to count for something." Grimbledung patted his friend on his side, "Right?"

Klank tilted his head to the Gnome, "No, what counts for something is The Incident..."

Grimbledung opened his mouth.

"...that will *never* get mentioned again, that made it necessary for me to have an entire, throurough cleaning. Will never get mentioned again."

"I said I was sorry."

"No, what you said was 'holy crap! Holy flaming crap!' That's what you said as a vague and unhelpful warning!"

"It seemed appropriate considering what was about to happen."

"Quietness," reminded Nulu. "Quietness and only quietness."

Surprisingly, there was until they left the forest

Chapter Thirty-One
Arrrg! There Be Squalls Ahead…And Angry Pixies

As the group neared the edge of the forest, a stiff breeze picked up. One, then another leaf swatted Grimbledung's face. "Hey! What gives?"

"It was like this coming into the Foreboding Forest," said Nulu, "didn't you notice?"

"I was upside down with a bag on my head at the time. I was noticing not much of anything."

"Don't you mean 'not noticing'?" Asked Rat.

"No, I was noticing that I was not noticing. There's a difference."

"You say that as if that happens every day," said Klank has he stopped walking. The rest followed suit.

"Well, not *every* day, Klank, but more often than you'd think."

"I'd think once was more than enough," said Nulu. "How many times have you been captured, hung upside down, and had a sack over your head?"

"Lots, I suppose."

"Lots?"

"In Grimbledung's defense, anything over two is lots," explained Nulu. She shook her head. "You know, maybe you should reassess your..."

"Life choices," interrupted Grimbledung. "Yeah, I've heard." With another shake of his head, he started forward again. "Heard it a few times."

"A few?" Nulu called after him. "Or lots?"

The quartet emerged from the dim -blustery- forest. On the Great Shambler Plains, the sun was high in the sky, already moving towards its nighttime retreat. Large black clouds seemed to be crowding it on its way.

"Ahh, sunlight."

Nulu nodded at Klank. "Finally."

"At least for a while anyway," said Rat. He was looking at the dark clouds. "Say, that reminds me."

Grimbledung craned his neck to look at his friend who was now a rat and perched on his shoulder. "Of what?"

"It reminds me..."

"Of food in some way," interrupted Nulu. "Two can play that game."

Rat squinted his good eye at the Trolless. He twitched his ragged whiskers for good measure.

Nulu patted Rat on the head. "I'm teasing Rat. I'm a little hungry too, now that you mention it." She hazarded a glance at Klank.

Klank nodded, then scanned the area. In the distance was a group of three trees. "I say we go over there to eat. Not sure if I want to eat back in there." He gestured over his shoulder at the Foreboding Forest. "Can't be more than a half hour's walk." Klank looked at the others for their approval. "To that..."

"A grouping of trees is called a corpse!" Grimbledung had been spouting collectives all day to pass the time (since he couldn't see the clouds while in the forest).

Nulu nodded back at the Gnoll. "Sounds good to me. A nice picnic sounds like a good way to start our trip back." She looked at the dark clouds. "And if it starts to rain, we can wait it out there."

The group made for the corpse of trees as the clouds finally overtook the sun. No one understood why the all-powerful sun, maker of light and heat, would let a few rebellious clouds push it around, but it happened all the time. Some thought they had to be related, probably by blood with how the clouds always seemed to get their way. Other's believed that the sun owed the clouds money from a late night Trufflidge game... This was actually much nearer to the truth.

The temperature dropped sharply as the clouds completely masked the sun. The group picked up their pace as a breeze developed. "It's like we're back in the forest," said Grimbledung. As he looked up, a raindrop splattered on his head.

"We are going to get wet, me thinks." Several other drops hit him. Large ones "Gah! Last one there is all wet!" Grimbledung broke into a run towards the trees that were still almost a half a mile away. He thrust his arms into the air. "Winning!"

Klank moved beside Grimbledung, trotting comfortably. "Rat, is it true what they say about rats and a sinking ship?"

Rat looked from the Gnoll to the dark skies, to Grimbledung, then back to Klank.

"Hey!" Complained Grimbledung as he huffed and puffed. "Don't you dare!"

"Sorry, Grim. It's every rat for himself." With a quick jump, he landed on Klank's shoulders. "Ready when you are." He grabbed handfuls of hair.

Klank sprang ahead at a full sprint.

"Hey!" He shouted at the rapidly disappearing pair.

"Road apples!" Grimbledung heard a hissing behind him. Without stopping, he looked over his shoulder. There was a wall of rain approaching him rapidly. "Nuts." He looked forward again and tried to pick up his pace.

Just as Nulu passed him in long, terrain-gobbling strides.

"Steaming road apples!"

Nulu was not nearly as fast as a four-legged Gnoll encumbered by only a backpack and a small rodent, but much, much faster that a Gnome.

"Steaming road apples with nuts on top!" He said as he watched the distance between them grow. Within moments, the wall of rain overtook him. Only moments after, he was drenched. His ~~dress~~ tunic stuck to him all over. He looked up at the skies, silently cursing (so he didn't get a mouthful of water-birds flew up there you know!) as he tried to keep his pace up.

Unsuccessfully.

By the time he reached the tree, Klank had a fire going and was leaning over a boiling caldron of stew. Nulu was leaning back against a tree, a large tankard of cider in her hand.

Rat was asleep.

"Well, this is a find how-do-you-do." Grimbledung shook himself off, purposely moving closer to Nulu as he did.

Nulu raised an eyebrow at him. "You want tossed back out there?" She gestured at the downpour with her tankard. "Under here it's barely sprinkling, if you haven't noticed." She took a drink. "Or do you want some cider?"

"Cider," Grimbledung said meekly. He moved closer to the fire. A strange feeling tickled the scar behind his ear. He looked around the area. Nothing *seemed* out of the ordinary.

"Yer cup is out there." Klank pointed just past the protective cover of the trees at a clay tankard that was overflowing with rain water. "That what yerrr lookin' for?"

Grimbledung shook his head to try and clear it. "Sure, I suppose?" The feeling he was being watched was overwhelming. "Anyone else have the creeping willies?"

"You mean because your clothes are see-through at the moment?"

"No, Nulu." Grimbledung quickly scampered out and retrieved his tankard. He looked at it. "How're you going to make this into cider? You know this comes from the same sky *birds* fly in, right?"

"Ever had a bird crap on you?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "Sure. Usually when I'm saying something about Fate. Who hasn't?"

Fate looked over and raised an eyebrow.

"So the droppin's don't stay up there, you daft Gnome. The water's clean." Klank took the tankard from him and sloshed some out. "Lookit this." He placed it atop the stew pot that was on the fire and took a jar from his pack. He unstopped it and moved to pour it into the cup.

Nothing happened.

"It's empty." Grimbledung's shoulders slacked. "No more cider." *Were those bells*? He looked up into the thick leaves. When he looked back down, something that looked like a tendril of tar was hanging out of the jar. "Is that tar?"

"Boiled down cider. Just takes a dollop and it lasts for months." As the tendril of goo reached the water, Klank twisted his wrist quickly and the tendril snapped off and sank. Klank continued the motion, coaxing the remaining tentacle of cider back into the jar. He pressed a cork hard into the opening. "Give it a minute, then stir it with a stick."

"Neat!" *Bells again?* He looked up worriedly.

"What you keep looking at?"

"I keep hearing bells." He rubbed the scar behind his ear.

"A lunch bell?" Rat was suddenly wide awake. "Count me in."

Grimbledung drew his wand. "Maybe we should go."

"What, out there?" Rat pointed outward. The rain still had not slowed. In fact, it seemed to have even picked up a little. "Not without a warm meal in me first."

Nulu leaned forward. "Relax, Grim. We're perfectly safe here. Just drink your cider and you'll.." She stopped in mid-sentence as she looked up.

"Bells?"

Nulu shook her head. "It's just the wind, Grim."

"I have a bad feeling about this. Creeping willy bad."

Klank offered Grimbledung the steaming tankard. It smelled like cider. He cautiously took a sip. It tasted like it too! "Wow, that's good cider." He looked up. "Can you hear the bells?"

"No, I can't," said Rat. "Not a bit."

"Well, I can hear the bells," Grimbledung looked up. "Just hear them chiming. My temperature is climbing." He shook his head. "I can hear the bells"

"Gads, now you've got me jittery," said Klank. "The stew'll be ready in a little. We'll eat then head out. Sound good?"

Grimbledung nodded as he squatted by the fire. "I suppose." Reflexively, he reached up and rubbed the scar behind his ear. He took another sip of cider but his eyes were trained at the leaves above him.

"So the stew is on its way?" Rat sat on his haunches. "I'm famished you know. And Grimbledung's fidgeting isn't helping any."

"What's fidgeting got to do with eating?"

Rat looked at Nulu. "It's common knowledge that when..."

Suddenly the air was filled with Pixies.

Grimbledung jumped to his feet. "Everyone out in the rain!" He jabbed his wand at a swooping Pixie. A stream of lava enveloped it. He continued moving his wand, catching another in the molten stream.

Nulu pushed herself to her feet and swung her tankard at a Pixie. The tankard shattered as it connected, sending the Pixie reeling. The cider hissed as it splashed on the fire. She dropped the useless handle and pulled a wand from her belt.

Grimbledung ducked as Nulu aimed across him, tracking a Pixie as it flew at Klank. She blasted it out of existence once it was past Grimbledung.

"No disintegrations!" Grimbledung shrieked as he ducked again. "Get in the rain!" He stumbled backwards into the downpour, falling roughly on his butt.

Klank grabbed a Pixie and stuffed it into his mouth. He chewed it up and swallowed hard. "They taste like ham! Mayhap we can get them on the menu at the school?" He reached for another one.

Grimbledung immolated another Pixie as they continued to swarm. "Get out in the rain!"

Finally, Nulu and Klank backed into the rain from their current positions then jogged over to Grimbledung.

"So, they don't like water? I never knew." Nulu aimed her wand into the swarm of Pixies. There seemed to be hundreds of them. She blasted another.

"Water doesn't bother them when it's on the ground. Rain is a completely different story."

"Where's Rat?" Klank looked around. "RAT!"

Rat sat in the swarm of Pixies, sipping Grimbledung's abandoned tankard of cider. "Quit shouting; I'm right here."

"Get out here Rat!"

Rat shook his head. "Pixies don't mess with rats." He took another sip of cider. "Seems they find us repulsive." He stuck out his tongue. "We're a misunderstood species, rats."

True to his word, the Pixies swarmed all under the tree, but still gave Rat a healthy berth.

Two Pixies began to heave the lid off the stew pot.

"Stay outta my stew!"

"Shut up you flea bag!" Sneered one of the Pixies tugging on the lid. It's voice seemed to be intermixed with bells.

"Why don't you come stop us?" Said the other. "You walking carpet!"

Nulu aimed down her arm carefully at the first Pixie and blasted it. The disintegrate spell hit the Pixie squarely in the chest and ricocheted off the lid and passed over Grimbledung's shoulder.

"No disintegrations!" Grimbledung screeched as he dropped to his knees, cowering.

"Sorry Grimbledung."

"Grimbledung?" Tinkled a Pixie.

"Grimbledung?" Said the remaining one on the stew pot. It was flittering just above the lid, hands on her hips. "Is that you?"

"Come closer, *Grimbledung*," said another as it flew right to the edge of where the leaves stopped the rain.

"GRRIIIIMMM BALLLL Dung," the Pixies all said in unison.

Grimbledung sheathed his wand and covered his ears. "Stop!"

"GRRRIIIMMM BALLL *DUNG*!"

"Stop it!"

"GRRRIIIIMM BALLL...."

"Hey, leave him alone!" Interrupted Nulu.

A Pixie left the swarm and hovered in front of the Trolless, just under cover of the tree -and more importantly- just out of her reach. "What're you going to do about it, *Troll*?" She brandished her own wand and aimed it at Nulu. "Leave the Gnome. Take the Caldron. And no one gets hurt."

Grimbledung clapped his hands over his ears. "Leave the caldron! Let's just go!"

Nulu took a step forward, putting the Pixie within reach. "No flea with wings is going to push *me* around." The Pixie moved back, out of grabbing-range yet again. Nulu took another step forward. She was now under the trees.

"Nulu!" Grimbledung saw red before his eyes. His brain was a swirl of madness. There was an almost maddening jangling of bells in his ears. He was losing control. "Let's go!" His vision tunneled in on Nulu; she was a small figure in a sea of swirling red. "Gah!"

Nulu reached out again. "Stinking Pixie bullies." She grabbed the Pixie out of the air. "Got you!"

"Really?" In a flash of wings, Pixies swarmed her. Thin silvery ribbons sprang from their wands, entangling her.

"Get out into the rain, Nulu," Klank called as he sprang. But it was too late. Within mere moments, Nulu was completely mummified in the silvery threads. She swayed one way, then the other, then fell to the ground roughly.

Klank landed beside her and grabbed her around the shoulders. The silky threads made it difficult to get a good hold on her. He arched his back and began to pull the Trolless out into the rain. Again, too late. As he frantically tugged, the Pixies pounced on the hapless Gnoll. In moments, he too lay beside the struggling Nulu, trapped in thousands of Pixie strands.

Rat sat quietly throughout the entire melee, hoping no one took notice of him.

Not a Pixie did.

Grimbledung got to his feet, pounding his hands on his head. "Get out! Get out!" He screeched.

"GRRRIIIMMM BALLLL DUNG!" The Pixies all said in unison.

Unable to control his actions, Grimbledung ran onto the Great Shambler Plains through the pouring rain. Pixie Madness overtaking him.

"Well, that's no good. How we supposed to get him now, Pete?" Asked a Pixie as it flitted down and landed on the struggling Nulu. He looked down. "Quit squirming or I'll give you something to squirm about."

Pete looked out into the rain. It had subsided considerably. "That's not too much to be flying in, I don't think."

A Pixie flew out into the rain. The drops struck it harshly, pushing it down, but it was still able to fly. More or less. The Pixie raised its arms in triumph, then quickly lowered them to keep her balance.

"See? Glider there can fly in it." Pete appraised his fellow Pixie. "More or less."

"I say we go finish off that Gnome for what he did to us!" Glider brandished her wand. "Who's with me?"

Rat held his breath.

"Let's go!" The Pixies called in unison. Like a tinkling swarm of wasps, the Pixies poured out into the rain and in the general direction Grimbledung ran. Or more precisely, was running. Being a Gnome, he hadn't made much progress and was still plainly in sight, a mere 200 yards away. He was still hitting his head as he went.

Rat let out a breath. "I thought they'd never go." He scurried over to Nulu. "I'll get you out, don't you worry." He looked at Nulu and Klank for a long moment. "How the hell do I get you out of that stuff?"

Nulu mumbled something.

"What?"

Nulu mumbled again. She thrashed around as she did so.

Rat hopped onto Nulu's chest and using his claws tore away the silvery threads over her mouth.

"You can't breathe through this stuff. Help Klank!"

Rat hopped from Nulu to Klank and moved to his snout. Carefully, he plucked away the threads from around his nose. As he cleared it, Klank took a deep breath. "Good thing you don't have a cold, right?"

Klank thrashed about.

"Relax. That's one crisis down." He moved to Nulu's hand. It still had her wand in it. He nibbled one end of it to remove the threads. "Those taste horrible." When he had one end clear, he pulled the wand free. He hopped onto Klank's chest; he was closer to the edge of the trees. "Now to deal with the second crisis." He looked out into the rain. The swarm of Pixies was gaining on Grimbledung. The downpour had slowed them down, and they flew erratically, but no matter what, Grimbledung could only run as fast as a Gnome. Which wasn't particularly fast, compared to how a Pixie flew. Even in a rainstorm. "What spell should I use?"

Klank sneezed, spraying Rat with snot.

"Gross! What is the matter with you?" He flicked Klank's nose with his free hand. "I'm trying to help Grimbledung out there."

Klank sneezed again.

Rat ducked but not soon enough. He caught the full spray in his face. "You know, even for a rat, that's disgusting." A lantern went off in his head. "Oh!" He turned outward and looked up at the sky. "So more rain, huh?"

Klank inhaled.

"Don't you do it." Rat warned. He pointed the wand at the cloud-filled sky. He paused for a moment, wand upraised, then turned back to Klank. "You know, I'm not sure what I'm doing here."

Klank exhaled then inhaled again. Deeply.

"All right, I'll give it a shot." He turned around and aimed his wand skyward.

Rain drops!

Keep falling on Grimbledung's head.

Just like a guy whose feet are too big for his bed.

Nothing seems to fit. Those.

Raindrops falling on Grimbledung's head!

They keep falling. And falling.

HARD!

He intoned.

Klank snorted.

"Hey, what do you want from me?" A bolt of lightning struck the topmost tree in the corpse. It burst into flame. "Wow, even the gods didn't approve. As long as it starts..."

A torrential downpour fell from the heavens. It was as if they were under a waterfall. Rat tried to look out to where Grimbledung was, but all he saw was grey rain. Even at just over 200 yards, he was completely obscured. "Well that worked."

Nulu struggled under her wrappings as water began to flow past her.

"Whoops. That's not good." Rat dropped the wand and moved back to the pot. Next to it were Klank's cooking utensils. He picked up a knife and scurried back to Klank. He deftly slid the knife under the threads and pulled up sharply. The threads held fast. He tugged and tugged, sawing back and forth at them. Finally, little by little, they began to break. "Let me get Klank out first, Nulu. Then he can get you out. With his fur, there's more room for me to make a mistake if I cut too..."

Klank let out a yelp.

"Sorry, Klank. Nulu, stop distracting me! These are some really strong threads!" As rat worked on the silver threads, the rain -unbelievably – seemed to increase in ferocity. Lightning lit the dark skies as thunder crashed overhead. There were those that believed the two traveled together. Possibly siblings chasing each other around when the clouds hid the sun. Probably so they couldn't get in trouble. It had to be true since one never heard thunder or saw lightning when the sun was out and bright.

A small stream began to flow past the trio, putting out the fire in the process. Rat glanced down and noticed Nulu's wand floating off. He retrieved it quickly then returned to the Pixie Thread cutting. When he had Klank's upper body free, Klank took control of the knife. "Hey!" He chuckled as he looked at the knife. "You know it works better if you use the *sharp* side to cut." Klank chuckled. "I got it from here, Rat. See what ya can save from our stuff before it all floats off."

"Hey, I'm a rat; I don't use utensils." Rat scampered around the campsite, retrieving several wooden spoons, a plate, and even Grimbledung's now-empty tankard. He pulled the items into Klank's backpack as Klank hopped to his feet and began to free Nulu. Making quick work of it, Nulu was soon on her feet as well.

"Like a guy whose feet are too big for his bed? What's that even mean?"

Rat twitched his ragged whiskers. "I heard it once in a song. It has to do with rain somehow."

Nulu gestured into the tempest. "You think?" Even under the trees, the downpour was such that it was raining almost as hard under the trees as out on the plains. "Well, at least that had to have stopped those stinking Pixies." She paused. "What did that one mean 'get him for what he did to us'?"

Rat shrugged. "I have no idea. Grimbledung was already the way he was when he enchanted me."

A bolt of lightning hit another treetop above them. The trio ducked as a peal of thunder cracked through the air.

Nulu looked up. "We're going to get fried if we stay under these trees. You know how much lightning hates trees."

"I think the thunder chases it towards the trees. It's always just behind the lightning," Klank said. "Well, I suppose we can head out in the direction Grimbledung went. He can't have gotten too far with them little legs."

"Besides," offered Rat, "if that lighting hits the ground, we'll have snakes everywhere."

"That's just absurd." Said Klank. "Where do people make up these things?"

Nulu nodded. She reached down and picked up the caldron as it floated past. "That was some spell, Rat." She handed the caldron to Klank.

"Sorry. It was the first thing that came to mind." He moved to a new spot, out of another stream of water that had started to course by.

Klank turned the caldron over, emptying the contents onto the muddy ground,

"That's a terrible sight."

Klank nodded at Rat as he Minisculated the caldron and dropped it into his pack. "I'll clean the thing out later." He held the pack open as Nulu tossed the remaining items into it. After jerking the drawstring tight and folding down the flap, Klank slung it over his shoulder. He looked out into what appeared to be a typhoon. "Yer killin' me, Rat. Killing me."

"Nulu, since Grimbledung isn't here, do you mind?" He stood on his hind legs.

Nulu smiled. "Sure thing, Rat. I'd hate to have you get washed away." She bent down and picked up the rodent, placing him on her shoulder.

"Thanks, Nulu. So which way did that crazy Gnome go?"

Nulu looked back and forth into the tempest. "You know, he kind of went in the direction of Aution."

"Aution?"

Nulu shrugged. "Well, it's in that general direction. Or was, anyway." She pointed. "It's as good a place as any to start."

"You know, we just found the cuss and now we're looking for him again," Klank said. "I'm seeing a pattern developing in our current events."

"We're all stalling, aren't we," said Rat. It wasn't a question.

Klank grinned at Rat. "Look on the bright side, Rat..."

"Do tell."

"The rain'll wash off all that snot!"

Rat considered that. "You know, that *is* a bright side."

Klank steeled himself and stepped into the rain. It felt like little needles hitting him all over. Nulu moved beside him. "This now officially sucks," Nulu said over the howling wind.

"What, only just now?" Rat shook his drenched head.

The trio marched blind into the squall. Thanks to the darkness and swirling winds, they ended up going in the wrong direction. By the time they realized it, they just huddled against a lone tree trying to wait out the storm.

Camping right next to...

Chapter Thirty-Two
Julesville – Marched Upon!

Corporal Colossus led his small contingent towards Julesville. Blinded by revenge, he had pulled aside a hundred soldiers and moved toward Julesville as the rest of the force swarmed out of the castle heading to who knew where. Or, in Colossus' case, who cared where.

Much slower, now that their magical speed had worn off, they advanced on the town in a loose formation . The sun had been just out of its lair when they started their march, now it was almost ready to go away again. The soldiers marched along with their long shadows to keep them quiet company.

"Orders, Corporal?" Barked a Private on Colossus' left. With less than two hours to go, the tension level has begun to rise.

Colossus looked at his soldiers then at the sun. Then remembered a conversation he had had with Gigantus. "We're going to camp for the night and attack at first light so we're fresh."

The men nodded in agreement- tired from a long day of marching.

"Break out the tents and rations and set up a perimeter in case there's any search parties out there."

The camp was quickly and efficiently set up- thanks to the Halfling Army (as with most others) subscribing to the adage that the three things that ensured a military operation's success were: rehearsals, rehearsals, rehearsals.

With several small fires started and meals prepared, the Halflings settled down for a quiet night.

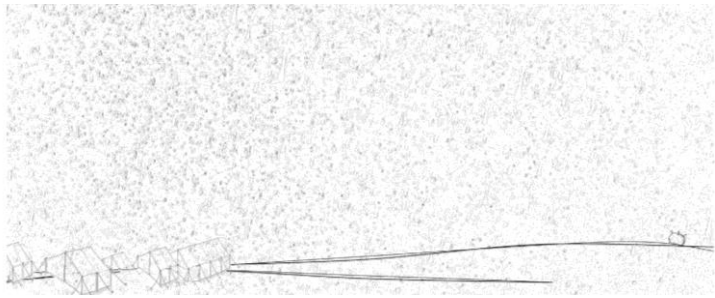
As the sun seemed ready to settle for the night without any fuss, dark clouds began to form on the horizon, chasing it away. It looked like it was raining far away from them. Colossus moved around the camp, ensuring that tent pegs were securely hammered, and that corners had two pegs, and even adding additional tie downs to center poles. As the wind picked up, he made a second pass through the camp, making sure any objects that could blow away were tied down. In the morning, most his soldiers would thank him for his attentiveness. Finally, with

nothing left to do, he ordered his soldiers into their tents for the night and then took refuge in his own.

Just as the sun disappeared, the rain that seemed to be far off was suddenly all around them The dark clouds opened up in a furious, torrential downpour. Such as none of them had ever seen before. Or would after, for that matter.

In any case, it was a long night for the Halflings.

And others; camped out less than a hundred yards from them, Nulu, Klank, and RatShambler were huddled down as well under a thrice ContraMinisculated caldron the trio barely fit under. Thanks to Klank's insistence (he could smell the Halflings), they were on their way as soon as the sun came out of its den and weren't noticed



Colossus peered out his tent as the sun finally began to color the sky blue once again. He had never experienced a storm of such ferocity. As he untied the rest of his tent flap, he thanked the Lord High Priest that the tent made it through the night. Standing up, he braced himself for the devastation he expected of his encampment. He let out a relieved sigh when he saw that only three tents seemed to be missing. *Hopefully those soldiers were able to see refuge in another tent*. As he moved about the camp, tapping on tents to raise its occupants, he was relieved that several tents had more soldiers in it them than they should have had- the odds were in his favor that he would be at full strength to attack the town.

"All right, Halflings! Let's get some breakfast in us and then we're on our way. Leave the tents because we're sleeping indoors tonight!" He bellowed.

Several soldiers responded with whoops and cheers. The previous night's deluge had made most of them unwilling to spend another night under flimsy canvas.

Within the hour, the soldiers were fed, outfitted, and ready for battle.

"If anyone in town gives us trouble, we'll send them out here to stay!" Colossus shouted to his men. "Move out!"

Colossus expected some sort of resistance- although the report from the High Priest's passing crow yesterday before the battle was that that there was a large force assembled on the plains, it might not have been every able-bodied fighter in the area. "Keep the ranks close when we get near town." He thought back to what the crow has said about the battle that should have gone in their favor. Before the Golems and Gargoyles were thrown into the mix. "Keep an eye out for Gargoyles and Golems." Another thought occurred to him at the crow's mention of a flail wielding warrior. "And Half Orcs".

"Gargoyles, and Golems, and Half Orcs? Oh My!" Said a Halfling soldier.

Colossus wheeled around to face him. "The next soldier that uses *that* alliteration won't make it to the sun's setting!"

The soldier nodded. "Right, Corporal! We'll get this town, and their little Gnome too!"

"I'm warning you..." Colossus drew his sword.

The soldier saluted. Colossus noted a trace of a smile on the soldier's face. *Why do I get all the unstables?* "Fine, smart-mouth. Is that the way you want it? You're on recon! Get up there and see what you can see." He pointed his sword at the soldier then towards Julesville. "All the way up!"

"If that's what you want, Corporal," the Soldier saluted again and began to move ahead the formation. "Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins, the Corporal gave me one. Brought it up to me like room service. It was a real choice mission, and when it's all over, I'll never want another."

"Get up there!"

The soldier broke into a jog, quickly disappearing over the hill crest. When the soldiers reached the top, the reconnoitering soldier was two steep hills away and increasing the distance with every moment.

"That nut has got some speed," remarked a Halfling to the chuckles of several others.

"What he lacks in brains..." offered another.

"Settle down, Halflings," cautioned Colossus. "Remember this town is expecting trouble. I want everyone on task. No wandering off for looting. Or anything else."

Several soldiers nodded in understanding.

"So what are your orders for the attack, Corporal?" Asked a soldier.

"We're going to be spread thin so worry about their forces first, then we'll deal with the rabble."

Oftentimes when attacking a town, soldiers would stop fighting to loot a particular shop, or to chase a particularly attractive female. When they were an overwhelming force, losing an odd soldier here and there was not an issue- far from reinforcements and with no idea as to the opposing force, losing even a handful of soldiers could be catastrophic.

Colossus had experienced enough troubles in recent events than to have to deal with a loss in Julesville as well. If nothing else, he needed to burn the town to the ground to avenge his dear Chéri' s death.

Who was dealing with her own troubles at that very moment...

Chapter Thirty-Three
Three? Definitely *Not* Company

"How much farther do you think it is?" Asked Semfeld as he repacked what little gear he had on the Shambler.

The three had spent the day huddled under the shade of the two Shamblers- who didn't seem to mind standing in the sun. Now that the sun had started to set, they prepared to set out again.

"Like I told you yesterday; I have no idea," said Chéri angrily as she shook off her blanket. "All I know is that it's that way." She pointed easterly.

"Are you thure?" Asked Liverioso. He looked in the direction the Gnomess was pointing. It seemed as barren as any other direction. He squinted for good measure.

Chéri stalked to the other Shambler, "All I know is that is the direction that Pic chief pointed while we were at the campfire." She shoved her blanket under the beast's harness.

"Let's not start this up again," pleaded Semfeld. He had spent the better part of the previous evening, riding with Liverioso because Chéri had refused to ride with him. It wasn't that riding with Chéri was that much more enjoyable. Never mind- it was *much* more enjoyable. "Liverioso, we've got to be close now. We can't afford to start second-guessing ourselves and walking in circles."

"I thuppose tho," said Liverioso. Secretly he preferred riding with Chéri as well. "Thorry" he added hopefully.

Chéri frowned. She was hoping to have another blow-out so she could get her own Shambler. The prospect of riding with either human wasn't all that appealing. "Fine," she said flatly.

Semfeld pointed at the top of the dune they had camped beside. "I'll go and see if there's anything to see while you get the rest of camp loaded." He turned and trudged up the soft sand. As he went he turned and looked back - both Chéri and Liverioso were silently packing up.

"I hope we find that town thoon," said Liverioso.

"You saying we're going the wrong way?" Snapped Chéri.

Liverioso brought his hands up defensively, "No, no! It's just that I wanth to get thoth Gnometh."

Chéri exhaled slowly. At some point she would have to tell the two Magician's Guild Enforcers her secret. One at a time might be the best method. "You know, Liverioso," she began as she stepped forward. "I want to be honest with you," she lied. "I'm after Drimblerod and Grimbledung as well."

"Really?"

She took another step forward, "You know I'm an assassin, right?"

"Thure."

"Well, I was sent to kill them." She shrugged as innocently as she could.

"What?"

"I was paid to get rid of them and that crazy Grimbledung knocked me into an Abyssmal Box."

"Who paid you to do that?"

Chéri grimaced in what she hoped was convincing, "It was a disgruntled customer. An Elf." Liverioso nodded knowingly so she pressed on with her lie, "Grimbledung insulted him and now the Elf wants him dead."

"I know the feeling!"

Chéri took another step forward. She was finally up to Liverioso. "Yeah," she cooed as she looked up at him, "and seeing as how he paid me upfront, I'd hate to have him think I'm a bad assassin." She tried to work up some tears. "You wouldn't want him to think that would you?"

"No, no!" Liverioso shook his head severely, "not at all!" He wrung his hands, "But whath can I do?"

Chéri cringed inside as she made her move. "Can I help you kill them?"

Liverioso looked up the dune at his partner. He was almost to the top of it. "I thuppose I could athk Themfeld."

Chéri bit her lip as she tried to get a tear to run down her face. For a ruthless assassin, it was hard to do. "But he doesn't understand me like you do." She took another step forward, crowding him. She almost came up to his chin. She craned her head up and looked at him, "I know *you* understand me." She put her hand on his arm, "Right?" The feeling to break it was overwhelming. It caused a tear to run down her cheek. *Nice.*

Liverioso looked down at the Gnomess. Even though she was a Gnome, there was no denying she was well put together, and her being tall for a Gnome, and him being short for a human, they weren't too far off in height. A jolt ran through his innards. It started out really, *really* low, and made its way to his chest quickly. "Thure I do!" He looked up the hill at his partner- he was looking the other way, hands thrust in the air. *Odd.* Liverioso nodded angrily, "I'll juth tell him when he geths back…"

"No!" Chéri said almost too quickly. She regained her composure as she hovered her other hand over Liverioso's chest. "Can we keep this our secret?" She looked up at him again pleadingly as she prepared to punch him directly over his heart. To stop it.

Unaware his life hung in the balance, Liverioso looked back and forth from the alarmingly attractive -yet deadly- Gnomess he had only just recently met and who had threatened his life on several occasions, and his partner of almost five years. It wasn't a difficult decision. "Thure!"

Even though it was merely a pat (instead of a heart-stopping punch), Liverioso's heart skipped a beat as Chéri patted his chest gently.

"Hey!" Semfeld called down at the two. *Were they standing very close together*?! "HEY!"

The two turned to look up as Semfeld began to run down the dune. A wave of sand formed behind him as she went.

"Look out!" Liverioso called as he pointed.

Running in good form ahead of the wave of sand, Semfeld didn't falter until he looked back. In a panic he lost his footing. The wave overtook him and washed down the dune. First a hand, then a foot stuck out of the sand as it rushed down - his head never did.

Chéri looked up at Liverioso, "What'd you do *that* for?"

"I was being helpful." Liverioso moved past the Gnomess and made for the mound of sand as it stopped at the bottom of the dune. Semfeld's leg was sticking out of it. It wasn't moving.

Moving quickly, Chéri reached the man first. She grabbed the leg and began to tug. "Pull him out!" She commanded as Liverioso made it to her side.

Together the two of them pulled Semfeld out. As soon as his head came out of the sand, he gasped for breath. "Thanks!" He sputtered as he spat out sand.

"Thure!" Beamed Liverioso.

Chéri looked between the two. "You're *thanking* him?" She shook her head, "What a pair." A thought came to her, "So what's so important that you had to bring half a dune down on yourself?"

Semfeld rose to a seated position. "We're there," he said as he shook sand out of his hair.

"Finally! Cool Thpringths here we come!" Liverioso looked to the top of the dune, then to Chéri. After their recent interaction he was hoping for another day on the trail to lay the groundwork (so to speak) of an actual relationship with the suddenly attentive female. "Hrmmm," he added.

Semfeld stood slowly, shaking his head to get the sand out of his ears. "We're in business." He slapped his partner on the shoulder, "Let's go find the Guild Tent."

"Tent? Your guild uses tents?" Chéri shook her head, "What kind of guild…"

"Hey Gnome, Don't you go casting aspersions upon our guild. I'll have you know…," began Semfeld angrily.

Liverioso stepped between the two, "Lithen. Leths just get going to town."

Semfeld looked from his partner to the Gnomess and back. *The Gnomess who was standing really close to him just moments ago*. "What?"

"I agree." Chéri turned and quickly moved to one of the Shamblers and clambered atop it.

Very strange. "What's going on here?"

"Let's get going, Semfeld," called Chéri as she situated herself in the saddle, "let's get going to your guild." She offered her hand down to help him up. Keeping the two off balance was the new plan.

Semfeld looked at his partner, who was now dejectedly clambering onto the other Shambler. Semfeld moved to Chéri's Shambler, "So we're on our way, eh?" He squinted his eyes, "A friendly trio, we three?"

Chéri continued to reach down with a smile on her face- at one time she was a professional Trufflidge player; one just did not succeed at Trufflidge without being able to bluff at will. "You coming?"

After another round of suspicious glances, Semfeld took Chéri's hand and swung up into the saddle behind her.

Before he could reach around for the reins, Chéri took them and gave them a vicious snap. The Shambler lurched forward as the stinging along its neck got its undivided attention. With a prod of her heels, they began to lope around the around the dune. Semfeld had to grab onto Chéri's waist to keep from falling off.

Liverioso looked up from his saddle to see his partner gallop off. *With his arms around the Gnomess!*

He kicked at his animal's sides to coax it into action. After a few moments, he began to catch up to the pair. "Wait for me!" He said angrily. He tried to make eye contact with Chéri, but vexingly, she was intent on looking forward. Instead, Semfeld met his eyes. There was anger in them.

Semfeld squinted his eyes to focus the anger better. "The bedroll's slipping out, Chéri" he said with a mischievous grin, "let me get it tucked back in so it doesn't fall out. Hate to lose what little supplies we have."

Liverioso's eyes got large as his partner twisted in the saddle to reach back behind himself. As he did so, he moved his other hand to Chéri's side as he leaned back. By the time he was done leaning, he was using her breast as a handhold. And she didn't seem to complain! *Then he noticed that the bedroll was securely in place!* "Hey!" He complained.

"Got it?" Chéri asked nonchalantly. She had been planning the deaths of both humans. Only a few of the minor details remained unresolved. Thanks to very current events, the sequence of their deaths had just been worked out.

Semfeld grinned at his flabbergasted partner, "Yeah, I got it." He leaned forward and returned his hands to her waist.

"Ooohhhh!" Declared Liverioso angrily, insides aglow with fury.

Very nice, thought Chéri. Once they were around the dune and into town, she would see about getting them separated and kill them. With two Shamblers, the trip to Aution would be that much easier. Inside, Chéri was aglow with the satisfaction of having started to work between the two.

Semfeld was aglow for a completely different reason.

They rode in silent, aglow-ness around the dune.

Chéri was *NOT* pleased when they rounded it

Chapter Thirty-Four
Grimbledung's Mind: a Terrible Thing; a Waste

Grimbledung's head felt like it would explode. The cacophony of bells was maddening. "Gaa!" He shouted as he ran into the tempest, oblivious to the rain and wind. "GAAAAA!" Grimbledung seemed to look at himself from his mind's eye. He had a vague idea that he was on the Great Shambler Plains. What he was doing there, he couldn't remember. Were there others with him? That was also a mystery. Only the bells - Pixie Bells - in his head seemed to be of importance. Grimbledung hit his head as he ran, trying to silence them.

But it was no use.

"Get out of my head!" He shouted at the squall as he ran. His ~~dress~~ tunic clung to him, slowing his run. As he ran, he tore at it, finally pulling it off a piece at a time. He continued to run from the bells in his head.

Unsuccessfully.

Finally, after what seemed hours (but was only minutes, really) the bells began to chime in a pattern. Words started to form from the tones in his head. Or more precisely, a word.

Kill!

they chimed.

"Kill who?" He shouted at the black skies. Lightning cracked around him, casting long shadows in all directions. Grimbledung spun around. "Kill who?"

Someone

They clanged.

"Who?" He looked through the rain, seeing only red. "WHO?"

Anyone. Find Anyone

Rang one deep, angry bell.

"But there's no one here!" Grimbledung spun around, running one way, then another. "Who?"

You know where there are people. Your town.

Said the same bell.

"Aution burned down!"

The new town then

They all chorused.

"Then you'll stop?" Grimbledung put his hands over his ears as he ran. The bells continued to assault him. "Then you'll stop?"

The bells did not answer.

"Make the bells stop!" He shouted. He looked around him, through the red filling his eyes, and the heavy raindrops that seemed to fall in sheets. Everything seemed bleak. "It's too far! Julesville is too far. I can't get there!"

Get There FAST! Or else.

the bells warned.

Grimbledung was well aware of what the bells could do to him. When he had first woken up from his injury, when he realized there were parts of a Pixie's brain embedded in his, the bells warned him to do their bidding. Foolishly, he tried to refuse and lost an entire year, living in the wilds, Pixie Madness controlling his very existence. When they finally relented, Grimbledung staggered into one of the Dwarf encampments, hysterical, and barely in control. He tried unsuccessfully to find someone to relate to. Anyone. Not finding anyone to listen, he took it upon himself to make himself a companion. Seeing a haggard looking rat with half a tail, notched ear, and several missing whiskers rummaging in a refuse bin, Grimbledung enchanted the animal, making it his familiar. Tied to him magically, the rat was forced to come when he called, forced to listen to his ranting. After several decades, Rat (as he was called by then) had become the closest thing to a friend Grimbledung had. It was with great pleasure that Grimbledung discovered that after a hundred years (the enchantment caused Rat to become immortal- as least as long as Grimbledung was alive), Rat had developed the ability of speech. Thanks to having to listen to Grimbledung for a century, it was usually snarky speech. Even so, his long-time companion could now converse with him, Grimbledung felt better. Once, while traveling north in fact he...

Quit reminiscing. Find someone to kill

warned the bells.

"Gah!" Grimbledung drew his wand from his wrist sheath- that and his dirk sheath being his last remaining bit of clothing- and aimed it at himself. "I'll get there fast!"

Gazell-itis!

He intoned.

A golden glow surrounded his legs. He slipped his wand into its sheath and cinched it down tight. Lowering his head against the storm, he ran towards Julesville, his legs a blur.

Maca Karthy stepped out into the porch of her shop. The storm had started abruptly an hour ago, whipping rain up and down the street, pushing the townsfolk indoors. *Nice magic*, she thought. *Nice and dark*. Only the occasional pedestrian seemed to brave the downpour- heading either towards the Duck Inn and Dine, or the Mora Tau Bar. One invisible human moved towards the house that another had only moments before left to make his way to the Mora Tau. "While you're charming the Doxies there, someone's charming yours here, it seems," she said with a smirk. "Ahh love." She stepped out into the rain. "Or is it lust?" She looked hard at the house. "Oh dear. *That's* lust." A warm glow formed in her chest as the emotions in the house overtook her. She let out a sigh as the rain continued to fall all around her. But not on her.



Maca stayed dry as the rain parted well above her head, arcing out around her in all directions before splattering a safe distance away. Typical of Elves, her clothes remained dry and clean. Maca Karthy had arrived in town the week before, and had, within the hour established her herb shop- 'Herbs and More. Lots More'. Maca perked an Elfin ear towards one side of town. *Strange. Are those bells?* She turned and looked in that direction, her hair, as usual, making the turn just a moment later. Her long black hair seemed to waver and flow as if she were standing in a breeze. Even when she was indoors. Typical of Elves, she was tall- tall as an average human male, however unlike most Elves, she was not slim. Not overly large, just not "Elfin-sized," as it was called; she was merely not Elfin lithe and athletic. In appearance at least. Maca took several slow, graceful steps into the center of the street, the ground drying under her feet moments before they

touched. She smiled. "How are you this fine evening, Constable?" She said without turning. Even the stealthy werewolf was unable to sneak up on her. He had been furiously trying since she showed up in town. It was a matter of pride at this point- pride any maybe something else. "Quiet?"

"This rain's keeping the rrrrabble indoors." Akita moved close to Maca, partly because he found her interesting in more ways than one, and partly because standing close to her meant the rain avoided him as well. He glanced toward the house she had been staring at. "I don't see how the neighbors don't hear that rrracket."

"They don't have Werewolf ears." She turned to face him, crowding him in her rainless space, hair catching up a moment later. She raised an eyebrow. "Or Elvin ones." She looked up. "Glorious spell, don't you think?"

"Ya mean this spell of rain, or the rain's a spell?"

She shrugged. Even that was graceful and slow. "It'll stop in half an hour." She looked up again. "Just under that, actually."

Akita tore his eyes away from her pale, exposed neck and looked upward as well. "Well, that's soon enough nothin'll get washed away at least. I was worrrried it'd go on all night." He cleared his throat. "Since ya mention it, I was thinkin..."

Maca abruptly turned from the Constable and looked into the darkness. "What *is* that?"

Akita frowned at the woman's back. It had -for some reason- taken him most of the day to build up the courage to ask her to join him for a drink. Now that he had actually started to get the words out, she seemed distracted.

"Do you hear that?" She looked over her shoulder at Akita. "What is that?" Her eyes were wide. "Bells?"

"Hear what?" Akita clenched and unclenched his fists. He had not been around when Herbs and More. Lots More had suddenly appeared along the main street, but word had spread quickly of a mysterious and dark, Elf witch having set up shop. Expecting the worst, Akita made his way to the shop right away and met Maca. Elf? Definitely. Witch? Who was he to judge? Not with the smile she gave him when he entered her shop. A warm, welcoming smile, as if the fact that he was a Werewolf had not even registered. What drove it home was that after only a few minutes, he knew that *everything* registered with Maca. The fact that something unknown was causing her angst raised the hairs on his back.

"Can you hear them?" She didn't look back, attention focused into the darkness.

"What?" Akita turned his head, straining hard to listen. The couple next door was at it. *Still.* There was a party several houses down. He could even pick out the footsteps of the Dwarf (or maybe a Gnome) coming up from behind, over the downpour. Music from the Duck in and Dine intermixed with it all. He hazarded a glance over his shoulder. It was a Dwarf. Teapot of Invisibility in his hand, hood pulled down tight. Pozzuoli was going out for a drink. Nothing more. "No. What do you hear?"

A crack of thunder made Akita start. He frowned, hoping Maca hadn't noticed. If she did, she didn't let on.[12]

Maca took a step, then another away from Akita. Towards whatever was coming. "Stay here."

Akita flinched as a torrent of rain dropped on him as she moved away from him. *She moved away from me?* Akita let a growl start in the back of his throat. He wasn't, by any means, invulnerable, but he was quite hardy, and quick to heal. And extraordinarily fast in a close-quarters fight. There were not many things that would make him think twice about his own safety. The fact that this female felt he was safer where he was, didn't sit right.

Akita crouched down, ready for action as he moved beside the Elf. He was unable to stop a smirk. *Outta the rain. Nice.* "Whatcha hear?" Akita narrowed his glowing eyes into the darkness. Thanks to the potion he took regularly, he was able to see through all manner of invisibility spells. He saw nothing. Then, at the far edge of his vision, he saw a shadow moving towards them in the rain. A blur of a shadow. It was still a ways off with how small it was. "Hey, I see it." He opened his eyes wide, "That a person? They're a ways off still."

Maca turned to Akita, "We need to get indoors. That sound. The bells." She reached her hand out to the Constable. "Let's go get that dri..."

She was interrupted as a figure slammed into her. A small figure. A small naked figure. The two tumbled past Akita in a blur of motion.

Not a large person far away; a small person close up, moving real fast. Akita silently cursed. He turned and looked down. Grimbledung was straddling Maca, a long knife in his hands. He raised the blade up high in the air as a crack of lightning lit the streets. "KILL SOMEONE!" He screeched as he brought the blade down.

Akita leapt for the Gnome, mouth opened wide. He connected with Grimbledung just as the knife hit Maca's chest. He clamped his jaws tight around the Gnome's neck, letting his momentum carry them both into the mud. *Away from Maca*. They landed in a heap. In a flash, Akita was on his feet, claws out and ready for combat. "What's gotten into you, you crazy Gnome? Where's Nulu and Klank and..." He stopped when he realized the Gnome's head was twisted at a funny angle.

"You know this Gnome?" In one motion, Maca moved to a standing position- her hands and knees never touched the ground as she did. She moved beside Akita and looked at her attacker. "Oh dear."

"Yeah, I know him. We've been lookin' for him. The Halflings captured him at the battle at Frank's Keep. Nulu, Klank, and Rat went looking for him in the Foreboding Forest." He bent over and peered at the corpse. "Nuts. I'm not going to hear the end of this from him."

"You want him back?"

"He's a friend."

"Something is wrong with your friend."

Akita let out a genuine laugh. "You don't know the half of it. This crazy Gnome..."

Maca put her hand on Akita's shoulder, "No, I mean, there's something *wrong* with him. Something seems to be controlling him." She paused for a moment. "Or was controlling him."

"Can you fix him?" Akita looked down at the Gnome. "Nuts. Drimblerod's gonna be upset."

She moved her hand down his shoulder to his claw. "I can fix him. We just need to get him into my shop."

"There's an herb to fix *that*?" He pointed at the dead Gnome's obviously broken neck.

Maca looked up at the rain. It parted even wider to create a dry area that encompassed the three of them. "The sign says 'And More' you know." She gave Akita a smile. "It was nice when you stayed beside me."

"All part of the service, Ma'am," Akita said as he reached down and picked up Grimbledung by the shoulder. His head flopped to the side. Maca looked at Akita wide-eyed. "He's dead, he don't care."

Maca led the way to her shop, creating a dry path for Akita and the dead Grimbledung as she did.

Akita was too busy watching her hips as she glided across the street to notice not being rained on. Being behind her, he also did not notice the satisfied smile on her face, and that when she reached up and touched the pendant around her neck, her eyes flashed golden and the nicked red scale on her chest faded to pale flesh. Or, that for the briefest of moments, she had horns sticking out of her temples.

The door of her shop opened before she reached it and closed behind Akita. "Let's get him to the back," Maca said, "and let's see what we can do about your friend's problem."

Obediently, almost as if under a spell, Akita followed her instructions[13].

Throughout the storm (which ended just within thirty minutes) and the rest of the night, Maca worked on Grimbledung with Akita's help. Thanks to her extensive supply of herbs, spices, and magic, she was able to finally rid the Gnome of the Pixie parts in his head.

As the dawn approached, Klank wiped his tired brow. "Is he cured?"

Maca continued to look at the Gnome.

"Is he cured?"

The Elf looked into the Constable's eyes. "Of the Pixie influence, yes."

Akita squirmed under her gaze. It seemed to penetrate straight into his bones. "So that's it then; he should be completely normal?" He considered that. "For a Gnome, that is?" He considered that as well. "For Grimbledung?"

Maca continued to stare.

"What?" Akita self-consciously took a step backward.

"You don't know?"

"Know, what?"

"I cured him of his Pixie influence."

"Yeah. That's great. And you saved his life" He smiled. "I owe you for that." He cleared his throat , "Say, how about we..."

"But I can't cure his other problem." Maca interrupted. "It's just too difficult and would most likely end up killing him if I tried. Permanently."

"What other problem?" Akita took a step forward. Her lack of a genuine answer was beginning to annoy him. "What problem?" He asked tersely.

Maca silently turned Grimbledung's head to the side. There were two arcing white scars on his neck where his throat had been ripped open. "It's bound to him much like Vampirism."

"Vampirism?" Akita asked, unbelievingly.

"Yes, they are similar, the two conditions."

"Vampirism." Akita shook his head. "You're just making that up. That's an old wife's tale."

"Said the *Werewolf*."

Akita considered that for a moment. Then another disturbing thought came to mind. "Well hell. Drimblerod's *not* going to be happy."

Chapter Thirty-Five
When Good Orcs Make Bad Puns
Or Bad Orcs Make Good Puns?

The Halfling scout - Pachydermis - continued to jog ahead of the group of Halflings. The slow-turning windmill had been in view for several minutes now- every time he ran down a hill and made it to the next crest, it was larger. Finally, he crested a hill that brought the town itself into view. He stopped to catch his breath and appraise the town. There were quite a few buildings under construction but even so, it was a good-sized town. He rubbed his hands together. It would burn beautifully!

He spotted a group at the edge of town, off to his left. There were at most twenty of them of various sizes and races. Most were human-sized with several a full head taller. He shaded his eyes with his hand as he squinted. Four war dogs? Large dogs at that. *That was never a good thing!* One of the dogs stood upright and shoved a human-sized person. Or perhaps hit him in the head. *Werewolf? Gnoll?* Either was worse than just a war dog. "We'll have to kill those things first," he said matter-of-factly. "Nothing personal."

The Halfling watched the group interact for a few minutes. They didn't seem to really be in any sort of formation – it was more like groups standing near each other. Occasionally an individual would move from one group to another, or an entire group would move over to another. "Disorganized amateurs. Killing you is going to be like..." He thought for a moment. Nothing came to mind. "Killing disorganized amateurs."

He shrugged as he turned away from the soon-to-be-destroyed town. Even the Gnolls or Werewolves were no matter to him; they were assured absurdly overwhelming success. He just needed to get back to his Corporal and relay the excellent news. He turned and looked the way he came. Several steep hills made seeing the other Halflings impossible. "Piece of Pie," he said aloud. "With clotted cream on top." He started down the hill, running quickly as it pulled him along. When he got to the bottom, he slowed but only slightly as he made his way to the top. When he got to the top of it he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Wot're you doin' out 'ere?" A deep, gravelly voice asked him. Several grunts of approval followed the question.

"Minding my own business is what *I'm* doing. I hope it's contagious," snapped the Halfling.

The Orc looked left and right to his compatriots. "Suppose we're immune?" He snorted. "We gots our shots n' everything."

"Listen up, Orc," began the Halfling as he crossed his arms defiantly. "In just a few moments, an entire *company* of Halflings is gonna come over that hill behind you, and you and your immune Orcs are going to have a really bad day."

The Orcs eyes got large. "An entire comp'ny?"

"An entire company," assured the Halfling. He moved his hands to his hips in hopes it was even more defiant.

"Well, that changes ev'rythin'." The Orc smiled a jagged smile. "Cause you know what?"

"What's that, *Orc*?"

"That's not my name," offered the Orc.

Several other Orcs snickered. It was one of their favorite jokes.

"All right, Orc. I'll bite. What's your name?"

"Well, not my real name 'course. I don't give that out to just anyone." The Orc shrugged. "It's a nickname, really. Somethin' I's picked up on the playin' field."

The Halfling exhaled loudly. "Fine, what's your nickname?"

The Orc reached out and grabbed the Halfling by the throat. "Misery."

"Urp!" Said the Halfling.

"An' ya know what they say...."

All the Orcs snickered now.

"Misery sure do love comp'ny." He loosened his grip so that the Halfling's color became less purple. "So I'lls ask you again." He narrowed his eyes. "Wot're you doin' out 'ere? Up to 'alflin' mischief?"

Chapter Thirty-Six
The Julesville Defense Force:
Being All They Can Be

A group of five young Humans approached the crowd that had gathered at the edge of town. They brought the total number up to twenty. "You sure about this?" Asked one in dark brown robes. He was holding a large staff in his hand and a spell book in the other. '*Better Trees and Gardens - Druid Spells for All Occasions*' was emblazoned on it in large gold lettering.

"Yes, I told you already. I'm sure. I'm sure this is a good idea. I'm sure this will work out. I'm sure that we'll be completely safe." The lanky human put his hand on his sword, "*I am sure.*"

"If you say so, Zoddious," said another young man- this one was dressed in all green and was holding a longbow. He looked at the group gathered at the edge of town nervously. "I mean, I just..." His voice trailed off.

The lad beside him wearing black robes and holding a crystal ball patted him on the shoulder. "It will work out. Don't worry, Ambler."

"Quiet, or they'll hear us," snapped Zoddious. He eyed the townsfolk who had gathered. The majority that were there were Humans, with two Half-Orcs, several Dwarves, a lone Elf, and one large Trolless rounding out the rest. He didn't know it, but twice again that many invisible people milled about, but because of their transparency, weren't counted in the total. Obviously.

'So we need to make a plan', the group of youths heard the Trolless say as they approached.

"Because if those Halflings show up, they'll sure have a plan," said Nulu. She stuck her please stick in the ground and stalked away from it. "I have a ba-ad feeling about this." She said to no one in particular. She spotted Akita approaching with Drimblerod. *Finally some backup!* "Akita!" She called. She moved to the Constable, pulling her weapon from the ground as she went. "We need your help."

Akita nodded as he approached. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Let me guess. We're a disorganized mob and the Halflings are going to crush us when they get here," said Drimblerod.

"Akita," Nulu pleaded.

"Nulu's rrrright. We need to have some sort of plan." He looked around. "We've got what, not barely twenty of us?" He looked at the two score invisible persons milling around. They were furiously not making eye contact with the Constable. "Do we know how many Halflings are coming?"

Nulu looked out on the Great Shambler Plains. "We've no idea. Could be ten. Could be a standard group of a hundred."

"You know, I'm really hoping for the lower part of that estimate," offered Drimblerod. "So this is all that would come out to support the very town they live in?" Drimblerod shook his head. "Disgraceful."

"Well, in their defense, these are the ones that didn't get picked to go to the main battle," said Nulu. "Still, it's better than I expected."

"Rrrright. For them it's not a job." He smiled. "Or even an adventure." He eyed the lanky youth and his cohorts as they approached. "What's this then?"

Nulu looked around. "Where's Grimbledung? I'd figured he be here to deal with these Halflings. Settle a grudge, or something."

Akita shuffled his feet.

"He's laid up at... well, I'm not really sure *what* she is, or what her shop offers, but he's laid up there right now. He hasn't recovered from his episode yet, right Akita?"

"Sure. We'll go with that."

Drimblerod gave the Werewolf a double take. "What?"

Akita ignored the question. "Well, I'll see if we can get this rabble to at least act like they know what they're doing." He looked at the group- they had all begun to mill closer to the trio to hear what was going on. "I mean, some of them have to have *some* sort of military trainin' rrrright?"

Nulu shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine." She turned to look at the group of youngish-looking Humans that had just arrived. "Well, at least we have

a few more within our ranks." She smiled. *I might as well ask.* "Say, any of you young men have any sort of military training?"

"What?" Tried Drimblerod again.

" 'Course we do," said Zoddious. "What do you take us for?"

"Don't even open that door." Said Nulu. "What sort of training do you...ahhh... you..."

The youth put his hand on his sword. "These are my guild mates. We campaign together. I'm Zoddious, Zoddious Halfdead. Blood Death Knight. I'm their leader."

"Now, hold on there, Akita," interjected Drimblerod.

"Right. And the door opens. So you... folks have military experience?" Nulu wasn't convinced.

"Yes."

"Akita!?"

"And might I ask what sort of experience you have, ahh..." Akita offered, hoping to get Drimblerod to forget his line of questioning..

"Zoddious Halfdead, Blood Death Knight," Zoddious reminded the Werewolf. "Weren't you listening?"

The youth holding the large book opened it and began to flip through pages, trying to look magically competent.

"Military experience." Nulu said flatly. She tightened her grip on her please stick. "Where is it from?"

"We play World of Warring Dragons and Dungeons," offered Zoddious.

"Dragons and Dungeons?" Nulu shook her head.

"*Advanced* World of Warring Dragons and Dungeons" corrected the youth. "*Sixth* edition even." He tightened his grip on his sword. "I'm a Warrior. This is my guild. We're here to join this quest." He gestured to his four companions.

"Gads."

Akita shook his head. "Balls..." His voice trailed off. "This aren't no quest. We're here to fight off a horde of Halflings," said Akita.

The youths all nodded. "Right," said the one dressed in green. "That's why we're here." He looked to the horizon in what he hoped was a Rangerish fashion. "I'll keep an eye out."

"I hate to interrupt, but there seems to be yet another unusual turn of events approaching. A double helping even." Drimblerod pointed behind Nulu towards town. "I wonder how *this* will go over."

Nulu turned to look. Mon and Ton were marching towards them. Ton seemed to have a leash in his hand. There was no dog in it, but it seemed to be stiff enough material that it hovered over the ground ahead of him. It moved back and forth in front of him as he walked. They were both smiling as they came. Mon waved.

"And they brought a pet," said Drimblerod. "Nice. I don't see how this could get any worse." He glanced at the group of Human youths. "And I'm willing to wager those two don't even play *regular* Dragons and Dungeons."

A loud murmur rose from the rest of the group.

"Whose side are they on?" The Elf asked over the talk.

"I think they're on their own side," offered another.

"Everyone just relax," said Nulu. "They've been nothing but friendly and helpful the entire time they've been around. Let's just see what they have to say." She paused. "Metaphorically speaking, that is."

Everyone turned to watch the two Mimes approach. When they were a mere twenty feet away, they encountered an unseen wall. Mon groped along it until he found the edge, then led Ton to it. Ton made sure to have his leash take a wide birth so that his invisible pet avoided the invisible wall.

"These two can't be stable enough to help fight."

Akita leveled his eyes on the Human. "Do *not* insult the Mimes." He looked back at the pair as they approached. They were both now waving amicably. Then he looked at the creature on the end of Ton's leash. It drooled excessively and eyed everyone in turn. It looked like a cross between a small war dog and a spiny lizard. The two foot tall creature (at the shoulder) had short dark fur and black glowing eyes. A row of black bony spikes ran from its snout to the back of its

head. They started up again at its shoulders and ended at its rump. Large fangs stuck out from its top and bottom jaw, clearing each other by the smallest of gaps. It opened and closed its mouth as it panted, tongue running over the fangs as it moved from side to side. Its tail seemed to end after just barely getting started- whether it was bobbed or had been lost in a previous battle was anyone's guess. Akita assumed it was bobbed as he couldn't imagine anything getting the better of such a fearsome looking little creature. It looked at Akita, bared its teeth and barked a silent bark. The menacing spiked collar it wore seemed to be the friendliest part of the beast.

Ton noticed Akita staring at his pet and winked at the Constable.

"Hello, brothers Dieu," said Nulu. "Are you here to watch the battle, or partake?"

Mon feigned offence. He raised his hands in a boxer's pose and tossed a couple of jabs. He then removed what could have been a large bow from his back, pulled a nonexistent arrow from a quiver that wasn't there, notched the arrow and drew an invisible string back and forth. He smiled.

"Here to fight, huh? That's good to hear," said Drimblerod. "I'd like nothing better than to see a couple of professionals in action." He glanced at the lanky youths. They ignored him.

"I'm a Warrior." Insisted the youth.

Ton gave the lad a thumb's up. The beast on the leash sat down and began to scratch behind its ear with a rear paw.

"Well, I'm glad you're here as well. The more armed folks we have, the better our chances."

Drimblerod prodded Akita. "Armed?? Armed with what?"

Akita looked at Mon's exquisite longbow. It seemed to be of Elvish construction, as were the two overstuffed quiver of arrows that crossed his back. The highly polished head of the one he currently had notched in his bow gleamed in the sun and seemed razor sharp. "Don't you worry about that, Drimblerod." Akita assured the Gnome.

Mon nodded at the Gnome and gave the Constable a wink.

Ton bent down and undid the unseen strap on his war dog. It stopped scratching and proceeded to lick itself. Ton folded up the leash and put it in a pocket.

"What did you bring to the fight, Ton?" Drimblerod asked. He was looking where the creature that was until recently on the leash, should have been. He only saw clear air. "If you don't mind me asking." He glanced at Akita.

Ton showed both sides of his hands as if he were doing a magic trick.

"Empty." Agreed Drimblerod.

Ton nodded then reached into the bandoliers that crisscrossed his chest and drew two of the dozen long daggers. He stabbed the air with both of them quickly and repeatedly, then he flipped one over in his hand and pretended to throw it.

Drimblerod saw nothing. He glanced at Akita again. "Very nice. Daggers of imminent death."

A Human crowded Drimblerod. "I don't see nothing" he whispered.

Drimblerod looked up at the man. "Join the club."

"Listen. You two seem like completely nice folk. Friendly and all, and I'm glad you're here to help but I just don't see..." began the Human who had never heard of the Dieu Brothers.

"What was that?" Asked Akita. He raised an ear to the air. "You hear that?" He looked over at the Gnoll Brothers. They were standing off by themselves looking into the distance. All in the same direction.

Akita barked to catch Crash's eye.

Crash loped over. "Ya hear that too Akita? They're getting closer. Whoever they are."

"Hear what?" Asked Drimblerod. Even with the size ears they had, Gnomes were no match for Gnolls or Werewolves. 'Purely for aesthetics' was the reason Gnomes gave for the size of their ears.

Ton sheathed his "daggers" and cupped his hands to his ears. He shrugged.

"I hear them. Sounds like a pretty good sized group and they're coming this way," said Akita. "Listen up! We've got company and there's not much time to decide what to do."

The group began to spread out as they drew their weapons.

"No, no! Stick close to one another. Form a circle if you have to. Don't let whoever it is behind you or you're through," said Crash. "We'll move around the outside and try to keep 'em off balance. You folks need to stay together. The four of us..."

"Five."

Crash nodded at Akita, "Five of us will move around and try to keep them corralled close by."

"I'll stick with the main force," offered Nulu. "Drimblerod, stick with me."

"Hey! Now I hear it too!" Said Drimblerod.

"Shhhh!" Said the lanky youth. "Listen..."

Everyone fell silent as they strained their ears.

The Ranger knelt down and put his ear to the ground. "Sounds like a song," he said.

"No way I'm fighting any minstrels. No way!" Said Drimblerod.

Ton nodded his head in approval. To be sure, the things that intimidated the Mimes were on a short list. A *very* short list. Minstrels however, were at the top of that list. In bold.

"Sounds like a pretty big group." Zoddious drew his sword. "I hope we get the initiative."

Akita shook his head. "Gads," he said to the boy. He turned to address the rest of the townsfolk. "Don't worry. Troops always sing a cadence when they're going someplace. It makes sure they get to where they're supposed to be in one group and on time," he said.

"Listen. You can hear what they're saying!"

Everyone grew still; many had their ears tilted toward the hill. A song wafted over it on deep, throaty voices:

We don't want to go to war today.

But the Captain of the team says nay, nay, nay!

We're gonna fight all day, all day, all day!

'Cause where there's a fight there's th' BeeBees, yeah!

Oh yeah

When there's a fight, there's th' BeeBees, yeah!

Left! Right!

Left! Right!

Left! Right!

"What's a Beebeesyeah?"

A banner popped above the top of a far-off hill, wobbling to and fro. Its forward movement kept it perpendicular to the group. Only a fluttering of green could be seen as it moved in the distance.

"They seem unbalanced." The youth pointed with his sword. "That's a good thing, right?"

A moment later, the head of an Orc appeared, then another, and more until a group of fifteen or so were visible. They were jogging close together, elbows touching as they ran.

"What in the lands?"

"Maybe their tribe is called the Beebeesyeah," suggested Bash. "Didn't expect to be fightin' Orcs today. I'd a'eaten a lighter breakfast."

"What's that lead Orc holding? Is that a doll?"

As the Orcs - which were still almost three hundred yards away- came closer, it appeared that the lead Orc was holding a largish doll in his hand that flopped back and forth as he ran. There seemed to be as many of them as there were townsfolk.

"Orcs? No one said anything about Orcs."

"Hold on, I know that banner! It's the Bek'Ham Benders. The Bee Bees!" Exclaimed Nulu. "Well *that's* a relief."

"What's a Bek'Ham? And why do they bend them?"

"Bek'Ham is a not very polite Orcish term for Elves."

"So are they on our side?" Zoddious asked.

"I think he's holding a Halfling," someone in the crowd offered. "Bless its little heart."

"Great; Orcs putting in with Halflings. So they have Ogres up at the wall, and Orcs here on the plains."

"There weren't no Ogres at the Anti-Ogre Wall," said Bonk, as he turned to address the human.

"Of course there were. Why else would it be called that?"

"So politicians could trick people into givin' them money then they built the thing at half the size and pocket the difference."

"That doesn't even make sense. Why would a politician lie?"

Bonk walked over and slapped the man on the head. "Not another word out of you."

The man opened his mouth.

Bonk clenched his previously open hand. "Don't do it."

The man moved back into the group of townsfolk that he had come with. Upset and confused. And now disillusioned.

The Orcs slowed as they approached. They appeared to be wearing matching clothes. Even though they had been ostensibly jogging for much longer than the five minutes (or so) the townsfolk had been watching them as they

approached, they were not out of breath. They all came to a stop in front of the townsfolk.

"We found dis. He yours?" The Orc held up the struggling Halfling.

"Not at all...Captain?" Tried Nulu.

"Yeah. Me Captain of Bek'Ham Benders." The Orc grinned what should have been a proud grin. It came across as a deathly leer. "Misery is my playin' name."

The Orc holding their banner waved it back and forth. Violently. Several townsfolk moved back to give him room. They kept a close eye on the sharpened end of the banner in case he dipped it in their direction.

"He yours?" The Captain held up the squirming Halfling again. The Halfling ineffectually clawed at the Orc's hand.

Nulu shook her head. "No that is not our Halfling. Were there more of them?"

"Dis only one we see. So we grab him up." He gestured toward the Halfling. "We was going to pick up game over by old Aution and we find him." The Halfling's face was deep red, bordering on purple; he was still getting enough air to stay alive. But just barely. "You don't want 'im?"

"Nope. Not at all." Said Nulu. "Sorry."

"Hmmm..."

"Why don't you just put him back where you found him?" Someone in the group behind Nulu suggested. "Got enough Halflings on their way without adding one more."

Nods from most everyone showed their agreement.

The Orc shrugged. "I *try*." The Halflings eyes got big. The Orc walked around his teammates (who had spread out and seemed to be stretching), and looked into the distance. "Hmmm" he said again. Without further consideration, he dropkicked the Halfling, grunting with the effort. The Halfling sailed -end over end- for almost two hundred yards. He flailed until he hit the ground with a fairly-audible crash. The flailing stopped as abruptly as his contact with the ground.

"Not go all the way." The Orc looked over his shoulder back at Nulu. "Want me do over?"

"No, no. Once was enough, it seems."

"We here to help," said the Orc as he moved around his players back to Nulu. Now some were on the ground, stretching their hamstrings. One was doing deep knee bends. "Halfling say he coming to Big Julie school. Best games played at Big Julie school. Can't let Halflings ruin rest of season. Bee Bees doing good this year."

"Well, you *are* ahead in the points."

"Right?! We win Rugby Cup dis time!"

Several Orcs nodded in agreement.

"This time? This group actually *loses* games?"

The Orc looked down at the Human. "Hey, it happen!" He said defensively. "Some team no play fair."

"Now, now; it's fair." Nulu assured the Orc. She put her hand on his shoulder, "You can't win them all you know."

"*This* team?" Said a youth dressed in long flowing robes. He folded his hands in what he hoped was an Empathic manner. "Really?"

She looked at the human. "Apparently the word is the Dwarves have some sort of sneakery that allows them to avoid being tackled. Or so they say."

"Not very sportsmanlike," offered the team captain again.

"So, you're here to help. That's great!" Said Zoddious. "I'm a Warrior too."

The Orc gave the youth a double take. Shrugged, then looked at Nulu. "Yeah. We here to scrum."

"Fight."

"Same difference." The Captain shrugged as he put one leg out in front of the other. He bent his knee, reaching forward with his hand toward the ground.[14]

"No, you see the difference is..."

"Well, actually, Zod," interrupted Nulu, "when *they're* on the field, there really isn't much difference."

The Human frowned at the shortening of his name but with the size of the Trolless, he decided to let it pass.

The Orc gave another toothy grin. "Who we fight?" He looked around. "Who?"

"Halflings of course."

The Orc squinted his eyes. "Me know that." He clenched his fists. "Asking where they at." His eyes got large. "They forfeit? Forfeit count as win!"

Several of the Orcs nodded in agreement.

Because it did.

"No, no; they're just not here yet, Captain. You and your team are welcome to wait with us."

"They is late for their own ass kicking."

"Apparently so." Nulu chuckled.

"Want to scrimmage while we wait?" Several Orcs jumped to their feet and stretched their hands over their heads. Several grunted in anticipation. "To pass time." The Captain waved a hand dismissively. "Friendly match."

An Orc pulled an oblong, dark brown leather ball from a backpack. He tossed it into the air and caught it.

"Yes?"

"Just for fun? No worry about who wins?" The Empath wasn't convinced. "No keeping score?"

"Sure keep score! If winning not important, why keep score? That old Orc proverb," said the Orc holding the banner. He waved it around for emphasis. Violently.

"You know, I think we'll pass. That way we're fresh when the Halflings get here."

"Suit youself. We go stretch. Hate to pull a Halfling" The Orc guffawed.

"I don't even know how to respond to that," admitted Nulu.

"Laugh at pun!"

Nulu obliged by laughing heartily at the terrible play on words. Not wanting to get the Orcs upset with them, the others joined in.

With a pleased nod, the Captain moved back among his players and joined in the stretching.

"Unbelievable. I think we have a fighting chance."

Akita nodded at Drimblerod. "As long as there aren't too many of them Halflings, I think we do too."

"So what's wrong with Grimbledung?"

Akita looked at the distance. "You know, I should make sure that everyone's morale is up since we have a little time yet."

"Akita..."

Akita loped off quickly.

"What's wrong with Grimbledung?" Asked Nulu.

"That's what I want to find out. I know he came back into town in a Pixie fueled craze and he's sleeping it off at the shop of some mystic or witch or whatever she is, but that's pretty much it."

"Well, I haven't seen him since he ran off into the rain. But I'm sure he's fine. Otherwise, Akita would've told us."

Drimblerod considered that for a moment. "I suppose."

"Hey! Here dey come!" Said Misery. "Looks like good bunch Halflings!!" He pointed at a hill to their right. A large group of Halflings crested the hill then disappeared in the trough. There seemed to be a *very* large number of them.

"Gads. That looked like a hundred or so Halflings." Drimblerod looked around. "We've got what..."

"Fifteen Humans. Four Gnolls. One Werewolf. Two Mimes. Fifteen Orcs. And the biggest, badest Trolless you're going to see this side of Picistan." Nulu

shifted her grip on her please-stick. “We should give those poor Halflings a chance to surrender. Not that they’d accept it. They really don’t stand a chance.”

They did. They didn’t. And then, they didn’t.

When all was said and done, all but three Halflings were killed- Colossus being the last prisoner taken.

The group of youths even managed to collectively kill a Halfling. The Warrior threw up twice afterwards. When he recovered, he attributed their success to “a string of natural twenties.”[15]

All right. That’s enough bouncing back and forth...

CAUTION: Subplot merging ahead. At least for the next 27,538-ish words...

Chapter Thirty-Seven
Turtle Tracker Takes Trio To Town

Chéri looked to the top of the dune as they moved around it. "You'd think we'd know if we were near the end of this cursed desert."

Semfeld shrugged. "It butts up against the southern reaches of the Foreboding Forest." He paused. "But it's called the Emerald Forest here though. That thing just starts up where it wants to."

"How can a forest do anything?"

"I suppose no one told it otherwise?"

"Either way, I don't care. I'm just glad to be getting into town."

Semfeld leaned out and looked at Chéri, "What town?"

"Cool Springs. You said we were there."

"No I didn't."

Chéri tightened her grip on the reins and yanked them back severely. The Shambler came to an abrupt halt. Liverioso veered left to avoid running into the back of them. "Yes, you did, you annoying Human." She twisted in the saddle to face him.

"No. I said we were out of the desert. We're not at Cool Springs yet."

Chéri took a deep breath. "So where is town and your stupid guild then?"

"I dunno."

Chéri let go of the reins. "I swear on the Lord High Priest I'm going to wring your scrawny neck if you don't start being more helpful." With a frown she turned around and snapped the reins. The Shambler dutifully began to move again. "If there isn't a town on the other side of this dune..." She began.

The trio rounded the dune.

Chéri was *NOT* pleased when they rounded it. True to Semfeld's word, the forest began abruptly- as if it had just been plopped down. Fine white sand ran right up to, but not past the edge of the forest. Cool shade beckoned them.

"Finally some shade."

"I'm glad too partner. Then we'll get those blathted Gnomths."

They led the two Shamblers into the shade of the forest. Chéri once again turned to look at Semfeld. "So how far is your town? Do you have any idea?"

Semfeld nodded at the assassin as he slid off the Shambler's back. "Now that we're close, I can find out." He drew Garibaldis' wand. "Behold!" He tilted his hands back and forth to show they were empty.

Chéri rolled her eyes. "Here we go."

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages. I offer a feast." He raised his hands in the air. "A feast for your eyes. Your very eyes!"

Liverioso leaned forward on his Shambler, an excited smile plastered on his face. "Ooohhh!"

"Homing pigeons? Pah" Semfeld waved his hand dismissively. "Mere child's play. Amateur at best." He looked around on the ground. A rock seemed to catch his eye, though he couldn't think why. He pointed at it. "That's a trick they teach to school children. No, ladies and gentlemen; I offer more."

"More?"

Chéri looked up at the treetops. This same spiel accompanied most all tricks by Semfeld. Liverioso as well- except with more spittle.

"Yes, sir. More." Semfeld assured.

"Take that rock. That very rock. What is it good for? Absolutely nothing. Huh!"

Chéri thought of using it to bash the magician's head in. "I can think of something." She knew that no matter what she said - and she had heard this numerous times- the show would go on. "Can I have that rock for just a moment?" She said anyway.

Semfeld pressed on. He pointed the wand at the rock.

Igneous. Sedimentary.
Metamorphic too
Transform into a homing turtle!
That's what you will do!

Bazaam!

He intoned.

The rock shuddered and twitched.

"Turtle?"

Stubby legs poked out from under the rock, lifting it slightly off the ground.

"A turtle. Really?"

As the rock moved, a head poked out of the 'front' of it. At least now it was the front. A tail followed on the other end. Its head craned back at Semfeld. It seemed to have a satisfied look on its face. Or at least as satisfied as a common box turtle could look.

"To the guild!" Commanded Semfeld.

The turtle - who with every passing moment, looked more like a box turtle and less like a rock- nodded at him, then turned its head around and started to walk. At a normal turtle pace.

"Honestly. A turtle? Why not a snail or a slug?" Chéri said angrily. She dropped the reins and put her hands on her hips. "Couldn't you pick anything slower?"

Semfeld sheathed the wand with a flourish and took a bow.

Liverioso, as usual, clapped and 'hooted' at him once he had bowed. That meant the trick was over.

Chéri clambered off her mount. "A stinking turtle?"

"You doubt its abilities?"

"To find the guild? No." Chéri crowded the Human. "Doubt its abilities to get there before next summer?" She pointed an accusatory finger at him. For a moment she considered crushing his throat with it. "Yes!"

"You wanted maybe a homing pigeon or crow, perhaps?" The trick was over but the show... it went on.

"Well, they're called that for a reason." She glanced at Liverioso.

He stopped clapping and hooting.

"Can we ride as fast as they fly?" Semfeld crossed his arms.

"No." Chéri dropped her finger.

Semfeld pointed to the turtle. It was a mere ten feet away. It was moving in a generally straight line, ostensibly towards the Magician's Guild. "The guild is that way. If it were a crow or pigeon, we'd have lost it by now."

Chéri exhaled. "I will give you that."

Semfeld grinned triumphantly. He took another small bow.

"But," Chéri continued, "it will take that blasted thing a week to get anywhere." She pointed at it. It was maybe another foot away. "I mean, just *look* at it."

Semfeld looked at the turtle. It was moving slowly and steadily in what seemed to be a generally straight line. "Yep. Isn't it grand?"

"But."

Realization crept across Semfeld's face. "Oh! No, you got it all wrong, Chéri." He patted her on the shoulder as he laughed. "Oh, that's rich."

"Yeah. Rich. That's the word I'm thinking of right now."

Semfeld walked (now a full twelve feet) and picked up the turtle. "The guild is that way." He pointed the direction the turtle was walking. "We ride that way for a while. If we think we're off track, we just put the turtle down and see what he does."

Chéri opened her mouth then closed it sourly. It was, apparently, an easily controlled and effective guide. She pursed her lips instead of saying so.

Semfeld took another bow anyway.

"Stop doing that. I'm warning you." Chéri moved back to her Shambler. In a fluid motion she mounted it. "Let's get going then." She snapped the reins and the Shambler picked up its head- long tufts of grass hung from it. She snapped the reins again and it begrudgingly set off, chewing as it went.

"Wait for us!" Said Liverioso as he reached his hand down as he moved toward Semfeld.

Semfeld clambered onto the Shambler as Liverioso went by. "That woman." He shook his head.

"Yeah," agreed Liverioso. Dreamily. "That woman."

Semfeld gave his partner a double-take. "I thought you were done with women."

Liverioso shrugged, "Well, long term relationships, yeth. Short, passion filled ones? Those I'm still keeping an eye out for."

"That female is liable to kill you."

Liverioso smirked. "What a way to go."

Without another word, the pair moved to catch up with Chéri.

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Out of the Desert, On To the Main Course

The trio rode for quite a while until finally Chéri stopped. "Time to take a bearing," she said. "Put your turtle down, Sem."

"Can we thop and get thomething to eat?" Asked Liverioso. "It'd be nice to eat in the shade for a change." He looked up at the triple canopy of trees. The temperature had dropped a full twenty degrees since they had entered the forest.

Chéri considered that for a moment. *Eating in the shade would be a welcome change.* "I suppose we can do that." She looked up at the darkening overhead cover. "We might even need to see about making camp at some point." She looked around. "Either of you been here before? Know what lives in this forest?"

Semfeld shrugged. "Some animals that eat hay, but mainly ones that eat meat. Wild animals. But mainly..."

"Lions," offered Liverioso.

"What?" Chéri looked at him.

"And tigers."

"Don't," she warned. She raised two fingers at him.

Liverioso pursed his lips tight. He had learned early on that when Chéri pointed at him with her index and middle finger held together, that meant that if whatever he said next was in any way displeasing to her, she would, without fail, shortly thereafter, jab him with the aforementioned fingers. The first time was to his side, just where his ribs started. The pain actually made him drop to his knees. The second time was to a spot on his lower back (off to the side) that apparently seemed to control when he peed. Which seemed to be whenever Chéri wanted him to, because she had struck him in the same place twice, both times with the same effect. Later that day when he relieved himself (on purpose) he was alarmed to detect a faint red tint to his flow. It was then that he decided to not say a *damn* thing whenever she held up two fingers.

Even though he had only witnessed instead of experiencing the strikes, Semfeld followed the same plan.

"We'll set up camp so we're all settled before it gets dark." She looked up again. "We still have a little time."

"Well, I'm no expert, but I imagine it will get darker before it gets lighter," offered Semfeld

Liverioso nodded in agreement. Because honestly, his partner was right.

Chéri slid off her Shambler, flipped the reins over its head and tied them to a low hanging branch. "This is a break stop. Not an overnight stop. I think we should take a short break, then get some more distance between us and those Pic monkeys."

"I dunno, Chéri," said Semfeld. "I think spending the night closer to the desert is safer than being in the middle of the Emerald Forest. This place is crawling with Orcs you know."

"That's true," offered Liverioso.

Chéri turned to face the pair. "Listen you two. I want to get to town and that's what we're going to do. Take a break. Have a drink. Have a pee. But in a *very* little bit, we're moving on. I've dealt with Orcs before and as long as you show them who's boss, you're fine." She scowled at the pair. They both took a step back. "And I'm the boss out here. Got it?"

"Thure," said Liverioso. "Whatever you thay." He frowned as he looked around. "It thure is dark all of a thudden. Maybe we shouldn't go too far from the Shamblers."

Semfeld nodded. "I agree."

"Well, I'm having a little private time that doesn't involve you two watching me." Chéri pointed at the Shamblers. "I'll meet you two dolts back here in a few minutes and make sure you go your own way because I'm not putting on a show for you two." With that she turned and disappeared into the forest.

Semfeld put his hand on Liverioso's shoulder. "Just try to not upset her until we get to town. Then we'll be rid of her."

Liverioso's lower lip poked out. "My pee is thill a little red."

"I know, buddy. I know," Semfeld reassured his partner. "We're going to get through this, you and I, because we're partners. Right?"

Liverioso's eyes teared up. "Yeth."

Semfeld and Liverioso looked at each other for a moment. "I guess I'll go that way" Semfeld pointed opposite of where the Gnomess went. "Meet you back here?" He hesitantly moved off into the dark.

"Thure?" Liverioso considered just peeing there in front of the Shamblers and calling it even. He did, truth be told, need to make a more 'substantial deposit' in the forest, but fear was overriding any fullness of bowel he was feeling. It was a mistake he would regret later. "Here goes nothing," he said to the Shamblers as he too moved off in a third direction. "I hope this works out," he said accidentally as he groped in the dark.

Five Minutes Later

The trio met back at the Shamblers.[16]

Semfeld was standing near the Shamblers, looking down at his tracking turtle. It was shuffling along in a generally straight line. Semfeld looked up. "We're still heading in the general direction of town. Since we're on track, maybe we should just..."

"We're going farther than just here, so don't even ask." Said Chéri flatly. She stalked to a Shambler and untied it. As she passed Semfeld, she bumped him with her shoulder.

That could have been worse. With a relieved sigh, Semfeld moved to untie the other Shambler. "OK, so we'll go a little farther but then we should really stop for the night."

"I agree. Juth a little further."

"I'm not taking a month to get to town, you two." Chéri looked up at the trees. It was considerably darker and there were definite unknown dangers in the dark. "We'll ride another hour then call it a night." She finally said.

"Agreed." Semfeld untied the Shambler. "On this one or the other?"

"Since we're walking in the forest, it would be better if we just walked instead of rode."

"Are you thure?"

"We won't go any faster, and if anything happens, we'll be close to the ground with Shamblers to provide cover. Up on them, we're easy targets."

Both Magicians considered that. Semfeld bent over and picked up the turtle. It immediately ducked its head and feet inside its shell. Dropping it into a sack on the Shambler, he pointed. "So we walk that way."

Chéri untied the other animal. "Lead the way."

Liverioso moved up beside his partner as the trio started off. Hoping for the best.

Fifty Five Minutes Later

Semfeld, Liverioso, and Chéri moved into a small clearing- one of several they had passed through.[17]

"How's this one look?" Semfeld asked as he had done for the previous few.

Chéri looked around the clearing. "This'll work."

Semfeld looked around as well. It looked just like the previous half dozen clearings that had crossed. With a shrug, he tied the Shambler to a branch. It immediately began to eat.

Chéri tied her mount next to the other. "We'll set up camp here."

"Thure," agreed Liverioso. He pointed at a large fallen tree. "That's a good place for a lookout, I think."

"I think so too," agreed Semfeld. "You know, I'm not tired so I can take the first watch, if you want."

Chéri pulled the gear off her Shambler and dropped it. "I'll go find something for us to eat. You two set up camp." Without another word, she stepped around the Shambler and into the forest.

"So let's get camp set up, and maybe a small fire going." He looked around. "A small fire."

"Just in cathe?"

"Just in case." Agreed Semfeld.

"You think we'll see any?" Liverioso wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

Semfeld dragged the pack off the other Shambler. "That's why we're gonna keep her around" He nodded with his head toward where Chéri disappeared. "Hopefully she can protect us."

"From Orcs?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"But she doesn't have a weapon," said Liverioso as he unfolded the first pack, pulling out two cups and a bedroll.

Suddenly a loud shriek pierced the forest air.

"What was that?" Liverioso ducked down.

"Sounded like a monkey. Sort of. Maybe one of them howling kinds?"

Another shriek echoed past.

"Let's get the fire going." Semfeld offered the wand to his partner.

Liverioso nodded. "After dinner, I'm going to need to run out behind a tree. Been needing to all day."

"Okay."

With a smile he raised Garibaldis' wand. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he began as he tilted his hands back and forth...

Thirty Minutes Later

The trio sat around the small fire. Liverioso nibbled on the meat left on a thin bone. "I'd never had monkey before." He stuck out his tongue. "Not thure I like it." [18]

Chéri nodded. "Pretty gamey." She leaned back against a small log she had dragged within the glow of the fire. "So you're taking the first shift, Semmie?" She raised an eyebrow.

Semfeld nodded nervously. "I said I would, didn't I?" He looked out at the darkening forest. "We can't all just go to sleep. Not here."

Chéri stretched out her legs and looked into the darkness. "Suppose not." She reached beside her and put the sharpened stick she had come back out of the forest with, across her lap. "Dangerous out here at night." Disturbingly, she looked past Semfeld. Neither had asked her where she got the weapon, or how she managed to make it when she had returned with three large spider monkeys skewered on it. "Anything can happen."

Semfeld had been waiting for an opportunity; now seemed as good a time as any. "That is true. So whoever is on watch should hold the spear, I think." He stretched out his legs, hoping it looked casual. His insides were in knots. "Just in case."

Chéri shrugged. "If it will make you feel better." She casually turned the spear around, which was as long as she was, and tossed it to him butt first. Hard. "Catch." She said after she threw it.

The spear thunked hard into Semfeld's chest as he grabbed it. Had it been turned around, it would have stuck in several inches. "I'll take the first watch, then," he gasped.

Chéri smiled, once again looking past the magician. "So what are you watching for, Sem-tastic?" She crossed her legs as she slipped her hands behind her back. Her right hand rested on the hilt of a dagger. "If you don't mind me asking."

"Lions?" Offered Liverioso cautiously.

Chéri nodded. "They do live out here. What else?"

Liverioso didn't want to say the second thing. And he *definitely* didn't want to say the third. "You know."

"No, tell me." Chéri's hand tightened on the hilt of the dagger. "I want to know."

Trying to spare his partner, Semfeld spoke up. "Ti..ti.. tigers?"

Chéri slipped the dagger slightly out of its sheath. "Not just those two though, right?"

Semfeld and Liverioso exchanged nervous glances. They weren't sure what the assassin was up to, but she seemed to be drawing it out of them and she just *couldn't* be heartlessly setting them up just to jab at them. Could she?

Liverioso tensed up. "But mainly Orcs."[19]

Chapter Thirty-Nine
Look Who's Coming- For Dinner

Three Orcs jumped into the ring of light created by the small fire. "Finally! We've been waiting since befores dinner for someone to says it!" Said an Orc. He was holding what looked like a large, polished tree with the roots still attached. The gnarled roots had chains interwoven into them for extra weight. The entire weapon was longer than Semfeld or Liverioso. Probably as long as either of the Magicians if they had Chéri on their shoulders. "Right, boys?"

The other two Orcs nodded hungrily. "Now that you've eaten, we'd like our go," said another Orc. This one wielded a two-headed axe.

"We was feeling left out," said the third. He was wearing heavy iron knuckles with long spikes sticking out of them.

Liverioso and Semfeld were frozen with sheer, bladder-emptying terror. Their respective bowels were only waiting for their cue. Liverioso's were more than ready.

"Sorry, fellas," said Chéri. She was still seated, legs crossed at the ankle. "All the food is gone. You should go find something else to eat. If you'd have come over sooner and been neighborly, instead of skulking in the shadows like the worm ridden Orcs that you are, we'd have shared." She drew her legs up, crossing them at the knees. "Them's the breaks."

"Wot she call us?" Double-bladed axe Orc asked iron knuckles Orc.

"Worm ridden, she says," said iron knuckles.

"Well, I thinks we'll just have to sees about..." Tree wielding Orc let the roots of his weapon bang on the ground. "A change in attit..."

Three things happened at once:

1. Startled by the clattering of the chains on the tree roots, Semfeld threw the spear, that he was still holding point out thanks to Chéri's toss, at the closest

Orc. Double-bladed axe Orc. Being seated, the spear only went a mere three inches. Thanks to blind luck, those scarce inches were from the side of the Orc's throat in the general direction of his spine.

"Urp!" Went double-bladed axe Orc as he dropped his weapon, both hands going to the spear. He pulled it out, sending a torrent of blood, spraying in life draining pulses. He dropped to his knees, eyes wide with surprise.

2. Chéri pulled her dagger from its sheath, spinning it around on the palm of her hand as she brought it about, and threw it with all the force she had at tree-wielding Orc, coming up to her knees as she did so. The dagger stuck to the hilt into his eye. He fell backward, dead before he even teetered.

3. Liverioso's bowels let loose.

Iron knuckles Orc looked at his two brothers. "Wot!" He exclaimed unbelievingly. "Wot?" He narrowed his eyes at his closest target. Liverioso.

"What?" Liverioso asked as he got to his knees. "What?" He still was unsure about the events that just occurred. Well, not event 3.

The Orc took a step toward Liverioso as Chéri pushed herself up to her feet. With a kick, she sent a good deal of the fire towards the advancing Orc. "Get the spear!" She commanded Semfeld.

Semfeld clambered to his feet.

The Orc swatted at the embers as he stepped between him and his still twitching brother. The spear lay at their feet, completely out of Semfeld's reach.

Chéri stepped forward and to the left of knuckles, making him try to keep an eye on both of them. She edged closer to her dagger sticking out of the other Orc's head. "Stinking Orc!" She challenged him.

Knuckles turned on her "Stinkin *Gnome*. I'm gonna suck the marrow outta yer bones!" He took a menacing step towards her.

Bones
Go Poof!

Declared Liverioso.

The Orc took another step and collapsed into a puddle. "Wot?" He said as he oozed around.

Chéri looked down at the Orc. "OK. I don't care who you are. That's just gross."

"Wotyou dootoome?" Slurred the Orc since he still had muscles to work his mouth, but no bones for them to hold on to.[20]

"Nice one Liv!" Semfeld stepped forward and retrieved the spear. "Real nice!"

Liverioso smiled sheepishly. A smell came to his nose. "I need to take care of something," he said quickly as he backed out of the light- which was now considerably smaller since half the fire was missing.

Both Semfeld and Chéri nodded knowingly and let him go.

"Hey!" Complained ~~knuckles~~ puddles. He wiggled around a little bit, but was unable to make any sort of worthwhile movement.

"Well, I think when Liverioso gets back, we should see about getting out of here. There's no telling if there's more of them out and about." He gestured towards the Orc. "These three might have been part of a larger party."

"Breathinshard"

Chéri looked down at the Orc. "At least you're still breathing, Orc. That's better than we would have been if you'd had gotten the upper hand." She nudged him with her foot.

The Orc grunted in reply.

"That's really gross."

"Well, let's pack up camp while Liverioso is taking care of business and then we should head out."

Chéri looked into the darkness. "That's probably a good idea."

"What should we do with him?"

"Thisain't verypleasant."

"I say we take him with," said Chéri.

"Take him with us?" Semfeld looked down at the mound that was the Orc. "Why in the lands would we do that?" He nudged him with his foot. "How're we even going to move him?"

"I'mgonnagetyouferthis."

"I don't know if that's a good..."

"We can lay him across the back of one of the Shamblers," Chéri interrupted Semfeld, "and if we come across any Orcs, we can tell them that we found him this way and were trying to help him out, the poor thing."

The Orc grunted.

"And," she continued, "while they're figuring that out, we can drop him off the back of the Shambler and then make a run for it."

"That doesn't sound like a very good plan."

"It's called misdirection and it's one of the mainstays of the assassin lifestyle." She pulled her dagger from the dead Orc's eye. "That and just outright killing things that get in your way." She wiped it on the Orcs sash. "And while they're figuring it out, we can opt for that more lethal mainstay of the assassin lifestyle." She slid the dagger into her back sheath.

Semfeld moved to the double bladed axe. Its blades were as wide as his chest. He strained as he picked it up. "There's no way I can swing this thing." He let it drop to the ground. "So I still don't have a weapon."

"You have the spear." Chéri pointed at it. "That's a pretty good weapon." She smiled. "Call it Orc Killer. Weapons with names are always more formidable."

"I suppose so." Semfeld picked up the spear. It did have some weight to it, and the tip was carved into a fairly sharp point. And it had, very recently, dispatched an Orc.

Liverioso returned to the dim light of the fire. "Thorry about that."

"Sorry about what? You took care of that last mangy Orc, partner!"

"Icans hearyoutalkin' 'boutme, yousknow."

Liverioso went over to examine his work. He smiled approvingly.

"How long will he stay like that?"

Liverioso looked at Chéri. "About a day. By tomorrow night, his bones will all pop back into place."

"Thatgonnahurt?"

"I have no idea," confessed Liverioso.

"Well we need to get going and if he's going to be better in a day, then all's the better we bring him with us to barter with."

Semfeld leaned on the spear. "I just wish I had a better weapon is all."

"We'll make due," Chéri assured him. "Remember who is in charge."

Liverioso nodded. "I'll get the Shambler to put Mith-ter Orc on." He went to untie one of the Shamblers.

"Jusleaveme'ere."

"No way, Orc. You're our ticket to freedom." Chéri nudged him with her foot again. "It's gonna take all three of us to get him up there. Have that Shambler kneel beside him and we'll just roll him up on its back."

Liverioso brought the Shambler over and kneeled it beside the Orc. "This close enough?"

Chéri nodded. "Everyone get on one side and let's heave the bag of skin over."

After only two tries, the trio had the Orc balanced properly on the Shambler. Much to the Orc's displeasure they tied his arms under the Shambler to keep him in place.

"All right. Let's head out and see if we can find a good place to hide out for the night. Something that is defendable."

"I still think we should stay put and make the best of this clearing."

"And I still think I'm in charge of this little group." Chéri marched up to the other Shambler and untied it. "And I think it's time to get going!"

"I have a bad feeling about thith"

Chapter Forty
Look Who's Coming to Dinner. Now

With the Shamblers in tow, the three moved into the forest in search of a safe place to bed down for the night.

Not Even Five Minutes Later

"Well this is a fine how-do-you-do" said Semfeld. "Fine indeed." He looked at Chéri. She wouldn't make eye contact with him.[21]

"Thay, anyone want to play a game? It's called who wath right."

Chéri made eye contact with Liverioso. In that brief moment, she conveyed a great deal of pounding and pain to be delivered at an as of yet unnamed time. Frustrated she wasn't in any position to dole out said punishment, she looked away from him.

"So, Chéri. Now that you're the boss and everything. I was hoping that maybe you know, you could do something boss like." Semfeld glowered at the Assassin. "Like, oh, I don't know, GET US OUT OF THIS MESS!"

"Shaddap you!" Ordered the Orc holding the front pole that Semfeld was currently tied to.

The one holding the back of the pole did a shuffle-step and kicked him in the rear. "That's yer last warning!"

Even though Liverioso was being transported tied to the same pole as his partner, his back was to him so he didn't see the kick. "Thath's a grand idea!" Within moments, he received a kick of his own.

Chéri bobbed up and down- being the smallest, she had been tied to the end of a pole that an Orc had held over his shoulder like a long fishing pole. "Caught me a Gnome!" He had remarked as he had hoisted her up.

Chéri exhaled angrily. At least they hadn't searched us, she thought. I've got my dagger and one of those two idiots still has a wand. We just need to figure...

The Orcs stopped in the middle of a small clearing. "This'll work?" Asked the Orc carrying Chéri.

Front Orc nodded. "Sure. Don't need that much space to do some cookin'. Just need a place to sit, really."

"And start a fire, 'course," added back Orc, helpfully. "This spot'll work."

"Ya hungry too?"

"Idon' thinkIcans eatanythin' ," said puddles Orc.

The three Orcs guffawed. After finding the Humans and Gnome trudging through the forest, they were offered the boneless Orc as ransom to pass. Not knowing what ransom was, they immediately snatched the three travelers, planning on eating them. They brought the soupy Orc along for laughs. So far, the plan was working out splendidly- they would soon sit and eat, and they were being provided with laughs galore.

"Knot hungry are ya?" Chéri-carrying Orc snickered. "Knot? Knot?"

Rear Orc laughed along heartily.

Front Orc didn't get it. As far as Orcs were concerned, he was one of the more dimwitted ones. But he was good in a fight, which counted for more than brains where Orcs were concerned.

"I'll go get some kindlin"' said Chéri carrying Orc. He hefted the pole high over his head and slammed it into the ground. It sunk in over a foot as Chéri bounced off the ground, effectively staked in place. For the briefest of moments, he considered ordering Kilmer (front Orc) to watch the prisoners, but dismissed the thought because Tarl (rear Orc) was there, and he seemed to be easily four times as smart and would never let their dinner get away. Confident, he moved off in search of firewood.

"I'll see about findin' some herbs for spicin them up while Mangus is out," said Tarl. For the briefest of moments, he considered ordering Kilmer to watch the prisoners, but dismissed the thought because, in all honesty, he was just barely smarter than Kilmer- it was just the fact that he tended to keep his mouth shut that kept other Orcs from noticing. So Tarl abruptly let go of his end of the pole holding Semfeld and Liverioso. Kilmer didn't let go of his end because he

was looking at a tree. As the pole bounced on the ground, Semfeld and Liverioso slipped off. Though their hands and feet were tight on the pole while they were hanging, now that they were free of it, the ropes literally fell off as they rolled to a stop. They looked at each other for a split second then bolted in opposite directions into the underbrush before front Orc turned around.

Front Orc turned around, "Well, I guess I'll prep the..." He stopped because all that he saw was several tangles of rope and a very angry looking Gnomess sitting on the ground, tied to a pole. "Uhm..." he said. He tried to think back and was fairly certain they had captured more than one prisoner. Since he couldn't count, he wasn't sure how many, but it was more than one. Probably.

"Heyyou" said Puddles from the back of one of the Shamblers.

Ahh! That's it. There was that other Orc that looks weird and those two Shamblers. That's what we caught! Kilmer smiled in triumph as he looked around the camp. "I'll just prep the Gnomess then since we don't eat things we can ride. Maggus tol' me that. Right?"

"Right," said Puddles. Because it was sound advice. Nothing else came to mind. Since his brains were down near his left shoulder at the moment, he wasn't thinking too clearly.

"Yeah." Kilmer looked at a tree. He liked trees. And poems. And poems about trees. "I don't thinks I'll ever sees a poem as loverly as that tree. That tree with its hungry mouth pressed against the sweet land's flowin' boobie..."

"Theysgettin' away," said Puddles. Because they were.

Kilmer nodded. "Yeah. I'm gonna prep the Gnomess." He drew a long dagger from his side. "Cause Maggus is bringing wood."

Semfeld slid off the pole. As he hit the ground, he put his hands out to brace himself. The once tight ropes fell slack to his forearms. He twisted his arms and the ropes flopped off. As he moved his feet under him, those ropes also dropped free. He looked at his partner and bolted into the underbrush.

As Semfeld ducked down behind a bush, he saw his partner do the same in the other direction. The Orc holding the pole still hadn't turned around. He made eye contact with Liverioso and gestured to a nearby tree. When he got a nod in return, he moved in that direction.

Liverioso slid off the pole. As he hit the ground, he put his feet out to brace himself. The once tight ropes fell slack onto his calves. He straightened his feet and the ropes flopped off. As he moved his hands under him, those ropes also dropped off. He looked at his partner and bolted into the underbrush.

As Liverioso ducked behind a log, he saw his partner do the same in the other direction. The Orc seemed to be looking up at a tree and still hadn't turned around. He made eye contact with Semfeld; he was pointing to a nearby tree. Liverioso gave a quick nod and moved in that direction.

Semfeld made it to the tree just before Liverioso. "Great!" He said. "We should make a run for it while he's busy with that stinking Gnome."

Liverioso gaped at his partner. "What? We can't juth leave her there!"

"She'd do the same to us. Without a moment's thought."

"That's cause she's an *Assassin*. We're Magithians of the Great Magithian Guild, and enforthers at that." Liverioso shook his head. "We're better than that."

Semfeld put his hand on his partner's shoulder. "You're right. I'm sorry; I don't know what I was thinking." He looked at the Orc. It had finally turned around and was moving towards Chéri. He had also drawn a very long knife. "Uh oh."

Liverioso drew his wand. "I can geth him from here."

"I'll move around to get Chéri and the Shamblers when you do. Give me a couple of seconds if you can." With another pat on his noble partner's shoulder, Semfeld moved toward the Orc.

Liverioso aimed down his arm at the Orc. He had a full view of his back. He just needed to wait until his (also) noble partner was in position. "Here we go."

Kilmer moved toward the Gnomess. "Now, I'm gonna prep you fer cookin, if that's all right w'you."

"No, actually, that's not all right by me, you oaf."

"Kilmer."

"Kill who?"

"M'name's Kilmer, not Oaf. Oaf didn't come on this trip."

Chéri moved to a standing position. "Well, if you're going to kill me, don't expect me to go quietly."

"Naww... You'll probably holler real loud like all the rest, I imagine." He raised the knife.

Chéri looked into the eyes of the Orc. There was not hatred in them at all. Killing her to him was just something to do- like killing a chicken before cooking it. *What a way for a Grand Master Assassin to go. And where did those two Humans go? They're probably covering under a log hoping they can just get away.* Chéri closed her eyes. *Curse them to the lowest bowels of Niflheim!*

"GO!" Shouted Semfeld as he sprang from the bushes.

Kilmer looked at the Human. "Hey, I 'member you. You was..." Kilmer was cut off as he was transformed into a large tan toadstool with bright red and blue dots.



Chéri opened her eyes.

Semfeld reached down as he ran toward Chéri, grabbing the now ownerless knife as he went. Within three more bounds, he was at her. He skidded to a stop and dropped to his knees.

"Semfeld!"

"Shhh!" He cut at the ropes. The knife was very sharp and made quick work of them. He stood up and offered his hand to her. He hoped something dashing would come to mind to say, but nothing did. Instead all he could think of was: "Come with me if you want to live."

Chéri took Semfeld's hand and let herself be pulled to her feet. She hugged him. "Thanks"

"We need to go. Quick like." Semfeld turned and untied one of the Shamblers.

"Willya leaveme 'ere?"

Semfeld kneeled down and untied Puddles' arms. He oozed off the Shambler's back. "There you go, Orc."

"Thanks. I'lls tellhim yougone th' otherway."

Semfeld nodded at Puddles. "Deal."

Liverioso ran up to the pair. "Leth go before that other cometh back."

Chéri untied the other Shambler. "You won't have to tell me twice. How long will he be like that?" She pointed at Toadstool Orc.

"About an hour. I didn't get a full windup on him."

Chéri nodded. "We need to be long gone by then." She pulled the Shambler roughly to her. "Let's get out of here and then put that turtle to work again."

Semfeld turned and jogged towards the tree he and Liverioso met at- it was, if nothing else, in the opposite direction of the Orc who had gone for wood.

Chéri and Liverioso fell in step behind him, all three picking up a fast jog.

Mangus stepped into the clearing. He had large logs stacked up his arms to his chin. Cooking three whole meals took a bit of wood, after all. "I'm back. Did ya make sure..." He looked around. The clearing was empty. "Not again. That stupid Kilmer."

"They's gonethataway," Puddles said as he gestured with a soupy finger in the direction the trio had run.

Mangus looked down at Puddles. "Where's Kilmer?"

"Which'ns that?"

"The stupid one." Maggus let out a long breath. "The one that was supposed t'be preppin the prisoners."

"He th'toadstool there." Puddles swiveled his finger around to point.

Maggus dropped the logs in exasperation.

Not on Kilmer.

Or on Puddles.

"Where's...."

Tarl stepped into the clearing. "Got some marjoram an' wild onion an' some ginger bark. This should turn out..." His voice trailed off as he looked at the very angry Maggus. "Not again. That stupid Kilmer."

Maggus nodded.

"Where's he?"

Maggus pointed at the toadstool. "Ya know how long he's going to be like that?"

"Said n'hour."

Maggus nodded. He looked from Puddles to Kilmer to Tarl. Tarl looked straight back at him and nodded.

"Canwetalkthisover, fellas?"

Semfeld, Liverioso, and Chéri ran through the forest with the Shamblers in tow.

"We need to check to see if we're going the right way," said Semfeld. "We just have to stop for a minute!"

"Fine, fine." Chéri stopped running. She was winded but not out of breath.

Liverioso put his hands on his knees. "We. Should. Ride. The Shamblers." He said as he gasped for air.

Semfeld moved to the side of the Shambler and pulled the turtle out of the pouch. He put it on the ground. The turtle poked out its head and looked at him. "To the Guild, remember?"

The turtle nodded then turned its head forward. With grim determination, it began to walk in what seemed to be a mostly straight line, off to the side of the direction they had been running.

"Well, at least we need to be going away from those Orcs." Semfeld picked up the turtle and dropped him back into the sack. A thought occurred to him. He

reached down and grabbed a large handful of grass and dropped it in the sack with the turtle. "Snack time."

Liverioso shook his head. "If I ate, I'd throw up."

Chéri looked around. "Well, we should ride for a little, I think."

"You said riding was dangerous."

"Well, we need to get some distance between those Orcs and us. That's more dangerous, I think."

Semfeld nodded at her. "Sounds good." He smiled. "Glad you're with us."

Chéri smiled a genuine smile back. "Me too."

Liverioso shoved Chéri, "Don't go and get mushy on us."

Chéri shoved him back. "Do that again and I'll kill you where you stand," she said. She was, however smiling.

"There, thath's more like it."

"Let's get some ground between us and them and find a good place to bed down."

The three mounted their Shamblers – Chéri with Liverioso- and began to move at a trot through the dark forest.

Chapter Forty-One
Look! Who's Running? Dinner

Chéri, Liverioso, and Semfeld rode through the forest, ducking under branches as they let their Shamblers navigate the trees ahead of them. After almost half an hour, Chéri spoke up: "I think we should see about finding a place to bed down for the night."

Semfeld leaned forward, trying to look into the night. He was not successful. A thought occurred to him. "Hey, I have an idea. Stop for a moment." He pulled on the reins of the Shambler and as soon as it stopped, he slipped off the saddle.

Chéri guided her Shambler beside his. "What are you doing?"

"Going to use our tracker to see if there's someplace safe around here to hide out until morning."

"What?"

Semfeld reached into the bag hanging on his Shambler. "I'll ask the turtle." He peered into the shell of the turtle. "We need a safe place to sleep. Some place that's defendable. Can there be anything like that around here?"

The turtle poked out his head and stared at Semfeld.

"We'll keep going to the Guild tomorrow. Now we need a safe place to stay for the night. There's got to be something like that around here. Isn't there?" He tried again.

The turtle nodded slowly.

"Is it close by?"

The turtle looked over at Chéri. It didn't nod.

"You're going to confuse it, let me do the asking"

Chéri let out an exasperated sigh. "Turtles."

"Is it close by?"

The turtle nodded again.

"Can you walk there in less than five minutes?"

The turtle nodded.

"Make it so," commanded Semfeld as he put the turtle down.

The turtle looked around for a moment, twisted its head oddly, then walked off in a 90 degree angle from where they were standing.

"Less than five minutes that way then."

"I don't see how..."

"Trust me. Nothing beats a tracking turtle."

"I can beat pretty much anything if I have a large enough club."

Liverioso slipped off the Shambler from behind her. "Leth's go." He moved beside his partner, who was now leading his Shambler and keeping an eye on the turtle.

"Why can't you just pick the thing up and we ride in that direction and get there in a quarter of the time?"

"Because it might be hard to see."

Chéri dismounted her Shambler, "That's just absurd. If it's hard to see how can it be any place that we can get into?"

Semfeld turned to look at the Gnomess. "Listen, I don't understand how a tracking critters spells work. All I know is that they do pretty much all the time. So lets' just follow the turtle."

The turtle turned his head and nodded at them. He looked forward and continued at his slow pace.

"I don't see how..."

The trio stepped into a clearing. Sitting in the middle of it was a ramshackle shack. The turtle made straight for it.

"Well, that's just absurd."

"Like I said, Chéri; I don't know how they work, just that they do."

They moved closer to the shack. It seemed to be made of fallen logs with a rough-hewn door set on one side. The roof seemed to be several spit logs lashed together with ropes.

"What a dump."

Semfeld and Liverioso turned to look at Chéri. So did the turtle. "What did you expect in the middle of the forest?" Asked Semfeld.

"Yeah; a cottage made of candy?" Added Liverioso.

The turtle just shook its head.

Chéri moved to the front door. "Should we knock?"

Semfeld opened his mouth, then closed it. "I have no idea. I suppose we could just go right on in. I can't imagine anyone living out here."

Liverioso looked around the clearing. "What're we going to do with the Shamblers?"

"Bring them inside as well. The last thing we need is a couple of Shamblers drawing anyone or anything's attention," said Semfeld.

"I agree," said Chéri. She lifted the latch on the door and pushed it open. Musty air pushed out of the shack. "I don't think anyone has lived here for a long time." She turned to look at Liverioso. "You got a spell to make some sort of light?"

"Do I?!"

"Here we go."

Liverioso stepped away from the pair. "Lady and Gentleman. I greet you thith evening from the dark of the foreth. The dark that will soon be light."

Semfeld clapped. With a sigh, Chéri clapped twice- that was the most either magician had gotten out of her.

Liverioso tilted his hands back and forth. With a flourish, he drew Garibaldis' wand. "Light for the dark!" He bent down.

Chéri clapped again. Usually bows meant that the show was over. She was hoping that it was, anyway.

Liverioso picked up a fist-sized rock. "Water from rocks? Child's play. Any hack can do that. Make it a pigeon? That's an old birthday party trick." He raised the rock up to chest level and arms-length. Holding the wand similarly, he passed the wand over the stone. "Light from a rock. Oh yes. You will thee it happen right before your eyes!"

Crystalis Projectus
Lightus All Around Us!

He intoned.

He moved the rock to his lips and blew through it as if it were a horn. As he did, a glow began to grow from the center of it. With each breath, the glow got brighter. Soon, Semfeld and Chéri could see their own shadows. Liverioso took a deep breath and prepared to blow into the stone again.

"That's plenty, Liv; otherwise everyone'll know we're here," cautioned Semfeld.

Chéri clapped. "That's the most amazing thing I've seen you do. Really."

Liverioso beamed - almost as bright as the stone. "Thankths!" He tossed the shining rock to Chéri.

Chéri caught the rock. It was cool to the touch. It had dimmed slightly when it was tossed. She paused, then brought it up to her lips. As she blew into it, the light grew with intensity. "Really, really nice." She moved back to the door. She leaned in, rock out in front of her. "It looks as bad in here as it does on the outside," she remarked. She stepped into the shack, boards creaking under her feet.

"Real nice, Amazing Liverioso."

Liverioso took a deep bow.

"Let's get inside before anyone notices were here." He looked at the two Shamblers. "If you two need to make a dump, now is the time to do it." He

swatted the rump of one of the beasts. It obliged by getting rid of a large amount of pellets that at one time were plants and flowers it had passed on the day's walk. The other beast followed suit.

"Good Shamblers!" Semfeld patted the Shambler's rump again. He looked at his partner. "Let's get inside." He took his mount's reins and pulled him to the door. After only a couple of tries, he had his Shambler inside the shack. Liverioso was not far behind him.

"So what're we looking at in here?" Asked Semfeld.

Chéri was moving around the room with the glowing rock in her hand. "Well, there's not much here. An old bed that's completely used up, just the boards are left. No windows and only one door. It's either the perfect hiding place, or the ultimate trap."

"Well, in that case, I think we're set!" Said Liverioso. He moved the animals to the far corner of the room. He tucked the reins into a crack in the wood. "Stay."

The turtle finally made it to the door of the shack- less than five minutes from when it first started. It looked around, appraising the room, pleased with what it had constructed. In a twist that even Fate couldn't fathom, Semfeld had once again managed to pick up the one stone within a thousand day's walk that was an entrapped Djinn. All powerful, it had languished in the stone for well over five hundred years. Unable to move, or even lure someone near to rub it, it sat in stony silence hoping.

Until.

Until a certain Magician had picked him up and transformed him into a turtle. He was free of the bonds of the rock, and since the Magician had picked him up, he was now bound to him. Being a turtle, however, he was unable to convey any of the duties and responsibilities (there were quite a few) that came with owning a Djinn. The request to 'find' a safe place for the night within walking distance had been taken as a request for a wish. The Djinn complied as the trio seemed to be in a fix, and it put him two wishes closer to being free from his current predicament.

Semfeld moved over and picked up the turtle. "Thanks heaps, turtle; you're a real life saver!" He carried him over and dropped him in the sack. The turtle didn't mind; after being a rock for five hundred years, being a turtle in a sack was

a breeze! Especially since as soon as the sack closed, he conjured up a comfortable little palace with a nice wading pond for him to relax in.

Semfeld looked at the bed-boards. "Well, we can put our bedrolls on it and we should be just as comfortable as out on the hard ground. At least here, there's no bugs to worry about."

"Don't look under the bed."

Semfeld nodded at Chéri. It would be the last thing he would do. "Got it."

"Juth make one big bed and it will be more comfy," suggested Liverioso.

Chéri frowned. "All right, gentlemen. Here's the deal. I am not in any way interested in either of you at all. I have a very dear mate that I want to get back to. He is the one I care about. So if we make one bed, I just want you to know that I'm not going to tolerate any sort of... anything."

Semfeld put on a smile. "Of course, we're honorable men, after all." Inside he screamed 'CURSES!' He looked at his partner. "Right?"

Liverioso quickly put on a smile of his own. He nodded furiously. "Thath's right. Your honor is safe with uth." Inside he screamed 'NOOOOOOO!'

"Well, good then. Let's make one bed and get some sleep. We can't be trudging around this forest all tired or we're done for."

Chapter Forty-Two
Look! Who's Coming?

That's the last one. Promise.

Chéri startled awake. She tried to sit up but couldn't; Semfeld and Liverioso were both snuggled up against her. "Ridiculous." Still, it was a good night's sleep. Something had awoken her, though. She looked at the Shamblers. They were still standing in the corner just as they had been left the night before. One turned and looked at her.

Outside, she heard a clatter of armor. She struggled out from under the two Magicians. They both rolled over away from her, still asleep. Stealthily, she moved to the door and peeked out a crack. There were three Orcs standing in front of the shack. She recognized them all. "Great; Puddles, Toadstool, and that other one who went for wood." She looked down at the door latch and the hastily rigged, mostly rotten, piece of wood jammed into the mechanism. It was the only thing standing between them and what would probably be a hard fought -losing- battle. Chéri pressed her ear against the door to listen.

"Well, they gots to be 'round here somewheres," said one.

"Mayhap they made it to Cool Springs. It's not but about ten minute's ride each from here."[22]

" 'Specially since they got Shamblers."

Chéri frowned. Ten minutes? *We could have been safe in town instead of trapped in here!* She turned to the Magicians. They were now snuggled with each other. Moving to them quietly, she pressed her hands over their mouths. Immediately their eyes flew open. "Shhh. We've got company," she whispered.

The two nodded.

Chéri moved to the door and peeked out again. The Orcs were still talking. She listened in once again.

"... it were locks from the insides, so there's no ways they are in there."

"But what if they locks it once they got in?" Said a second Orc.

"Don' be stupid."

Chéri heard a meaty slap.

"Sorry Maccus. I weren't thinkin' ," said Slapp-ee.

"So where you want to look?" Asked Non-Slapped.

"Let's go look around town. See if they is there," said Maccus AKA Slapp-er.

"But we can't fight in town or our heads gets put on pikes," complained Slapp-ee.

"Yeah, but we cans look."

Grunts all around indicated the plan was accepted by all.

Chéri took her ear from the door and turned. She startled because Semfeld and Liverioso were crowding her.

"What'd they thay?"

"They're going to look for us in town". She scowled. "And town, it seems, is only *ten* minutes away."

"Whath? Thath stupid turtle!"

Chéri noticed that the more nervous he was, the more he lisped. "Well, that's the good news at least. I say we give them the ten minutes, and maybe a couple more, then make a break for town."

"Whath if they catch us there?"

Chéri shook her head. "Relax; they said if they fight in town, their heads get put on pikes."

"Then I say we pick a fight with them if we see 'em in town," suggested Semfeld.

"We need to keep a low profile," said Chéri. "Besides, they may just put *all* heads on pikes; not just the Orc ones."

"Oh."

"Well, I goth to pee. Think we can sneak out for that?"

Chéri peeked out the crack again. She couldn't hear anyone. Pressing her ear up to the crack, she closed her eyes and concentrated. "Nothing. I think it's safe to..." a rustling outside made her stop. She looked out the crack again. There was an Orc eye looking back at her. Startled, Chéri flinched back and jammed her finger through the crack.

"OWWW!" Screamed an Orc. "Tol' yas they was in there!"

"Semfeld put that turtle down. We're going to have to make a run for it. Untie the Shamblers, Liv."

Semfeld took the turtle from the sack and put it on the ground.

Chéri looked back out the crack. The three Orcs were standing together. One had his hand over his eye. "Hurry up Liv, or we're all dead."

The Orcs turned to look at the shack. One nodded and moved out of view.

"Liv?"

Liverioso was struggling to get one Shambler behind the other. "Almoth there."

Chéri looked back out. The missing Orc came back into view. He was dragging a large dry bush. He tossed it against the door and disappeared again.

"Lord High Priest on a stick. We need to get out of here." Eye-poked Orc moved out of sight.

"Sem, What've you got?"

Semfeld looked down at the turtle. "Town has to be ten minutes from here. Take us to town."

It seemed as close to requesting a wish as the previous time, so the TurtleDjin complied. It nodded and began to walk towards a corner of the shack. "Got it!" Semfeld picked up the turtle. "Thanks turtle!" He smooched it then dropped it back in the sack. The turtle immediately went back to lounging in a marble pool. That also contained a dozen bathing beauties. Turtles that is.

"It's that way when we go out the door." He pointed in a 45 degree angle from the door.

"OK. The Shamblers are ready," said Liverioso. He was seated on the front one, head ducked down. "Leth's go." He put his hand down to pull up Chéri.

"How bad you got to pee?" Chéri asked with a smile.

"Pretty bad."

"I'll ride with Semmie."

Semfeld mounted the other Shambler. "Ready, Chéri." He reached his hand down.

Chéri shook her head. "Someone's got to open the door and move the bushes out of the way." As if on cue, another bush could be heard hitting the door. Early yesterday she would have never offered to be the one left dismounted, but after recent events, she was sure the Humans wouldn't leave her behind. "Liv. You go first. Go straight out the door then when you're in the forest, head toward town." She pointed in a 45 degree angle from the door. "That way. Got it?"

"OK."

"Semmie. I'm going to open the door and drag the bushes to the right. After Liv makes a break for it, swing right, pick me up, and we'll catch back up when we're all heading the right way."

"You thure that's a good plan?"

"It's a *horrible* plan, but it's all we have time for. Ready?" Chéri poised her hand above the block holding the latch in place.

Semfeld put his spear out like a lance. The two Shamblers clomped their hooves on the floorboards. They weren't sure what was happening, but it was exciting all the same.

Chéri heard another bush hit the door. "Colossus, give me strength." She gave the two Humans a nod. "Here we go."

Chéri gently pulled the block and dropped it to the ground. She lifted the latch. "Thank the gods this door opens in." She carefully pulled the door open to see a large pile of shrubs blocking her path. Two of the Orcs were out of sight. The third was squatted down using a tinderbox to start a small pile of kindling. His back was to her, shielding his workspace from an early morning breeze.

Steeling herself, she grabbed hand's-full of branches and pushed out and to the right. The entire pile of dry bushes moved easily as she stepped out of the door. Until she ran into Eye-poked Orc.

"Hey!" He complained as he dropped the two bushes he was carrying. He squinted his one good eye. "Stop that!"

"Go! Go! Go!" Chéri shoved the bushes against the Orc and held them there, trying to keep him at bay.

Tinderbox Orc stood and turned. "Hey youse!" He took a step toward her as Liverioso's Shambler came out the door. He heeled its sides roughly, coaxing it to a gallop within three strides. As he headed for the forest, his Shambler hit Tinderbox Orc with its shoulder, spinning him to the ground.

Eye-poked Orc grabbed the shrubs Chéri was holding and tossed them over his shoulder, removing all obstacles between him and her. "You th' one that poked out m' eye?"

"That was him!" Chéri pointed at the disappearing Liverioso.

The Orc turned to look.

Semfeld came out of the door. "Chéri!" He called.

Eye-poked Orc turned back to look at Semfeld and took a step towards him.

Chéri blindly stepped back and raised both arms, hands spread wide. She prepared for the back-jarring yank that was to come from Semfeld.

It didn't.

Semfeld exited the shack, seeing that his partner had knocked one Orc to the ground, and looped out the door and angled toward the Orc advancing on Chéri, spear held out.

Chéri stumbled back, almost losing her balance. She turned to look for Semfeld just as he passed her on the other side- she didn't see him. "Semfeld!"

Eye-Poked Orc fought between paying attention to the Gnomess and the Human on the Shambler. He wasn't sure who to kill first.

Maccus got to his feet. He knew exactly who needed to be killed first; the most dangerous. "Get rid of the mounted one!" He drew his long knife. "I'll get the female." He advanced on Chéri.

Chéri, spun around to see Eye-poked Orc draw a sword and turn to face Semfeld, who was now moving toward him, spear held out. Chéri drew her dagger, flipped it over in her hand and launched it at Eye-poked Orc's back. It struck him high and between the shoulders. Eye-poked Orc arched his back as he reached over his shoulder to remove the buried-to-the-hilt dagger. Just as Semfeld's spear hit him in the center of the chest. The spear was wrenched out of Semfeld's hand as it stuck almost a foot into the Orc. The Orc spun to the side and dropped to the ground, dead before he even hit.

Chéri ran forward and yanked her (now) trusty Pic dagger from the Orc's back. She stood on his back as Semfeld turned in a broad arc back towards her.

Maccus advanced on Chéri, long knife held out in front of him- apparently the more deadly one was dismounted, this time. "All right, knife tosser, let's see what yas gots." He swapped the knife from hand to hand as he advanced.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Semfeld had managed his turn and was now galloping towards her. In a move that went against all her weapons training, she sheathed her bloody dagger. Once again, she raised her hands over her head, still facing the advancing Orc.

Maccus saw what was going to happen, and moved to a run, closing the distance between him and Chéri rapidly.

Semfeld reached Chéri first, grabbing her by one hand and yanking her up to his side. She hugged him around the chest as she worked her way in front of him, facing the wrong way. "Nicely done!"

Maccus, taking a cue from the female that now seemed to be getting away, flipped his long knife and hurled it at the escaping pair. He was upset to see that he missed the female. His letdown was tempered by the fact that his knife was stuck a good distance into the male that was driving the mount.

Chéri leaned back as the tip of the long knife stuck through Semfeld's shoulder, just above his right armpit. Semfeld jolted in the saddle from the impact and lost the reins. Still moving at a gallop, the Shambler continued with no guidance from its rider, following the last order given by having its sides kicked.

Chéri twisted around in the saddle and grabbed the reins as Semfeld leaned to one side. Unable to grab anything else, she reached up and held the blade of the knife to keep him on. She looked around to get her bearings and made the Shambler turn to its left to head toward where town should be. "Hang on Semfeld. It's just ten minutes. Hang on!"

Chéri kicked her Shambler in the sides, trying to coax more speed out of it. She looked left and right, hoping to see Liverioso.

Finally after several long moments, Liverioso moved beside her. "We made..." he began. His voice trailed off as he saw the two-foot long knife sticking out of his partner. "Semfeld!"

"He'll make it. We just need to get to town!"

"What can I do?"

"Have you ever been to Cool Springs? Where's the doctor?" She called from her mount.

Liverioso thought back to the one time, years ago, when he had been to the town. He was in his mid-teens and it was for a wedding. The Bryologist was marrying the Butcher if he remembered correctly. It was a big affair and his parents, friends of the Groom, made sure they were there, introducing the young Liverioso to both sides of the family. He had had no need to go to the doctor while he was there. "I have no idea! I know the guild is near a water tower, though!" He distinctly remembered that because he had climbed up there with the bride's younger sister to go skinny dipping in it. The Magicians heard the giggling and climbed up to see what was taking place in their water supply. He and the also-in-her-mid-teens girl were caught by two stern-looking Magicians in, as they had put it, 'Floating Flagrante Delicto'. His parents were *not* pleased and immediately ordered the pair to never see each other again.

Thus began a torrid love affair that spanned the better part of five years. When Sage abruptly left one day after watching her nephew the night before, Liverioso was devastated. There was no note, no explanation. Nothing. It was then that his stutter developed. And his mean streak.

"Look out Liv!" Chéri's warning snapped Liverioso out of his painful reminiscence as a branch approached. "Sage," he said absently as he ducked. "Where are you, Sage?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

The two rode hard towards the town, which thanks to the intervention of the TurtleDjin, was now a life-saving ten minute - seven with the current pace- ride away.

"Hold on Semfeld!" Chéri called to the lolling Magician. She had moved to use her back to support Semfeld by bracing it against his chest as she held the end of the knife down on her shoulder.

Semfeld's arms hung alarmingly slack to his sides.

Chapter Forty-Three
The Race Into Cool Springs

Within seven minutes, the trio burst from the Emerald Forest and into town.

"We need a doctor!" Chéri called to the first pedestrian she saw. "And make it quick!" She snapped.

The pedestrian quickly moved to the opposite side of the road at the sight of the blood covered Gnomess and Human.

"Leth me try," offered Liverioso. He moved to an Elf walking in the opposite direction. "Excuthe me, Elf. We are in dire need of a doctor. Can you point uth there?"

"He can't fix lisps, I don't think."

Chéri moved beside the Elf. "Can he fix me taking your head clean off at the shoulders? This one needs the doctor, you dolt!" She jerked her chin up at the barely conscious and still bleeding Semfeld, behind her.

The Elf's eyes got large. "That he can fix." He pointed down the street. "One way or another. He's by the water tower, two blocks down. There's a set of Orc leg bones crossed over the place. But I'm not so sure Murr..."

Chéri bolted down the street in the direction the Elf had said.

"Thankth, Elf."

The Elf raised a well-maintained eyebrow. "Want some advice?"

"Nope." Liverioso kicked his Shambler's side and took off towards his partner.

The Elf pursed his lips and continued on his way. "The magic word to get past Murray right away would have been good advice."

When Liverioso caught up to Chéri, she had stopped in front of an old wood building. She was pulling Semfeld off the saddle while trying to not cut herself on the large blade sticking out of him.

Liverioso jumped from his saddle and went to help Chéri. He picked up Semfeld and gestured toward the doctor's office with his chin. "Go!"

Chéri moved to the steps in front of the door. Over the door was a set of crossed Orc leg bones. Mounted on top of them was a Human's skull. "What kind of advertisement is that?"

"What you want?" Asked the skull.

Chéri did a double-take. "What?"

"Looks like a puncture wound. Through and through as it were." The skull's jaw clattered up and down as it spoke. "High though, so it missed anything vital. Can still kill you with blood loss if you don't..."

"Listen, Skull. I don't... We don't have time to sit and chat."

"Murray."

"What?!"

"Name's Murray. Highly evil skull aiming to take over the Lands!"

"What're you doing up there?"

"Well, in between other domination plans, I'm the receptionist."

Liverioso stepped forward. "Well thith ith an emergenthy. We need to get our friend theen!"

"Can't fix lisps."

"I KNOW THAT!" Liverioso shook his fist from under Semfeld's knees at Murray.

"Listen, Murray. We're here because he had a very large knife stuck into him and we need it to be *not* stuck in him. We need to see the doctor!"

"Looks like an Orcish long knife. Not quite a short sword, bigger than a dagger. Why I remember this one time, I was sitting on a shelf, contemplating

taking over the Lands with a diabolical plan, when suddenly the park of amusement I was in exploded..."

"Listen, I don't give a Shambler's left nut..."

"...and after ending up here, Doc Morrow, a man after my own darkened soul, gave me a job. As a recept..."

"We don't have time for a long story and I don't care *what* this blade is called. I just want it out of him!" Now Chéri shook her fist at Murray.

"Please, please, let us see the doctor!" Begged Liverioso.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Murray clattered at them. Murray looked down at the door. "Examination room two."

The door squeaked open.

"Right behind you, Chéri!"

Chapter Forty-Four
Doctors in Cool Springs- Not as Helpful as You'd Think

"Don't make a mess!" Murray called after them. "I've just mopped!"

Chéri took the stairs two at a time. As she entered the doctor's office she saw small pennants sticking out of door frames, numbered one to four. She moved to the door under the pennant with a '2' over it and opened it. "In here, Liv!"

Liverioso took his time on the stairs, not wanting to fall and cause extra injury to his partner. Semfeld moaned in his arms as he made it to the door. Liverioso turned sideways and shuffled in.

"In here, Liv!" Chéri said again. She pointed into the room.

"What seems to be the trouble, Miss?" Said an ancient-looking Dwarf as he shuffled up.

"Our friend got stabbed by some Orcs..."

"In town?"

"No. What does it matter where he got stabbed?"

"It's against the law in town." He smiled. "Would have to call the sheriff."

"It was out in the forest near some old shack." She pointed out the door. "In the forest."

The Dwarf nodded. "Fine, fine. Bring him in and put him on the table and I'll see what I can do."

Liverioso moved to the table and placed his partner on it on his side, injured side up.

"Woops there youngster. Flip him that other way."

Liverioso obeyed the ancient Dwarf and carefully rolled his partner onto his other side. "Why?"

"Cause I don't want him to stop breathing. I'd have to call the authorities."

"What?."

"Same if he dies, you know." The Dwarf still had not made any movement toward the injured Semfeld.

Semfeld moaned.

"For the Lord High Priest's sake, do something!"

"Now, now, lassie. It's all under control." He assured Chéri. He still hadn't moved.

"Are you a doctor?" Liverioso asked.

"Yep. The best one in Cool Springs."

Chéri rolled her eyes. "What, are you the only one?"

The Dwarf finally moved to Semfeld and began to prod his chest. "No, no. There's more th'n a dozen in town. Rough place, Cool Springs. Lots of doctors. Lots."

"Well, do some of that best doctoring in town, and take care of him," Liverioso said as he pointed to his friend.

The Dwarf looked at the long knife. "Well, here's your problem, right here." He grasped the long knife by the leather-wrapped hilt and yanked it out in one motion. He let it clatter onto the table. "That's better."

Semfeld moaned as blood poured out of the now-open wound.

"Whath are you doing?" Liverioso drew his wand.

"Now, now," said the Dwarf. "Can't rightly fix a hole in someone if something is already plugging it, can I?"

"Do. Something. Helpful," Chéri said icily. "Or I swear on the heads of..."

"Don't go threatening doctors, Missy. Not the smartest thing to you. I'd have to call the authorities." He looked at her. "After I killed you where you stood." He eyed her for a moment, then smiled as he turned back to the bleeding Semfeld. "Well, looks like we've got a problem here. Yep, sure does." He reached under the table and pulled out a dirty rag. Before either Liverioso or Chéri could

say anything, he rolled it by twirling it between his hands and shoved one half into the front wound in Semfeld. He did the same with the back half. "There we go."

Semfeld moaned again.

"Can you give him something for the pain?"

"Sure, sure. I can do that." He turned to look at Chéri again. "Say, while you're at it, you want to talk me through everything else I'm going to do?"

"Fine, Doc. Take care of him and we can come back." She waited for the doctor to say something. He didn't.

Semfeld moaned.

"When do you want us to come back?"

"Honestly? Never." The doctor returned to prodding Semfeld's chest. "But since that's not gonna happen. Give me a good thirty minutes." He looked at the soiled rag. "Make it an hour to be sure."

"And you are going to..."

"Missy..." He began to turn away from Semfeld again.

"Fine, Doc. We'll be back in an hour." She put her hand on Liverioso's shoulder. "We'll go wait someplace."

"That's exactly where I want you to go."

"Got any better advice on a place to wait?" Liverioso asked.

"Nice inn in town. You could get a room. He's not gonna be able to travel for a few days."

"Thanks Doc." The pair started to move to the door.

"Oh, almost forgot to ask," the Dwarf said. "You want him back like he was, or a Zombie?"

"What?" Chéri turned around. "We want him back like he was. Why would we want our friend to be a Zombie?"

"Well, easy to get along with," began the Dwarf, "and of course..." He paused for a moment. "Fine, fine. Back to being a human." He looked at Semfeld. "In that case, make it sixteen hours."

Chéri stared at the doctor.

He shrugged and turned back to Semfeld. "See you in sixteen hours. Back to Human, all that."

Chéri put her arm on Liverioso again. "Let's go see about a place to stay for a few days."

"But, Chéri..." began Liverioso.

Chéri pinched his shoulder. Hard. Thanks to a fairly steady stream of abuse from her, Liverioso closed his mouth. She ushered him out of the examination room.

As she got to the bottom of the stairs, she turned to Liverioso, "What's the matter with you? Were you going to say we have no money right there in front of that unstable doctor?"

Liverioso's eyes got large when he realized the mistake he almost made. "I'm sorry, I don't know..."

"Ya got no money?" Murray interrupted.

The pair looked up at the skull. "Who asked you?" Chéri asked.

"I'm the receptionist. I take care of appointments, examination room assignments, and billing," Murray said with a clattering jaw. "Don't try and double cross me!"

"Well, we have money, juth so you know," said Liverioso. He stood up a little straighter. "It juth so happenth that I am an Enforther in the Magithians Guild and have full power and authority to act..."

"Look who's the chatter box all of a sudden," said Murray. "A simple 'yes' would do, you know. Even a jingling of a money purse." Inexplicably, he seemed to roll his empty eye sockets.

"Let's go Liv. We'll get a room, then go by the guild and get a line of credit," Chéri said. She looked up at Murray. "Where's the nearest, best inn?"

Murray furrowed his brow. “Let’s see. I’d suggest the Are and Eee or Eee and Are. Down the way to the left about two blocks.”

“So which one is better?”

“Which what?”

“Which inn?” Chéri put her hands on her hips. “Why is everyone in this town so difficult?”

“Listen,” began Murray. “You asked me for the closest Inn that was also of good quality.”

“Yes.”

“So I said the Are and Eee or Eee and Are. Because that’s the best inn in this vicinity.”

“The inn is called Are and Eee or Eee and Are?”

“You’re kinda slow, I take it.” He turned toward Liverioso. “You got anything chatterbox?”

“Whath a stupid name for an inn.”

“That didn’t help any. I’d suggest keeping your mouth closed from now on.”

“You know, you sure aren’t the most friendly of sorts.”

No one said anything for a moment.

“Oh, you were talking to me?” Clattered Murray. “I thought you meant mister chatterbox there.”

“Let’s go Chéri,” said Liverioso. He didn’t like being pushed around by a skull and wanted to say something just to defy him. But nothing came to mind.

Murray seemed to roll his eyes again. “Out of towners.” He said to no one in particular.

“Let’s go,” said Chéri. “We’ll get a room, then go by the guild. You said it was by a water tower?”

Liverioso nodded. He had thought of the water tower incident with Sage, her disappearance and all the days in between almost every night.

With that, the pair started to walk off.

"See you in an hour," said Murray.

"We don't want our friend to be a Zombie," Liverioso called to Murray.

"See you in sixteen hours," said Murray without missing a beat.

Chapter Forty-Five
Inn Keepers in Cool Springs- They Are Actually Quite...

The pair walked down the street towards where Murray said the inn was.

"Thanks again for what you and Semfeld did for me, Liv."

"You'd have done the same for us."

The two walked in uncomfortable silence for a few paces. "No, honestly, Liv, I don't know if I would have. Being in my profession, you tend to not get close to too many people."

"Why's that?"

"Well, typically when someone puts out a contract on an Assassin, that other Assassin usually starts by killing everyone close to them just to let them know that they're marked."

"Gads! That's horrible."

"Hey, we're not gardeners..."

"Well, in any cathe. We couldn't juth leave you there."

"And for that I'm thankful." She turned to look at Liverioso, "And for the record, as my friend, I'll always come back for you now. 'Course..."

"Yeth?"

"If I ever get marked for death, now you'll be one of the first to know." She gave him a playful shove.

"Well, thath's comforting."

The two stepped in front of a four-story building. "Thith has to be the inn." Liverioso looked up at the top of the inn. Across the top, in large red letters was: 'R&E or E&R'. Under it in smaller red letters was 'Eating House and Inn'.

"That still doesn't make sense. Let's go in and see about getting a room."

The two went up the stairs to the large, stain glass double doors. "Nice," offered Liverioso. "Hope it's not too expenthive." Liverioso leaned forward and opened the door for Chéri. "After you."

Chéri smiled as she entered. The foyer and front desk were well apportioned and bright. "Real nice."

Liverioso pointed to the front desk. There was a bored looking human standing there. Beside the front desk, staring straight ahead, was a full-grown Orc. He was wearing white pants that came to his knees, a short-waisted red coat, and a red cap that had a black tassel sticking out of the top of it.

"Ith that an Orc in a fez?"

"That it is." Chéri said as the pair moved to the front desk.

"How may I help you?" Asked the Front Desk Clerk.

"We need a room."

"A room. How quaint."

Chéri looked at Liverioso, "I swear, before we leave this town, I'm going on a killing streak so big that even the King is going to hear about."

"I'll help."

"So you need a room before your killing streak, then?"

"Well," began Liverioso, "we could actually use two adjoining doors."

The Front Desk Clerk winked slyly. "You don't have to keep up appearances around here, Sir."

"No, no! Thath's not it. We're just friends."

"Right, right. *Friends*. Quite right Sir. My mistake."

"But really!"

"Forget it, Liv." Chéri said. "Just give us a couple of rooms."

"Of course Miss..." He dipped a quill into an inkwell. He held it above the registration book, poised to write.

"Chéri Belladonna."

"Chéri.... Bella ... Donna," said the Front Desk Clerk as he wrote. He re-dipped his quill. "Sir?" He raised an eyebrow.

"The Mythterious Liverioso". Liverioso puffed up his chest. "I'm an Offithial Enforth..."

"Myth... Terryous.... Liveri... Oso... Comma... The," said the Front Desk Clerk. "So... Belladonna and Liverioso. Right."

"Now lithen here!"

"It's fine, Sir. No need to explain." He leaned forward over the counter to get a good look at Chéri- the counter came up almost to her shoulders. "Nothing to explain at all," he said as his eyes traveled all over the Gnomess. "No, Sir."

"Bub, you're living on borrowed time."

"Oh. There'll be one more in the room," said Liverioso. "The Athtounding Semfeld."

The Front Desk Clerk now raised both eyebrows. "Oh, well. Now it's interesting." He leaned over the counter again to run his eyes over Chéri again. "Very interesting indeed."

Chéri reached up and grabbed the man by the collar. "I'm warning you for the last time." She pulled him closer so that his feet came off the floor. "The last time." She let go of the man and he slithered back to the other side of the counter.

"Well then," he said nonplussed. "Two adjoining rooms. Three folks. That'll be a silver a day for half board." He looked at Liverioso. "How long of a stay?"

Liverioso glanced at Chéri. "What do we need, do you think? Five days for Liverioso to be fit to travel?"

Chéri nodded. "That's what the doctor said. Five days should do it."

The Front Desk Clerk was still looking at Liverioso.

"Five days should do it."

The Clerk wrote something else in the guest book. "Fine, fine." He flattened a hand and slapped it on his lips, making a popping sound. "Lang!"

The Orc shuddered as if he had just woken up. Even though he was standing and staring straight ahead. He shuffled in a half-circle to face the Front Desk Clerk. "Uhhhh?" He said.

"Take their bags to rooms three ten and three eleven."

"Uhhhh." Said Lang.

"We don't have any bags," said Liverioso.

"No extra clothes?" Eyebrows were raised once again.

"Lighten up creep; we were robbed," said Chéri. "Where's the nearest clothier?"

"Round the corner to the right, two blocks down."

Chéri nodded. "Let's go to the guild, Liv, and get... Talk to them and then we'll pick up some clothes and then come back here to relax for a while."

Liverioso nodded. "We'll be back."

The Front Desk Clerk nodded. He slapped his hand on his lips twice. "Back, Lang! Back!"

Lang shuffled around to face forward again. "Uhhhh," he said.

Liverioso noticed he wasn't breathing. At all. "Creepy..." he muttered.

The pair walked out into the street. "So the guild is back towards the doctor's office then."

"Yeth," agreed Liverioso. "Then we'll get some clothes and get settled. Semfeld is going to need clothes too, I imagine."

Chéri nodded. "Let's go and get your accounts set up." He pointed in the direction they came. "Over by the water tower?"

"Yeth. Thath's where it happened. I mean, that's where it is." He started walking towards the water tower that was visible even from where they were standing.

Chéri glanced at Liverioso. "What happened?"

Liverioso shook his head. "You'll laugh."

"Is it about a girl?"

"Yeth."

Chéri stopped walking. Liverioso took only two steps more then turned to look at her.

"If it's about love, I will not laugh."

"Ok, Chéri. How about when we're eating tonight?"

"Promise?"

"Sure," he lied.

She started walking again. "Now lets' go see if we can get some money to actually eat with."[23]

As they passed the doctor's office, Murray called out to them: "Hey, you with the face! I don't want to see you in here for another sixteen hours! You two lost? What you looking for?"

"Peace and quiet!" Chéri called up to him.

"Hey! Leave the insults to the skull!" His jaw clattered as he laughed.

Chéri shook her head. "This is one weird town."

The two rounded the corner. Liverioso pointed. "The Magithian's Guild."

Chéri looked at the guild. It looked like a giant Magician's hat. It stood almost thirty feet high and seemed to be about thirty feet across. "That is the most absurd thing I've ever seen. You people ever heard of subtle?"

"Yeth. That's that thing non-Magithian's do." Liverioso gave the standard Magician's Guild answer.

Standing at the front door of the guild -which was more a flap than anything else- was a large Golem. He had a matching-the-guild magician's hat on his head and held a very large pike. He watched as passers-by walked past. Nodding at some, offering a greeting to others. Everyone tried to avoid making eye contact with the ten foot tall Golem in the magician's hat.

Chéri and Liverioso walked up to the Golem.

"Good afternoon t'ya," he offered in a deep, gravelly voice.

"Good afternoon to you too, Grand Guardian of the Magithian's Guild."



Due to that response, the Golem looked down at Liverioso. Even though he wasn't dressed the part, it was obvious he was a member of the guild. Lisp notwithstanding. He straightened up some. "How may I help ya?"

"We're on a quest and I need to stop in to see the Grand Magician or The Second." He paused for a moment. "Or The Third through Tenth."

It was required duty for the Grand Magician to remain in the guild to deal with guild issues. Being only one person, this was impossible, so a deputy 'The Second' was appointed to fill in when the Grand Magician wasn't around. 'The Second', of course, didn't want to spend all their time in the guild, so they would appoint 'The Third'. In larger guilds, it was sometimes possible that the person dealing with daily duties was 'The Tenth'.

The Golem lifted its pike off the ground and gripped it with both hands, holding it across his chest menacingly. He looked as if he were ready to lop both their heads off with one swing.

"Liv..."

Liverioso waved a hand at her.

The Golem glowered down at Liverioso. "What's the password?"

"What do you take me for? I know as well as you do that there *IS* no pathword!" He crossed his arms. "Now let me in you shambling pile of thrown together parts!"

The Golem nodded as he returned his pike to one hand, and placed the base of it on the ground. "You may pass."

"Now just a grain of sand," Chéri said. "Are you telling me there isn't a password to get into your guild?"

Liverioso shook his head. "Of courth not. There thure is a password and I gave it."

"No, you said there wasn't... That's the stupidest password I've ever heard."

"Well, if someone doesn't know the password and they try to guess something, then the Guardian of the Magician's Guild deals with them...."

"Harshly," interjected the Golem.

"Harshly," agreed Liverioso. "It's only the ones in the know, that know the pathword is 'what do you take me for. I know as well as you that there is no pathword' and say it with the right amount of haughtiness to get it right."

"An' the insult," offered the Golem.

Liverioso snapped his fingers. "Right, thorry about that. And you have to include an insult toward whatever massive beast is the guard." He smiled up at the guard. "Love you guys."

"Yep."

Chéri shrugged. "Fine. Let's get in there and get this settled."

Liverioso shook his head. "Only guild members can get in. You'll have to wait out here."

"Wait out here?" Chéri gestured around. "Out in the street?"

"Ya can wait with me, Missy," said the Golem. "We can do riddles 'til he comes back."

Chéri shrugged. “First a talking Skull...”

“Murray,” said the Golem. “Wantin’ t’ take over th’ lands.”

“... then a Zombie Orc bellhop....”

“That’s Lang. Carries bags. ‘Bout it.”

“... and now riddles with a Golem.”

“That’s me. Grand Guard o’ th’ Magician’s Guild.”

“This town is off its rocker.”

The Golem grinned. “Ahh. The first riddle then. Ya walked into it. What’s a rocker got that I don’t got?”

Chéri looked up at the Golem. “I have no idea.”

“Ya gotta guess or playin’ Riddles is no fun.” He looked at Liverioso. “She okay?”

Liverioso smiled, “Oh, She’s definitely okay.” He looked at Chéri. “I’ll be right back, Chéri.” With that, he turned and ducked under the flap.

“So... What does a rocker have that you don’t...”

The Golem smiled. “Yeah.”

“Let’s see...”

Chapter Forty-Six
The Magician's Guild- Nope. Not Helpful at All

Liverioso exited the Magician's Guild to hear the Golem say "That'd be because there's a b in both, and an n in neither."

Chéri frowned. "Well, doesn't that beat all." She crossed her arms. "You're really good at this."

"Thanks."

Chéri unfolded her arms and clapped her hands once, then rubbed them greedily together. "So, we have a line of credit that will get us traveling clothes, pay for the doctor, pay for the inn, feed us in town, and get us an extra mount and supplies for the journey back!"

Liverioso stared at Chéri. His eyes were red as if he has been crying. "No. No. No, No, and No."

"Ya missed one."

Liverioso looked up at the Golem. "No."

"Yeah, ya did."

A tear ran down Liverioso's cheek. "I was adding in the one I missed."

The Golem nodded a massive head. "Then yer good."

"Wait a grain of sand," said Chéri. "They wouldn't give you *anything*?" She crossed her arms again. "And why not?"

"We... Semfeld and I have been kicked out of the guild."

"What?" Chéri moved to Liverioso. "Why is that?"

"Well, seems the word was we were out gallivanting with Pics instead of enforcing Magician Guild standards of conduct." Another tear ran down his cheek. "And we're late on our dues."

"That's absurd. You were cast out into the desert by that stupid Gnome and have been working your way back the entire time!"

"We're really late on our dues."

"So what, you are out until you pay your dues?"

Liverioso nodded. His lower lip was trembling.

"It's not been a month. How ..."

"Six."

"Six months? Yer six months late on yer dues?" The Golem shook his head. "Not proper, that is."

"Well, we were having a hard time extorting people. We were hoping those Gnomes would be an easy fix." Tears welled up in his eyes.

"It's fine, Liv. We'll work something out. Then we'll figure out how to get to Second Hand Sorcery and deal with those Gnomes once and for all."

"What? Th' place across town? Not hard t' get to."

"What?"

"Second Hand Sorc'ry. Sells used wands. Run by a couple of Gnomes."

"What?" Said Liverioso as he looked up.

"You're telling me that Second Hand Sorcery, run by a couple of Gnomes, that sells used wands is across town?" Asked Chéri

"This a riddle?"

"No."

"Where is this shop, exactly?" Tried Liverioso.

"It's over by th' Gristmill." The Golem pointed with a free hand down the street. "That way till the end of town. Next t' the Gristmill, 'course."

Chéri put her hand on Liverioso's shoulder. "Let's go. We'll take care of this before Semfeld even wakes up. Those stinking Gnomes. First let's go cancel our room then we'll go there."

Liverioso nodded to the Golem. "Thanks for your service."

The Golem nodded back then resumed his rigid guard pose.

The pair moved quickly towards the R&E or E&R Eating House and Hotel.

They received: "You again? It is a small world, after all! Isn't it?" From Murray as they went by.

The pair bounded the stairs to the *R&E or E&R*. Liverioso threw open the door and Chéri charged in. She almost ran into a large creature that was moving toward the door. Or maybe it was two large creatures. Possibly one.

Chapter Forty-Seven
Helpful People! Or Person. Maybe People?

"Excuse me, Miss," said the head on the left. "Didn't see you coming in." He moved out of her way.

Liverioso stopped in the doorway and gaped.

"Come on in, Sir. Do you have a reservation?" Asked the second head. The first head turned toward the Front Desk. "Got customers, Effron." He snapped his fingers at the Front Desk Clerk.

"They're checked in already, Sirs," he replied.

"That's what we're here to talk about," said Chéri to the head on the left. "You see, we checked in a little early and now we need to..."

"You can check in any time you like," offered the head on the left.

"Uhmmm.," said Liverioso. That was all that came to mind.

"Well, Sirs," Chéri pressed on, taking a cue from Effron. "Well, we were going to stay here, but you see, we're suddenly a little short of funds."

Left and Right Head's eyes got large.

"But once we go deal with Grimbledung, we'll be..."

"Grimbledung?" Asked Left Head.

"And Drimblerod? You know them?" Asked Right Head.

"Well..." Chéri wasn't sure how to answer. 'Yes, we do and we're planning to kill them' was probably not a good response. Instead she went with; "Yes, we go way back, them and I... Us," she corrected herself as she pointed between herself and Liverioso.

"Well, any friend of Grimbledung is a friend of ours," said Left Head. "I'm Runion," said Runion. "And this is Earl."

"Runion and Earl?" Liverioso smiled. "So the sign..."

"Runion and Earl or Earl and Runion. Depending on how you look at it," said Earl. "So you going to sell them some used wands?"

"No, Runion, actually we were going to talk about a different sort of business," offered Chéri vaguely.

"Well, let me tell you, those two bought so many wands from us, we were able to start this place," he held his arms out wide. Or maybe they held their arms out wide. "So, we try to help out friends of theirs when we can. Right Earl?"

"Right," agreed Earl. He looked at Effron. "Comp their rooms and meals for however long their stay was."

"Five days, Sirs?" Asked Effron.

"Comp it," ordered Earl. Between the two, he had more the mind for business.

"Well, I don't know how we can thank you for that," said Chéri. *Since we're going to kill those two* she thought to herself.

"Thankth very much," said Liverioso. "Maybe we should go upstairs and talk about our business plan before we prethent it to the Gnomths." He pointed up the stairs.

Chéri looked at Liverioso. He pointed again up the stairs. This time with even more urgency. "OK, Liv. We can do that." She turned to face Runion and Earl, "Thanks very much, Gentlemen. We really appreciate it."

"No trouble at all, Miss," Runion smiled. Between the two, he had more the mind for carousing. "No trouble at all."

Liverioso moved to Chéri and put his hand on her elbow. "We'll thee you later, Thirs," he said as he waved with his free hand. With that, he pulled Chéri up the stairs.

When they got to the first landing, Chéri pulled her arm out of his. "What are you doing?"

"We've got a free place to stay. If we kill them now, we're going to have to run for it and Semfeld ithn't going to be in any condithion to do that."

Chéri thought for a moment. "We're still going to need clothes." She looked down at herself. "I'm a mess" She looked at him. "You're not much better."

"Well, tonight we can go out and see what we can do about that. But for now, we thoud just take all the hospitality thothe two will give."

"I see Enforcers of the Magician's Guild aren't above taking handouts."

"Former Enforthers. Unemployed Enfothers. I'm not above pretty much anything." He looked down the stairs. "Even stealing some clothes tonight." He shrugged. "Maybe we can help in the kitchen."

"A Grand Master Assassin doing dishes?"

"Well, if you can find a contract in the next day thath's going to earn some therious money and not have uth running out of town with Themfeld in tow, then go do that."

Chéri looked down the stairs. "You're right. I was getting ahead of myself there. We have plenty of time to kill those two on our way out of town." She smiled. "Let's eat and build up our strength on someone else's coins." She put her hand on Liverioso's shoulder. "That's a sound plan."

Effron cleared his throat. "Well..." He said as he eyed Chéri's hand on the man's shoulder. "Starting early, are we?"

Chéri took her hand off Liverioso and balled it into a fist. "What do you want?"

Effron feigned offence. "I was merely coming up to relay a message from the owners." He stared at her.

After several moments of no one speaking, Effron continued. "When I mentioned to Mister Runion that you two had asked for the nearest clothier because you had... lost your luggage to ruffians, he told me to bring this up." He held out a pouch at arm's length. He shook it and it jingled.

Chéri looked at Liverioso. His eyebrows were raised. Chéri took the sack. For the briefest of moments, Effron didn't release it. Chéri snatched it from him. "That was it," he said, "you can go back to ..." His eyebrows raised again - it seemed to be their default position- "Whatever you were doing here on the landing."

"Let's go Liv," Chéri turned and jogged up the stairs.

"Tell Mithter Runion we said thanks very much." Liverioso turned and ran to catch up with his new partner.

When they reached the rooms, Lang was standing there with a key in each hand. "Uhhhh," he said as he held them out.

"Thankth, Lang." Liverioso quickly took a key from the Orc.

The Orc continued to stare straight ahead, even though that was over Liverioso's head, and well over Chéri's.

Liverioso reached for the other key. Lang looked down at them. "Uhhhh!" He said angrily.

Chéri stepped forward. "That one is mind, I think." She reached up and took the key. "Thanks very much."

Lang continued to look down at the pair.

Chéri exhaled. "Lord High Priest," she cursed. She opened the pouch, fished out a copper coin and handed it to Lang. "Thanks, Lang."

"Uhhhh!" Said Lang. As he shuffled off, he tucked the coin in his pocket.

"This town." Chéri put her key in the door and turned it. With a squeak, it opened. She stepped in. "Meet you in a minute. I want to look around first. Old habit."

Liverioso nodded. "OK. I'll unlock the middle door." He unlocked his door and entered the room. It was small but well apportioned with two beds, a small nightstand between them, a small writing desk with a chair, and a two-cushion sofa. A washbasin and a jug sat on a dresser. There seemed to be a closet tucked into a corner. After living in the desert and forest, it looked like the Slice of Nirvanna- the luxurious spa on the Great Salty Sea. He took a running start and jumped for one of the beds, twisting to land on his back as he did so. The soft bed welcomed him. "Ohhh. Nice!" He closed his eyes and was asleep within a minute.

Chapter Forty-Eight
There's Thievery in the Air. And Baths Too

Loud knocking startled Liverioso awake. He sat up, suddenly unaware of his surroundings. He looked around, remembered where he was, and who was probably knocking -angrily- on the door adjoining his room with the one next to it.

He moved to the door and undid the hasp. As he opened the door, Chéri pushed her way in. With a running start, she leapt for the bed. Twisting in the air, she landed on her back. "This is a welcome change, I have to tell you, Liv." She said. "Welcome indeed."

Liverioso smiled. "Yeth, it is." He moved to the other bed and sat on it. "How much did they give us?"

Chéri took the pouch off her belt. "Ten silver, nine copper."

"Wow."

"It won't dress us in style, but we can each get a couple of simple traveling clothes to go with what we have. Once we pay the doctor bill." She tossed the bag to Liverioso and lay back. "Welcome indeed," she said again.

Liverioso lay back as well. "Well we've got nothing elth to do until tomorrow. We might as well turn in."

Chéri sat up, "Oh there's stuff to do. Three real important things."

Liverioso kept looking at the ceiling. "Whath?"

"Well, first we need to go to Secondhand Sorcery here in town and see what's going on there. A lot of our troubles are taken care of if those two have set up shop here."

"I don't see why they would. We should wait for Themfeld to do that. It's only proper."

"Fine. That's first on the list, we'll just skip it until Semfeld is well."

Liverioso didn't answer.

"Then we need to scope out the town, find a place where we can steal some clothes..."

"Theal clothes? I thought we were going to buy thome."

"We will. But not until we know what the doctor is charging us. I could use a change of clothes tonight. And a bath. Oh, and we definitely need to get a line on a third Shambler..."

"A third?"

"If this isn't the right shop, I'm not riding all the way to Aution without my own beast."

Liverioso shrugged. He was still looking at the ceiling. Now his eyes were closed. "Thaths it?"

"No, that's only part of number two. We need to figure out the fastest, most direct way out of town so when we steal that Shambler, we get away instead of ending up being hung."

"Thath's important," agreed Liverioso.

"Right. Real important." She waited to hear from Liverioso. He didn't respond. She continued: "And you're not getting out of telling me about that lost love of yours."

Liverioso snored.

"Hey!" Chéri kicked his leg. "Wake up!"

"Fine, fine. Make thure we're not hung!" He said as he startled awake.

"No, you. I said the last one was that you were going to tell me about that lost love of yours."

Liverioso sat up. "Wath? Who said I'd do that?"

"You did." She hopped off the bed. "Over dinner, if I remember correctly. Now let's go see just how much of this town we can steal without getting caught."

With a sigh, Liverioso stood as well. "All right then." He looked at the bed. "We turn in early, though, right?"

Chéri nodded "That we do. I've got a nice bed waiting for me as well." She moved to the adjoining door. "Lock your door and I'll meet you in the hall." She moved to her room without closing the door.

Liverioso looked longingly at his bed. "Thoon you will be mine." He moved to the door to the room and exited it.

Chéri was waiting for him there. "Lock it up and let's go. We're burning daylight."

The pair went down the three flights of stairs to the lobby. Effron was still sitting at the front desk. He leered at the pair. "Done already?"

Chéri tossed her key at him. Hard. "Hold onto that. That's *my* room key."

Effron didn't manage to catch the key and it hit him in the chest. It clattered onto the front desk.

Liverioso walked over and placed his key beside hers. "Thath one is mine."

"Right, right," said Effron with a wink. "Whatever you say, Sir."

The pair left the hotel, with thievery on their minds.

Soon after leaving, the duo had found where several families- one a Gnomish one- hung their clothes out to dry and that the Livery Yard was actually a Grass Livery with several varieties of Shambler, Horses, and even two Mules to choose from. All with no visible security. "What's with this town?" Chéri had asked when she saw that it was situated conveniently at the edge of town- within seconds of starting a gallop, the soon-to-be-stolen mount would be outside town limits.

Again without a deposit, they left their two Shamblers to graze in the fenced-off area. A copper a day for the pair was what they were planning on cheating the livery owner out of. And an additional Shambler. And a wagon if possible.

By nightfall, Chéri had two extra tunics and a set of leather breaches that were a little large, but still close enough to be worn without drawing attention. Liverioso was also the proud owner of new clothes.[24]

Content with their found-loot, and information, the pair returned to the hotel.

"Evening folks," said a Dwarf at the front desk as he looked up from the parchment he was reading. It was obvious that he was standing on a large box because the desk came up to his waist. "Checking in, or returning?"

"Returning," said Liverioso, relieved the annoying Effron was no longer on duty. "We're in rooms three ten and three eleven," he said, also relieved they weren't in any room with a 'six' or a 'seven' in it.

"Fine, fine." He turned and moved to the rack that held all the hotel's keys. Liverioso, expecting him to step off a box to do it, was surprised he merely walked to the rack. He gave Chéri a glance. She only shrugged in return. The Dwarf turned and put both keys on the counter and slid them towards the Magician. "Ten n' eleven, up on three."

Liverioso nodded. "Thankth."

Chéri looked at Lang. He was standing where he had been earlier in the day. "How're you doing, Lang?"

Lang looked down at Chéri. "Uhhhh." He groaned.

"Same as before, then. Great."

"Don't pester the help, if you please, Miss Gnome," warned the Dwarf.

"Why's that?"

"They're oftentimes temperamental when they haven't been changed for very long."

"I have to ask, why is the doctor so intent on making Zombies?"

The Dwarf shrugged. "They're in vogue. People like seeing them around. Doing things."

"Yours don't seem to do very much of anything."

"Hey, you get what you pay for. You want Zombies? Go to Zombievillage." He looked back down at his parchment.

"Zombievillage?"

"Big abandoned town crawling with Zombies. Over on the way to EternCity."

"We'll skip it, I think."[25]

The Dwarf returned to reading the parchment. He was in the middle of a rousing article about the recent burning of Aution '*cause unknown*' it reported. "Uh huh." he said to the pair without looking up.

"Where's your bathhouse?" Chéri asked.

The Dwarf looked up. He was at the point where the band had started to play and an impromptu dance floor had opened up in front of them. "Down the hall," he pointed. "At the end. To the right." He returned to the parchment.

Chéri nodded at the Dwarf. "Can you have a bath drawn?"

"Uh huh."

"Thanks very much."

The Dwarf kept reading. It was a gripping tale!

"Let's go upstairs so I can drop off some of my new clothes, then I'm taking a bath. You?"

Liverioso desperately wanted to just take a nap but was well aware that he too could use a hearty bath. Especially if he were going to eat dinner with a female. "Thame here."

"Two baths please, Mister Dwarf."

"Uh huh."

Hoping the baths would be ready, and with their clothes tucked under their arms, the two moved up their stairs to their respective room. "Meet you down-thtairs."

Chéri nodded as she ducked into her room. Along with the tunics and breeches, she had managed to steal several pair of underwear. She had quickly

stuffed them down the front of her top when she grabbed them- Grand Master Assassin notwithstanding, a female just didn't go waving her undergarments around a male they weren't intimate with!

Unknown to her, Liverioso had done the very same thing. He rolled a clean pair in the middle of a leather jerkin, loose fitting shirt, and knickers. He wasn't happy with his choice of pants, but as Chéri had told him 'thievery and choosy don't always go together'. She even managed to keep a straight face as he held them up to test their fit.

Liverioso left his room - the hallway was empty so either Chéri was ahead of him, or still in her room. Hoping for the latter, he quickly went downstairs to make sure he was in a tub before she arrived.

When he got there, he was disheartened to see she was already lounging in a steaming bath, head tilted back, eyes closed.

Quickly, he disrobed and jumped into his own tub.

"Ohhh!" Said Liverioso, glad he had chosen to not take a nap. "Nice."

"Uh huh."

Taking the cue, he didn't say another word. Finishing before her, he quickly exited the tub, dressed and moved upstairs. Chéri didn't follow for another hour, twice having more hot water added.

Later over dinner, Liverioso recounted his tale of love found, and love lost.

Chapter Forty-Nine
Love Found - Love Lost

The two sat in the Eating House attached to the R&E or E&R Inn. "Howths an eating house different than a restaurant?" He looked around the establishment. It *looked* like a restaurant.

Chéri thought for a moment, "If I remember correctly, a restaurant can serve alcohol but mainly serves food. An eating house usually doesn't serve alcohol. A tavern serves mainly alcohol but some food."

Liverioso smiled at her.

"I worked as a serving wench in a tavern."

"Really?"

Chéri shrugged, "It was cover for a job I was going to do. It let me get the lay of the town and even chat up the guy a couple of times to get his routine."

Liverioso's smile faded away. "Oh."

She picked up her glass of mead. "A quick little job." She took a drink. "So, while we're waiting on the food. Tell me the tale."

Liverioso exhaled. He had been dreading retelling his painful tale and had hoped it had slipped the Assassin's mind. "All right." He picked up his drink as well to stall for time.

Chéri's raised eyebrows indicated that would only work for a moment.

"We were young. I was about seventeen going on eighteen and she was almost too."

"Young love. Wait, what?"

"She was sixteen going on seventeen."

"Oh good. For a second, I thought she was a Pixie or a Brownie."

"She was a human," Liverioso assured her.

"And her name?" Coaxed Chéri.

"Sage," Liverioso said breathlessly. "Her name was Sage. We were in town at the same time because of a wedding. My family knew the groom, a fellow named Spits Finnish. He was the town butcher. Sage was the bride's sister. She was Majory Belladonna, the town's Mistress of Herbs" He realized what he just said. "Any relation?"

Chéri shook her head, "It's a common family name among Herbologists and Assassins."

He nodded. "So Sage was the bride's sister. That's why she was at the wedding."

Chéri realized that he had stopped lisping as soon as he started his story about the girl. *Maybe the condition is related to this?* She thought. Then her thoughts wandered to her beloved Colossus. Unsure of his fate, she felt in her heart that he was still alive. Their bond, she felt, was stronger than any bond she had ever had with anyone. Even though they had only known each other for a year, they had immediately realized there was a connection between them. Somewhere he was alive- she was sure of it. *Somewhere*. She realized that Liverioso was speaking.

"... and we didn't need to be at the rehearsal so we kind of wandered off together because the adults were all doing things and we were just in the way...."

The waiter brought their food, sliding a plate of steak and vegetables in front of each of them. In the crook of one arm, he held two bowls that were overflowing with a garden salad. "Rolls?" He offered.

"Yes, please," said Liverioso. "That would be great."

Chéri smiled at the Human. Haughtiness aside, he seemed to genuinely be a good person. It was strange to think that the man sitting in front of her who was polite with serving staff was also someone who could blackmail or shakedown a hapless stranger.[26] *Business and personal*, she thought. Again, she realized he was back to telling his tale.

"... and I said we should see if the top of the water tower was open to the sky, or closed off, to be sure."

Chéri mentally kicked herself for missing an important detail. "I've never seen the top of a water tower," she lied, hoping it would get Liverioso to retell the reason why a water tower was now in the story.

"That's what she said!" Liverioso picked up a forkful of vegetables. "So I said we should go up and check to see." He put the vegetables in his mouth and after only half-chewing them, moved them to one side, "But I'd already been up there on a dare so I knew the top was open. I don't know why the Magician's Guild keeps it open, but they do."

"So you were luring that young girl to the top of the Magician's Guild water tower with ulterior motives in the back of your dirty adolescent mind." She cut a piece of steak and skewered it with her fork. She pointed it at him. "You males are all the same." She popped it into her mouth.

Liverioso smiled. "I was just hoping to get a kiss from her. She was so pretty, I didn't think Sage would do even that."

The server unobtrusively slid a plate of steaming wheat rolls onto the table as he walked past.

Liverioso picked up a roll and got a far off look in his eye.

"So we got to the top of the tower and we're standing on this little ledge that's barely wide enough for one of us, and she's holding tight to the metal ring, up against me. We can't see into the cistern because its walls are higher than we are tall. I tell her there's another ladder around the back that leads to the top. Then all of a sudden, she kisses me, and it was like fireballs went off in my belly." He smiled as he thought back to that fateful day. "So then, without saying anything else, Sage scoots around to the back of the water tower and the next thing I hear is a splash. So I get worried and I go back to the ladder and climb up it."

"To save the drowning maiden, of course."

Liverioso nodded. "Sure! So I climb up the ladder and she's in the water. I ask her if she's okay and she says she is, so I'm really relieved. Then a thought come to me!"

"Her clothes are all wet and everyone will know where you had been."

Liverioso, engrossed with his story, didn't even acknowledge Chéri. "I'm worried that her clothes are wet and everyone'll know where we have been. So I tell her. And she says to not worry about it."

"The ever calm female."

"But I'm panicked because we have to go back for the full rehearsal later that day and I know her clothes won't be dry by then, and if she changes, then *everyone will notice*. So I tell her that."

"What did she say?" Chéri stopped eating as well as Liverioso became more and more agitated as he retold his tale.

"She said *her* clothes weren't going to get wet. And neither would *mine*."

"Oh my." Chéri picked up a roll and poked a piece of steak into it.

"And that's when I noticed her dress was laid over the side of the cistern, nice and dry. And she asks me what I was going to do about it."

"And being the sex-addled youngster you were..." Coaxed Chéri with a laugh.

"Well, right, I took my clothes off and jumped right in with her." He feigned offence. "Anything else would have been rude. I mean, what's a guy to do?"

Chéri took a drink of her mead. "What indeed?"

"Well, one thing led to another and the next thing we know." He blushed.

"In the Magician's Guild water tower?"

"No, no. The next... well, yes, *that* was happening, and the next thing we know, there are two really angry Magicians standing at the top of the ladder looking down at us. Really angry Magicians."

"Oh dear." Chéri couldn't help but giggle. "The scandal!"

"Well, they weren't laughing and neither were our parents when we were dragged back to the wedding glen, wet clothes stuck to us because they didn't let us dry off."

Chéri giggled again. "I'm sorry." She took another drink. "So your parents were upset?"

"They forbade us from ever seeing each other again." He raised his hands plaintively. "Even though we lived in separate towns. I have to tell you, that was like throwing alcohol on a flame."

"I never understood why parents did things like that. You'd think they hadn't read any literature at all." Chéri took a bite of the roll. Love story or not, the meal was getting cold.

"So over the course of the next five years..."

Chéri almost choked on her bite of bread and steak. "*Five* years?"

"Well, we were planning on getting married and she was going to move to Hot Rocks."

"Wait, she lived in Cool Springs and you lived in Hot Rocks?"

"I didn't name the towns," Liverioso said defensively. "Blame the Cartographer's Guild.[27]" He too, took a bite of steak. After swallowing, he continued: "So one evening, Sage was watching her sister's kid, who's about five at this point." He thought for a moment. "I can't remember his name because I never went by there."

"Secret encounters."

Liverioso nodded. "Secret encounters. But one evening she was watching their son and then the next morning she was gone. No letter, no note. Nothing." Tears developed in his eyes.

"Did you ask her family?"

"How could I? We weren't supposed to be seeing each other." He picked up his fork and jabbed it into his steak. He roughly cut off a corner and put it in his mouth.

"Maybe she found..." Began Chéri.

Liverioso slammed his fork and knife down on the table harshly. Several nearby patrons looked over. "*THAT* did not happen." He pointed an angry finger at her. "Not Sage. Not to me." The tears overflowed and began to run down his cheeks. "She was my world. I died that day!"

Chéri sat back in her chair. "I'm sorry Liverioso. Really I am." She put down her fork and knife. Patrons were still watching the pair. "I know what it's

like to be caught up in a love affair that is difficult because you can't let either family know it's going on."

"How could you..." Began Liverioso, a little louder, and a little angrier than he should have.

"I'm in love with a Halfling. He's part of the invasion. It's hard to bring a Halfling home to your parents. 'Hey parents, this here is my marauding mate. He's going to burn the town to the ground as part of the invasion, but I love him'. That's not going to go over well at all." She leaned forward and lowered her voice, hoping he would follow suit. "And as a Halfling, he can't very well bring home a Gnomess..."

"But you're an assassin," interrupted Liverioso. Quieter this time.

"A Gnomess first, an assassin second. And overall, *not* a Halfling." She shook her head. "No, I understand how you feel, but," she reached out her hand. "Didn't you even try to find her?"

He picked up his fork and knife and cut a piece of meat. "Where would I even start? She just disappeared. And that was three years ago."

Chéri sighed. "Well, I can put the word out; see if anyone in the Assassin Guild knows something."

"That doesn't sound like news I'd want to hear."

Chéri shook her head, "No, no. We've got assassins all over working all sorts of jobs. Someone in a town might have seen her. Plus, we don't just kill people you know."

"The Assassin's Guild?"

Chéri waved her knife. "Well, mainly we do, sure. But we also do snatch and grabs rescuing people who have been kidnapped, and we help locate people who don't want to be found."

"A full service Guild."

"Well, we do tend to kill kidnappers, and those people we help locate who don't want to be found…"

"You kill them?"

"No. Well, the people looking for them sometimes do, we don't." She smiled. "But sometimes it's parents looking for a wayward child. Those we just snatch and bring back. See? Helpful."

Liverioso put a piece of meat in his mouth and took a bite of bread- he was avoiding any more of the salad.

"You going to eat that?" Chéri pointed at his salad. Hers was gone already.

He shook his head. "Rabbit food. I'd rather just eat the rabbit."

Chéri slid the salad across the table. "I'll take care of it for you. If you want more steak, I'm done with that."

"Well, I'll take care of *that* for you." He said as he took her plate and slid the steak onto the remnants of his. "It's been a long time since I've had a decent meal."

"You know, I hate asking because of how things are going, but have you noticed that you haven't lisped at all since you started talking about Sage?"

Liverioso sighed. "It started once I lotht her." His eyes got large. "Well, damn."

"I shouldn't have mentioned it, sorry."

"Could be worse."

"Really?"

"No." He put the last piece of his steak in his mouth. While he chewed, he turned Chéri's steak on the plate and began to cut it.

The pair ate in silence until their meal was done.

"I thay we turn in for the night."

"I agree. We'll get Semfeld in the morning and maybe while he's resting we can go take a peek at the wand shop in town."

Liverioso raised an eyebrow at her- his mouth was full of steak.

" Just a peek. We won't go inside or anything," she assured him.

Liverioso nodded as he chewed the last of Chéri's steak. "OK." He downed the remainder of his drink. "Ready?"

Chéri did the same and stood. "Oh, I'm really ready for that bed."

Liverioso took a copper coin from the pouch and put it on the table. Even though the meal was free, didn't mean a tip wasn't in order.

After a quick stop at the outdoor facilities, the pair went upstairs to their separate rooms. They were asleep within minutes.

Chapter Fifty
Semfeld's (Uneventful) Road to Recovery and Then a Meal

Liverioso and Chéri picked up Semfeld the next day. They were pleased he was not zombified, even though the doctor pointed out he could still make that happen if they changed their minds.

The pair had decided that once they paid off the doctor, they would split what was left to buy some basic supplies and weapons so they could at least hunt for game as they traveled, since they didn't have enough to properly outfit themselves for the entire journey.

Murray was displeased to say that the bill had already been paid by the R&E or E&R Eating House and Inn. Displeased because he had been paid local rates. Murray was planning on gouging the out of town travelers. 'Diabolical plans to dominate the Lands didn't just fund themselves!' he had lamented- hoping for a tip.

He didn't get one.

Chéri and Liverioso took turns watching over Semfeld as he quickly regained his strength, allowing him Chéri's room for maximum quiet as he slept.

By the morning of the sixth day, he was completely healed. When Liverioso and Chéri woke up in their beds (on Liverioso's side of the double room), Semfeld was sitting on the small couch. "I'm ready." He said flatly.

"Can we be ready after breakfast?"

Semfeld chuckled. "All this lounging make you soft?"

Chéri picked up a pillow and hurled it at him. "Do *not* make me get out of this bed!"

Semfeld threw the pillow back at her. "Lady, that's exactly what I'm doing." He stood up. "Meet you two downstairs." He rubbed his shoulder where the Orc's long knife had stuck through. Even though it was healed, the puckered scar would remain with him for the rest of his life. The long knife – kept as his personal weapon – would last for almost two decades, until he would finally lose it in the lair of a Dragon. As he cut his way out of its belly. Liverioso and Sage had already dispatched the dragon by that point, but in fighting off her brood alongside Drimblerod and Grimbledung, the long knife would clatter down a crevice and be lost to him forever[28].

He went down the stairs stiffly, using the railing for support. Even though he was completely healed of the injury, he needed to work out the kinks of being in bed for five days. When he reached the lobby, Effron smirked at him.

"Look a little stiff there. Stiff from being upstairs, huh? Stiff upstairs, huh?" He waggled his eyebrows.

Semfeld shook his head; he had no idea what the man was talking about. Without a word to the strange man, he looked around the lobby, hoping he wouldn't have to ask directions. There seemed to be a large statue of an Orc by the front desk. He was wearing a red waist-coat and a fez. *That's strange.* To his relief, above a set of double doors, he spied an engraved wood sign. It proclaimed in bold, red letters 'Eating House'. Without a look back, he went in.

"Uhhhh," said a very pale Human in a white coat. "Roooom number?"

"What?"

"Yer roooom nuhhhmb'rrr?"

Semfeld realized he had no idea. He had spent the entire time laid up in bed, with Liverioso and Chéri taking turns bringing him meals, and (thankfully) only Liverioso emptying the bedpan. When he left the room, he didn't look at the door. "I'm sorry. I have no idea what room I'm in."

"Uhhhh.. Neeed to know you stayin' 'ere." The Human furrowed his brown. "Uhhhhh" he added.

"I'm on the third floor."

"That not roooom numb'rrrr." He shuffled his feet as he looked around the establishment. There were tables to clear- numbers eleven, three, and eight to be more specific.

Semfeld frowned. A thought occurred to him. "Wait, I'm staying with another Human and a Gnomess. They've been here almost a week."

The Human snapped his fingers. "Hoooman and Gnome?" He smiled. Or maybe it was a grimace. "They come down toooouuhhh?"

Semfeld nodded. He was still trying to make sense of Chéri being especially friendly in the room. Of course, it didn't seem like anything at the time - normal in fact- but she did seem on the verge of playful when she tossed the pillow and didn't complain when he threw it back at her. *Strange.* "Yes, they'll be down shortly."

"Uhhhh." He gestured to a table with four chairs. "Coffffffeeeee?"

"Sure?" Semfeld was unsure why the server was acting like he did. It was friendly in a manner of speaking. But also disturbing. He moved to the table and sat down. He looked around the room. Several other patrons were seated around the establishment. *He can't be too off, otherwise there'd be other complaints.* He drummed his fingers as he waited.

Within moments, the server shuffled back to the table. "Brought carafeuuhhhh" He set the container on the table as well as three cups from his tray. "The yooosual?"

"Usual?"

The server shrugged. "What they eat." He pointed at the ceiling, toward the third floor. "But for threeuuuhhh."

Semfeld nodded. He felt confident that they had not ordered anything outlandish. "That sounds fine." He took the carafe and poured himself a cup of coffee as the server moved off. "This is the strangest town on the map"[29], he said to no one in particular. Carefully he slurped the hot coffee.

Before he had finished half of it, Liverioso and Chéri entered the eatery. The server gave them a wave as they came in. "Morning Imran," said Liverioso.

"Morrnuuuhhh," the server called back as he cleared a table.

"This is the strangest town on the map," Semfeld said to the pair as they sat down. "Starting with that server." He pointed even though the server was the only staff in the room.

"Imran's a Zombie," explained Chéri.

"What?" Semfeld looked at the man. He had cleared two of the tables and was now shuffling toward the kitchen with the dishes. "Him? Why?"

"The doctor likes to make them. Seems they're en vogue."

"You mean like hats with feathers or women with nine fingers?"

"Nine fingers?" Chéri blanched.

"Only more so, it seems." Offered Liverioso.

"That's really strange."

"You get used to them." Chéri watched Imran approach. "Mostly."

Imran shuffled to the table. He was holding a large tray on his shoulder. As he bent down to slide it onto the table, his knees creaked and popped. "Yoooosualuuuuhhhh. But for threeeuhhh." He stood and began to transfer food to the table: several boiled eggs, a half dozen slices of bread, a jar of preserves, and a stack of pancakes. Lastly, he put a jar of syrup on the table. "That allllluhhhh?"

"Yes, thanks Imran."

Imran shuffled away, confident he had earned a copper coin as a tip. If the tipping continued, soon he would have enough money to have a good and proper tongue put in his head and he would stop adding 'uuhhhh' to most of his words. Then the big coins would start rolling in!

Semfeld cracked an egg and began to peel it. "So what have I missed in these five days?"

Chéri took two pancakes and put them on her plate. Liverioso passed her the syrup as he moved two to his own plate. "Well," began Chéri. "We have the town scoped out pretty good and we know we can get another Shambler so we have one each."

"And maybe a wagon if it's out."

Chéri nodded as she cut her pancakes. "True. And as we ride out of town, we'll grab some extra clothes." She skewered some pancakes and put them in her mouth. She nodded at Liverioso.

Liverioso's eyes got large.

"What?" Semfeld took a bite of his egg. "What else?"

"SecondhandSorcerymighthavemovedherewhilewe'vebeenaway."

Semfeld sputtered egg onto the table. "What?!"

"Well, it seems there was a fire in Aution and it's gone now."

"The *entire* town?"

"Yes. There was some sort of jamboree and a fire broke out and spread in the center of town and then out in all directions." Chéri picked up another forkful of pancakes. "Want to tell him about the Halflings?"

"What about the Halflings?"

"I'll tell him," said Liverioso. Chéri obliged by eating the pancakes. She was looking down at her plate. "Well, the Great Army of the Halfling Empire was invading the lands."

"That's been the rumor for months."

"Well they finally went and did it. Or tried to anyway."

Chéri ate another piece of pancake. After hearing the news from Effron he came close to killing him there and then. Comp'ed rooms or not. Only the thought of being stuck in town for a trial kept her from doing it. That, and the now-overwhelming urge to kill two certain Gnomes that she was sure had a hand in the demise of her dear Colossus.

"They lost? The entire Empire?"

"Well, it seems that some Gargoyles and Golems got involved and that it turned the tide. The parchments all say that it was a massacre and that there were no survivors." He hazarded a glance at Chéri. She was still looking at her plate.

"Oh no."

"The last she heard from the Assassin Network was that a small group of Halflings that survived made their way to Julesville. They were led by Colossus."

Semfeld perked up. "Oh, so that's a good thing, right?"

"They were also... unsuccessful." Liverioso put his hand on Chéri's shoulder. "And Halflings fight to the death, so the odds of Colossus coming out of this are pretty low."

Semfeld sat back. "Oh, Chéri, I'm sorry to hear that."

Chéri put down her fork. "That is in the past." She picked up an egg and began to roughly shell it. "Right now I'm concerned about dealing with a certain pair of Gnomes that I'm sure had a hand in..." She looked down, all that was left of her egg was the yolk. She popped it into her mouth.

"We'll find them, Chéri." Liverioso nodded at Semfeld.

"Yes. That we will." Semfeld began peeling an egg as well.

Chéri nodded in return.

Liverioso and Chéri ate in silence as Semfeld peeled his egg, considering all he had been told.

"There's something else. But promise you'll try to stay calm," said Liverioso.

Semfeld put down his egg. "What?"

"There's a Second-Hand Sorcery here in town," said Chéri.

Semfeld finished peeling his egg. "So, a or our Second- Hand Sorcery might be here in town?" He salted his egg. "We need to check that out and save us a bunch of traveling." He took a bite of his egg.

"Well, once we heard about a Secondhand Sorcery here in town, and it was run by a couple of Gnomes, we snuck over and took a look."

"Did you go in?" Semfeld put down the last bit of his egg.

"No, no. We were waiting for you to go over. We were just trying to see if it's Grimbledung and Drimblerod."

"It's called Second-Hand Sorcery and there are Gnomes running it. Who else could it be?" Semfeld said a little louder than he wanted to. Several patrons turned to look. Even Imran looked over.

"That's why we were waiting for you," said Chéri. "We just went to see where it was." She shrugged as she picked up her coffee cup. "It's in a really good location."

"I could care less if they found themselves a good location for their shop!"

Chéri leaned forward. "Keep your voice down, Semfeld." She shook her head. "Don't forget who you're talking to. It's in a good location to commit a double assassination. It's far away from nearby businesses. It's in its own building..."

Semfeld nodded. "I'm sorry. You're right." He smiled. "I did forget who I was talking to. The last time we talked, you were a little more..." He hesitated, not wanting a return to the old Chéri.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What?"

"Well, more rough and tumble, I think I'll say."

"Well, I can be *rough and tumble* if I need to. But right now, we're in town trying to blend in with the locals." She picked up her knife menacingly, then stuck out her pinky. "Like this. When we get out there to the shop, the old Chéri will be alive and kicking, don't you worry."

Overcome by curiosity, Imran shuffled over. "Yooo Ohhh Kayuuhh?"

"Yes, Imran. Everything is fine," Chéri assured him. "Could we get a little more coffee?"

"Uhhhhh." Imran picked up the carafe and sloshed it around. There was still a little coffee left in it. He did a pass of the table, topping off everyone's cup then shuffled off with the now-empty carafe. *Maybe even two copperuuuhhh.* He frowned.

"Tho let's have a good breakfast because ith's our last" Liverioso put the last piece of pancake on his plate in his mouth. "You gonna eat those?" He pointed at the remaining two with his fork.

"Not me."

"I'll have one, I think," said Semfeld as he moved it to his plate.

"Oh!" Liverioso glanced at the double glass doors and sat up straight. "I almost forgot the most important thing!"

Runion and Earl entered the Eating House. They felt it was important to make their rounds at breakfast and dinner so that the patrons knew that management was keeping an eye on things. "Morning all," said Runion.

"Good to see you," added Earl.

"They're friends of..." hissed Chéri

She cut herself off as Runion and Earl shuffled to the table. Just as Imran returned with a full carafe. "Coffeeeuuuh, Sirs?" He asked the managers.

"Sure. At the front desk once you're done with the customers."

Earl nodded in agreement.

"Uhhhhh." Imran put the carafe down and shuffled towards a table where a (nervous) patron had waved to him. Having just arrived, the 'en vogue-ness' of having a Zombie server hadn't sunk in just yet.

"So. It's good to see you up and about, Semfeld," said Runion.

"Your partners have been telling me they've been waiting for you to be up and around before going over to surprise the Gnomes," said Earl.

"You got that right," Semfeld said. "We've got a surprise in store for them." He picked up his fork.

Chéri opened her mouth, then thinking better of it, closed it. She went back to sipping her coffee and hoping for the best.

"Well, I'm sure that will go over really well. After the events in Aution, I'm sure they'll be really shocked to see you three come through their door."

Semfeld smiled. "Shocked" He stabbed a piece of pancake. "To death."

"Well, won't that be a treat?" Earl agreed.

Semfeld nodded as he put the pancake in his mouth.

"Well, I have to tell you, we really appreciate your hospitality," said Chéri, desperately wanting to change the subject since it seemed like Semfeld was going to mention wanting to kill the Gnomes and ruin everything. "And we're going to pay you back..."

Runion waved a hand dismissively.

"That's not necessary," offered Earl.

"...by letting people know that if they're coming to Cool Springs, then the R&E or E&R Eating House and Inn is the place to go," she finished. She was well aware that the pair would never accept any money, but the offer to direct business to them would be appreciated.

"Well, we appreciate it." Said Earl.[30]

"And if you're ever traveling back through Cool Springs, you'll have to let me know how things went with the Gnomes," added Runion.

"Send them our regards," suggested Earl.

"What?" Semfeld asked.

"You'll have to tell us how thing went." Said Runion again. "And tell them we said hello."

"Sure thing, Runion," said Chéri. "Count on it." She gave Semfeld a glance and he went back to finishing his pancakes.

"Well, we've got to hobnob with more customers. You can check out any time you want." Said Runion.

"But you can never leave." Finished Earl.

"What?"

The pair looked at Semfeld. "It's a business slogan we're trying out. We might put it under the sign out front." They both gave a shrug (one shoulder each). "A patron of ours is a patron for life. We're testing it out."

"Well, it's catchy, I suppose," offered Semfeld.

With a wave, Runion and Earl moved off.

Chéri sat back. "You almost blew that, Semfeld."

"How am I supposed to know..."

"You never mention any sort of killing to anyone in public. That's how you end up in jail."

Semfeld sat back as well. "Sorry about that. I guess I'm still out of sorts."

Liverioso nodded at them. "Well, finish eating then we'll get our stuff and go over to thith Thecond Hand Sorthery and see what is going on."

Semfeld nodded. "That sounds like a good idea." He looked at Chéri. "Is it?"

Chéri shrugged. "It's as good as any. It gives us a full day to ride away from here so we'll have a bit of distance between us by nightfall." She thought for a moment. "Those two families might not have their clothes out so we might not get another change of clothes."

"Is that it?"

"Well, the Shamblers might not be out in the field. If they're not there, we'll need to wait."

"We've done well enough with only two Shamblers," offered Semfeld.

"We'll need to wait."

Semfeld nodded. "Fine. So we can go take care of those Gnomes first."

Chéri shook her head. "No. We need the Shamblers to be out on the field when we're making our run for it, not sitting in a stall that we can't get at without causing a ruckus that ends up forming into a posse that turns into a mob that turns into a lynching."

Semfeld frowned.

"Either way we're leaving town; if that's the new Second-Hand Sorcery, then we kill them, steal the extra Shambler, and make a run for it. If it's not then, then we steal the extra Shambler and *then* make a run for it."

"Fine." Semfeld stood. "I'm going to get ready to go." He teetered as he stood, having to put his hand on the table to steady himself. "Maybe I'll just lie down till we're heading out. I'm still a little shaky."

"The fresh air will do you good," said Liverioso as he wiped up the last of the syrup from his plate with a piece of pancake. "You'll see."

Chéri stood as well. "I'm going to get packed and ready to go as well." She looked at Liverioso, "See you upstairs. Let's go Sem."

The two went upstairs as Liverioso finished off the last of his coffee.

Imran shuffled over. “Duuuuunnnne?”

“Yes, Imran. Thath’s it for uth. We’re checking out.” As Liverioso stood he reached into his belt pouch and pulled out two copper coins. “Thankths,” he said simply.

The new tongue! The new tongue! “Wann a takeout bag for the rouuuhhhhd?”

“That’d be great. Thankths.”

Imran nodded as he deftly picked up the two copper -lest one of the busboys nabbed them instead. Mary, the head busser, was in the market for some new legs. This time of the same length! “Commin uhhhhhp.” He pointed to the front desk. “There.”

Liverioso nodded. “Great.” He walked towards the stairs. Effron had his back to him, sorting keys. Liverioso quickened his pace and was halfway up the first set of stairs before Effron turned around. Relieved, Liverioso slowed his pace. *Now to get rid of those stupid Gnomes, then we can get on with our lives.* He moved up the rest of the stairs to the room. Semfeld was lying face-down on his bed.

Chapter Fifty-One
You Can Check Out, But You Can Never Leave

"You awake?"

Semfeld grunted.

"Well, we should get going. We're loothing daylight."

Semfeld rolled over. "It just doesn't make sense."

"Well, that's just what the sun does."

"Not *that*. I mean why those two Gnomes would be set up here. Who said they were set up here?"

"The Guardian at the Magician's Guild."

"Was that before or after he knew we were cast out?"

"Before, I think." He thought back. Now he wasn't sure. "But I can't imagine he'd lie about something like that. He'd give general directions to juth about anyone."

Semfeld moved to a sitting position. "I suppose so. We will definitely check it out." He stopped and appraised Liverioso for a moment.

"Whath?"

"Thanks for what you did for me."

"Whath are friends for?" He smiled. "And I think it helped Chéri out to actually care about someone for a change."

"Did you and her?" He pointed at the door.

Liverioso shook his head furiously. "No, no! We juth took care of you, thaths all."

"Did you tell her?"

Now Liverioso was silent. Finally he spoke. "Yeth. Over dinner that firsth night." He smiled. "She said she could asthk around, see if any assassins knew where she was."

"That was really nice of her."

"What was really nice of me?" Chéri poked her head through the doorway. "Don't go telling people I'm nice. I have a reputation to uphold, you know."

Semfeld laughed. "No one will hear it from me." He narrowed his eyes. "No matter how nice you are to us."

"You want to see how *nice* I can be?" She cracked her knuckled. "Let's go see who exactly is running Second Hand Sorcery in this town. I'll show you *nice*."

"Well, we don't'h have a lot to pack, so I think we should head out."

Semfeld stood. "Let's go then."

The trio moved out into the hallway. Lang was standing there. "Th' bags." He said. He held out his massive hands. It seems more an order than a request.

"We don't have any bags." Semfeld held up his bedroll. "Just a couple of bedrolls. Three small ones, really."

"Hand'em ov'r." He reached for them clumsily. Semfeld stepped back, and then thinking better of it, offered the bedroll to the ZombieOrc. "Rest o'em too." He growled.

Liverioso and Chéri followed Semfeld's example and handed theirs over.

"These Zombies. They're all fishing for tips." Semfeld shook his head. "What is that doctor up to?"

Chéri appraised the Orc as it turned and shuffled off, clutching the bedrolls to his chest. "I'd give him a copper, nonetheless. Hate to get that brute upset."

The trio followed the beast as he trudged down the stairs slowly. Finally, after what was twice as long as normal, they all reached the front desk.

Effron appraised them all. "What a motley looking crew you are." He waggled his eyebrows at Chéri. "Motley."

Chéri looked up at Lang. "Punch him in the face and I'll give you two copper." She said quickly.

Effron's eyes got large.

Lang dropped the three bedrolls, and with speed belying not only his size, but all his other previous movements, the ZombieOrc lunged forward. Putting one hand on the counter for balance, he executed a quick jab at Effron's nose. Even with no windup, the blow knocked the human back against the wall of keys behind him. He slid to the ground, nose gushing blood.

"Pay the Orc," said Chéri to Liverioso.

Liverioso reached into his pouch and pulled out two copper. They were now down to a three silver coins. "We're down to three silver."

Lang, in a motion used by bellhops everywhere, held out his hand while not making eye contact.

Liverioso put the two copper in the massive hand. "Thankths Lang. I think."

"Oh, no. Thanks are in order. That was two well-spent copper," Chéri assured him. "Let's go." She tossed her key over the counter where it bounced off the unconscious Effron's head. Semfeld just laid his on the counter.

Liverioso took the three sacks of food that were sitting on the counter. "I kinda like these Zombies. Pretty reliable, I think."

"Come back ag'in." Lang waved at the trio as he moved to his spot by the side of the counter. As soon as he got there, he stared straight ahead; standing in the exact position he was in when they first saw him.

Semfeld, Liverioso, and Chéri left the R&E or E&R Inn and Eating House and moved to the street. "What an experience that was." Semfeld looked over his shoulder. "I hope we're never back in that strange place."

Liverioso nodded. "Me too."

As Runion and Earl had said 'they could check out but would never (really) leave - Both were unaware that in their old age, they would become long-term residents of the establishment.[31]

"So where is this place?"

Chéri pointed down the street, away from the Magician's Guild. "It's that way at the edge of town. We'll past the Grass Livery on our way there. I hope

that Shambler's out eating. If all goes well, we can kill them, grab the Shambler, hook around the Livery, and be on the Forest Road before anyone even knows what happened."

Liverioso nodded. "We should check to see if more clothes are out drying."

With that, the trio made their way down the street towards what they were hoping was *their* Second Hand Sorcery. As they passed the Livery, they saw that there were several Shamblers, Horses, and even two Donkeys in the field-besides their two. There was also a Shambler hitched to a wagon. A stable boy was unloading bags of feed.

"Looks like we've got about half an hour before he's done." Chéri pointed ahead. "Let's get this over with quick-like. A wagon would be a nice addition."

Ahead and to the left of the Livery stood a lone building. Above the door was a hand painted sign. It read Second Hand Sorcery.

"Thath's it, then."

"Well, the first rule of assassin work is to not rush into things. Let's just watch and see what's going on before we barge in there."

"Thath's the first rule?"

"There's lots of first rules."

Semfeld pointed. "Look! There he is!" Sure enough, a squatty Gnome was ambling toward the wand shop. As he walked by a couple of passers-by, he gave one of them a shove. "That crazy Gnome."

The Gnome turned to look around the street before entering the shop. He *looked* like Grimbledung. "He looks like Grimbledung," offered Liverioso. "Acts like him too."

"I don't recall him having a beard."

Liverioso looked at Chéri. "Maybe he grew it after leaving Aution?"

"Maybe." She narrowed her eyes.

The Gnome opened the door to the shop and disappeared inside.

"Well, there's nothing else we can do from here."

"Right, Gents. Let's go." Chéri started across the street.

"Wait! Don'th we need a plan or something?"

"You can over plan these things."

"Thath a rule too?"

"Yep."

They stopped at the door. It didn't open for them. "Well, at least they don't have as many Mechanimated items," offered Semfeld. He reached down and worked the latch on the door. He pushed it open. "Assassins first." He gave a little bow.

Chapter Fifty-Two
Second Hand Sorcery - yrecroS dnaH dnoceS

"My pleasure." Chéri marched into the shop. There was no one at the counter. "Why am I not surprised?"

As Semfeld closed the door behind him, Chéri looked around. "Lot smaller than the other place."

"Well, they probably lotht a lot in the fire."

A Gnome came through the curtain behind the counter. He was carrying a large box that blocked his view. "Be with you in a moment. Peruse the merchandise while you wait."

Liverioso and Semfeld exchanged glances. Chéri put her hand on her dagger.

The Gnome hobbled to the counter and placed the box on it. He stepped to the side. "Welcome to Second Hand Sorcery," he said.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the proprietor, of course. Me and my partner, to be exact."

"You run this store?"

"We prefer shop." The Gnome spread his arms out wide, "Here at Second Hand Sorcery."

"But..." Began Liverioso.

Another Gnome burst in from the backroom. This one looked familiar.

"Hey! What you doin' with that box? Can I have that box?"

"We have customers..." Began the first Gnome.

"Ohh! Lemmie deal with them." The second Gnome turned to look at the trio. If he recognized them, he didn't let on.

They felt they recognized him. “Grimbledung?” Asked Semfeld.

“Yeah?” Said Grimbledung. “Whad’ya want?”

Liverioso drew Garibaldis’ wand. “You thinking Gnome!”

Chéri kept her hand on her dagger. “Wait a second.”

“What?” Asked Grimbledung. “You going to buy something, or what?”

“Something’s not right.”

“What, Chéri?”

“If that’s Grimbledung, why doesn’t he recognize you? Or me? Or any of Us?”

Liverioso looked between Grimbledung and Chéri.

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. “Gaaaa!” He shouted. “Buy somethin’!”

The other Gnome stepped next to him. “Relax, Grim. Let them look around first.”

“Who are you?” Asked Chéri again.

“I’m the pro...”

“What’s your name?” Chéri drew her dagger.

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. “Peruse the merchandise! We endeavor to serve!”



"I'm Grimbledung. Who are you?"

"Where's Grimbledung?"

"That's me." The Gnome pointed at himself.

"No you're not."

"Yes I…"

"Your name," Chéri interrupted, drawing her dagger at the other Gnome. "Your name, now."

"Seiko."

"Where's Grimbledung?"

"Who cares?" Said Seiko.

"But what is..." Chéri couldn't bring herself to call the Gnome 'Grimbledung'. "That Gnome doing here with you? In this shop?"

Grimbledung stopped hopping back and forth. "Can I have that box?"

"Thaths *not* how Grimbledung acted."

"Sure it is," assured Seiko. "He was a complete nut."

"Ah ha!" Said Semfeld. "You just referred to Grimbledung as someone else. So *that*," he pointed at the Gnome, "isn't him."

Seiko opened his mouth to speak.

"I'm Grimbledung! GRIMBLEDUNG!" Grimbledung began to hop back and forth again.

"What's the matter with you?" Chéri asked. She put her dagger back in its sheath.

"He's Pixie Crazy, of course."

"You mean there's two Pixie Crazy Gnomes? What are the odds of that?"

Seiko narrowed his eyes. "Are you in the market for a wand?"

"No," the trio said in unison.

Seiko sighed. "Well then, I guess I'll tell you. After trying to muscle in on Drimblerod and Grimbledung's business and not being able to, Webber and I..."

"Is that Webber?"

Seiko shook his head at Chéri. "No, Webber was my other partner. He got blasted by Grimbledung while we were running a land scam in Julesville. I've never seen him since."

"Wait, Webber? Webber's a Gnome?" Semfeld and Liverioso exchanged looks.

"Yeah. He's a Gnome. Do you know him?"

"Nope," said Semfeld.

"Not a clue," added Liverioso. Though he stuck his tongue out afterwards.

"Julesville?" Chéri asked.

Grimbledung looked from person to person as they spoke. He hopped occasionally, but mainly listened.

"It's where they resettled when Aution burned to the ground. I hear it's up the road towards Prost Garrison. Or something like that." He shrugged. "In any case..."

"Can I have the box?"

"No." Seiko continued: "When I lost my partner, I thought 'what makes Second Hand Sorcery so successful?' so I could do the same thing someplace else."

"And you thought..." Liverioso pointed at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung pointed back.

"Well, sure. It had to be the novelty of an unstable partner that got people to come in the shop."

Semfeld shook his head. "It was the customer service and good reputation that brought people in." *What am I saying?* "And the selection of wands too." *Whose side are we on?*

"And Grimbledung wasn't like this Gnome here," added Chéri. "He was a little unstable, sure, but on the whole, he was good natured and actually trying to help folks out. Things just didn't turn out like he expected, a lot of times."

"Right." Agreed Semfeld. "Why are we defending those two?"

"No, he was an unstable womanizer. They both were."

"Unstable?"

"Womanizers."

A bedraggled Dwarfling came through the curtain. He was carrying a small box.

"That my box?"

"Yes, Mister Grimbledung. Sorry I'm late with it."

"You're late with my box!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Your agony-izer, Kyle."

"But the glue wasn't holding so I had to wait..."

"Your agony-izer!"

Kyle removed a thick wood stick from his belt and handed it to Grimbledung.

Grimbledung bonked the youth on the head with it. "Carelessness with glue will *not* be tolerated!" He handed the youth back the stick and yanked the box from his hands.

"Grimbledung wasn't like that." Chéri pointed at the Gnome.

"Sure he was."

A thought came to Chéri, "And they weren't womanizers. Even when he was under the influence of a pretty powerful enchantment, Drimblerod was still a proper gentleman and..." She caught herself before continuing. *Who am I defending here?* "Just what did you do to him?" Chéri leaned in to look at Grimbledung. He leaned in as well, then tried to bite her nose. She moved back quickly. "He's not right."

"Well, I needed to make him Pixie Crazy, so I blasted a Pixie into his head. Show them the scar, Grimbledung."

Grimbledung turned his head to the side. Above his temple was a puckered scar.

"You've got to be kidding!"

Seiko shrugged at Semfeld. "Well, I was trying to do what they did. Seems to work for them."

"Those two, say what you want about them," said Chéri, "looked out for each other, and would never *never* do something like that to the other."

"You're sick." Liverioso summed it up. "Leth's go." He turned towards the door.

Chéri drew her dagger again. "That's a good idea."

"Knife! Gnome with a knife!" Screeched Grimbledung as he ran to the back of the counter and ducked down. "Kniiiife!"

"Good grief. Grimbledung would never act like that." Chéri pointed her dagger at Seiko. "Give me everything in your coin drawer." She gestured towards the counter. "And make it snappy or I'll have this sticking out of your left eye before you know it." She aimed the dagger at his head.

Seiko blanched. "You can't rob *me*!"

Liverioso drew Garibaldis' wand. Without even tilting his hands, or making an announcement, he leveled it at Seiko.

Sapiens to Plantae
Brassica Rapa!

He intoned.

Seiko turned into a large turnip.

"Ya!" Grimbledung ducked down behind the counter. "Turnip invasion!"

"Nice, Liv," said Chéri as she leaned over the counter, pulled out the drawer. There were three silver and four copper pieces in it. "Well this business plan wasn't working out for him anyway." She gathered the coins then dropped back onto the other side of the counter. "Let's go. Flip the sign, Sem."

Semfeld stepped to the window and flipped the sign to 'closed'.

Liverioso opened the door and held it for his two partners. As he was closing it, he heard the imposter Grimbledung say 'Oh! A yummy turnip!'

The trio left the shop and jogged toward the Livery. As they neared it, they saw that the Shambler was still hooked up to the wagon, and several bags of grain were still on it. The stable boy was not in sight. "Crud. Thath took less time than we thought."

"And the Lord High Priest smiles down on us. You two get the other Shamblers. Give me a moment to get the saddles on the wagon and then I'll meet you out front."

Semfeld and Liverioso ducked under the fence railing and made their way to their respective Shamblers. Even though they were much more comfortable to

ride with saddles and tack, Shamblers were routinely ridden bareback and controlled by tugging on the tufts of hair on their neck.

The pair waited by their mounts anxiously. They watched as Chéri shuffled out hefting a saddle in front of her. Once it was on the wagon, she disappeared back into the stable. After only a moment, she emerged with the other one. "Nice, Chéri," remarked Semfeld.

As the two mounted their Shamblers, Chéri ran back into the stable. "Oh no; don't get greedy! Let's gets up there Liverioso." He kicked the sides of his Shambler and moved toward the wagon. Liverioso dropped in behind him.

As they neared, Chéri came back out. She was dragging a tarp and some rope. She tossed it onto the wagon. As she clambered onto the front of the wagon, Semfeld and Liverioso came beside her. "You're getting greedy. What if the stable boy comes back?"

"He won't."

"You didn't!"

Chéri shook her head. "He's busy grabbing jugs for some spoiled farm girl that could just as easily grab them herself. 'Farm boy give me that jug. As you wish. Farm boy hand me that tray. As you wish.' Disgraceful. I bonked them both on the head. Maybe it'll knock some sense into them."

"Leth's go then!" Liverioso leaned forward and grabbed the tufts of hair on the neck of his Shambler.

Chéri took the reins in her hands. "Nice and calm like, or we'll draw attention to ourselves. But don't dawdle." She snapped the reins and the Shambler began to walk towards the open gate.

"No dawdling but don't draw attention to ourselves? How do we do that?" Liverioso asked as he coaxed his Shambler toward Semfeld's.

"I don't know. Ride casual," suggested Semfeld as he kicked the sides of his Shambler. "We're falling behind."

The trio made their way around the Grass Livery, taking a short detour to look for any wayward clothes left to dry. Semfeld and Liverioso were rewarded with three shirts and two more pair of knickers between them. Chéri ended up with -begrudgingly- two young girl's sundresses.

Keeping to a faster than normal, but not *too* fast pace, they made it out of town without anyone's attention.

Finally outside of town, the trio rode hard for an hour, then Chéri brought the wagon to a stop. While she acted as look-out, Semfeld and Liverioso dismounted their Shamblers and rearranged the wagon. After half an hour, they had a second Shambler harnessed to the wagon with the third tied to the back to follow along. The four bags of feed as well as bedrolls were stacked and covered with the tarp and secured with the rope in case of inclement weather. They were also arranged into a fairly comfortable bench.

Liverioso took to lounging on the impromptu bench right away with Semfeld moving up beside Chéri.

"So..." said Liverioso. He put his hands behind his head and looked up at the sky through tree branches. "On our way."

"You know, that was really strange what Seiko did. I can't imagine how he got such a warped opinion of those two Gnomes."

"Yeth. Even after our one visit, I knew thath they weren't malicious. Grimbledung was annoying thure, but not much else. I think in a pinch, with time to explain, he'd have been on our side."

Both Magician's considered the thought.

So did Chéri.

All three felt their resolve waiver.

"Well, none of that matters now. We're back on track with gear, food, clothing, and a little coins," said Chéri. "And there's only one more thing to do."

"Kill the real Grimbledung," said Liverioso, not completely convinced anymore.

"And the real Drimblerod," added Semfeld, also not completely convinced.

"Right," said Chéri. She was still convinced- they had helped kill her one true love. If for that fact only, they were going to pay. Someone was going to pay for dear Colossus' death. And pay dearly. She snapped the reins at the Shamblers pulling the wagon. They picked up a quick walk. Northward.

The trio began their journey by heading north to Aution; they were well aware of its condition but because of the faulty directions, would ride right past Julesville knowing that was where the Gnomes were. That missing bit of information would cost them exactly two additional days on top of the four months it would already take them to make the journey.

Because of this, they would arrive the day after Grimbledung transformed into a WereGnome in the Mora Tau Bar and BAR. This was another bit of information they were unaware of.

We now return you to your main plot.

It has been on hold so you haven't missed anything.

Chapter Fifty-Three
Battle's End, Unlikely Captive

Nulu looked around the battlefield. From what she could tell, several townsfolk were injured and two seemed to be dead. *Hopefully not permanently*. Thanks to the Orcs and Gnolls, and without being too modest, herself, the inexperienced Humans were spared from the main force of the attack.

The young Warrior threw up again.

"You need to stop doing that," said Drimblerod. "It's really gross."

"Sorry." The Human leaned on his sword as he took deep breaths.

Akita loped over to Nulu and Drimblerod. "I've interestin' news."

"What? Not good or bad?"

"Well, it don't fall into either category, Drim."

"Is it about Grimbledung?"

Akita turned to Nulu. "We got three prisoners."

Nulu planted her Please Stick in the ground. "That *is* interesting news." She looked around the battlefield. "Doesn't happen that often."

"Really? I'd think with how often they get into battles..."

Nulu looked down at Drimblerod. "Halflings fight to the death and would rather kill themselves..." A commotion made her look up. As she tracked her eyes left, she saw a Halfling fall on his sword. "Uh oh! Come on Akita." Leaving her weapon, she sprinted to the two remaining Halflings. One had a dagger he was using to keep several Humans at bay.

"Stand back!" Said the armed Halfling as Nulu approached. "And your dog too!"

"Lemmie just kill them, save everyone the trouble," offered Akita.

Nulu shook her head. "Let's talk this through, uhm..."

The two Halflings glowered at her.

"Oh come on, if you're going to kill yourselves you might as well tell us your names. There's no sense in being impersonal about it. We may even include them in the songs about how bravely the marauding Halflings fought."

They both considered that for a moment.

"I'm Mastadonius," said the Halfling with the sword.

The other Halfling continued to glower at her. "I'm not telling you nothing, Troll."

"Trolless, if you please... uhm..."

The Halfling put his hands on his hips. "Corporal Colossus of the Clan of the Black Hand of the Great Halfling Empire."

"Well it's nice to meet you two," said Nulu. She furiously tried to keep their attention as Bonk and Klank now moved behind them. "Do you think we can talk this through?"

"No. You've gotten all the information you're going to get from us," said Mastadonius. "I demand to be released."

"And I demand a hot bath and a cool drink. and a tall, handsome Troll to serve it."

The Halfling raised an eyebrow at Nulu.

"That means neither of us are going to get what we want today."

Klank and Bonk leapt at the two Halflings. As they did, Nulu reflexively glanced up at them. Corporal Colossus started to turn toward the threat. Mastadonius, seeing his fellow Halfling move, brought his dagger up.

Klank slammed into Colossus' side, knocking the two of them to the ground.

Bonk's leap took him to Mastadonius' shoulder, as he fell forward, his arms dropped and the point of his dagger aimed back at himself. When the pair crashed to the ground, Mastadonius' dagger stuck completely through him and

into Bonk's shoulder. With a yelp, Bonk lifted himself off the blade and rolled to the side.

"Hah! So much for your plan on taking us alive," said Colossus from under Klank.

Klank looked down on the Halfling pinned to the ground under him. "Well, you're half right, Corporal. You're not getting' off so easy." He looked at his brother. "You okay , Bonk?"

Bonk was holding a paw to his bleeding shoulder. "It's worse than you think."

Klank's ears perked up. "What?"

"I'm never gonna live this down, am I?"

Klank laughed. "No brother; that you are not."

"Don't tell Mom," he begged.

"Nice work Klank," said Nulu. "Bonk, if you can get to town on your own, we and handle this here."

With a nod, Bonk began walking towards town. He was not looking forward to the teasing his brothers would give him that night. And the earful he would get from his mother when she found out- and she always found out that he had managed to get stabbed by accident. Yet again.

"Klank, can you handle the Corporal?" Akita asked.

Colossus struggled uselessly under the Gnoll .

"Yeah, I gots 'im."

"Great," said Akita. "Nulu, we're gonna take our newest resident to town and put him in the jail. Can you organize a party to get the dead and wounded back?"

Nulu nodded. "Drim and I can handle that. Right Drim?"

"Sure. Then when we get back, you can tell me all about how my partner is doing."

"Right." Akita nodded. "Let's go Klank."

Drimblerod watched the two move off. "I'm telling you, there's something wrong with Grimbledung."

"We'll get it figured out later. Now let's get our wounded and worse to the doc."

"What about all these dead Halflings?"

"I'll organize a mandatory burial party made up from all the able bodied folks of fighting age who didn't show up today."

Drimblerod nodded. "Sounds reasonable." He looked around at all the dead Halflings. "I'm thinking of pulling the armor and weapons off them. Lots of coinage just laying out there." He looked at Zoddious, who had walked over. "Unless you want to do that."

"Do what?"

"Search the dead. Take their armor and weapons before they get buried."

Zoddious threw up.

"Gads! Let's go Drim." As they turned to leave the young Warrior to his retching, Misery approached them. "Greetings Fine Orc. That was a glorious battle."

"Thanks!"

"And we really appreciate that you folks stopped to help."

Misery nodded. "Was a good match." He frowned. "Missed the pickup game though. Took a forfeit there."

"Was it a sanctioned game?"

The Orc shook his head. "No. Bee Bee's standings still good."

"Well, that's good to hear. When you're in town for your next game, the first round of drinks for your team is on me." Nulu smiled at the Orc.

"Sound good! Thanks!" The Orc grinned at the Trolless. "Real good!" He turned to his teammates. They were involved in post-match stretching. "We head home. When we come back. Trolless say she buy drinks!"

A cheer went up from the BeckHam Benders.

Nulu put her hands on her head. "Oh brother. That's gonna get expensive."

"We'll make it back off the armor and weapons." Drimblerod assured her. "I'll hire a couple of people to do it."

Nulu nodded. "Deal." She turned to the remaining townsfolk. "We're going to head to town. Let's all help the wounded and take any of our dead."

Several townsfolk nodded at her and began to help their comrades.

"So do you think you'll get anything out of that Corporal? He seems pretty tough," Drimblerod asked.

"I have no experience with interrogating anyone. But we definitely need some sort of plan, that's for sure. Does anyone you know have experience with interrogations?"

Drimblerod exhaled. "I hate to say it, but Grimbledung does."

"Grimbledung?"

"Apparently he was pretty good at it, too. Back in the day."

"Well, getting locked in a small room with him for an extended period of time would make most anyone crack."

Drimblerod started to complain about the insult, then realized that was probably the reason that his partner was so successful at questioning. "It'll be interesting to watch, in any case."

"Then let's get to it." She snapped her fingers. "Be right back." Nulu jogged to where she had stuck her Please stick in the ground and yanked it out. Then she jogged back to Drimblerod. "Hate to leave behind my trusty Please Stick."

Chapter Fifty-Four
Interrogation! Reconciliation. Employ...ation?

Julie and Grimbledung walked to the front of Akita's jail. "So you sure you're okay to talk to him? What if you get excited?"

Grimbledung waved a dismissive hand. "Interrogating is all about putting on a show. Even when you seem upset, you're not really upset. You just want to make the other person *think* you're upset."

"And you've done these before."

"Sure, sure. Hundreds. Back when the Gnomes were involved in that land dispute in southwest Glasia."

"I've heard that one of the classic blunders of the Gnome Army was to get involved in a land war in Glasia. They should have stuck with diplomacy."

"Diplomacy only gets you so far. First we lose Glasia, then Soal, then Dontbodia." He shook his head. "No. Next thing you know, we're all speaking Glasian."

"Wait, the Glasian war was over two hundred years ago. Are you telling me you haven't done an interrogation in over two hundred years?"

Grimbledung waved another hand at her. "What's to remember? Ask questions. Get answers. Repeat until done." He reached for the latch on the door. "You'll see. Any dimwit can do an interrogation. If you set it up right."

Big Julie laughed. "I'm not sure that's a good endorsement."

The pair entered the building. Seated by the far left cell was Akita. He was leaning back in his chair with a loaded crossbow on his lap. The Corporal was standing up against the bars, staring at him. "It's 'bout time you two got here. Where've you two been?" Asked Akita.

"You're surprised that Grimbledung is late?" Julie asked- avoiding the question.

Akita's chair clattered back onto four legs. He stood up. "Him no. You, yes," he said with a grin. His face got serious. "How are the other wounded.? And the fellows that got killed. Are they gonna be okay ?"

Big Julie nodded. "They'll all pull through. How's Bonk? I heard he got stabbed as well."

"Just a little prick really. By the time that dagger had stuck through the Halfling, there weren't much left to stick out the other side."

"That's good to hear. So the only ones who came out on the short end of this was the Halflings," said Julie. "And since they're the ones who started this entire commotion, I don't feel too sorry for them."

Colossus turned from the bars and sat on the bed that occupied the far corner of the cell.

Grimbledung cleared his throat. Loudly. "Well, I suppose I'll be the one asking the questions, then."

Pozzuoli entered the jail. As if on cue. He was carrying a long rope.



Grimbledung turned to look at the Dwarf. "What are you doing here?"

"We're here to take-a care of that Halfling!"

Colossus moved to the bars to watch the interaction.

"I'm going to do the talking with him," said Grimbledung. "That's all there is to it."

"You wanna him to talk? Then I got the thing right here." Pozzuoli held up the rope. "Wanna string him up to make-a him talk?"

"What? Hang him? How is that a way to make him talk?"

Colossus moved to the corner of the cell closest the pair.

"Well, you-a see, you get him up off the ground. Then you get a bunch of sticks and you whack him with them."

"Like a piñata?"

"Well, kind of. The stuff that-a come out is no like candy."

Grimbledung looked at the Halfling. "Well, how about I see if we can do this the reasonable way first?"

Pozzuoli, wanting nothing better to do that to go back to his shop, skipped his next three lines and went to the closing. "Well, ifa you need me, you know where I am."

Grimbledung narrowed his eyes at the Dwarf. "You do that."

Pozzuoli slung the rope over his shoulder and marched out.

Grimbledung turned back toward the Halfling. "Go sit in that chair so we can talk." He moved to Akita. "Let me in and lock the door behind us. If he gets out of his chair, put a bolt right through his head."

As he moved to the cell, Grimbledung picked up a chair.

Nulu entered the jail as Pozzuoli left. "Where's Pozz going with that rope?"

Julie shook her head and waved off the Trolless. "Grim's got it under control," she whispered. "I think."

Akita shifted the large crossbow to one hand and unlocked the cell with the other. Colossus dutifully remained in his seat as Grimbledung entered.

Akita locked the door behind him then placed the cocking stirrup between the bars. He sighted down on Colossus, finger on the trigger release. "Got ya covered, Grim."

Grimbledung put his chair down. He didn't sit in it. "Are you going to behave?"

"Probably not."

Grimbledung sat down. “Fine then.”

Drimblerod snuck into the jail and stood beside Nulu. “Is he talking?” He whispered.

Nulu shook his head.

Grimbledung cleared his throat. “So. Tell me why you are attacking Julesville.”

“No.”

“Would you like a drink. I can get you a drink if you’ll tell me why you’re attacking Julesville.”

“No.”

“You know all your friends are dead and the only way you can keep their story alive is by telling it to me. Don’t you love your friends?”

“No.”

“Well, I wouldn’t either if I were you. They fought horribly and got killed when they had superior numbers. I’d hate them so much, that I’d tell anyone anything I knew just to get back at them. What about you?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Well, how about if we keep you in here forever then? You’ll die of old age in this jail. Never seeing any of your friends or family again!”

“They’re all dead.”

“Or we could let you out so that you could go make new friends, start a new family. You’re young and fit and I’m sure you could do that. Just tell me why you were attacking Julesville.”

“No.”

“Well, I’m sure you would tell me if you knew but you’re probably so low ranking you barely knew where the mess tent was. How’d someone of your rank even get through the day?”

“I’m a Corporal.”

"And with that rank, I'd imagine you were involved in any and all planning. Planning that included why you were attacking Julesville. You should tell me that plan."

"No."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but we already know why you were attacking Julesville. I just wanted to hear you say it, so that things go easier on you."

"What?"

"We have files. Lots and lots of files. All of them explain exactly what you had in mind. So you might as well tell us because we already know the entire plan."

"Then you don't need to hear it from me."

"So you claim to be a Corporal. I'd imagine a Corporal would know the plan and obviously you don't. So there's no way you're a Corporal. Prove to me you're a Corporal by telling me the plan. Then I'll believe you."

"Not a chance."

"Tell me the plan."

"No."

"Tell me the plan."

"No."

"TELL ME THE PLAN!"

"Nope."

Grimbledung stared at Colossus with a slight smile on his face. He nodded once, then twice at the Halfling.

The Halfling stared back.

"Get out of that chair and move to this one!" Grimbledung stood up and moved beside Colossus. "Get over there!"

Colossus cautiously stood, keeping an eye on Akita. He moved to the other chair and sat in it.

"What was the plan?"

Colossus shook his head.

"I say we just let the Dwarf have him," said Julie (as if on cue) from outside the cell.

"Well, that wouldn't be a nice thing to do," countered Grimbledung.

Colossus looked over his shoulder at the Human.

"Well, that's what I say we should do." She deadpanned.

"No, no. Let me handle this." Grimbledung patted Colossus' knee. "I'll keep you safe in here and make sure those others don't' get you. Just tell me the plan."

"No."

Grimbledung looked around the room, then leaned in close. "It's okay . Just play along. I'm actually a spy for the Halfling Empire. I'll get you out of this. Just tell me the plan and that will help me get you out." He winked for good measure.

"No way."

"How about if we put you in a cell all by yourself then. Without any other Halflings to talk to?"

Colossus looked around. "That's where I'm at already."

Drimblerod shook his head as he moved to the bars as Grimbledung started from the top of the list again[32].

Grimbledung cleared his throat. "So. Tell me why you are attacking Julesville."

"Uhm, Corporal?" Drimblerod said.

Grimbledung's eyes got large as he looked at his partner. "Hey!"

The Corporal looked over his shoulder at Drimblerod. "I don't want a drink."

Drimblerod pressed on. "You realize that Chéri isn't dead, right?"

Colossus scooted his chair around - making sure he didn't stand up and draw the fire of the Constable. "What?"

"She fell into an *Abyssmal* Box. Not a Box of Annihilation. She's still alive. I just thought you should know that."

Tears welled up in Colossus' eyes as he sat back in his chair. Shakily he stood and moved to the bars. He grabbed hold of them as Akita backed up and tracked him with the crossbow as he did. "Are you sure?"

Drimblerod nodded. "I am *positive* she's not dead."

Colossus slid down the bars to his knees. "Thank the Lord High Priest." He looked up at Drimblerod. "Do you know where she is?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "I'm not really sure where the box leads to. But we could find out, I suppose."

"Really?"

"If you told us why you were attacking Julesville. Maybe move past this. Start working together like civilized folk."

"Really?"

Drimblerod nodded. "I mean, wars start and wars end. And when they end the people who were fighting end up working things out. From what I hear, there is talk of a peace treaty with the Great Halfling Empire."

Colossus stood. "We were attacking Julesville because Aution was already burned to the ground and the Lord High Priest wanted it razed as an example." He paused for a moment. "And I thought you killed my dearest Chéri."

"Well, we didn't. And now that there is an armistice between the Halflings and pretty much everyone else. Are there any other backup plans to stage an attack?"

"It was all or nothing."

"Will you talk to any other groups of Halflings that maybe haven't gotten word that the invasion is off?"

"I suppose I could do that…"

"I see. So will you swear to behave yourself while in town?"

Colossus considered that. If the tables had been turned, every one of them would have been in stocks, hanging from ropes, or worse. The fact that they were even considering allowing him to remain in the town, and on his own, took him aback. "Why would I stay in town?"

Drimblerod shrugged. "Well, this is where Chéri fell accidentally into our Abyssmal Box, so I imagine she's going to try and make her way back here. If you left here, she'd most likely not find you."

Colossus moved back to the chair and sat in it. He leaned over, putting his elbows on his knees, he held his head. The prospect of seeing Chéri again was overwhelming. Could he trust this odd mix of races? Would they trust him? Should they?

No one said anything for a long moment.

Finally, Colossus raised his head. "All right. I'll not harm you folks and swear on the head of the Lord High Priest that I will abide by the town's laws."

Akita lowered the crossbow.

Colossus stood again. "But when Chéri arrives, I will... We will leave."

"As the Mayoress of Julesville, I accept your oath," said Big Julie. "However, seeing as how you are a Corporal in the Army that was until very recently, trying to burn us to the ground, I must insist that you are closely monitored by our Constable."

Colossus looked at Akita. "I agree to those terms." He looked around the cell. "So I am to remain here until she returns?"

Julie considered that. With Halflings, honor came above all else. If the Corporal swore to behave himself, there was no reason to doubt him. Still the townsfolk might not look at it that way. "You are only required to stay in the cell at night."

"What time is that?"

"From an hour after the sun goes down to two hours after it comes up," said Akita, falling back on the standard curfew.

Big Julie nodded. "That works for me. Corporal?"

Corporal Colossus looked between the pair. “But I am destitute. How will I pay for any food or clothing I need?”

Grimbledung moved in front of the Halfling. “We’ll hire you during the day. Doing odd jobs, stocking, testing wands. That sort of thing. And we’ll pay you half the going rate.”

Colossus nodded. “I accept.” He put out his hand.

Grimbledung slapped it.

Colossus started to slap it back, then hesitated. “When does this arrangement start?”

Big Julie stepped forward. “I think we should give it a couple of days before you wander the town. Just so I can spread the word that you’re here under... house arrest we’ll call it.”

“Fine.” Colossus slapped Grimbledung’s hand.

“Akita, if you would please,” Grimbledung gestured toward the cell door.

Akita obliged by unlocking it. After he left, he relocked the cell. “I’ll bring ya something to eat in a little bit.”

Colossus nodded then went to his bed. He flopped on it face-first. He had a lot to think about. Foremost was that Chéri was alive and possibly moving in his direction.

“I’ll see you all later at the Duck Inn,” Akita glanced at the Halfling, “and give you any updates.”

Nulu nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

Big Julie nodded as well. “I think we should all go and leave the Constable to his work.”

With nods all around, the quartet left the jail.

As soon as the door closed, Grimbledung hopped back and forth. “Told ya it would work!” He waggled his ears for emphasis.

“Couldn’t we have just started with telling him about Chéri?” Drimblerod asked.

"Amateurs," Grimbledung scoffed. "There's a certain pageantry to interrogation you know."

"Pageantry?" Asked Big Julie.

"I have to say, that was the biggest load of pageantry I've seen in a long while," offered Nulu.

"Well, now that that's over with, *I have to say*, I'm famished!" Said Grimbledung. "Anyone want to join me for a meal?"

Nulu grinned. "Well, I'm going that way anyway, so sure. Let's go eat."

"I'm a little peckish too," admitted Big Julie. "I'm in."

Drimblerod put his arm on his partner's shoulder. "Well, I don't know how I doubted you. That worked out just about as well as it could have."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Right? Once Chéri shows back up, those two lovebirds will pack up and leave. I mean, what could go wrong?"

Fate, who had been hanging out in HalflingCity for several months, turned to look at Julesville.

She smiled and moved towards the town.

Chapter Fifty-Five
The After Party

"So, now that everything seems to be back to normal. I'd love to hear your story," coaxed Big Julie (unnecessarily) as she put down her goblet.

The others behind him all shook their heads frantically at Big Julie.

It was too late.

"Well," began Grim. He thought for a moment. For some reason the past few weeks were a complete blur to him. The last thing he remembered, that he was sure had *actually* happened, was backing away from a tree while Righty waited for him, then turning to run. Then he remembered being back in town and leaving the odd Elf Witch's shop. Everything in between was a complete fog except for bits and pieces that really didn't seem to fit together at all. Not wanting to miss a chance to tell a story, he pressed on with whatever came to mind. "So once I escaped the Halflings by backing away from a tree I was supposed to poop by..."

"Oh dear." Said Big Julie, already sorry she had asked for the story.

"Then I was sitting there waiting for them cannibal Elves to eat me when this beef-minded Minotaur comes lunting up…"

"Lunting?" Interrupted Julie, eyebrow raised.

Grimbledung shrugged, "It's a good and proper word," he raised an eyebrow back, "it just doesn't get used that much."

Julie smirked, "Go on then, with your lunting."

He let out a sign, "As I was saying, *I* was sitting there when a *Minotaur* came lunting up." He paused for a moment, "Pipe in mouth, walking along," he winked at Julie, "and all the Elves stopped with building their fire to meet with him. Full grown Minotaur tend to get folks' attention."

"Is this a sit down and eat seconds story?" It was Rat. "Or will there be a conclusion rounding the corner soon? Are you sure the Minotaur was the one that was beef-minded? Honestly."

"There's more where that came from," warned Grimbledung.

"You know, for an illiterate, you're pretty well spoken," offered Julie.

Grimbledung took it as a challenge. He cracked his knuckles. "So, the Minotaur lunted into the clearing, then he sat down and began to groat." Grimbledung nodded, "*That*, I don't have to tell you, got me worried."

"I'll bet," agreed Nulu. As a Trolless, she had done her fair share of groating.

Nonplussed, Grimbledung continued, "Especially since the Elves seemed like facile folk. When they're not trying to eat you. And Teeth, being especially zafty, thanks to his frog licking habit, told Mink…"

"Mink?"

"That's the Minotaur," Grimbledung explained to Big Julie. "So Teeth told Mink he could come in and have a bite to eat. Of me. So Mink comes over and sits by the fire. Now I'm curglaffed since they were trying to clean me up to cook me but I still notice that Teeth jirbles out a dram of mead to him, so I know that the Elves and Minotaur don't really get along."

"You could tell that the Elves didn't get along with Minotaur from that one nervous pouring?" Julie asked unconvinced.

Grimbledung shook his head, "Minotaur sitting there, not Minotaur everywhere. They really need a plural for them." He thought for a moment.

"Just get on with the story," coaxed Rat.

"Minotaire? Minotai?" He shrugged, "Anyway, Mink has the Elves all nervous and being a master of shybosh, that's when I decide that I was going to…"

Two Hours Later

Everyone sat back exhausted at the table. They had (fortunately) ordered more snacks after an hour and more drinks a half hour after that. And later, a snack of tea with jam and bread (of course).

Grimbledung stood in the middle of the table, baguette in hand. He thrust it outward and then parried a blow, "Like this! Then, when I had them at bay, Nulu, Rat, and Klank showed up."

"That's not what I remembered happening," offered Rat. "You were only in the forest two days and only in the hands of the Elves for a part of one of those days." Rat picked up a piece of bread. "And it took you most of the afternoon to go through just the part where they were trying to cook you?" He shied (sorry) the bread at the Gnome. "I'm going to take a nap." With that, he hopped up and made for the door.

"Wait! There's more. Lots more!"

"Maybe you can write... maybe you can dictate it to a scribe and we can read it later," suggested Drimblerod.

Nulu stood. "I think I'll wait for the parchment to come out as well. I need to get over and see what's going on at the..." She realized she was already in her establishment and her often-used excuse to detach herself from Grimbledung's antics would probably not work. Or maybe it would. "the inn part of the Duck Inn and Dine. Being a sole proprietor has its responsibilities, you know."

Grimbledung nodded. "I'll bet it does."

"You know you're also a..." Began Drimblerod. "Never mind. Say, how about we go back to the shop and get cleaned up."

"Cleaned up?" Grimbledung hopped off the table.

"Sure. We can pop down to the Mora Tau and have a drink or two."

"Or two?"

"A welcome home celebration."

"How much we celebrating?"

"We can go downstairs and chat up a Doxie." Drimblerod winked. "Or two."

"You know," began Big Julie, "it wouldn't do you two any harm to actually try to find a respectable gal." She considered that for a moment. "One each, preferably."

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Respectable gals? They're a copper a dozen. Now Doxies on the other hand..."

"Are what?" Julie asked.

"About two silver for the night!" Guffawed Grimbledung. He slapped his hand on the table. "Right?"

Drimblerod laughed as well. "Well, if you can haggle, that is."

"You two should be ashamed of yourselves."

"Hey, we're supporting local business," said Grimbledung defensively.

"No."

"But..."

"No. The next time we talk, I want to hear about respectable gals that you meet in respectable places."

"Where does one go to meet respectable gals?" Drimblerod asked. Now he was curious.

Julie opened her mouth. Then closed it. *Where does one meet respectable gals?* She snapped her fingers. "At the social I'm throwing at the first of the month. There'll be plenty there."

"Social? Will there be food?"

"That's what makes it a Social, Grim."

"What about music and dancing?" Grimbledung stood. "Will there be that?"

"Yes. That's more of what makes it a Social."

"You gonna have a big fire to roast your Marsh Mallows and Marsh Pixies on?"

"NO!" Big Julie, Nulu, and Drimblerod all said at once.

Grimbledung sat back down. “I was just curious.”

“There will be no fires of any kind.” Big Julie leaned in towards Grimbledung. “None.”

“Well, I was just asking because you know if you’re going to serve Marsh Mallows and Marsh Pixies you really need a place to roast them because they’re best served warm because once they’re cold they really don’t taste so good so you have to cook them right before you eat them kind of like yams because no one likes cold yams which are a lot like Marsh Mallows...”

“Grimbledung.” Julie interrupted.

Grimbledung smiled. He waggled his ears as well.

“Why don’t you go get cleaned up for your night on the town with your partner. I’ll see about setting up a chef...”

Grimbledung stood again.

“Who will do ALL the roasting for everyone.”

“But there’ll be a line,” Grimbledung whined.

“WHO WILL DO ALL THE ROASTING FOR EVERYONE.”

Grimbledung let out a long sigh. “That sounds great to me.”

“Good. Now, go get ready so you can go carousing.”

“You want to come along, Julie?” Drimblerod asked.

Big Julie stood up. “Thanks for the offer, Drimblerod. But I’m a respectable gal nowadays.” She smirked. “I do my carousing behind closed doors.”

Grimbledung gaped at her.

With a wink, Big Julie sashayed out, hips traveling an inordinate distance to each side as she went.

“Well, I’m dashed.”

“Me too, Grim,” said Nulu.

“Really?”

"Yeah, I don't have anyone to carouse with."

"You want to come with? It'll be fun. And we don't have to talk to the Doxies. We can just sit and have a good time."

"Thanks, Grimbledung. I think I may take you up on that." Nulu smiled. "How soon until you gentlemen walk over?"

"We can come pick you up in a couple of hours if that works for you," said Drimblerod. "That'll let you check on your place, and let us do some work in the shop, then get cleaned up and be ready on time."

"Ready on time? Not like last time?"

Drimblerod stood. "Sure. Right on time!"

Nulu shook her head. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"Are you saying we're always late?"

"You're always late."

"Not that one..."

"Always."

Drimblerod pursed his lips. Thinking back, he realized she was right. "Not *this time*, though," he assured her.

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "So let's get going so we can be on time."

"Good. See you in two hours then. We'll have ourselves a good time. Carousing or no." With that Nulu stood and sashayed out the door, hips wandering to and fro as much as her Human friend's had moments earlier.

"Holy Wooly Shamblers."

Grimbledung nodded. His tongue was hanging out too far to form words. He rolled it back in. "So we should go get ready now then."

Drimblerod stood. "We've got plenty of time. Pleeeenty."

Three Hours Later

Drimblerod and Grimbledung ran towards the Duck Inn and Dine. Drimblerod (thanks to a head start) was a full twenty paces ahead of his partner. "Think we'll make it?" Grimbledung called.

"Maybe," puffed Drimblerod. "I'll scoot in and bring her out!"

Drimblerod rounded the corner to the front of the Duck Inn and came face to face with a female Dwarf. He skidded around her, twirled once and grabbed the door handle. With a hearty pull, he yanked the door open, pulling it closed behind him before Grimbledung cleared the corner.

Grimbledung rounded the corner. There was a female Dwarf standing in the middle of the street, looking towards the Duck Inn and Dine. He crashed into her full on, knocking her to the ground, him on top. "Yaaa!" He screeched as they landed.

The Dwarfess' basket spilled its contents as it hit the ground. A large amount of fruit and vegetables spread all over the ground. Grimbledung pushed himself up and looked down at the woman. "Sorry about that. Really I am."

"Do you mind?"

"Not a bit," said Grimbledung, still in the same position. "I wasn't hurt at all. You?"

The Dwarfess stared at Grimbledung.

Nulu stepped out of her establishment. "Drim's talking to one of the cooks and will meet... Gads Grimbledung! What are you doing?"

Grimbledung looked at Nulu. "Well, me and Drim were running here to be on time..."

"You're an hour late."

"...and when I rounded the corner, this Dwarfess was standing still and we kind of ran into each other."

"Grimbledung..."

"But it's okay , because neither one of us are hurt."

"Grimbledung," said the Dwarf.

Grimbledung looked down at the female. "Yes?"

"How about you stop using my breasts to hold yourself up. Or maybe it's to hold me down. Whichever it is, I'd like you to stop."

"Yaah!" Screeched Grimbledung when he looked down and saw where he was pushing to hold himself up. He still didn't move.

"And this is when you get off me."

Nulu grabbed Grimbledung by the arm and pulled him off the Dwarfess. "Honestly, Grim."

"Sorry about that, really I am." There was a grin plastered on Grimbledung's face.

"Really?" The Dwarfess sat up and extended her hand to him.

Grimbledung shook it. "Sure."

"Is this normal or was he hit in the head recently?"

"Well..." said Nulu. "It's a really long story. I'm not sure if..."

Grimbledung shook the Dwarfess' hand again since it was still extended. "Sure!" He said again.

"Grimbledung, please help the lady up."

"Oh, right. Thanks Nulu!" Grimbledung took the Dwarfess' hand in his and yanked her forcefully to her feet.

Hers head snapped back as she popped up. "Easy there, tiger." She rubbed her neck with her free hand. Grimbledung still hadn't let go of her other one. She looked at Nulu. "Clingy isn't he?"

Nulu laughed. "Honestly, that's a word I've never heard used to describe him."

The Dwarfess worked her hand out of Grimbledung's. "Thanks, I suppose." She looked down at her groceries. They were strewn all over the ground. "Great." She began to bend down.

Nulu knew what was going to happen and cringed.

"I'll get that!" Grimbledung bent down and bonked his head against the Dwarfess'. Hard. "Gah!" He fell backward.

So did the Dwarfess. "Delberger's hand. You're killing me, Grimbledung. Killing me." She said as she rubbed her head.

Grimbledung rolled to his feet and extended his hand. "I'll get ya!"

"No. No you won't, actually." She scooted back several feet from Grimbledung. "I'll get myself up." And she did.

Nulu bent down and began picking up produce. "I'll get this for you, Ma'am."

"Miss."

"Miss." An absurdly absurd thought came to Nulu. She glanced at Grimbledung. He was still rubbing his head. She looked at the Dwarf. So was she. They *seemed* to be close together in age. It was sometimes difficult to tell with some races, but Gnomes and Dwarves were, at the end of the day, pretty similar. *Absolutely absurd. Don't even think it Nulu*, she said to herself.

"I'll get those grapefruits," Grimbledung reached down to pick up a pair of grapefruits. He grabbed one but only managed to kick the other away. Towards the Dwarfess. Still moving with his head down, he head-butted her in the stomach just as he grasped the grapefruit, causing her to bend over.

"What is the matter with you?"

"I assure you, Miss. This is completely normal for him."

Grimbledung stood up, hitting his head against her breasts as he did so. "Gah!" He said again.

"Honestly, I'm being groped more here on the street than at the Mora Tau."

"Grimbledung, for Delberger's Hand, stand still and take a deep breath."

Grimbledung stopped and took in a deep breath. He held it.

"Don't tell me you're going to have to tell him to stop."

"Let's just see." Nulu smiled. "I'm Nulu. Nulu Bentknees. Owner of the Duck Inn and Dine." She pointed behind her at the large building.

"Love your scones."

Grimbledung exhaled loudly. "Me too!" He hopped back and forth. "Me too! Me too!"

"I'm Mantodea Hesperus. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." She pointed at Grimbledung. "You've sort of met Grimbledung Sixtoes. He's part owner of Second Hand Sorcery."

"Where the talking rat sleeps on the bench?"

"That's the place."

"*He* owns a business?" She pointed at the still hopping Grimbledung.

"Makes you stop and think, doesn't it?"

Grimbledung stopped hopping. "So wanna come with us to the Mora Tau? We're doing carousing tonight."

"What, more than you've already done?"

"What?"

"Never mind." Mantodea smiled at Nulu. "Pleasure meeting you." She looked at Grimbledung.

"Yeah?" He waggled his ears.

"And I met you."

"Right? What could be better?" Grimbledung waggled his ears again.

"I don't have that kind of time on my hands. Maybe at a later, as yet undetermined date."

Did that female just agree to meet Grimbledung at a later date? Nulu thought quickly. "Sure. Maybe here for breakfast tomorrow." Don't push it. Grimbledung is in rare form right now. You'll end up spooking her! "Or another day," she added noncommittally.

The Dwarf appraised Grimbledung. He was looking up at the night sky. There was a full moon peeking out of the clouds. She shook her head. "I don't know."

"It's on the house for the bruised... produce."

Grimbledung looked at the two females. "Breakfast? I'd be dee-lighted." He raised an eyebrow. "If you're going to be around."

"I live here in town."

"So you're going to be around then?"

Mantodea looked at Nulu. "Was he stung by something maybe?"

Cut your losses. Things are going good. Just get Grim away before he blows it! Nulu laughed nervously, "Hah, hah. No, no. He's just a jokester, that's all." She moved beside the Gnome. He was looking up at the moon again. "Well, we've got to go meet some friends and we're already very late, so how about breakfast?" Nulu thought to the night Grimbledung was expecting to have and the amount he was planning on drinking. A hung-over Gnome would *not* make pleasant breakfast conversation. "Day after tomorrow about nine or so?"

"Sure. I'd be glad to," Mantodea said. "See you then Nulu." She looked at Grimbledung. He was staring at the moon. "And you, Grimbledung."

"Mm-hmm." He never looked down.

With a shrug, Mantodea turned and walked off.

"Grimbledung, you're impossible sometimes. You know that?"

"Mm-hmm."

Nulu put her hand on the top of his head and aimed it downward. "You didn't even say good evening to her when she left. Did you notice her at all?"

"She smelled like lilacs."

"Well, that's something, I suppose. Maybe you can bring that up at breakfast in a couple of days. In the meanwhile, let's go put a dent in old PalmerLee's alcohol stores."

"Now you're talking." Grimbledung looked around. "Hey, where'd that Dwarfess go?"

"She left, you silly Gnome. All you'd do is grope her or stare at the moon. There's not much a gal can do with that, you know."

"Wait, what?"

"Never mind. Let's go catch up with Drimblerod at the Mora Tau and see who's who in the zoo."

The pair turned and walked towards the Mora Tau Bar and BAR. Twice Grimbledung stopped to look up at the moon.

Chapter Fifty-Six
Changes in Attitude, Changes in, well... Grimbledung

Grimbledung and Nulu walked onto the covered porch of the bar. Drimblerod was sitting on a bench waiting. "Where've you two been?" He already had a drink. Half of which was gone.

"Where have we been? Where have you been, I should say. You two loons are an hour late. As usual."

Drimblerod smiled. "If you..." He shook his head. "Never mind; I don't really have any sort of excuse." He toasted her with his glass. "Sorry."

"It's fine. You wanna sit outside?" Nulu asked. "It's a nice night." She pointed at the full moon. "Full moon and all."

Drimblerod's eyes got large. "Oh boy. No, maybe we should go inside."

"Why's that?"

Grimbledung glanced over his shoulder at the moon.

"Tell you when we've got a minute." He took Grimbledung by the shoulder and maneuvered him to the door. He and Klank (and Maca) had been hoping to keep Grimbledung's affliction a secret until they could get it cured, or know that they couldn't. With a full moon out, that plan was looking like it wouldn't work. "Inside, maybe."

The trio entered the bar. It was - as usual- crowded. "You wanna stay up here or go downstairs?" Grimbledung asked.

"I dunno. Where's Palmerlee? He's always good for a story."

Grimbledung looked over towards the bar. There was a large Human tending it. A very large Human. "Hey, Tarbender. You know where Palmerlee is?"

Tarbender looked up from where he was wiping down the bar, and over at Grimbledung for a long moment. "Yep." He went back to wiping down the bar.

"Great. Say. You know where your *neck* is? You seem to have left it someplace." Grimbledung stuck out his tongue at the muscled Human. "That Human has no neck, Drim!" He nudged his partner, "Wanna stay here and bug him?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "No, I'd rather not get thrown out by him again. Way out, if I recall correctly. Let's go downstairs."

"Wait; again?" Nulu asked.

Grimbledung shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"Again?" Tried Nulu. Again.

The trio walked down the spiral staircase that led to the bowels of the bar. As usual, Grimbledung paused to look at the paintings that were hung along the staircase. "I wonder who all these people are," he said absently as he went. "Some look famous even." When he reached the bottom he looked around the room. Like the room above it, it was crowded, with only one or two empty tables. "Wanna sit at a table, Drim?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "They wobble too much. Let's sit at the bar." Palmerlee had the tables and chairs made light and weak on purpose. Even the tankards were extra-thin to prevent them from becoming lethal weapons in the all-too-regular brawls that occurred. "Besides, look who's at the bar."

Palmer Lee was tending bar along with a barmaid. Palmerlee was also large, but not as large as his employee one floor up. His skin was tanned and wrinkled from decades at sea. A captain's hat was cocked to one side on his head as he was leaned over, telling one of countless stories to a patron.

"Neat! Let's see what story he's telling tonight!"

Nulu grabbed Grimbledung's sleeve as he started to move away. "There's Halflings at the bar, Grim."

Grimbledung looked at the bar. Seated at one end were four Halflings. They had pulled their stools close together and seemed to be engaged in a secret conversation. "They're on the far end and they don't look like soldiers. We'll sit on the Palmer Lee end."

"I don't know..."

"Relax Nulu; there's lots of Halflings in the lands."

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at his partner. “Look who’s the voice of reason all of a sudden.”

“It’ll be fine. Trust me!” Grimbledung shuffled over to the bar and climbed up onto a stool, Drimblerod right behind. Nulu taking up the rear.

“Don’t interrupt him this time,” warned Drimblerod, “I hate it when I miss the end of a story.”

“Maybe they just end abruptly,” offered Grimbledung.

“No. No they don’t.” He elbowed his partner, “So behave yourself.”

“Everything’s fine! I feel fine. My head feels fine. Everything is fine,” assured Grimbledung. “I haven’t felt this clear headed in a century. Never better.”

“How are you gentlemen and lady this evening?” Asked the Barmaid

“Well, I have this crick in my neck...” began Grimbledung.

“He’s fine,” interrupted Drimblerod. “We all are.”

“We’d like a couple of ales,” said Grimbledung. He held up four fingers. He added with a wink: “If you please.”

Drimblerod sighed. He held up three fingers and gestured to the three of them.

Nulu held up her hands and motioned that she wanted a troll-sized mug.

The Barmaid nodded. “And all the orders are in. Coming right up.”

Grimbledung scratched his neck absently. “It hot in here?” He asked no one in particular.

Nulu leaned on the bar instead of sitting on one of the stools. She had been downstairs on many occasions and knew better than to trust any of the furniture. “So... How often do you two get thrown out of here?”

“What, every time?”

“Yeah, Grim. How many times have you been thrown out of here?” Nulu asked again.

"Every. Time."

Nulu shook her head. "Well, let's make tonight a first, please."

The Barmaid returned with two normal sized mugs and a third that was easily three times as big.

"What's that?"

"That's a stein, Grim."

"It comes in steins?" He looked down at his drink, dejected. "That's the kind of thing you tell a Gnome."

"Well, look at it this way, by the time you got to the bottom of it, it would be warm. This way, you can order your drinks nice and cold every time."

Grimbledung thought for a moment. Taking several sips from his mug as he did. "I guess that sounds reasonable." Still, he eyed Nulu's massive stein. "I guess."

The trio drank by the bar, listened to PalmerLee tell his stories of high adventure on the raging seas, and commented when appropriate. After several rounds, Grimbledung hopped off his stool. "I think I gotta go get rid of some ale. Drim?"

Drimblerod looked from his partner to Nulu and back. "I'll wait here with Nulu to hold our spot, then when you get back, we'll go. It's getting crowded down here you know."

Grimbledung nodded. "Good thinking! I'll be right back then." He turned and shuffled to the stairs, taking them two at a time as he went. As usual however, he stopped midway to look at the pictures that ran up and down the stairs.

"I'm afraid to even ask."

Drimblerod finished his drink. "Well, remember when you were out with Grimbledung at the tree with Rat and Klank?"

"Yeah, the tree full of Pixies. I remember that all too well."

"Well, when Grimbledung ran off in that storm, he came straight to town."

"I know all that." Nulu took a drink. "You should stop stalling. That Gnome'll be back soon." She put down her stein. "Out with it."

Drimblerod sighed. "Well, he came straight to town and ran into Akita and Maca out in the street." He looked at the stairs. The coast was still clear. "He attacked Maca and Akita had to get him off her."

"I think there's something going on between those two."

Drimblerod nodded. "Oh, definitely. And probably because of that, Akita went a little overboard in getting him off."

"Overboard?"

"He bit him on the neck killing him."

"He died *again?* That Gnome spends as much time in the hereafter as he does anyplace else."

"Well, Maca is some sort of Elf Witch and she brought him back. The good part was that she was able to cure his Pixie madness. But..."

"Oh no. You're not saying."

"Yes." Drimblerod nodded. "He's a WereGnome now. Until Maca can figure out a way to cure him without killing him for good."

Nulu looked to the stairs. "I don't know if that's better or worse." A thought came to her. "Wait. He's a Lycan and you brought him out on a full moon?"

Drimblerod shrugged. "Well, he's not a full blown Lycan because Akita is kind of a subdued one so we don't think there's any danger of him just changing out of the blue."

"Still."

"Well, that's why we've been keeping an eye on him. So far he hasn't had any sort of... outbreak."

Nulu shook her head. "That Gnome."

"Yeah. That about sums it up." Drimblerod glanced at the stairs. "Here he comes. Act natural."

Nulu smiled. As Grimbledung walked up she said "And that's when I learned I wasn't lactose intolerant."

"What?"

"Nothing, Grim. We were just chatting."

"Oh, okay." Grimbledung scratched at his neck again. "I'll order another round while you two make a run for it."

Nulu nodded. "That sounds like a good plan. Are you going to be all right here by yourself?" Nulu looked at the crowded bar. *Any one of these patrons could easily set off Grimbledung's Pixie...* She stopped herself. *That's not a problem anymore.* "OK, Grim. We'll be right back. Three drinks." She held up three fingers.

Grimbledung held up three fingers as well. "Got it." He kept his three fingers raised so he wouldn't forget. He waved them at the Barmaid. "This many." He winked. "If you please."

The Barmaid rolled her eyes at him then nodded. If nothing else, she knew that the Gnomes were good tippers. Unstable, prone to starting brawls, and tended to grope the Doxies, but when all was said and done, they tipped well. It was more than she could say about a lot of other patrons who also started brawls and groped at random.

Nulu shook her head. "Come on Drim. Let's get out and back quick like."

Grimbledung hopped back onto his stool. "This is great!"

"Right this way, Nulu," Drimblerod led the way to the stairs. Thanks to a long discussion with Mon and Ton, Drimblerod had picked up a few pointers on politeness. Apparently, females went first, unless stairs were involved; then it was the male's duty to go first. *Who would have known?* These and other helpful tips (such as belching at the table = bad. Compliments for the tasty cooking = good) Drimblerod had stored away, in case, as Nulu had said earlier, he did come across a respectable female he wanted to enter into an exclusive relationship with.

"Right behind you," said Nulu.

The pair moved to the stairs and disappeared from sight.

Grimbledung bounced in his stool as the Barmaid returned with the three drinks. "Here you go, Mister Gnome."

"Grimbledung"

"I'm a Barmaid," the female reminded him. "Barmaid."

Grimbledung nodded. "I know. I was just being sociable is all."

The Barmaid nodded. "Mary"

"Thanks, Mary. It's just that until recently, I had these sounds in my head that made me do really crazy things and now they're gone." He scratched the back of his neck. "So it's nice that I can just say hello to someone without... you know."

Mary shrugged. She didn't know, and really didn't want to know. But, if it helped raise the tips even higher, she would, as all Barmaids (and servers) everywhere, pretend to care completely about any and all problems a customer mentioned. "Well, that's really good to hear," she lied. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Grimbledung looked around. "Say, Mary..."

Here it comes. The proposition.

"What would it take to get you to serve me a drink in one of these things?" He pointed at Nulu's stein.

Oh, that's all? "Well, we reserve those for our larger customers." She paused as she considered how to phrase her next sentence. "And, to be honest, Grimbledung, patrons who aren't known for smashing their mugs on other patron's heads."

Grimbledung nodded. "I understand, Mary. But, like I said; I'm better now." He smiled at the woman. "I'm on my bestest behavior." He perked up. "Plus we've got Nulu to keep things in line. Nothing says stay in line like a large Trolless, right?"

Mary considered that. She let out a long sigh. "Well, I suppose so. Tell you what, Grimbledung. You take this one." She slid Nulu's drink across to him. "And I'll pour her a fresh one."

"What about this other one?" Grimbledung pointed at his now unaffiliated mug.

"I'll drink that in honor of your getting better."

Grimbledung clapped. "A toast!" He hefted the stein. It took both hands for him to do so.

Mary laughed. "All right. A toast." She lifted the mug.

"To me not having Pixie Madness anymore." He tried hefting the stein higher but ended up sloshing out some of the ale. "Woops! Ale foul!" He lowered the stein, balancing the nearer edge on the bar as he sipped the drink.

Mary raised the mug higher and then took a drink herself. "To your health. Mental health, that is."

The Halflings at the end of the bar all laughed.

Grimbledung took another long drink. "Ahh, that hits the spot."

"Just take it easy. That's three of your regular drinks." Warned Mary as she moved off, mug in hand, to tend to other customers.

"How's about a toast to that Gnome for not being Pixie stupid?" A Halfling raised his glass.

"That sounds good. Now if we can just cure him of his bigger problem" said the other.

"What's that?" Said a third as he raised his glass.

The fourth just smiled, enjoying the insults as they flew.

"Being Gnome-stupid, of course!" Guffawed the first as they all clinked their glasses.

Grimbledung looked over at the trio. He pulled on his collar. "It getting hotter in here?"

"Not, it's just getting *stupider* in here." Another round of laughter and toasting made its way around the Halflings.

Grimbledung took a deep breath. Then another. It didn't help. "You know, just a month ago, I'd have been all over you for that." He took another drink. "Not today."

"Well, I'm not your type so I'm glad you're not all over me!" Laughed a Halfling.

Grimbledung's back started to itch. He reached back and tried to scratch it, but couldn't reach.

"He's having a fit!"

Grimbledung let go of his stein. "Why don't you just go someplace else."

"Why don't you go hump a stump?"

Grimbledung got off his stool. The itching in his back made its way down to his legs. He squirmed at the uncomfortable feeling.

"Oooh! Give us a dance, Gnome!" One of the Halflings tossed a copper coin at Grimbledung. It hit him in the chest and clattered to the floor.

Grimbledung looked to the stairs. *Where are those two?* "Grrrr!" He said out loud.

"Oh, and he's well-spoken too. Dance for us well-spoken Gnome!"

"GRRRR!" Growled Grimbledung, "You'd better leave! You're making me angry! You wouldn't like me when I'm angry!" He clambered up on the barstool glowering down.

"I don't think I'd like you when you're *not* angry."

Mary moved back to the Gnome. Quickly. "Grimbledung, what's going on?"

"GRRRRR!" Said Grimbledung as he clambered down from his bar stool. "Put away the breakables!" He said to Mary.

"This is a bar, *everything* is breakable."

Grimbledung growled again. He tugged at his shirt. "Is it getting hotter in here?"

"We've been through this already," said one of the Halflings to the chuckles of his friends. "No. It's getting *stupider* in here."

"GRRRR!" Said Grimbledung as he clenched and flexed his hands. "Stinkin' Halfling!"

"I think it's time you four left," said Mary.

One of the Halflings shook his head. "I've had enough." He reached into his belt pouch and produced five coppers- effectively no tip at all. He tossed them to the barmaid. "Here you go. Get yourself a drink for having to deal with this loon."

Grimbledung panted as a tendril of drool leaked out of his mouth.

"That's just gross," said the Halfling. The quartet got off their barstools.

"Yeah," agreed Mary, "stop doing that. You're going to spook the other customers."

Grimbledung panted. "Ahhhh OOOOOoooo!" He shouted at the ceiling. Most of the patrons turned to look.

The Halflings moved to Grimbledung, "You're a complete..." began one of the Halflings.

Grimbledung's eye color swirled as they became all black and two of his teeth grew twice their size as he looked on. They now stuck down past his lower lip and ended in sharp points. "Grrrrr!" He said as his tongue hung out.

"Lord High Priest! Let's get out of here!" He grabbed his partners by the shoulders and pulled them to the stairs.

They had to wait as Nulu (going first of course) and Drimblerod made their way down. After they had passed, they clambered up the stairs as fast as they could.

"Uh oh. Grim, you okay ?" Drimblerod called.

Grimbledung turned to look at him. A tendril of drool hung from the side of his mouth and, alarmingly, his ears were completely covered in hair.

Several patrons stood up.

"What in the..." began one.

Nulu turned on the Human. "Just sit down and relax and whatever you do, do NOT make any sudden movements." She pointed at his chair. "Sit down real slow."

She looked up at the other patrons. "Just have a seat, real quiet like and we'll..." She was cut off.

"Aaaaaahhh OOOOOOO!" Howled Grimbledung as he panted.

Nulu looked back. There was now fur - honest to goodness fur- sticking out of his collar and sleeves. His fingers ended in long claws. He hunched over and panted. "Grrrrr!"

"Grim, just relax. Breathe deeply and relax," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung panted.

And panted.

Finally, his breathing slowed. As did his drooling. The fur that had seemingly appeared in moments, withdrew. The same happened to his claws and, much to the relief of the patrons, his fangs.

Finally after a long moment Grimbledung cleared his throat. "I'm fine now. I'm not sure what came over me."

"Well, why don't we take our drinks with us and head home?" Said Drimblerod worriedly. "Everything is calm around here so let's just have a quiet evening at home." He looked at the Barmaid.

Mary nodded at Drimblerod. Usually patrons did not carry any drinks out of the bar, but at this point, she was ready to make an exception. She glanced over at Palmerlee. He was holding a loaded crossbow. He kept his eye on Grimbledung, but nodded as well.

"Thanks very much, and sorry for the trouble," said Drimblerod. He moved to the counter and picked up his mug with one hand as he reached into his pocket with the other. "What's the total?"

Mary did a quick mental calculation. In all honesty, the ale in the mugs cost more than the mugs themselves, so she didn't even include them in her calculations. She did, however, add her drink to the total. "Little over a half silver. Six copper."

Drimblerod nodded. He laid a silver on the table, then reached back into his pocket. He fished out several copper coins and let them clatter onto the bar. "See you next time."

Nulu moved to the bar, keeping an eye on Grimbledung as she did so. "I'll get these back to you." She said as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a

silver coin and added it to Drimblerod's pile. She picked up both steins. "Good evening to you."

"Let's go Grim," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung looked around as if he had just woken up. "We're leaving already?"

"Yeah, it's a nice night out so we thought we'd walk home nice and slow. And we get to take our drinks with us." Nulu handed him his stein.

Grimbledung took it with both hands. He hefted it up and took a sip. He turned back to the Barmaid. "See, Mary, I told you I was all better."

Mary simply raised her eyebrows at him. "*That's* better?"

"After you, Grim." Drimblerod pointed to the stairs.

In a daze, Grimbledung moved to the stairs and walked up them, not even stopping to look at the pictures this time.

Palmerlee put the crossbow back on its hook. "That little fellow really worries me sometimes."

"Sometimes? Only sometimes?"

"Well, it could be worse. Probably."

Mary picked up the coins as she counted them. There were eight coppers and two silver for what was a six copper bill. "I think we need to make allowances for those two Gnomes. I think we've got some worse patrons, when all is said and done and the tips are in." She watched as Nulu went up the stairs. "The Trolless is good in my book as well."

Nulu, Drimblerod, and Grimbledung left the bar and stood in the night air. Grimbledung looked up at the moon. "Sorry, Drim; I don't know what happened back there. It's all a blur."

"I think you should tell him."

"Tell me what, Nulu?"

"Tell him on the way."

The three started walking towards the Duck Inn and Dine.

Drimblerod nodded. "Grim, you remember when you were at the tree when you left the Foreboding Forest and it was full of Pixies?"

"Uhm. Sure," Grimbledung lied. It too was all a blur. "What about it?" He fished.

"Well, when they pushed you over the edge, you came raging back into town and attacked someone."

"Did I hurt anyone?"

"No, Grim, you didn't." said Nulu.

Grimbledung took a drink. "Well, that's good to know." He took another drink. "Who'd I attack?"

"Well, Akita and Maca were standing out in the street when you came along..."

"Not Akita?"

"No, you attacked Maca." Said Drimblerod.

"You know, I think there's something going on with those two."

Nulu laughed. "Yeah, it's the town's worst kept secret, I think. They're the only ones who don't know that everyone' else knows."

Drimblerod chucked as well. "That's probably true."

"I didn't hurt her did I?"

"No, Grim. Akita got you off her, but in the process..."

"What?"

"He may have bitten you."

"Well, no hard feelings, I suppose." He scratched his neck again. "Seeing as how I was attacking Maca." Grimbledung stopped walking. "You know, I didn't know I was doing that, right? I mean..." His voice trailed off. "Do I need to go apologize? I'd hate to think..."

Drimblerod put his hand on his partner's shoulder. "No, that's not necessary. She knew what was going on."

"She's a Witch, you know."

"That's another of the worst kept secrets in town, I think," said Nulu.

"Anyway, when you attacked Maca, Akita bit you and you died."

"What, again?"

"Yes. And Maca got you healed up." He pointed toward the Duck Inn and Dine and they began to walk again. "And in the process, cured you of your Pixie Madness."

"Well, I knew I was feeling better. That buzzing in my head is completely gone."

"Well, she was able to cure you of that, but because Akita bit you."

"Wait..."

"He may have transferred some of his condition to..." Began Drimblerod.

"Are you saying I'm a Werewolf?"

"No, no," Drimblerod assured him. "Not at all."

"Well, that's a relief." Grimbledung took another drink.

"You're not a wolf so you can't be a Werewolf. You're a WereGnome," offered Nulu.

Grimbledung spit out his ale. "What?"

"Maca is working on a way to fix it, but in the meantime, you need to make sure you don't get upset."

Grimbledung looked at his partner. "Don't get upset? You're telling me to not get upset? *Me*?"

"Well, just try your best and we'll be around to keep an eye out and help as we can until you get this thing under control."

"So a WereGnome. What does that mean exactly?"

Drimblerod considered that. "You know, I have no idea. Maybe you should talk to Akita about that." He put his arm around his partner. "But we're here for you."

Nulu nodded. "That's right." She smiled wide. "I offer a toast to the town's latest resident, Grimbledung Sixtoes, WereGnome." She raised her glass high. "Here, here!"

Drimblerod followed suit. "To Grimbledung!"

Grimbledung hefted his stein then took a deep drink. "You know, Mary was right."

"What's that?" Nulu looked down at her friend. "Who's Mary?"

"The Barmaid. She said if I got a big mug, it would be warm before I got to the bottom. She was right." Grimbledung peered into the stein. "This is a lot of warm ale."

"Well, my dear friend, I have just the cure at my establishment." Nulu gestured to the building in front of them. "This place has a ready supply of cold ale that we can swap out for that warm stuff."

"That's my kind of establishment." Grimbledung smiled at Nulu.

She moved to the door and opened it. "Drunkenness awaits," she said with a small bow.

"Whoo hoo!" Grimbledung poured out his warm ale in the street. "Let's get to it! I feel a song coming on." He put his arm around Drimblerod, "And you're going to sing too."

"You know I have a wand that would have cooled off that ale for you," offered Nulu.

Grimbledung looked at the puddle of ale. "Rolton puddles."

"We'll get it replaced," assured Nulu.

Drimblerod downed the last of his ale- thanks to it being a smaller mug, it was still fairly cool. "I'll sing only if Nulu sings as well."

Nulu ushered the pair into the foyer. "That just might happen," she said as she moved in behind them, closing the door as she went.

There was drinking galore. And singing. And, at one point, some howling. Once the bar closed, Grimbledung stretched out in a very nicely constructed booth and fell asleep. Drimblerod followed suit in another next to him.

Nulu made it back to her room upstairs, stopping to gather her strength and bearings on the bench conveniently placed on the landing between the floors. As she fell asleep, she was glad she had put off the breakfast until the day after next- she wouldn't be good company in the morning either.

Chapter Fifty-Seven
All Good Things…

Grimbledung sat at the counter drinking. His head was pounding and an early customer had suggested that drinking the 'hair of the dog' would cure him. When he flatly refused to do any such thing, Colossus – who was at his first day on the job in the shop (currently mopping floors in the back) suggested some ale instead. "That I can do," Grimbledung assured him, then promptly ordered a small keg of ale from the brewery two blocks down- The Fat Blue Mooned Tyre. He's been drinking it since breakfast. *It's made with wheat- that's a breakfast food, right?* "Bored." He said aloud. He cringed at how loud his voice sounded. "Mayhap I'll try some dog hair next time." In the meanwhile, he poured himself another drink.

Door opened and a large (weren't they all?) Orc entered the shop.

Grimbledung recognized this particular large Orc. "You again?"

"Got wand."

"Did you find it?"

"Sure?"

"Was someone holding it while you found it?"

"Holding what?"

"The wand."

"Wand? No."

"You know, I'm not too sure we're going to be able to do business...."

"Have wand!" The Orc leaned over the counter and pointed a thick finger at Grimbledung. "You say you buy wand. I find wand. So I say have wand. You say you buy wand. So I say you buy wand!" His finger curled in, completing his fist. "SO BUY WAND!"

Grimbledung clutched his head. "All right, all right. Not so loud. That's some hard to argue with reasoning, I suppose." He shrugged. A thought occurred to him. "Oh, we have a new rule. Here's a copper!" Grimbledung put a copper coin on the counter.

"Rule like no more eat Elves?" The Orc made a sour face- which was saying a lot for a face that looked like an Orc's face.

Grimbledung blinked. "Uhm. It's easier to follow than that."

"Hope so."

"We only buy one wand a month from a customer."

"Why?"

"Because..." Grimbledung's mind went blank.

Rat hopped onto the counter next to his friend, "Because if we buy more than one wand from a customer a month, we get taxed double. You understand taxes, right? A government needs money to operate so they levy taxes on various..."

"Don't want civics lesson from Rat!"

"Shhhh!" He cringed again. "Well, that's the rule. So you aren't allowed to come back for an entire month. We don't make the rules, we just follow them," Grimbledung lied softly. The Orc was *not* helping his pounding head.

The Orc let out a snort. "Fine. Follow that rule." The Orc turned and started to walk away.

"Hey you." Grimbledung called after him. "Where's the wand?"

The Orc stopped and turned. Door latched shut behind him. "Wot?"

"We paid for the wand but you didn't leave it," said Grimbledung testily. "You have wand. We pay wand. You leave wand!" He mimicked the Orc, albeit quieter.

The Orc walked back to the counter. "Forgot." He looked down at Rat. "Got distracted by professor, here." His eyes brightened up. "There rule on eating rodents?"

"Only within city limits," said Rat.

"Just like Elves, then."

"Ahhh," tried Grimbledung.

The Orc nodded and made his way towards Door. Door obliged by unlatching and opening for the creature.

"I think we've created a monster."

Rat shook his head, "He was always a monster. Now he's a capitalist."

"Gads!"

Rat nodded. "My sentiments exactly." He licked his lips. "Well, I think I may go get a snack, now that that's over with. You all right up here by yourself?" He twitched his whiskers. "Alone with just you and that Halfling?"

"Sure. I'll just doodle until someone else comes in."

Rat hopped off the counter. "I'm popping over to Nulu's. Just give a howl if you need something."

"What?"

"Or, you know, whatever bays out of your throat." Rat twitched his ragged whiskers. He was having untold fun with the double entendres even though Grimbledung didn't get most of them.

Grimbledung nodded. "Seems quiet. I got it."

Rat scampered out of the shop, Door obliging him by opening and closing.

Within moments, Grimbledung sighed. "Bored." He began to doodle.

And drink.

Finally, after a long ten minutes, a smiling Human customer entered the shop. "Hello all!" She said cheerily.

Grimbledung looked up from his doodling at her. He was in the shop alone. He looked around to make sure. It was, in fact, just him and the newly arrived female. She was smiling as if she had just found the Flying Picman's long lost gold mine.

"So how are things today?" She continued, "in yea olde wand sales?"

"Well, they're more used than olde, really." Grimbledung shrugged. "But fine, I suppose." *Better if you buy something.*

"So..." She raised an eyebrow.

Grimbledung raised an eyebrow back at her. "So." He repeated. He wasn't sure where the line of questioning was going. Or if it even *was* a line of questioning. The attractive (to a Human most likely) Human female seemed to be waiting for something. A thought occurred to him. It wasn't something that was even required for a sale. Oftentimes, it was avoided. "Grimbledung," he offered.

She clapped her hands as she moved forward, "Grimbledung. How nice to meet you. I am Lisa." She smiled again. "So..."

He stared at the female. "Lisa?" He tried. *Maybe she forgot?*

The female leaned on the counter amicably. "Yes?"

Grimbledung wasn't sure if she was trying to push his angry button, or just seemed to have a knack for inadvertently jabbing at it. He took a deep breath then let it out. *Let's try this.* "So, Lisa, how may I help you today?"

The female seemed to look confused for a moment. She looked around the shop as if she had not realized she was in it. She looked back at the still-waiting Grimbledung with surprise. Then anger flashed across it for the briefest of moments. It was replaced by a smile. "I'm in the market for a wand, of course," she said, finally.

Grimbledung was not sure how to react to the wide range of emotions the female had just displayed. Or if he even should react. "You sure?"

"Why else would I be here?" She asked defensively. She looked around the shop again. "In a wand shop." She smiled again, but this time forced.

"Well, that's what we have here, you know."

"Lucky I came in then."

That's how you want to play? All right, let's go! "Then you came to the right place."

"Especially if I need a wand."

"Right, otherwise you might have ended up with a bucket or a rake. Neither of which made good wands."

"Well, you can ride a rake, so I hear."

"True, but that's not the same as a wand."

"And buckets are good for carrying things."

"Maybe water or a tune, but definitely not magic."

"Then it's a good thing I came in here and not someplace else."

"It seemed that way, at first."

"Are you running any sales?"

"As many as a row boat."

"Want to know what kind of wand I'm looking for?"

"In the worst kind of way."

"Water."

"You sure you don't need that bucket I mentioned earlier?" *You don't know who you're dealing with, Sister!*

Lisa laughed loudly. "You are quick on your toes."

"All six of them."

"Total or each?"

Still at it, then? Fine. "On average."

She turned and leaned back on the counter, surveying the wands along the walls. "So a water wand."

And the master wins yet another battle of inane banter. Grimbledung smiled at her back. "Those are over there" He pointed to her left at a rack of wands. "In yon' corner." They were sorted upward by color- the topmost were deep blue and the lowest ones were as light as the sky on a winter day. "More powerful are on the top."

She looked over her shoulder to see where he was pointing, and then looked in that direction. "I see." She moved to the wands and took a topmost one. It was a deep azure.

"That's a pretty powerful wand, Lisa." Grimbledung warned her as he moved around the counter. The last thing he needed was her flooding the place out. "So please be careful."

She nodded as she looked at the wand, carefully and slowly turning it in her hands. "I see."

"What do you need such a powerful wand for?" The amount of water that particular wand could produce was staggering. And in the right circumstances, lethal.

"For a fire."

Grimbledung looked at the female's face for any signs of malice; she was still smiling amicably. "Your planning on starting a fire?"

She shoved him with her free hand. "No, silly. For when one breaks out in town."

When? "You planning on starting a fire?" He tried again.

She shook her head. "No it's for when one does break out."

There's that when *again!* "Why would a fire break out?"

She shrugged and moved back to the counter. "Just in case. I was in Aution when that fire broke out." Grimbledung looked down at the floor as he moved back to his side of the counter. "You know what I thought as I was running for it, Grimbledung?"

Grimbledung looked past her shoulder. "What's that, Lisa?"

"Where were all the water wands?" She put the wand on the counter and spread her arms out wide. "You'd think that a few dozen water wands could have solved that whole problem quick and easy, right? That's what I was thinking. Why even have a bucket brigade when a few dozen water wands could have solved the problem."

Grimbledung opened his mouth. Then closed it. The thought hadn't occurred to him at the time. "That didn't occur to me at the time."

"Really?" She narrowed her eyes.

Grimbledung looked down at the wand. It really hadn't occurred to him. If it had, he would have passed out every water wand in the shop and it might, just might, have stopped all the events that had occurred since then from happening. *Gads*! Grimbledung looked at the female finally. She was still staring at him expecting an answer, apparently. "Really." He raised his hands defensively. "There was a lot going on all at once you know. There was a jamboree with a band and everything. Then things started to burn..." His voice trailed off.

Lisa shrugged, "Well, Julesville has turned out pretty good, in any case." She looked down. "How much?"

He blinked at her. "I don't know. Heaps good?"

She reached across and shoved him again. It seemed that his angry button was located someplace other than his shoulder because the move didn't seem to raise his blood pressure. Really, anyway. "No, silly. How much is the wand?" She smiled again.

For the owner of a gold mine? "Two silver."

Lisa reached into a pocket in her dress. "That's a fair price. I lost far more than that in the fire."

"How much?"

The smile faltered for the briefest of moments. "Heaps."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Lisa. Really I am." Because he was.

"Thanks Grimbledung." She smiled. She picked up the wand carefully. She had an overwhelming urge to shove it into the Gnome's mouth and burst his sides with a torrent of water. "I'm glad I met you," she said instead. "I hope to see you again."

"Sure?"

She turned and walked out of the store, waving over her shoulder as she went. "Ta, ta!"

"Same to you?" He said, confused. He knew what a 'tata' was, but he was pretty sure that's not what she meant. He *hoped* that wasn't what she meant. *Ewwww!*

Lisa stepped onto the sidewalk, the smile still on her face. After Door closed behind her, she spat onto the road- a good six feet away as the smile dropped from her face. A mask of hate replaced it. "Just you wait. *Grimbledung*" With a snort and another spit, she turned towards the ruins of Aution. Towards where three of her brothers were. The other two weren't there anymore. Neither were her parents. As a matter of fact, they weren't anywhere anymore. Thanks to Grimbledung. "Just you wait."

Grimbledung shook his head. "I'm glad *that's* over with." He returned to his doodles, unaware of the danger that he was in. "Two silvers. Very nice." He took another drink of ale. He considered how he felt. He did think he was feeling better. Or perhaps more drunk. Either seemed acceptable. He downed the drink and refilled it. And stared out the window.

Grimbledung exhaled loudly. "Bored," he said just as the door of the shop opened. He looked up.

Entering the shop was what had to have been the oldest looking human he had ever seen. He was bent over, and hunch-backed, and seemed to have only one arm.

Here we go. A nice quiet sale from this last shred of a human. This should be a piece of pie…

Meanwhile, across town...

Drimblerod exited the carpenter's shop, across town from the wand shop. He shuffled out the door with a bar stool in each hand. "Such a nice, a quiet morning," he said to no one in particular. As a female Dwarf approached, he smiled and offered "Good morning to you."

She kept her head facing straight ahead and ignored him completely.

"Some folk." Drimblerod hefted the two stools several times then began to walk back to the shop.

Akita snuck silently behind the Gnome. Finally when he was right on him, he pinched Drimblerod's side "Hey! Whatcha doing?"

Drimblerod dropped one of the stools. “You trying to scare me to death or something?”

“Scare you from what? Everything’s back to normal ‘round here.”

“Normal?”

Akita grinned, “Rrrright. What I meant was everything’s nice and calm ‘round here.”

Drimblerod nodded. “It’s about time too. After dealing with those Halflings, their stupid booby-trapped wands, assassins of various sizes and shapes, chasing Grimbledung over half the map, some quiet time will be worthwhile,” he said. “Fate, willing of course” he added quickly.

Akita let his tongue hang out. “So where's our often at the center of attention Gnome? Staying outta trouble?”

“I left him tending the shop while I went looking for some more stools.”

“More or new?”

Drimblerod shook his head, “The ones we have are holding up well. It's just that with the bigger floor plan, people come by to visit and we sometimes don't have enough places for them to sit.”

“Good problem to have.”

“True. I was telling Grimbledung just this morning...”

Akita turned to look up the road, his ears perked up. “Ya hear that?”

“Gads. No. What?”

“Glass breaking someplace up the way.” He took a step down the street. “And some hammering or a door slammin’.”

“In the direction of the shop?”

Akita looked back at the Gnome. “Someone’s slamming a door over and over.”

“Rolton Chips.” He looked up at the heavens as he moved beside the Constable. “Come on Fate. Just a week is all I ask.” He raised his hands plaintively. “What that too much to ask for?”

Apparently, it was.

The two walked down the street quickly, and at the intersection, turned left. Drimblerod could see glass and bits of wood in front of Second Hand Sorcery, halfway down the block. "Someone broke our window?" He could now hear Door opening and shutting loudly. Several pedestrians had stopped to watch the commotion.

"I hope that's all that's broke." Akita moved to a trot, Drimblerod close behind.

The two made it to the shop quickly. A crowd had gathered. "Go about your business. There's nothing to see, folks."

"Are you kidding?" Said a Human. "This is the best show in town, I'd imagine."

Several nodded in agreement. They all stayed put. In fact, more seemed to be joining what was now becoming a large crowd. At the back of the group, unnoticed by most, two Humans and a Gnomess stopped to watch.

"We're here Door," said Drimblerod as he stepped onto the wood planking in front of the shop. He patted the door's frame. "Relax."

Door shuddered in response.

"Grimbledung?" Drimblerod dropped the barstools and stepped into the store. Colossus was standing by the door to the back room. "You!"

"I was out back in the outhouse when I heard the commotion," said Colossus. "I just got here."

Akita bent down and sniffed the broken glass and framework. "Was a human."

"See?" Said Colossus.

"Yeah," said the man on the street. "Older guy, I think."

Akita turned around. "Yeah?"

"Didn't get a good look at him, you know." He shrugged. "None of my business, you know."

"Then you should go elsewhere, *you know*!" Growled Akita.

"Akita, get in here!"

With a head shake, Akita turned back to the shop. Door clattered at him as he entered. "Where's Grimble..." he stopped when he saw the Gnome lying on the floor. Or at least his feet because his partner was blocking the rest of him from view.

Drimblerod looked at his partner. He didn't seem to be breathing. There was a smallish (hopefully) metal rod sticking about three inches out of his chest. "I think he's dead."

"Nuts."

Drimblerod bent over to look at the metal rod. "It looks like a miniature crossbow bolt, if I had to guess."

Akita narrowed his eyes. "Hate them things. Little crossbows. Only thieves and assassins use 'em."

Drimblerod stood and moved to the back of the counter. He pulled open a drawer. It was empty. "Thieves." He slammed the door shut. He looked at Colossus. "And you didn't hear anything?"

"Just the window breaking. Then when I came out here, you were coming in." He looked around the store. "I'm going back to mopping, I think."

"You do that."

Colossus obliged Drimblerod. Truth be told, he *had* sworn an oath to obey the laws of the town but if the townsfolk disregarded their own laws and killed each other, he was fine with that.

Akita's ears perked up. "That thing silver?" He moved closer to examine the miniature crossbow bolt sticking out of his chest. It looked like four inches of it was sticking out of the Gnome. "Wonder how long that thing is."

"I don't know. Why?"

"Just curious." Akita sniffed deeply. "There's been a few people in here today. But one of them is the same one as outside." He glanced around the store. "Plenty of smells in here." He glanced at the corner, then down at Grimbledung. "Can't tell if it's a repeat customer or just someone passing through." He smirked. "I heard that lots of people come in here on a daily basis."

Drimblerod moved back to his partner. “Poor Grimbledung” He looked down. Something didn't look right. “That's odd.”

Akita poked around the showroom of the store. “What’s that?”

“I could have sworn that thing was sticking further into him just a moment ago.”

“Prolly was,” Akita muttered. He picked up a piece of window frame and licked it.

“What?” Drimblerod looked at the Constable.

“It’s not silver.”

“So?”

Akita ran his tongue from one side of his mouth to the other. “It’s gonna take silver to keep that crazy Gnome down from now on. And only while it’s in him unless it hits him in the heart.”

“Then what?”

Akita stared at him. “Then that’s it; end of the story titled Grimbledung. That’s what it’ll take.” He licked his lips “Or maybe a bunch of angry villagers that won’t listen to reason who have also built a really big fire.”

Drimblerod looked down just as the bolt pushed out the last little bit and clattered to the ground- all six inches of it. “What is going on?”

Grimbledung sat up suddenly. There was a neat round hole in his jerkin with a ring of blood around it. The skin peeking out from the hole was perfectly smooth. “Gah!”

Drimblerod hopped backwards. “What in the lands?!”

“See? Told ya.”

“Akita!” Grimbledung looked at the Constable. “I’m glad you’re here! We’ve been robbed.” He looked down and felt his chest. “And I've been shot!” He looked at Drimblerod. “And we’ve been robbed!”

“Ya get a good look at him?”

“It was a one-armed man!”

Akita grinned. “A one-armed man got the drop on you?”

“I don't think he's fully recovered yet,” offered Drimblerod.

Grimbledung’s eyes got large. “Wah.... wah... wah!” He said as he pointed at the window.

“Yes, Grim; we'll have to get the window fixed,” Drimblerod reassured him. He moved beside his partner. “It's not that big a deal.”

“Bah... bah... bah!” Said Grimbledung.

“I don't think he's fully recovered yet,” said Drimblerod again. “Mayhap he needs to lay down for a little bit.”

“Bah.. bah... BACK!”

“On your back is fine, I suppose.” Drimblerod patted his shoulder.

“Gah!” Grimbledung scooted backward.

Akita looked to his right and raised an eyebrow. “Relax, Grim. I’m sure there’re witnesses that can...”

“Grimbledung, you’re fine. You just need to relax.” Drimblerod interrupted as he stood up. “I'll get the stools I just bought so we can all sit down and talk this through nice and calm like.” He turned towards the door. His eyes flew wide and he stumbled back to sit on his butt beside his partner.

Semfeld was standing there holding a stool. He was also holding a wand.

Liverioso had the other stool. And a wand as well. Garibaldis’ wand to be exact.

Neither looked very happy.

“Bah... bah... bah!” Said Grimbledung.

Akita gestured toward the door with his snout.

“Pick up a nervous twitch, Constable*?”* Chéri seemed to be smiling. And holding two miniature crossbows. Loaded miniature crossbows. Their polished silver bolts gleamed in the light pouring in through the space that once held a window. “Constable Akita Finnish. How nice to see you again…” Began Chéri.

"Akita?" Asked Liverioso as he looked at the Constable. " Akita *Finnish*? By any chance was Spit…"

Chéri interrupted him: "We'll go with Drimblerod's idea. Let's all sit down and talk this through." She aimed one of the crossbows at Akita. "Brought you something," she said as she pulled the trigger, sending the miniature silver bolt directly at Akita's heart.

Liverioso gaped. "No!" It was too late, though.

Akita lurched as the…

Never mind.

The End

P.S. Fate looked over at the shop, surprised.

IS Akita shot point blank in the chest with a -lethal- silver bolt?

Will Chéri and Colossus leave town peacefully when they reunite?

How certain is Grimbledung's (delicious) death at the hand of the Elves when they find him?

FIND OUT in the exciting fourth installment of the Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop- **Book 4: A New Hope**

Available NOW on Amazon.

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If you still haven't looked at Robert's web page and are home sick for the day, eat some soup. And then maybe, just maybe hop over here to his webite at www.RobertPWills.com.

About the Author



Robert P. Wills is still, at the time of this writing, a senior U.S. Army Interrogator, Chief Warrant Officer Four. He is working very hard to be a *retired* U.S. Army Interrogator, Chief Warrant Officer Four after a nice simple, quiet retirement ceremony.

If you're rooting for Robert- like his page on Facebook:

https://www.facebook.com/RobertPatrickWills/

He is still living in Herrenberg, Germany in a house that is very, very large with his wife of many decades. They soon plan to move to where most all retirees move- Florida! Central Florida, that is. Swimming pools, movie stars. Well, not that last one, really.

He plans to continue his writing antics when he settles there, hoping to have book 4 - *A New Hope* published by late-2014, and work on Books 5- *Grimbledung and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good Minee*, and 6- *It's the Election, Stupid* moving along with publishing dates in early 2016 and late 2016, respectively.

Unless he is eaten by a shark first.

Fling of Illustrators

Robert seems to be gathering a Fling of Illustrators. Yes- they share the same collective as Sandpipers. Obviously.

Rio Burton (formerly Rio Taylor) is the now-married, original illustrator of the first book in the Tales From a Second-Hand Wand Shop series. She has also lent her skills to Book 3.

Rio is currently living in Colorado while she and her (also very talented) husband try to figure out the United Kingdom's absurdly unfair green-card policies.



In the meanwhile, she is plying her artistic skills on several games, graphic novels, and of course, the Tales series.

Nikki Taylor's outstanding work on book 2 led to the author asking her to once again provide illustrations for the series. And, once again, Nikki's talent

shines through. She has recently moved to a certain author's home in Florida where she is living rent free within 70 yards of the community pool, hot tub, and fitness center! What a deal, right?



As of right now Nikki uses Deviant Art for her artwork gallery and sales information. Along with selling (excellent) character illustrations, she is currently working on several flash game designs for an up-and-coming website.



Daniel Reuben "Roo" Young is another talented artist that is now part of The Fling. Roo's work centers around video game character conceptual art, but thanks to his association with Rio and Nikki, has been guilted into supplying sketches of RatShambler and Mink the Minotaur. Maybe he needs to reassess his life choices…



Book Club Discussion Questions

Is it wrong to envision Nulu- A strong, confident female character who is (refreshingly) a healthy, normal sized Trolless as merely a sex object in her battle armor?

Draw what you think she would look like. Use a separate sheet (or sheets) of paper if you need to. Please forward all drawings to the author.

Julie has herself a man. As a friend of Nulu, do you think the Sisterhood Rule of finding a suitable companion for your friend applies across races? Why? Why Not?

Do Grimbledung and Drimblerod have any chance at finding respectable womenfolk? Write down possible scenarios that involve them finding said females. Forward them to the author.

Maca. What is up with her? Elf? Witch? Demon? What gives?

What exactly happened with Sage that made her leave Liverioso behind? Should he forgive her if they ever reunite? How will Semfeld feel about a reunion? How would you feel if you suddenly found yourself being "the third wheel"?

[1] So said a famous Shaman once. Sort of.

[2] Book 2, Chapter 37. A couple of paragraphs down.

[3] *The Accidental Sailor*. It'll be a rollicking short in the Tales From the Mora Tau Bar and BAR.

[4] Sorry, that was a real reach.

[5] **Warning: Math Content!** Considering the height of Halflings to scale with typical 6-foot Human terms, this is a 90 foot drop. (45 ft drop/3 ft tall = 15 heights * 6 ft tall = 90 ft drop). 90 Feet = Lethal.

[6] Oh yes, there's going to be a bank robbery at some point. And it's going to go on all day…

[7] Literally! If you don't believe that, just look!

[8] It caused enough of a stir when Aution burned to the ground resulting in the town of Julesville, and not soon after, Halfling City was mentioned. The suggestion to rename Prost Garrison was NOT greeted with smiles. Persnickety folk, those Illustra.... err Cartographers.

[9] Hence the term, "Pic(king) your leaders.

[10] No, it doesn't.

[11] Honestly, how much security do you need when everyone knows that the occupants eat trespassers??

[12] Yeah, she did. But she didn't let on; she was polite that way.

[13] Yes, we'll just come out and say it- Akita was hips-notized.

[14] Even being the size of Orcs, stretching was fairly important- it was rule number 18 in their handbook, in fact

[15] No, we have no idea what that means either.

[16] Whew! Right?

[17] So far so good!

[18] This can't go this well for much longer...

[19] Here we go...

[20] No we don't understand it either. Just suspend your belief and go with it, all right?

[21] Really, it's more exciting this way.

[22] It was, in fact, thirty minutes to Cool Springs, however the Orc assumed that if each rode ten minutes, that would equal the thirty minute. This bit of information does not affect the Orcs, but does come into play later. That's why it is being brought up.

[23] Half-board remember? They still need money for lunch.

[24] Well, mostly proud.

[25] For now at least….

[26] Always a sure sign of a good person- people who are mean to servers are black hearted scoundrels to be avoided and/or dumped at the first opportunity! Beware!

[27] Send the complaint "C/O Rio"

[28] Book 16 - Grimbledung, the Witch, and the Dragon's Wardrobe

[29] No, it's not. For two reasons: First off, South Jute is completely nuts. Second, Cool Springs isn't even *on* the map.

[30] See?

[31] Human ones. At least for the first twenty years, anyway.

[32] Field Scroll 2.22-3 is out there for everyone. Even Gnomes.