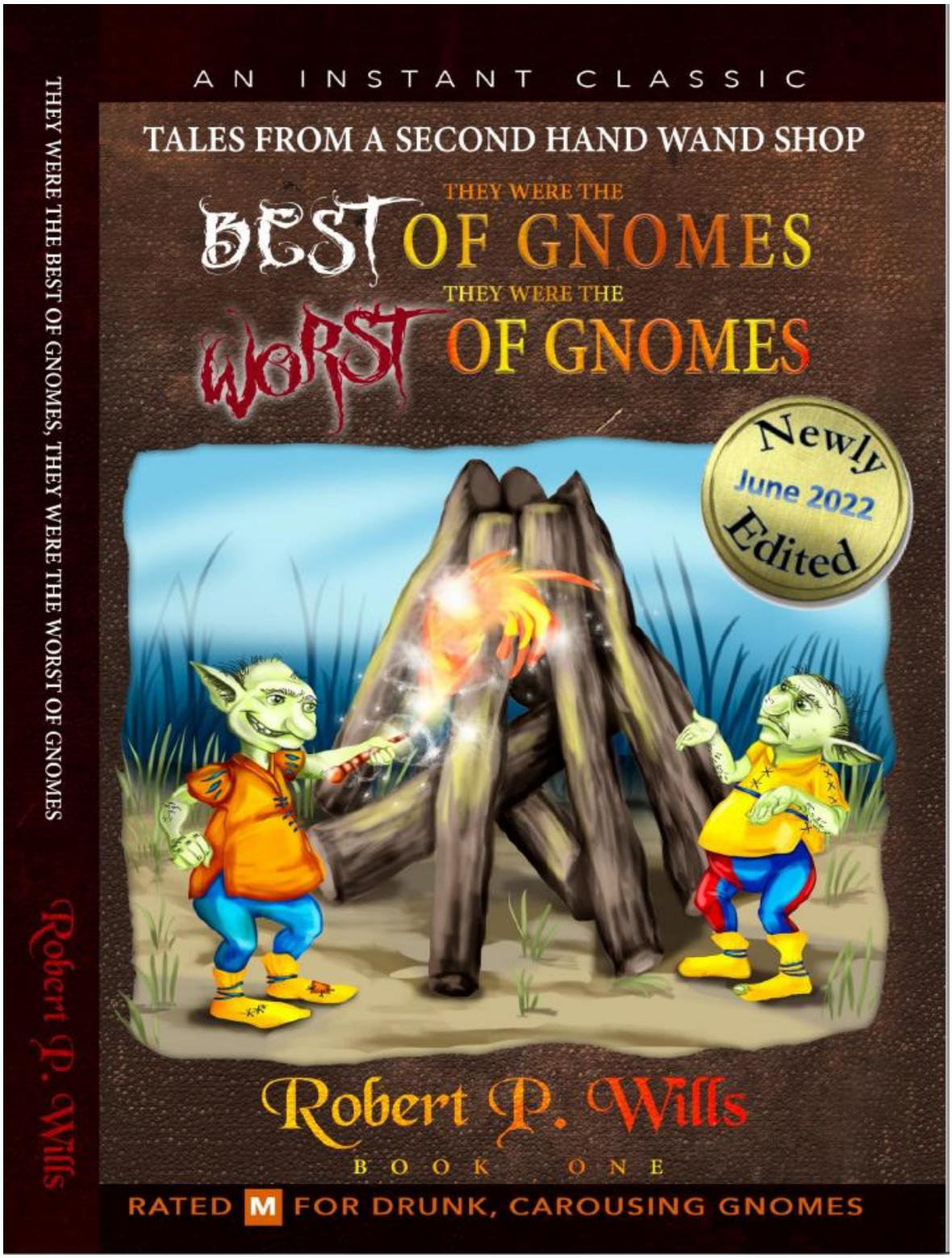
AN INSTANT CLASSIC
TALES FROM A SECOND HAND WAND SHOP
THEY WERE THE
BEST OF GNOMES
THEY WERE THE
WORST OF GNOMES
Newly
June 2022
Edited
Robert P. Wills
BOOK ONE
RATED M FOR DRUNK, CAROUSING GNOMES
THEY WERE THE BEST OF GNOMES, THEY WERE THE WORST OF GNOMES
Robert P. Wills

They Were the Best of Gnomes
They Were the Worst of Gnomes

Book 1: Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop

Any similarities between the characters in this book and persons living or dead (or undead) is purely coincidental. The author has made an effort to avoid using the names of real places or businesses in his story. Again, similarities with like-named businesses or places is coincidental. It would also be disturbing.

No animals were harmed in the writing of this book.

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Written by Robert P. Wills
Illustrated by Rio Taylor

For my father- David W. Wills

Thanks to Mary Grace, Donna Allen, and the talented Krystal Urban- for their editing assistance

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Grimbledung and Drimblerod -Fast Friends

Tea Time... The Gnomes sat down at the table- Rat already had half a scone in his mouth. "Hungry?" Asked Drimblerod, "Those constant naps do take a toll, don't they?" Rat continued to chew as he reached for his cup. He gave Drimblerod a glance with his good eye as he sipped his coffee. Wordlessly he went back to work on the scone. He would banter and bicker later; now Rat was concentrating on his scones and Gnollish Dark Blend® coffee. Serious business, that.

Downstairs, the bell above the front door jingled. Grimbledung frowned, "Stupid door! I'll go shoo them off and make sure it's locked this time." Teatime overrode any profit-making tendencies the Gnomes had. Grimbledung bounded down the stairs and was greeted by two Half-Orcs. One looked familiar. The other was probably from the same litter. Its brother perhaps? Suddenly a lantern went off in Grimbledung's head. "Pike, nice to see you again," he said cheerily. Shooing Half-Orcs was dangerous business; teatime might override profits but self-preservation was always at the top of the list. "What brings you around?" *At the time for tea* he thought.

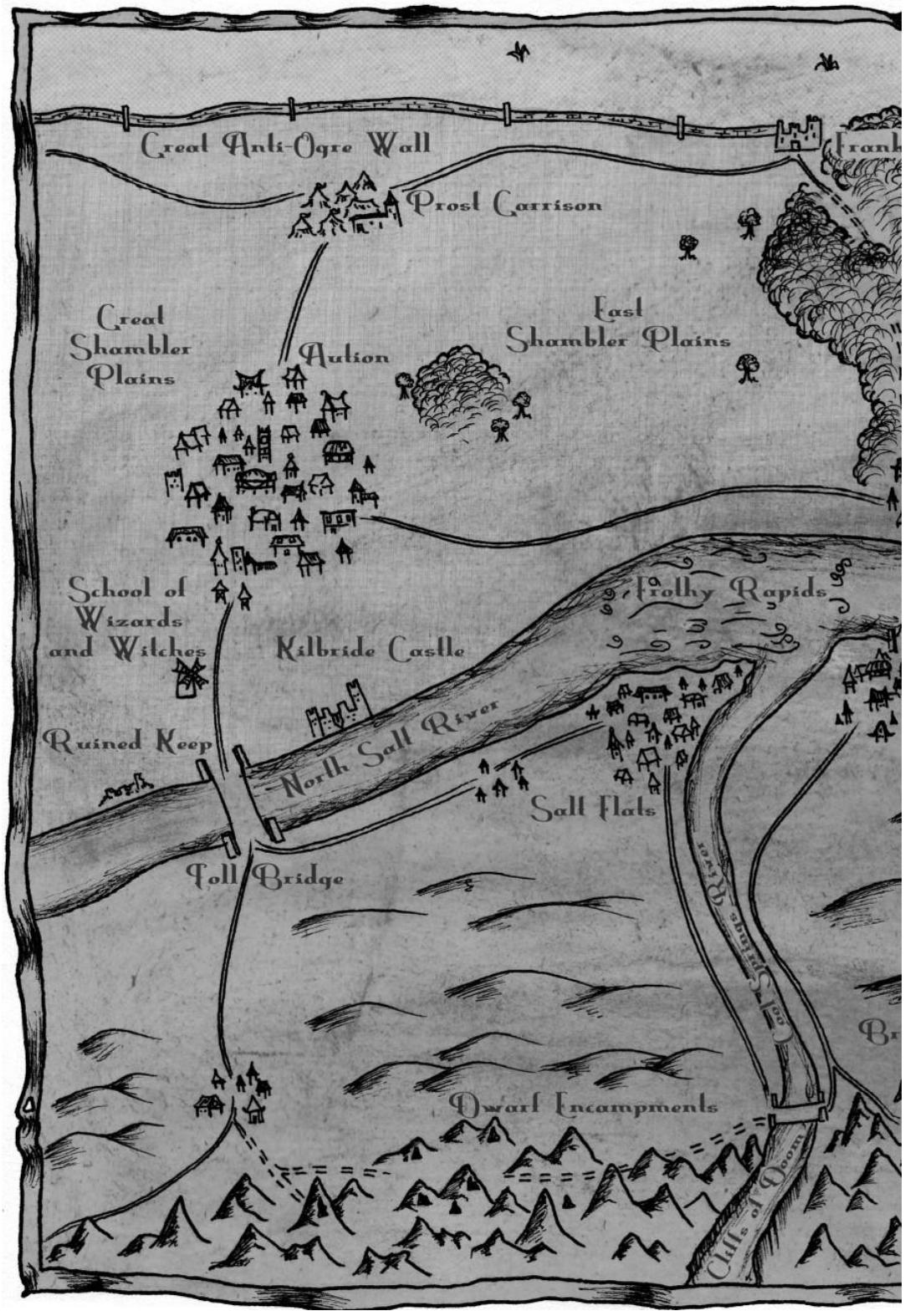
"Hullo," began Pike, "You tell Pike come back with mate sometime." He smiled with sharp, jagged teeth. "This her." He jabbed a thick thumb at the female. Just his pointed thumbnail was longer than the entire of Grimbledung's thumb.

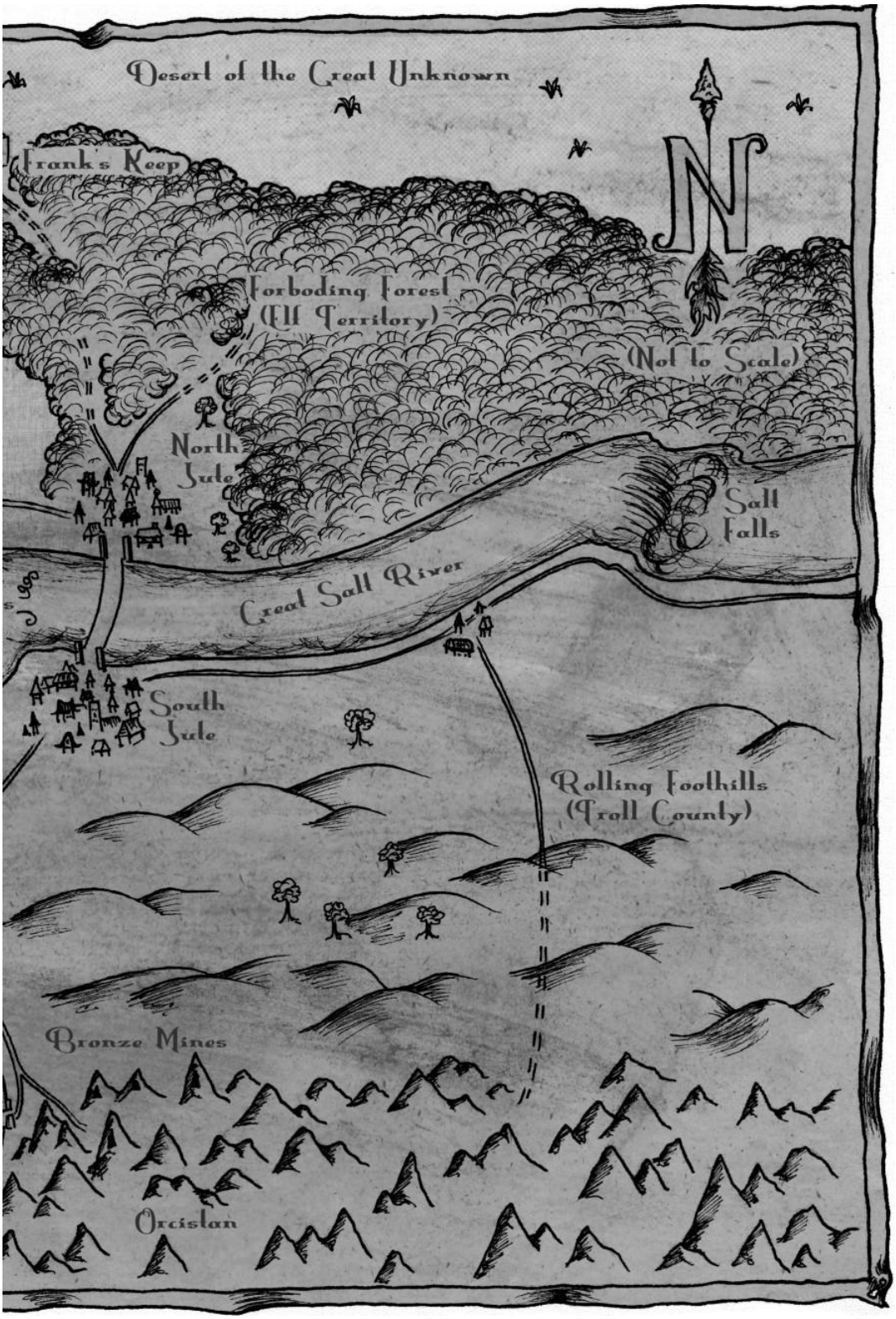
Female? Suddenly, ~~a many-legged~~ a many-hairy-legged creature ran up Grimbledung's spine- he

was overtaken by the Heebie-Jeebies. “Gah!” Came out before he could stop it. “Nice to meet you,” followed (fortunately) close behind. Suddenly, not in control of his senses he heard himself continue, “Want to join us upstairs for tea? Its teatime, time for tea you know.”

“Sure?” Offered the Female. She had never been invited for tea. Or anywhere for that matter; Half-Orcs were notorious Crashers. That was probably why no one bothered to invite them; they showed up anyway.

The many-hairy-legged creature continued up Grimbledung’s spine, into his ear and somehow made it to his belly. It joined several butterflies who were already engaged in a lively dance. “Bah, bah, bah” stuttered Grimbledung (in time with the beat in his belly no less). Tea with a couple of Half-Orcs. Drimblerod would not be pleased. There was a bright side after all! With the biggest smile he could manage, he continued, “Come on up. You can sit next to Drim, Missus Pike.”


Great Anti-Ogre Wall
Frost Garrison
Great Shambler Plains
Aution
East Shambler Plains
School of Wizards and Witches
Kilbride Castle
Frothy Rapids
Ruined Keep
North Salt River
Salt Flats
Toll Bridge
Dwarf Encampments
Hills of Doom


Desert of the Great Unknown
Frank's Keep
N
Forboding Forest
(Elf Territory)
(Not to Scale)
North
Jule
Salt
Falls
Great Salt River
South
Jule
Rolling Foothills
(Troll County)
Bronze Mines
Orcistan

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Chapter One
It's All Downhill From Here

"Then the plan is set?" Asked the Grizzled Old Warrior. "We *finally* attack tomorrow morning?"

The other generals at the table nodded. There were several races represented around the table along with the Human warrior; there were Half-Orcs, Trolls, and Halflings. There were more Halflings than the others combined. It was their plan after all; the others were being paid for their participation.

The leader of the group, a Halfling, banged the hilt of his sword on the table. "Yes, the plan is set," he said to the grizzled warrior, "The invasion begins tomorrow!" He looked around the table, "You all have your orders. Now go execute them." He narrowed his beady eyes, "Or I'll be ordering the executing."

The others at the table all stood hurriedly. Even on their best days, Halflings were unpredictable, unruly, and unforgiving. The 'three U's' as they were called. When Halflings didn't get their way, the 'U's' became capitalized and an exclamation point was added. For good reason.

As the others left the room, one of the Halfling generals approached the leader who was still seated at his massive, ornately decorated chair. It might not have been a throne, but it was in the right zip code. "Lord High Priest, are you sure we can trust some of these warriors we've hired for this mission?"

The Lord High Priest of the Great Halfling Empire looked at his general. He narrowed his eyes, "What?" He said coolly.

The General fidgeted; he was in dangerous territory; questioning the LHP. "The plan is an excellent plan and is sure to work out gloriously." He looked over his shoulder at the others as they departed. "It is just that I don't trust these Tallers[1] to get the job done."

"I don't trust them to be able to find their own noses with the lights on. But *they* don't have to be successful in their mission for *ours* to be. There are less than a hundred of them in all and all they have

to do is hold outlying towns in check." The LHP stared at his General for a moment. "Are you done questioning my plan, or is there *more* you want to discuss?"

The General's eyes grew wide, "No, Lord High Priest, Sir. I am sorry to have bothered you!" He gulped as he bowed deeply, "I will leave you to your absurdly overwhelmingly masterful planning."

The Lord High Priest chuckled. "Now, now, General; take it easy. You don't get into a position like mine by not listening to your subordinates."[2] The General visibly relaxed so he continued, "So go get your Halflings ready for our glorious, unabashedly successful part in this campaign."

The General bowed again and then smiled, "Thank you Sir, I'm glad you feel that way. You know, I think we are a lot alike, you and me."

As the General turned to leave, the Lord High Priest lifted his sword (which he was still holding by the blade because he had been using it like a gavel) and smashed the other Halfling on the head with it.

Any sound the collapsing Halfling made was drowned out by the clanging of the sword.

"Conscripts!"

Within moments, two Halflings appeared. "Yes, Lord High Priest?" They asked in unison.

Without even looking at them (they were conscripts after all) the LHP commanded, "Take this one to the Half Orc encampment. Tell them he's for the kitchen."

"As a cook?" One asked, confused.

"Not exactly." The Lord High Priest smiled in an Unforgiving! and Unpredictable! manner. "I have seen the future and we are guaranteed absurdly overwhelming success." He flipped the sword around and caught it by the hilt. He pointed it at the conscript. "And absolutely positively nothing will stand in our way. *Nothing*."

Chapter Two
Wherein Grimbledung and Drimblerod Meet

Grimbledung crested the hill on a cloudy, yet still bright and crisp fall afternoon. He gazed at the carnage below. There was a lot of it. It was what weeks of battle left behind. That, and profit.

"And honestly, a little bit of stench," offered Grimbledung, helpfully.

And honestly, a little bit of stench.

Red and yellow flowers -still in bloom even as the leaves hinted at changing colors to a season that would probably not get discussed again[3]- carpeted the fields before him. Above, hundreds of birds caught the breeze and flew in lazy circles- mostly crows but some vultures and eagles. Very soon, if his experiences with such events held true, vultures would outnumber the other birds three to one.

Flash! Staff in hand, Grimbledung continued down the hill. The Flash! Staff was more of a precaution than a walking aid; one never knew when a merely comatose fighter would come-to and think the battle was still raging. The solid wood staff was topped with a Power Orb imbued with a particularly powerful Lumens! Spell. As mandated by local ordinance, it was the exclamation point that denoted the 'particularly powerful' as opposed to 'regular strength' version of the spell. A sharp knock- in this case by rapping the staff on the ground- fired the always loaded spell. It was not bright enough to cause permanent damage (that would require two exclamation points) but would cause anyone and everyone nearby to see blue and purple spots for about three minutes. This was plenty of time for Grimbledung to affect what he called a Tactical Flanking Maneuver. Witnesses described it as 'running away flailing like a scared six-year-old girl'. Elvin – Elfin was Grimbledung's opinion on the matter. As he went down the hill, Grimbledung absently swung the staff at a passing crow. It had seemed to take a dive at Grimbledung as if to get a better look at him. Surprised he connected; he looked wide-eyed at the careening bird. The

subsequent Flash! made him sit for a full three minutes.

Drimblerod saw the flash (he was unsure of its potency) from across the valley. *A glint off a soldier's shield?* A quick glance at the cloudy sky and that hope was gone. *Another gatherer.* Most looters took items that could be stored and sold easily; swords, daggers, shields and such. Wands did not fit into either the 'store' or 'sell' easily category for most folks.

Wand were however, what Drimblerod was after. They were his specialty. Even though Drimblerod knew that many a variety of wands could be had after an extensive battle, it wasn't something he had done before. He was working under duress.

Drimblerod's shop- Second Hand Sorcery did a fair business of wand sales; enough for him to earn a decent living that fit his simple lifestyle nicely. Unfortunately, since the Merchants' Guild recently raised their percentage off the top to fifteen, it was pointed out to Drimblerod (this is where the duress came in) by a rather large Merchants' Guild Dues Collector that the shop was not bringing in nearly enough coins to support not only the aforementioned guild dues, but also the afore-aforementioned Guild Collector's cut. Paltry is the word, the Ogre had used. With a duressfully clenched fist.

The issue was (as Drimblerod tried to explain while he was being held upside down) that since times were tough, many people were out of work and tended to wander around aimlessly in shops to fill their non-employed days. This wouldn't have been too bad if it weren't for the inconvenient fact that the aimless, unemployed shoppers who came into Drimblerod's shop also tended to talk potential, employed shoppers from buying. Business went from bad to worse in a short amount of time.

The Ogre however, did not care.

So now Drimblerod was not only in the market for a wider variety of wands, he was also in the market for a means to keep 'windowlickers'[4] out of his shop. He was leaning toward a Hellhound as he had not come across anyone he would trust as a partner.

In any case, back to the wands:

Drimblerod was in search of several easy-to-market wands that were used in and around battles. Typically, Dispellers (against other magic), Incinerators (used by cooks), Levitators (used by the weak, lazy, or crafty- depending on the point of view), and Nudgers (used by hack Magicians) were commonly found. In addition to these, the more-rare and valuable Repeller Wands could also be found. Before large battles, squads of men would pool their salary to hire Wizards or (if no Wizards were available) Sorcerers to accompany them. Magicians were a distant third and hired as a last resort. Unless of course, someone was having a birthday party, then they were at the top of the list.

Sorcerers drew from the magical forces in the ground (they called it *What's This?)* to create spells. The problem with this was that with a large number of Sorcerers tapping the *What's This?* in a particular area, it would run out fairly quickly. Anything over a week and the landscape would be leeched dry. Then the Sorcerers, (with their No Refund policy enforced by the local union that no one wanted to cross) would all go scampering away in a much more dignified manner than a six-year-old girl. But not by much.

As previously mentioned, Magicians were hardly considered when life and death were on the line; Wizards were the way to go. Day after day, week after week, they would blast away with a wand or two. Even if you had to tie them to their mount, spoon feed them, and occasionally change their breeches, they would stick to their task. As far as pricing, a soldier's life was literally decided by the haggling. Wizards who commanded a silver coin a day usually carried an assortment of wands to include Dispellers, Levitators, an Incinerator and of course-the nefarious Nudger Wand. Honestly; no one wanted to be turned into a newt, have to carry their own gear, or worse- go without a hot dinner! But a Nudger- those were welcomed gleefully by the rank and file fighter. Unfortunately, Wizards with Nudger wands were often frowned upon by higher-ups (who tended to stay out of the immediate battle area) because a Nudger Wand merely affected the trajectory of an incoming catapult round or ballista bolt. Those to the front, rear, and flanks usually lost patience with a Nudger Wand Wielding Wizard rather quickly. This often caused an event called "Blue on Blue" by the Officers, and was very much discouraged. Loudly. Non-judicial punishment often followed the loud scolding.

Above and beyond those wands, it was the Wizard who could wield a Repeller Wand that received four or five silver coins a day. Unlike the sloppier Nudger wand, Repellers sent a projectile back along its original trajectory- or at least a close approximation of it. Once it was over enemy ranks, no one faulted a wizard on where exactly a returning projectile landed. Officers liked seeing Repeller Wands because they kept the battle just like the field scroll said it should be; Blue on Red.[5]

Drimblerod had already picked up a fair assortment of ordinary wands and was presently searching in Earnest for costlier wands. Without any luck. Drimblerod rolled the soldier back onto his shield, just below the scratched in '0743-Earnest'. "Better luck next time," Drimblerod said as he patted the dead soldier's back, "You should have sprung for a Repeller." He brushed off his hands and drew his Dragon Spine Wand.

Short at about seven inches (it was originally just the very tip of a Dragon's tail) it was still a formidable wand with a wide array of offensive, defensive and of course, Precursor spells. Often used for bluster, Precursor spells let those nearby know that a powerful, potentially hazardous spell was about to be cast. Effects such as gathering storm clouds, lightning bolts, or even vortexes of various colors of light from the end of a wand were common Precursor spells.

The Precursor spell of choice for Drimblerod was 'The Crossbow'. There were no atmospheric effects or lightshows- just a simple sound; "Ka Clack". It was the sound made by pulling the charging handle on a crossbow "Ka," and the string dropping into the trigger release under great tension "Clack". It was a universal sound which transcended language and race. Everyone everywhere had heard this sound at one point or another. These were, after all dangerous times. In fact, nothing sent a shiver up the back of an after-hours intruder like "Ka-Clack" breaking the still of the night. When faced with a group bent on redistributing Drimblerod's hard earned wealth among themselves, the sound would usually give the band of ne'er-do-wells pause. Unfortunately, Drimblerod had learned that a well-placed warning shot was also sometimes necessary to bring the point home.

There are two main camps when it comes to warning shots: Over-The- Head and At-The-Feet. Drimblerod was in an altogether different camp- Center Mass. It was a simple yet resoundingly effective camp; pick the largest and/or leader of the aforementioned group and aim center

mass. In a word this told the group:

"Ireallythinkyoushouldreconsideryourcurrentcourseofactionoryouren
ext"

This type of warning shot never failed in disbanding a group. It also precluded the inevitable from happening when one chose an over-the-head or at-the-feet approach: the death of an innocent bystander.

Invariably, a warning shot would ricochet off something or another and hit a hapless widow who was the bedrock of the community or some kid (or kid-like creature) whom everyone liked because "they were so full of life." These 'innocent bystanders' could have been actual demons, eating small pets up to that point, but now that they were dead, they were transformed into saints. Citizens would get riled up, drawing the attention of the local authorities. And when the local authorities arrived, they were greeted by the self-same thugs who by then were assisting the citizenry in plucking chickens, heating up tar, or helping build some gallows. Center of Mass was the way to go in Drimblerod's book. Besides, when there is only one person telling the story to the local authorities, there was no one to rebut said story.

Grimbledung blinked away the last of the pesky blue and purple spots and continued down to the carnage on the valley floor, mindful to not whack any other crows. He did keep an eye on the one that seemed to be keeping an eye on him. The valley was littered with all types of soldiers, officers (their armor was shiny), and beasts. The particular corpses Grimbledung was looking for were the ones dressed in robes. Wizard robes. He knew of other Gatherers who always searched foot soldiers and officers for Incinerators or Levitators as they came across them while looking for Wizards. He held them in low regard. They stooped to pick up a copper piece on the way to a gold piece. "Let them have their copper," Grimbledung mused, "It's gold I'm after!"

Another couple of copper pieces, thought Drimblerod as he pocketed yet another Incinerator. He knew of Gatherers who would pass by a dozen Incinerators while looking for one valuable wand. *Five of these*

are a silver coin; who would pass up a silver coin on the street? "Not I!" He said out loud as he rolled over another officer to check his belt.

"Check his sleeves while you're at it, copper-grubber!" Drimblerod heard from behind him. He stood slowly but as he turned, he drew his wand from his belt in the blink of an eye and finished with what he hoped was a flashy yet also formidable pose. He was greeted by a shortish creature. Definitely a Gnome with perhaps a Dwarf thrown into the family tree for good measure. Simply speaking, the two of them could be related.

"Got a sack full of copper then?" Asked Grimbledung as he leaned on his staff in what he hoped was a haughty pose.

"More like a sack of silver *and* gold, friend," replied Drimblerod. He still had not lowered his wand, since the fellow before him still had two firm hands on what had to be a powerful staff judging by the size of the Power Orb affixed to the top of it. "Tell me where you came from and I'll retrace your steps and double my coins." He smiled in what he hoped looked like an honest one, though since he did not have much (if any) familiarity with honesty, he was guessing.

Grimbledung would have believed he was looking in a mirror; he had seen the same dishonest smile right below his own nose for centuries (metaphorically speaking, that is). "You want to be behind me then, so you can take all my legally obtained loot? I think not, Pal. Just work over there in front of me so I can keep an eye on you." Grimbledung gestured casually with his staff off to the side, yet still in front of him.

Chapter Three
Wherein Grimbledung and Drimblerod Come to an Agreement

Without even thinking, Drimblerod followed the orb on the staff as the Gnome pointed with it and continued on the same arc with his eyes. Not 200 paces in that direction was a heap of brown cloaks. "That sounds like an excellent suggestion, thanks friend!" He said over his shoulder, already trotting toward the pile of cloaks.

Grimbledung blinked in surprise. Never had he suspected the strange Gnome to quickly accept defeat and move off. He watched the Gnome trotting off and in between bounds he spied the brown cloaks over his shoulder. *Cloaks*? At least three or four wizards had died in one spot! Grimbledung broke out into a run, careful not to let his staff bounce too much.

By the time they were 100 paces away from the cloaks, they were neck and neck. And tiring. Gnomes, at four feet tall and almost three feet wide, are not known as sprinters. "It's my pile! I saw it first!" Puffed Drimblerod, "Besides, *you* gave it to me!"

"Did not!" Huffed Grimbledung back, "Did not! I was *clearly* pointing at someplace else and *I* saw them first!"

It was another ten paces before either had the breath to speak again. "I distinctly heard you tell me to look over here and to go here to get the wands!" said Drimblerod. "Here!"

By now, the pace was down to a quick walk and slowing. Grimbledung tried to get the orb of his staff in front of the other Gnome but was too tired to hold it out that far. *It worked once, it may work again*, he thought. "Look here!" He coaxed as he banged the base of the staff against his thigh. It flashed brightly. Several now-blinded birds careened out of the sky.

"Ah Hah!" Cheered Drimblerod, who was not looking at the staff at all. He was completely focused on the cloaks. Sticking out of the pile of cloaks was the shaft of a nearly black wand. Sheathing his own wand, he made a dive for the black wand. He came up short. Grimbledung spied the wand moments after Drimblerod's cheer. Holding his staff like a spear, he hurled it ahead of himself and also

dove. Also short.

Both Gnomes looked up at the wand and began to scamper towards it just as the staff clattered to the ground directly behind it. It went off three times in quick succession, blinding both Gnomes.

"If this is permanent you will be hearing from my Troll Lawyers!" Cried Drimblerod as he rolled onto his back, palms over his eyes.

"Relax, it's temporary. Just wait thr ... sit very still with your eyes closed for about ten minutes so the effect will wear off quicklier."

"You were going to say 'three' weren't you? You're still trying to cheat me out of the wands you gave me!" Shouted Drimblerod.

"I was not going to say three," said Grimbledung. *What was I going to say?* he thought. *What could I have said that started with 'thr'? What a corner to paint myself into! This Gnome seems pretty smart, as all Gnomes are, he mused. Really, we are a much maligned race, we Gnomes. Smarter than Elves, nimbler than Dwarves- what's not to like? Wait, what was I supposed to be ...*

"Liar! LIAAAR! I can't believe you'd try to cheat a fellow Gnome!" Bellowed Drimblerod. "Three minutes says you? I'll have found the wand by then says I!" With that he began to search on all fours for the black wand.

"You sound piratey when you're angry. It's absurd, really." Grimbledung opened his eyes wide, willing himself to see past the floating blue spheres. He began to feel around for the wand frantically hoping to have it first. Two minutes later, with the telltales of shapes and colors finally beginning to return to their eyes, both spotted the outline of the wand, still sticking out of the robes. Both grabbed at the wand, and both had it. Struggling to their feet, they wrestled for possession of the wand, when suddenly their grunts and curses were silenced by a very familiar "Ka-Clack". Both Gnomes froze. Each had one hand on the hilt and one on the shaft.

"Well I'm dashed!" Said Drimblerod, "Look what you did!"

"Me? You started this entire festival of absurdness by collecting copper-anty wands! If you were a respectable Gatherer, none of this ..." He stopped to listen, "Why are you humming?"

"That's not me."

Both Gnomes looked down at the now humming wand which also seemed to be getting warmer.

"Well now *I'm* dashed." Grimbledung said. "And I don't even know what that means! We need to get rid of this wand before we're both

obliterated- or worse!" The wand was now uncomfortably hot. "What kind of wand is this? Can you tell?" Grimbledung squinted past fading, but still present blue spheres. He could not make out the wand.

Many wand makers imbued fail-safes into their wands; Anti-Grappling was one of the more common types. It worked like this: if a caster prepared a spell and (usually a couple of seconds) after preparing it, more hands were sensed on the wand by the Anti-Grapple fail-safe, the wand would go into overload and explode. This kept people from grabbing a spell caster's wand by the business end. Another only slightly less common fail-safe involved the wand exploding if after a spell caster prepared a spell, the wand was knocked from his hand. The Warrior Guild routinely complained about the unfairness of this at the annual Guilds Jubilee and Cookout to the Wizard's Guild. After all, nothing exploded if someone grabbed a Warrior's sword or knocked a mace from their hand. The official reply from the Wizard's Guild was always a very polite "We'll get right on that." Followed by slightly less polite sniggering.

Blue and purple spots floated by allowing Drimblerod glimpses of the wand. "It's black and I think it's wood! Acacia or Oak, maybe?" He had to speak loudly over the humming. Hairs on his hand were beginning to curl. "*Do we toss it or not*? I say we toss it! Yes?"

"You're just saying that so that I'll let go and then you'll keep the wand!"

Drimblerod let go of the wand.

"Gah!" Grimbledung's unfocused eyes got huge as he tossed the wand straight up.

Both Gnomes dove away from the wand as it spun in a lazy arc over their heads. A crack of thunder sounded and a blue bolt of energy crackled out of the wand. It spun in the opposite direction like a hose whipping about spraying water- except much more lethal. Great scorches ground across the wet earth as the wand flailed about. Aiming upward, clouds were cut in half. Finally, with the spell spent, the wand clattered to the ground. On top of the Flash! Staff which promptly went off. Both Gnomes, intently watching the wand -hoping to save themselves from obliteration- were both blinded.

"Well, I'm dashed."

Grimbledung picked up a rock and heaved it in Drimblerod's direction. His luck for the day still had not changed; he missed completely. Furious, he flopped to the ground, thrashed around for good measure, then sat up.

Both Gnomes sat in silence for three full minutes. When their eyesight finally returned, they were sitting less than a foot apart, practically touching noses.

"I think I may very well kill you with my bare hands. That, I have to tell you, is saying a lot. If you even try to say you're dashed, it will happen. Right here. Right now."

"Where do you sell your wands? I really think you'd do well in my shop." Drimblerod said. He leaned forward just enough so their noses touched. "Deal?"

Even though his eyes were finally clear, Grimbledung saw red. Red air. Red on the ground. Red on his hand. Red! Red! Red! Red all over the insane Gnome in front of him. He rolled to his feet and assumed a semi-crouching stance. "I AM going to kill you now!"

"Hear me out. I have a proposition for you."

"Here's a proposition- DIE!" Grimbledung growled and snarled as he circled. "Grrr! Kill. Kill! KILL! Stand up and die like a Gnome!" He snarled as he clawed at the air in front of him.

"Listen, friend. Just listen to my proposal." Started Drimblerod.

Grimbledung circled the seated Gnome, snarling and shadowboxing as he went. "Oooh, the unimaginable poundings I am going to heap on you!" He said as he punched the air.

"You sell wands- I sell wands; by combining our efforts we can maximize our profits."

Grimbledung threw his head back and howled, arms splayed out to his side in what he hoped was a formidable pose. He held it for a full five seconds past the end of his long howl.

"So, I have this store," continued Drimblerod nonplussed, "it's in a nice rent-controlled part of town. Real cheap, lots of foot traffic."

Another howl erupted from Grimbledung. This time he was on all fours. And drooling. Heavily.

Drimblerod ignored the drooling and continued: "Sales could be better, that's true. It's the window lickers that cause undecided customers to leave. I want a teetering customer to fall on the side of a sale. You could help with them and the Merchants' Guild..."

"Now you die!" Interrupted Grimbledung. He feigned several attacks, clawed at the air and snarled. Then he spat at Drimblerod's feet. *The* Faux Pas. As soon as he did it, he realized his mistake and his eyes grew large.

Drimblerod narrowed his eye as he drew his wand, "Now *that's* getting personal." 'Ka-Clack' it went, menacingly as he aimed at the other Gnome. "I truly hope you brought more than a Flash! Staff with you today." Ethereal wisps began to materialize and swirl over Drimblerod's head. They were *not* part of a lightshow. "The posturing I accept as valid haggling. Even the shadow boxing was well executed. The howling was a nice addition as well. But. You. S*pat*. At me." The Ethereal wisps became arm-thick tendrils as if a magical octopus was forming. A very *angry* magical octopus.

Grimbledung stood arms in front of him, hands bent like claws and crouched to attack, but he was frozen in place. Since spitting, he had not moved a muscle. He had just turned down Faux Pas Avenue onto the Cul-de-Sac of Inappropriateness. And parked in a loading-only zone. His hazard lights weren't even on.

There are a great many rites and haggling gestures that are universal- the typically human antic of spreading coins between various pockets and pouches to hide wealth, feinting displeasure with size or color, even noticing phantom flaws were tolerated by most races. Some race-specific bargaining techniques include ear rubbing (buyer's or seller's) by elves; offering a random child and/or pet instead of currency (Golems), a punch to the chest (Ogres), a swift kick (Trolls), and ear slapping (Gnomes). Only one race included spitting; Orcs.

Uncouth and ill-tempered creatures, even Trolls and Ogres refused to deal with them on endeavors of a business nature -war related and sporting endeavors were acceptable however. Goblins openly traded with Orcs and it caused them all sorts of problems in their dealings with other races. Elves and Dwarves killed them both on sight, just because they believed it good for the general populace. They considered it their community service. For anyone else to spit in negotiations was the Negotiate-or calling the Negotiate-ee the aforementioned uncouth, ill-mannered Orc. Fighting words in one globule of spittle.

The tendrils of Ethereal magic coalesced over Drimblerod's head, forming a halo of ~~green power~~ angry green power.

"Wait ..." Was all Grimbledung managed to say as Drimblerod slashed the wand at him. In an instant, the ethereal tendrils flew to envelop Grimbledung. Still frozen in his pose, he now hovered a foot off the ground with a thin green line connecting Drimblerod's wand to the green mass that was Grimbledung's prison. He was, for all intents and purposes, a Grimbledung Flail. Grimbledung's eyes trained on Drimblerod.

"To the moon!"

Grimbledung blinked. His eyelids seemed to be the only thing that still worked despite the spell. He hoped absently that his major organs still did so as well. Or at least his various sphincters. Especially one in particular.

"That is where I will send you!" Drimblerod glanced up and there, in the late afternoon sky hung a waning moon.

Grimbledung's eyes moved up in his head until they were almost white. He could see the moon just barely. He blinked again.

"They say it's over 5,000 leagues away, but that's where I will send you. And when it goes away for the new moon to replace it, you will go with it."

-Blink-

"You will solve first-hand one of the great mysteries of our time; where does the old moon go?"

-Blink - Blink- Grimbledung lowered his eyes back to Drimblerod.

"Just so you know that I can and will do it, I will show you what's half way there." Drimblerod squinted his eyes again.

- Blink- went Grimbledung. Squinting seemed beyond him.

With a quick flick of his wand, Drimblerod pointed at the moon.

Grimbledung thought his stomach was in his feet. Both of them. Feet- not stomachs. He was a Gnome, not a cow, after all. Up he went like a sparrow chasing a hawk. He strained to look down and was

surprised how small The Region looked. He could see the Anti-Ogre Wall as a thin line arcing all the way down to the mountains in Orcistan. His town of Aution was a mere speck. He craned his eyes upward. The moon was still the same size. *Odd.* Was it avoiding him he thought? Sometimes when he walked, he felt that the new full moon followed him. *Very odd.* He could also still breathe- which was a relief. The Ring of Fire that enveloped the world must still be higher up. *That* would have been dangerous- to actually be close to the Ring of Fire, where all dragons were born. *No one could survive being that close to so many newly-spawned dragons*, thought Grimbledung. There were those who said that dragons were born out of eggs. *Crackpots*. These were the same people who said that snakes came from eggs. *Snakes from Eggs? Ludicrous.* Grimbledung had tried one evening at a local pub to explain to one such crackpot that snakes, as everyone knew, came out of the ground when lightning struck it. It was common knowledge. *Some people*, mused Grimbledung, *why even* ... Grimbledung was snapped out of his musings when he thought his stomach was in his head. One each. It had to be since he *could* definitely taste his breakfast. Down like a late spring, greenish grey Grimbledung-shaped hailstone he fell. He lurched to a stop, once again a foot off the ground.

"Will you hear me out now?" Drimblerod asked.

-Blink-

Drimblerod lowered his wand, breaking the thin line. The Ethereal magic seeped back into the ground around Grimbledung like Night Crawlers returning to their earthly domain after a rain. Unless they were struck by lightning- then they'd become full-grown snakes. Of course.

Grimbledung lay in a heap, panting.

"Now where was I? Oh yes- teetering customers," continued Drimblerod as if nothing had happened. "You can help them teeter toward being a wand owner by using your ... unique character quirks we'll call them… to keep the window lickers and Dues Collector away."

"So ... you want me to close my successful business and be your bouncer? Send me to the Moon because that will never happen."

Said Grimbledung as he moved to a seated position. He was afraid that if he stood, the breakfast he had tasted earlier would make a sudden reappearance.

"You weren't listening at all before, were you? What kind of haggling was that?" Drimblerod sighed. "No. I said we could be partners. Split everything fifty-fifty." In his mind Drimblerod thought *sixty-forty when I do the books*.

"Fifty- Fifty you say?" Said Grimbledung leaning forward, as he thought *I'll just keep everything I can until I get caught. Numbers are for sissies.* "But what am I supposed to do with my well-established store?"

"Well established store?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Tons of floor space."

"Where is it?"

"Well ventilated too."

"What part of town is it in? I haven't heard of another wand shop around here."

"Plenty of foot traffic, all day long."

"It's not even a store, is it?"

"Excellent security at night."

"It sounds like a cart to me."

"Freshly painted with custom shelves throughout."

"It's a cart. Isn't it?"

Grimbledung sneered. "It's much bigger than a mere cart, thank you very much."

"A wagon then."

"Now I'm offended!"

"Don't you even dare to think about growling."

"It's a wagon," said Grimbledung meekly.

"Fine. All's the better. We wheel your ... store over to my ... actual store and combine our inventory there."

"Tell me again how that makes me more money?" Grimbledung said warily. "All I hear is that you've incorporated *my* inventory into *your* store."

"Respectability," began Drimblerod, "by being in a shop, you appear to be a respectable member of society. People think you have roots in the community. Roots and overhead, so they expect you to charge more."

"But what happens if something goes wrong?"

"We sneak out of town in the middle of the night with all we can carry on your wagon. Nice and respectable like."

"But the authorities…"

"Along with nice and respectable like. We do it real fast."

Grimbledung mulled this over for a full minute. "Deal" he said finally. "But don't you dare touch my nose again."

"Deal" said Drimblerod as he held out his hand.

Grimbledung slapped it then rolled to his feet. He picked up the black wand and his staff. "I have an anti-magic bag so we'll put the Wizard wands in my bag."

"I bought the same bag last year from the Gally Wuck traveling merchant, so we'll split them."

Grimbledung scowled. "Deal." This time Grimbledung held out his hand and Drimblerod slapped it.

The pair spent the day gathering wands. By nightfall both bags were bulging to the point they didn't even close completely. Several wands were stuck in their belts and pockets as well.

"Of course, we need to figure out what all these wands do. It will take a month just to do that," complained Grimbledung. "That's the part I hate."

"Well I've got some good news for you." Drimblerod winked. "I have what most all other shop owners have- hapless employees to do the drudgery. It keeps the profits up by keeping the inventory up to date. No sludge," explained Drimblerod.

"Don't you lose the added profits by paying your employees?" Asked Grimbledung. Shop ownership seemed confusing all of a sudden. "Or are they slaves?"

"Let me ask you ... Say, I never did get your name." With Gnomes, names were not necessary to form legal, binding contracts. In fact, sometimes they were specifically avoided.

"Grimbledung. Grimbledung Sixtoes. Esquire that is."

"Drimblerod. Drimblerod Axebreath. So, let me ask you Grimbledung- what times do we live in?"

"You mean the date?" Grimbledung nodded. "It's Grunsday today."

"Not the date time, the time- time. Times time." Drimblerod raised his voice. "I'm trying to teach you something."

"The time we live in? Elven Standard Time, of course. To the south near the mines I think they are on Dwarven Savings Time." Grimbledung tapped his chin. "What's that, about an hour later?"

Drimblerod shook his fists, each held two wands. They crackled ominously. "Answer the question you daft Gnome!"

"Hard?" Grimbledung offered.

Drimblerod lowered his fists. "What?"

"Hard? We live in hard times?"

"Exactly!" Cheered Drimblerod as he thrust his fists in the air, incinerating two crows, and sending a vulture on a high arc off into the distance. A fourth bird promptly turned into a Newt. Being a very non-aerodynamic Newt, it fell to its death. "Hard times are what we live in. I always remind my employees that. 'A down economy is no economy to be out of work'. That's what I tell them. If they complain, I shout it at them." Drimblerod said. "*That* keeps profits high."

Suddenly shop ownership did not seem all that complicated to Grimbledung. It was much like running a Brute Squad or a Chain Gang, but apparently much more respectable. Or maybe only slightly more so. "And I can shout at the employees too?"

"Fifty percent of the time," assured Drimblerod.

Sucker, thought Grimbledung, even though he wasn't sure what fifty percent of anything was. He put his arm over the shoulder of his new partner. "I think this is the beginning of a profitable relationship."

They both started walking up the hill Grimbledung had originally come down. When they were half way up it, Grimbledung shrugged out from under Drimblerod's arm, "Just one question before we go."

Drimblerod looked as his new partner appraisingly, "Yes?"

Grimbledung squinted at him, "Where do Dragons come from?"

"From the Ring of Fire, of course," Drimblerod lied without even hesitating.

Grimbledung replaced his partner's arm on his shoulder. "That's all I wanted to hear partner. That's all I wanted to hear."

The two left the valley and gingerly headed towards town, crackling and sizzling as they went.

Chapter Four
Wherein Grimbledung Closes his Shoppe (which is, in fact, a wagon)

Grimbledung looked around his home. He had lived here for nearly six years. It was ramshackle, drafty and smelled of animals. It was an abandoned livery stable in the West End of the town of Aution where even respectable thieves did not venture. He had bought it for a song.[6] Not even the residents of West End enjoyed coming home, and when they did, they made a mad dash of it. The only person in Aution who walked the streets of West End slowly and calmly was the Constable; he didn't rush *anywhere.* And being who he was, he didn't need to. Of course, being *what* he was helped considerably. Thugs and ruffians moved out of his way and tried not to catch his eye. Beggars acted as if they had full bellies so he wouldn't approach them to discuss their vagrancy issues. Aution was tough, but its Constable was tougher.

The town of Aution had actually started out as a small crossroads trader's shack that was established to sell wares to soldiers moving between the towns along the Great Salt River and the Anti-Ogre wall to the north. Sheward Delberger, a conniving Halfling ran the shop with a Ruthless Hand (a variation on the Finger of Death but five times as powerful). A disgruntled traveler, trying to warn others of Sheward's shady business practices had hastily tried to put up a warning sign which proclaimed "Caution!" In thick red letters. An Ogre skull and crossbones were painted underneath it. Sheward saw the traveler hammering the sign into the ground and promptly blasted him with the Ruthless Hand. The traveler was reduced to a pile of bones, and the sign lost its "C". Not bothering to go kick down the rest of the sign, Sheward left it in place and the town of aution was born.

The "a" was later capitalized by the town's first schoolteacher – Margareta Barlow, for grammar's sake. However, for what they called "historical's sake," the townsfolk fought the change tooth and nail. Miss Barlow pointed out at the time (testily) that "historical's"

was not even a word, but the issue was put to a vote anyway. When it finally came time to actually vote however, Miss Barlow showed up at the town council meeting with a four-foot ruler that she wielded like a katana (comfortably, thanks to the leather wrapped handle). Prior to the vote, an eagle-eyed citizen made a Point of Order to bring to everyone's attention the usually present metal edge of the ruler seemed to be sharpened. This led to some quick mental calculations by the townsfolk prior to the vote[7].

Thanks to no one daring to raise their hand (lest they lose it) to vote against Miss Barlow, Aution was added to the maps.

The rest is history. We'd say historical, but that's actually a word. It's just not the right one for this occasion. Obviously.

Grimbledung's brightly colored wagon sat in a corner of the barn. A large banner was pulled fairly tight between the upturned side slats. "Grim's Wands" it proclaimed in large blue letters. Much, much smaller letters in a color nearly identical to the banner itself whispered 'no refunds whatsoever, so don't even ask!' Grimbledung put his bedroll, cooking gear, and various odds and ends onto the wagon. There was not a lot to show for nearly three and a half centuries of living. *Of course, the Great Flood took most of my treasured possessions* Grimbledung mused trying to defend his life choices. *Right,* the other half of him responded, *what treasures exactly? - A leaky cauldron, dented skillet, and a ladle with half a handle*. Grimbledung scowled; sometimes he annoyed himself thoroughly.

"Ah well, time to start a new chapter," he said aloud. "There's always tomorrow." He clapped his hands twice, summoning the kindly old rat that he had befriended. *You enchanted it so it has to come when you clap. It can't even find rest in death*, the other half reminded him. "Shaddap you!" He clapped twice again, and finally a haggard looking grey rat trotted in. One of its eyes was black, the other a milky grey. Its tail ended at what should have been the midway point. It looked up at him, head cocked to one side. From that angle, Grimbledung could see that its whiskers were no longer even on both sides.

"Rough day? You look a mess!"

"You don't know the half of it," replied Grimbledung. "I'm moving out and I think this is the last I'll need of your service. Unless you want to hang around for kicks."

"Just kill me," the rat rasped, "after a hundred years, I think I'm ready for The Long Dirt Nap." The rat pondered the thought for a

moment, "Wait, moving? Where? Is it someplace inside where I could lay by a fire all day?" A slight gleam appeared in the rat's good eye, the other remained like month-old milk.

"It's some fancy shop on the East Side. I have acquired fifty percent of an actual Wand Shop. Whatever that is. You can probably hang out there all day, chat with customers." He considered that for a moment, "Or insult them. Relax in your golden years. What a lucky rat you are!" Grimbledung smiled at the foot-long rat.

It sat back on its haunches like a lap dog. A century old, beaten, boiled, and baked lapdog kept alive by a poorly executed Enchant spell. "Don't start with me, Grim." It snarled through a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. Thanks to rat physiology, its teeth continued to grow no matter how long it lived. Rat's teeth were as fresh as the day he was born. The rest of it was another matter entirely.

"Well, it's settled then! Let's get going. To the wagon, Rat!" Grimbledung drew a short gold wand- a Pixie Stick- from his boot as Rat moved to the front of the wagon. Much too large to be used *by* Pixies, Pixie Sticks were to be used *against* Pixies. Contrary to how they were portrayed in popular literature, Pixies were ill-tempered, spiteful creatures and considered a nuisance by most everyone. An infestation of rats was more tolerable than a Thrush of Pixies (as groupings of Pixies were called) moving into one's attic. At one point, the gold wand was imbued with the Gallinas Rotisserie spell, which turned the vile Cornish Pixie into a delicious Cornish Hen. It had been modified through the years to transmute a variety of creatures. Presently, it turned rats into a Green Toed Shamblers- a useful beast of burden. Grimbledung pointed the wand at the impatiently waiting rat.

It squinted its eye in anticipation.

Rodentus Grigo!
Transmutis completes
Shambli Verdes!

Intoned Grimbledung.

A gold bolt arced from the wand and struck Rat. It was enveloped with the golden light for a fraction of a second. In a flash,

Rat sprung in height to six feet at the shoulder. Shamblers, a distant cousin of the Moose, were effective beasts of burden. Unlike moose, they were calm tempered and easy to reason with. Slightly smaller and missing the antlers, they still possessed the elongated snout, barrel body, and gangly legs. They could easily pull twice their weight and walk for days on end. They were a majestic animal, proudly displayed on the standards of several kingdoms. The one presently before Grimbledung was such a beast in species, but not quite in appearance. The milky eye was larger, yet still present and instead of a gleaming brown coat, it was mottled and grey. And its tail still only made it to the half way point.

"I should remind you that I still, at this point, despise you" said RatShambler. It's characteristically emerald green-furred feet were more akin to moat green.

"Buck up, Rat," Grimbledung said as he hopped up to grab the harness and hook it under the massive beast, "we'll at least give this a shot for a couple of months. If it doesn't work out, I'll kill you then."

"Promise?"

"Absolutely. Right after I kill Drimblerod for talking me into this scheme." He scowled "Dead as a winter turnip." He hopped up onto the wagon and pulled the whip from its notch and cracked it over RatShambler's head.

RatShambler craned its neck around and glared at him with its large black eye. Slowly and deliberately, he began out of the stable at an absurdly slow pace.

"Come on Rat! I've got a reputation to maintain here and I might be back in a few weeks," pleaded Grimbledung. He was rewarded with a slightly faster than a walk shuffle. "Thanks, Rat!" Grimbledung sneered at passers-by as they went; smiling was the mark of a patsy in *this* part of town.

Chapter Five
Wherein Drimblerod Prepares for His New Partner

Drimblerod entered his shop. From the outside, the shop appeared to be only a little wider than a standard six-pane window and a door. "Second Hand Sorcery" was painted across the front of the building in a jaunty script. Below it hung a bright banner- "Psychotic Readings" it proclaimed in neon-red letters. The shop was nestled between a Haberdashery and a Cobbler. It was an ideal location as adventurers on their way out of town stopped by the latter for comfortable adventuring shoes of some sort and the former for their essentials. The shop itself was painted a mystical flat black with stars scattered here and there that twinkled on their own. A moon was magicked over the door so it mimicked the phases of the actual moon. It hovered a full foot away from the building- just enough to catch the eye of pedestrians but not enough to break any local codes. Variances cost money (especially with institutionalized graft) and that was bad for profits. He closed the door behind him, the small bell dinging yet again as the door hit it. The shop was easily three times as wide as it appeared from the street. A simple Disburse! Spell kept the actual boundaries of the neighboring stores from infringing on Drimblerod's magically maintained square footage. A broom swept haphazardly in the corner. It never really cleaned anything; an automatic Disintegrate spell handled that, but Drimblerod felt that the brooms added a bit of expected whimsical magical ambiance to the shop.

"You only have to do that when we're open!" Drimblerod sighed. "How many times do I have to tell you that?"

The broom stopped, seemed to flex in the middle in a slight shrug, and then leaned against the wall. Drimblerod moved behind the counter and dumped his full sack onto it. Emptying his pockets, he added to the sizzling pile of wands. Since his staff of testers had called his bluff and he was forced to fire them (who would have thought?!) it would take the better part of two weeks to test them all. He went to the back room- it was again as big as the front showroom. He pulled down his Murphy bed and sat on it. He would

have to add another bed back here as well, as well as make room for whatever junk Grimbledung brought with him.

"We give it a couple of months, then I shove him into the Abyssmal Box and keep his wagon." He said to another sweeping broom, "How does that sound to you?" The broom kept up its ineffectual sweeping. "I really need to work on that enchantment so you brooms actually do some work."

The broom perked up.

"No I do *not* count the incident with the buckets of water as working."

The broom perked down.

"Work?" Drimblerod dug through a pile of boxes, tossing wrapping and random items about. The brooms would at least sweep everything back into a pile later. "Success!" He cheered. "Brooms! Clean up this mess!" He moved to the living area of the shop, "Caldrons make some stew!" He called to a corner of the area. He was rewarded with the clattering of lids and spoons clanking. Drimblerod pulled a crate to the edge of the bed and put a battered and beaten jousting dummy torso on it. "My precious tester! *You* would never leave me, would you?" He asked the dummy. "No, no you won't," he cooed at it. "Now to make those arms move." He tilted the box lid back, careful not to dump the dummy as he blindly felt in the crate. He was rewarded with a charred wooden box. "Let's see," he muttered as he rummaged through his personal stash of wands. "Reanimators? Enchanters?" He glanced at the dummy, "How about a good old fashioned Mechanimator?" The dummy sat silent. "You agree? Excellent." He took the wand and stepped back from the dummy. He thought for a moment, cleared his throat and intoned:

Hacking and Slashing not towards the living
To do that, never are you willing!
Discover a wand's purpose and use and sort them in some way

he paused and considered for a moment

However you choose!

He jabbed the wand at the dummy. It bucked and jerked- if it had legs it would have done a jig. After a few moments Drimblerod approached it cautiously. It spasmed several times but seemed to be

accepting its new enchantment. He poked it with the tip of its wand and it tried to grab it. "No! You'd set the whole shop running amok through town!"

Dejected, the dummy dropped its arms.

"I'm going to get you set up and you can go through dozens of wands. How does that sound?"

The dummy bopped and flailed like a happy puppy. A battered, legless puppy.

Drimblerod picked up the dummy and kicked the crate along with him as he moved to a clear corner of the room. Excited to be out and about, the giddy dummy bounced up and down. It pointed and waved at various objects as it was carried.

"Quit squirming, you!" Drimblerod put the dummy on top of the crate.

The dummy looked around this new area of the room. It gave an approving nod.

"Don't wander off," Drimblerod commanded.

The dummy looked at him, hands on its hips.

"I'm starting to regret this," he muttered as the dummy began to wave a nonexistent wand at things in the room.

Drimblerod moved to the front of the shop and caught a glimpse of the sweeping broom. When he turned toward it, it quickly leaned against the wall. Drimblerod scowled, "When Grimbledung gets here, *then* you can act like you're working. Set the mood, as it were." Moving behind the counter, he picked up a heavy, copper gilded box. Its lid was clamped down on all four corners. Grunting, he hefted it to the living area of the shop. As he came through the curtain, the dummy wheeled around and slashed at him with the non-bristled end of a broom.

"That is *not* a wand!" Scolded Drimblerod. "Put that poor broom down! DOWN!"

The dummy released the broom. It clattered to the ground but quickly righted itself and retreated a safe distance away.

"No playing with the brooms!"

The dummy dropped his arms to its sides and sulked.

"And I thought I told you to *never* point a wand at a living thing!" Drimblerod dropped the box and opened the lid. Inside was an inky black and red vortex which spiraled down on itself. "'I've a mind to put you into the box!" Drimblerod threatened.

The dummy appeared to look at the box, then gestured with its hands in a classic 'So?' gesture.

"You don't know what this is, do you, dummy?" Drimblerod shoved the box beside the crate the dummy was on.

It peered down into the swirling colors. 'So?' it gestured again.

"Allow me to demonstrate then." Drimblerod looked around the room and spied a piece of lumber three feet long- a shelf that was never put up. He walked over and picked it up. "Hello, jousting dummy" he said to the piece of wood, "So you want to act up? That is not a good idea."

Dummy stared at him.

"But I can do what I want," Drimblerod said out of the corner of his mouth as he bobbed the wood up and down, "I'm a real smart dummy."

Dummy was now standing with its hands on its hips, mitten fingers tapping.

Drimblerod stretched up so he was almost eye to eye with the dummy. "This. Is. You." He said in a low voice. He stepped back and without ceremony let go of the wood.

The dummy tracked it leave Drimblerod's hand down into the box. It slid noiselessly into the swirling colors. Where it should have bottomed out because it was much longer than the entire box, it continued down into the swirls.

"Gone," said Drimblerod as he looked at the dummy. "Into the abyss."

The dummy jumped back, arms flailing in front of it.

"This is an Abyssmal Box," explained Drimblerod. "Things I drop into it never come back. Ever. I have no idea where anything actually goes and I don't really care. Sure, I occasionally get an angrily-worded postcard from some low-level bureaucrat from the Nether Regions, but that's about it."

The dummy now had its hands clasped together in front of it. If it had knees, it would have been on them.

"You understand then?"

The dummy reached out and shook Drimblerod's hand with both of its mitts.

"Fine, fine, don't get all mushy on me. Aim the wands at the Abyssmal Box and sort them. Got it?"

The dummy rendered several salutes. With both hands.

"I'm still regretting this," mumbled Drimblerod as he hefted the

Abyssmal Box. He carried it several feet away and sat it on a barrel. He tipped the box on its side and aimed it at the dummy. It had been watching his action and ducked quickly, its hands over its head. "Relax, dummy. It doesn't work that way." Even on its side, the swirling vortex continued on its spiral towards the bottom of the box. "Aim here," commanded Drimblerod.

The dummy again saluted with both hands. Drimblerod shook his head as he again went to the front room. He pulled out an empty display case and gingerly raked the wands onto it. The glass beneath the pile was discolored and warped. He carried the tray to the dummy and sat it on its perch.

The dummy grabbed a wand and flung it at the Abyssmal Box. The wand dutifully disappeared. Dummy raised its hands in triumph.

Drimblerod grabbed the dummy's arm as it reached for another wand, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" He bellowed, "Bad dummy! NO! We do NOT do that. NO!" Drimblerod shook his head at the dummy, "Weren't you listening?"

The dummy pointed to its nonexistent ears with its free hand and shrugged.

"Don't give me that! How do you know what I'm saying if you can't hear?"

The dummy started to raise its hand to make a point then dropped it. It cocked its head to one side, moving an invisible ear closer to Drimblerod.

"Good. Now that you're actually listening- what you do is wave the wand at the box. *Wave* it. Then when you see what it does, you sort them according to what they do. Got it now?"

The dummy nodded and gave a thumbs up sign.

"I'll bring in some cans to put the wands in." Drimblerod heard the bell clatter at the front door. "I'll bring them later, but please, *please* get it right." The dummy saluted again. "Or else!" He called over his shoulder as he walked out. More saluting greeted his back as he went.

Chapter Six
Wherein Grimbledung Tours Second Hand Sorcery

Drimblerod pushed aside the curtains separating the two rooms with what he hoped was a suitably grandiose entrance. Grimbledung was leaning on the front counter peering through the glass. Drimblerod noticed the broom sat in the corner silent. He forced a scowl from his face, "Partner! Glad you finally made it." Grimbledung was looking into the case.

"Ahhh, the incinerators. Those move like Elven hotcakes."



"Sure," replied Grimbledung, "at a measly two coppers each. You'd have to sell ..."

"On average, ten a day" Drimblerod lied, "day in and day out. And that's just that one wand type." In truth, he used to sell ten a day. Lately it

was closer to five or six a week.

Grimbledung blinked at Drimblerod. Mentally he made some calculations, using his toes pressing on the floor to help him out. The shop brought in more in a week that he did in a month. "That's impressive, but there's one thing I don't understand ..." He was interrupted by what sounded like a peal of thunder from the backroom.

"Just a moment," said Drimblerod as he quickly stepped through the curtain. Grimbledung followed close behind. They were greeted by the dummy lying flat on its back, holding a wand as far from it as possible in its mitten hand. It seemed stunned. Drimblerod took the wand and carefully laid it aside.

"Dummy, can you hear me?" Drimblerod asked, worry in his voice. "What happened?" He asked as he put the dummy back on its base.

"That thing can speak?" Grimbledung asked. He had seen Mechanimator magic in action before- usually as novelty coat or hat racks, or cooking utensils. He had never heard one speak a more than a simple spiel, and that was a wine cask Matre'D who gave the current wine list at the Sliced Unicorn Restaurant and Ice Cream Parlor[8].

"No, I made that mistake once. My stupid brooms argued day and night 'dust, dirt, or mud- which was worse'. It was the longest week of my life" Drimblerod looked up at the dummy. "What happened?"

The dummy pantomimed selecting a wand and waving it at the Abyssmal Box.

"Right, so far so good," coaxed Drimblerod.

The dummy then flailed his arms around, almost falling to the ground again.

Drimblerod steadied the dummy. "Okay, okay. A really powerful wand. We'll make a special copper-lined container for them. Maybe we need to screw you down to this crate."

He was answered with more flailing from the dummy.

"How about some straps until we find a better solution? I think I have a pair of Ogre suspenders around here someplace."

The dummy nodded.

"Let's stop until I can scrounge up some cans."

"So, what happened to the employees?" Grimbledung asked.

Drimblerod had been preparing for this question since he had

Mechanimated the dueling dummy. He suppressed a smile at his cleverness. "I'm glad you asked, Grimbledung. I'm glad you asked. You see, in order to maximize profits, I felt we needed to liquidate certain non-depreciating assets of the business. By using this cost-free tester, which took days to locate, I have to tell you, I believe we will both experience an elevated through-put of currency."

"But we only met earlier today." Said Grimbledung, "How could you have been looking for an alternative for days?"

Rolton chips, thought Drimblerod, *great heaping piles of steaming Rolton chips*. "I fired them" confessed Drimblerod, "They wanted a raise. The dummy was a temporary solution that I ..."

He was interrupted by frantic flailing by the dummy.

"... that I think may be more of a permanent solution of the problem."

The dummy wiped non-existent sweat from its blank, flour sack head and began to shake both the Gnomes' hands.

"Let's go back out front so we can talk privately."

The dummy saluted the two until they left.

"So you were confused about something?"

"Yes" began Grimbledung, "the wand business I get- you have a nice operation going here. But what's a Psychotic Reading?"

"That's the Hook."

"The Hook?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Yes, you know- something to pull people into the shop so they'll buy something else."

"I know what a Hook is!" said Grimbledung testily, "I *do* have my own business you know. I've heard of psychic readings of course, just never psychotic ones."

"Well, the way this Hook works is that after they come in and I explain a Psychotic Reading to them, they usually decline, *but* by then, I have them in the shop where I have a chance of making a wand sale."

"That sounds like a Bait and Switch. What's the constable think of that?" He shuddered at the thought of the town's Constable.

"No, no. If they *want* a Psychotic Reading, I give it to them," assured Drimblerod, "it's all above the board."

"OK, I'll bite," said Grimbledung as he sat on a stool.

Chapter Seven
Wherein Grimbledung receives His First (and Last) Psychotic Reading

"What's a Psychotic Reading?"

"Why, I'm glad you asked." Said Drimblerod as he switched into his well- rehearsed pitch, "A Psychotic Reading, my valued customer, is a completely revolutionary art I have developed wherein I tap into the Chaotic Ether of the universe to attempt to determine the success ... or failure of your immediate endeavors." He smiled at Grimbledung. The hook was being dangled.

"I'd be interested in knowing that, to be honest," Grimbledung moved forward on the stool.

There was the nibble.

"But," continued Drimblerod, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone, "I must warn you- there are dire consequences if the Chaotic Ether does not cooperate. It is, shall I say, unpredictable." As if on cue (which it may have been), it began to rain. Big heavy drops spattered against the large window as Grimbledung moved back to the center of his stool. "For a mere copper coin, I can begin the reading. After I start, a silver will keep the connection open," he eyed Grimbledung, "for a short period."

Grimbledung raised an eyebrow. He dug into his pocket and pulled a copper and a silver coin from a hidden slit. He dropped them both on the counter. Before they even stopped rattling, Drimblerod had covered them with a black silk cloth and covered that with a massive egg-shaped loadstone. It sparkled and emitted sporadic green Ethereal wisps. *The hook was set.*

"The Chaotic Ether answers!" Drimblerod hissed. He peered intently into the stone. "I see your death. It is far out on the horizon, true, but yes indeed, it is there."

"Well, that's not too mysterious; everyone dies at one point. Sometimes twice even."

Drimblerod nodded. "Yes, yes." He grabbed a green wisp and tugged on it. "I see pain and suffering. Crushed by a heavy stone maybe? A round stone? A Gastrolith possibly. Yes. Definitely

possibly... In the belly of a Dragon? ... Gruesome indeed."

Grimbledung moved back on the stool, "What? Eaten alive?" His face paled.

"Perhaps," continued Drimblerod. He peered at the wisp. "You may already be dead at that point. Hit on the head?" Drimblerod looked up at Grimbledung and locked eyes with him, "By someone you recently met." He let go of the wisp and it curled about and seemed to move towards Grimbledung.

Grimbledung avoided it.

"It seems," Drimblerod continued as he looked back down, "it may be a Halfling or perhaps a Gnome that does you in. Are there any Halflings or Gnomes that you have recently met in the near future or close to the present, per chance?" He asked without looking up.

"Yes, several of each," said Grimbledung. The front two legs of his stool were now lifted off the floor. "Including you, of course."

"Yes, yes. I see that clearly now. There is a failure of a business transaction that causes the stalking. How unfortunate. That involved an event which, according to local law enforcement reports, led to ... the incident..."

"What incident?"

"... that causes your demise. It's gruesome the Chaotic Ether suggests."

"You've said that already!" the legs of Grimbledung's stool moved farther from the floor.

"It seems that the Chaotic Ether has gotten upset." Drimblerod pulled a tendril up to his ear and went stiff. The tendril turned purple as it entered his ear. "Yes... Maybe... I don't know." Drimblerod looked up at Grimbledung with unfocusing eyes and narrowed them, "Probably."

"Probably what?"

"No. I think I could." Drimblerod chuckled. "No, I don't think they would figure it out."

"Who's they?" Grimbledung stood on the rails of his stool. It clattered back onto all four legs. "Who wouldn't figure what out?"

The tendril turned blood red. "I understand... I might do that. I could do that. I shall do that." Drimblerod's voice dropped to a whisper. An evil one... "I must obey."

"Now just a minute, Drimblerod! I've had quite enough of this!" Grimbledung complained.

Drimblerod pulled the tendril from his ear and it switched from red

to purple then back to green. He visibly relaxed. "My-oh-me! That was exciting, wasn't it?" Drimblerod said innocently. "Do you want to pay another silver to hear more?"

"No, I won't pay another coin. I've had all I want to hear from this Chaotic Ether or whatever it is. And you're... you're..."

"Psychotic?" Suggested Drimblerod.

"Yes, completely..." Grimbledung sat back on the stool, glowering at Drimblerod. Realization crept across his face. He narrowed his eyes at Drimblerod, "Saaaay, how long can you keep that up?"

"Till either your pockets or courage run dry." Drimblerod opened his eyes wide, "Wait, just what did I say to you?" He oozed innocence. Or at least plausible deniability. "Can I interest you in a reasonably priced wand loaded with an array of defensive spells?" He offered nonchalantly.

"Nice pitch, Drim. You can stop it now." Grimbledung said as he leaned forward on the counter. "I don't see as how that's legal. That whole pitch just *reeks* of blackmail and murder. What if someone goes to the authorities? The last thing we need is the Constable on the payroll." He shivered at the thought.

"Blackmail? Murder? Why, I'm dashed! You see the problem *is* the law, or rather Lawmakers themselves. They are completely out of touch with everyday life and the local populace."

"Well, wouldn't you be if you had the means?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Of course- who actually chooses to hang around with common folk?" Drimblerod stuck out his tongue. "Ilk, really." He tried to think of a better word; none came to mind. "Yes, we're definitely ilk. Now as I was saying, Lawmakers are out of touch with common people and that always causes loopholes in their laws because they don't realize how conniving we ilk really are."

"What's the loophole?"

"There's a sign out front that advertises the service of Psychotic Readings."

"I suppose," agreed Grimbledung.

"I tell the people that it will be dark and most likely foreboding"

"Yes, I heard that part myself in fact."

"And I explain the fees upfront."

"Again, true."

"I never guarantee success or accuracy. This isn't thievery on *my*

part; it's a very poor business decision on *their* part." He waved his hand dismissively, "People are free to make bad business decisions all day long!"

Grimbledung pondered the situation for a long moment. "Genius! Sheer genius. How many readings do you actually end up doing in a week?"

"Only one or two, but it's pure profit. As I was telling my shiftless employees..."

A thought came to Grimbledung, "Employees! My rat is still out front!" He got up and went to the door.

Chapter Eight
Wherein Grimbledung Officially Moves In

Grimbledung opened the door and was greeted by a soaked RatShambler still hooked up to the wagon. He had his head under the Magicked Moon in a vain attempt to keep it dry. "I really and truly do loath you. Loathing like Clay Golems loath flowing water. Whampyri and sunlight. Elves and dirt. Complete and utter hatred," he said.

"Bring the wagon around the back and I'll open the rear doors," called Drimblerod as he moved through the curtain.

"Oh Rat, I'm sorry. I completely forgot about you. I was having a fine time inside."

"Where it isn't raining?" Asked RatShambler. "That inside?"

Grimbledung hopped up on the wagon, "Let's go- I'm getting soaked!"

RatShambler looked over his shoulder and began to walk slowly up the street, "You're getting wet? I don't know how I can live with myself with such knowledge." His pace did not quicken.

A full five minutes later, the wagon pulled into the back of the shop. Grimbledung was sitting, completely dejected- he wasn't even trying to drive the cart and was merely along for the ride.

"What took so long?" Asked Drimblerod, "It's not even a minute walk from the front to the back."

Grimbledung merely pointed at RatShambler, "Maybe I can use your Mechanimator Wand to get a saw horse to pull me around?"

RatShambler snorted in reply.

"Let's get your stuff off the wagon and your beast unhitched," suggested Drimblerod.

"Too easy" said Grimbledung as he hopped off the wagon, a large sack in one hand, his gold Pixie Stick in the other. He gestured at RatShambler who promptly flashed back to just Rat. "Done."

"You travel light, I see," remarked Drimblerod, "We'll get a bed put together and after we get some cans, we'll get your wands sorted as well." This brought muffled clapping from the living area.

"Please, please tell me you have a stove or a fireplace that I can

nap in front of," pleaded Rat. He was still soaking wet- the enchantment didn't change that. Actually, there was a large puddle of water where Rat was standing since his fur didn't hold the same amount of water as a full grown Shambler.

"Of course," replied Drimblerod, completely nonplussed with holding a conversation with a rat. These were hard times, but also strange ones as well. "Head to the front of the store and it's on the right. There's a nice Red-Tailed Shambler fur throw in front of it."

Without a word, Rat ambled out from the rear room, heading to the first warm nap he had had in six years.

Drimblerod watched him go with interest. "A rat and a shambler?"

"It's a long story," remarked Grimbledung.

"I'd love to hear it someday," said Drimblerod. "But first let me show you the operations up front. Grab your bag of wands."

As they moved past the dummy, it waved and clapped.

When Grimbledung dropped his stuffed-with-wands sack on its stand, it almost fell over as it bounced for joy.

"That is one odd dummy" said Grimbledung. As he came to the front of the store, he spotted Rat lying on its back, all four paws sticking up as if it were finally, mercifully, dead. Grimbledung leaned in close and heard a raspy snore. Satisfied, he returned to the counter. "OK, give me the tour," he said.

"I put the flashy ones in the window," began Drimblerod as he moved to the window, "Something to draw pedestrians in. Anything unusual or colorful goes there. On the wall racks," he said moving there, "go the nonlethal wands. Things that won't kill us if some harebrained window-licker waves it around. Behind the counter," he pointed, "go the really expensive ones. The ones you do not hand to someone unless you've got *your* wand out."

"Got it," Grimbledung said. "So- that leaves the window-licker problem?"

"Those people come in, wander the store, pick up *everything*, including the ones under the glass. After an hour, they just leave. The problem is that while they are in here, they chat up the other customers and distract them from buying something as well."

"Why don't you just blast them out of existence?" Suggested Grimbledung, "Or bewitch them into buying a wand?"

"Because, as you said, having a Constable on the payroll hurts profits. And once a lawman is on the take, they *never* come off."

Drimblerod scowled, "Blasting a couple of my chronic window-lickers out of existence would make my century. Besides, the last thing you want to do is deal with the Constable on a regular basis."

"Wait, you mean the *same ones* come back day after day? Don't these folks work?"

"Times are tough. They have nowhere else to go and browsing is free." Drimblerod shrugged, "It's like a disease. Usually old people do it, but nowadays young ones do as well."

"So, I get to insult the same people every day and they will come back again and again?"

"At least until you finally drive them off."

"I'd do that for free!" Grimbledung rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at him.

"It's just an expression! Don't get your hopes up." Grimbledung shook a finger at him. "I still expect some of the profits you know." He sniffed. "And if I could get them up." He sniffed again. "Then that's more coinage in my pockets. Is… is that stew I smell?" He asked.

"It is!" Said Drimblerod, "I'd started it before you arrived. I say we eat."

"Stew! Hot stew!" cooed Grimbledung.

"Stew?" Asked Rat suddenly wide awake, "I'm all for stew!"

"Asleep for the business, awake for the food." Grimbledung said. "As usual."

"So then why are you surprised?" Rat asked. He gestured with a claw. "Lead the way Drimblerod; belly-filling awaits."

With Drimblerod in the lead, the three of them moved to the middle part of the store for their first evening meal together.

Chapter Nine
Wherein the Gnomes Begin Their First Day as Partners

Grimbledung snored loudly. He was propped between two crates, a bag of rags for a pillow. It was dry and clean- he was having the best night's sleep in years. He was awoken by the clanging and banging of pots. Angrily he sat up from his glorious slumber. Eyes red from sleep and building anger, he swung his feet off the bed and slapped them on the floor. It was then that the smells washed over him. Coffee? Eggs? Sizzling Elf Toes?! Pure bliss (except for the toes) wafted up on the morning air. He stumbled over nose first towards the sound of the ironware. "Gads! That smells great!" He said.

The largest of the pots clattered its lid in a simple 'Thanks'. In doing so it let out a cloud of steam which filled the corner with the smell of honey-soaked grits. Grimbledung shuddered with pleasure and began a frantic search for a plate, bowl, or hunk of wood to hold the feast long enough to devour it. "Plates! Plates!" He begged the cookware, which only clattered in response.

Even Dummy joined in the crisis, waving its arms frantically.

Drimblerod entered from the back room. "Morning all!" He called.

The pots clattered in response.

The jousting dummy, still unsure of its future, saluted furiously.

"The privy's free if you want to use it while I get the plates" he said to Grimbledung.

"Privy? You don't use your box for that?" Grimbledung asked, pointing at the Abyssmal Box.

Drimblerod blanched. "I get the occasional strongly worded postcard for the odd wand, magical blasts, and random thoughts. Anything more..." He considered his words, "Substantial and I'd probably get a summons."

"Fair enough. I'll tend to the morning ablutions and be back in a flash." Grimbledung's stomach growled loudly, "Or possibly faster." He trotted out to the rear of the shop and out a small back door.

Grimbledung looked left and right in the alley. Last night in the darkness and rain, he had not given it much attention. Now, with daylight

and fair weather he examined closely what could become his own escape from dire circumstances. 'It is always better to be safe 'cause of proper planning, than sorry on the end of a rope' as his father used to tell him. Grimbledung lived according to (and on two occasions because of) that simple lesson. It was, as with most alleys, cluttered with boxes and overflowing bins. 'Cover' as Grimbledung liked to call it. The way to the right, from where he came last night, joined a large busy intersection from an odd angle that was difficult to see from three of the four other roads. 'Concealment'. Sometime in the very near future, he would have to see where the left went. A growling from his stomach reminded him of more pressing matters. Looking around his immediate surroundings, he spotted a small shack with a universally understood half-moon burned into the door. Grabbing a parchment from a nearby bin, he took a couple of deep breaths, held it, and ventured in.

"Think he's going to work out?" Drimblerod asked Dummy.

It shrugged then raised its arms in front of itself, mitten hands curled claw-like.

"Yes, he does have a temper" agreed Drimblerod, "If I can keep him trained on the window-lickers to keep them at bay, we'll double our profits."

Dummy nodded even though it had no idea what profits or window-lickers were. A happy Master might keep him around longer. Dummy's plan was a simple one; always agree.

"And that will keep the Merchant's Guild happy." He glanced at the dummy. "Do you even know what I'm talking about?" Drimblerod asked it.

Dummy held up two thumbs in approval.

Drimblerod shook his head, "I think I'll start talking to the rat," he said as he opened a cupboard. He retrieved two wooden plates and clay cups. "Rat!" He called to the front of the store, "Are you going to eat?" Just in case, he took down a saucer and extra cup.

Rat shuffled under the curtain, "I'll eat if there's any to spare. I've gotten pretty good at rummaging if not."

"There's plenty, Rat," assured Drimblerod. "Coffee?"

"At my age and in my condition, my heart might explode." Rat sniffed the air, "Pour me a cup." He moved beside the small table, jumped onto it, and sat on his haunches. "That's dark roasted

Gnollish Coffee, isn't it?" He asked.

Drimblerod nodded.

"I thought that was embargoed since the Great Gnoll Invasion of 648."

"It was. Or, still is, really. I trade the Gremlins for it," explained Drimblerod.

"You deal with Gremlins? Isn't that dangerous? I hear they just muck things up out of sheer spite."

Drimblerod put a cup of steaming coffee in front of Rat. "That's how it *used* to be. But there's not much of a living in just breaking things. Besides, because of that reputation, whenever anyone saw a Gremlin, they incinerated it."

"So what's changed?" Asked Rat, He took a tentative sip, coffee dripping from his longer whiskers.

"They got organized."

"You mean a union?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "Worse. A Syndicate. Now when Gremlins break things, it's because someone hasn't paid them *not* to."

"And you still deal with them?" Rat shuddered- the coffee had his heart racing. There was a reason it was only available on the black market- it was great stuff!

"It's a mutually beneficial agreement," explained Drimblerod, "I have a good reputation in the Gremlin community for helping out a couple of Gremlins who were on the lamb. Now, I supply them with Incinerator Wands, and they supply me with Gnoll Coffee, Elf Toes, and Orc Head Cheese."

"All for a few Incinerator Wands?"

"Well, that and no questions asked. And if a Gremlin or two needs to lay low, they stay in the back room. They usually only stay a few days, keep quiet, and honestly they don't eat much. It's a pretty solid deal."

"Really? Solid with Gremlins?" Asked Rat not at all completely sure. "That's not a term one hears often. Or ever, really."

"I'm an Honorary Grem'," Drimblerod said, "untouchable by any Gremlin, anywhere." He rolled up his sleeve to reveal a tattoo of a dark green circle with a small six-toed footprint in blue inside it.

"Wait, did you say Elf Toes?" Rat smacked his lips. "Pickled even?"

Drimblerod heaped eggs on the saucer and added two Elf toes. A very expensive and difficult to get delicacy. Mainly because Elves not only frowned on their appendages being served as snacks, but also because

they tended to fight back when someone tried to harvest them. In large numbers.

"Gremlins!" Grimbledung came crashing into the room. "You're infested with Gremlins!"

"Relax" said Rat, "They're on our side. Have an Elf Toe." He examined the Elf toe (a pinky toe) for a moment, "Or maybe we're on their side. Either way, the eating is good." He nibbled on the end of the toe.

Grimbledung sat down, "We consort with Gremlins? I don't know if I can stomach that."

"Elf toe?" Offered Rat.

"I hate the things almost as much as I hate the stuck up beasts they are attached to." Grimbledung scrunched up his face. "Hoity toity, the lot of them."

"And there are a lot of them," Rat twitched his whiskers.

"Nice," Grimbledung said.

"Cup of Gnollish Dark Roast?" Drimblerod asked.

"Cup of ... what did you say?"

"Gnollish Dark Roast" said Drimblerod slowly.

"From the Gremlins?" Grimbledung jabbed a thumb at the back room as Drimblerod placed a cup of the steaming black coffee in front of him. "Much maligned those poor critters," Grimbledung said as he inhaled the aromatic steam rising from the cup, "a proud and noble race, the Gremlin." Daintily he picked up the scalding cup and slurped some of the luxurious liquid, "May the gods bless their little hearts."

"Eggs?"

Grimbledung did not take his eyes off the cup of coffee, "Heartily," he said.

Drimblerod ladled several heaping spoonsful of eggs onto his new partner's plate. He added grits just in case.

Grimbledung inhaled deeply over the steaming pile of eggs, "Gads, it's a good thing we ran into each other on that field of battle isn't it?" He picked up some eggs with his fork, "Do you know what happened there?" He closed his eyes with delight as he savored the taste.

"You don't know? It was all over the parchments," said Drimblerod as he also began to eat.

Grimbledung shook his head, "Never read the things." He

managed between bites.

Drimblerod took a sip of coffee, "I've got the latest copy still. I'll read it to you."

"Great," said Grimbledung as his partner stood and moved beside the caldron to fetch the latest copy of the Daily NESW.

The Daily NESW was a clockwise parchment dealing with news from the North, East, South, and West, with its chief rival being the counter-clockwise NWSE Daily Parchment. There were those that read the new upstart parchment – the Daily NEWS – but since that didn't even make sense direction-wise, those people were considered unstable and not very trustable.

Drimblerod cleared his throat, "This particular battle had begun like no other war in local memory; with a parade. It was an especially cool morning when, a clanging of bells and beating of drums broke the morning calm. The soldiers marched by thirty-five abreast, smiling and waving as they went; bells a-clanging, drums a-beating. The melody was horrible but the soldiers were all in step. Leading the parade's front-most contingent, which as the six behind it, was fifty soldiers deep, was a grizzled warrior waving a double-bladed axe like a baton.

" 'Are and Are' was his reply to the mayor that had come out to meet the Army to ask (nervously) why they were there. 'We've had a long campaign and the men could use a little Are and Are. Battles win wars you know, and you can't win those with worn out troops.'

" 'Fine, fine. Quite nice', replied the mayor in typical politician speak, 'so where do you plan on engaging in this Rest and Relaxation?' With only a slight pause he added hopefully 'Up the road perhaps?'

"Perhaps not, apparently. It seemed the mayor's town was the first stop in a tour of local towns, villages, and castles in The Region. 'Trickle-down economics.' That's what the warrior called over his shoulder as the procession continued its march, 'That's the road to prosperity!' "

"Neat!" Interrupted Grimbledung as he scooped some grits into his mouth. "I love parades!"

Drimblerod peered over the top of the parchment at the Gnome. "Yes." He squinted as a warning then continued, "As the mayor looked

forward to the thousands of prosperous villagers, or more precisely, prosperous *registered* villager voters. A warm glow filled his innards. Lining the pockets of constituents with other people's money seemed like a win-win situation. Until.

"Until an evening two nights later when the mayor sat upright in his bed and bellowed 'Reservations!' That had been nagging him since his brief conversation with the Grizzled Warrior, the mayor explained to his very startled, newly awoken wife. It had seemed peculiar at the time that none of the soldiers had even tried to make reservations before they arrived, but well-lined constituent's pockets had pushed the thought right out of his mind. Even the hasty bivouac and foundry set up by the river had not pushed it forward. 'First thing in the morning', he told his wife, he would speak to that warrior about their ill-planned trip. 'No reservations? Bad form, that.'

"By nine o'clock that same morning, the Army controlled the entire city. Thanks to a well-planned (and adhered to) operation called 'Kill Everyone' with a follow-on operation called 'Take Everything', it was nearly a month and a half before a lone survivor was able to get word out that even though 'R and R' usually stood for 'Rest and Relaxation', in the case of *this* Army, it stood for 'Rampage and Reck'. The locals were not pleased at all with this subtle, yet noteworthy, difference. Especially since that second one was traditionally spelled with a leading 'w'. The local politicians, sensing the displeasure of their remaining constituency did what all politicians did; they immediately formed a committee and two focus groups. Three months later, the remaining two Kingdom's armies in The Region had massed in a last-ditch effort to stop the Invaders as they were now being called -appropriately so."

"Is this story almost done?"

Drimblerod squinted at Rat this time. "And the invaders were beaten." He lowered the parchment. "There."

"Well, I was hoping for a little more exposition," Grimbledung said. "Was that the end of the invasion? Are there follow on armies to worry about?"

"Was there a love story in the background between the invading army and a local gal?" Rat asked. "There usually is you know. Or perhaps a reluctant hero"

Drimblerod raised the parchment again. "The battle being won,

the locals decided to return to their calm way of life- after all if this massive battle has been lost, whatever nation was behind it would have to realize the folly of their ways and move on to other, more easily vanquished, quarry. Unfortunately for the locals, the invaders were, in a word, 'not easily deterred and willing to do whatever it took to succeed in whatever task was before them' (well, in Orcish it's one word; "chutzpa"). Not that they were Orcs, but the term was appropriate. As such, the loss of their lead contingent was only mentioned once -and only in passing- at the weekly roundtable along with the weekly weather report. *That's* chutzpa." Drimblerod put the parchment down. "The end."

"Huh. So no love story?"

Drimblerod squinted at Rat then picked up the parchment. "And the couple that met on the field of battle lived happily ever after."

"Well, that's better, at least." Rat nodded at Drimblerod.

Now Grimbledung did the squinting as Drimblerod rolled up the parchment, "Now wait a grain of sand. If there were no survivors, how'd the parchment come up with such a detailed story from the battle? And that timeline just doesn't make sense at all. Something's fishy."

"It's called 'artistic license', I'm told."

Grimbledung thought for a moment. "Well, I must admit I don't know much about art."

"Who does, really?" Rat said.

"True," Grimbledung said. "And I didn't even realize one needed to be licensed to produce it. If they're licensed, who am I to argue with artists -journalistic or otherwise?" He pursed his lips. "Wonder where I get a License to Art."

"Oh boy." Rat said. "Got new topics to read about, Drimblerod?" He glanced at Grimbledung, "He never reads to me."

Drimblerod looked down at his plate, "Not with my eggs getting cold. No more readings until tomorrow." He reengaged his breakfast with fervor.

"Deal." Grimbledung followed suit as he too took to eating with the seriousness that all Gnomes had when it came to eating.

Rat had never stopped eating so he just kept at it.

Once breakfast was done, Rat returned to the front of the stove and fell asleep on his side, distended belly rising and falling with each breath. Grimbledung and Drimblerod went to the front of the shop. "Time to

open the shop!" Said Drimblerod as he rubbed his hands together, "Let the coins flow!"

Chapter Ten
Wherein Grimbledung Sells His First Wand (in the shop)

"So what do you want me to do, Drim?"

"Stay out here and mind the shop while I get some cans together for the dummy to start sorting into. If tension continues to build around here with all that talk about an impending invasion, we're going to be really busy, really soon."

"I don't believe all that talk." He waved a hand dismissively, "After the trouncing the Dragon Brigade gave those mercenaries, there's no way anyone would dare attack again. No one is that stupid."

"I would have to agree with you, but if there's even a chance that there's going to be a run on wands in this town, we need to make sure we're fully stocked and ready to sell to every paranoid person with coins to spare." Drimblerod smiled mischievously, "And if folks start to calm down, we'll just have to get them back on their edge again."

"Well, if there's one thing that Rat says I'm good at, it's getting people on edge. I'm not even sure what that means." He furrowed his brow. "The edge of what?"

Drimblerod blinked at his new partner; he wasn't sure if he was making light of the situation or actually was perplexed. "Why don't you handle selling wands while I worry about the whole impending invasion thing?"

Grimbledung looked around the store, "Do you have any, maybe, more helpful or detailed directions for me than that? I've never sold indoors before."

"It's just like outdoors; be nice to people. Let them browse and pick up wands. Make suggestions. If they seem to be just window shopping, try a hard sell. If that doesn't work..." Drimblerod lowered his voice, "Get rid of them."

"Got it. That's it then?"

"No, actually. Don't let anyone take a wand from under the glass unless you're holding the Dispel! Wand that's behind the counter."

"Got it." Grimbledung moved to the sign on the window that in big red letters said:

CLOSED!

And doen't even think abowt
Nocking on the glas!

Go a way

But come back laeter!

"Got it, Grim? Dispel! Wand behind the counter," said Drimblerod again.

"Sure thing," Grimbledung said as he waved his hand over his shoulder. He was craning his neck to try to see people on the street. "Here customer, customer, customer!" He whistled in hopes it would help. As Drimblerod left the front of the Shop, Grimbledung was hopping from foot to foot singing:

Customers we love you!
Customers you're great.
Please come buy something,
or I'll blast your head off

He clapped in between iterations of his song. After five minutes (much to the relief of Rat) he stopped singing and sat behind the counter sulking and drumming his fingers. When he spied a passerby in the window, he sat up straight and tried to look business-like. As was often the case, the seventh one actually entered the store.

"Good morning," said the smallish Human man.

"Good morning to you too!" Replied Grimbledung sitting ramrod straight, "come in and peruse the merchandise!"

"Well, what I really need is a Loo" said the man.

"Lou? Who's that?" Asked Grimbledung, spine loosening up.

"A John"

"I don't know anyone named John Lou." Grimbledung's shoulders hunched. "Or even Lou John for that matter."

"Ahhh, I, ahhh" tried the man. "Uhm…"

"I only speak Common, Gnomish, Dwarfish, and a little Elven, and *that* not by choice." His fingers stopped drumming on the counter.

"A bathroom?" Tried the man.

"I see." Grimbledung winked knowingly. "We Gnomes call that 'a Privy'."

"Oh, I see. Well then..." Began the man with a relieved smile.

"And do you know *why* we call it that?" Interrupted Grimbledung as he stood on the stool, hands holding him up as he leaned over the counter.

"Uhmm. No?" Offered the man.

"BECAUSE IT'S PRIVATE!" Yelled Grimbledung. "As in NOT for the likes of you!" Drops of spittle hit the glass counter. Grimbledung's ears were flat against his head, "UNDERSTAND?" He screamed as he began to clamber off the counter. "Or do you need a more up close and personal explanation!?!"

"Urp!" Said the man as he closed the door and waddled back past the window.

"I guess he doesn't need a Loo anymore" Grimbledung said to no one in particular.

Drimblerod put the last can- a copper lined affair with a lid- on Dummy's pedestal. "I think he's going to work out nicely," he said to the Dummy, who was hunched over, hands covering its ears (or at least where its ears should have been).

Dummy straightened and twirled one of its mitten hands beside its ear.

"Maybe a little, but I think he's more bluster than bite."

Dummy shrugged.

"Mostly harmless" explained Drimblerod.

At that, Dummy raised a thumb. Just then the bell at the front door jingled. Dummy covered its 'ears' again.

"Welcome, come in! Peruse the merchandise!" Grimbledung said cheerfully. He had worked half the night on that phrase. He searched and searched his mind for something professional yet friendly to say to customers. At his wagon, a whispered 'Whaddayawant?' usually sufficed. He had selected, 'Check out the merchandise' but after Rat suggested 'peruse'- and assured him it was indeed a real word- he decided on 'Peruse

the merchandise'. He had 'We endeavor to serve' in reserve just in case two customers came in close together. He had never experienced three customers at once so the thought of that didn't even occur to him.

"Thanks," said the lanky youth as he closed the door behind him. He stared at Grimbledung. "New management?" He asked.

Grimbledung shook his head, "No, no. Just expanded management." He smiled a hopefully welcoming smile and added, "Come in, we endeavor to serve." Grimbledung scowled to himself; now he was out of phrases.

"Thanks" repeated the youth as he looked at the wands on the wall, "Oh- a levitator! Nice," he said as he picked it up. "And a Shire Egg Finder! Neat!" He used the levitator wand to pick up the other wand. He held both for a moment then put them both back down. He continued to look at the wands on the wall. Grimbledung began to drum his fingers.

The bell over the door rang as another customer entered, "Welcome, per ... we.." Grimbledung scowled. "Come in," he finished. It was another human, slightly older than the first but still as lanky. *Don't these humans eat*? He thought as he tried to keep an eye on both of them.

The second customer moved straight to the glass counter. "A disruptor," he commented as he leaned over the glass so close he fogged it up, "and an Assassin's Wand!" he exclaimed. "Can I hold it?" He asked pointing at the Assassin Wand. "Can I? Can I?"

"Sure thing, Pal," said Grimbledung thumbing the catch of the back of the counter and sliding open the rear door. "We can make you a deal on that, if you like it" he said handing it over. "Even add a wrist sheath to complete the package."

"A-hah!" Exclaimed the customer as he whirled about and pointed the wand at the back of the first customer. "Boooom!" He said as he pointed it at the still dozing Rat. He pointed it at Grimbledung, "Ka BLAM!" He exclaimed.

Grimbledung's eyes were now trained on the business end of the wand. The highly dangerous, mostly unstable and barely legal, Assassin Wand. His knees felt loose. So did his bowels. He glanced quickly down and saw the Dispel! Wand hanging on a wooden peg by a worn leather strap. It was well out of reach.

"Bazaaam!" The Human said again as he pointed the wand at

the ceiling.

Grimbledung's bowels sent a request to his brain to vacate the premises. In capital letters.

"Gads!" Scowled Rat as he rolled over, "There's folk trying to sleep here. Namely folk named me, so keep it down!"

The customer lowered the wand slightly as he turned toward Rat. "Sorry, I di ..." Was all the man got out before a stool shattered atop his head. Still holding one of the stool's legs, Grimbledung wacked the man on the wrist, knocking the wand from his hand. The wrist twisted in a way that revealed it was obviously broken. Fortunately, since the man was already unconscious and falling at the time, he did not notice.

The first customer raised an expensive, hard to find Green Pixie Stick (a Forest Pixie dispeller) and opened his mouth as if he were going to ask a question.

"Don't you even think about it!" Snapped Grimbledung as he pointed the stool leg at him, "If you say anything besides 'I'll take it', I'll pound you with this!" He shook the leg at the man for emphasis.

The man took a silver coin from his pocket and tossed it to Grimbledung.

He caught it without even taking his eyes off the man. "Well?" He snarled, "I'm sure there is someplace you need to be besides here!"

"Gah!" Was all the man managed to get out before scampering out.

Chapter Eleven
Wherein Grimbledung Makes His First Bribe (in the shop)

Drimblerod came from the rear of the shop to where the Dummy was working- or supposed to be working.

Dummy was flailing and pointing to the front of the shop, he would stop and punch one hand into the other, or hit himself in the head.

"Settle down. I'll go see what's going on," Drimblerod assured Dummy. He moved quickly to the curtain. "What's going on?" Asked Drimblerod as he pushed through the curtain. He was greeted by Grimbledung standing over a splayed and very unconscious human. Bits of stool were scattered about and Grimbledung was still holding the wooden leg in one hand, Assassin Wand in the other.

"I made a sale," offered Grimbledung. He hadn't moved from his stance.

"You just can't beat people over the head to sell them a wand."

"No, not this one," Grimbledung nudged the man with the stool leg, "the other one." He pointed at the door with the wand. "That other guy bought a Green Pixie Stick for a silver coin." He grinned. "He seemed pleased with the purchase too," he added.

"What's with this one?" Drimblerod nudged him with his foot. He picked up the man's arm which covered his face. His hand flopped in unnatural directions. Drimblerod stuck out his tongue, "That's not good. What? Did you hit him while he was down?"

Grimbledung looked offended, "Not at all! He hadn't collapsed yet when I hit his wrist."

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow.

"Well, at least not completely anyway. He still might have twitched with this thing in his hand." Grimbledung waved the Assassin Wand, which crackled ominously.

Assassin Wands were smaller than normal wands; easy to conceal, or after being used, discarded discretely. They were imbued with one or two spells, always offensive, usually lethal. In many

townships and municipalities, they were illegal. Fortunately, in Aution, a more devil-may-care attitude was followed. Since no devils had complained about Assassin Wands (because they didn't use them, and no one would ever consider trying to use one on them) they were fair game within township limits.

"Well, we need to move him," said Drimblerod, "at the very least, he'll spook the other customers. At least he's not bleeding." He bent over to look at the man more closely. "Externally anyway."

"What'll we do? This guy's sure to file a complaint about this." Grimbledung said worriedly. "He got a good look at me too. What I really need now is ..."

"A doctor?" Suggested Drimblerod.

"No," replied Grimbledung. "An alibi!"

"Relax. Get the dolly from the back. We'll strap him to it. I'll roll him down to the doc. He can patch him up, wipe today from his head, and send him on his way."

"Really? That's a great doctor!" Grimbledung relaxed and put the wand and hunk of wood on the counter.

"Well, he does owe me a favor or two. It shouldn't cost more than a silver."

"But that was my first indoor sale," whined Grimbledung.

"Now it's your first indoor bribe," said Drimblerod, "hand it over."

Grimbledung took the silver coin from his pouch, kissed it and tossed it to Drimblerod. "I'll get the dolly" he said sullenly.

After several failed attempts, the two Gnomes were able to balance the man on the dolly long enough to strap him down. "OK. I'll take care of him, you clean up this mess and mind the shop," ordered Drimblerod.

"Got it," assured Grimbledung.

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at him.

"No, really. I can handle this," Grimbledung said as he shuffled Drimblerod out the door, dolly and all. "Rolton Chips!" Exclaimed Grimbledung as he gathered the broken stool and fed it into the stove. He moved back behind the counter and caught himself trying to sit down on a no longer in existence stool. "Steaming piles of Rolton chips." He muttered as he leaned on the counter.

"Oooh, thanks," said Rat sleepily as he rolled his back to the now crackling fire. "Whack another customer in an hour, will you, Grim." With that he dozed off.

Grimbledung's gesture at Rat was wasted. If nothing else, it made Grimbledung feel better.

After a few minutes, a cloaked figure came in quickly and shut the door. "Welcome. Come in and peruse the merchandise," said Grimbledung, straightening.

The cloaked figure moved quickly to the counter, keeping low as it went.

"Shhh," it rasped, "not so loud."

"Right," replied Grimbledung in a fake theatrical whisper, "the rat's sleeping."

The figure shook its hooded head. "They might hear. Keep it down. And don't wake the rat," the figure hissed.

The situation suddenly seemed familiar to Grimbledung. He was back at his wagon on the wrong side of town. He leaned forward, "Of course; no witnesses."

"Riiiight," the figure whispered.

Grimbledung leaned over the counter so his feet were barely on the ground and in his best conspirator tone asked, "*Whaddayawant*?"

"I'm off on a mission. An adventure. I don't know what I'll encounter" the figure said. "Death itself," it suggested.

"Well, he can be a friendly sort if you engage him in a game of strategy. Especially if dice are involved. Chutes and Elves comes to mind. Turnips to Turnips even." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

The dark figure stared at Grimbledung.

"I understand," Grimbledung said knowingly. *I understand you're a mark* he thought. Out loud he continued, "You need a standard Adventure of Doom package." He winked.

"Yessss," the figure agreed, "money is no object."

Grimbledung did little puppy flips on the inside, "Follow me" he said as calmly as he could as he moved from behind the counter, "And stay clear of the window."

The cloaked figure obliged, practically crawling behind Grimbledung. "I suggest an Incinerator wand to heat ... I mean to boil a person's brain."

"Perfect!" Agreed the figure.

Grimbledung stuck the wand in the figure's belt. In theory, one *could* cause harm with an Incinerator wand, but it would have to be held tightly against a head for a long time to even begin to cause damage. Skulls were poor conductors when it came to Incinerator

wands. By then, a rock to the head would be a far better choice- especially if a victim was unwilling to remain still for a long time. "And to help move the bodies, a Levitator Wand"

"Just what I was thinking. Will it move several bodies at once?" The figure asked.

"Oh plenty of bodies" assured Grimbledung, "I saw one pick up a whole troop[9] of Orcs once." Behind him, he heard the bell over the door. *Things couldn't get better*, he thought. "Come in, we endeavor to ser ..." His eyes met Drimblerod's.

The cloaked figure hunched down, "No witnesses!" It hissed.

"Drimblerod's not a witness," Grimbledung explained to the figure, "he's management." He patted the figure's back. "Relax."

Drimblerod shook his head.

"Not management?" Asked Grimbledung.

Drimblerod pushed the empty dolly in and shut the door. He shook his head again. He stuck out his tongue and waggled it around as if he had a sugar stick.

"Lunch?" Suggested Grimbledung.

Drimblerod's head shook again. He pointed at the window and waggled his tongue again.

"No." Grimbledung said flatly, as he continued to pat the figure.

Drimblerod pointed to the cloaked figure and gave a thumbs-up.

"Right then," Grimbledung's eyes narrowed. "Back to my customer." He drew a finger across his throat slowly at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod silently pushed the dolly through the shop and under the curtain, then he returned to peek out from behind it.

"Ahhh, I thought he'd never leave," said Grimbledung. "Now where were we? Killing things and toting corpses, I think. What more could you need?"

The hooded figure un-stooped slightly. "What do you suggest?"

"Come to the counter, friend and I'll show you." Grimbledung quickly moved around the counter so the figure knew where to skulk. "I only show this wand to the truly adventurous and most dangerous of customers. Only the most worthy of worthiest."

"That's me."

Grimbledung searched quickly under the glass hoping that a wand would catch his eye. One did. He thumbed open the door and pulled out a small black wand. "This is your wand. I hope you have the gold for it," warned Grimbledung.

"Of course I do," whispered the figure.

"I sure hope so. The last time was horrible" said Grimbledung casually as he held the wand by the tip, offering the hilt to the figure. It was not how someone generally passed a wand to another, but the figure did not notice. Unlike knives that were passed by the blade offering the hilt, wands were passed by the hilt in a sideways 'hilt to hilt' manner.

"Last time?" It asked.

"It's nothing really. Hardly even worth mentioning. It's just...."

The figure peered up at him, hand hovered inches from the hilt. "Just what?" It said finally.

"The cleanup was tough, is all. Took a whole week. We had to repaint you see."

"Repaint?" The figure asked.

"The walls," said Grimbledung.

"Walls?"

"And the ceilings of course."

The figure's hand moved ever so slightly away from the wand's hilt.

"No matter," continued Grimbledung, "you're obviously much more controlled, magically speaking. And you're definitely powerful enough wearing that ominous yet stylish cloak." With that, Grimbledung shoved the wand into the figure's sleeve.

Reflexively it grasped the wand.

"Ka-Clack" went the wand.

"Is it supposed to do that?" Asked the figure.

"Oh, we'll be alright as long as ..." Grimbledung stopped as a high pitch whine began to emit from the wand. "Uh oh," he said flatly.

"Uh oh? What's that mean?"

Grimbledung let go of the tip of the wand. "I really, really need you to pay for that quickly because we don't offer refunds."

"Refunds?"

"And it should help pay for the cleanup." Grimbledung said as the wand's pitch rose two more octaves. "Sooner is definitely better than later at this point," he suggested.

"What do I do? How do I make it stop?" Pleaded the figure.

"Pay and take it outside so the street sweepers can take care of the mess. Less to paint out there."

"But ..." started the figure. He had to speak up over the noise.

"But what?" Asked Grimbledung innocently.

"I have... no money" the figure finally admitted. It dropped the wand on the counter and sprinted out of the shop.

"One down" said Grimbledung as he gingerly picked up the now smoking wand. "Make way!" He called as he ran through the curtain. Drimblerod barely sidestepped as he came through. "Duck, Dummy!" Grimbledung called. He was now running at top speed, wand held out ahead of him.

Dummy saw Grimbledung at full tilt, smoking wand aimed at it. It wheeled its arms and fell off the platform just as the wand went off. A jagged purple bolt zigzagged from the wand and into the Abyssmal Box for a full five seconds, crackling and sizzling as it went.

"We're going to get very angry letters," said Drimblerod as he helped Dummy to its base. It was furiously twirling a mitten hand around its ear as it gestured towards Grimbledung with the other.

"Well, *that* was exciting!" Said Grimbledung, "I thought that guy would never leave!"

"Why in the Lands did you hand that fool a Destructor!! Wand for?" Drimblerod asked angrily, "He could have taken out half the shop!"

"Relax, Drim. I had it all under control," Grimbledung tried to reassure him.

"And what if Dummy had moved the box?" Drimblerod pointed testily at the Abyssmal Box. "What if you didn't make it back here? What if the lid was shut? What then?"

"I'd have gone outside and cut a bunch of clouds in half. No harm done"

"Except that discharging a Destructor!! Wand within township limits is a felony and I would have, *WE* would have lost the shop trying to pay all the fines and bribes!" Snapped Drimblerod. "And that's not even taking into account any up close and personal meetings we'd have with the Constable!"

Grimbledung shuddered. Fines and jail time- those could be dealt with. Up close and personal meetings with the Constable, or more specifically *Aution's* Constable was a different matter entirely. Then something *truly horrible* came to his mind, "Rolton Chips!" He exclaimed.

"What now?" Said Drimblerod, exasperated.

"That fellow walked out of here with that Incinerator Wand stuck in his belt. Steaming piles of Rolton Chips." He scrunched up his face at the loss of a wand.

"Well, if *that's* all this learning experience costs us, we're still doing pretty well." He thought for a moment, "But for now on, put wands on the *counter* until a customer pays for it, *not* on their person!"

Grimbledung sighed heavily. Wand Shop ownership definitely was more complicated than Wand Wagon ownership. Hopefully he got the hang of it. At least before he killed off his new partner. "Fine, fine."

Chapter Twelve
Wherein Grimbledung Gets Some Pointers on Wand Sales

Grimbledung's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry, Drimblerod. I really am. I'll take this seriously."

They both looked at each other in silence. Just then the front doorbell jingled.

"I'll see to it Drimblerod," assured Grimbledung, "Don't worry," he said as he quickly pushed through the curtain to the front of the shop.

"Welcome to the shop." Grimbledung said somberly, "Can I help you find something?"

The squat creature in front of him- half Gnome, half Dwarf- looked at the wands on the shelves. "I'm off to seek my fortune and I need a wand or two." He shuffled to the counter with an impossibly large pack on his back, "Can I put this down?"

"Sure thing, friend," Grimbledung gestured to the edge of the counter and the Gnome-Dwarf obliged. The pack was nearly as tall as he was.

"I think the first thing *you* need is a Levitation Wand," suggested Grimbledung as he moved around the counter, "It will definitely make your travels more enjoyable." He took one of the wands off the shelf and pointed it at the pack. With a slight twist of his wrist, he levitated the pack to the top of the counter. "See?"

"Well, that's good and fine" said the Gnome-Dwarf as he crossed his arms and watched the demonstration.

"Exactly," Grimbledung said as he lowered the pack, "So what else do you need?"

"How about to *not* be the laughing stock of the group? That would be nice," he said. "What do you think that would do to my reputation to foist my pack duties onto a wand? Should I keep my pinky out as well?" He finished.

Grimbledung looked at the Gnome-Dwarf as he decided how to respond. Nothing helpful came to mind. "You know, sir, you're right," agreed Grimbledung, trying to act like a respectable, serious businessman. "That wouldn't do at all. Let me ask my associate what he thinks of the situation." He held out his palm. "Just a moment." He went behind the

curtain, "Drim, I'm trying to make a sale and I need your help," he said, "I need a suggestion, or an opinion, or something."

Drimblerod looked up from the can of wands he was examining, "Did you waylay another customer?" He asked.

"No! Now hurry before he leaves!" Snapped Grimbledung. "I'm trying to be serious here." He stepped back through the curtain. The fellow had an Incinerator Wand in his hand.

"How well do these work?"

"Well, you can definitely cook a hearty pot of stew with it, roast a rabbit, or even a shank of lamb. Nothing bigger than that," explained Grimbledung.

"How much?" Asked the Gnome-Dwarf.

"Three copper" said Drimblerod quickly as he came through the curtain, "but we might be able to make you a deal."

"Three?" The creature said as he started to put the wand back on the shelf.

Drimblerod nimbly intercepted the wand, hurriedly placed it on the counter, and executed a crisp U-Turn back to the potential customer within a moment. "So what's the trouble?" Drimblerod asked the Gnome-Dwarf.

"Your partner here wants me to be the fool who totes his pack at the end of a wand," he scowled.

Grimbledung's eyes got large.

"He's new," offered Drimblerod, "he meant no offense, sir. He's still learning the ropes. Career change and all that. Bad times we live in, you know."

Grimbledung narrowed his eyes at Drimblerod who only winked in reply.

"So, what's your suggestion?" Said the Gnome-Dwarf as he re-crossed his arms.

"I'd say a nice Levitation Wand," suggested Drimblerod.

From behind the customer, Grimbledung shook his head and pulled his finger across his throat.

"We've been through that!" Scowled the Gnome-Dwarf as he raised his hands, "I shan't be seen waggling a wand at my pack as we trudge the Wilds!"

"No, not at all," assured Drimblerod, "and no one is saying you should." He put his arm around the customer and led him to the pack. "Watch this." Drimblerod took the wand, gave it a flick and

bumped the hilt with the palm of his other hand. Quickly he shoved the wand into the main pocket of the pack. "There," he said simply.

"Are you giving me it then? Either way, I won't use it. I've got my reputation to maintain, and there's no way I'll lose my..."

As the Gnome-Dwarf spoke, Drimblerod reached for the middle of the pack and hefted it over his head.

"...self-respect to... hey now. What's this?" He finished.

"It's on automatic," explained Drimblerod as he put the pack down.

The Gnome-Dwarf grabbed the pack with both hands and nearly stumbled due to the lack of resistance as he picked it up. "Say! This weighs the same as when it was empty! How's that work?"

"When you see those Humans or Orcs battling and running all day, do you really think they're doing it in regular, full weight armor?"

"Well, I just assumed," said the Gnome-Dwarf.

Drimblerod shook his head. "Levitation Wands in their armor."

"I'll be! And no one'll know it's there?" He asked.

"Not unless you'll tell them. All for a mere three copper. A pittance really. A token of appreciation," suggested Drimblerod. "A piddling of copper for effortless walking on non-blistered feet."

"Sold!" Said the Gnome-Dwarf. He hefted the pack several times. "What a deal!" He beamed. "Wait till the rest of the guys are complaining and I'm just strolling along." He dropped the pack and then rubbed his hands together with glee.

"And since you're such a good fellow, I'll throw in the Incinerator for two copper. Five total coins for fresh feet, a straight back, and hot chow."

"Excellent!" The Gnome-Dwarf dug into his pockets and pulled out five copper coins, "Here you go," he said as he handed the coins over giddily. He hefted his pack and effortlessly slung it on.

"Remember, flick and bump to set it on. Repeat it to turn it off," said Drimblerod as the fellow cinched the straps on its pack.

"Don't forget your Incinerator." Said Grimbledung as he stuck the wand into one of the pack's bulging pockets, "Hot chow!"

"Thanks again! I'll be back when I need something else," waved the Gnome-Dwarf as he opened the door behind him and bounded by the window, still waving.

"What a great customer!" Exclaimed Grimbledung, "I hope he sends us some more business."

"Not a chance," Drimblerod said as he shook his head.

"Why?"

"First," started Drimblerod tapping one finger, "he'll never tell his pals because he'll want to keep that wand his secret, even though it would help out the entire group and possibly save lives." He ticked a second finger off, "And second, he'll be dead in about a week."

"Dead?"

"Eaten by Orcs most likely. Skewered by Trolls and roasted. Squashed by Ogres into pudding. Possibly even digested by a Dragon."

"How can you be so sure?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Most of those Adventurers are dead in a week." Drimblerod said. "They almost never come back to tell their tales of high adventure. Or even High Adventure," he said, managing to enunciate the capitalization. "Usually, it is a haggard lone survivor telling their sad story at the Maura Tau Bar and BAR."

"Maybe they settle someplace else, living like kings?" Suggested Grimbledung.

Drimblerod looked at him solemnly and shook his head.

Grimbledung blanched. "How gruesome! Still, it was impressive to see you get five copper for two copper worth of wands. Very tricky" he shook his finger at Drimblerod.

"I probably could have gotten six. You always have to leave space in Yea Olde Haggle Room to sit in."

"Good tip."

"You know what they say," offered Drimblerod, "Them's that don't haggle, gets tooken."

"That's horrible Common," tut-tutted Grimbledung.

"It's a poem."

"Oh? How's the rest of it go?" Asked Grimbledung hopefully.

"That's it. It's the Great Poem of Business."

Grimbledung blinked. "Who wrote it?"

"Me." Drimblerod winked as went back through the curtain. "Remember, we've a silver coin to make back" he reminded over his shoulder.

"Right!" Called Grimbledung. "I've got this!" He returned to wait behind the counter, fingers drumming on the glass. After ten minutes, no one had come in and he was bored. "I'm bored," he confirmed to no one in particular. He took a piece of parchment from behind the counter and began to doodle. Soon, he had a

(terrible) sketch of a Dragon devouring a band of adventurers. He supplied the appropriate commentary and wails as the sketch progressed. "If only we *all* had light packs!" Groaned one adventurer as the Dragon chomped on it. "If only we had knowwwwnnn!" The stick figure lamented with his last breath. "If only." Grimbledung said to console the now devoured stick figure.

"If only they had known?" He asked himself. He stood up straight and clapped with glee. "If only! If only!" He sing-songed as he hopped foot to foot.

Quickly, his gleeful hand clapping became a more sinister hand-rubbing. At the same time, the hopping became a stooped over shuffle as he moved back and forth behind the counter, "Oh yes, *they* will know. They *will* know!" Grimbledung hissed to himself. "They may still get devoured but it won't be because they didn't know." A cackle formed in the back of Grimbledung's throat and worked its way up as he tilted his head back and laughed at the ceiling. "They will know!" He finished loudly, arms splayed out to the side, fingers arched upward. "**MWWAAHHAA**!"

Rat sat up sleepily. "What in the Lands are you going on about now, you crazy Gnome?"

Grimbledung reverted to hopping back and forth. "If only! If only!" He sing-songed again as he clapped -again- gleefully innocent.

Chapter Thirteen
Wherein Grimbledung has a Grand Idea

"Stop that!" Commanded Rat, "You look positively absurd."

"Rat! You're awake! Great. I need your help."

"Wonderful. What with? I was just getting ready to start my nap." Rat yawned.

"But you were just asleep," said Grimbledung confused.

"Yes. That was sleeping. Now I will be napping. They're completely different things," explained Rat.

"No they aren't." Countered Grimbledung.

"Then why aren't they called the same thing?"

Grimbledung opened his mouth and then closed it. "I guess you're right, but wait for a bit to nap- I need your help," pleaded Grimbledung.

"With what?"

"The same as always; spelling. Mind the store." Grimbledung rushed through the curtain as Rat sat up.

"Minding, minding." said Rat in a monotone.

"Drimblerod, I need a couple of boards and some paint," said Grimbledung. He cautiously continued, "For something."

Drimblerod was seated on the floor, a dozen cans of wands sitting around him. "In the back" he said without looking up. He pulled a wand under his nose and inhaled as if it were a long cigar. "Reds" he mumbled as he put the wand in a red-spattered can. Without looking, he reached for another wand from the large pile.

"Hey, Dummy" said Grimbledung, "do you want to help?" He looked around the room conspiratorially. "With something."

Dummy was pointing a wand into the Abyssmal Box. He shook his head at Grimbledung and waggled the wand at the box. A solid stream of water shot out of it. He placed the wand in a can with blue wavy lines painted on it. A dozen cans surrounded Dummy. Some had figures, some symbols, one had a large question mark. It had six wands in it.

"No idea, huh?" Grimbledung asked as he pointed at the can.

Dummy shrugged.

"Sure you don't want to help?"

The dummy shook its head and pointed to the platform with a mitted hand.

"Ordered to stay put. Fine, suit yourself," finished Grimbledung as he moved to the storeroom in back.

A few moments later he came shuffling out with two squares of wood, several paint cans, brushes, and a length of rope. Neither Drimblerod nor Dummy paid attention to him as he fought past the curtain with his load.

"He's a *very* strange Gnome," said Drimblerod. "But at least he's being quiet."

Dummy nodded as he picked up another wand.

"All right, Rat," started Grimbledung. "This is what the sign needs to say ..."

"I'm listening." Rat had a piece of parchment and a bit of charcoal in his paw, ready to take notes.

Grimbledung cleared his throat. "This is your chance to own a great magical wand!" Declared Grimbledung. "Great power at reasonable prices! Lots of wands to choose from. Free wrapping and no hassles from the law. Come buy your wand today." He smiled proudly.

"Got it." Said Rat almost as soon as Grimbledung had stopped speaking.

"Really? You don't need me to repeat it?" Asked Grimbledung, "I didn't see you writing a lot."

"Short hand," explained Rat. "Don't worry," he assured Grimbledung, "I'll write it on both pieces so when you tie them together, folks going either way will see it."

Grimbledung opened the cans of paint and put the brushes beside them. He arranged the wood squares side by side. "How is that?"

"Great. I'll get this done so I can nap."

Grimbledung hopped from foot to foot and twirled the rope over his head. "Great power! Reasonable prices!" He sing-songed, "Lots of wands too. Buy today."

"OK," said Rat after just three iterations of the song, "I'm done."

"Already?" Asked Grimbledung, sorry he was going to have to stop playing with the rope. "That was quick."

"It's just what you want. Trust me," assured Rat. "Now tie them together at the top." He pointed to the tops of the boards, "This end," he

added.

Grimbledung twirled the rope over his head like a long ribbon one more time. He then drew his dirk and punched holes at what Rat said were the tops of the signs. He square-knotted the two lengths of rope at the top, and tied another length along the bottom so the wood formed a crude 'A'. "That should do the trick, eh, Rat?" He pointed at it proudly. "That's one nice looking sign!"

He carried the sign out the door and sat it on the boardwalk. In big red letters it proclaimed:

SaLe Too Dae

And in smaller, light brown letters, it whispered

No Ree funds!

"Are you sure that it says everything I said?" Asked Grimbledung, "That's not a lot of writing."

"Yes. Don't worry. It's short-hand. Businesses do it all the time."

"Does it say 'Lots of Wands'? That's important."

Rat rolled his one eye, "If it will make you happy, I can add that."

After Grimbledung muscled the sign back into the store, Rat dipped the brush in black paint and added to the sign

Hooge Inventorie

Rat had to go back to re-dip the brush for the other side. "Happy?"

Grimbledung clapped and hopped back and forth. He took the sign and placed it on the walkway in front of the store and came back in giddily. "This will be great!" He squealed. "Rat, watch the store while I put this stuff away." He grabbed up the paint and brushes and hurried to the rear storeroom. As he passed Drimblerod and Dummy, he shielded the paint cans with his body, sidestepping through the room. He was sprinting as he came back through empty handed. Neither Drimblerod nor Dummy even looked up from their

tasks.

Grimbledung burst through the curtain, "What'd I miss, Rat?" He asked.

Rat was already napping.

Chapter Fourteen
Wherein Grimbledung Almost Starves to Death

Three customers looked at him. "So what's the sale all about?" An Elf asked him curtly.

Elves, thought Grimbledung, *they act so smug. Maybe I should ask pretty-elf how many toes he has.* Swallowing hard he replied as controlled and politely as possible, "Expanded management. We're celebrating," and because he could not help himself, he added: "Ma'am."

"I'm a male," said the Elf as he tossed his long blond hair. His outfit was impeccably clean and polished. Even after a massive battle, Elves never seemed dirty. "The hair is a symbol of my prestige," he explained haughtily.

"Of course, of course," said Grimbledung, not offering an apology, "What are you looking for today, brave Elf?"

"A Waterspout Wand," he replied in curt, better-than-everyone-else Elf fashion.

"We've a fine one right here," offered Grimbledung as he moved around the counter and took a blue-tinted wand from a wall rack. *Just what you need to stay Elfishly clean* he thought as he handed the Elf the wand. "Four copper today only," he said hopefully.

The Elf looked down at the Gnome. "I'll give you two," he said smugly.

"Sold!" Exclaimed Grimbledung as he slapped his hands together. A Gnomish gesture that meant haggling was over.

The Elf blinked angrily, realizing the lack of a counter-offer of 'three copper' meant he was overpaying. "Ah. I see," he said as he took out two shiny copper pieces (even their money was always clean).

Grimbledung took the coins from his hand. "Very nice. Good deal." Grimbledung looked up at the Elf. "For you, my brave Elf," he added quickly. "Have a magically wet day and come back soon!"

The Elf furrowed a well-maintained brow and left without a word. Grimbledung haggled and harangued customers for what seemed hours. He would look outside and still the shadow of his

clapboard was still not directly beneath it. His stomach growled angrily.

Finally, during a break in customers he poked his head through the curtain, "Drimblerod! I've been out here for hours. I need a break!" He called at his partner, who was still (annoyingly) sitting on the floor smelling and sorting wands, "Are you going to snort wands all day?" He demanded.

"It's been not half an hour since you asked for the paints," said Drimblerod. "Quit being a Gnomeling."

Dummy nodded. He held a mitten about at the height of where his knees would be. The other he held to his belly as he pantomimed laughing.

"Half an hour? I've served hundreds of customers out here and I'm famished." Grimbledung complained. "*Hundreds!*"

"Hundreds? Quit exaggerating," said Drimblerod as he stood, "I'll come help you with your hundreds of customers."

Dummy shook his head at Drimblerod as he jerked a thumb at Grimbledung.

"This will be fun."

Grimbledung moved so Drimblerod could move through the curtain.

"I see four customers, Grimbledung. That's good, but not what I'd call a 'rush'."

"Sure, it's four now, but it's usually six or seven and it's been solid customers for hours." Grimbledung's stomach growled furiously. A customer glanced over at him. "See?"

"So how much have you made?" Asked Drimblerod, still not convinced.

Grimbledung pulled a bulging pouch from his belt. "Here, take this," he said as he emptied the coins into Drimblerod's cupped hands.

"Well, there's twenty copper, and a few silver here for sure." Drimblerod tilted his head, "But not hundreds of customer's coins."

"Put it with the rest," said Grimbledung flatly.

"The rest?"

"I had to keep emptying my pouch. Check the drawer by the Dispel Wand." Grimbledung's stomach made a sound like the last moments of a sink draining. "I'm starving to death. What a way for a Gnome to go." He groaned.

Drimblerod moved behind the counter to the Dispel Wand and pulled on the drawer with his full hands. It felt stuck. He dumped the

coins on the counter and again pulled on the drawer. Heavily, it slid out, tilting dangerously downwards. It was over half full of coins- a solid layer of copper and silver two feet by two feet, six inches deep. Drimblerod swept the coins off the counter into the drawer and grunted as he pushed it shut. He thought for a moment. "What day is it?" He asked warily.

"Gwenersday," replied Grimbledung.

"Sadornsday," said a customer at the same time.

They both looked at each other and repeated their answers.

"Are you sure?" Grimbledung asked the customer; a Half-Orc.

"I'm sure," the customer snarled. "Day before yesterday was Grunsday. Grunsday are not work days at mine for Pike,"[10] he said as he pointed to himself. "Pike goes to work from Sadornsday to Thraksday," he said mimicking what was most likely his mate, "Every day when the sun go down, Pike go to the Bronze Mines, not get in fights, and then ..." He continued to parrot in a voice two octaves above his.

"Yes, yes. We get it" interrupted Drimblerod. "Thanks, Pike."

Pike smiled. A 'thank you' meant Pike was being good. Screams meant Pike was being bad. Pike's mate had said to stop being bad.

"Pike need light wand. You see ..." He started.

"Give Pike a wand, Grim," Drimblerod interrupted the Half-Orc again.

Pike's blood pressure went up slightly. He clenched his fists. Sometimes obeying a mate was difficult[11].

"On the house!" Drimblerod added quickly, spying the clenched fists. "Thanks again, Pike! Come back soon, and bring your lovely wife." He said moving around the counter. "Everyone, can I have your attention?" He continued, "We're going to have to take a break for lunch."

"It's not even ten in the morning," said another customer - a human. "Lunch?"

"More like brunch then," corrected Drimblerod, "Pike, help the gentleman out with you. Thanks."

Pike, wand in hand, grabbed the human by the neck and led him out of the store. In true Orcish fashion, roughly. The other customers followed instead of waiting for Pike to return for them.

"Thanks folks!" Called Drimblerod. "Flip the sign, Grim."

Grimbledung flipped the sign and the catch on the door. "What

is going on here?"

"I've heard about this happening in Enchanted Forests, but never in an actual building," explained Drimblerod. "It has something to do with a lot of magic in one place mucking up time. Like a princess who sleeps for a hundred years but to her, it's just a night."

"This," said Grimbledung spreading his hands wide, "is nice, but it's no Enchanted Forest. It's not even the Emerald Forest, and *that's* infested with Orcs."

"True, but it *is* full of magic. Much more than normal right now so maybe we're at some sort of tipping point."

"So what do we do about it? Work until we starve to death?" Grimbledung's stomach growled again. "My body seems to think it's only been an hour or so, but my stomach knows it's been a lot longer. Let's listen to my stomach," he suggested.

Drimblerod paced around the shop. "I've got it." He clapped his hands together, "the tavern across the street. It's under new ownership since old man Hooper died and his sons sold off the place. I don't know who bought it but maybe they can help us."

"Excellent suggestion, Drim!" Exclaimed Grimbledung as he unlatched the door, "Let's go eat and have an ale." He offered the exit to Drimblerod, "Grab a handful of copper, grab Rat, and let's go."

"No, that's not it."

"But I'm going to faint, I think," whimpered Grimbledung as he closed the door.

"No, no. We're going to the tavern, but not just to eat," explained Drimblerod.

Grimbledung reopened the door, "Great! To the tavern. Eating and more!" This time he started to leave first. "Come on Rat," he called.

Rat sat up, "I thought someone said something about me being carried."

"I've got him," said Drimblerod as he scooped up Rat, "I'll just get some coins." He moved behind the counter and filled his pouch with an assortment of silver and copper coins. "We really need to count all this. And see about getting it into the bank. It's not safe keeping all this coinage around, you know." He looked at the window. "And if the Merchant Guild did a surprise inspection, I'd owe a lot more coins that I'd want to admit to owing."

"Merchant Guild smerchant guild; deposit it later! Right now, I need a deposit in my belly!" Whimpered Grimbledung from the doorway. With that he gripped his belly with both hands and bent over with a groan.

"All right, all right, just calm down," said Drimblerod. "We're on our way. We'll get this all sorted out and you something to eat." He shook his head, "I can't believe I am putting your stomach on even ground with the welfare of the shop."

Grimbledung groaned again, "I'm fading fast! Wax on while we leave."

"Fine, fine. Let's get going then," said Drimblerod. He looked down at Rat with a pained look in his eye, "Is this normal for him?"

Rat looked at Grimbledung. He was bent over clutching his stomach with both hands and moaning. "Yep. Pretty much."

"Well we better get going before..." Drimblerod considered what he was going to say. "... Before he really starts acting strange."

"Starts? Are you in for a treat."

Grimbledung leapt at the ceiling then began to hop back and forth. With smile, he burst into song

We're going to the Ta-vern right now
My belly will be so happ-y.
Meat and cheese and crusty bread!
And an Ale or two for me.
An Ale or two for me?

Yes! An Ale or two for me!

"Are *any* of his songs good?" Drimblerod asked Rat as he shut the door, following his dancing partner out.

"No. Not a single one."

Chapter Fifteen
Wherein the Gnomes Make a New Partner

The three crossed the sidewalk into the street. As they got there, a group of Halflings, ten in all, crossed their path.

"Hey there little fellas!" Said Grimbledung amicably, "we're going to get something to eat!"

The entire group skidded to a halt. The lead Halfling looked up at Grimbledung, "What'd you call me?" He snapped.

"What?" Asked Grimbledung. He was still hopping back and forth out of excitement. "Who; me?"

Drimblerod saw several of the Halflings rest their hands on the hilts of their weapons- the others already had their hands on theirs. "Hold on there, Halfling, my friend meant no disrespect," began Drimblerod.

The Halfling whirled on Drimblerod, "You callin' me stupid or deaf?"

"What?" Asked Drimblerod. "Me? How?"

"Well," began the Halfling as the others spread out around the Gnomes, "either I'm hard of hearing 'cause your friend didn't say what I thought he said, *or* I'm stupid because I didn't understand what he said to me." He glowered up at Drimblerod, "Which is it?"

Drimblerod took a step back, "Listen, we're just crossing the street going to get something to eat. We don't want any trouble."

Several of the Halflings muttered "Trouble."

Grimbledung stopped hopping back and forth. "What?" He said again. This time *his* eyes narrowed.

Drimblerod looked from his partner to the group of Halflings. From recent (Grimbledung) and not too recent (all Halflings) experiences, he knew that they were all pretty unstable. Individually Halflings were fairly pleasant to be around. Once they got into groups of three or more, their demeanor completely changed; they became bullying, cantankerous, and just downright unpleasant.

Drimblerod smiled at the lead Halfling, "Listen, pal, how about we buy you and your friends a drink? We're celebrating and would be happy to buy your first round."

The lead Halfling crowded Drimblerod, "I don't need no stinking

Gnome..."

"*WHAT*?" Interjected Grimbledung.

"... buying me or my mates drinks. Wec'n get our own drinks. When and where we want. Got it?"

"Your loss then, Pal." Drimblerod said. He grabbed Grimbledung's shoulder and pulled him around to face the direction of the pub, "Let's go Grim."

"Oh it'll be *grim* all right," sneered the Halfling.

The others nodded. Several continued to mutter "Trouble." Some said "grim."

"And you're at the top of the list for when we hand it out." He kicked a clod of dirt at the Gnomes.

Rat who had been standing on Drimblerod's shoulder the entire exchange hopped onto the Halfling's shoulder. "I'm going to pee in your ear at one point in the near future." He whispered into the Halfling's ear as he hopped off.

The Halfling unsheathed his blade. All eighteen inches of it (they are, after all, Halflings). And pointed it at Rat. "I'll turn you into a hat!"

The other Halflings laughed uproariously at their leader. "A hat!" They all guffawed.

Drimblerod led Grimbledung across the remainder of the street, "You can't go around doing that to Halflings, Grim," he explained, "the last thing we need is a brawl in the center of town."

Grimbledung looked at his partner, "Sorry, but those folk just rub me the wrong way. It's their small hands and beady eyes. And they smell of cabbage. They give me the willies and I end up saying things I shouldn't."

"Well, it's over with now and I'm sure we'll not have to deal with them again. I don't recall any Halflings in town so they must just be passing through."[12]

"I suppose you're right," said Grimbledung as they moved to the door of the tavern. "Sorry about that. I'll try to keep a civil tongue inside my head."

"Your poor tongue," said Rat. "Stuck in that head of yours, all civil, with nothing to keep it company but buckets of crazy."

Grimbledung looked down at Rat, "I'll pee in your ear if you keep it up."

Drimblerod shook his head. "On *that* note, how about we get

some food?"

Grimbledung's stomach made gurgling sounds. "Gah! We're still not eating. Don't tell my stomach! My achy breaky stomach!"

"Don't you dare make that into a song," warned Rat.

"I'm too hungry to sing," answered Grimbledung as he entered the tavern like a famished Ogre entering an encampment of River Folk. "Sustenance!" He bellowed, "I need food, and I need it now!" He pointed at his belly just in case anyone was unsure of who was in need of feeding. And where.

The tavern was practically empty- it was still too early for any lunch time patrons, and breakfast was long over. Not that the menu changed for different meals. Only several professional drinkers sat at the bar.

"Let's find a table with a view of the shop," suggested Drimblerod, "then we can see what they have for fare." He moved towards the tables when a large hand grabbed him by the collar. The hand was connected to a larger arm, which was attached to a huge female. Drimblerod followed the arm up, craning his neck until his eyes met those of a scowling Trolless. "Is this section closed?" He asked.

"Can't you read?" The Trolless snapped.

"Yes," said Drimblerod and before he could help himself, he added smarmily, "several languages in fact."

"Well, mister smart mouth Gnome," she turned Drimblerod roughly by his neck. "Then I imagine you will have no trouble reading that sign to me." She aimed his head at a colorful plaque by the front door.

"Please wait to be seated by hostess?" Offered Drimblerod.

"Very good." She turned him back around to face her, "And right below that?" The Trolless asked. Grimbledung's stomach growled loudly. She spun to face him, never releasing her grip on Drimblerod, "You GROWLING at ME?"

"No, no! It was my stomach!" Whimpered Grimbledung. "So what's the bottom of the sign say?" He prodded Drimblerod on the shoulder. "What, what?"

"Or else," said the Trolless.

"Or else what?" Asked Grimbledung.

Drimblerod shook loose of the Trolless to face Grimbledung, "Or else what?!" He demanded. "Are you insane? Or else this troll..."

"Trolless" corrected the Trolless.

"Trolless" continued Drimblerod, "will pop my head off like a cherry. Why are you trying to provoke it?"

"Her," corrected the Trolless testily.

"Her." Agreed Grimbledung, "Definitely a her." He looked her up and down. Hungrily. "Make no mistake about her membership in the feminine persuasion."

The Trolless blushed, "Why thank you my little Gnome."

"Listen, Mistress Troll," began Drimblerod, "we meant- I meant no offence. You see we are famished and our hunger has clouded our eyes. Obviously, you are a lovely Trolless. Kind hearted, I imagine. A tribute to your ...

"Fine, Gnome. Don't lay it on too thick," warned the Trolless, "otherwise I'll start to think you're just making stuff up."

"Great. Give us a table." Drimblerod said flatly.

"You can lay it on a little," said the Trolless, "after all, what girl doesn't like a little sweet talk?"

Drimblerod cleared his throat, then began to speak politely, "Perchance, kind Trolless, could you take us to a table so we may enjoy your company a might longer?" He looked up hopefully.

"Very nice, Gnome. Where'd you want to sit?"

"By the window?" Asked Drimblerod.

The Trolless pointed to a table against the window. "Keeping an eye out? If you two are wanted by the law, you should know I run a respectable Tavern and I'll turn you in before you cause me any trouble with the law. The last thing I need is the Constable in here." She shuddered.

"Not at all!" Drimblerod feigned offence, "we're respectable shop owners."

"With a door and walls and everything!" Beamed Grimbledung.

"It's right across the street," Drimblerod pointed out the window. "We own Second Hand Sorcery. We're neighbors."

"Good. That means you can pay. Nothing gets my hackles up more than a 'I'll sweep for a meal' customer."

"That's a lot of hackles," said Grimbledung eyeing her up and down again.

Drimblerod shook his full pouch of coins. It jingled loudly.

"I'll bring menus." She caught herself as she began to turn. "Pictures or words?"

"Words" said Drimblerod before Grimbledung could answer.

The two Gnomes moved to opposite sides of the table and sat down.

Drimblerod put Rat at the end of the table. Grimbledung bounced up and down in his chair. "Just imagine, Rat," he exclaimed, "food that we actually ordered ourselves!"

"That *will* be a treat," agreed Rat. "Say. I want some warm meat and ale when you do order. Skip the vegetables."

"Got it" Grimbledung said. He began to clap.

"Would you two try to control yourselves?" Said Drimblerod, "You're going to embarrass me. Haven't you two eaten out before?"

Rat twitched its whiskers. "Was it after the Great Quake of 748?"

"I think so, Rat. Drim, does it count if it was after an earthquake and we served ourselves? It was after the mandatory evacuation."

"Savages." Drimblerod scowled, "let me do the ordering. We need to build some in-roads with this place and I don't want you two to screw it up."

The Trolless approached with two menus and a piece of parchment. She stared at the rat. "Do I even want to know?" She asked as she pointed at it with a quill.

"Lovely Trolless." Rat stood and bowed, "please don't let my appearance trouble you. Any ill comfort caused by *my* appearance is overshadowed by *your* immense beauty." He sat down again.

"The rat eats on the house."

Drimblerod picked up his menu. "We'll start with two pints and a shot glass of ale. By the way," Drimblerod smiled. "I'm Drimblerod. That's Grimbledung. You've already met Rat."

"Pleasure. I'm Nulu. Nulu Bentknees. Owner and operator of the Stumbling Drunk." She smiled back.

"Stumbling Drunk? Not very appetizing for a restaurant," said Drimblerod.

"We're a Pub and Restaurant, *not* a Restaurant and Pub operation," Nulu explained. "Besides, the real profit is in alcohol. Water is free down at the well, you know." She winked, "And it's awful hard to water down a rack of lamb."

"Rack? Of Lamb?" Asked Grimbledung hungrily. "A whole rack?"

"We'll take two of those, some roasted potatoes, radishes, and turnips."

Rat stuck out his tongue.

"No vegetables for Rat" Drimblerod added.

Grimbledung looked back and forth between Nulu and Drimblerod through the order. "Is your ale cold?" He asked.

Nulu tilted her massive hand back and forth. Her sharp nails were pink. "It's been unusually warm lately so the cellar isn't as cool as it should be. Still, the drinks aren't warm."

"You know; it sounds to me like we can help you out. I'm going to run across the street for a moment." He stood. "I'll be back before the drinks show up! Don't you two do anything weird. We're going to be regulars here." Drimblerod warned the two with a jab of his finger as he left quickly.

Nulu frowned. "I'm offended. Did he just say I'm slow at serving drinks?"



Grimbledung had a huge grin on his face the entire time he was sitting.

"What's so funny?" demanded Nulu.

"Oh, nothing!" Explained Grimbledung, "I get to eat out!" He clapped his hands.

"What a strange crew." She shook her head and went to fetch their drinks. When she got to the bar, Drimblerod burst back into the door panting. "Success!" He cheered. He was holding a thick, deep blue wand.

Nulu dropped her tray on the bar and jumped around. "What are you on about?" She demanded.

"How about we go down to the cellar?" Drimblerod asked as he raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not that kind of gal." Nulu said as she crossed her arms, biceps bulging, "and this isn't *that* kind of establishment."

"Gads no!" Exclaimed Drimblerod, "Nothing like that! I want to show you something."

Now Nulu raised one of her well-maintained eyebrows.

"Business related, of course." Tut-tutted Drimblerod. "If it were otherwise," he added with a mischievous smile, "I'd have a ladder with me, not a wand."

"You sure know how to charm a gal." Nulu pointed at a closed door, "Down here." Nulu led Drimblerod down a set of stairs deep below the pub. It was a dark tunnel with wooden stairs laid down on it. At the bottom, the room was more a grotto than anything else.

Barrels were stacked four high around the room, lining the walls. Crates of vegetables were stacked in the middle of the space. "I present to you the cellar," she said flatly.

"It *is* a little cooler in here" said Drimblerod.

"Especially early in the year. Now, after a warm summer and before any snow, not so much," explained Nulu. "In another couple of months, it will be nice and cool down here again."

Drimblerod grinned at Nulu. "Why wait?" He flourished the wand and aimed it at the ceiling.

Gelu Cretum
Up Yonder!

he intoned.

A light blue light flashed from the wand and rose to the ceiling slowly. Where it hit, a blob of ice began to crackle and form. Drimblerod held the wand in place as the ice crept out in all directions. When the stalactite-glacier reached the walls, he lowered the wand.

"That's amazing!" Said Nulu, her words coming out with little white puffs.

Drimblerod offered the wand to Nulu. "Don't aim it at anyone."

"Really?"

Drimblerod blinked. "Sure, it would kill them almost instantly."

"No, not that." Nulu shook her head, "I understand *that*. I mean, you're giving it to me?" Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Sure. As an initial offering of business. Maybe we can talk after we eat?"

Nulu took the wand hesitantly.

"All I ask is just to hear me out. The wand is for your time either way."

"Then let me pour you and your partners some drinks" said Nulu. She shivered, "And get a shawl."

The two went back upstairs. As Nulu got mugs for the drinks, Drimblerod returned to the table. Grimbledung was still smiling. Drimblerod snapped his fingers. "Mop."

"Mop?" Asked Rat.

"I'll have to enchant her a mop," said Drimblerod, "that will be to close the deal."

"Hey Drim, I had a thought" began Grimbledung, still smiling.

Drimblerod waggled his ears. "Really? A stray thought? Well nurse it along- it's in enemy territory." He giggled.

The smile dropped from Grimbledung's face like a sheet, replaced by pure rage. He stood quickly, knocking his chair to the ground so hard an inebriated Dwarf at the bar turned to look. In a flash Grimbledung drew his wand from inside his sleeve, "What are you saying here? 'Cause I can't read, I'm not smart?" A sneer pulled across his face, "Reading doesn't make a person smart. It makes them arrogant so they insult business partners at the meal table." He leaned forward with his wand and pointed it at Drimblerod's forehead. "How well do you think *you'd* read with a hole straight through *your head*?"

Drimblerod sat frozen in place. Rat moved between the two, "Now Grimbledung, that's not what he meant at all."

"Are you saying I don't understand what someone says now? YOU calling me stupid too?" Grimbledung fumed. He moved the wand between the two.

Nulu walked up to the table, the tray in her hand holding two large frosted tankards and a frosted shot glass. "Trouble boys?" She asked as she slid the tray onto the table. "Let's not have any ..."

"Disintegrations." offered Grimbledung menacingly.

"Disintegrations." she continued, "in the pub. It's really bad for

business you know."

Grimbledung didn't take his eyes off Drimblerod.

"I brought some frosty ale for you boys. I thought there was going to be a toast or something."

Grimbledung's eyes shifted for an instant to the tankards. "Frosted?" He asked.

Nulu slid into a chair at the table. It creaked in protest. "Listen, Grimbledung, I'm sure whatever your partner said, it wasn't said out of spite or meanness."

Drimblerod nodded.

She put her massive hand gently on Grimbledung's shoulder. "How about you give him a chance to apologize before you disintegrate a good part of his head?"

Grimbledung lowered his wand slightly, "Well?"

Drimblerod took a deep breath. "Grimbledung, I wasn't trying to offend you," he began. "I was just messing around. I actually think you're really smart."

As he spoke, Nulu reached around and righted the chair.

"You've done a really good job in the store," he continued, "your idea for the sale sign was great. I've been in that shop for nearly ten years and it never occurred to me to run a fake sale. You've probably singlehandedly saved me from that Merchant Guild Dues Enforcer."

"Really?" Asked Grimbledung, sitting back down. He still had his wand marginally trained on Drimblerod.

"Really. You boosted sales more in one day than, than..." He hesitated.

"Than when?" Grimbledung put the wand on the table.

"Than since the Great Frost Giant Invasion of 816."

"That was a big invasion," agreed Grimbledung.

"And remember? Everyone wanted an Incinerator Wand to scare off the Frost Giants, Frost Bears, and those Mastodons."

"I hated those Mastodons." Grimbledung shuddered. "I lost an entire season's vegetables to one."

Nulu slid the tankards in front of the two and handed Rat his frosty shot glass.

"A toast to the failed Frost Giant Invasion!" Rat said, raising his shot glass.

Neither Gnome moved to touch his drink.

"Grimbledung, let's have a drink so I can hear your idea. If it's anything like your sale idea, it will be deviously great." He spun a tankard around so the handle faced Grimbledung. "How about it?"

Grimbledung looked between Drimblerod and the tankard.

"I sincerely apologize," finished Drimblerod. "Really I do."

"Fine then. Let's drink to our partnership," said Grimbledung, slipping the wand up his sleeve, "then you can hear my idea."

"All right, boys," said Nulu as she got up from the table, "you play nice and I'll go check on your racks."

Picking up his tankard, Drimblerod said: "To a great partnership and an underhanded partner at luring in customers."

Grimbledung hefted his tankard, "To us!" He said and he gulped down some ale.

"Thank the gods!" Said Rat, "My paws were getting tired." He sipped his ale. "That is some cold ale."

"So," said Drimblerod, "What's the plan?"

Chapter Sixteen
Wherein Grimbledung has Another (Grand?) Idea

"It seems to me" Grimbledung sat back, "that coming up with inventory is the hardest part of our business. I mean, with my wagon, I'd have to be out looking for a while before I was able to sell anything."

Drimblerod shrugged, "Well, you can't sell without inventory. I do have people that come in to sell old wands when they want something else. That's where most of my inventory used to come from before we met out there on that battlefield."

"Sure, but that's only part of the time and then they buy something else so you still don't gain any wands." He took a drink from his mug. "What we need is folks purposely looking for wands for us. Bringing us wands on purpose."

Drimblerod put down his mug, "But having a bunch of employees cuts into profits."

Grimbledung shook his head. "We won't be paying them." He winked. "They'll volunteer to go get us wands."

"I don't see it."

"They'll be wanting to get us wands. They'll be willing to get us wands. They'll be waiting to get us wands."

"You're nuts."

Grimbledung nodded, "Nuts like a fox!"

Rat opened his mouth, thought better of it, and went back to drinking.

"So who are these people that will work for us for free?" Drimblerod was far from convinced. "Slaves are out of fashion at the moment. We'd end up with folks picketing out front. Who do you suggest?"

"Well, those people going into the Outfitters Store, we can use them to find wands for us. We could ask that store if we could advertise there for people to bring us wands."

Drimblerod mulled over the idea as he scraped frost off his tankard, "What do we give that owner?"

"A couple of brooms?" Suggested Grimbledung, "no one likes

to sweep. I know I don't."

"I've never seen you sweep" said Rat as he sat down, shot glass in front of him.

"That's 'cause I don't like to do it," explained Grimbledung. He took another gulp of his ale.

"A couple of brooms," Drimblerod considered it. "I don't know, Grim. If word gets out that there's lots of Mechanimated things around here, the Magician's Guild might come poking around. I don't know if I can go through that again." His face paled, "You have never dealt with those people." He thought again and sighed, "All right, so what are we hiring these folks to do? Bring us wands? How do we get them to do that?" Asked Drimblerod. If the plan were *too* absurd he would just nix the whole idea, but there was no sense in *not* listening to his partner; he'd surprised him once already.

"While they are out and about, if they find Unicorn horns, Basilisk scales, any sort of item we can use for wands. Dragon spines even. If they come across something and bring it back, we'll buy it. If they come across actual wands, we buy those too."

"But what if they don't come back?"

"That's the beauty of it," Grimbledung said, "if they just wander off or get eaten by a dragon, we're not out any coins."

Drimblerod shook his head. "But what about complaints from next of kin?"

"That's the best part! We won't be liable if anything happens," explained Grimbledung. "We won't be tasking them to do anything, or signing any contracts. We'll just sensitize them to what we're interested in. All we'll do is ask them to keep an eye out for peculiar items. If they come across something and bring it back, we'll buy it from them if we like it."

Drimblerod sipped his ale and thought over the plan.

"We can set up a display in the store advertising the start of this brand-new part of adventuring- Wand Gathering."

"You could call them the Gathering Division and give them a badge with GD on it," suggested Rat.

"A 'Gee' and a 'Dee'?" Said Drimblerod hesitantly.

"Sure! Either Gathering Division, or you two; Grimbledung and Drimblerod!"

Grimbledung looked hopefully at his partner. "Neat!"

Drimblerod put down his tankard, "Grimbledung, that is underhanded and conniving. Completely below board. Even for a

Gnome." He squinted his eyes at his now squirming partner. After a moment he continued, "And I have to say absolutely, positively brilliant. You truly have a dizzying way with business."

Grimbledung squealed and clapped his hands. "So, can we call them the Gathering Division?"

"Sure, we can even give out bonuses to the best Gatherers. We can have them all come to a year-end ceremony or something."

Grimbledung jumped from his chair and it once again clattered to the floor on its back. The Dwarf looked again. It was the most interesting thing happening in the bar. For a moment, Drimblerod thought he had said something wrong again. Until Grimbledung shot his hands in the air and cheered. "A Jamboree! I've always wanted to host a Jamboree!" Grimbledung clapped his hands. "And a bar-b-cue?" He asked hopefully.

"I suppose so," said Drimblerod hesitantly.

"A Jamboree and Bar-B-Cue!" Sang Grimbledung as he hopped back and forth. Nulu walked up to the table hefting two large racks of lamb surrounded by vegetables.

"What now?" She asked Drimblerod. "He's an all or nothing kind of Gnome, isn't he."

"Apparently so," said Drimblerod.

Nulu leaned over and slipped the platters with the racks of lamb across the table.

"Wow, nice rack," commented Grimbledung with a wry smile- his eyes aimed nowhere near the platters.

"Watch it buster," warned Nulu as she straightened.

"It's hard not to," said Grimbledung.

"No vegetables for me." warned Rat. "If I eat vegetables, I get the toots something fierce."

"I got you taken care of," said Nulu as she pulled a saucer from her apron.

Rat sat on his haunches. "You really are a fine Trolless. Load up that plate, Grim!"

Grimbledung stopped dancing and sat down. His stomach growled loudly.

"I'll leave you to your meal and we'll talk later," she said as she dropped some cloth squares and two knives on the table. "I'll get those drinks freshened up in a bit."

"Cut some for me before you push any vegetables against the

meat" said Rat, "otherwise, I won't be responsible for my actions later."

They (all three) dug into the meat and vegetables (not Rat) heartily without much chatter beyond a comment about a morsel or the taste of the chilled ale.

Soon, the lamb was reduced to bones and small bits of meat scattered on the platters and table. Rat lay on his side panting. "I'm embarrassed to say someone's going to have to carry me out of here."

"But Rat," said Grimbledung, "you were carried in." Grimbledung spoke around a rib that stuck out of his mouth like a pipe.

"I'm stuffed" admitted Drimblerod.

Grimbledung pulled the bone from his mouth and tapped it on his platter. "I propose a toast to the founder of the feast."

"Our customers?" Asked Drimblerod.

"No," said Grimbledung, "to Rat, of course."

"What'd I do?" Asked Rat without moving.

"Was the sale his idea?" Asked Drimblerod.

Grimbledung shook his head, "No, the idea was the easy part." He smiled broadly. "He spelled all the words right." Grimbledung lifted his almost empty (for the fifth time) tankard.

"Well, I'll drink to that!" Said Drimblerod hefting his also nearly empty tankard high.

"You'll just have to pour mine down my gullet because I can't hold my glass," slurred Rat.

Grimbledung picked up the shot glass and poured the ale into Rat's open mouth. Most went down his throat, some sloshed past his whiskers. Finally, Rat's one eye rolled back in his head and he flopped back onto the table.

"Is he dead?" Drimblerod asked as he leaned forward to examine Rat.

Grimbledung shook his head, "Rat can't die. I enchanted him as a familiar. He's tried getting squashed, skewered and burned. Nothing does him in. He's over 100 years old. More or less."

"Has he tried getting himself eaten? It seems to me that would work."

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "You'd think that, but apparently not. It seems the enchantment resists digestion as well."

"That must have been traumatic for the poor thing" Drimblerod gazed at the sleeping Rat.

"Not as traumatic as it was for the cat. That was a one-way Rat-trip of sheer terror for that cat, if you get my meaning. Rat wasn't too pleased about it either. Cats are a subject you do NOT bring up around Rat."

Drimblerod blanched. "Gads! Good tip. No discussions about cats." He thumped his tankard on the table loudly. "One more drink while we talk to Nana."

"Nulu" corrected Grimbledung.

"Nulu. Then we get bock to the shap."

"Agreed." Grimbledung also banged his tankard on the table. "One more please!" He yelled to no one in particular.

A Halfling approached the table, "Whatayawant?"

"Two more drinks if you please, Mister Halfling. And ask..." Drimblerod looked at Grimbledung who nodded once at him, "Nulu if she has time to speak to us."

"Fine," scowled the Halfling as he gathered Rat's numerous empty shot glasses. "What about the rodent?" He gestured to the sleeping Rat.

"I think he's had his fill. Let's just let him sleep it off." Grimbledung said, "Bless his little heart. I'll take mine though."

The Halfling scrunched up his face. "Yeah," he snapped. "Yeah, you'll get yers," he snapped (again) as he walked off.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung shrugged. "It's probably nothing" (see footnote 11). He nodded once and let his chin rest on his chest.

"Hey! Wake up, Grim!" Drimblerod nudged the table.

Grimbledung startled awake, "I'm awake, don't worry about me."

"You better be," tut-tutted Drimblerod, "we have drinks on the way. We Gnomes have a reputation to hold up." He blinked. "Up hold."

Grimbledung giggled.

"Don't you *dare* get the giggles," warned Drimblerod, "we're going to have a serious business meeting with Nala."

Grimbledung giggled again.

"And the last drink I need for you to is...." Drimblerod paused. "What was I saying?"

"You were saying that we had drinks on the way," suggested Grimbledung.

"Exactly," agreed Drimblerod as he slapped his hand on the table, "we have drinks on the way!"

"And Nulu to talk to."

"Right" agreed Drimblerod.

"What do we want to Nulu about?" Asked Grimbledung. "That wasn't right. What do we want about Nulu?" He tried again. He concentrated. It didn't help. "Nope. I give up." He took a drink. "Something about Nulu. We're curious about her. Or something." He finished off his drink and sat it down with a forlorn look. "Curious, I suppose."

Chapter Seventeen
Wherein the Gnomes Make an Offer to Nulu

"That makes two of us," said Nulu as she placed two mugs on the table. "I went a little smaller on the mugs or I'd have to carry you two out of here."

"Well, I can't imagine you'd have trouble doing that," observed Drimblerod.

Grimbledung giggled.

"Miss Nulu... our shop seems to be doing well. But we seem to have an issue with time management," continued Drimblerod, "and what we need is an outside party to keep us on track."

"You want to borrow my sun dial?" Asked Nulu.

Grimbledung giggled. "I like that word. Sundial. Sun dial. Sun. dial." He giggled again.

Drimblerod shook his head, ignoring his partner, "That wouldn't work. Once it was in the shop, it wouldn't work right either."

"So what is it you want?" Nulu asked, wishing she had a drink as well. "Maybe we should have talked before all those drinks."

"No!" Said Drimblerod almost too loudly as he slapped his hand on the table, "what we need is tea and cakes."

"But I'm stuffed" complained Grimbledung as he patted his belly.

"Not now, you. I mean during the day when we're open," explained Drimblerod. "Say mid-morning and mid-afternoon."

"Mid-morning," repeated Grimbledung obediently. And cluelessly.

"And what would that do?" Asked Nulu.

"Mid-afternoon," interjected Grimbledung. Still clueless.

"It would give us an idea of what time it was," continued Drimblerod. "We lost two days today."

"Tea Time!" giggled Grimbledung.

Nulu considered the offer. She took a swig of Grimbledung's ale, who promptly took back the mug and caressed it. "So since I'm outside the store, I'll know what time of day it really is." Nulu

thought out loud, "And when I bring over snacks, you'll know too."

"Exactly!" Cheered Drimblerod, this time definitely too loudly.

"What's in it for me?" Nulu asked flatly.

"You can charge an extra half copper for frosty drinks, all day, every day," said Drimblerod.

Nulu feigned offense, "You think I'd charge my loyal customers extra for cold drinks? I love my customers and I can't believe you'd even suggest I'd jack up my prices for frosty mugs."

Drimblerod stared at her, eyebrows raised.

"Well," Nulu shrugged, "maybe half a copper."

"And to help you out even more, we'll even throw in a mop!"

"A mop," Grimbledung agreed. "Oh yes... A mop."

Nulu did not look impressed. "A mop? Really? How's a girl to turn down a gift like that?" She crossed her arms. "A mop."

"Yes, but not *any* mop," continued Drimblerod as he leaned forward and whispered (loudly) "An *enchanted* mop. It will keep your cellar floor clean and dry." He held up a finger. "Plus every evening you can let it run around up here to clean up." He held up a second finger. "And along with frosty ale," he continued as he held up four fingers, "your vegetables will stay fresher long ... fresher longer." *Drat.* "Good." He smiled in triumph.

Nulu considered the offer as she looked between the two. "So some tea and maybe crackers and toast is all you are going to need twice a day?"

"Do you think maybe you could maybe bring some scones once in a while? Maybe?" Asked Grimbledung. "I like scones."

"It's a Pub and Restaurant, not a Restaurant and Pub," reminded Nulu. "It took me weeks to get my cooks to not char every piece of meat they dragged across the grill. Now you want them to bake scones?"

"Well, it's just a thought. Maybe," said Grimbledung dejected. "You can't have a proper tea without scones, is all."

"I'll see what I can do."

"So is that a yes?" Asked Drimblerod as he set his mug down.

"I may regret this, but yes. It's a deal." Nulu stuck out her hand.

Drimblerod slapped it. "Deal."

"But," said Nulu, "we'll discuss and reassess the deal every month. I won't be roped into a lifelong arrangement. It's not like we're getting married."

"Once a month, we sit down and see how things are going. That works for me," said Drimblerod as he now stuck out his hand.

Nulu slapped it.

Drimblerod winced. "Wow, I'm glad that's settled."

Grimbledung had been looking back and forth between the two during the negotiations, smiling and sipping his drink.

Both Nulu and Drimblerod stared at each other. When after several moments, neither added anything to the arrangements, Drimblerod clapped his hands. "It's settled then."

"Yes," said Nulu as she spat into a not-so-nearby spittoon.

Both Gnomes gaped at her.

"Sorry, I was married to an Orc once. It's a long story."

Grimbledung hopped onto his chair and began to dance. As he did, he sang:

Trolless and Gnome -ses working togeth - er!
Selling, ale, wands and veg - er – tables!

Nulu looked at Drimblerod who only shrugged.

Once a month, we'll have some la – amb.

And maybe eat a scone or two?
Yes! We'll eat a scone or two - ooo!
Yes, we'll eat a scone or two!

He then fell off his chair, landing in a heap on the floor. Nulu leaned over and examined Grimbledung. He was snoring softly.

"He is really one of the oddest Gnomes I've met. And I have to tell you, Gnomes are an odd race," said Nulu. She added quickly, "No offense."

Drimblerod shook his head, "None taken. We are a noble and proud race. But on the whole, a bit odd. It's part of our charm."

"I see," said Nulu.

"Oh, one thing I've learned at this table," began Drimblerod.

"Yes?"

"No matter what, don't ever call Grimbledung stupid," he warned.

"Oh, is that what brought about the... incident?"

"Afraid so."

"Well," Nulu said, "he may be odd, but I don't think he's stupid." She smirked. "If he were rich, they would call him eccentric."

"That's a good word for him. Ectrexic. Entrecix?" Drimblerod frowned. "I think it's time to go home."

"I think so too. Do you need help with him?" Nulu said as she pointed at the snoring Gnome.

"No, I can handle it," said Drimblerod as he stood. He used the table to steady himself. "Well, maybe a little help would be nice," he said as he picked up the still sleeping Rat. "I'd hate to drop one of them."

Nulu moved to the prone Gnome and easily picked up Grimbledung. She tucked him under her arm like a barrel of ale. "Lead the way, Drimblerod."

Drimblerod walked in a fairly straight line to the door even though he leaned heavily as he did so. "Right this way, Mistress Nulu," he called over his shoulder as he opened the door, gesturing for her to leave first.

"Can you let go of the door without falling over?"

"No. I think not," said Drimblerod. "There seems to be something amiss with the establishment in your floor."

"Come here" she said as she added Drimblerod under her other arm.

"Forward!" Commanded Drimblerod as he pointed with the sleeping Rat. He moved his feet as if he were still walking, kicking Nulu's arm.

"Let me do the work, will you?" Suggested Nulu as she crossed the street. She reached for the catch on the door and pushed. The door remained closed. Nulu leaned as she pushed, the frame of the door groaning in protest. "It's locked" she said finally.

Drimblerod, still pointing forward (with Rat), dropped his arm (but not Rat), "Of course it's locked. The store's closed. See the sign? Let's come back when they're open."

Nulu shook her head. "You drunk Gnome, It's *your* shop! How do I unlock the door?"

Drimblerod looked up, "Say, that's a nice-looking store!"

"Yes, I agree. Where's the key?"

"Open up you door!" Scolded Drimblerod as he waggled a finger from his free hand at it. "We want to come in!"

The latch on the door clattered open.

Nulu looked down at Drimblerod, "You're kidding me. That's all it

takes to open your shop? How is it you haven't been cleaned out by the shadier characters in town?"

"Because the door recognizes my voice, of course," explained Drimblerod, twisting his neck to look up at Nulu, "you don't think it would listen to just anyone, do you?" Drimblerod looked at the door, "You're a smart door, aren't you? Yes, you are. A smart, *handsome* door. That's what you are!"

The door rattled with joy.

"Yes you are! Such a GOOD door. I'll give you a good waxing later. Yes, I will."

The door shuddered with glee and popped open.



Nulu shook her head and eased sideways through the door. It closed behind her dutifully. She put Drimblerod down. He shakily stayed on his feet. "Can you put Grim on the cot in the back?" He asked as he laid Rat in front of the now cold stove.

"Sure thing, Drimblerod," she said as she moved through the curtain.

Drimblerod sat on a stool, put his head on the counter and promptly fell asleep.

Nulu ducked to get through the curtain and entered the living area of the shop.

Dummy had its back to the curtain and was waving a wand at an upturned box.

"What in the lands?" She mumbled. "Hey, should you be doing that?" She asked Dummy.

The wand flared a yellow light into the box. He put it into a can with a sun painted on it. He turned his head to see who had entered the work area. When he faced Nulu, his head went from her to the limp Grimbledung and back to her. He flailed his arms then brought his mitt hands up in front of his face in a boxing pose. He made a couple of jabs then gestured for Nulu to move closer.

"Relax you ... whatever you are. He's drunk and I'm just carrying him home," explained Nulu. "Where can I put him?"

Not changing his stance, Dummy jabbed at the cot.

"Over there, huh?" Nulu moved over and put Grimbledung not so gently on the cot. He continued to snore. Nulu turned to Dummy who stood disapprovingly with his hands on his hips. "Still not happy?"

The dummy appraised her for a moment, then gave a thumbs up. He moved his hands in the shape of an hourglass. A very large hourglass. Then he gave her another thumbs up.

"Oh for the love of ..." She started, "you're all nuts. Completely barking mad," she continued as she moved back past the curtain.

The Dummy waved approvingly at her. Exiting to the front of the store, Nulu saw Drimblerod asleep on the stool. Deciding he was safe there (it was a short drop if he tottered over) she went to open the door. It was locked. She rattled the catch but it made no difference. Nulu let go in an exasperated sigh and peered over her shoulder to make sure Drimblerod was fast asleep. He was snoring softly. She bent over, putting her hands on her knees, "Who's a good door? You are! Please let me out, Door. I just dropped the boys off and now I'm leaving. You solid, nice

door." It did not seem to move so she continued, "Such a safe and strong door. The best on the block, yes you are. Let me go, you wonderful door," she finished.

The catch of the door clacked as it opened.

Nulu straightened and shook her head. "What have I gotten myself into?" She asked as she reached for the handle.

Quietly, she opened the door and slipped past it. As she stealthily shut it, she heard Rat chuckling. With a sour look on her face, she returned to her pub.

And immediately raised her prices for frosted drinks by a full copper.

Chapter Eighteen
Wherein Grimbledung Explains His Condition

The next morning, Nulu crossed the street with a large tray in her hand. When she reached the door, she tried to open it. It was locked. "All right door," said Nulu testily, "here is the deal. I'll be coming over here a lot in the future and there's something you need to know."

The door was silent.

"As a Trolless, begging just isn't in my nature. It really just isn't. Yesterday was a once in a lifetime freebie." She shifted the tray to one hand.

The door remained reticent.

"So let's make sure we understand each other." She leaned forward and placed a massive- yet manicured - hand on the door. "Don't mistake my pink nails for daintiness," she growled. "Push me too far and I'll rip you clean out of this wall and break you into toothpicks; then use you to jab olives and cherries for my drinks to add some pizazz."

The door clattered open.

"And a good morning to you too." She gave a quick curtsey and ducked to enter the shop. Nulu flicked the bell several times with her finger. No one came out of the backroom. She shut the door behind her. "Stay locked until they're up. I'm not going to deal with customers."

The door obediently clacked and locked.

"Thanks Door." Nulu said.

The door rattled what was hopefully a 'you're welcome'.

Ducking under the curtain she saw Grimbledung still asleep on the cot. Drimblerod sat beside the cot, head tilted back resting on Grimbledung's feet. "That's going to be a sore neck." As she put the tray on the table, Dummy sat up and waved. "You again," she said, appraising Dummy.

It nodded and gave her a hearty thumbs up.

"Uhm, not now. Not ever," she said flatly.

Dummy's shoulders sagged.

"Never in a hundred years."

Dummy's arm lowered slightly.

"Never if every Troll in the Lands were gone."

Dummy's hand dropped to its side, thumb still extended.

"Not if the only males left were prissy, lute playing Elves."

Dummy's thumb sagged.

"Gah!" Shouted Drimblerod as he rolled on his side. "My neck's broke!" He lamented as he held his head with both hands.

"Nothing some strong tea won't fix, I imagine," offered Nulu.

"Is it morning?" Drimblerod asked, rubbing his neck.

"Only barely still." Nulu replied, "I let you sleep in a little." She gestured to the table, "Get some food in you." She wagged a finger at him. "So you'll remember you owe me a mop. My storeroom is quickly becoming an underground lake."

Drimblerod staggered to the table, head tilted sideways. He plopped into a chair and removed a shoe. He flung it at Grimbledung. "Wake up! The day's getting away from us!" He shouted.

The shoe bounced off Grimbledung's shoulder. "Hey!" He angrily exclaimed. He sat up quickly, "Hey!" He said this time with his nose in the air, "HEY! There's bread and tea nearby." Grimbledung turned and swung his legs off the cot, "And preserves!" He squealed.

Holding his head with one hand, Drimblerod pointed with the other, "Don't you dare sing the Preserves song."

"There's a Preserves song?" Asked Nulu, surprised.

"Probably," replied Drimblerod, "there seems to be a song for everything. Even certain bodily functions, if I remember correctly." Drimblerod scrunched up his face and sing-songed, "Do I really? Yes, I do - do."

"On *that* note," said Nulu, "I'll pick up my tray after lunch. Send that mop over before I'm flooded out." She ducked under the curtain. Even before she reached the door, it swung open and closed behind her. She patted it as she left, "That's a good door."

Drimblerod poured himself a cup of tea as Grimbledung moved to the table, leading with his nose, "Tea, toast, and blackberry preserves. Very nice dealings, Drim."

Drimblerod spread the preserves on a hunk of crusty bread. It wasn't warm but the inside was still soft and the crust was crunchy. "If she had a Gnome cousin, I'd marry her."

Grimbledung blinked twice, "Why would you marry Nulu if her cousin was a Gnome?" He asked. "Wouldn't it make more sense to

marry the Gnomish one?"

Drimblerod stared at Grimbledung, "It's really too early for your antics. Eat your bread, drink your tea and be content."

"Whatever you say, Drimblerod," Grimbledung said. As he spread the dark preserves on a piece of bread, he hummed a tune. When he bit into it, crumbs spilled all over the table. "Tasty."

Drimblerod shook his head, "Let's just save Rat a piece for when he wakes, he put a way a bit of Ale yesterday."

Grimbledung set a piece of bread - a heel- aside. "Say, I was thinking. How about if I whip up the Gatherer Division sign. I have an idea that I think would be perfect."

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at him- his mouth was too full of bread and preserves to speak.

Grimbledung raised a hand, "Don't worry. Nothing gaudy or outrageous. Just a simple sign to get customers' attention. I'll get Rat to help with the spelling."

Drimblerod finally swallowed his bread. "Sounds fine to me. You seem to have a flair for that sort of stuff."

Grimbledung smiled. Now his mouth was too full to speak.

Drimblerod poured him a cup of tea, "I do have one question, and please don't get upset. I'm just curious." Grimbledung was sipping his newly poured cup of tea around a mouthful of bread so Drimblerod continued, "Why can't you read? I mean, you're conniving, underhanded, and devious..."

Grimbledung waved a hand at him dismissively.

"No, no; I give credit where credit is due. Great Gnomish qualities, all. So why can't you read?"

Grimbledung finished chewing and put down his tea cup. He turned his head to the side and bent his large ear forward. Behind it was a puckered scar as big around as a gold coin. "I took a ricochet Disintegrate! Spell to the side of the head in the last Pixie Uprising. I haven't been able to read since."

"Good gravy!" Exclaimed Drimblerod. "How did that not kill you outright?" He moved closer to peer at the impressive scar.

"From what I've been told, the blast took out a Brownie, bounced off a shield, winged a Pixie and then caught the side of my head. I was out of commission for two months."

Drimblerod shuddered. "*That* was a close call. At least all you lost was your ability to read."

Grimbledung shook his head slowly, "Well, that wasn't all I lost. I lost something even more dear to me than reading."

Drimblerod refilled their cups, "Gads! What could be worse than losing the ability to read?"

Grimbledung sighed. "I lost my rhythm. I used to be a famous Bard."

Drimblerod stared at him wide-eyed. "No kidding? Wow, that does explain a lot," he said. "All your rhythm? That's a tough one. Well, if those are the only two side effects, that still not bad."

"Actually no. I'm kidding. I've always sung like this. But I really can't read."

Drimblerod smirked, "Well at least *you* know the quality of your songs. Admitting you have issues is the first step to recovery."

"And why, pray, am I the only one NOT eating?" Scowled Rat as he squeezed under the curtain.

"Rat!" Grimbledung clapped. "I saved you some bread!"

"A heel?"

"Of course. I'll put some blackberry preserves on it for you." Grimbledung reached down and scooped up Rat. "Want some tea?"

"Only if it's strong enough to stop my head from pounding," said Rat. "And blow up my heart."

"Well, we can always hope. About the heart, that is," offered Grimbledung.

"So," Drimblerod brushed his hands off, "I'll go open the store and leave you two to your work." He got up and moved to the curtain, "I can't wait to see this display. Reserved?"

Grimbledung nodded.

"Professional?"

Grimbledung nodded again.

"And not at all gaudy," finished Drimblerod as he ducked past the curtain, "Riiight ...."

Chapter Nineteen
Wherein Grimbledung Begins Work on the Gatherer Division Sign

"That's what I am aiming for," reassured Grimbledung to his departing partner's back.

"All I can guarantee is that all the words will be spelled right," said Rat. He sniffed the blackberry preserves, "What have you volunteered poor Rat to do now?"

"It will be fun, Rat" assured Grimbledung, "we're going to make a Gatherer's Division sign to trick people to get us wands."

"I see," said Rat warily. He took a bite of his bread.

"All for next to nothing! It's a perfect scheme," said Grimbledung as he wet his finger to pick up crumbs from the table.

"Sneaky and underhanded as usual," said Rat.

Grimbledung took his finger from his mouth.

"Is the truth so hard to use to get your way?"

Grimbledung silently pulled his finger around the table, gathering more crumbs.

"People sometimes will actually do more for you if you're truthful, you know."

Grimbledung put his finger back into his mouth around a smile.

"I heard that Disintegrate! yarn you spun for Drimblerod, by the way. Are you going to stick to that story?"

Grimbledung's smile faded as he pulled his finger from his mouth. "And *that*," he said pointing his wet finger at Rat, "is the last that will be said about the subject." The two stared at each other in silence for a long moment- Rat with one good eye, Grimbledung with eyes hot as newly forged iron. Grimbledung's smile returned. "So come on, Rat. Finish up so we can get to work." He clapped his hands, "We're going to paint, carve, and imbue a sign. It will be fun!"

"Sounds fun." Monotoned Rat.

"And if all goes well," continued Grimbledung, still smiling, "I won't pitch you into the box." he finished as he casually pointed at the Abyssmal Box.

"Yes. Won't that be a treat," said Rat, stuffing the last of the bread

into his mouth.

"Chew *that* while I dig up some lumber." said Grimbledung as he pranced to the backroom, humming a tune.

The threat or the bread? Rat hopped off the table onto the chair. "Morning, Dummy."

The Dummy turned to look down at Rat. He twirled his hand next to his head and jerked his thumb at the backroom.

"You don't know the half of it," said Rat. "He's got Pixie brains mixed in with his brains. They weren't able to get it all out. Every so often, he goes Pixie Crazy. When he's not just unstable like a Pixie."

Dummy raised his hands and shrugged.

"You see, Pixies are mean, spiteful, and ornery. Much like your garden variety Gnome."

Dummy nodded.

"The problem is that Pixies are also mean spirited, and on the whole, criminally insane." Rat sat on the chair. "Take those Gremlins that hide out in the back that we hear about but never really see, and they never seem to interact with anyone at all. Why, it's as if they aren't even really there."[13]

Dummy gave Rat a thumbs up.

"They are mischievous and tamper with things," continued Rat. "Well, at least they used to anyway. Now they're an organized mob. BUT, before, when they messed with things, it was more as a nuisance than as lethal. Stitching in water bladders leaked, knots untied. That sort of thing. It made you curse, but that's about it."

Dummy nodded and gave another thumbs up.

"Now Pixies on the other hand, lure Werebears and Werewolves to sleeping travelers' campsites."

Dummy shivered.

"Or they untie knots to rope bridges while folks are on it. Lure pirates to your secret hideout. They're just plain mean monsters."[14]

Dummy gestured to the back room.

"Yes, and when that Disintegrate! Spell blast bounced off a shield, it caught that second Pixie in the head, not the wing. When it hit Grimbledung, it was carrying along mean Pixie brain bits with it."

Dummy put his hands on either side of his head.

"Right. So those little bits of Pixie brain make him more than a little unstable. He's getting a lot better. A few years ago, he'd have burned this place down by now. The Pixie is working its way out of

him slowly but surely. Hopefully soon, he'll be back to just being goofy." Rat dropped his voice to a conspiratorial tone, "You know," he continued, "he didn't know how to read *before* he got blasted in the head."



Dummy flailed its arms wildly.

"It's true," assured Rat.

Just then Grimbledung came back into the room, arms full of lumber and nails. He was kicking along a hammer. "Success!" He said as he let it all fall to a pile at his feet. "Say, Dummy," Grimbledung began. "Say- do you mind us calling you that? I know you *are* a dummy, but you, well, you also aren't a dummy."

Dummy shook his head and waved off the double entendre.

"Well you know, no one should be called a dummy, even if they are a Dummy." Grimbledung looked confused. Finally, he brightened up "So I'm going to call you Larry from now on. How does that sound?"

Dummy gave him a thumbs up.

"Great, so Larry, what I need from you is a Mechanimator Wand."

Larry pointed to where his legs should be.

Grimbledung shook his head. "That I can't do. Since Drimblerod started the magic on you, he has to finish it. Bad things can happen when you mix magic like that."

Larry shrugged then held up his hands questioningly.

"I need a Mechanimator Wand for my display" he said. "For just a dash of style that will lure adventurers in."

Larry held mitten fingers close to his thumb

"Just a hint, nothing gaudy. That's right," assured Grimbledung, "let's get to work Rat, while Larry digs up a wand."

"Why don't I get a name?" Asked Rat. "How come Dummy is now Larry, but I'm still Rat?"

"Because Rat isn't as derogatory as Dummy, of course," replied Grimbledung. "Besides we can't call you Larry as well. It would get really confusing around here with two Larrys. Really Rat," scolded Grimbledung.

Larry nodded.

"But no, that's not ..." Started Rat. "I wouldn't want to ..." Rat looked between Grimbledung and Larry. "You know, Rat is fine," he finally said.

"Then what's the problem?" Asked Grimbledung as he picked up a wide board. "This is perfect!" He said appraising the board. "Let's get this done and surprise Drimblerod." He reached for a handsaw.

Chapter Twenty
Wherein Drimblerod Tends to Customers Until the Sign is Ready.
Kind Of.

Drimblerod tended to customers throughout the rest of the morning. *I wonder how long we can run that sale sign* he thought as another customer entered the store.

"What's on sale?" Said the Half-Elf, "I'm looking for a bargain."

"A bargain what?" Asked Drimblerod flatly.

The Half-Elf thought for a moment, "I'm looking for a bargain, please?" He offered.

Drimblerod frowned. "No. That's not what I meant. What *kind* of bargain wand are you looking for?"

"A cheap one?" Suggested the Half-Elf.

Drimblerod moved from around the counter testily. "Well, we have some cheap wands, some really cheap wands, and some really really cheap wands." He was pointing at various racks in the store. "But these here are the supreme bargain cheap wands," he said has he picked up an Incinerator Wand.

"Wow! That's exactly what I am looking for!" The Half-Elf exclaimed as he took the wand in his hand. "What's it cost?"

"It's the cheapest in the whole shop. We're practically giving those things away," teased Drimblerod.

Giddily, the Half-Elf raised the wand over his head. "I'll take it!"

"It's merely one little gold coin." Drimblerod said with a straight face. "It's a before-lunch sale." He added a wink for good measure.

"Sounds great! My wife will be so happy. She says I never make a good deal. *This* will show her." He raised the wand again over his head and it flared a small blue flame. "Oooh! It works too!"

"I'm just curious, friend," began Drimblerod, "Do you by any chance have a Gnome as a relation?"

"Not as far as I know," he answered, "Why?"

"You remind me of a Gnome I know. Another... bargain hunter," explained Drimblerod as he quickly pocketed the gold coin.

"Sorry I couldn't help you," said the Half Elf as he tucked the wands

in a pocket. "I need to show this thing to my wife."

"You do that," suggested Drimblerod as he ushered the man to the door. "And come back when you need another bargain. Bring your wife and we'll sell her something too."

"Drim!" Shouted Grimbledung from the backroom. "Come look! The sign's ready!"

Chapter Twenty (Part Two)
Wherein the Sign is -Almost- Ready

"Take care kind Half Elf, and come back soon!" Drimblerod finished with an almost-polite shove on the Half Elf's back as he kicked the door shut. "This will be interesting," he said as he flipped the sign to the closed side.

"Hurry before the sign stops moving!" Grimbledung called.

"Moving?" Shaking his head, Drimblerod shuffled quickly to the curtain and pushed it aside.

Grimbledung was hopping back and forth in front of the sign. Drimblerod caught glimpses of gold, green, and yellow colors shouting at him.

"We wanted something that explained itself. Something understated yet gripping." Explained Grimbledung as he stepped out of the way with a flourish.

Drimblerod was greeted by a sign the height of Grimbledung. Dummy, covered in paint, was still holding a dripping brush that it was dabbing at the edge of what appeared to be a large grey, slowly spinning disk. The disk was attached to a wooden backdrop of a forest, several fairies, and what seemed to be an excited adventurer holding a bulging sack. The edge of the disk was painted with crude gold coins which as the disk turned, seemed to dump into the sack the adventurer was holding. There was a faint clinking sound coming from the entire assembly.

"Get it?" Asked Grimbledung excitedly, "He's getting rich!"

Drimblerod took a deep breath. Then another.

"See? We made it ourselves!"

Dummy nodded and pointed a blue thumb at himself.

Grimbledung appraised his work. "It moves and everything! Dummy painted the coins."

Drimblerod took an even deeper breath and held it.

"Drim?" Asked Grimbledung, his smile faltering. "You'll pass out if you don't breathe. It's important you know."

Drimblerod exhaled slowly. He rubbed his temples as he did. "Now, Grimbledung," he began slowly, "can you explain to me what this has to do with adventurers bringing us wands?"

Grimbledung squealed. "I thought you'd never ask! Let me give you the tour." He moved beside the sign. He turned and looked at it.

After a few moments, Drimblerod cleared his throat. Grimbledung continued to appraise his handiwork. Only the sound of the squeaking wheel and the clink of coins could be heard.

"GRIMBLEDUNG!" Shouted Drimblerod, "Snap out of it and explain the sign!"

Grimbledung startled as if he were asleep. "Sorry, I was thinking about all the money we were going to make."

Drimblerod stared at his partner. "Grim, I could really use that explanation about now. Why is the sign that big?"

Grimbledung tut-tutted, "Because that's all the wood you had, of course."

"You used up *all* my hard-scrounged wood?" Fumed Drimblerod. "To make *this sign*? This heap of lumber that looks more like a crazed carpenter's apprentice's *CHILD'S project*?"

"I was thinking ..." Grimbledung began.

"Do you know how long I had to scrounge to get that wood?" Howled Drimblerod. "It's not like people just throw good lumber higgle-dee piggle-dee you know! And you've wasted it all!"

"...you know there are people out there that can't read," continued Grimbledung as if his partner hadn't said a word, "so we couldn't have a sign with writing on it. Or those people who can't read wouldn't be able to read it. Because they can't read. See?"

Drimblerod's face was becoming red. "Yes. Some people can't read. I got it. What is with the stick figure fairies, the dragon with three legs, and the spinning wheel?"

"Why would people throw away perfectly good wood?"

"What?"

"You just said people don't throw perfectly good wood away day in and day out." Explained Grimbledung.

"Yes?" Drimblerod was caught off guard by the sudden change in conversation. Quickly he regained his composure. And anger. "Yes! People don't just throw good lumber out higgle-dee piggle-dee! So stop wasting it!"

"So sometimes they throw out good wood?"

"What?"

"So, if they don't *always* throw out good wood that means sometimes they *do* throw out good wood, right?"

Drimblerod clenched his fists. "Forget the blasted wood. Tell me about this infernal sign."

Grimbledung brightened up immediately, "Glad you asked! You see, while out in the Wilds, adventurers come across all sorts of magical beasts like fairies and dragons..." Began Grimbledung

"With three legs" offered Drimblerod.

"Well, that's perspective. You can't see that other leg because it's so far away. It's an artist thing." Chided Grimbledung. "So this lucky adventurer is making all sorts of gold as you can tell by the sound of gold falling into the sack. Dummy suggested adding the clinking sounds."

Dummy pointed at himself proudly.

"But." Began Drimblerod. He took another deep breath, "Explain to me how people..."

"Who can't read," interrupted Grimbledung.

"... who can't read," agreed Drimblerod, "will know this has anything to do with selling us wands they find."

"Because," began Grimbledung. He looked at the sign. "Fairies?" He tried. "No wait, it's the dragon. Yes. Definitely the dragon. No. Wait." He tried again- "Because of the gold coins?" He offered.

"THERE ARE NO WANDS ON YOUR SIGN OR ANYTHING THAT SAYS SECOND HAND SORCERY!" Roared Drimblerod. "How are people going to know what this sign is even advertising?"

"Because we're going to tell them?" Said Grimbledung meekly, "honestly, you really have a temper issue you need to deal with."

Drimblerod spun around and pushed through the curtain.

"Where's he going?" Asked Grimbledung.

The Dummy raised both his hands and shrugged. He pointed at the sign and cupped his hand to the side of his head.

"Yes, the clinking was a nice touch," agreed Grimbledung.

Drimblerod burst back through the curtain wielding an Annihilate!! Wand. "I'm going to ask you one more time and then I'm going to let you have it!" Drimblerod snarled.

"But Drim, what would I want with an Annihilate!! Wand?" Asked Grimbledung.

Drimblerod ignored his baiting, "How will people know to sell wands to us by looking at this sign that used up all my good lumber?"

Grimbledung looked from Drimblerod to the glowing wand and back again.

"By looking? They won't?" He said matter-of-factly.

Drimblerod lowered the wand and pointed it at Grimbledung's chest.

"Yes. That's right. They won't." Purplish tendrils started leaking from the end of the wand. "So why even have the sign that wasted all my wood?" Drimblerod narrowed his eyes. "Careful how you answer because those may be your last words. Ever."

Grimbledung blinked as realization crept across his face. "Wait, you're telling me you're upset with how the sign turned out?"

Drimblerod spun the wand over his head. The tendrils were longer and darker now with flashes of red intermixed with the purple. "That's what you want your last words to be?"

"But Drimblerod, you haven't even seen the best part."

Drimblerod inhaled deeply and let it whistle past his bared teeth. "You mean there's more to this monstrosity?" He stopped twirling the wand but still held it aloft. The tendrils coalesced into a glob of magical Annihilate!! at its end.

"Sure." Grimbledung said. "You don't think that *this* is all that we did all morning." He said as he pointed at the sign. "You haven't *seen* the best part." Grimbledung smirked. "Seen. That's a good one."

"What is the best part?"

"Come closer and you'll.... See." Grimbledung giggled.

Drimblerod lowered the wand but kept it pointed in Grimbledung's general direction. The glob of magic was now the size of a Dwarf's head[15]. "This better be good," he warned as he stepped forward.

Grimbledung stepped back, giggling as he went. "Closer ... closer," he coaxed.

Drimblerod moved directly in front of the sign. "What? What am I suppo..."

"WELCOME ADVENTURER!" Said the sign as the adventurer's mouth moved up and down jerkily. "Earn gold coins by bringing wands to Second Hand Sorcery. Right across from the Stumbling Drunk. Sell a wand and have a drink. What are you waiting for?" The wooden adventurer winked. "Stop by the Wand Shop to get your pin!"

"I gave Nulu a little plug too. Sneaky, huh?"

Drimblerod let the wand drop to his side. The blob of Annihilate!! immediately dispersed, *What's This?* leaking back into the floor. He appraised the sign for a long minute. He was still frowning

when he was done. He took another moment to look at the sign. "I admit that's a good pitch, but what shop owner is going to want to hear that all day long? After half a day, they'll pitch it on a burn pile."

"Do not burn me Mister Gnome!" Pleaded the wooden adventurer, "I will be a good sign, I will!"

Drimblerod raised the wand again. "You didn't. You Mechanimated that sign?"

Grimbledung beamed.

"You know what happens if you Mechanimate too many things and the Magicians Guild finds out about it?"

"They get their tabards in a bunch and sit around all pouty-faced?" Said Grimbledung, "What's a measly magician going to do to me?" He crossed his arms defiantly. "Angrily pull a rabbit out of my hat?" He snapped his fingers. "Well I don't *wear* a hat, now do I?"

Chapter Twenty One
Wherein Drimblerod Explains the Difference Between Magicians and Wizards

"Let's just go through that." Drimblerod held up a finger, "They turn your heart into a frog," then a second finger, "Or your head into a mushroom," he held up a third finger, "Or they teleport your skin someplace else," he held up a fourth finger, "they turn your bones to jelly." He held up his thumb "Or maybe they just ... well, let's just say it can get worse than that."

Grimbledung blanched. "Wait, what was that first one again?"

Drimblerod ignored his partner's baiting. Again. "Just imagine a bunch of uptight, upset, *organized* old hacks who just want to prove their worth. And by making a bunch of animated objects, they think you cheapen their craft."

"How would you know all that?" Asked Grimbledung. "Did you cross them?"

"I might have had a fully Mechanimated workshop at one point," confessed Drimblerod. "And they didn't take too kindly to even the pliers working on their own."

"What'd they do to you?"

"The last one" he said holding up his thumb. "I had to stay out of the sun and eat soft foods for a whole year. Trust me- that's all the details you want."

"Well, I'm dashed!" Said Grimbledung, "And I always thought that they were such kind-hearted folks, running schools to teach magic to youngsters, pulling rabbits from hats, and all that."

Drimblerod shook his head, "No, no, you're confusing Magicians with Wizards. They're completely different. They're not even in the same guild." He thought for a moment. "Magicians do the rabbit from the hat trick. No Wizard would be caught pulling off a cheap parlor trick like that."

"Cutting women in half?"

"Magicians."

"Defeat dragons?"

"Wizards."

"Quests for all powerful rings?"

"Those are just conjurors of cheap tricks. They're in a class all their own."

"Hmmm" Grimbledung said, "I've always thought that Big Julie was a tough Head Mistress, but she was fair. So, she's a Wizard then."

"Witch," corrected Drimblerod absently. He blinked as he realized what he had just said, "Hold on. Big Julie is a female? Do you know her?" He continued hopefully.

"No, that's what I've heard. I've never met her. Julie's a girl's name so I just figured she was a girl. Who would name their son Julie?" He giggled. "A boy named Julie."

"I have met several very dangerous males named Julie. One Eye'd Julie was a Troll who ran a Pickled Elf Toe stand in Orcistan, the other was No Teeth Julie Shor'tongue, a Human who was as crooked as the Great Salt River is long. Then there's Flatfoot Julie. He had a Numbers racket that cleaned out a whole town." When he had first arrived in town, Drimblerod had considered dabbling in the less than legal business of Numbers. Then after being at old Flatfoot's lynching, he decided wand selling was the way to go.

"Well, either way, I hear that Big Julie is tough but fair. Why do you care anyway?" Grimbledung asked.

"At some point, I'd like to see his or her operation. To see how it might fit into *our* operation. *If* Big Julie is a male, things might be more difficult. There's conniving that comes with that name." Drimblerod stopped and considered the possibilities of selling wands to new students, and the invariable lost or broken wand that would require replacement. There was money to be had if a wand seller could align themselves with a successful Wizard and Witch's School. The real hurdle was whether some other outfit was already affiliated with the school. A second hurdle was how to get rid of any other outfit already in that position. Since the school had been established fairly recently, the odds were in his favor that no one had an Exclusivity Contract. Yet. Drimblerod smiled at the thought of the profit associated with an Exclusivity Contract. New customers every school year. Former students keeping wands for nostalgia. Lost wands even. Income galore! Which, in turn, would make the Merchant's Guilt happy. And their Ogre dues collector.

Drimblerod realized everyone was waiting for him to finish his thought. He scowled to get back in the mood. "We're getting off track.

What are we going to do with this Mechanimated sign?"

Chapter Twenty (Part Three)
Wherein Grimbledung Finishes the Sign

"I say we do not put it in the burn pile!" Suggested the sign.

"Shaddap you!" Warned Drimblerod. He stopped and examined the sign closely. "Don't you have contractions?"

"A what?" Asked the sign, "I do not know what that is. What is a contraction?"

Drimblerod looked at Grimbledung who just shrugged. "Either way is fine. I suppose it makes us seem like a classier operation," he reassured Grimbledung. "Anyway," he continued, "a few pots and pans, and an occasional broom are about as Mechanimated as I want my life to be." Dummy dropped his paintbrush and flailed his arms.

"You're fine, Dummy."

"Larry," corrected Grimbledung.

"Don't tell me you gave him a *name*! That makes it that much harder to ..."

"Do not say throw into the burn pile!" Pleaded the sign.

"Relax, Jerry. No one is going to throw you in the burn pile," assured Grimbledung.

"STOP NAMING THINGS!" Shouted Drimblerod. "Nothing else gets a name. Nothing!"

"Damn it all. I wanted to be Jerry."

"QUIET RAT!" Drimblerod raised the wand above his head again. Dutifully the glob of Annihilate!! began to reform. "All right," Drimblerod said. "Everyone listen and listen good. NOTHING else gets Mechanimated. EVERTHING that doesn't have a beating heart has a distinct possibility of ending up in the burn pile or the box! Got it?"

Dummy looked down at the ground, head lolling in anguish.

"Relax dummy," assured Drimblerod. "You're a valuable asset to the business."

Dummy's head sprung up and he did a jig from the waist up. That was all he had to work with.

"Just don't get cocky," warned Drimblerod.

Instead of stopping his jig, the Dummy toned it down and directed it towards the sign.

"What about me?" Asked Jerry the sign, "I am valuable, I am!"

"We will see, sign."

"Call me Jerry."

Drimblerod just glowered at the sign. "A bonfire is just one incinerator wand away, so don't press your luck. *Sign*," he repeated for emphasis.

Grimbledung cleared his throat, "You know Drim, I say we stick the sign at the Outfitters next door and see how it works over a few days. If it doesn't seem to attract any business, we can see what we will do with Jerry at that point." Grimbledung pointed at the still charged wand in Drimblerod's hand. "And you should put that back in the display case," he suggested.

Drimblerod looked up at the wand and the large blob of Annihilate! That hung just above its tip. "I suppose that's a good idea," he squinted at the sign, "I'd hate to waste a good bit of magic on a misfire when there are perfectly good targets all around." He squinted again at the sign.

"Mister Gnome! I will get you business, just drag me over to that shop and you will see!" Said the sign. "Say, I have an idea!" The sign perked up (as much as a wooden sign could), "Why do you not put some wheels on me and I will roll myself over there. Myself." The sign considered his offer for a moment. "I promise I will go straight to the Outfitters and nowhere else. I promise!" He cringed as he realized he had said too much.

Drimblerod scowled. "Sure, you would. You'd make a break for it the first chance you got. Then you'd run into some Magician's apprentice and they'd haul you before the Grand Magicians Council. In a flash they'd have my name and where my shop is. Not a chance, sign," he said. "Grim, since you made that thing" he pointed at the sign, "I want you to add a proximity spell to its Mechanimation."

"Proximity spell?" Asked Grimbledung.

"Yes, it means ..." Began Drimblerod.

"I KNOW WHAT IT MEANS!" Howled Grimbledung.

Dummy stopped his jig and cowered under his arms.

"YOU CALLING ME STUPID?" Grimbledung's face turned red, "Why do you want me to cast it on the sign?" He finished as he puffed out his chest, barely in control of himself.

Drimblerod blinked at Grimbledung. "If you know what it means, how do you not know why I asked you to cast it on the

sign?"

Grimbledung mulled over the question and his red face turned into a blush. "I might not have been listening. I was thinking of other things," he finished sheepishly.

Drimblerod just gaped at his partner.

Dummy uncovered his head and pointed to Grimbledung as he twirled his other mitten hand around where his ear would be.

"Lucius." Suggested Grimbledung.

This time Drimblerod's face turned red. "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?" He screamed. "Who's Lucius?"

"Have you ever met a Lucius that's nice? Why do parents even name their sons that?"

Drimblerod's fist clenched the wand until his knuckles were a pale grey. "What does that have to do with anything? Why aren't you paying attention? This is important shop business I'm trying to deal with and you're daydreaming!"

Grimbledung leaned against the sign. "Well you started it when you mentioned Big Julie being a guy's name but only guys who are underhanded." Explained Grimbledung. "That got me thinking of other names that always have a certain personality. Have you ever met a Lucius that was a good fellow?"

"No." Steamed Drimblerod.

"How about a Farrah that wasn't a total knockout?"

"No." Fumed Drimblerod.

"A GreenBeard that wasn't a tree?"

"No." Smoldered Drimblerod.

"A Sharayah that wasn't a little unstable?"

"No." Seethed Drimblerod.

Grimbledung beamed. "See?"

"How about a Grimbledung that actually *pays attention*. Ever met one of those? How about you *pay attention* to what's going on right now." He lowered his voice dangerously, "Now put a Proximity Spell on the sign so that the Mechanimation Spell won't work if he's more than 300 paces from you so he can't try to get away but get caught by a Magician's Apprentice in the process and then get tortured until he tells them where our shop is and the Magicians come here and torture us when they see how many Mechanimated things we've whipped up around here and we end up worse than dead all because you didn't put a Proximity Spell on the sign like I asked you to because you were daydreaming instead of

paying attention like you should have been."

Behind Grimbledung, Dummy held up his two hands, interlaced his thumbs and flapped his mitten fingers then pointed at Grimbledung's head.

"Dummy." Drimblerod scowled. "I am *not* in the mood for your antics right now."

Grimbledung turned to see what Dummy was doing who immediately put his hands behind his head as if he were stretching.

"Cast the spell so we can get the sign in place and get back to business. I'll go grease the skids with the Haberdashery owner."

"We don't have to slide it, it's light enough to carry, I think..." Began Grimbledung.

"Don't start with me," warned Drimblerod as he headed for the curtain, "just get that spell up and running."

Grimbledung took out his wand. "So, a Proximity Spell. I can do that," he said. "I cast one of them as part of a Lust spell on a tavern wench once. She'd go completely bonkers whenever she was within ten paces of me." Grimbledung reminisced, " 'Course, when she finally figured out what I had done, I couldn't get within the range of a crossbow from her. And *that* I don't have to tell you, is a lot farther than ten paces." Grimbledung thought back to his younger days when as a panhandler, he had made enough to carouse every evening. Or at least every other evening. Now as a reputable business owner he didn't know if he was even *allowed* to carouse anymore. *No canoodling*? *That can't be right. I'll have to talk to Drim about that.*

"How about you just *say* you cast the spell, and I promise not to run away?" Suggested the sign, bringing Grimbledung out of his introspection. "It could be our little secret." The sign winked.

Grimbledung shook his head, "Nope. Drimblerod asked me to do it and we're partners, so I'm going to do it. Now be quiet so I can think up the spell." Grimbledung put his hand on his chin as he thought. Casting spells required not only the right implement to channel the magical *What's This*? but also the correct wording to make the spell work as intended. That was the difference between Magicians and Wizards. Magicians took a Levitate Wand and used it to pick up things. Wizards took any sort of Magical Wand and used it to channel *What's This*? into a Levitate Spell. He mused on this and became completely confused. "That makes me a Magician then," he

thought sourly, "I hope that doesn't mean I have to turn Drim into the Grand Council," he said aloud.

Beside him he heard the sound of scraping wood. The sign had scooted several feet away from him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I figured since you were day dreaming again, I should just get to work."

"I was not daydreaming," said Grimbledung, "Now stay still and let me think of the spell. If I do it wrong, you'll end up a pile of splinters," he warned. "So ..." He mused, "I'll just Affix the Proximity Spell to me, then you'll *have* to stay nearby." He raised his wand and incanted

Mechanimated Sign creat ...

"Stop!" Interrupted the sign, "Do not make it you! What if you go on an errand?" The wheel on the sign spun until it was a blur. "What if you get killed? What if you go and join a traveling minstrel show? What if you get hit on the head and forget who you are and walk away? What if you get drunk and stagger off? *Do not make it you*!"

Grimbledung lowered his wand. "Don't be absurd Sign. None of those things can happen." Grim reconsidered the list. "Wait, well, maybe that last one might, now that I think about it."

"Make it something that is here in the shop." The sign paused for the slightest of moments. "Maybe something easily carried. That would be convenient!"

Grimbledung shook his head, "Not likely, Sign. Then you'll scoot off the first chance you get. I'll make it something in the shop, but not something you're liable to snatch and dash with."

"Well, I cannot believe you would even accuse me of such a thing!" Said the sign in a hurt tone.

Grimbledung raised an eyebrow at it.

The sign pressed on, "Why I am offended that you would even suggest that. I think that to make amends, you should just not put any sort of spell on me. That way we will both learn to trust each other and have a long and prosperous relationship."

"That was the biggest load of Trollwash I've ever heard." Said Grimbledung as he stuck out his tongue. "Now keep quiet while I work this out. These types of spells can be tricky to cast and if it gets messed

up, things can get ..." He tried to think of an appropriately catastrophic word. He couldn't. "Messy," he finished.

Grimbledung thought for several minutes and waggled his wand at the sign. He then raised his wand in the air, cleared his throat and incanted

Mechanimated Sign created by me-
Talking, winking, spinning and smiling.
All this you will do
And you do it with glee!

Grimbledung furrowed his brow as he concentrated

You are now limited to a distance that I demand!
Three hundred paces of mine, not a Ghillie Dhu, Ogre, or a wee Korrigan

Farther than that, and Boom! Pow! Crash!

Into a THOUSAND pieces will you smash!
Affixed to the Shop morning, night and noon.
Always tied to this here proximity-

T'will be thing that floats out front on the street. The Moon!
THAT will keep you tied to this vicinity.

Grimbledung hacked and slashed the wand at the sign.

"WAIT! Is that not supposed to rhyme better than that?" The sign thrashed its one arm and scooted again, this time towards Grimbledung.

Grimbledung finished the incantation with a vicious jab at the sign. "Uh-oh. Now you did it." Grimbledung lowered his wand.

The sign's eyes got huge. "What did *I* do? You are the one that cannot come up with a decent rhyming incantation!" It flailed its one arm as the spinning wheel went back and forth. It clinked and clattered with the sound of a downpour of gold coins.

"The spell worked, you stupid sign." Said Grimbledung as he put his wand away. "There was nothing to see since I was just adjusting the spell that was already in place. Until you messed it up."

"What did I do?" Whined the sign. "What did I do? Am I going to explode? And what's a Gilliedoo or a Corrigan? You were just making up words!"

"Those are both fine and proper creatures," said Grimbledung as he hefted the sign off the ground. "I said three hundred paces and that's how the spell was prepared but since you moved closer to me, I don't think three hundred paces is still your actual safe range." He grunted as he waddled his way toward the curtain. "Maybe we *should* grease some skids or something." When he got to the curtain, he dropped the sign harshly.

"What does that mean? Actual safe range? Are you saying that I have to be closer than three hundred paces to you? How much closer?" The wheel on the sign was a blur as it spun. "You stupid Gnome! You messed up a simple spell and I have to pay for it!"

Grimbledung reached out and grabbed the spinning wheel. It screeched to a halt. "*You* messed up the spell by moving, *sign*," he growled. "I'm not the stupid one moving when an incantation is taking place. That would be *you*." He jabbed his finger at the sign with his other hand, "And because you called me stupid, instead of just making the spell make the Mechanimate stop working, I made it so you will explode!"

"But you cast the spell *before* I called you stupid!" Howled the sign.

Grimbledung drew his wand, "Who's the more stupider one now?" He smirked mischievously, "Who's more stupider now? So now your range is less than three hundred of my paces. How much less, well, the only way to tell is for you to start moving away. When you explode, that's just a little too far." He pointed the wand at the sign's head. "Or maybe I'll be the one walking away from you." He narrowed his eyes.

Stay

He commanded as he touched the wand to the sign's forehead. Grimbledung ducked under the curtain.

The sign grunted and flailed his arm. "I cannot move. What did you do to me?" The sign asked. "Do not go too far, Mister Gnome!"

Grimbledung ducked back under the curtain with a wand in his hand. "This will do the trick. Work smartlier not hardlier, my Pappy used to say."

"Those are not words," the sign pointed out.

"Can you make your own way to the Outfitters?" Asked Grimbledung. He gestured through the curtain with a slight bow.

The sign grunted as it tried to move. "Hardly," replied the sign.

"That's not a word," sing-songed Grimbledung as he jabbed the wand at the sign. It rose silently off the floor. Grimbledung moved to position himself behind the sign. "Let us go." He continued in the sign's voice. "We must have to go to the store do not we?" He mimicked. Grimbledung motioned forward with the wand and the sign bounced off the wall beside the curtain.

"I do not talk like that," said the sign.

Grimbledung ignored it. "Oh dear. What I do not know how that are been happened." Grimbledung maneuvered the sign through the curtain. As Grimbledung ducked under the curtain, he took his eyes off the sign which bounced off the counter before floating to the open area in front of the shop.

"You have made your point, Gnome," said the sign. "I will behave myself and be glad for my existence."

Grimbledung snapped his fingers at the door. "Let us out, door. We've got a sign to put in place." Dutifully the door swung open. "Make sure you lock behind us," said Grimbledung as he swung the sign around the door jam and stepped through it himself.

With a click the door locked.

"Thanks, Gary."

Chapter Twenty-Two
Wherein Grimbledung Takes the Sign to the Haberdashery[16]

Drimblerod was waiting with the Haberdashery owner when Grimbledung came through the door, sign in tow. "What took you so long? We've been waiting forever!" Scolded Drimblerod. "I was explaining to Pozzuoli here about our generous offer of an enchanted broom. Even though it's our last one, I think Mister Pozz here really deserves it."

Grimbledung examined the shop owner, a haggard looking Dwarf who was twice his age if he were a day. Dressed in mismatched clothes and no shoes, he looked more like a prospector Dwarf in desperate need of a claim than a successful, respectable, shop owner. Of course, of the shops on the block, the Haberdashery was easily the most profitable. "Sorry about that. I had some trouble getting the sign out of the shop. I had to get a Levitator to help me move it."

Pozzuoli eyed the large sign. "I dinna know it would a-be so big. That's a lotta floor space I'm a-giving up." He rubbed his hands together in consternation. "The losses I will-a see. They will-a keep me up at a night," he lamented.

"Relax Pozz, at least you won't be up late sweeping your floors." Drimblerod nudged him in the ribs, "eh?"

Pozzuoli scowled. He hated having to pretend to be from the wrong side of the volcano but the advantage it gave him over his business partners was substantial. Fretting and complaining, wringing his hands kept adversaries - which was what he considered business partners- believing he was slow witted when he would have wagered 100 gold coins that there wasn't a creature smarter than him in all of Aution. "That is true, Mister Drimblerod. Say, whatta kind of a name is that? You are of the high country, no?" He asked innocently, knowing full well that with his accent, Drimblerod was from the lowlands, within two leagues of the Mostly Green Bog with how some of his endings dropped off when he was agitated. Nowhere near any sort of learning institution most likely. In any case, he had decided the novelty of a talking sign would bring in foot traffic so he agreed. 'A talking sign? Ahhh, that would be amazing to a-

see!' Had been his response to the offer.

"Hey, Pozz, you awake or daydreaming during business dealings like my Partner does?" Drimblerod nudged him again. "So, where would you like us to put the sign?"

"How about the Rectum?" Pozzuoli deadpanned without his accent as he moved to his cashbox. He quickly recovered, "How does that a-sound?" He pointed beside the counter.

"Fine, fine. That works for me," agreed Drimblerod. "Grim, move that sign over there by the Rectum."

"The what?" Grimbledung asked. He knew he had heard that word before but never when talking about things in a store. "Isn't that the thing in that limerick?" Grimbledung lowered the sign and assumed a poetic stance, hands clasped in front of him. He began to recite

There once was a Gnomess from Windom,
who had an unusually large...

Drimblerod bounded over and slapped Grimbledung's ear. "Gads! What is wrong with you? We're in the middle of a business deal and you're going to spout tawdry poems?" He slapped Grimbledung's ear again. "This Dwarf's not from around here," he whispered harshly. "It's got be Dwarfish or something. Just get that sign over there before he changes his mind." As he turned, he slapped Grimbledung's ear again. "That's for that silly pose you're in!"

Grimbledung rubbed his ear as he raised the wand. He aimed at the sign and maneuvered it behind the counter and against the wall. After a quick appraisal of his work, he nudged it away from the counter far enough that it did not keep someone from stepping behind the cash box. "How's that?"

"Say, that's amazing! How you move-a that a sign with that little a-stick?" Pozzuoli said as he clapped his hands. A Levitation wand would sweeten the deal above and beyond the enchanted broom. *Time to bait the hook*, he thought slyly. "Hey, I justhaddathought. But what happens when Pozzuoli needs to sweep behind the sign? I cannot-a pick it up with my bad a-back. And the mamma, she cannot-a pick it up because of the bad front. This won't work at all."

He sighed loudly, wringing his hands. "I do not think the sign will a work there. No. It will-a not a work there at all." He frowned as he leaned in to examine the sign. *And the hook goes in the water* he mused. "This is a good built sign. It can go in the street in front-a my store. The rain, she will not hurt this sign. Then I donna have to worry to sweep behind it. Yes?" A*nd the hook dangles*.

Grimbledung smiled. "Mister Pots Wally...."

"Pozzuoli" corrected the Dwarf.

"Pozz volley," Grimbledung tried again.

"You a-makin' fun of-a my name?" Pozzuoli narrowed his eyes at the Gnome. *And a little chum to get the fish to bite*.

"No, no!" groveled Grimbledung, "Not at all. I was hit in the head last week, you see. I wasn't trying to make fun of your name" he considered making another attempt at the Dwarf's name. With how red Drimblerod's face was, he decided to cut his losses and spare his ear another whacking. "Mister Dwarf," continued Grimbledung, "we could just leave you this wand and then you can move the sign whenever you like. How does that sound?"

And the hook was set. "You will-a leave the wand with me? No!" *And then we'll get that fish on the dock*.

"Sure thing. You can use it to move the sign any time you want. And ..." Grimbledung faltered as he tried to come up with another use for the wand. "...and you can even use it to get stuff off the top shelves without using the ladder! That's how accidents happen you know."

"That is a-very nice of you Grimbledung. A-very nice!" He reached out and took the wand from Grimbledung. "Then the deal, she is set. The sign it a-stays in the store and the wand, it moves the sign." He shook Grimbledung's hand before the Gnome had a chance to backpedal. "She is a good deal."

Grimbledung nodded slowly as he glanced at Drimblerod, who just shrugged. Grimbledung's nod increased in speed when the threat of any more ear-whacking was gone, "Our pleasure. Enjoy the sign." He beamed. "I made it myself."

Pozzuoli let go of his hand and turned to Drimblerod. "The deal. She is set." He reached out and shook Drimblerod's hand.

"Yes, Pozzuoli. The deal, she is set." Drimblerod smiled. "The sign stays in the store and the wand stays to move the sign. When we take the sign, the wand comes with it since you won't need it anymore." *From the highlands indeed*, scowled Drimblerod. What did he take him for; some

highland muckity-muck who eats with a pinky out on fine linen? He was from *The Nearly Green Bog*. You didn't survive *there* if you couldn't make a deal. "The deal is set."



"Oh, the fish" lamented Pozzuoli, "she is not as a-big as I thought she was!" He kicked himself mentally for getting duped by a lowlander. Now he would have to keep the sign at least through the annual inventorying, which was more than two months away. Then he could toss the sign and pocket an easy ten gold coins. Not only would he not have to hire three workers to move boxes as he inventoried for a week (a measly few silvers), they would not pilfer anything (a couple more silvers) and he wouldn't have to be closed for an entire week (which amounted to the balance of the ten gold coins). Of course, the sign could actually end up bringing in extra business after all. Time would tell.

"Yes. Those highlander fish look big under the water, but once you get them on the dock, they aren't nearly as big as you thought,"

agreed Drimblerod. "Let's go Grim." He started for the door. If he had to listen to that absurdly fake accent any longer, he would lose his meal.

Grimbledung followed him and turned at the door, "Good day to you, Sir Puss Wooly." He smiled amicably and closed the door behind him

"What complete idiots. Buffoons to the core."

"Sign. Let's get one thing straight." His accent was gone, as was his amicable fiddling. It suddenly seemed colder in the store. "You talk to customers. ONLY to customers." Pozzuoli glowered at the sign. "And if you annoy my customers, I'll pitch you in the fire barrel so fast your eyes will pop out and I'll use them as dice. I don't need a Levitation Wand *that* badly." He poked the sign. "And you even *talk* to my wife to try to get her on your side, you'll be a bunch of talking toothpicks."

"I got it, Mister Pozzuoli," sign agreed. The Gnomes seemed like much better company than the Dwarf – buffoons or not.

"Good. I'm going to bed. If anyone tries to break into the place, give a good shout and maybe I'll keep you around a little longer...."

"Jerry?"

"Sign," said Pozzuoli as he walked to the front door. "Turn off, lights!" He commanded. The Pixies, captive in jars hung from the ceiling, immediately flickered off. Any delay resulted in a punishment they called simply 'The Shakes'. As Pozzuoli turned the lock on the door, Jerry the sign began to scheme on how to return to the company of the buffoon Gnomes.

He did not know it at the moment, but no amount of scheming would ever make that happen.

Jerry the sign was doomed.

Doomed to a horrible end.

Sorry.

Chapter Twenty-Three
Wherein Rat Tells Grimbledung's Secret

Grimbledung sulked at the counter as he had for the past two days. Business had been brisk but so far not a single person had come by to join the Gatherers Division. "It's killing me, Drimblerod! Killing me!" He lamented.

"Yes, I know. You've been telling me for the past two days. I'm ready to take you up on your lamenting."

"All that time spent making a glorious sign, deciding what it would say. All that time and effort and time, and not a single volunteer has come to join the Gatherer's Division."

"Grim. Your complaining is etched on my brain. You have said that every half hour for the past two days. You even mutter it in your sleep. I swear on all the gold in The Region, if you say it again, I'm going to cut you down and bury you out back under the outhouse."

"Maybe I should go out and check on Larr ... the sign to see if it's still there." Suggested Grimbledung.

"Why don't you do that. And please take your time at it."

Grimbledung hopped off the stool and moved around the counter. "Do you want me to bring you anything back? I don't think Nulu will be here for a little while. You want me to bring you something back? Because I can if you want. Bring you something back, that is."

Drimblerod stared at his partner. Where the incessant energy came from was beyond him. He would be annoyingly bubbly and helpful for hours, but then out of the blue, he would teeter on the edge of insanity. There was definitely something not right with Grimbledung. "Thanks, no," was all he said in response. No sense in saying something that would flip whatever insanity switch was lurking in the dim recesses of Grim's head. "Take your time."

Grimbledung opened the door. It was completely blocked by Nulu. "Was that for me, or you heading out?"

"I'm checking on sign. I'll be right back for some snacks." He ducked under Nulu's legs, making her hop up as he scooted off.

"What in the Lands has gotten into him?" Asked Nulu as she

set the tray on the counter. She leaned against the wood edges of the Counter with her hands. She had learned that trying to sit on the stools in the shop did not end up well for the stool- or her pride. "I think there's something wrong with that Gnome. His mood swings are as broad as a ballista bow."

Drimblerod picked up a muffin. "His ..." He considered his words for a moment, "episodes seem to be a little fewer and farther between, even in the short time I've known him. Maybe he's getting better." He sniffed the muffin. "I have to tell you Nulu, your cooks really caught on to baking. You should offer up a breakfast menu, or have a street side window or something." He popped the muffin in his mouth and chewed approvingly.

"It's amazing how well it works once you get cooks that can read and follow a recipe. If this keeps up, I'll become a restaurant and pub, instead of a pub and restaurant." She frowned.

"You wouldn't like that?" Drimblerod mumbled around another muffin, "Your profits would definitely increase once word got out."

"It's not about the money...." Nulu started. Drimblerod choked on his muffin. Nulu slapped him on the back twice and poured him a cider. "Drink this before you die from a muffin. That would be bad for business!"

Drimblerod drank some of the cider and wiped away a tear, "That muffin almost came out my nose. Not about the money? *Isn't everything about the money*?"

"I'm well off financially." She did a quick mental calculation. "Really well off. The Stumbling Drunk is more something to pass the time. I get to talk to folks at the bar, listen to adventure tales, break up fights. If it were more restaurant than pub, it would get boring." Nulu picked up a muffin, smelled it and popped it into her mouth. She chewed the muffin and swallowed. "They *are* getting good at those things."

"No one calls me now when it's snack time?" Rat scolded as he came under the curtain. "We've known Rat long enough, so we'll just start ignoring him. Is that how it is?" He asked as he hopped up on the counter. "Is there a heel?"

Nulu picked up a heel and began to butter it "I save them just for you, Rat."

"Say Rat, you've known Grimbledung a long time, right?"

Rat's one good eye was on Nulu as she buttered and then jammed his heel of bread. "Yep." He was busy squinting at the bread, "Not so

stingy on the jam, if you please. It gives me a reason to clean my fur later."

"Do you know why Grimbledung acts like his does?" Asked Drimblerod. "Is it all because of that Disintegrate! shot he took to the head in the Pixie Uprising?"

Rat considered his options. The truth, as he often told Grimbledung, was usually the best policy because, in all practicality, it was difficult to keep lies straight over a long period of time. Speaking about the Pixie parts in his head seemed like a disloyalty. His episodes *were* getting better. The focus of being a shop owner was doing him good, Rat could tell that plainly. Even so, this Gnome and, strangely enough, the Trolless now seemed like family as well, so lying to them also went against his principles. After 100 years of life, Rat had developed a set of morals well beyond those of a common rat (which we don't have to tell you, have pretty high morals to begin with). Also, the end of the second month where Grimbledung had said he would pitch his Gnome partner into the Abyssmal box if things weren't going well was quickly approaching and the arrangement was definitely looking like it was going to become permanent. Diplomacy was in order. "That's mostly the issue with Grimbledung, yes. That shot to the head was at least, the cause of the issues. I'm not sure how much more I should talk about since Grim asked me to keep the issue to myself."

"Asked you to keep it a secret?" Asked Drimblerod, "Or did he threaten you?"

"Elfin Elven ..." Nulu handed him the bread which was dripping with jam. "Excellent, Mistress Nulu. That is one well-jammed heel of bread." He nibbled at the edges of it to keep the jam from leaking down his paw. "You both seem like nice folk and I would hate to have Grimbledung's secret come between us." He bit off a larger piece of bread to give him time to think of his next statement. Nulu and Drimblerod both leaned in as he chewed slowly. Finally swallowing, he started to take another bite of bread but Nulu's frown showed that her patience was nearing its end. "There was more involved than just a blast to the head. The issue involved a bit of shrapnel from some ..." He paused as he considered the proper word. The safest word. "Non-Grimbledung bits and pieces in his brain which now causes him to act ..." He licked at some wayward jam that had made it down to the bottom of the heel and

almost to his claw. "Unpredictably."

Nulu leaned back and whistled. "Unpredictable. That's one way of putting it."

"Are you saying that Gnome has rocks in his head?" Drimblerod asked. "That would explain a lot if that true."

"Rocks?" Said Rat. "No." He quickly took a large bite of bread.

"Wait, are you trying to tell me that Grim has *Pixie* parts stuck in his head?" Asked Drimblerod hesitantly.

At least, Rat thought, *I didn't actually tell them what happened- they guessed the details on their own. Hopefully Grimbledung will see it that way*. "Let's go with that."

"No wonder he's a mess at times. Pixie are a most nefarious beast if ever there was one! So what's the whole story, Rat. And what can we do to help?"

Rat sat back on his haunches and licked at another rivulet of wayward jam. "Fine. But I'm making it the quick version because if Grimbledung catches me, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"Don't say that Rat," assured Nulu, "we're only trying to help."

"No, no. I *wouldn't* be able to live with myself if Grimbledung found out. Knowing Grimbledung, it would be terrible."

"Terrible?" Asked Nulu.

"It would rival the Great Cat Incident of 823." Rat stuck out his tongue.

Drimblerod blanched. Nulu's perplexed look made him quickly whisper to her, "*Tell you later*." He gestured for Rat to continue.

"Well," started Rat. "It all began the morning of the Great Pixie Uprising." He took another bite of his bread then sat back on his haunches as he collected his thoughts. His one good eye got a far-away look in it. "I remember it well. It was a cool spring morning." He took another bite of his bread. "A Thraksday."

"*This* is the short version?" Nulu whispered to Drimblerod, "I hope Grim's gone awhile. This doesn't seem like the short version of anything. We should start calling him Bard instead of Rat."

Drimblerod shrugged in reply and whispered back, "Could be worse. He could be singing it ala Grim."

Nulu stifled a laugh.

Rat -still looking at the distance- ignored them both and continued, "...and nothing seemed out of the ordinary." His eye narrowed as he recalled the event. "That's when the first Brownie mercenary showed up.

He was astride a toad and wielding a relish fork..."

InTerN Mission

Standing in front of the ruined Keep along the Great Salt River, the group of Halflings stood in a straight line. The Keep, long since defeated, was a reminder to those in the area that no matter how strong one felt their battlements were, in the end, they were vulnerable. It was for this reason that several financially-secure Halflings had bought the Keep and kept it in its current state of decay. Even though it was not Halflings that had destroyed it, the Keep was still a good reminder to the locals. Plus, it was a good place to hold weekly drills, as well as the annual Summer Solstice Dance and Impaling. Halflings came from leagues around for the event.

Currently, the Keep was being used as a rallying point and temporary headquarters.

In front of the line of Halflings, a chubby Halfling in full dress uniform addressed them. The Halflings stared straight ahead as they listened to the recounting of a long since ended invasion. Tears of joy ran down several Halflings' cheeks as they heard of massive battles, copious amounts of spilled blood, and general destruction caused by the invading Halfling horde. Finally, the Halfling stopped talking. He looked down the line of soldiers. A lone tear rolled down *his* cheek. Clearing his throat, he put his hands on his hips, "Inspection ... Arms!" Barked the Halfling-Colonel Magnus von Humungous.

Obediently, the score[17] of Halflings drew their swords and held them up.

"Ready!" They all said in unison.

"Good, good," said Colonel Humungous as he moved from Halfling to Halfling. "Very good" he said to several. Finally, after inspecting all twenty (the entire score) of the soldiers, he moved back in front of them, "Port ... Arms!" He commanded.

The group returned their swords to their respective sheaths quickly.

"*At ease*, you fine bunch of soldiers," said Humungous, "You are probably wondering why I have asked you here." None of the soldiers took the bait and remained rock-still. "Right then," said Humungous. He looked over the soldiers again, "Really? You all know why you're here?"

The soldiers shuffled about. Finally, the leader of the group, a

Corporal, spoke up, "Sir! We do not know why we are here!" He shouted. "But we are here to do whatever you want us to!" He looked forward again, "We hope it has to do with killing folk!"

Several soldiers nodded (they were, after all *at ease*).

Colonel Humungous moved in front of the Corporal, "Exactly so, my fine soldier, that is, indeed part of the plan."

The Corporal stared straight ahead. The Colonel stared at the Corporal.

Finally, after several long moments the Corporal looked at his superior officer, "Honestly, Sir, we have no idea why we're here, Sir" he confessed.

"Good, good," said the Colonel as he again moved to the front of group. "And that's how it should be. Since it's a secret mission and all."

Several soldiers nodded. Usually secret missions meant that more mischief and mayhem could occur and no one would ever find out about it. It was one of the perks of secret missions. That and extra rations.

"Your job, my brave Halflings, will be to infiltrate the town of Aution, determine what sort of resistance they can put together once the invasion starts..." As he spoke, several of the Halflings smiled. "... and knock heads as you see fit!"

"Knock heads," mumbled several of the Halflings.

"Push 'em around!" Quipped one.

Two Halflings drew their swords.

"Safety Tax!" Said another. The fervor was building.

One of the Halflings, unable to contain himself, let out a loud "Huzzah!"[18] He had been on secret missions before.

"Yes, that is authorized as well," said the Colonel to the young Halfling. "Just try to avoid any witnesses this time," he tut-tutted.

"Huzzah," muttered several of the other Halflings. Ominously.

"So, to recap," said Colonel Humungous, "**IN**filtrate, de**TER**mine, and k**N**ock heads! *That* is your mission. We have an intelligence party already inserted into town and they are compiling the order of merit for razing ..."

It was important to have a plan when one burned a town to the ground; it assured the highest number of civilian casualties. If a force just started at one side and set the town ablaze, then residents were

able to evacuate through the non-inflamed parts of town. More often than not, escaped residents joined resistance movements and returned to avenge whoever they felt had wronged them. It created a lot of unnecessary work. More importantly, individuals who had started the aforementioned fire were typically at the top of said list. Since that list was going to be made up entirely of Halflings, it was in their best interest to ensure the razing went efficiently and quickly from the edges of town inward. Hence, the list, or as it was called The List, was an integral part of any Halfling invasion plan.

"Got it?"

"INTERN! Yes, Sir!" Said all the Halflings in unison.

"Fine, fine. Then get to work!" Barked Colonel Humongous. "DIS ..." He stopped himself as he almost committed a breach of military etiquette. "As you were," he ordered.

And they were.

The Colonel began again, "A - ten ... SHUN!" He barked. The group stopped their fidgeting and stood rock still. "Right, right," said Colonel Humungous, "DIS ... missed!"

The Corporal turned to the Halfling next to him. "Gigantus," he said, "I want you to take half the men and form your own squad. We're going to split our forces. You're going to get the north side of town, and we'll get the south side."

"Yes, Corporal," said the Halfling as he saluted.

"When we get to the middle of town, The List should be completed."

"Yes, Corporal," said the Halfling again as he stood arrow straight (albeit 2 7/8 feet tall).

The Corporal exhaled angrily. "Stop that. If you're taking half the force, then you are going to be a Corporal too."

"Yes, Corporal Colossus," said the Halfling (he hadn't been promoted yet).

"Attention troop!" Said Corporal Colossus loudly, "I hereby bestow a portion of my rank on now-Corporal Gigantus, with all the power, prestige, and pompousness it entails!"

"Here, here!" Said the Halflings in unison.

With that Corporal Colossus snorted deeply then spat on Gigantus' chest.

"Here, here!" Said the Halflings again.

"Thanks, Colossus," said Corporal Gigantus. Promotion ceremonies

were quick and easy in the Halfling Army. Demotions were also quick. Albeit messier.

"Take half the men and swing out wide around Aution to enter from the north side of town. Don't get too close to Prost Garrison patrols, but make sure you keep a low profile both outside and inside town."

"Got it," said Corporal Gigantus, "I'll see you in the middle of the town." With that, he moved down the rank, slapping half a score of the Halflings in the face. Hard. "Let's go, Halflings!" He said as he got to the end of the rank. Dutifully, the Halflings with a reddened cheek moved to follow him.

Corporal Colossus faced the remaining force. "We're going to give them a couple of three days to get in position so we'll hunker down here while we wait. Get your gear cleaned up and ready to go." The Halflings all nodded. Several smiled. The Corporal pointed a menacing finger at the soldiers, "And no impalings."

Again, the Halflings nodded. This time several frowned.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Wherein Grimbledung Witnesses a Robbery

Grimbledung stepped out onto the street around, or more precisely, under Nulu. The door clacked shut behind her. Grimbledung inhaled deeply the fresh afternoon air. Things were finally going well. He was mostly in control of his facilities and hadn't had an outburst in a while. At least a Pixie-caused outburst, he mused. Gnomes were often prone to outbursts without any outside aid. Several weeks had passed and there were more coins in his accounts (bank and mattress) than he had had in decades. Sourly, he felt he was still remiss in the carousing category- which he definitely wanted to discuss with Drimblerod. What good were coins in the bank if you couldn't take some down to the Mora Tau Bar and BAR and spend it on one of the doxies there?

Ahhh, the Mora Tau Bar and BAR, Grimbledung reminisced- founded by PalmerLee Greggs, a retired sailor who had had his fill of adventures, cursed diamonds, and voodoo vixens[19] . The establishment was set up with two distinct levels- on the street level was the Bar where drinks flowed freely and it was fairly well lit. Nice, sturdy furniture and comfortable chairs where one could sit and drink the night away. Even so, it was not a family establishment by any means, yet still allowed for a less rough and tumble crowd; social drinkers, pensioners, and haughty near-nobles. This was also where people could, with very little coaxing, get a story of high adventure out of old PalmerLee. In the cellar was the BAR, with dim lighting, spindly wood furniture (less lethal if used as weapons), and of course, the Doxies who would lead you to the second floor of the establishment. That was where Grimbledung often would spend his time. The basement, that is. He inhaled deeply again as he continued the few steps down the boardwalk to the other store. Smiling, he peered into the storefront window of Pozzuoli's Haberdashery.

Grimbledung did a jig, arms flapping wildly above his head. There were two youthful looking humans speaking with Larry the sign.

One was nodding, the other, hands in his pockets, seemed to be listening intently. Grimbledung leaned and put an ear against the glass.

"… sure. There is FORTUNE to be had. That is surely true," explained Larry the sign. "Why, there are wands just laying around waiting

to be picked up and brought in for cold hard coins. When you find them, bring them to the Wand Shop right next door and they will buy them from you. Since you get them for free. It is pure profit."

"But what if we can't find any wands?" Asked the Human with his hands in his pockets. "Then what do we do?"

Larry the sign considered this. "Of that I have no idea. That did not come up while I was being conjured by Grimbledung. I imagine you would just do what you were normally going out into the Wilds for."

"But we were going out to find our fortune," said the other Human. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea," he lamented to his partner. "I don't even know where to start looking." He winked and moved off to peruse the shelves, leaving his friend to deal with the Dwarf who approached them.

"Howsabout you start by buying something that you are gonna need when you are out doing the Adventuring?" Scowled Pozzuoli. "The adventurer, he need-a good strong backpack to hold all the gold. Yes? Whad-aya gonna do without a good backpack? Carry your stuff in you a-pockets?"

"I suppose we need a backpack. What do you have for two copper pieces?" Asked the Human.

"Two copper pieces? I say you a-use your pockets to carry your stuff because you can-a afford anything else! Two copper pieces, he says," he said to no one in particular, "he comes with two copper pieces! I sell him a bucket for that. He can hold it on-a stick." He waved his hands in the air above his head. Then he pantomimed walking with a stick over his shoulder- ostensibly with a bucket on its end. "What-a you say to that?"

"I suppose a bucket will do," said the hand-pocketed Human. "For two coppers, will you give us some rope to tie the bucket to the stick?"

"A bucket, she is not enough? Now you wanna piece of rope?" Cried Pozzuoli. "They are trying to ruin me. Rope costs money you know. Money! No one says to me, hey Pozzuoli, here is some rope. You can-a have it for free." He clasped his hands in front of him, "Free rope you say?"

"It would be nice" replied the Human. "Just a little bit I think would be enough."

Grimbledung alternated between pressing his hear against the glass to hear and turning his head to watch. In between the two he

did a little jig. *The sign idea was on the verge of working!* He thought gleefully as he hopped up and down.

Passersby gave him a wide birth.

"OK. So it's a deal. A bucket and a little bit of rope for two copper pieces," said the Human hopefully. "Would you consider throwing in a blanket maybe? Because you're good hearted?"

"Pozzuoli is good hearted, that is true," began Pozzuoli in a sincere voice, "but the Mamma Pozzuoli, she is not good hearted. She hit Pozzuoli in the head when he give things away. I canna take so much hitting in the head! Already, I give you the rope. That gonna get me wacked!" Again, he raised his hands in the air and waved them about. The Pixies, afraid the game "Flick the Glass" was about to begin, started flittering within their jars.

"Fine, sir. We'll take the bucket then. And a small piece of rope. A scrap even," agreed the Human. "I'd hate to see you hit because of us. My partner has the two copper coins. He gets to carry the money because he's more trustworthy than I am." He winked mischievously.

The other human whispered into Pozzuoli's ear, "Much more trustworthy."

Pozzuoli jumped in surprise. "That no a-funny! Sneaking up on Pozzuoli like that. That's how you get blasted." He scolded as he pulled the Human around in front of him by his ear. He patted the Human's cheek, "You two, I a-like you two." He winked at the Human, "I give you the blanket, just don't tell the Mamma Pozzuoli. S'okay?"

"Yes, sir. I won't tell a soul," agreed the other Human. He reached into his pocket and pulled out two dingy, battered copper pieces. "Here you go, Mister Pozzuoli."

"Where you get these, from under a heap of dead Orcs?" Asked Pozzuoli as he examined the beaten coins. "You boys really need to make some new money, eh? Maybe you take the sign's advice, No?" Pozzuoli moved behind the counter and picked up a bucket. He dumped the trash from it and handed it to the human. "Here is the bucket. No charge for emptying it!" He pulled some twine from under the counter and dropped it in the bucket as well. He came around the counter and handed the bucket to the less trustworthy Human. "You hold this. I hear you no so trustworthy. This way you no pick anything up on your way outta the store." Pozzuoli winked. "I joke with you!" He slapped the Human's cheek. "Hah!"

Pozzuoli led the two to the door, taking a small detour to a pile of

blankets. He took two and stuffed them into the bucket. "You each get one, yes?" He considered his gift. "Unless you boys only need-a one?"

"No, no. Two is great. We're close, but not *that* close," said the more trustworthy Human. "Thanks very much for your kindness, good Dwarf. We will definitely do all our business here."

"Bring back a-new money, eh?"

"Sure thing." The human replied as Pozzuoli ushered them out the door into the dancing Grimbledung.

"Have fun boys. Adventure good and come back with the shiny coins!" Said Pozzuoli as he closed the door.

Grimbledung appraised the two Humans. Definitely adventurers and definitely in need of extra coins. Perfect to be in the Gathering Brigade. He stopped his jig to speak to them.

"What'd we get?" Said the first Human, "besides that stupid bucket and blankets. It sure took you long enough. I was running out of things to say in there."

"Relax Danny," said the second Human, "I got a backpack, a shovel, a bulls-eye lantern, some *real* rope" he said as he peered into the Bag of Holding sewn into his pocket. "And let's see…" he rummaged around in it, "I think the other stuff is from the other store." The contents of the bag clattered and banged as he pushed them around, "No wait, I also got a coffee pot and a caldron." He looked up and smiled.

"Not bad, Peachey," said Danny, "not bad at all. I ah ..." He finally noticed Grimbledung who was standing in front of him and Peachey. "Can I help you?"

"So you just robbed that guy?" Asked Grimbledung. "Right under his nose?" The two looked at each other then back at Grimbledung. "We don't know what you're talking about" said Danny coolly. "We paid for our bucket and got the other stuff as a gift."

"Yeah," agreed Peachey. "That's our story and we'll stick to it. What business is it of yours?" He asked, becoming cross.

"Don't worry; I don't like that guy all too much. Take what you can from him. I was wondering if you were going to do what that sign suggested in there."

"That's our next stop," said Danny. "We should be able to lift a couple of wands from there without any trouble at all." He winked at

Grimbledung. "Especially if that shop owner is as easily distracted as the Dwarf was." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Pozzuoli's shop. "Let's go check it out." He said as he pushed his way past Grimbledung. Peachey pushed him back the other way as he fell in step beside his partner.

Grimbledung watched as the two walked down to his shop and entered it. Fuming, he drew his wand and followed behind them. He stopped to listen at the door.

"...and *that's* when I learned I was lactose intolerant," Grimbledung heard Rat say.

"Welcome, travelers." Grimbledung heard his partner say, "What are you looking for today?"

"The sign next door said to stop by here. Something about being deputized," said Peachey. "Ahh. Do you work here too?"

"No, I have my own place across the street if you get thirsty," Nulu told the human. She brushed her hands off, "Well, I'll let you boys get back to work." She moved to the door and pulled it open, stepping out she knocked Grimbledung flat on his back. Her momentum took her out the shop and the door dutifully closed behind her. "What are you doing Grim?" Realizing he had been listening to the door, she panicked. "How long have you been listening?" She asked. This blowout could be the biggest yet. Nulu noticed that Grimbledung had his wand out as he got to his feet and brushed himself off. His face was pure rage. "Why don't you put that wand away, and we'll talk," she offered.

"Outta my way, Nulu!" Said Grimbledung, a stern look on his face. "I need to get in there. Now." He stepped forward.

Nulu blocked his way. "Maybe we should talk first. Once you put that wand away. Then we can talk. Then you can go in the shop. After we talk."

Grimbledung raised his wand, aiming it at Nulu's chest. "Let me in there! I'm going to KILL those two!" He hopped back and forth from foot to foot, but there was not a single measure of jest in it.

Nulu backed up to block the door, keeping her eyes on the wand. Its tip was glowing a fierce red like the end of a fat cigar. There was no telling what spell was going to come out of it and she didn't want to find out. "Grim, we all care for you and have your best interest in mind. I can't let you go in there and do something you're going to regret." She said sternly. "Just hand me the wand and let's talk this through like adults."

Grimbledung's nostrils flared, his eyes watered and he began to drool

slightly. "Either you get outta my way, Nulu, or you're going to be a widow!"

Nulu blinked at Grimbledung. "What?" Then she decided to stall for time to let the tantrum pass, "I don't understand. How could I be a widow if I'm not married?"

Grimbledung howled "YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING! Now get out of my way before there's some real trouble in the shop!"

Nulu decided on the direct approach since the wand's tip was now dripping what appeared to be lava. "Rat only did what he thought was best. He was looking out for your best interests. So was Drimblerod. So was I. Because we care about you, you silly Gnome!"

"What's Rat got to do with it?" Asked Grimbledung, the end of his wand was now dribbling globs of lava onto the street.

"What?"

"What?"

"Rat told us about..." She stopped and considered her line of thought. Something wasn't right. "What are you talking about, Grim? What's got you all upset?"

"Those two just robbed Pazoolie's shop and now they're robbing OURS!" Grimbledung advanced with the wand. "AND I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU'RE KEEPING ME OUT OF THERE WHEN I CAN STOP THEM!"

Chapter Twenty-Five
Wherein Grimbledung Foils a Robbery

"Robbing the store?" Nulu's nostrils flared and her biceps bulged. She spun on her heels, "Open up Door!" She roared as she charged ahead with Grimbledung and his wand, literally hot on her heels. The door clattered open and the two burst into the shop like a tidal wave.

Because of the speed of their entry, for the briefest of moments, no one in the store paid either of them any attention. Rat was busily eating another piece of bread while Drimblerod spoke with the less trustworthy of the two Humans -Danny- while the other stood near a display shelf with his hands in his pockets.

"Nobody move!" Said Nulu as she grabbed Peachey, hands still in his pockets and picked him off the ground with a speed that someone her size should never - without the aid of magic at least- have.

Grimbledung moved past her, wand leaving scorch marks on the floor where it dripped lava.

Rat turned and gaped, his one good eye wide in terror.

Drimblerod looked where the floor was scorched to the foundation.

Danny still had not looked back.

"Look out! He's on a rampage and he's taking Nulu with him!" Warned Rat as he twisted gracefully and fell behind the counter. From Rat's point of view, Nulu was holding the hapless customer up as a shield between herself and Grimbledung. It was an uncharacteristic move, but honestly, one of the very few options available in the shop.

Grimbledung pointed the wand at the back of Danny's head. The smell of burning hair wafted through the shop. "*Don't. You. Move. A. Muscle.*"

"Grim! What are you doing?" Wailed Drimblerod. "These are customers and they want to join the Gathering Division!" He started to come around the counter and tripped on Rat who was cowering where he had landed.

Grimbledung looked down where Drimblerod's head was sticking out from behind the counter. "Stay down!" He commanded. Danny twirled around and swung a round house punch with all his might at shoulder level. It would have caught a human sized target squarely in the

face. It passed right over Grimbledung's head. His swing took him around so that his side was exposed to Grimbledung who promptly jabbed him in the ribs with his molten hot wand. "Take that, thief! Rob from ME will you?"

Danny dropped in a heap, hand going to his side. He pulled them away looking for blood but the wound was neatly cauterized. Still it felt as if he were stuck clean through. Because he had been. He let out a wail of pain and promptly fainted.

Drimblerod crawled out from behind the counter on all fours. "What is going on?" He demanded.

Grimbledung ignored his partner and spun on Peachey, still held fast by Nulu with his feet off the ground. He struggled hopelessly against Nulu's hands as his face turned blue. Nulu's bulging arms showed why he was no longer able to breathe. "Let him get some air, Nulu. I wanna ... talk to him." Said Grimbledung menacingly.

Peachey's eyes grew wide as he drew in a breath and realized that he was still trapped and facing a berserking Gnome. "This is all a case of mistaken identity, good Gnome," began Peachey. He recognized the Gnome in front of him. "Oh no, not you!" He began to squirm in Nulu's grasp then began to turn blue again as she tightened her hands.

"Oh yes. It's me. First you tell me you robbed Pozoolie's shop then you said you'd rob the wand shop?" He raised the still dripping wand. "*My shop*," he growled. "Do you know why you never hear about someone crossing a Gnome?" He asked, wand inches away from Peachey's face.

"No?" Wheezed Peachey.

"Because no one ever *lives* to tell the tale," finished Drimblerod as he stood and moved beside his partner. "So you heard him say he was going to rob the place?"

"Sure did," said Grimbledung.

"That's as good a confession as I need." He narrowed his eyes. "Whatever shall we do with them?"

Just then the bell over the door jingled as a customer came in. Or actually, two customers. Possibly it counted as one. Maybe two.

"What's going on here? The sign next door said to come by to join some sort of Gathering Division, but if this is the initiation, count us out!" The creature shuffled into the store, its three legs

working in unison to carry the bulk in gracefully.

"No kidding," said the second head. "I sure am not going to sign up if there's tattoos involved!"

Danny groaned on the floor and tried to lift himself with his hands.

"Not at all. Just dealing with a minor pilfering problem," said Drimblerod as he kicked Danny in the head. Danny promptly returned to unconsciousness. "What can I do for..." He examined the creature before him. "You?" He guessed.

"Well, like Runion said, we're looking to get into the ground floor of this Gatherer's Division gig," said the head on the right. "We're always out in the Region and come across all sorts of things. We usually leave wands behind because we can never find anyone to take them off our hands."

"Earl is right," agreed Runion, "we must have left dozens behind."

"Say, you two look like you could use a partner" began Peachey. "How about I come with ... URKK," he finished as Nulu tightened her clutch.

"Nulu, could you put that one down and fetch the constable?" Asked Drimblerod. "Grim can keep an eye on him while you're gone."

Nulu looked from the crumpled heap that was Danny and to Peachey who shook his head pleadingly. "How about Grim goes and I keep an eye on this one?"

Peachey nodded. Tears were streaming down his face. Nulu let up her grip and he gasped for air.

"Yeah," said Grimbledung hopefully, "I'll watch him. How about YOU go and get the constable." He winked with not a bit of mirth. "Get the constable." He looked into Peachey's teary eyes. "We'll see you tomorrow Nulu. Just put the thief down."

"Should we leave too?" Asked Runion. "We really can't be held in town as witnesses. A lengthy trial would really cut into business."

"Oh, there's not going to be any trial," cooed Grimbledung. "We'll just skip that part, right Drim?"

"Hold on boys," began Nulu. "This isn't how respectable shop owners work. Gnomes or not. Grim, go get the constable and make it quick. You might want to send for the Doc on your way back as well. I think that one on the ground is going to need some healing, and this one's got broke ribs."

"I don't think my ribs are broken" coughed Peachey. With that

Nulu's biceps bulged and a distinct crack was heard by all. Peachey promptly fainted.

Nulu stepped over and dropped him on top of his partner.

"Go quick, Grim. I'll stand watch." Nulu folded her arms and leaned against the counter. It creaked in protest but stayed put.

Grimbledung's face scrunched up. "But I don't wanna go!" He whined. "The constable gives me the willies!"

"Are you sure you don't want us to come back?" Asked Earl. "Honestly, this is more excitement than we have had since we went to the Mora Tau bar and BAR last week. Town should be a place for an adventurer to relax after the excitement in The Wilds."

"Get the constable," ordered Nulu.

"Or The Region," continued Runion.

Grimbledung lowered his wand in defeat. "Fine, I'll go get him if I have to." He shuddered. "He just really gives me the willies." He exhaled slowly. "Drim, take care of these fine adventurers, I'll fetch the authorities. Unless you want to go get him and I'll help them out!" He added quickly.

Drimblerod shook his head "There's no way I'm going to the Constable's Office."

"Fine," said Grimbledung, "I'll go. Are you going to wait?" He asked Runion and Earl, "or are you not," he searched for the right words, "inclined to meet the local law face to face."

"Oh no," said Runion as they both shook their heads. "We're respectable folk. We've no trouble talking to constables and such."

"Just because they're constables doesn't make them bad people," added Earl.

"Obviously you've never met *our* constable" muttered Grimbledung and with that he scooted out of the store quickly. Door let him out and quickly latched behind him- just in case the two made it past Nulu *and* Drimblerod. Door was going to do its part.

Drimblerod took a deep breath. "Sorry about that, Gentlemen. You're definitely not catching us on our best day."

"That much is certain" agreed Rat as he moved back onto the counter, his heel of bread battered and dusty. He dropped it on the plate in disgust. "And that was the last heel." He glared down with his one good eye at the pile that was Danny and Peachey. "You've made a powerful enemy, you two," he warned the unconscious

thieves.

Drimblerod ushered Runion and Earl over to the far side of the counter, farther from the mayhem. “So, you’re interested in our wand program then?”

Chapter Twenty-Six
Wherein the First Volunteers for the Gatherers Division are Recruited!

"Yes." Began Runion. "You see, we're the owners of a very successful Pickled Elf Toe business. We supply most of the fine eateries and inns in The Region with the highest quality Pickled Elf Toes so we're out and about quite a bit."

"And," continued Earl without missing a beat in their practiced spiel, "when we're not selling the finest quality Pickled Elf Toes, we're out… procuring them."

"Wait. I have to stop you gents right there," interrupted Nulu. "You mean to say that you actually go out and kill Elves and cut off their toes? The two of you?" She found it hard to believe that a lumbering mass that was Runion and Earl (or Earl and Runion even) could out-fight even a single Elf. And that was if they could come across one by themselves; much like ants, one never saw just one Elf. This was probably because of the unfortunate fact that their toes were, at the moment, considered a delicacy. Three years ago, it was Fried Orc Ears. Nulu paled. She was glad *that* gourmet fad was over. Orcs were cantankerous on a good day, once someone lopped one *or both* of their ears off, they were downright belligerent. For the year or so they were a fashionable snack, Orcs were on the warpath and it wasn't hardly safe to travel anywhere. "That's pretty impressive, I have to say. Even as a Trolless, I don't think I'd want to take on even a Troop of Elves."[20]

"We don't really take them on. We rely on *stealth* to get our wares," said Runion, "that and these pinky shears." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a curve-bladed pair of scissors. He snipped them in the air several times.

"Pinky shears?" Asked Rat, "I'm almost afraid to ask why they're called that."

Earl shrugged his affiliated shoulder, "In the Kingdom of Putch, south of Orcistan, it was fashionable for a time for ladies to have eight fingers. It was kind of like the foot binding that goes on in Far East- but with fingers. Dainty hands requiring Haute Couture

gloves were considered high fashion. *Anybody* that was *somebody* had eight fingers."

"What some people do to meet some unattainable ideal of beauty," said Nulu disapprovingly.

"Our sentiments exactly. Why try to improve on perfection?" Said Earl. Directly at Nulu.

"Exactly my sentiments," agreed Runion. He was still looking at Drimblerod. "So, what do you need from us to get this business deal going?" He asked.

"Just a handshake is good enough for me. We don't exchange coins until you bring wands, so you're not under any obligation to come back at all."

"The sign mentioned something about a Jamboree," said Earl.

"He did," added Runion.

"Grimbledung is going to run the Jamboree so expect it to be completely out of control and over the top. We'll do it at the Summer Solstice when the weather's nice and the days are long. Top performers will get some sort of absurd prize that Grim will think up. Don't expect it to be valuable though- Grimbledung is an odd Gnome." Even though he pooh-poohed the idea of a years' end Jamboree, Drimblerod was looking forward to it almost as much as Grimbledung was. Nothing got the name of a shop out on the winds better than a two or three-day party with free food and ale. The money spent on the event would easily be tripled with the word of mouth advertising it created.

"That's it then? We wander off?" Began Earl

"Bring back any wands we come across?" Finished Runion.

"Legally if at all possible" suggested Drimblerod, "I would like to keep our interaction with law enforcement and brute squads to a minimum if at all possible."

"So, legally gotten wands. And at the end of the year, you throw a bash with free food and drink?"

"That's the long and short of it. Oh- and if you come across other travelers, let them know about our proposition as well. The more people at the party, the better."

Earl stuck out his hand. "Deal."

Drimblerod slapped it. "Deal"

Runion stuck out his hand, "Deal."

Drimblerod sighed. He slapped Runion's hand as well. "Deal. Now don't go and get silly on me. I got enough to handle with Grimbledung."

Earl turned to Nulu who was silently watching the dealings while still keeping an eye on the two thieves. "Trolless, hopefully we'll meet again. Under better and more sociable circumstances." He raised an eyebrow at her. "At the Jamboree, perhaps a dance?"

"What?" Was all she could manage to say.

"Mayhap we can have a drink some time. I'm only in town a short while." He winked surreptitiously, "Just the two of us."

"But. What about ..." She began as she pointed at the Runion side of his body. "Never mind." For some reason, being a well-spoken Trolless made her an easy mark for every weirdo and oddball she came across. As if just because she didn't grunt and shout like a regular Trolless, she had lost all her standards in males.

"See you around then." Earl said as he waved. Runion was already walking out of the shop, which meant he was as well. "We'll be back," said Earl as the door unlocked and opened for them.

"Safe travels you two. Errr. You all. You-uns?" Nulu gave up and just waved.

Runion and Earl stepped out the door and turned down the street just as Grimbledung came puffing back into the store. He coasted to a stop at the counter and leaned on it. "Sheriff's a...." He said breathlessly.

"Yes. That's who you're supposed to be bringing. Did you forget?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Sheriff's a..." Panted Grimbledung. He started to speak again, but just pointed at the door instead. Standing there was Aution's current constable- Constable Akita. He was also panting, but that was normal for him.

Constable Akita had been elected by a landslide. Mainly because no one else's name was on the ballot. This was due to two reasons:

First, no one really wanted to be responsible for maintaining law and order in a lawless town like Aution, and

Second (and more importantly), because Akita would have probably killed anyone who dared to run against him. Constable Akita was the town's constable the past ten years running. The local nobility saw him mainly lounging about, usually in a bright patch of sunlight so they assumed that his unusual approach to the constabulary arts kept the town free of riff raff. In all actuality, he didn't conduct much law enforcement because no one wanted to deal with him; common riff raff dealt with their problems on their

own instead of approaching Constable Akita. He tended to bite people who interrupted his frequent naps, eating, sleeping, and, as he liked to call it, "marking the town as his own."

In short, Constable Akita was a wolf.

Sort of.

Chapter Twenty-Six and a Half
Wherein Marjory and Spitz are Discussed

Marjory Belladonna was the Mistress of Herbs (with a minor in Bryology) for Cool Springs- a town in southern Orcistan along the Emerald Forest in an area called The Wilds- and had been since turning sixteen years old. She had set up shop near the outskirts of town; closer to the herbs, lichens, and fungi that constituted her inventory. As Fate would have it (Fate *always* got her way), the town's butcher also had set up business at the outskirts of town- closer to deer and rabbit (and Orcs while their ears were in fashion) which constituted *his* inventory. Theirs was a whirlwind romance that spawned several songs and one mostly inappropriate limerick. On the day she became of legal age (18; they may have lived in The Wilds, but they weren't savages), they wed. It was a grand affair that the entire town of Cool Springs celebrated as one. Except for a minor incident involving a water tower and two participants of the wedding party, it was a gala event.[21] Even a good number of Orcs showed up. Unfortunately, the revelry was short lived. It was soon after the wedding that Marjory discovered her husband- Spitz Finnish- was a werewolf.

Being an Herbalist, Marjory tried to suppress Spitz's Lycan tendencies so that they could settle down and start a family. It was, she believed (correctly), difficult to put down roots when one was always worried that the townsfolk would come calling with torches and pitchforks the evening after a full moon after one's husband had been out terrorizing said townsfolk. One had a difficult time buying curtains and good quality, long lasting, furniture when one may have to leave them all behind and run into the Emerald Forest to avoid being strung up and/or burned at the stake. It's just not what one did. So, after many trials and errors, Marjory believed she had come up with a suitable concoction and began to give her beloved husband daily doses. With some concentration and breathing exercises on his part, and the potion on Marjory's part, Spitz's transformation to a Werewolf were very minor and very far between.

Since the Lycan-suppressing potion seemed to be working, the

two put down roots. Curtains were bought. Heavy, high-quality furniture was purchased and assembled, all with the handy *-included-* allen wrench. A fence was even erected around the Finnish household.

Roots!

Soon Marjory was pregnant and all was well. For most of nine months at least. It was then that Fate once again visited the Finnish family. Struggling under the pangs of impending child birth, Marjory waddled her way to their wagon as Spitz harnessed the team. With time running short, Spitz was nudged by Fate (who was still hanging around because not much else was happening in Cool Springs) to decide that instead of going through the winding roads of Cool Springs to get to Midwife Braxy Hicks' house, he would cut directly through the Emerald Forest. He was not concerned about losing his way because not only did he travel the forest often while stocking his hooks and smoke house, the moon was full and low in the sky. The forest was awash with moonlight and the paths practically glowed. A fresh dose of Lycan-inhibiting potion and they were off. The horses galloped swiftly, white foam flecking off them from their effort. Spitz coaxed them along the forest paths, cracking his whip while keeping an eye on his cherished Marjory. Realizing he would not make it to the Midwife in time, he pulled into a clearing to assist her as best he could. At this point, Fate was more than just loitering in the area; she was sitting in the wagon. The wagon which had stopped in a field of Monkshood. Blooming Monkshood.

"How can I help, my dearest?" Asked Spitz as he jumped (past Fate) to the back of the wagon. "What can I get to help your pains? Tell me what to look for and I'll fetch it."

Barely still in control of her senses, Marjory looked out from the back of the wagon hoping to spy a medicinal herb nearby. Her eyes got huge as she saw hundreds of blue and purple flowers with dark green leaves. The flowers all seemed to turn and meet her gaze of terror. "Move the cart, Spitz!" She begged, "MOVE THE CART!" But it was too late. The baby was coming and there was nothing that could be done. Marjory's screams of panic and pain echoed through the forest as nature took its course. Thirty minutes later, she gave birth under the pale moonlight to a baby boy. Spitz took his son in his arms and began to clean him off. The child cried as his father scrubbed. "He's a healthy boy. Are you alright, dearest?" Asked Spitz as he continued to rub down his

sire. "It must be the light," he said to no one in particular as he looked up at the moon.

He looked down again and saw his brindled son- he was sure it was caused by the moonlight passing through overhead branches. He looked up again and saw the full, clear moon above him. Eyes widening, he looked down again at his son. "Marjory! What has happened!" His screams also echoing in the forest behind those of his wife's. "What has happened to our son?"

"Wolfsbane!" Was all Marjory said before collapsing exhausted.

Spitz looked around the wagon, which now seemed to be spinning. On all sides, blue and purple flowers, hoods pulled back, seemed to stare at him and his son. Hopping to the front seat, he grabbed the reins with one hand, son in the crook of his other arm, and snapped the reins savagely. "Move!" He commanded the horses who took to a gallop almost immediately. Ignoring the moans of his wife and the cries -and to his horror- yelps of his son, he drove the horses from the meadow. As he entered the forest, he stopped the wagon. He looked down on his son- even though the brindling was more pronounced because of the trees; he could see that it was too late. He screamed at the moon in rage. The scream began in the throat of a young, able bodied Butcher in love but ended as a howl in the throat of a tormented Wolf in anguish.

Even a band of War Orcs who had come to see what was the cause of the commotion stopped when they heard the change in tone and returned home. When they got there, they bolted their doors and shutters.

SpitzWolf looked down at his young son. His pup. Large yellow eyes squinted as they met small yellow eyes. For long minutes, they looked at each other. Marjory's potion, unable to keep The Change from happening, kept Spitz's mind and wits in his Wolf head. He took the reins and led the horses home. Once there, he jumped to the back of the wagon, past the still laughing Fate, and picked up his wife in his other arm. He looked from his son to his wife and back and released another long-tormented howl.

The nearby Orcs moved from their sitting rooms to their cellars.

SpitzWolf moved his wife to their bed and placed his son beside her, then moved to the front room and collapsed in despair in front of the fireplace. In the morning, he awoke and was once again just

Spitz. He went to Marjory and hoped beyond all hope that last night had just been a dream brought on by the potion losing its hold on him.

Immediately, he saw that that not been the case. Marjory was sitting up in bed, a tan and brown tiger-striped bundle at her side. "He has his father's eyes." she remarked.

Such began a life of trials and errors, laughter and tears.

The life of Akita Finnish.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Wherein the Constable Arrives at the Shop

"They dead?" growled Akita. He was taking a nap in the sun when some fidgety Gnome had awoken him. This, he did not like. If people got in the habit of waking him up from naps to deal with legal issues, he would actually have to start *earning* his more than adequate Constable's Salary. He was up for a longevity raise- Township Service Step 10- next month but that didn't mean he wanted to work harder for it. That was clearly laid out in the Government Workers Guild (Local 414) bylaws; Section 4.3(b)1: 'No additional work shall be expected in return for annual longevity raises.' Akita didn't make the rules but he (mostly) followed them, especially when they benefited him so well.

Grimbledung hopped around Drimblerod to put the counter between him and Akita. "Yes, Mister Constable Akita," he said. "They're alive. I wasn't lying to you!"

Akita growled at him and turned to the other Gnome, who he was satisfied to see, seemed just as nervous. Nervous townsfolk tended to bother him less than friendly cheerful ones who would pop in for a chat. Although, he mused, he *did* appreciate the occasional mincemeat pie that was left at the Constabulary anonymously.

"These two tried to rob us, Constable," said Drimblerod, "and they robbed the store next door."

Akita looked down at the two humans. They were breathing. A growl started at the back of his throat. He didn't stop it. "Whadda ya want me to do about it?"

"Take them away?" Suggested Grimbledung. Akita turned to look at him again. His yellow eyes seemed to glow. Grimbledung ducked down to where his chin was resting on the counter, "Please?" He offered meekly. "And thank-you?"

"Wherrredya want me to take them? The jail? Then I gotta watch them," scowled Akita. He didn't *have* to roll his 'r's but he enjoyed the reaction it got. "Howsabout you just turrrn 'em into stools and you two can sit on them. Ya could use morrre stools in

here." It was a joke. Maybe these two Gnomes were the ones leaving the mincemeat pies. A joke might make another appear later in the day. Akita smiled what in he felt was the friendliest manner he knew to help the joke along. At least he considered it his friendly smile.

Drimblerod gulped as the Constable bared his long fangs after suggesting the two thieves be Transmogrified into stools. From anyone else he would have considered that a joke. Now, it was more terrifying than funny. Drool hung off one side of Akita's mouth. He seemed ready to devour any and all persons in the room.

"Excuse me, Constable Akita," said Nulu. "Should I go get the other shop keeper so you can have another witness to the crime?" Nulu finished as she moved to the door. "I can fetch him right now." Nulu wanted nothing else than to be out of the same room as the Constable. The hairs on her back were standing straight out. Being a Trolless- there were a lot of them. Rumors were that Akita was not contagious but being a WereTrolless was something she did not even *want* to consider. "I'll just be a jiffy," she said as she exited the shop.

On the street, she moved quickly to Pozzuoli's Haberdashery. She steeled herself and entered. Pozzuoli turned when he heard the sounds of bells chiming (there was a Pixie on a string that the door yanked about vigorously as it opened).

"Ohhh, hello Señora Nulu. What-a can I do for a-you?" He said hopefully. Nulu's steady income from her Bar and Restaurant meant she was always good for some mid-quality, high-profit-margin sales.

"I just need you to come next door, Mister Pozzuoli," began Nulu. She knew that it would be difficult to leave without buying something from the Dwarf so she cut to the chase. "You were robbed by those two Humans, then they tried robbing Second Hand Sorcery and the boys caught them."

Pozzuoli's eyes widened. "Robbed *ME*?" He shuddered with rage, "Let's go!"

"Great, great." Nulu agreed. "We'll get to the bottom of this now". Without thinking she added, "Now the Constable will *have* to take them in."

Pozzuoli stopped in his tracks. "The Constabulatore, he is a-there?"

"Yes, he's there to take away the two thieves. You need to identify them and your stuff. That's all. You don't have to go down to the Constable's Office," she assured the Dwarf.

"You a-sure?" He asked then caught himself. "Wait-a minute. What I am a-saying? These two robbed me! Let's go!"

Nulu quickly moved to the door before the Dwarf could change his mind. She opened it and stepped through. With only a moment's hesitation, Pozzuoli followed, slamming the door behind him leaving the Pixie to jingle furiously at an empty store.

The two entered the shop, Nulu first- much to her displeasure as she was planning a discrete getaway. "Here he is, Constable," she said.

Akita was holding Peachey upside down and shaking him violently. There was a growing pile of loot forming under him. Peachey groaned as he came-to. He grunted as he was shaken again. A Bulls-Eye lantern dropped to the floor.

"Hey! That's-a my lantern!" Said Pozzuoli. "What-a you do with my lantern?" He shook his finger at Peachey.

Finally, no more items dropped from Peachey so Constable Akita let go of his feet. Peachey landed in a heap and quickly got to his feet. "What do you think you're doi ..." He started to say until his eyes met Constable Akita's. Peachey paled and sat down roughly. "Do I get a lawyer?" He asked meekly.

Constable Akita glowered down at him. "Lawyer?" He snarled. "I hate them almost as much as I hate thieves." He looked up at Nulu. "I say we just eat them. Which do you want?" A*nother joke*. Maybe the Stumbling Drunk was the supplier of the pies. He was in rare form today. Akita licked his lips and tried another smile. "Ya?"

Nulu shuddered at the rows of teeth that greeted her. Still, she pressed on, "You don't scare me *that* much, Akita." She narrowed her eyes at the snarling Werewolf. "I pay my taxes which pays your salary. That means you work for me and I say you deal with these two thieves." She stopped because that was the limit of her courage with Akita.

Akita looked down at Peachey who was now helping Danny into a seated position. "I ate a big breakfast. I don't think I could eat both of them." He was on a roll now, he thought. Someone would *have* to laugh soon. He ran his tongue around his mouth, over his nose, and then let it hang down the side of his jaw. "I suppose I could save one for dinner. Have that one with ice cream. Ala mode even." He pointed at Peachey.

"DON'T EAT US!" Pleaded Peachey. "Anything but that! I don't want to become dog poop!"

Constable Akita shook his head. It continued down his back and ended at the tip of his tail. He had gone to great pains to maintain a gruff image because it suited his work habits and lifestyle. Namely: the less work, the better for his lifestyle. To think that people actually believed he would eat them out of hand (so to speak) was appalling even to him. "I'm not going to eat you. You'd taste horrrrrible." *Not even a chuckle?*



Grimbledung could not help himself; he had been trying to contain it but finally was unable to; he let out a single chuckle: "Hah!" All eyes turned to him. Grimbledung's eyes met Akita's. The glowing yellow orbs seemed to have a glimmer. Whether it was mischief or hunger he was not sure. He smiled meekly in desperate hopes that it was the former. "Ala

mode? Hah hah! Nicely done." He offered.

Finally! Akita grinned broadly at the odd Gnome cowering behind the counter.

Grimbledung blanched at the Constable's ominous maw. Rows of sharp, white teeth greeted him. It was like looking into the Nearly Bottomless Pit. Maybe it was the latter after all.

Overcome by betrayal, Pozzuoli pushed past a distracted Constable Akita. "No, you don' get to eat them. I got something better for them!" He held his hand out, palm flat facing down. With his other hand, he held his pointer finger against his downturned palm and twisted it around.

"Yer gonna skewerrr them?" guessed Akita.

"No." Pozzuoli shook his head. "This means under here it does not rain."

"Yerrrr gonna take 'em down to the dunking stool?" Tried Akita again. He licked his mouth and let his tongue hang on the other side now. "Yeah, I'd watch that. Fun stuff the dunking stool."

"Not exactly, Constabulatore Akita. This means they will get theirs." Pozzuoli narrowed his eyes and twisted his finger against his palm ominously. "You rob from ME? That a-big mistake. Pozzuoli you do not cross. It is Pozzuoli that crosses you!"

"Yer gonna impale them?" Akita tried again. He was losing patience with the Dwarf. "Kinda gross but whatever yer gonna do, do it quick. I need to get back to my nap."

Pozzuoli faced the Constable. With his connections, not many intimidated him. Besides, Pozzuoli figured Akita *had* to know it was him that delivered the mincemeat pies. It wasn't an official bribe; it was more of a bridge-building tactic. "No. That-a not it." he explained, "Pozzuoli have a cousin who has a friend who know a guy who makes shoes." He squinted at Peachey and Danny and pointed at each of them. "He gonna make shoes for you both!"

"How is giving them shoes going to make them sorry they stole from you?" Asked Grimbledung as his chin rested on the counter. "They probably already stole shoes from you."

Pozzuoli shook his head. "Not-a shoes like this. Nice a-custom made shoes." He glowered at the two men, "Of *marble*. We go down to the Salty River and a-try them out, S-okay?" He reached up and pulled down his lower eyelid with his finger. "You made a bad mistake thinking you a-cross Pozzuoli," he said menacingly.

Nulu stepped up beside the two men. "I have a better idea, if you're willing to listen to it."

Pozzuoli and Akita looked at her expectantly.

"I hear that they're looking for conscripts up at Prost Garrison. There's some sort of battle brewing. These two would be perfect conscripts."

Danny began to cry.

"Just give us the shoes!" Wailed Peachey. "ANYTHING but the Army!"

"I don't want to be cannon fodder!" Sobbed Danny. "I don't even know what a cannon is!"

Constable Akita laughed heartily. To everyone else, he was snarling. The long length of drool that was hanging from his mouth finally broke free and dropped to the floor- much to everyone's relief. "Grrreat idea, Nulu!" He growled. "You wanna carry them down to the rrrrecruitin' station?" He asked hopefully.

Nulu steeled herself and looked him in the eye. "Taxpaying bar owner" she said pointing at herself. "Tax receiving Constable" she said pointing at Constable Akita.

"Yer alllrrright Nulu. Glad yerrr in town." He looked at the two Humans. "On yer feet!" He growled. The two stumbled to their feet. "Yer gonna walk down to the rrrecruitin' station and I'm gonna follow you."

The two Humans looked at each other. They both had the same thought at the same time.

Constable Akita barked at the men and they jumped completely off the ground. "Don't be thinkin' you can run opposite ways and I can only catch one of you." He stood upright and was, surprisingly, taller than both of them by a head. "Yer willin' to take a fifty-fifty risk that you won't be the one I'm chasin'?" He loomed over the top of them as he spoke. He bent his head down and sniffed Peachey then Danny's hair deeply. "So here's yer chances." He returned to his typical crouched stance which put him about a head shorter than the two. Each was formidable in its own way. "One of you's gonna die right away. Prolly less than twenty paces looking at the shape you two'rrrre in." He licked his mouth again. Another tendril of drool formed on the side of his mouth. "The other I'll track even across the Great Sandy Desert to finish off. Not that you'll get that far. I don't even give you to the edge of town. Once word got out ol' Akita was lookin' for ya, there's no one in town'll help ya'."

He growled from the back of his throat.

"They no get-a away from you, Constabulatore Akita," started Pozzuoli as he moved to stand beside the Werewolf and faced the two condemned men. "But if-a they *do*, they no get away from the friends of Pozzuoli Consigliore. That I can a-guarantee." Pozzuoli made a sneer that rivaled Akita's. "I put-a out the word and someone will do a piece of work on them."

The two looked at each other again and began to weep anew.

"It's nuthin' perrrsonal," said Constable Akita as he got on all fours and moved behind the men, "I have a rrrreputation to maintain, you know. If word got out I'd gone soft and let you two get away, I'd be up to my haunches in work." He nipped at the back of the leg of one of the men. "So get movin'!"

"Thanks Constable Akita!" Said Grimbledung, still cowering behind the counter, and before he could stop himself, he added, "come back soon for a regular visit if you like. We can do lunch!"

The two humans moved to the door sullenly. "Do you forgive me for getting us caught and conscripted to the Army?" Asked Peachey

"That I do," replied Danny, "with no worries at all."

"Then we'll be all right, you and I," replied Peachey.

"Shaddap you two!" Constable Akita barked, then he laughed. It still sounded like a snarl. "There's no talkin' in the rrranks!"

The three moved out the door which opened and shut around them. None of them even gave the door a second look for doing it.

"That Constable Akita isn't that bad, I think," said Grimbledung. He still had not moved from his position behind the counter. "I think maybe he's just misunderstood. He's got a good sense of humor. I think."

Drimblerod and Nulu gaped at him in silence.

"You need help," offered Rat.

"Say" said Grimbledung, "that reminds me. What were you getting on about in the street, Nulu? You were saying something about Rat and you two trying to help? Help with what?" He quickly looked at Rat, who jumped as their eyes met.

"What? Me?" Started Rat. Then a thought sprang into his mind. "It was Drimblerod!" He pointed at the other Gnome accusingly.

"Me? It wasn't *me*," Drimblerod said quickly. "It was," the thought hopped over into *his* mind. "Nulu!"

All eyes turned to the Trolless. "I need to get back to minding

my business," said Nulu as she quickly picked up her tray and moved surprisingly fast to the door.

"Light of foot, are we?" Called Drimblerod at her back. He turned quickly and locked eyes with Rat. "Don't you dare move!"

"After all that tea and excitement? I need to go out back for a moment." Rat scampered off the counter and under the curtain, speed belying his years.

Drimblerod looked at his partner who was eyeing him expectedly. "Well…" began Drimblerod slowly. "Well…" he started again, "I guess it's just the two of us that get to plan the Jamboree."

"The Jamboree!" Cheered Grimbledung as he hopped from foot to foot and began to sing

People will come from far and wide!
Brothers, Sisters, Husbands and their Brides!
Singing dancing, drinks a flowing!
And maybe there'll be a door prize or two –oooo?

Yes, maybe there'll be a door prize or two!

"Better?"

Drimblerod tilted his hand back and forth. "It's not the worst I've heard. Now let's talk Jamboree festivities."

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Wherein the Magician's Guild Visits Unexpectedly

"Hey, I think we're up to a dozen!" Said Grimbledung happily, "I really think we've got a good dozen adventurers signed up to gather wands for us." He frowned. "How many's a dozen again?"

"It's a few," explained Drimblerod, "but there's an old Human saying; 'don't count your chickens before they come cross the road to roost'."

"What?"

"The 'Be Right Back Wagon' hardly ever *does* come back. We need to see how many of those folks actually come back with a wand before we know if this scheme of yours is working."

"So we're counting our Pixies before they flash."

"Yes," said Drimblerod. "That makes more sense than what those Humans say."

"Well, while we're waiting, what else you want to do to drum up business? Wanna hold another fake sale?"

"Well, I've been thinking of taking a day to see Big Julie," said Drimblerod. "If we leave early in the morning we can be there by midday, and then be back by dark. We'd only have to be closed a day."

"I get to go too?" Asked Grimbledung excitedly.

"We're partners, right? You need to be involved in the operation of the shop, and that includes drumming up new customers." Drimblerod had considered leaving Grimbledung alone in the shop for the day but only for a very short moment. Even with Nulu to keep an eye on him on and off throughout the day, the thought of him being in charge without any sort of continuous adult supervision still made him shudder. The incident with the two Gremlins and the freelance Brownie assassin was still being talked about up and down the business district of Aution. There was even talk of a new ordinance at the last council meeting.[22] "We'll make a day of it."

"Can Dummy come?" Grimbledung asked hopefully. "He

never gets to leave the store."

"He stays in the store." Drimblerod said emphatically. "It's bad enough we've got a mop and two brooms at Nulu and now Pozzuoli's place has a broom, AND that crazy sign talking up every adventurer that comes by. How I ever let you talk me into that scheme I'll never know. We need to keep a low profile with the Mechanimation. I'm telling you, you don't want to have to deal with the Magicians Guild." He shuddered involuntarily. "Ever. Those Magicians are ruthless!"

Grimbledung sighed loudly. "All right. The last thing I want to do is cause some sort of trouble."

Door clattered open and the bell jingled. Two cloaked figures walked in. Their cloaks were gaudy patchworks of colors with bright stars and moons of different sizes sewn on them. Though their heads were covered for ambiguity, their cloaks would easily have been spotted in a full-on siege of a castle from a league away. Drimblerod blanched as his caught sight of them. His knees buckled and he dropped from sight below the counter. The figures turned to watch the door close behind them and did not see him do it. They conversed in hushed tones still watching the now closed Door. It rattled self-consciously. Grimbledung was torn between watching the two mysterious and yet flamboyantly dressed figures and his partner on the floor in a heap. Drimblerod looked up and held a finger to his lips. His eyes were wide with terror.

"Are you the propriethor of this esthablishment?" Asked the shorter of the two figures haughtily.

Grimbledung examined them. They could have been Elves but were most likely short Humans. Or really tall Dwarfs. Possibly short, famished Orcs, he considered. Of course, the accent was not Orcish at all. In fact, he was unable to place it even though he was sure he had heard it before.

"You awake?" The man said as he snapped his fingers several times.

Grimbledung snapped his fingers back without realizing it. It was at the bathhouse! That's where he had heard the accent before. It was from the Eunuchs working the Ladies Baths. He snorted. It had been ages since he had been to the Baths. Maybe that's what he needed- a day at the Baths, and a night of carousing. Or maybe the other way around. He considered the pros and cons of both courses of action. Grimbledung was pulled from his thoughts by the feeling of someone tugging on his pant leg. He looked down and Drimblerod was still holding his pant leg with one hand and was furiously waving the other.

"You awake?" Said the man testily. "Whaths the matter with you?" He asked in the same tone.

"Greetings!" Said Grimbledung. "Welcome to the shop. Please feel free to peruse the merchandise." He gestured with both hands.

The figures stood rock still, examining Grimbledung for a full minute. "Do you speak Common?" Asked the taller figure. "Or just *Gnomish*" he asked. The way he said 'Gnomish' sounded like he had had an entire murder of crows take up residence in his mouth.[23]

"What?" Asked Grimbledung, smile fading from his face. " 'Course I speak Common. What do you take me for?" There was more frantic tugging at his pant leg but he didn't look down. His attention was wholly on the taller of the two figures. He narrowed his eyes menacingly.

The taller figure stepped back. "We're not looking for trouble, *Gnome*." This time when he said it, a Batch of Brownies may have moved into his mouth.[24] He even wrenched up his face as if the Brownies had been whipping up some of their famous Grub Flambé while they were there.

"Then I think you should go someplace else, because trouble is what's on sale today." Grimbledung said flatly. He did not try to hide the motion and the two figures followed his hand as it went from the counter to disappear in his sleeve. "It's a two for one special we're having." He growled, hoping it would have the same effect as when Akita did it. His hand remained up his sleeve.

The shorter of the two looked up and met eyes (figuratively) with Grimbledung. "Listhen, Gnome," he began. Nothing seemed to reside in this one's mouth as he said it but even so, it came out as an insult. "We are here on *offithial* business." He straightened up and pulled his hood back in a flourish. "We're from the Magithian's Guild and we've got some questhions for you." He said once again testily. It seemed to be his go-to tone.

Humans thought Grimbledung as he examined the older man in front of him. He was balding with more hair on his brow than on his head. There was also a great deal of hair protruding from his ears. A Gnome would be proud to have that much hair on and in their ears.

He considered what the Human had said. "You're a Magithian? What's that?" He asked. He had heard of Magi's, Magistrates, and even Magicians, but never a Magithian. It sounded like some sort of creature that lived deep in the sea. "Isn't that a creature that lives

deep in the sea?"

"That's a *Leviathan*," said the taller one as he too pulled back his hood. When he said 'leviathan' it seemed that there was a school of overfed blowfish swimming around inside his mouth. This Human was also bald but only on one side of his head. He was also missing his eyebrow on the bald side. There was no scarring but his face was pink. "What's the matter with you?" He demanded.

"The problem is that I like Humankind, it's people I can't stand," said Grimbledung, "people like *you*." It seemed like something had taken up residence in his mouth as well. Apparently, the condition was contagious. "*Especially* people like you. So why don't you just go." Grimbledung pointed at the door. "Away," he said with quite a degree of finality. "We're closed as of right now." He slid his hand out of his sleeve and his wand right along with it." There was furious tugging at his leg. He didn't bother to look down.

"We're here on offithial business!" Said the shorter one again, "and you will listhen to us if you know what's good for you."

"I sure do. Ale."

"What?" Asked the man, more confused than testy. It was unusual territory for him when being testy.

"Ale is good for me. And you don't look like you're selling Ale, Magi Thian." Grimbledung glowered. He tapped the end of the wand on the counter as he spoke. Tiny sparks flew from it every time it hit.

"We're from the Magician's Guild" said the taller man angrily. "And you'll be smart to not give us any grief." He stepped forward, his wand in *his* hand in a flash. Grimbledung looked at the magician's wand. It was not tapered like normal wands- it was a solid tube from hilt to tip. It was also colored a glossy black, which would have been menacing if a finger's width at each end weren't painted a bright white. "We're representatives of the Magician's Guild and have the FULL power of the ..."

Grimbledung jabbed his wand at the man. The man's wand clattered noisily to the floor of the shop as the man disappeared from under his Official Magician's Guild Enforcer Cloak®. There was no smoke, no dust, and no smell of disintegration. It was as if the man had never been there in the first place. The Anti-Magic enchantment on the cloak had protected *it* but the blast had caught the man square in the chest where there was nothing to protect *him*.

"Oooohhh! What have you done? Oooohhh! Now you're in for it!" Screamed the shorter man. "You will reap the full power of the

Magithian's Guild now!" He fumbled in his cloak. "Ooohhh you're going to get it!" He continued to fumble. "Ohhh justh you wait! You'll thee!"

"While you're looking" began Grimbledung, he raised his wand. He had a difficult time aiming because of the tugging on his leg. He felt as if it were in the mouth of a crocodile.

"Ah ha!" Said the man triumphantly, "thith will show you who YOU'RE dealing with. Prepare to be thorry AND amathed as I now perform the ..."

As his body swayed back to line up with the Magician, Grimbledung slashed his wand at the man. His wand also clattered to the floor beside his cloak. As his wand hit, it emitted a puff of smoke and a dove flew up out of the cloud. Door dutifully opened and let it fly out into the blue Aution sky.

Drimblerod let go of Grimbledung's leg and hopped up. He grabbed his partner by both shoulders and shook him violently. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?" He screamed. "You know what will happen when the Guild finds out we killed two of their Enforcers? When they find out YOU killed two Enforcers?" Drimblerod looked ill. He reached for the counter to steady himself and missed it. He staggered backwards and sat roughly. His face was covered in sweat and his arms trembled. "What have you done?" He asked again.

Grimbledung looked down at his partner. "Do you want a stool?" He asked.

Drimblerod shook his head. "I think I just took one." The room spun around him and he swooned.

Visions of a year bedridden as he was fed soft foods flashed before his eyes. A year without bones. Now he was on his back writhing and moaning.

"How about a drink of water?" Offered Grimbledung. The bell above Door sounded again. "What now?" Grimbledung looked up and saw Nulu walk in.

"Nulu! Get some water. Drimblerod's having a fit!"

"What? *Drimblerod* is having a fit?" She asked incredulously. Nulu moved quickly to the counter and peered over it. Drimblerod was now on his side, legs curled up to his chest. He was still moaning and while the twitches had stopped, he was now drooling. "Well that's a fit alright." She squinted at Grimbledung. "What did you do

to him?" demanded Nulu.

Grimbledung raised his hands in defense. "Not a thing!" He realized he was still holding his wand which was smoldering. He quickly shoved it up his sleeve into his arm sheath. He winced as it singed his arm. "I was being helpful. Minding my own business. Not doing nothing to nobody, when all of a sudden current event happened right around me." He raised his hands plaintively. "Same as always. Except this time, I was being helpful too."

"Helpful. He was helpful. Helpful" Drimblerod muttered. The twitching began anew. "Helpful."

"See?" Said Grimbledung pointing at the Gnome. "Even Drimblerod agrees!"

Nulu shook her head. "I don't think that is *agreeing*. I think that is *babbling*."

Chapter Twenty-Eight and a Half
Wherein Semfeld and Liverioso
Deal with Their Fate

...Poorly

"Magicians Guild behind us and ... and ..." Semfeld realized he was no longer in the wand shop. As far as he could tell he wasn't anywhere. In front of him, flat sands met blue cloudless skies. He turned in a small circle and surveyed his surroundings. He may as well have kept looking straight ahead because the scenery was the same in all directions- rolling sand dunes meeting blue sky. He looked up and noticed with more than a little bit of worry, that the sun was directly overhead. It was more than just overhead. It was looming overhead. It was blazing overhead. Pounding heat down upon him, overhead.

OVERHEAD!

Semfeld felt penned in by the blast of the sun and heat. On all sides, it pressed in on him. Even from below. He pulled his shirt off and stood on it. Even through his shirt he could feel the heat of the morning's baking seeping through to his feet. He looked up again at the sun. It glared at him with the same hot hatred as that vile little Gnome had. Except now instead of glaring back, he was sweating. There was a substantial river of sweat beginning to flow down his face, and from what he could tell, it had somehow found its way to the middle of his back and continued down from there.

Semfeld sat down on his shirt and began what he believed were going to be his last few hours of existence with as much dignity as an Official Enforcer of the Magician's Guild could muster.

Semfeld began to cry.

"Never before duplicated Dithapearing Bones Trick ..." Continued Liverioso. "Wait. Thith isn't right," he protested. He squinted into the distance. "Thith isn't right!" He shouted at the sand

meeting the sky, miles in the distance. Hearing sobbing, he turned quickly. "Themfeld! Whath's going on?"

Semfeld looked up from his sobbing, tears still running down his face. "We're going to die right here." He pointed at his shirt under him. "I'm going to die right here. You should find a place of your own." He wiped a tear from his face. "Want to sit and die with me?"

Liverioso glowered at his friend. "Nonthense! How can WE die? You're the Athtounding Themfeld and I'm the Mysterious Liveriotho."

Liverioso's inability to pronounce his own stage name had caused quite a stir within the Guild. There had been rumors that the lisp was a part of Liverioso's act that had somehow gotten out of hand and he now affected all his speech with it. Other's thought it was some sort of curse. Either way, it was only after threat of being (temporarily as a test) kicked out of the Magician's Guild that it was discovered that he was completely unaware that he even *had* a lisp. 'What do you mean I can't pronounth my own name?' was his entire argument to suggestions that he become the Great Earl instead of Mysterious Liverioso. After careful consultation of ancient texts and Guild Bylaws, it was decided (by a healthy majority) that Liverioso was, in fact, an idiot. Not only were all of his guild privileges restored, he was immediately made a Magician's Guild Enforcer. Mainly because Enforcers never listened to reason when dealing with folks that crossed the Magician's Guild. Even when those folks didn't even know about the guild. He was therefore, a perfect fit for the job.

"Thay, ith's hot out here." Liverioso looked around. "Where are we?"

Semfeld looked to the sun, which was still beating down on him as if it were an entire gross of Ogres wielding flaming morning stars.[25] "If I were to make a guess, I'd say we're in the Great Sandy Desert east of the Kingdom of Pictistan, south of Orcistan. Hopefully really far south of Orcistan"

"Why are all of theth places called something-Thtan? I never underthood that," remarked Liverioso.

"Stan means 'mountains'[26]. If you go far enough, there's mountains pretty much all around us," answered Semfeld. He became upset, "Who cares WHAT this place is called? Soon this place will be called Where Liverioso and Semfeld Died!" He rubbed his hands together, "Of course,

no one will call it that because no one will know we even died out here!" Tears once again began to run down his face.

"I don't like Pics. Think we'll thee any Pics?"

"No, I don't think Pic caravans come this deep into the desert. No one does," he said testily.

Liverioso looked down at his partner then to the horizon and then back at his partner. "How can you be thure thith is the Thandy Dethert?"

"WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE which DESERT WE ARE IN?" Howled Semfeld. He got to his feet and picked up his shirt. "I'm leaving! I refuse to die next to you!" He began to walk away.

"Wait! Don't leave me here!" Liverioso begged as he moved to catch up with his partner. "We need to think together if we're going to get out of here." He moved to walk beside his partner. A worried look came across his face. "Right?"

Semfeld stopped and faced his partner. "Do you have your wand?" He asked. His tears flowed freely now.

"No."

"Neither do I." Semfeld wiped a tear from his eye. His cheeks were streaked where the sand had blown and stuck to the trails of tears and sweat on his face. He held up his hand and ticked off fingers as he spoke, "So we're out here with no wands, no transportation, no food, no water, no way to call for help," he switched to his other hand when he ran out of fingers, "no compass, no map, no idea where we are, and to top it all off, no shade."

Liverioso thought for a moment. "You said you knew where we were," he countered. "So, that means we don't need a map." He snapped his fingers. "Hah!"

"Hah? If we're in the middle of the Great Sandy Desert, and on foot, we're weeks away from anyone and anything." Semfeld held up his hand and waggled his fingers. "There's still a whole hand of things we really need." He held up his other hand and wiggled a finger, "And there's still the little matter of not having any shade."

"We thtill have each other."

Semfeld jumped on his partner knocking him to the ground. "What good does that do us?" Every time he said a word, Semfeld hit his partner's head against the sand. "We are still going to die!"

Even though the sand was fairly soft, Liverioso saw spots in front of his eyes, "Thop that! You're going to kill me!"

"We are both going to die anyway. You might as well go first!" Semfeld continued to accent his yelling by hitting Liverioso's head on the sand, although not with every word. The heat was getting to him. "You lisping buffoon!"

"Hey now," countered Liverioso, "thath's getting perthonal." Although he did not think he had a lisp, he had accepted the fact that most people thought he did. He considered it a widespread delusion.

"I agree."

"Yeah! Thee? He agreeths too," agreed Liverioso.

Semfeld looked over his shoulder. The sun was blocked out by a wrinkled face. The haggard, wrinkled face was attached to a haggard, wrinkled man dressed in rags. Semfeld let go of his partner and scrambled to his feet. "Who in all the Blue Blazing Lands are you?" He grabbed the wiry man by the shoulders and shook him. "Are you a mirage?"

The man slapped Semfeld's face. "Get a hold of yourself. And let go of me." He shrugged out of Semfeld's grip and took several steps back. "What are you two doing here?"

Liverioso stood. "Whath are *you* doing here?" He demanded as his haughtiness returned since he now had a target for it.

"I live here, of course." The man said matter-of-factly as he turned to leave.

"Live here?" Asked Semfeld. "Why would you live here?" He looked around and still saw nothing except sand and blue sky in all directions. "Where did you even come from?" He called to the man's back. "Here?"

The old man trudged along. "You deal with what's dealt to you," he called over his shoulder. He moved at a slow and steady shuffle so he had not moved very far. "I was banished here by the Magician's Guild because I was behind on my dues and still doing Gigs."

The Magician's Guild had worked long and hard on finding an appropriate way to describe their work. For a long time, it was referred to simply as 'Doing a Gig' but there were those that felt that did not convey the grandeur that was the life of a Magician and hurt recruitment efforts. At several meetings (and one Jamboree), 'Performing' was suggested, but the Mime Guild put an end to that (one just did *not* cross the Mime Guild) very quickly. Due to ominous threats from the Wizarding Guild, 'working Magic' was also dropped from the list of contenders. After one extremely late running meeting, where everyone was hoping someone would make a motion to adjourn, a lone Magician suggested 'Practicing the Trade'- he

even suggested the capitalization to add emphasis. Another Magician, who was not paying attention, thought that a motion to adjourn had been made, so he quickly seconded it. The President of the Magician's Guild (local 232) also was not paying attention (it was a very long meeting) and announced that the motion carried. Everyone left, grateful that the meeting was finally over. It was not until the next meeting when the minutes were read that it was discovered that 'Practicing the Trade' was the new approved phrase to use. That had happened over six years ago.

The fact that the man did not know current terminology was not lost on Semfeld; it was a very long time to be living in the Great Sandy Desert. "You've been out here for over six years?" He gaped.

"I tell you, if I ever come across one of them Enforcers, I'll kill them and use their bones as straws," said the old man. "That would let me die a happy man."

Both Semfeld and Liverioso took a step back from the man.

"So what are you two doing out here?" The old man asked again. "Did you get banished too?"

"Yes," said Semfeld quickly.

"Whath? Banithed?" Began Liverioso, "Noth on your life! For your informathion, *I am* ..."

Semfeld quickly moved over to his partner and hit him in the arm, "What my friend means is, 'yes'. We've been banished and we're stuck here." He squinted up at the sun. It was still overhead and pounding. "What rotten luck, right Liverioso?" His partner started to open his mouth in protest again but he cut him off, "Oh, I'm the Astounding Semfeld and my traveling companion is the Mysterious Liverioso." He held out his hand. "And..."

"I'm the Great Garibaldis." Hyperbole was unknown among Magicians. He assumed a proud pose; hands on his hips, nose to the sky, "Prestidigitator to the High Court of Pic, Advisor to the Emperor of Iranistan. I'm also available for birthdays, anniversaries, and funerals." He paused for dramatic effect, "Cradle to grave services." He looked hopefully at the two Enforcers. "You in the market?"

Semfeld did not want to get into a lengthy discussion on the pros and cons of 'Practicing the Trade'. Especially out in the sun. "We're not here to hire you for a gig," began Semfeld, "we're stuck

here and we need to get back to Aution."

"Aution?"

"Yes; Aution."

"Never heard of it," said Garibaldis as he began to shuffle away again. "I'm fried. I'm getting out of the sun." He didn't look to see if the other two followed.

"Just keep quiet about being an Enforcer," hissed Semfeld. "That man is our ticket out of here!" He started to walk after the old man pulling Liverioso with him. Semfeld easily caught up with the man who was still moving at a slow, energy-conserving shuffle. "So where do you live?"

The man stopped walking and looked at Semfeld. "I live here, of course."

Semfeld narrowed his eyes at the old man. "Yes. We've established that you live in the desert. Has your brain been baked?"

The old man stared at Semfeld for a moment then bent down. As he did Semfeld jumped back. Garibaldis pushed aside some sand to reveal a metal ring. He gripped it with both hands and pulled up a small trap door. Semfeld leaned over and peered into the darkness. Cool, welcoming air greeted him from below. Garibaldis pushed past Semfeld and began to climb down the hole.

There were footholds carved into the shaft at regular intervals. After he disappeared from sight, Semfeld hit Liverioso in the arm, "Now control yourself and this old fool will get us out of here," he whispered. "Let's go."

Semfeld started down the hole. Looking down he was unable to see the bottom. He looked up and saw that his partner had started down as well. Liverioso pulled the hatch closed as he entered it, cutting off the light completely. Semfeld worked his way down the shaft in total darkness. When the foothold he expected was not there, he panicked. He gripped tightly with his hands and tentatively felt out with his toes. There was ground under him. "I'm at the bottom," he called up. He stepped away from the shaft, still surrounded in darkness. "Garibaldis," he called, "where are you?" Semfeld reached out with his hands and shuffled his feet, hoping he did not encounter another shaft.

Off to his right, a light flared up- it was a Bulls-Eye lantern. Garibaldis was holding it. "This way, you two," he said as he put the lantern down to guide the way. Semfeld waited for his partner and then the two moved toward the light. The passage was rough- hewn through

the bedrock and barely wide enough for the two of them side by side. As they approached the lantern, they heard clattering of pots.

They rounded the corner into a carved-out chamber. At the far end was a ramp that angled up toward the surface. Semfeld sniffed. "Did a Shambler die down here?"

Garibaldis turned from the pot he was stirring. "Die? No. Live? Yes." He pointed over his shoulder to an alcove that had a rope strung across it. "Three of them in fact."

"Wait a grain of thand," said Liverioso, "you're telling me you have animalths that you could ride out of here on and you don't?"

"All they do is teleport me back here, those stinking Magician Guild Enforcers. Three times so far. They're all a bunch of pompous blowhards. I hope they all die slow horrible deaths." He spat on the floor.

"Oooohhh!" Shuddered Liverioso.

Garibaldis looked at him curiously.

"That's his way of saying he agrees," interjected Semfeld. "Those stinking Enforcers!" He spat as well.

"Ooohhh!" Replied Liverioso as he shook his fists.

Garibaldis went back to tending his pot. He rolled up his one remaining sleeve and pulled a wand from his pocket. Gesturing out of habit he showed that there was nothing in his hands. He waved the wand over the pot mysteriously

Presto Antipasto!

he declared.

A small puff of smoke came from the white tipped, black wand. With a flourish, he put the wand away and tilted the pot for his guest's benefit. "Once again, the amazing feat of lunch has been accomplished for all to see." Showmanship was paramount when it came to Magicians.

Semfeld glanced at his partner who still had his fists clutched. His eyes were trained on the sleeve where the wand had disappeared. As he moved closer to the pot, he nudged Liverioso's shoulder and gestured toward a hanging frying pan. Liverioso nodded. "That was some show Garibaldis," he started, "very nice buildup. I especially

liked the way you waved your wand. Very mysterious."

"Thanks," said Garibaldis. It was nice to be performing for an actual audience again. "It's nice to be performing for an actual audience again." He affirmed.

"Say, can you show me something else?" He looked around the room quickly. "Maybe with one of those pots?" He pointed to several pots that were behind him. "That would be a treat; to watch a true professional in action."

Garibaldis beamed. It had been years since he had done a Gig. "Sure, sure." He looked over his kitchen. "I have a Stir Fry trick that's really worth the effort." He examined the pots to find the best one for the trick.

Semfeld flailed his arms wildly. Nodding, Liverioso stealthily glided up behind Garibaldis. He raised the frying pan high over his head and brought it down quickly. A resounding -GONG- accompanied the strike. Garibaldis fell in a heap. "Hah! Take thath mithter thmarty breecheth!" He bowed to an audience that was not there.

"OK. Let's move fast," commanded Semfeld. "Grab all the food and water you can, I'll grab the Shamblers. We need to be out of here before that old fool wakes up!" Quickly the two ransacked shelves, cabinets and cupboards, filling several sacks with supplies and grabbing four water skins each. They loaded the animals as Garibaldis started to groan. Semfeld roughly reached up Garibaldis' sleeve and yanked out the man's wand before leaving him.

Garibaldis was on his knees as the two pushed open the trap door at the top of the stairs. Sunlight and heat poured into the chamber as Semfeld led the animals up the ramp. "Stop you two!" groaned Garibaldis. "What are you doing?"

"Hah!" Liverioso executed a deep bow. "Onth again, the Enforthers of the Magithians Guild have proven they are thuperior! Take that mithter thmarty breecheth!" He ran up the ramp. Unable to stop himself, he stopped and rendered another bow from the top. "Next we'll take care of that louthy Drimblerod and his thupid Gnome partner!" He bowed again then turned and ran out of view.

Semfeld was already on one of the Brown-Toed Shamblers. It grunted its displeasure of being woken from its late afternoon nap. "Let's go!" He called, "that old man may have a spare wand!" He coaxed his Shambler into a trot as Liverioso clambered on top his. The third was tied to Semfeld's so it followed begrudgingly.

"So where do we go, Themfeld?"

Semfeld looked at the horizon in all directions as the Shamblers trudged away from the underground shelter. "Well, if this is the Great Sandy Desert, then Orcistan is to the north of us, and Aution is to the southwest of there. We'll keep the sun so it rises on our left and sets on our right. That should get us close enough. All we have to do is reach the Salty River then turn left."

"I'll get you!" Called Garibaldis who was now at the top of his ramp. He was holding another wand - this one a standard looking gnarled wood affair with a leather handle; a highly-modified Assassin's Wand. He rolled up his sleeve, tilted his hands back and forth to show they were empty then intoned

Flowers for Spines!
Kazzam!

he jabbed the wand towards the two figures. His head still spinning from the hit, the shot went wide.

Beside Liverioso a small flower sprung from the sand. "Fathter!" He called as he kicked his heels into the Tan Shambler's side. It grunted in protest but moved to a trot nevertheless. "We need to geth outh of range!"

The two Enforcers coached their Shamblers into full gallops zigging and zagging as they went. Finally, the beasts decided they had had enough and began to walk slowly. No amount of coaxing could make them speed up. "We're fine now, Liverioso. There's no way that old man can catch us. Let's not kill our only mounts." He laid back on the Shambler's hump. "Let's just take it easy until nightfall."

Garibaldis stalked down the ramp, smoldering Assassin wand in his hand. "Think you've seen the last of me?" He scowled. "You think wrong!" He stopped, frozen in place. "Wait- Drimblerod?" He laughed evilly as he looked at the Assassin Wand in his hand. "Oh no, you haven't seen the last of me." He removed his clothes and folded them neatly on the table. He wouldn't need this set of clothes again. Ever. Searching his ransacked abode, he found his trusty wrist sheath- a gift from Drimblerod for his several purchases. Finding where the Gnome had set up shop would be simple once he reached civilization. Drimblerod's reputation as a trustworthy wand salesman ensured that *someone* in a decent sized town would know where he

had set up shop. If not, the Gremlins could always point the way. His head was still foggy but one word caught his attention. "Aution?" He said aloud. "No, you stinking enforcers," he said, "we'll see each other again. The Great Garibaldis guarantees it!"

Garibaldis held the wrist sheath in place around his waist with one hand since the straps were much too short to tie around him. "Not by a long shot have you seen the last of *me*!" He said to a non-existent audience as he raised a hand dramatically. He turned his wand hand over and back to show it was empty. "The amazing Transmogrification Spell for your enjoyment," he said to the empty room. "Enjoyment *and* amazement!" He waved the wand over his head.

Behold the Short-Tailed Gila!
In slow motion even.

Ta Da!

He intoned.

Quickly he placed the wand in the sheath. He slowly shrunk in size and developed a brownish pallor. As he shrunk, he tied the wrist sheath around his waist. Garibaldis dropped to all fours as his limbs shortened and he developed a tail- albeit stubby one. After a few moments, the transformation was complete. Moving to its hind legs and using its tail as balance, GaribaldisGila gave a short bow.

He adjusted the wand sheath to his back and tightened it with nubby claws.

Slit eyes looking up at the ramp, he clambered up it and into the sun. He gazed up at the fiery ball which was finally heading toward the Western horizon. Its glare and heat did not even bother him.



Once again standing on hind legs, he scanned the area. The tracks of the three Shamblers were plainly evident- they led along a jagged path of already wilting flowers. GaribaldisGila dropped to all fours and slinked along their path, eating the flowers as he went.

"Home free Liverioso!" Semfeld beamed. "Oh, *pardon me*, I mean the *Mysterious Liverioso*!"

"Why thank you, *Astounding Themfeld*!" Liverioso reclined on his Shambler as well. "Thoon enough we'll exthact our revenge!"

The two rode generally south, with only a few minor detours (some even on purpose!), the next two months.

As always, with GaribaldisGila close behind.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Wherein Gnomes Decide to Visit the Local Wizarding School

Drimblerod peered out from behind the curtain and, as he had done for the past five days, asked "Is it safe?"

"Yes, Drim," replied Grimbledung flatly, "I told you; I sent them to the middle of the Great Sandy Desert. Those two are gone forever. Even if they made it out of the desert which they won't, they'll have to figure out which way to go, which they won't, and even if they go the right way, they have to deal with those treacherous Pics and their caravans, which they won't. Then they have to get through the entire of Orcistan, without getting eaten, which they won't. They have no wands, and no cloaks, no food and no water. You're never going to see them again. Ever."

Drimblerod moved cautiously to the counter, "These aren't people you cross, Grim." He shuddered. "But if they went where you said they went; I guess we'll be fine. But why didn't you send them to the middle of the Eastern Sea? Without a boat, that would have solved the issue once and for all."

"I've never been there," replied Grimbledung casually. "I've been to the middle of the Great Sandy Desert. I used this great little underground shelter right in the middle of it as a hideout once. It's built on top of a spring. Very cozy and out of the way."

Drimblerod looked up over his shoulder. "Well, in any case, I still wish you had thrown those things away."

"It's like when they put heads on pikes. It's a warning." He appraised his work. Above the curtained doorway was a lopsided shadowbox which contained two crisply folded, gaudy cloaks each with a black wand with white tips on them. "I think it really brightens up the place."

They both looked at the wands in silence. Finally, Grimbledung spoke up, "You know what would help? Why don't we take that trip to the Wizard's School like you were saying, a day out would be a fun mini-adventure."

Drimblerod exhaled slowly. "I suppose that would take my mind off these recent events. Let's pack the wagon and we'll head out at first light. Rat, would you mind being a Shambler for a little while?"

Rat was lying on his side in front of the fire as usual. "Sure thing, Drimblerod. After how the past few weeks have been going, I owe you a few pulls of your wagon."

"Then it's settled!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. He hopped back and forth and sang:

We'll ride in the wagon and visit the school!
Talking to students and Big Old Jule',
Drim'll talk wands and it'll be great!
I'll run the halls, and climb the gates!

He thrust his hands in the air.

And visit the cafeteria and eat some chow.
Visit the Cafeteria and eat some chow?

Yes!
Visit the Cafeteria and eat some CHOW -OW!

He finished the song on one knee, arms splayed out to his side. His fingers were all waggling.

"One more song and you're staying home."

"I agree, Rat," said Drimblerod. "AND there are no songs on the Wagon."

Grimbledung slowly got to his feet, pouting, "What about once we get there?"

"We're there on business, not as part of some traveling minstrel show," scolded Drimblerod. "No songs while we're there either."

"Fine no more songs." Grimbledung sighed heavily. "Until we get back, right?" He added worriedly.

"Yes. Now let's flip the sign and get some food. We're starting early in the morning."

Grimbledung hopped to the sign, humming a tune as he went. "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!" He said as he scooted to the back of the store.

"Tomorrow will be a really long day," lamented Rat as he too

turned to go.

Drimblerod followed Rat to the back of the shop. "How bad could it be?"

The sky was just turning pink as the wagon pulled out the back of the shop and down the street. "Why'd we have to start so early?" Complained Grimbledung for what was already probably the tenth time.

"It's not healthy to see the sun rise," said Drimblerod at the same time as Grimbledung did, "yes, I heard." They were barely out of the shop, not even on the main road heading south out of Aution and he was already tired of the journey. He concentrated on the back of RatShambler. "Keep up the good work Rat" he called.

RatShambler looked at him as he walked. There was pain in his eye; a pain that spoke one word; *Grimbledung*.

"Just keep the pace and get us out of town to the south, Rat," Drimblerod coaxed.

There wasn't even a whip on the wagon and Drimblerod wasn't holding the reins; he felt that would be insulting to Rat. On more than one occasion during the short time of their journey, a peasant eyed RatShambler curiously as it made its way along the streets, yielding where appropriate, nodding to passersby, and taking the right of way as necessary, all without any apparent guidance from the driver of the wagon. In fact, the driver appeared to be asleep while the Gnome next to him bounced on the seat and clapped. It was an unusual display even in Aution.

Finally, the town was behind them and the sun had cleared the far mountains. The warmth of the day had begun to crawl across the lands.

"Are we there yet?" Asked Grimbledung. "We've been gone for a while, haven't we?"

"Grim, we are just barely out of Aution," explained Drimblerod. "We've got a good two hours to go before we're there. Why don't you go in the back and count clouds, or have a snack, or take a nap, or something," said Drimblerod testily.

"Sorry, Drim," said Grimbledung, "it's just that I've never been on a business trip before. It's very exciting." He bounced on the seat and clapped his hands. "You don't know how much I want to make up a song about riding in a wagon."

"I can only imagine," offered Drimblerod.

"With the wheels going round and round, the scenery going by and by." He stopped as Drimblerod gave him a warning glance. After a moment, he pressed on warily, "And there's a sale in it for you and me. Yes, probably a wand sale in it for you and me."

"Feel better?" Drimblerod squinted at his partner. "That's as close to breaking out in song as I want you to be until the sun has set." His eyes squinted even more to the point where Grimbledung did not even think he could even see him anymore. "Understand?"

"Sure thing," said Grimbledung. Not knowing if his partner could see him, he finished by waggling his ears at him. "Loud and clear," he said, smiling.

The rest of the trip through rolling hills passed uneventfully and to Drimblerod's (and RatShambler's) relief, unmusically. After what seemed hours, but was only two, the large blades of the windmill that was the main hall of Displaines' School for Young Wizards and Witches came into the distant view. They were turning slowly even most of their fabric was missing and there was barely any breeze.

Displaines' School for Young Wizards and Witches had been established in an abandoned Gristmill. The outbuildings had been renovated to act as classrooms and a large three-story building had been built as a dormitory. In total about 100 students actually lived at the school and thanks to a newly opened Teleportal service, again that many students commuted every day to attend classes. The establishment of a magic school -especially a Displaines' School, was usually a boon to a local economy; restaurants, clothiers, and inns (filled during conferences and sporting events) invariably sprung up soon after a school was opened. This fact made communities interested in having their very own Magic School. The Teleportal service was the first of what would invariably become a business explosion in the area.

The school itself was actually a franchise operation belonging to the successful businessman and Wizard, Mac Displaines. Buying unusual abandoned buildings was part of a business model that kept start-up costs low. Hiring local instructors and support personnel kept local governments happy and the requirement for bribes to a minimum; graft may take a back seat, but it never got completely out of the wagon. Thanks to operating under the umbrella of the Mac

Displaines' School of Magic Corporation, slick marketing drew in students. Mac had long since retired from the Wizarding School business and he used the franchise scheme to ensure a healthy residual income. It was a perfect existence; he lived like a king but without the hassles that accompanied being King.

"FINALLY!" Cheered Grimbledung's clambering back to the front of the wagon. He had moved to the back of the wagon and had, for the past hour, been describing what he saw in the clouds.

In detail.

"Yes, finally," agreed an exasperated Drimblerod, "now be on your best behavior when we meet Julie. We don't know anything about her and I sure don't want you offending her right from the start."

"It'll be the bestest behaviorestes I have-estes."

Chapter Twenty-Nine (Interlude)
Wherein Big Julie's Ascension from Crime Lord to Franchise Owner is Presented

Julie had been orphaned at a very young age, so young in fact, that she did not even know her family name. She was just "Julie." Her parents were now mere wisps of memories that came to her only in the occasional dream. Taken in by a tavern owner, she spent her childhood serving drinks and clearing tables at the Gutted Boar Tavern. Because of her age, patrons would talk to her of high adventures and lucrative business deals. Not many of the stories were true, but to the ears of the young waif, they told of a magical future that could be hers. She listened raptly to anyone who would talk to her. As the years passed, she drew information from the Gutted Boar patrons, building a knowledge base that ranged from how to cold pitch a low-level government employee to setting up a successful Bronze Mine prospector pyramid scheme; "A quick exit strategy is the key, Julie!" She had been told with a wink. "Or your first scheme that falls apart will be your last!" Along with that one bit of advice, Julie had also learned two hard rules:

1- People generally pushed around those weaker than them, and
2- Being one of the aforementioned weaker people, on the whole, sucked.

Realizing that aside from size, knowledge gave power, Julie endeavored to build her mind. She learned to read from the menus she passed around and from the wanted posters tacked to the walls sometimes two or three layers thick. Arithmetic she learned quickly after being soundly reprimanded for being cheated while making change. That sound being the 'swish' of a switch. And, thanks to that one patron's unmitigated gall to continue to patron the Gutted Boar after cheating her out his entire night's tab, Julie learned the time-consuming art of distilling Miasma Brew. Because of that, that particular patron only came back a few times. By the third dose of Miasma Brew, he suddenly didn't have the strength to leave his

house.

Ultimately, it was only with the help of six bearers that he eventually did make it out of his home... and down the street, left at the bakery, and then straight on to the cemetery.

As she grew, Julie- raised on a strict diet of mutton, beef, and Shambler cutlets with ale to wash it down- gained what would become a lifelong moniker; Big Julie. Not offensive to look at, she was just big. Upsized. Robust. A true Broad. Between her imposing size and accompanying street-smarts, at the tender age of 20, Julie managed to take control of the Gutted Boar when its owner died unexpectedly of natural causes (around that town, very few actually expected to die of natural causes). Closing for several weeks, she renovated and expanded the tavern. It was with much fanfare that Julie opened the first of several lucrative businesses; The Prancing Vixen Bed and Brothel.

After the Prancing Vixen began to turn a healthy profit, Big Julie focused her attention across the street to the faltering establishment there. With mild coaxing that only bordered on illegal, she acquired a tailor shop. Once again, there was a store closing, a two-week refurbishment, followed by a grand opening of Rugged Jules Clothier and Such. She specialized in not only clothes for larger people (the Clothier part), but also for people who needed clothes with hidden pockets and built in armor (and Such). Word spread quickly in ne'er-do-well circles of this useful store that had a "no questions asked" sales policy, and once again, profits began to climb. That's when Julie received *her* first cold pitch. For insurance.

"These are nice shops you have here, Julie," the man began as he came into Big Julies office- a converted room above the Clothier, "real nice shops." He was dressed in all black and wore a black cloak- both seemed just a little too small on him as if he had borrowed his younger brother's outfit. He was accompanied by a hulk of a Human male who was similarly dressed. Similarly, only in the sense that he too was dressed in all black and had a cloak. His trousers were crisp and cuffed. The cloak just barely brushed the floor and hung on his shoulders smoothly. The pitch-man moved to the chair in front of the desk and sat without asking. His shirt puckered open at the buttons revealing a pale belly beneath. "I hear you're doing well for yourself. That's a good place to be, you know. Owner of two successful businesses." He put his feet up on Big Julie's desk. Behind him, Muscles closed the door and stood in front of it, arms

crossed across his chest.

Julie noticed that even in that position, his shirt hung properly and the cloak fell flat across large, rounded shoulders. *I wonder if that's one of our designs*, she thought, while at the same time, Julie fumed. She had seen shakedowns in the tavern growing up and even then, they turned her stomach; people unable to make their own business because of lack of vision bullied those that could. It was begging with a club. Outwardly, her expression was the same- thanks to watching countless games of Trufflidge. In that card game, bluffing was an integral part of the game; those that could do it invariably took home a substantial pile of coins.

Julie crossed the room and sat behind her desk. "How about a drink?" She asked as she opened a bottom drawer. She saw that the man before her tensed as she reached down. Muscles, who was already watching her intently, leaned forward slightly. *No aces in his hand.* Out loud she remarked casually, "I brew it myself." She produced a large square bottle filled with a purplish fluid. She sat the bottle on the desk and pulled two glasses from the same drawer. The man eyed her as he put his feet back on the ground. *Not even a face card.* Muscles, seeing the bottle and two glasses as opposed to some sort of weapon, once again leaned back slightly against the door.

Crisis resolved.

"We're here to talk business, Julie." The man began when he also decided that there was no threat from the drawer. He was still tense however. "Business. Your business." He said, continuing the pitch, "which is going well."

"You know," began Big Julie as she poured two glasses of the fluid quickly with her left hand. She filled his glass substantially more than hers. After pouring the drink, she lifted the bottle up as a toast and as she put the bottle down on the opposite side of the desk, she picked up her glass with her right hand. The man's eyes followed the moving bottle instead of looking at the unequally filled glasses. She immediately tilted the glass as she picked it up and moved it towards her mouth. There was now no way to tell how much was actually in it compared to his. "I think we can work something out that's mutually beneficial," she said with a smile. She then pretended to take a drink. When she sat her glass back down, it was obviously much less full than the man's- practically empty in fact. Simple sleight of hand had been taught to her by one of the regulars at the

Gutted Boar; a traveling magician. Young Julie could never get enough of his antics at the tavern.

The man looked from Julie to the glasses and back to Julie. "Good. That's good." He said as he picked up the glass. "We were worried you would make trouble," he said as he took a drink from the glass. He glanced at the liquid in his glass and nodded. "Real good. And when people make trouble for us," he took another drink from the glass, "we make trouble for them." He eyed Julie and in what he hoped was an ominous fashion and downed the rest of the drink. "And no one wins then."

Julie stood. "Sounds great! How about you draw up the papers and we'll sign them tomorrow."

"Papers?" Said the man. "We don't need papers." He smirked at her. "We can just have a gentleman's agreement, you and I. There's no need for *papers*."

Julie remained standing and glowered down at the man. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not a man, *genteel or otherwise*." She raised an eyebrow at the man. Behind him, a chuckle escaped Muscles.

Realizing that he was losing initiative and worse, was being talked down to, the man stood. As he did, the room took a complete clock-wise turn. He leaned forward and put his hands on Julie's desk for stability. "We'll draw something up and be back tomorrow right after lunch." The man narrowed his eyes. For a moment, Julie became unfocused.

"You do that," said Julie as she came around the desk and moved to Muscles. They were the same general size but the bumps were all in different places. "I hope to see you again," she said to him levelly- there was not seduction in her voice; it was an offer of employment.

Muscles blinked in surprise. He looked from Julie to his current boss who was steadying himself on the arm of the chair as he walked around it, and back to Julie. Unsure of what to say, he simply nodded.

"Well then. I will be very interested in seeing you tomorrow afternoon, Mister ... Mister ..."

The man could hear what Julie was saying but there was some sort of disconnect between his brain and his mouth. He thought he was speaking but apparently, he was not. He frowned as he concentrated. A fog came over him. What was his name? At the moment, he was not entirely sure. "Drinn. Drinn Kapoisoned." He slurred.

Muscles knew that wasn't his boss' name but played along: "Sure thing, boss." Drawing up an agreement meant there would be a paper

trail. Maybe his boss was laying the groundwork for a pseudonym so that there would be no incriminating evidence. "I think we should get going, Mister Kapoisoned," he said. Big Julie stepped out of the way as Muscles opened the door, putting him two steps closer to his boss who stumbled forward a step and took his bodyguard's arm.

"Less go," slurred the doomed man.

Muscles looked from his Boss to Julie and back again. "Mayhap you need to lay down for a bit, Boss." He offered his arm to the teetering man.

"Yes, that's a grand idea. A nice… long … nap," Big Julie said as she locked eyes with Muscles. "See you." As she stole a glance at the wavering man, she added ominously: "Soon."

The two left with Muscles practically carrying his boss. Big Julie closed the door and quickly went to her desk. She took out a bottle of water from a different drawer and poured it over her lips, making a puddle on the floor. Bending over she also took a towel from the same drawer and scrubbed her lips vigorously. Finally satisfied, she threw the rag into the waste bin- it wasn't even safe to use as a dust rag anymore. Over the years, she had gotten really, really good at brewing Miasma Potion. She took a swig from the water bottle, stoppered it, and slammed it down on the desk. "*Me pay protection money*?" She roared. She ran out the door and down the stairs to her shop. "Raul!" She called.

"Ma'am?" replied Raul with a silky voice as he appeared, as always, out of nowhere. "What can Raul help you with, Mistress Julie?"

Raul, a 900-year-old Woodland Elf (as far as Elves go, still a youngster), always referred to himself in the third person. Not a narcissist by any means, it was merely a linguistic habit he had picked up living with Orcs as an armorer (for a couple of centuries) whose grasp of Common was tenuous, at best. As far as running the Clothier, Raul was second to none; he always dressed impeccably, was honest in appraisals, and could make a two-thread slip stitch as straight as he could fire an arrow. Being an Elf, that was really straight. He also knew practically everyone. If Raul didn't know a person or creature, the odds were he knew someone who did. And everyone who was anyone in the fashion world knew of Raul. If there were a gala event taking place, anywhere in The Region, Raul

invariably had two, sometimes three message hawks show up- note in one claw, bag of coins in the other. Fashion by Raul was *It.*

"Who were those two goons who just came through here?" Big Julie asked, still fuming.

"The big one is named Mo Fletcher."

"Muscles," offered Julie.

"Decent guy working to support a family. *Excellent* taste." He gave a small bow. "I did his ensemble."

"It hung beautifully," offered Julie.

"Thanks." Raul thought again before continuing, "The small guy is a two-bit Under Boss named Sal Valachi. He's trying to set out on his own." Raul said. "From what I hear, he's got a good shot at making it happen." He looked at Julie appraisingly. "Yes?"

"No." Julie shook her head slowly. "Not unless he can bring his whole plan together in the next couple of hours."

Raul blanched. "That's not going to go over well, Mistress Julie. Raul heard just last week that Sal was going to be Made. In a month or two, tops."

Julie cupped her hand and punched it with her fist. "That's not good. Even if he's not Made yet, that's still not good." She put her hands on her hips as she considered her next course of action. In times of crisis, it was the one with the clear plan that everyone looked to. In the many brawls, arguments, and duels she had seen it regularly in the Gutted Boar. When the customers got riled, they always looked to the bartender, expecting him (or her) to have some sort of plan. "I need to get moving. You know where Sal has his meetings?"

Raul gave a hurt look. "Why does Mistress Julie say such things to Raul? Why doesn't she just say 'where does Sal conduct The Business'?" Before Julie could open her mouth, he continued, "Head down to the Surgeon's Shop. He works out of the back room."

Julie called a 'thanks' over her shoulder as she quickly exited her store and went left up the street. Huffing and puffing, passersby gave her a wide berth; she was, after all, Big Julie. As she rounded a corner, she saw a familiar red and blue striped pole hanging from a storefront. It was on a strap of leather so it spun back and forth in the breeze. She moved to the entrance and stopped to compose herself. Putting a glower on her face she burst in. A patron was getting a shave, and, as he jumped, the Surgeon nicked him.

"Hey! You trying to get someone kilt?" Scolded the Surgeon. "Ya don' just barge in this place of all places!"

Julie pushed past him into the back room. Several males were seated at a dingy wooden table. They had been leaning over in heated discussion. Muscles was standing by the back door. He looked at her with surprise. "Don't bother getting up," she snapped, "this won't take long." The two Dwarfs, a Human, and a Gnome looked expectedly at Muscles. Muscles returned their look then glanced at Big Julie. Silently, he turned and went out the back door. There was a solid -thunk- from the door as he leaned against it from the outside. The four looked at Julie, sitting ramrod straight.

"Sal's taking a vacation." She said flatly. "A *long* vacation. If you want to keep working, you'll try not to do what Sal did. Or *you* may go on vacation too." Julie moved to the empty chair at the head of the table and eased into it. It creaked in protest. "Business continues as usual." Julie placed her hands flat on the table. "Nothing's changed in the operation."

The four males visibly relaxed.

"Except."

They tensed again.

"You each get an extra three percent cut."

The males all leaned forward.

"*Gross, not Net*."

Smiles crawled across their faces as they made mental calculations. They all leaned back in their chairs and exchanged glances. They all nodded and the Gnome spoke up, "You got it Boss."

"Big Julie," said Big Julie.

"You got it Big Julie," the Gnome corrected himself without missing a beat.

"We meet upstairs at Jules Clothier and Such. Lunch will be provided. See you on Thraksday around noon." Without waiting to hear a response, she stood and stormed out of the backroom. To her pleasure, the customer once again jumped and Julie was rewarded with a curse.

Big Julie operated as a fair but firm - and more importantly - loose handed manager. Profits trickled down to the lowest levels of her organization to the point where everyone wanted to work for

her. No one even considered trying to skim off the top because working for Big Julie was, as the word on the street attested, "a Gravy Train, and when you're on a Gravy Train, you make sure you don't fall off." For Big Julie, volume is where she made her fortune. After almost a decade of running one of the most successful syndicates in The Land, Julie's beloved Raul was poisoned. With Miasma Brew. The exit strategy, long since planned was implemented immediately. Putting Muscles in charge of the operation, she made a clean break and moved to Aution. The pastures there weren't necessarily greener, but they were definitely less lethal.

It was there that Big Julie had heard about Mac Displaines and his School of Magic franchise- and its overall legal status. Thinking it would be a good change of pace she called in a few favors to clear any zoning issues and gathered up the funds required to purchase the Gristmill, outbuildings, and surrounding fields. It was all abandoned and mostly condemned so the complex was purchased for coppers on the gold. Backing from local businesses in Aution built the dormitory (Mac schools were well-known successes) which ensured that her investment in the scheme was, overall, low.

For the very first two semesters, enrollment was at 60 percent. By the start of this semester, their third, there was a waiting list. Big Julie was content. Content and legitimate.

Mostly[27].

Chapter Twenty-Nine (Reliquume)
Wherein the Gnomes and
Big Julie Discuss Business

"Yes- finally" agreed RatShambler, "If I had to hear about one more cloud that looked exactly like a headless Orc riding a three-legged unicorn across a cotton field, I was going to throw up."

"That's what they looked like to me," countered Grimbledung. "Lookit! We're almost there!" He squealed as he clapped.

A full mile from the school, the road abruptly changed from hardpan to sandstone. The wagon practically glided to the front of the massive Windmill. The Windmill's blades creaked quietly as they glided by. There was no discernible breeze. The double front doors were polished wood and held together with oiled iron strapping. Sitting on each side were two very large stone Gargoyles.

"Want to come Rat?" Asked Drimblerod, "or you want to stay out here and relax in the fields."

RatShambler turned to look at Drimblerod. "Let's see. Get a proper meal inside, or stay out here in the hot sun and eat grass that birds have *pooped* on. That's a tough one."

"Grim, can you change him back?"

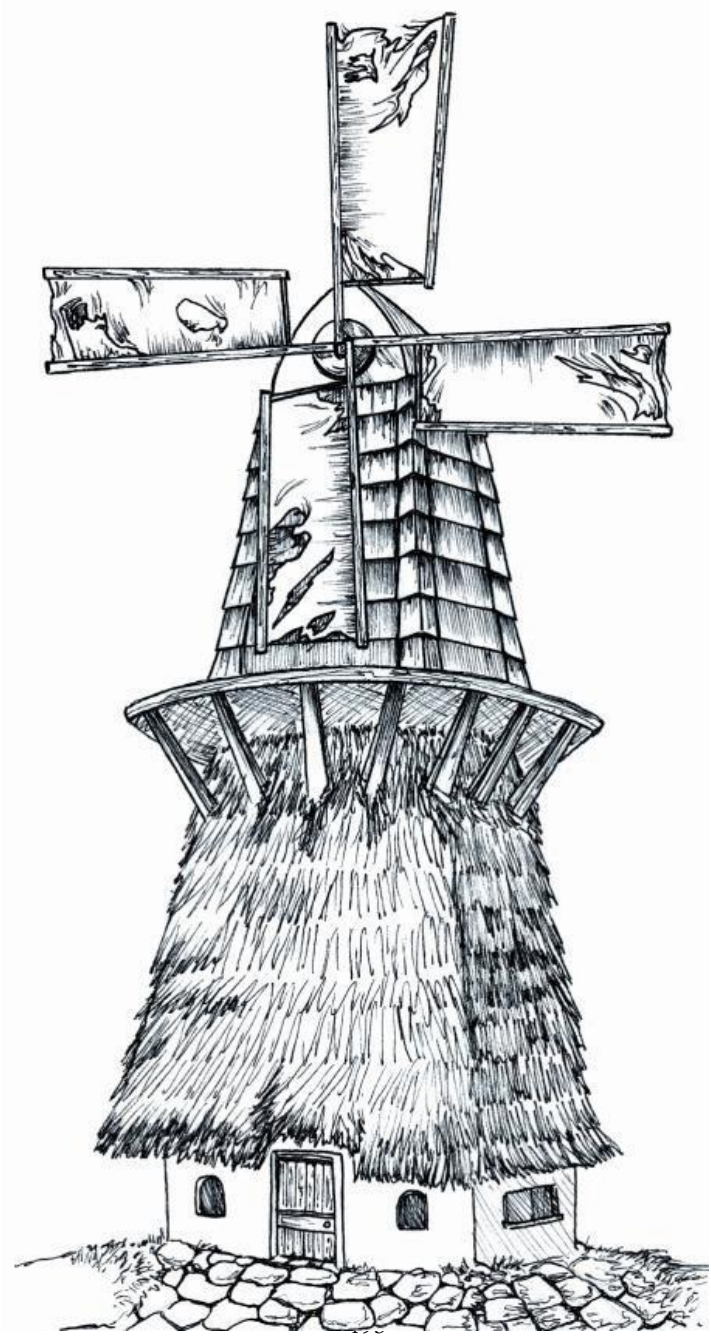
Grimbledung looked confused. "But he didn't say which one he was going to do." A scornful glance from Drimblerod and Grimbledung produced his wand and jabbed it at RatShambler who once again became just Rat. "Well, he didn't," protested Grimbledung as he sheathed his wand.

Drimblerod approached the front doors. He looked at the two Gargoyles. They were immense compared to him. They were a matched set with dragon heads, lion bodies with squatty folded wings, and long sharp talons. They sat on roughhewn stone bases and their heads were angled in so they faced anyone who was at the doors. Drimblerod looked from one to the other.

"Aren't we going in?" Asked Grimbledung. He hopped from foot to foot, "Maybe we should knock."

"I figured they'd ask our names, or demand a password, or something." He moved in close and peered into the face of one of

the Gargoyles. "This *is* a school of magic after all."



Grimbledung moved beside his partner, grabbed the huge iron ring and knocked loudly on the doors. Drimblerod continued to eye the Gargoyles. They seemed to just be stone carvings. After a few moments, the doors opened and they were greeted by a Dwarf child. "Picking up or dropping off?" He asked.

"Neither." Confessed Grimbledung.

Drimblerod took his attention away from the Gargoyles. "Yes, hello youngster. We were hoping to speak to the Headmistress."

"Got an appointment?"

Drimblerod and Grimbledung exchanged glances.

Drimblerod shrugged.

After a moment, Grimbledung suggested, "Yes?"

"Follow me" said the Dwarfling as he walked into the foyer. "The office is this way." The three followed the boy into the Windmill and the door closed of its own accord.

One of the Gargoyles winked at the other, who grinned back.

"Hey, what's a student doing answering the door?" Asked Drimblerod. "Shouldn't you be in class or something?"

"This is my free period and I'm answering the door because I am on detention," answered the Dwarfling. "But it could'a been worse. I could have drawn Latrine duty." He stuck out his tongue.

"So, what are you in for?" Asked Grimbledung in a conspiratorial tone.

The Dwarfling put his hands in his pockets. "Littering."

Grimbledung shook his head. "Detention for littering? That's disgraceful."

Perking up the youth continued, "And creating a public nuisance."

"Well that's more like it then!"

"Don't encourage him to follow in your footsteps," scolded Drimblerod.

"Why in the Lands were you given detention for littering and how does that turn into being a public nuisance?"

"Well" began the Dwarfling as they walked, "a couple of weeks ago, we were cleaning up one of the outbuildings to make an indoor sparring ring, and the previous owners lived in the hay loft, and since they lived in the hay loft, they had a lot of room down where the stables used to be. And, having all that room seeing as how the horses were all gone, they decided they didn't have to take out the trash for a very long time. So

when we started cleaning up the place, me and my friend Guthrie decided we would take the garbage down to the dump. So we took some shovels and rakes and loaded the trash up in my ..." He stopped in front of a black door. "Here we are. Miss Julie's office." He knocked on it and quickly ran off. "Good luck!" He called over his shoulder.

"I wanted to hear how that turned into a public nuisance charge," whined Rat.

"Bah," said Drimblerod, "it sounded like it would take him almost 20 minutes to ramble through it. Ask him later when we aren't on business."

"Say, I wonder why he ran off," wondered Grimbledung aloud, "You'd think ..."

The door sprung open and what was the largest non-Troll, non-Giant female Grimbledung had ever seen, greeted them. Julie always opened her own door to ensure that whatever student or faculty happened to be on the other side had to deal with her filling the doorframe. As part of the renovations, she had had it rebuilt slightly smaller in width and height so she quite literally filled it. Since the Gristmill was over a hundred years old, none of the doors matched anyway, so her oddly shaped door did not seem out of place.

As usual, she stared straight ahead, as if at one point, she actually *expected* a six-foot three inch tall student to greet her. Slowly she lowered her eyes. It was another tactic she used to make sure the students didn't try to get away with anything- fear was a good motivator. In all honesty however, being around all the youngsters had brought a motherly instinct bubbling up from the nether regions of Big Julie -Former Mob Boss- that she never knew she had. This had brought about another tactic from Julie; dressing up. Unknown to the local gentry of the male persuasion (so far anyway), Julie was "in the market." If she came across an above average height male who wasn't looking for a free ride, Julie -Former Mob Boss- would transform rather quickly into Julie -Panther on the Prowl-. She met Grimbledung's eyes. At half her height, he would have had to own a kingdom to be in the running, she mused sourly. The musing transferred to her face.

"Gah!" Exclaimed Grimbledung, "We're sorry to bother you Big ... *Big.. BIG,*" he was overwhelmed. "Julie." He finished quickly. "I ... I ... I." He stammered helplessly.

From a tender young age, Grimbledung had found taller, more robust women of interest to him. Now that he was an adult, that "interest" had turned into full blown Obsession (with a capital Ooooh!); His advances on Nulu were only slightly in jest; he was testing the waters, as it were. Now faced with a buxom and big all over Human, he was agog. "We ... we ... *we!*"

Drimblerod had been eyeing his partner with interest. He had no idea what was wrong with Grimbledung but it was, at least for a while, entertaining to watch.

"I want," began Grimbledung again. "I WANT!" He said louder than he really wanted to.

Julie took a step back from the door. It felt as if this unintelligible Gnome was the panther and *she* was the prey. It was unfamiliar territory. "Can I help you?" She asked, hoping for a well-spoken answer from the other Gnome.

"Yes," began Grimbledung. "You can *help* me."

Drimblerod, realization rushing across his mind, slapped his partner's ear. "Cut it out! We're here on business."

Finally, thought Julie, *a sentence*. She addressed the articulate Gnome, "Business with what? Are you applying for a job?" The increase in student body had made her put notices out for persons able to teach magic, physical fitness, as well as the standard compulsory classes; it was a fully accredited franchise after all. "Come in." She said as she stepped back out of the doorway. "What are your specialties?" She asked as she moved to sit behind her desk. Partially to look official, and partially to put a piece of furniture between her and the other, rather disturbing Gnome.

"Wands!" Grimbledung spat out, "we do wands." His tongue still was not in synch with his mind. He had a big smile across his face and didn't know how to get rid of it. He thought of kicking wet, baby River Seals, but that just made him giggle.

"We aren't in the market for a professor of the Art of Wand," began Julie, "What we really need is someone to teach etiquette and someone who can teach Alchemy and also Potions." She looked at Grimbledung, "But I have a feeling, that is not your forte. What are your credentials, Mister Gnome?" She asked the coherent Gnome.

Drimblerod slapped Grimbledung's ear. Finally, the smile left his face. "I apologize for my partner, Miss Julie. He doesn't get out much." That brought the smile back to Grimbledung's face. Drimblerod pressed on, "I am Drimblerod. Drimblerod Axebreath. This is my partner

Grimbledung Sixtoes."

"Esquire," Grimbledung said as his mouth caught up with his head.

Drimblerod continued: "We run Second Hand Sorcery, a well-established wand shop in Aution." He waited to let that sink in. He had practiced his pitch several times in the wagon- not only to make sure that the deal went well, but also to block out Grimbledung's cloud-describing antics. "We have been expanding our business and thought that your school could benefit from our wide selection of wands." He glanced at the chair beside him. Julie had not offered them seats and did not look like she would. The pitch was not going well. "We would be willing to offer wands at bulk prices for your students to practice with and would also be willing to buy back any the students do not keep or break at the end of the year. Your outlay of money would be held at the bank in Aution to assure you that your deposit is safe. At the end of the year, we settle the account and..."

"Who keeps the interest?" Julie interrupted.

Drimblerod was prepared for the question. "We do as part of our fee, and to offset wand costs to keep prices as low as possible," he answered smoothly. "That way your parents won't feel like they are being gouged. If their kids break a wand, then of course, they will be expected to buy another one, but unless a student is a chronic wand breaker, we will give them a deep discount on their replacement wand."

"What's the buy back on the wands?" Julie asked again. As she did, she glanced at the chair beside Drimblerod.

Inside, Drimblerod did a little flip. Julie's glance meant that she was considering offering them a seat. Things were looking up! "We buy back at fifty percent sale price which is well above industry standard." This was true; many wand salesmen treated wands like beasts of burden and depreciated them accordingly. However, the dirty secret with wands was that usually, they improved in quality with age because they became more stable, or in some cases were actually improved by owners with new spells being imbued on them. Of course, sometimes conflicting spells were imbued on a wand which usually rendered them highly unstable. A Levitation Dispel! Wand was a combination that did not work well at all. "And, as I said, if a student loses or breaks a wand, we will replace it at a steeply

discounted price. Sixty percent off."

"Have a seat," said Julie. The two Gnomes sat in their chairs. It was only then that she noticed they had a rat with them. It sat on the floor between them. "Oh! I am so sorry; would you like a chair too?" She asked the rodent.

Rat shook his head. "I'm fine right here. Go ahead with the business part of this expedition. I'm waiting for the lunch part."

Big Julie smiled. "Don't worry, you don't get to be my size by skipping or *scrimping* on meals." She looked at Grimbledung, He was still ogling her. Sighing, she turned to Drimblerod, "To be frank with you Drimblerod, we've been telling students to bring their own wands with them but that has led to some issues with standardization of wands, as well as some who show up with none at all. It has been bugging me because I don't think that's very professional or good for our accreditation. I'd love a display of wands that we can offer the students depending on what year they are in."

Drimblerod did another flip on the inside. He was expecting to have to bargain more to get the deal done. "Then it's a good thing we passed by this way, Miss Julie." He was staying formal with the woman to ensure he didn't accidentally insult her and ruin the deal. It was already an uphill battle with Grimbledung's antics. Thinking back, Grimbledung's comments to Nulu now made sense. He leaned back in his chair. "You'll have to forgive my partner here. I think… he's just overwhelmed."

"Overwhelmed?"

"Well, to be honest with you, when I heard the school was run by a 'Big Julie', I expected it to be a rough and tumble, edge-of-the-law looking male. Then when I heard you were a female. I expected someone ..." He was now in dangerous territory. Middle of Orcistan covered in brown gravy dangerous. Bumping an Orc so he spills his drink at the Impaled Minstrel Tavern (located just a little to the left of the center of Orcistan but close enough) while covered in brown gravy.[28] "Much, much more rough looking," he finished.

"Well said." Julie sat back in her chair. "You were half right. I did run a pretty profitable Organized." She considered her choice of words- thanks to her previous line of work, she was always mindful of incriminating statements- especially in front of strangers. "Business endeavor," she finished in a manner she felt her Troll Lawyers would approve of.

"Yeah. Really stacked nicely," said Grimbledung. Pixies tended to

speak their mind so at times, Grimbledung could not tell when his inner monologue became his outside voice. His eyes got huge as he realized he was speaking out loud. "The business arrangement that is." He said quickly, "It's well put together." He looked at Drimblerod hopefully. "Right?"

Drimblerod ignored him, as he hoped Julie did. "Hey, Miss Julie, do you think we can get a tour of your school?" Drimblerod asked, much to the relief of his partner who was now sweating at the thought of a serious ear whacking.

Julie stood. "Sure thing." Anything to get Grimbledung's mind out of the gutter. "Do you want to come too?" She looked down at the rat and was at a loss of what to call him, "Ahhh ..."

"Rat. Just Rat."

"Want to come along, Rat?"

"If there's a meal at the end of the tour, count me in." Rat shook his fur. "I'm famished."

"You're always hungry," commented Grimbledung as he reached down and picked up Rat. "I'll tote you along so you can save your strength." He sat Rat on his shoulder. "Ready when you are Julie." He said. He was deliberately avoiding looking at her.

"I'll direct you from back here so I'm not blocking your view," she suggested (mercifully) to Grimbledung as she offered them the door ahead of her.

Grimbledung exhaled. He did not realize he was holding his breath. "Sounds great! Being at your behind would really make this tour hard for me." He blushed deeply. "Err, what I meant was it would be really hard being behi ..." He stopped. That wasn't going to work either. Grimbledung decided to just look at the floor quietly. "Nice floors." He said safely.

"We'll start here on the ground level" said Julie ignoring the strange Gnome's volley of entendres across her bow -metaphorically speaking. She pulled the door closed behind her. "This is a pretty good operation we have going here."

(part of) Chapter Thirty
Wherein Julie Gives the Gnomes (and Rat) a Tour of the School

The four of them moved out of Julie's office into the large central common room which was set up like a library. Like Secondhand Sorcery, it seemed much larger on the inside than it did from the outside. Bookshelves were freestanding in no particular order yet still readily accessible. Overstuffed chairs, benches, and several tables also seemed to be placed by whim. Even so, the area was well used and there were plenty of pathways leading between the maze of bookshelves and seating options. The edge of the central room was only apparent because of where the thick, colorful throw carpets ended. The hardwood floor beyond the carpeting created a wide hallway which arced around the middle of the Gristmill. The classrooms were pie-shaped, fanning out from the central hallway and each had several windows. A tightly wound spiral staircase in the very middle of the structure ran to the very top. Above, the floor of the next level was a full fifteen feet overhead. Exposed beams thicker than Julie's arms radiated from a central ring. The central ring did not touch the spiral staircase which just twisted up out of sight. There were no supports in the middle of the room to break up the flow. Nowhere on the first floor was there a feeling of being pent-in, much less that one was inside an ancient, albeit massive, windmill.

Grimbledung had taken to staring at the ceiling. "I'm sorry, Julie," he began.

For a moment, Julie thought the Gnome was going to apologize for his behavior. But that was not the case.

"I just don't see how that floor stays up there without any supports down here." He stopped and stared up the middle staircase. "How do you work that?"

"You're teasing, right?" She asked. For the six months, she had been working in the Gristmill, the open space had never given her pause. With only a brief encounter to judge him by, she was sure he was not the brains of the operation. If she were pinned down and had to make a hard choice, she would have said that it was Rat. Out of the trio, she figured Grimbledung came in a strong fourth.

Drimblerod shook his head. "You know; I have to agree with Grim on this. That's some pretty fancy carpentry you have going on there." He also had been looking up. It was both impressive and also disconcerting- the floor which should at any moment come crashing down- spanned a good fifty feet with all the supports seeming to meet at a central wooden ring which was not attached to anything. "What sort of magic are you using for that? You have a hundred Levitation Wands inlaid in the beams?" he guessed.

The two of them were craning their heads back almost to the point of falling backwards. Even Rat took part. "I would say that it's a Feather Spell that's been cast on the wood so that it doesn't fall under its own weight."

Julie looked up. "Ahhh. No. Not even close."

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "The beams are cantilevered so all the weight's being carried on the outside of the Windmill. Once I saw the Temple to Notra Dahm. It was like that. They said it was held up with butts."

"With you, it's always about butts," scolded Rat. "You need to get your mind out of the gutter."

"No really! That's what they said. It was all butted and stressed! I'm positive that's what they said on the tour!" Countered Grimbledung angrily.

None of the three had noticed that Julie had begun moving up the stairs. She had to take them sideways to make it up the tight spiral. Once she was half way up, she called over the railing, "The tour continues upstairs. Come up before you break your necks."

The three looked at each other embarrassed. "Move it Grim!" Commanded Rat. Grimbledung obliged by beating Drimblerod to the stairs. Quickly he raced up them but by the time he reached Julie she was already on the next level. He bent over, huffing and puffing, hands braced on his knees. Drimblerod appeared soon after, breathing hard as well.

"How many floors are in this place?" Asked Rat since he was the only one not out of breath.

"Three," answered Julie. They were in a smaller version of the floor below except this room had thick wood beams evenly spaced out that ran from the floor upwards and into the ceiling.[29]

There was still a sitting area but it was substantially smaller. The book cases were also shorter so that light could make it across the

entire area. There were also fewer classrooms. As the structure went higher, it got narrower with a steeply pitched roof on the very top.

"There are classrooms on this level and the one over it. The first floor you saw had fifteen classrooms. This one has eight. The next one up has three." She leaned over the railing and peered up. Grimbledung did the same. "Up there is another floor with just one open classroom with a balcony that we use for levitation exercises, and above that is just a storage area." She stopped leaning over the railing-even for her it was disconcerting. "Then above that," she continued, "the Magicked gears that run the blades." Even from the second floor, the staircase disappeared into the darkness. Grimbledung, still leaning over the railing and looking up, had a feeling of vertigo wash over him. Losing his balance, he reached out and grabbed Julie's elbow to keep from falling over.

"Don't you dare fall with me on you, Grim!" Warned Rat, who was holding onto Grimbledung's ear for stability as the two leaned precariously over the railing.

"Hey there!" Snapped Julie. "Watch the hands buster!"

Grimbledung was definitely NOT holding onto Julie's elbow.

"Well, I'm dashed! Grim! Let go of Julie's ..." Rat began. "Let go of Julie you fool Gnome! Most inappropriate, that."

His balance somewhat returning, Grimbledung turned to look at Julie and realized where he was holding. *What* he was holding. He let go as another wave of vertigo crashed over him like a cart load of Trolls. He teetered back over the railing. This time it was Julie who did the grabbing as she reached out and pulled Grimbledung back onto his feet by his jerkin. "Delberger's Hand! Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I.. I ... I" attempted Grimbledung. The stutters had arrived with a vengeance. He looked down and walked to the seating area. He flopped onto a well-worn Shambler leather wingback chair. "I need to sit a moment, I think," he mumbled. He was flexing his hand open and closed as if it were numb.

Rat hopped off Grimbledung's shoulder, onto the arm of the chair, and then the carpeted floor. "I think I'll walk from now on. Where's the tour go from here Julie? Personally, I think it's going down. Down like a mine cart overloaded with greedy Dwarves."

Julie laughed. "I agree, Rat. Down it is. Follow me, Gents." She said as she once again side-stepped down the stairs. Grimbledung made it a point to wait until Julie was well out of sight before following Drimblerod

down the stairs.

"This is a really nice main building you have here," commented Rat, "and the out buildings are more classrooms and a dormitory, I imagine? Places for staff even?"

"Yes. That's about the size of it," said Julie. She was a little let down that it seemed the tour was being cut short; she was quite proud of the school.

"Rat!" Scolded Drimblerod, "We are *not* skipping the rest of the tour just to fill your belly."

Rat matched Grimbledung and began to look intently at the floor.

"I swear; I can't take you two anywhere." He turned to Julie, "Where to next? We need to get a feel for the place to have an idea of the kinds of wands you are going to need." He glanced to the two, who were now examining a chair intently, in a louder voice he continued, "So we'll have a good time on the tour and get something to eat later." He waited for either of them to acknowledge him. Neither did. "I said," he began again, testily; "*We are going to enjoy the tour and get something to eat afterwards*."

"Does this mean someone's going to carry me? I'd hate to faint."

Grimbledung silently reached down and picked up Rat and sat him back on his shoulder.

"No more teetering," warned Rat.

Drimblerod exhaled slowly. "OK, Miss Julie. How about we see some instructing in action."

Julie perked up. "Great! Let's go to the sparring ring. We just got that set up. That's a good place to watch the action up close and personal." She walked to the main entrance. As she got to it, the doors opened. Both of them. Per her explicit instructions to the Gargoyle Brothers -Pollux and Castor- both doors only opened for her; everyone else got one or the other. There was no pattern to which opened- it depended on which Gargoyle won Odds or Evens or whatever other bet had been made. "Thanks guys," she said over her shoulder as she exited. Before the Gnomes got to the door, the one on the left closed quickly, making them abruptly change course to weave out the open door on the right... They were, after all *explicit* instructions.

(more of) Chapter Thirty
Wherein Julie Continues to Give the Gnomes (and Rat) a Tour of the School

Julie led the Gnomes behind the Gristmill to a cluster of buildings. As they walked out the doors, Drimblerod looked over his shoulder. The Gargoyles were now both looking in opposite directions.

The entire area around the school was paved with large blocks of sandstone; even in a downpour no student was in danger of tracking mud inside. All of the buildings were different sizes, but were painted the same traditional farmer-green with white trim. "We'll eat in there," she pointed at the one that was, at one point a barn, "so we'll do a loop around to it. Don't worry, Rat," she looked at the rodent and smiled, "the food is really worth the wait. The bottom floor is a full-service Cafeteria with four of the best cooks within a week's walk. The top floor has a couple of dozen classrooms in it. We won't go upstairs because by then you will be classroomed-out." She pointed to the building they were approaching. "This used to be a stable so we knocked out the stall walls, added some seating in the hay loft and it's now the sparring ring."

They entered the building through a small door that was installed in one of the large stable doors. "The big doors still work and when we have a dance, we open them up. We can put the minstrels on the inside and tables to eat on out here. It's really nice." She smiled as she thought back to the last dance- it was a rousing success. Hopefully at the next dance, she mused, she would actually find a partner to swing her around the flagstones. The building was completely open on the inside and fresh straw was spread on the floor. A cluster of students- all around 12 years of age- were in the far corner while a gangly Human stood on a box and gave instructions.

"... so disarmin's better som'times when duelin' 'cause the law can't git you then." He finished as Julie approached. He lowered his wand. "Big Julie. Hey." He said amicably. He was a man of little words. The less said, the less chance something incriminating would come out. 'No convictions' was a record he was proud of. He was only one of three professors who called her 'Big Julie'- they were part of her Syndicate that also believed that a change of pace was in order when Raul was done in.

One didn't take the poisoning of a nearly immortal, impeccably dressed Elf lightly. At least three of her close associates didn't.

When she told them of the long since established 'exit strategy', they all asked when they were leaving.

"How are things going, Vera?" Julie asked.

Grimbledung, who had been looking about the sparring room appraised the man, "Vera? Isn't that a girl's name?" He said casually.

Veratus "Killer" Bosconius -wanted in a dozen kingdoms for murder, mayhem, mischief[30]- and worse, slowly turned his head to meet Grimbledung's appraising eyes. "*Radish*," he said simply. As he did, he barely even flicked the wand at Grimbledung from his waist. If no one were looking directly at the wand, the move wouldn't even be noticed. In a flash Grimbledung became a plump red radish. Clothes and all. Rat dropped to the ground beside GrimbledungRadish. They were about the same size.

"What in all the lands!" Exclaimed Rat as he backed away from GrimbledungRadish.

Grimbledung was aware that something was amiss. He had no arms, no legs, no body that he could ascertain, yet he wasn't gone. There was no need for breathing in the darkness that was his existence, so he was pleased about that; however, in general, he was aware that he was, all in all, nothing substantial anymore. A wisp of a thought. It was disconcerting being in that state, and even more so not knowing if he would ever come out of it. He wanted to cry, but since he lacked eyes, all he could do was whimper to himself in the darkness. It wasn't nearly as comforting.

Drimblerod staggered back and sat down roughly. His eyes were trained on the radish that was once his partner. He was in shock. "Grim?"

"Vera!" Scolded Julie, "that's a new business partner of ours. Please change him back!"

Vera nodded at Julie, "S'alright Boss." Once again, without raising his wand he flicked it discretely. Suddenly Grimbledung was back.

Grimbledung sniffed. "What happened?"

"YOU WERE A RADISH!" Rat sniffed Grimbledung's foot. There was, to his amazement, a mild radishy smell to him.

Grimbledung glanced down at Rat. "What? I think I was here, I think. But I wasn't really here. Not really, anyway. Actually, I'm not

sure ..." He looked at Drimblerod for support. All he got was a wide-eyed look in return, "What just happened?"

"Well, why don't we just move on and leave Professor Vera to his lessons," suggested Julie as she tried to usher the two Gnomes out the door.

"Vera?" Began Grimbledung, "isn't that... OWW! Rat! Why did you bite me?" He winced as he grabbed his foot and hopped about.

"Let's keep the tour moving, like Julie said," said Drimblerod has he steadied his partner and led him to the door.

"Well, you were right about one thing, Julie," commented Rat looking up at Julie. There seemed to be a grin on his face.

"What's that?"

"That definitely *was* up close and personal."

"That it was. Let's get moving before something else happens." She ushered the Gnomes to the door.

As they left, they heard the professor continue with his lesson, "An' a salad later, y'got no body. No body. No murder." He nodded. "An' no trial. And what's no trial mean?" He asked his students.

"No convictions," they all replied in unison.

Hastily Julie closed the door. "Sorry about that. He's an old business partner of mine and he's..." She smiled. "Unpredictable."

"I know what you mean. I got one of them too." He jerked his thumb at Grimbledung who was skipping stone to stone toward the next building as if nothing had happened.

The group continued to a pair of three-story buildings that were side by side. They were connected by a covered walkway in the middle and both ends. "That one was the old homestead for the Gristmill, and that one was used as a hostel," explained Julie. "We kept the Homestead pretty much like it was, but we completely refurbished it. A few of the professors use the rooms to stay here during the week and then they go back to their hometowns on the weekend. It works out well because they have a well-equipped kitchen they can share. The other rooms are used when we have sporting events or competitions for visiting schools. I'm hoping that as things get better around here, we can have some houses built and maybe a store or two opened up." She smiled proudly, "We could establish a whole new town here, if things work out." She stopped and looked around the grounds. "Julesville." She said reverently. Lost in thought, she scanned the area, seeing a boom town around her.

"What's the other building for?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Ohhh! A headless Orc riding a unicorn!" exclaimed Grimbledung, who was also looking about, but more up than anything else. "Through a field of cotton!" He added.

Broken from her daydream, Julie looked at Grimbledung. She looked up at the blob that was a cloud and saw nothing even remotely as he had just described. She began to say something but Drimblerod interrupted her.

"You'd be wasting your breath, Julie. Believe me. So, what's the other building?"

Still looking up in an attempt to discern a form from the cloud she answered, "That's the old hostel. We combined the rooms to make them bigger and ended up with twenty-five classrooms. There're five per side on the first two floors and then on the top floor, we have five really big rooms that we can use for combined classes or meetings."

"That's a lot of classrooms" said Rat, "How many students do you have here?"

"Well, about one hundred live here on the grounds and they go home for holidays and class breaks. About another hundred or so live in the general area and commute in."

"That many kids live in the area?" Asked Rat, "I'd never have imagined. That's a lot of kids. What, was there a war and follow-on baby boom that I didn't hear about?"

Definitely the brains of the operation. "Well it used to be just a couple dozen kids, but since the Teleportal service opened up, we have about a hundred students coming in every day. We definitely aren't using all our classroom space so there's plenty of room to expand into."

"If I weren't just a rat, with only the food that temporarily resides in my belly as my only asset, I'd buy into your racket."

"I appreciate the endorsement, Rat" said Julie. "OK, that building over there," she said pointing, "is the Dormitory." The building, nearly half again as long as the others and three stories tall, was the newest looking building on the campus.

"When I had it built, I figured all the students would stay here on campus. I never imagined a Teleportal service opening up." She frowned, "I should have started one of those as well."

Drimblerod shook his head. "I don't know if that would have been a good idea." He thought back to his days as a miner, before

the Great Riot of 681. "Folks may work for a Company for a bit, but after a while, the Company Houses, Company Store, Company School, and Company everything else rubs them the wrong way. Then there's picketing, rioting, and general mayhem." He stuck out his tongue. "It's better to let the money get spread around so there's no one person to be the focus of the ... general mayhem," he finished politely.

"General mayhem?" Asked Julie.

"That's polite for lynching's above bonfires that also may include some disemboweling for good measure," said Grimbledung. He remembered the riots of 681 as well. Mainly because he was a chief instigator of them.

Julie blanched. "Wow." Was all she could say. "On *that* note, I say the tour's over."

"That's it?" Asked Rat. "I was just starting to enjoy myself."

"Well, how about we finish the tour over at the Cafeteria then?" Julie smiled at Rat. "I must say; you have been pretty patient."

"Lead the way, Mistress Julie. I have some serious eating to do!" Declared Rat.

With Rat leading the way, the group moved quickly (because they were trying to keep up with Rat) towards the Cafeteria.

After a few moments, Grimbledung was breathing heavily. "Is it much farther? I'm all tired out from carrying Rat all day, you know."

"Well, no one's going to carry you," said Drimblerod, "I can guarantee that."

"Don't even think of me doing it. You'd have a stroke if I picked you up, the way you've been acting."

"Why did you put it on the other side of the entire place?" Whined Grimbledung, "Couldn't you have put it on the closer side?"

Big Julie looked down at Grimbledung and smiled. "It is on the closer side, you silly Gnome. We just started the tour on the wrong end."

Grimbledung frowned but kept his comments to himself. For a moment, at least. "That doesn't even make sense. Why would we start the tour on the far end of the campus when we arrived at the near end of it?"

"That's because it's Springtime, and the sun comes up earlier, so it's hotter on the east side of campus."

"But ...." tried Grimbledung

"So we started the tour on the opposite side to stay cool, of course."

"Keep it up, Julie" coaxed Drimblerod, "at least you're keeping him walking."

"Now wait a minute, Big Julie. That doesn't make sense. Why does Spring...." Grimbledung considered that for a moment, "Hey! It's Fall anyhow! Not that there are any actual indications of seasons around here."

"Then we must have started at the near side after all," suggested Julie.

"But ..."

Now Julie interrupted Grimbledung, "Ahhh, we're here!"

(the rest of) Chapter Thirty[31]
Wherein Julie, the Gnomes and Rat Finish the Tour and Eat Lunch

Walking across the campus they arrived at the Barn-cum-Cafeteria and Classrooms. The Cafeteria was run by quadruplet gourmet chefs; Klank, Clash, Rush, and Bonk. They were Gnolls from the same litter. The brothers snarled and barked at each other as they cooked. The barking and snarling was not reserved just for themselves; they continued both as they served heaping portions of food to anyone and everyone. Seconds were a mandatory part of the meal. "Eat you! *EAT*!" They commanded the students, and, much to their pleasure, Grimbledung and Rat as well.

"Grrrr! Finish that soup so you can have ham!" Klank eyed Grimbledung. "We made ham!" He declared proudly, "With oakapple glaze and yer gonna eat it!" He narrowed his eyes. They developed a dreamy look to them, "Yeah; fresh, juicy ham!"

As Clash delivered yet another basket of fresh baked, heavily buttered, honey rolls to the table, Grimbledung tried to hug him.

"No time for that. I got eight quiche in the oven!" He growled, although he did pause long enough for the back of his ear to be scratched. A moment's foot thumping, and he was loping back to the kitchen.

Drimblerod had a difficult time keeping up with the numerous courses that were being served. "Is there anything after this?" He asked for the fourth time. Hoping the answer would be a resounding 'no'.

Klank, pot of potato soup in the crook of his arm stopped and appraised the Gnome. "Huh! 'Course there is!" He growled, "What kinda place you take this for?" He squinted his eyes and growled. "Bonk! Brrrring this Gnome somethin' to eat! Seems he's not full yet." He then loped off, refilling bowls as he went.

"Drimblerod, if you're full, just stop eating. Every time you ask one of them if there's another course, they take it as a challenge," warned Julie. "I know about Gnomes and their legendary ability to eat, but with the Gnoll Brothers, you have truly found your match."

Drimblerod sat back in his chair. "I was trying to be polite. I don't think I could eat another bite." He exhaled slowly and placed his hands

on his distended belly, "Stuffed. I'm a stuffed Gnome. Just hang me over your fireplace."

"Tell that to one of them when they come by. That's the best compliment you could give them," Julie suggested.

"I think I'm full too," said Grimbledung meekly.

"That's something I never thought I'd hear," remarked Drimblerod.

Klank returned to their table. He was holding a tray that held what looked like an entire side of a rib cage from some large animal. The meat was falling off the bones as he walked. "Who wants rrrribs?" He snarled. "Ya gotta trrry the rrrribs. They was cooking since yesterrrday." He flattened his ears against his head menacingly, "Anyone? Rrrrribs?"

Drimblerod held up his hands plaintively. "Good Gnoll, I would love a rib but ..." He didn't get any farther. Klank's ears perked up and he brandished a large fork from a sheath on his waist. He heaped several ribs onto Drimblerod's plate. As the ribs hit, more meat fell off the bones. Quickly he shoveled meat from the platter onto the plate as well. It looked like an entire meal on its own- not the fifth course.

Watching them interact, Grimbledung tried a different course of action. "No more! I can't take any more! You have beaten me, you devious Gnoll!" He let out a burp (not on purpose). "Not another bite, I beg you." He looked at the Gnoll hopefully.

Klank appraised Grimbledung for a moment. "Fine, fine," he barked. He then squinted at the Gnome. "What about an aperitif? Ya gots rrrroomn for one of them?"

"What's an aperitif?" Asked Grimbledung warily.

The Gnoll held up his paw with two claws close together. "Just a little drink to help with digestion. Yerrr a big Gnome. I think ya can handle it." A mischievous smile came across his face. "Prolly."

The challenge was made!

Grimbledung squinted back at the Gnoll. "Bring the drink. I'll down it." His eyes grew wide, "It's a small drink, right?"

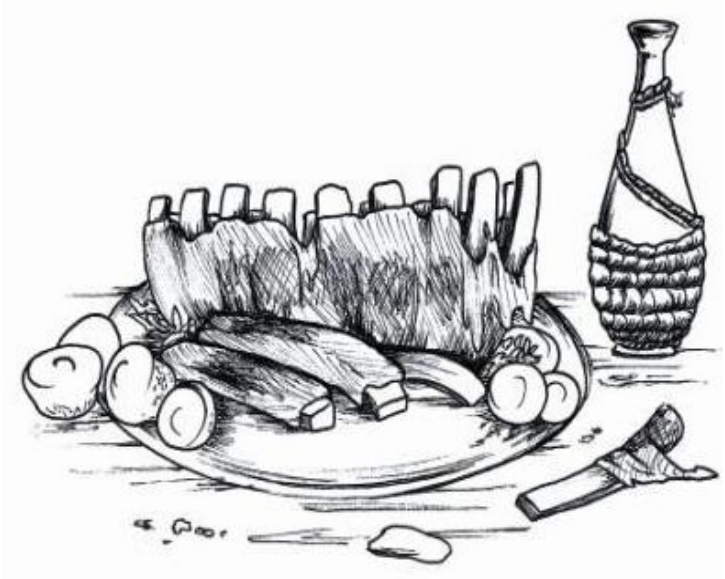
Klank barked a laugh, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. "Don't you worry. Klank'll rrrroll you out if need be." He called over his shoulder, "Aperitifs, Table Six!"

Another of the Gnolls yipped in response.

"On its way" he said as he loped off, tray in paw, searching for empty plates to refill.

"Grim" hissed Drimblerod, "eat a rib before he comes back! You too Rat!"

Rat shook his head. "My stomach's not much bigger than my head, you silly Gnome. How much do you think I can eat?"



"But Rat, you've had a bunch of rolls and three servings of meat. That's more than the size of your head," countered Grimbledung.

"Not if you chew your food really well," said Rat smugly. "Then it's smaller and fits better."

"Oh." Grimbledung thought for a moment. "Really?" He thought some more. "Say, that doesn't make much sense."

Julie shook her head, "Oh, give me a rib. I'll eat a couple." She was also quite full after several courses but she had been pacing herself; she knew the Gnoll Brothers' game.

Bonk (or at least one of the Gnolls that wasn't Klank) approached the table. He had a tray over his head. On it was a bottle of a bright orange liquid, several small glasses, and to Drimblerod's horror, a plate of dark cookies. "Aperrrtif?" He asked smoothly.

"Sure," replied Drimblerod warily. "I'll have *one*."

Bonk lowered the tray to the table, "And a home-made cookie?" He said nonchalantly. "Wafer thin, they are."

"I don't know if I should," mumbled Drimblerod.

"It's nice and thin with a coat of chocolate to help it go down," offered Bonk. "One cookie." He growled.

Drimblerod felt as if he were haggling with Akita. It was disconcerting even though the Gnolls, and as far as he knew, Akita's condition, were not contagious. It was always the specter of Lycanthropy that kept people in line around Akita. He had on several occasions actually nipped at people and even though they didn't become Werewolves, the general consensus was "What if I'm the first?" While he was thinking, Bonk was patiently waiting. Waiting and panting.

"Well?" He asked.

"One then," agreed Drimblerod sociably.

In a flash, Bonk wheeled on Grimbledung, "Whatabout you?" He growled. "Wanna aperrrtif?"

Grimbledung had a rib sticking out of his mouth, his eyes grew wide. "Want a what?" Tears welled up in his eyes. "I don't know if I can. I'm having enough trouble with this rib."

"Eat the meat, not the bones!" Said Bonk, revealing rows of sharp white teeth. "Finish off yer meal with an aperrrtif. It'll help ya digest it." He took the rib bone from Grimbledung's mouth, dropped it on his plate, and handed him a small glass, "It's good fer ya," he barked.

He picked up the bottle of orange liquid. It seemed to glow it was so bright. He poured some into the glasses on the tray then filled Grimbledung's glass to the rim. Cautiously Grimbledung smelled it. "Melons?" He guessed.

Bonk gestured at the now-filled glass. "That there's called Melonchello. Good stuff. Just dangerous. We don't serrrve it to the students."

Grimbledung moved the glass away from his lips, "Dangerous?"

"Only in that you'll end up drinking a whole bottle because it's so smooth." Julie tipped her glass up and drained it in one gulp. She raised an eyebrow at Grimbledung.

Bonk started banging his paw on the table, "Go! Go! Go!" He growled.

From various points around the room, his three brothers looked in his direction and picked up the chant. It was disturbing and yet also, strangely persuasive.

Steeling himself for the harsh bite of alcohol that usually accompanied most drinks, he tilted the glass and downed the drink. It ran down his throat like peaches daintily placed on a silk sheet resting in the shade on a warm summer's evening. There was no bite, not even a nip- or even a peck of alcohol for that matter. "This is alcoholic?" He asked unconvinced.

Bonk's eyes seemed to twinkle. "Wait for it." He cocked his head to the side as he gazed at the Gnome. "Yaaaa?"

"Ohhh. I'm all warm on the insides," cooed Grimbledung. He smacked his lips several times. The melon flavor lingered in his mouth but nothing else. A warm glow emanating from his belly was the only indication that the drink was alcoholic. From how the glow spread, *very* alcoholic. "Say, how about another shot of that stuff. I think I drank that last one too fast."

"Ya had yer one drink. Here; have a mint cookie to go with it." Bonk placed a cookie on Grimbledung's plate, and for the first time of the meal, Bonk (or any of the Gnolls for that matter) left without providing seconds.

Drimblerod sipped his drink approvingly. "This is some smooth stuff. We need a couple of bottles of this to make the ride home more enjoyable." He, too, smacked his lips when his drink was done. "Maybe three bottles. Just in case there's traffic."

"I think we can arrange that," said Julie amicably. She then switched to a more business-like tone. "So, we have a deal then. If you put together a variety of wands for the students and bring them over, we can set them up in the Parchment Shop. I'll buy them in bulk from you and then we can adjust as we go."

Drimblerod looked at his partner who nodded at him. "Sounds good to us. How about next week we load up the wagon and come out?"

She stuck out her hand and Drimblerod slapped it. "That works for me. Come by on Moonsday and we'll work out any unforeseen details." Drimblerod nodded and Julie slapped his hand in return.

"Now there's only one more thing to work out," said Grimbledung smiling.

Both Julie and Drimblerod peered at him- it was a faux pas to alter a deal once it was accepted. They looked at him expectedly.

"Is it two or three bottles that will accompany us back to Aution?" He licked the inside of the glass. "Can I keep the glass? Drinking from a bottle, that's the first step to degradation," he added haughtily.

Drimblerod shook his head. "Either will work, Grim." Then he too licked the inside of his glass. "Whichever Miss Julie decides upon." He looked at her hopefully.

"We'll make it three, but only if you agree to call me Big Julie. I haven't been called Miss since I was eight."

Grimbledung stood, "Sounds great Big Julie." The warmth had started to fade from his belly and he was intent on getting back in the wagon and into the bottles of Melonchello.

The three of them (Rat was back to being carried) made their way back to the front of the Gristmill. As they came around the side of the Gristmill, Drimblerod was *sure* the Gargoyle on the left moved his head to watch them approach. Grimbledung placed Rat at the head of the wagon, drew his wand and hacked it at Rat. After RatShambler was fully formed, he deftly attached the harness to him.

Drimblerod was already in the wagon as Grimbledung climbed aboard. "Well, I have to say," began Drimblerod, "that was one of the most entertaining and productive days we've had in a while." He smiled broadly and hoped that it wasn't TOO obvious he was stalling. "Yes, very productive." So far, no one had delivered *any* bottles of the orange goodness.

"Me too," agreed Julie. "See you next week" she turned and as she started for the double doors, both dutifully opened.

"Drim!" Whined Grimbledung. "But… But… Drim!"

"Maybe she forgot" his partner tried to console him, although in all honesty, Drimblerod was also crestfallen. He looked sadly as Big Julie entered the Gristmill. A Dwarfling trotted past her, coming out of the windmill. He had a covered basket in his hands. "What a woman." He remarked.

"You're telling me" agreed Grimbledung albeit dejectedly. He was once again searching the skies for clouds.

"Sorry. I had to find a basket to put them in," puffed the Dwarfling, "here you go." He held the basket up as high as his arms would reach. Drimblerod bent over and took the basket from his hands. It was heavier than he expected.

"Thanks, kid," said Drimblerod as he hefted the basket between

him and his partner. "Let's go home Rat." With a snort, RatShambler began to walk off slowly.

"Ohhh!" Said Grimbledung, "lookit that one!" He said pointing at a cloud.

Drimblerod elbowed his friend, "No, look at *that* one."

Grimbledung looked down at the covered basket. "What?"

Drimblerod flipped back the lid revealing four squat bottles filled with bright orange liquid, as well as several ribs and honey rolls. There were also two fresh shot glasses.

"I think I'm in love with a Gnoll," Grimbledung said.

Chapter Thirty-One
Wherein the Gnomes Return to the Shop
And Grimbledung is killed

It was dark when the Gnomes got back to the shop; the trip back was decidedly slower due to several shortcuts Drimblerod insisted they try after they started drinking the alcohol. Finally, out of exasperation, RatShambler took control of the reins and the two Gnomes sat in the back and drank the remaining Melonchello to pass the time.

At first, they planned to bring three bottles back with them for later.

After a little while, two seemed an appropriate number; one each for their own special occasion.

Shortly after that, it was then decided that one bottle for a joint special occasion to be named later was an appropriate amount to bring back. It was a unanimous vote.

By the time they arrived at the shop, all four bottles were gone.

"Whaddayasay we close for the rest dof the say?" Slurred Grimbledung as he leaned on Door for support. He had a route to the counter all planned out and was waiting for the room to swing in the right direction to make a break for it. "I donthink I should be haddling money." He made his move but the floor suddenly tilted in the opposite direction. He leaned heavily as he tried to counter the listing but was unsuccessful. He was, he thought giddily, in the shop but not any closer to the counter. With his back against the wall he squinted at the counter. "Think we can get Nulu to carry ush to the back?"

"Ish night. We're already closed." Drimblerod, now at the door himself shook his head. It felt as if his head were full of oil. The room rattled back and forth even when he was sure he had stopped moving his head. "She won't be coming by today. I told her we'd be gone the day. So for the day we're on our own for the day." He hiccupped. "Today," he finished proudly. "So ..." he continued as he stepped into the room, still holding the door for support. He reached out his hand for the counter which was completely out of reach. "...

so we have to make it on our own because Nulu isn't coming by today." He made a circle out of his finger and thumb. He closed one eye and aimed down his arm at the counter. "Now I've got you!" He let go of the door and made a dash for the counter, still squinting down his arm. He tried to keep the counter in the circle of his fingers and made it three paces before he fell over. Still holding his hand out in front of him, he crawled to the counter. "Ah ha!" He proclaimed as the side of the counter filled his field of view through his fingers.

Grimbledung slid down the wall and sat. "Say!" He exclaimed, "I've a great idea!" He hiccupped. "Why don't we have Nulu carry us to the back?"

Drimblerod rolled onto his side and sighted at his partner down his arm and through his fingers, "That does sound likes a good idea." He agreed. "I see you!" He added triumphantly.

"When ish she going to come get us?" Asked Grimbledung expectedly.

"Who?"

"Nulu, of coursh."

"Nulu ishn't coming." Said Drimblerod.

"Of course, she's not coming," agreed Grimbledung, "I hear she's got the day off or something. She's not coming by. That's what I hear anyway. Word on the street is."

"Well, if you heard it, it must be true," said Drimblerod. He rolled on his back. "I think I may stay here."

Grimbledung snored in response.

"Grim! You awake?" He asked as he turned his head to view his partner. He held his hand up to his face and looked through a ring he made with his finger and thumb. "Maybe we should wait here for Nulu to come get us."

Soon, both Gnomes were snoring contentedly on the floor of the shop. Door, as it had done several times in the past, quietly closed and latched shut. Door wasn't aware of very much but he was certain that the owners of the shop were, on the whole, odd. It shuddered in its frame and waited for morning to arrive. It really had nothing better to do.

Grimbledung, slouched over on the wall, finally reached the tipping point and fell over. As his head banged on a shelf, he popped awake. "Gah!" He exclaimed, "I've been shot in the head!" He sat up and felt his head. It was not bleeding as far as he could tell, but it felt like an entire herd of Shamblers were trotting around in it. *Shamblers*, he thought,

something about Shamblers. He pushed the thought out of his head and looked for his partner. "Drim! You alive?"

Drimblerod was on the floor on his belly, arms and legs spayed out. He picked up his head and looked at Grimbledung. "I swear, I'll never drink again," he lied. "What's wrong with that woman giving us four bottles at once? Has she never met a Gnome?" He rolled onto his side. "What's that banging?" He asked testily.

Grimbledung listened intently for a moment. "I don't hear any banging." He tilted his ear towards the ceiling. "There *is* a thumping ..."

"Are they building a second floor on this place?" Drimblerod asked no one in particular. "There're laws against doing construction so early in the day!" He sat up and held his head in his hands.

"Thump. Thump. Thump," said Grimbledung. "That's what I'm hearing. Maybe there's a dragon on the roof and his tail's wagging."

"Don't be daft," scolded Drimblerod, "How in all the lands could there be a dragon on the roof with all the construction going on up there?"

Grimbledung looked at the ceiling. "What construction? Are we expanding? Now it sounds like there's Shamblers galloping around up there," he said as he stood uneasily. He held his head in his hands. There it was again- the thought of Shamblers. Again, he pushed it out of his head.

Drimblerod pulled himself to a standing position using the counter to steady himself. "Mayhap it's the Melonchello that's causing the racket." He too was holding his head.

"Don't be absurd Drim," Grimbledung shook his head, "how could a bottle wag its tale?" He staggered to the curtain. "I say we get something to eat and see if that helps." He moved the curtain aside and stepped into the back room.

Drimblerod moved to the edge of the counter and looked up. "A strongly worded letter to the city council. That's what I'll do." He shook his fist at the ceiling, almost losing his balance in the process. He quickly grabbed the counter with both hands. After several deep breaths, he also stepped through the curtain. "I'm telling you Grimbledung, I don't think it's the Melonchello that's got my head hammering" said Drimblerod as he sat at the table. "You hear it too, right?" He put his head in his hands, "I'm going to kill whoever is

making that racket," he groaned.

"Let's ask Rat," suggested Grimbledung, "he didn't have anything to drink, so if he hears it too, then we will know it's not us."

"Brilliant! Say, where is Rat?"

Grimbledung looked around the shop. "I'm not sure. That racket is making it hard to think." Angrily he got up. "Let me yell at those construction workers, then we'll sort this out." Testily (and somewhat unstably) he made his way to the front door. It dutifully unlocked as he reached for the handle. Yanking the door open, he stepped out and was promptly kicked in the chest. He doubled over and rolled back into the store. "Drim! We're being robbed again!" He groaned as he tried to scramble to his feet. Still holding his chest, he managed to get to his knees; the wind was knocked out of him. For a moment Grimbledung was unable to speak. Finally, his breath returned.

"I really and truly loathe you. Loathe you like a fifth ace in Trufflidge. With the fires of a thousand volcanoes. White hot hate," said RatShambler. He was still attached to the wagon which stuck out in the street at an odd angle because of how he had backed in to be able to kick the door. There were several notices tacked to the wagon and one tucked under his harness. The door was scuffed where he had been kicking it. "If you don't change me back this instant, I'm going to go find a spice caravan to join. In a month, I'd own the operation. Then I'll sell it, and use the profits to hire a whole band of assassins to hunt you down, you dimwitted drunkard."

"Say, that's getting personal, Rat," countered Grimbledung. He rubbed his chest. "That really hurt you know." He considered his words for a moment. "Both what you said and what you did."

Drimblerod came rushing from the backroom, wand in hand, "Let me at them!" He said, "If those two Humans are trying to rob us again, they're in for it!" He waved the wand over his head as a purple glob of magic sizzled and swung around on a tendril of lightning like a flail.

"Drim! It's just Rat. We forgot him outside," explained Grimbledung as he got to his feet, still clutching his chest. "I think I have some broken ribs," he said absently, "or something's broken, anyway." He staggered back against the wall. "Woops," he commented to neither of them as he fell back. He coughed and droplets of blood dribbled down his chin onto the front of his jerkin. He looked down at the drops of blood on his front, and on the floor in front of him, then looked back up at Drimblerod, "You know, I don't think that's normal," he commented.

He looked ahead, staring at nothing in particular for a long moment. "Huh."

Drimblerod took a step towards his partner, "You okay?" He asked, worried.

Grimbledung waved him off dismissively but continued to stare straight ahead. He then turned his face to Drimblerod and finally focused on him. A smile came across his face for a moment "I'm..." The smile faded away. "Oh my," he remarked right before he died.

Sorry.

Chapter Thirty-Two(ish)
Wherein Akita Disposes of Grimbledung's Body

"Grimbledung!" Shouted Drimblerod as he rushed to his crumpled partner.

RatShambler was still facing out on the street and had not seen what had occurred. "Tell Grim that any time he feels like changing me back would be fine by me. Oh, and the Constable said he'd be coming back to collect on these tickets. He should be by any minute now."

"SHUT UP, RAT!" Howled Drimblerod as he tilted up his partner's lifeless head.

"What's going on in there?" Asked RatShambler.

"YOU KILLED GRIMBLEDUNG!" Drimblerod stood and turned towards the door. "You stupid rat! You killed him!"

"What?" Asked RatShambler, "How'd I kill him? I've been out here all night long." He maneuvered the wagon around so he could look into the shop. Curses from the street came into the store as the wagon blocked even more of the traffic. "What happened?" He asked as he looked at the crumbled Gnome. "What happened to Grim?"

Drimblerod stalked up to RatShambler, "You kicked him, you idiot. You kicked him and killed him. And the Constable is on his way here." He looked down at his dead partner, "And you have no one who can change you back." He raised his wand and aimed it between RatShambler's eyes. It flashed menacingly. "Not that you need to worry about that now." The wand cracked like thunder as a lightning bolt sprang from it and struck RatShambler neatly between the eyes. The bolt continued through RatShambler's head and across the street, charring a lamp post. It fell to the ground as bits of cinder. Drimblerod glared at RatShambler as the hole in his head quickly began to close in on itself.

"That hurts you know."

"So does killing my partner and friend!"

"Someone's gonna pay for that lamp post," said Akita as he stepped past RatShambler into the doorway. "And ya better not discharge that wand on the strrrreet again or I'll fine ya somethin' fierce for that as well." Akita watched as the hole in RatShambler's head sealed itself up. There was not even a discoloration to show that a substantial hole had been

blasted there moments before. "Interestin'," he commented.

"Constable Akita!" Drimblerod said worriedly. "Why don't we talk out in the street." He moved to block the Constable's view of the store.

"And that's how you ask a lawman in." Said Akita as he pushed past the Gnome into the store. He quickly surveyed the store and stopped as his gaze fell on the heap that was Grimbledung. "What's goin on here?" He growled.

"It was an accident!" Wailed RatShambler, "It wasn't my fault!"

"And that's how you confess to a lawman." He looked RatShambler up and down. "What happened to the Gnome?"

"I DON'T KNOW! I wasn't even looking when it happened." RatShambler pondered recent events, "Perhaps I kicked him while I was kicking the door."

"That was when I came by the *first* time. 'Cause of the racket." He bared his teeth. He *had* been still asleep when some pesky citizen had pounded on his door. "Ya got a ticket for that," he narrowed his eyes, "ya kept doin' it after I left?"

RatShambler blinked at the Constable. "But I wanted to get in and no one was answering and I...."

The Constable turned away from the beast to face the other Gnome; that was all the confession he needed. "So what'r you going to do with him?" He asked. "Anyone we need to tell?"

Drimblerod paused. He had no idea, really, of Grimbledung's past- family, associates. Nothing. "I have no idea if he had family." Tears welled up in his eyes, "I guess I didn't really know him at all." Drimblerod, completely at a loss of what do it, began to cry.

Akita shook his head, tongue waggling back and forth. "That's not gonna help him out any. Arrrre ya gonna doing anything more productive than that?" Akita, with many years as a Constable behind him, had dealt with many deaths and, overall, felt sorry for the loss the people felt. He remembered when his own mother had died; he was inconsolable and went on a month-long tear. It had made the parchments for the better part of the month: "BEWARE- Mad Werewolf on the Loose!" They had proclaimed. "Rum Running Short in Cool Springs," and finally by the last week, "Orcs Request Special Council Meeting- Town Becoming Too Rough For Them"

"This is all that comes to mind" sobbed Drimblerod.

"So that there Gnome was kicked then." Akita moved over to the body and appraised it. "No magicin' then?"

RatShambler, now also tearing up answered for the sobbing Gnome, "No, that's it. I kicked him I suppose." Tears began to roll down his long face, "Take me away I suppose. That's what I deserve for killing such a nice Gnome. I suppose."[32]

Akita growled deep in his throat. "Yerrrr all hopeless." He brandished a twisted wand- a Unicorn Horn- and aimed it at Grimbledung's body, "And useless." He barked something that may have been an incantation, or may have just simply been a bark. He jabbed the wand at the dead Gnome. In a flash of light, the body was gone. Only his wand remained.

Drimblerod stopped crying and looked where Grimbledung's remains had been only a moment ago. He jumped to his feet angrily, "What'd you do to him you *dog*!" He closed the gap between them quickly and looked up at the Constable. Both still had their wands out. "What'd you do with my friend!" He demanded.

Akita took a step back. Grief often gave people more courage than any potion ever could. It also often removed any and all common sense. He planned on ignoring the 'dog' comment unless it was made again. "Take it easy, Mister Axebreath." He said, making sure he enunciated every word clearly. Growls now could make the entire situation spiral out of control. "Really. I took care of your friend in the best way possible," he said as he backed away from the door. His wand was at his side but ready for action. He kept his eyes on the Gnome's wand as he backed out of the shop. "He'll be taken care of." As he got to the door, he glanced at RatShambler, "We're gonna have to talk later, you and me."

RatShambler sighed. "I'll be in town, Constable," he replied, even though he was already mentally going over the benefits and drawbacks of joining either a spice or a silk caravan.

Drimblerod took a step towards the door, "Where'd you send him?" He sniffed. "Sorry about the 'dog', Akita," he added sadly. "Really I am. Uncalled for is what that was. Uncouth and rude."

Akita shook his furry shoulders. "He's dead and not by magic. I sent him to the best place for that."

Drimblerod narrowed his eyes. "*Where to, Akita*?" He began to raise his wand.

"The morgue, of course." With that he backed around the corner and loped off. Quickly.

(some of) Chapter Thirty-Two
Wherein Grimbledung's Body Arrives At Prost Garrison

"Doc! Doc Marone!" Said the corpsman as he poked his head into the window, "We got a body out here!" He ducked back out for a moment, then stuck his head back through. "Looks like it's a Gnome."

Doctor Marone looked up from his parchment- the Daily NEWS (that was the kind of doctor he was). An interested look crawled across his face. It did not remain there though- it merely started on one side and made its way to the other then went wherever interested looks went when they were through for the day. Boredom was back in place in no time. "Great Scott. A body. You don't say. We don't get a lot of *those* here." He looked back down at the parchment, "In the morgue."

"But Doc, this one's in one piece!" Insisted the corpsman. He disappeared for a moment then returned, "And he's still warm!"

Doc Marone exhaled as he rerolled the parchment. "Bring him in and I'll take a look." He stood and hobbled to the door to open it, peg leg thumping as he went. Doctor Marone had been working at the Prost Garrison for nearly a year and because of its hazardous location along the Anti-Ogre Wall, he tended to deal with 'bits' and sometimes 'most of' corpses. It was very rare that an entire corpse actually made it to him. Once, a bucket of Ogre scat was brought to him "This was all we could find," the soldier had explained, "What can you do for him?" Even with all the potions and herbs at his disposal, the prognosis for the digested trooper was not good. On the bright side, Doc Marone *did* win 'Best Roses of Show' that year at the annual Druid Convention. To his credit, when he accepted the award, he cryptically thanked 'the West End Roving Sentry, Night Shift' for his part in making the roses award-winners.

The corpsman, a stout Human huffed and puffed as he carried in the body. "I don't get it," he grunted, "I guess Gnomes are like Dwarves." He struggled to put the body on the combined examination/ operation/ embalming / zombification table

(sometimes with the same patient), "They are sure heavier than they look." He maneuvered the body around and then looked at it. "No holes anywhere," he commented as he examined the drops of blood on the front of the body's shirt. "Poison maybe?"

Doc Marone shook his head. "His color's too good for that." He pressed on the Gnome's chest. It crackled and popped. "Wow, I think a cart ran over this fellow." He moved to the sides of the chest and began to probe there as well. "Maybe even a wagon."

"What do you think?" Asked the corpsman, "Can we use him?"

"Maybe as a bearer, Gnomes aren't the best fighters around." He held his hands out, elbows tucked in close to his body, "Too short of a reach," he said. "We can use him in the supply room, I suppose. Gnomes are good organizers. So I hear."

The corpsman moved to a shelf crowded with jars of assorted sizes and took a large stoneware jar that had a skull and crossbones painted on it. He held it at arm's length as he placed it beside the body. He took out what appeared to be a butterfly cocoon, soaked in honey. "You think one of these is enough?"

The doctor wiped his hand on his stained smock and then stuck his finger into the Gnome's mouth. He looked at the ceiling for a moment. He pulled his finger out and examined it. "He's still pretty warm. One should be plenty," said the doctor, re-wiping his hand on the smock.

The corpsman handed him the cocoon daintily so as to not rub off too much honey. The doctor took it and quickly shoved it into the Gnomes mouth. He clamped it shut with one hand as he held out his hand to the corpsman, "Poker." He said as he assumed a professional tone.

"Poker," said the corpsman as he slapped a sharpened stick into the doctor's hand.

The doctor slid the stick through his fingers into the Gnome's mouth. He jabbed it around several times until he felt it puncture the cocoon. As he pulled it out, it trailed what looked like tar intermixed with honey. Without taking his eyes off the Gnome's mouth, he handed the stick to the corpsman. "Plug," he commanded.

The corpsman took a stained handkerchief from his back pocket, snapped it once to knock the dust (and other accoutrements) off and handed it to the doctor, "Plug," he said.

The doctor took the cloth in his hand and glanced at it, "Prep the plug, what's wrong with you?" He handed it back to the corpsman. "And

quickly, man!"

The corpsman laid the handkerchief on the table beside the Gnome's leg and rolled it.

"Plug," said the doctor testily.

"Plug," the corpsman repeated as he placed the rolled cloth in his hand.

Quickly, the doctor stuffed one end of the cloth in one of the Gnome's nostrils, and the other end in the other one. "Clamp"

The corpsman, already anticipating the doctor's request had one in his hand. In hopes of making up for the failed rolling incident, which he was sure would be addressed later, he slapped a clothespin into the doctor's hand, "Clamp."

The doctor quickly removed his hand and used the clothespin to pinch the Gnome's lips shut. He backed away warily. "I think that's got it," he said.

"What's the prognosis, Doc?" Asked the corpsman, hoping to keep Doctor Marone's mind off the impending scolding.

"Time will tell," he said solemnly, "time will tell."

"I'm going to see if anyone else comes in after him. Maybe there was a group of them that got run over," said the corpsman as he quickly moved to the door. "Anything else, Doc?" He asked warily.

The doctor, already in his seat, had begun to unroll the parchment, "That's it, corpsman." Without looking up he continued, "And keep an eye on your prep- work. We're not running some ramshackle aid station here."

Content with the mild reprimand, the corpsman quickly exited the building and ran into two lanky humans deep in conversation. "Drilling Peachey!" Said the first one, "that's how you whip a bunch of savages into shape. A few longbows and a little drilling and we can take over the whole of the Great Unknown."

The other one shook his head as the corpsman stopped to listen, "Davie, why would we want to do that?" Peachey asked.

"Because we can set ourselves up like kings afterwards. You and me Peachey! Kings!" Said Davie as he put his arm around his accomplice and led him away.

The corpsman shook his head as he went the opposite way of the two scheming Humans. Many people came out to make their fortune in the Desert of the Great Unknown. They were usually the

ones in the 'bits' category when they were discovered.

The doctor had barely finished the second page of the parchment when the Gnome on the table began to thrash about. "Corpsman!" Bellowed the doctor as he rose to his feet. He held the chair in front of him as a shield. At times, the recently deceased were disoriented and continued to act as if they were still in the incident that resulted in their demise. If it were a duel, things could get hairy. "Calm down, Mister Gnome," said the doctor firmly. "You're safe here."

Grimbledung sat up and looked about the room, "Whhaffm?" He asked.

The doctor pointed to his own lips. "Clamp." He said flatly. The Gnome apparently was not involved in a traumatic incident, he mused. In some cases, the reawakened didn't even realize they had died- if not that much time had passed.

"Clamfmm?" Asked the Gnome again.

The doctor shook his head. Definitely not a violent Gnome. He stepped forward and pulled the clothespin from the Gnome's lips. It snapped shut as he pulled it off.

"Owwa!!" Complained the Gnome. "Heyd. Wherd am I?"

"Plug." The doctor said pointing at his own nose. Maybe this Gnome could pass arrows and crossbow bolts. The stockroom might prove too taxing mentally. "Plug." He said again.

"Plugdb?" Asked the Gnome "Where'db Plugdb?"

"Oh for the love of Sheba's teats." He said as he stepped forward again and yanked out the cloth. "Try now," he snapped.

"Say! Where am I?" Asked Grimbledung. "And how'd I get here?" He looked at the doctor, "And who are you?" He looked at his unfamiliar surroundings. "And how'd I get here?" He added angrily.

Doctor Marone shook his head. "Here's the sum of it. You were dead. You were Magicked here. Nothing was missing so I fixed you. Good so far?" The Gnome nodded, so he continued, "And since we fixed you, you are now a conscript in the army of the Great Anti-Ogre Wall." He put his hands on the operating table. "So far so good?"

Grimbledung swung his legs off the table. "No, actually, no. Not good, Doc." He looked around the room again, "In fact, this is as far from good as you could get." He prepared to hop off the table.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," warned the doctor.

Ignoring him, Grimbledung hopped off the table. His legs immediately gave out under him and he fell in a heap. "What's wrong with

my legs?" He complained from the floor, "What'd you do to my legs?"

"You've been dead for a little while. I'd say it's going to take the rest of the day for all your limbs to work properly."

The corpsman had been at the window listening, finally he poked his head in, "Need a hand Doc?" Often disoriented recently-deceased patients could be talked down by one person- a second entering could set them off and end up with them being re-deceased. The doctor nodded without looking at him.

The corpsman moved to the door and entered the room slowly. "Let me help you back on the table, Mister Gnome," he said soothingly. He picked up Grimbledung and heaved him back on the table. "Sitting or lying?"

"Sitting," said Grimbledung. "Until I get enough strength to leave."

"Oh you'll have plenty of strength by the time your conscription is done," the doctor assured him, "plenty."

Grimbledung blinked at the doctor, "How long's a regular conscription?" He asked warily.

"Six months for a regular conscription."

Grimbledung considered this for a moment; six months to repay not being dead. It was, overall, not a bad deal. Once he sent word to Drimblerod and had his wand sent out, that would go by quickly. After all, a service *had* been rendered, so payment was due. "Six months is not too bad. I've been in the Army twice before already. Hate being a BOOT again, but I can do it if I need to."

"Well," began the corpsman hesitantly, "that's a *regular* conscription. That's people who just show up or are sent here ready to serve."

"How long is my conscription?"

"We had to provide you with extensive treatments and procedures. That's expensive, you know."

"How long?" Grimbledung asked warily.

"And supplies were used. Both magical and non-magical. Those will have to be replenished. These *are* hard times..."

"How long?" More testily than warily now.

"Above and beyond the six months?" Asked the corpsman. He had begun to move towards the door.

"Total," demanded Grimbledung. "*In total*, how many months

am I going to have to be here?"

"Eight," said the corpsman hesitantly. He was now at the door and he reached behind him to the latch.

"Eight months?" Said Grimbledung. "That's only two more months for life- returning services. That's not so bad." He nodded at the man. "Sounds good to me."

The corpsman opened the door and as he backed out of it, he corrected Grimbledung: "Years." He quickly closed the door.

"Years? EIGHT YEARS?"

The doctor had picked up the chair and was once again holding it in front of him. "Settle down, Mister Gnome. It's not as bad as it sounds."

Grimbledung glowered at the doctor. "Not bad?" He said. "You don't know what bad is!" He scooted along the table towards the doctor, "You people haven't experienced bad!"

Doctor Marone moved out of reach of the rabid Gnome, "We deal with Ogres and worse up here," he said nonchalantly, "we know what bad is."

"Ogres?" Grimbledung cackled, "he thinks Ogres are bad," he said to no one in particular. "Ogres are like little cute rabbits in a field of blooming flowers that smell bad!!" He snarled. "Ogres? Ooop! Ooooop! Wait until they get a load of me!" He dropped from the table and dragged himself towards the doctor with his hands. He was snarling and to the doctor's alarm, drooling excessively.

"CORPSMAN!" Yelled the doctor in a frightened voice, "*CORPSMAN*! Guards! Golem Squad!! Someone help!"

(the rest of) Chapter Thirty-Two
Wherein Grimbledung is Kicked Out of Prost Garrison.

Forever[33]

"Sir, I really think we made a mistake with this one," said the Master at Arms to the Garrison Commander as they looked at Grimbledung. "He's been in the stocks for all of three weeks and he's even more angry now that when we put him in." The Master at Arms, a broad-shouldered Warrior who had participated in scores of battles, took a step back from the snarling Gnome. He was, once again, gnawing on the wood braces that held his arms. "I think we should engage in a tactical flanking maneuver from our relationship with this conscript."

The Garrison Commander -Major General Granger Prost- looked at his Master at Arms. "What is that I just heard? The famed tactician that led the expedition to the bowels of the Bronze Mines against hordes of rampaging Orcs? That put down the Brownie Uprising? That secured the Steel Mines of Chalybeate? *That* Warrior is suggesting we retreat?" General Prost looked at the Gnome. He had managed to chew away half the wood once again. This would be the fourth time they would have to replace the stocks. He took a step back as well.

"Kill, Kill! *KILL*!" Said Grimbledung between bites at the wood. He had said not much else since being put in the stocks. It had taken four Golems to put him in them. They barely managed. Afterwards, one of the Golems even had to be 'decommissioned' due to (some) physical and (mostly) emotional distress.

"Sure, there is no honor in retreating, but there is a whole lot of life afterwards to pat yourself on the back for doing it." Suggested the Warrior. "This crazy Gnome might just eat us in our sleep if we let him out. General, I say we put him on the next supply train going south and let the authorities in Aution deal with him."

"Make it so, Master at Arms," said the General as he turned to leave. Being this close to the Gnome made him nervous. "I'll be on

the wall inspecting the troops while you move him." As quickly as he could go and still maintain his military bearing, the General left.

The Warrior leaned in and growled at the Gnome, "You're getting outta here, Gnome. Not 'cause you won, but because I got better things to do than deal with the likes of you." He kicked dirt at the Gnome who snarled in return. "And to top it off yer getting a dishonorable discharge, not one of them Failure to Adapt discharges other conscripts get!" He kicked another clod of dirt at the Gnome. Grimbledung caught the clod in his mouth. He stared at the Master at Arms as he silently chewed and swallowed it. Quickly as he felt he could afford to go and maintain his honor, the Master at Arms left as well. Perhaps, he would accompany the General in the inspection and let the Golems deal with the Gnome. After all, whatever parts they lost, could be slathered back on. Usually.



As he left, the Warrior heard the Gnome singing;

We'll be leavin' the Garrison in the 'morn!
We'll be leavin' the Garrison in the 'MORN!

We'll be leavin' the Garrison,
leavin' the Garrison,
leavin' the Garrison,
IN THE 'MORN!

Shaking his head, The Master at Arms decided that he would definitely be accompanying the General in the inspection. The Golems would handle getting rid of the rabid Gnome.

The next morning, a squad of regular Mark III Golems arrived at the stocks.[34]

"Ahhh,, Yer suppos'd to be ... ahhh" the head Golem (appointed because it was twice as smart as the rest of his squad) stopped for a moment, "ahhh. Goin." He looked at the Gnome. "Ahhh.. away." It finished triumphantly. The others grunted in agreement, marveling at how eloquently their Squad Chief had put it. "So ahhh .... when we ... ahhh ..."

The Golem looked up at a passing bird. When it looked back down at the Gnome, it had forgotten what it was saying.

"So when we unlock the stocks," offered Grimbledung.

"Ahhh... yeah. When we unlock the stocks," the Golem agreed, "when we unlock the stocks."

Both Grimbledung and the Golem stared at each other. Finally, Grimbledung broke the silence, "You're not supposed..." He coaxed.

"Yah... Ahhh you're not supposed to make any .... any…Ahhh..." He furrowed a clay brow. "Ahhh trouble?" He offered.

"Yes. I promise I won't make any trouble."

"Kill Gnome now?" Asked another Golem. The other three nodded. Surely, this Golem was going to be the next Squad Chief.

"Ahhh... no." The Golem thought back to his orders. "Ahhh. Only if the Gnome squirms. Then we kill 'im really most sincerely dead."

A third Golem popped open the shackles and appraised the Gnome. Grimbledung didn't move a muscle. He was not sure what the threshold was between squirming and stretching. Golems were notorious for misunderstanding orders. This was mainly due to the fact that they usually had rocks, or in this case, clay for brains.

"Ahhh... now ... ahhh," began the Golem Squad Chief, "Ahhh

... to the wagon." He pointed with a roughly molded clay arm as thick around as Grimbledung's leg. "Ahhh... thataway." His fingers looked like cut down table legs stuck into clay pot palms. The troubling part was that they might very well have been just that.

Grimbledung hopped up smartly -with what he hoped was no squirming at all- and moved directly to the wagon. When he got there, he sat down promptly and didn't move a muscle. The other Golems looked crestfallen that he didn't cause a ruckus. Word had spread quickly around Prost Garrison that there was a mad Gnome inside the walls and it was discovered in an unfortunate series of events to be both a biter *and* a spitter. "Let's go Messrs Golems," said Grimbledung, "I'm ready when you gents are."

Dejected, the Squad Chief moved to the front of the wagon. There was a Shaggy-tailed Shambler harnessed to the front of it. "Ahhh. Who's comin?" It asked.

One of the golems trudged forward and got into the wagon beside Grimbledung. "Run and'll knock yur head clean off," it said flatly. "*Clean. Off.*" It swung its huge fist in an uppercut motion. Disturbingly, it made a 'whooosh' sound as it went.

"Ahhh. Sit up ... ahhh here," said the Squad Leader. The other Golem obliged. Since Golems weren't made of flesh they didn't tire in a chase, so any attempt to run from the wagon would be fruitless- even if Grimbledung weren't a squat Gnome. "Ahhh... GO!" The Golem cracked a whip at the Shambler and it began to trot out of the Garrison.

After an hour of bouncing around in the back of the wagon, Grimbledung was bored; it was a clear blue sky so there were no clouds to look at, so he took to hanging over the side of the wagon to look at the countryside. With a quick warning that consisted of two words- "clean off," the Golem up front made sure that was as far as Grimbledung got to getting out of the wagon.

Another hour later, even the rolling countryside couldn't keep Grimbledung's' attention. "I'm bored" he said to no one in particular.

The Golems didn't respond; they were adept at ignoring prisoners; whether they were complaining or shrieking in terror, they paid no mind. Finally, Grimbledung spotted a caravan approaching. *At least that'll be interesting for a little bit*. He sat up and watched it approach. It looked like a spice caravan since the Shamblers were outfitted with barrels and sacks. As they approached, the lead Shambler began to look familiar. The closer it got, the more forward Grimbledung leaned. Soon, he was sitting

between the two Golems. Since sitting between them did not violate the "Do not. NOT! Let the Gnome out of the wagon. NOT out of the wagon. NOT until you get to town" rule, the two Golems allowed it.

Much to their annoyance, Grimbledung began hopping on the seat from foot to foot, using the Golems for support. "Rat! Raaaat!" He shouted.

'Clean Off' Golem swiveled his massive head to look at him angrily, but now, Grimbledung was ignoring it.

"RAT!!" He cheered, alternating between pumping his fists in the air and holding onto (and patting) the top of the Golem's head.

RatShambler was lost in thought, deciding whether to pitch the Wagon Driver his business proposal or just eliminate him altogether when he heard his name being called. He looked up and there, hopping between two stern looking Golems, was Grimbledung. Grimbledung who not three weeks ago, was really and truly dead. Grimbledung. The Gnome who he had mourned for the nearly three weeks- starting the next day since sneaking out of town in the dead of night (a lone Shambler does tend to draw attention – even in Aution) to avoid the Constable. Grimbledung, who had the ability to return him to his comfortable (and less identifiable) glory as Rat. He picked up a trot to close the distance quicker. "GRIMBLEDUNG!" He called, much to the surprise of not only the other Shamblers, but the men working the caravan. "I'm going to kill you!" He moved to a full gallop. "You maniacal Gnome!"

Grimbledung leaned forward, using the Gnomes to keep him on the wagon. 'Kill you' wafted on the breeze to his ears. "Wait, what?" Grimbledung asked. He leaned back. "Maybe we should just keep going." He prodded 'Clean Off' Golem on the side of its neck, "How's that sound to you? Just go straight to town with no stopping." He poked the Golem again.

It peered down at him with annoyance somehow conveyed in the fist-sized rocks that were its eyes. The Golem looked at its Squad Leader. "Dump'im here?" It suggested.

The Squad Leader looked from its cohort to the Gnome and back. "Uhhmmm .... Yeah." Without ceremony, and more importantly without stopping, 'Clean Off' Golem grabbed Grimbledung by the back of the neck, heaved him around to the side of the wagon, and let go. In what was a completely inadvertent act of

mercy, the wagon veered away from Grimbledung as it did an arc to return to Prost Garrison instead of running over him.

Grimbledung rolled to a stop and stood. RatShambler was nearly upon him. "I can explain!" Began Grimbledung. RatShambler skidded to a halt in front of him. After a moment, Grimbledung shuffled his feet in the dirt, "Actually I can't. I have no idea how most of this happened. I think I was dead for the important bits."

RatShambler shook his head. "I can't believe you. How is it you're alive? Can you explain that?"

"Ooohhh! That part yes! The Army doctor at Prost Garrison brought me back to life to make me a conscript." He beamed in satisfaction.

"How did you even get to Prost Garrison?"

"Dead for that part," explained Grimbledung glumly.

"So why didn't you contact us?"

"Ohhh! That one I know!" He hopped back and forth. "I was in the stockade." Grimbledung thrust his fists in the air.

"You were in stocks *for three weeks*?" RatShambler Gaped.

"Well, I don't know how long I was dead but once I was alive again, it took just the rest of that day to be put in stocks. If it's been three weeks, then I was in for three weeks." He smiled proudly- He was getting answers right! "Ask another one, I'm on a roll!"

"Do you know who killed you?" Asked RatShambler hesitantly.

Grimbledung frowned. The streak was over. "No. That's kind of fuzzy. The last thing I remember was we were riding home in the wagon from Big Julies and we were almost to the Shop." He furrowed his brow with concentration. "That's about it."

"Fine by me. Say, want to go home? I'm tired of being a Shambler. They don't take nearly enough naps," said RatShambler.

Grimbledung perked up. "Do I? Let's go!" He resumed hopping back and forth.

The caravan finally caught up to the pair and the Trail Master approached them. "Say there ..." He paused because he was unsure of what to call his apparently talkative Shambler. "Shambler?" He tried. "We're tryin t'get to town with that stuff. I'd 'preciate it if'n you'd get back in the train."

RatShambler looked at the Trail Master. "Here's the deal, Cutter," he began, "I quit as of right now. I'm a free Shambler and I've decided that I'm through working. And I've got a proposition for you."

Cutter just looked at RatShambler openmouthed; he was accustomed to having to deal with beasts of burden, but not accustomed to have them deal back.

"Here's what I'm going to do for you." RatShambler winked at Cutter, "I'll tell the other Shamblers to work really hard for you so you make up the loss of me and my cargo. I imagine I can gain you a good couple of days on your routes."

Cutter considered the offer and closed his mouth, now his eyes were wide.

"How's that sound?"

"That sounds good't me. Coupla days 'ere and 'aire will add up." He stuck out his hand then rethought the action and lowered it. "Deal?" Said Cutter.

"Deal. Let me tell the other Shamblers." RatShambler moved off to the head of the silk train and began to grunt as he walked down the line of beasts.

Cutter and Grimbledung stared at each other in the prolonged silence. "Sure has been hot out here," offered Grimbledung.

"Nary a cloud in th' sky," said Cutter

"Yep."

"Yep."

Finally, to both of their relief, RatShambler returned. "OK. It's all settled. Just keep them in food and water, and it's all set." RatShambler moved beside Grimbledung, "Climb aboard so we can make good time." He bent at the knees so that the Gnome could clamber on. "Nice doing business with you, Cutter," said RatShambler as he walked off, leaving the confused Trail Master in the middle of the road.

"You speak Shambler? I had no idea the enchantment gave that ability," commented Grimbledung after they had walked a few minutes.

RatShambler shook his head. "No, that would be an absurd effect for a Transmogrification spell. But if he gives those beasts more food and water than he currently does, they'll definitely walk faster for him." Soon, the rolling of RatShambler lulled Grimbledung to sleep and they continued the rest of journey in silence.

Obviously; because one of them was asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Three
Wherein Gatherer Division Wands Unfortunately Do Not Begin to Arrive

The pair arrived in Aution later that evening and Grimbledung's return was met with much fanfare by Drimblerod and Nulu. Akita was pleased to see there hadn't been a murder (those directly affected his annual raises) but upset that RatShambler left town without being questioned. "I'll catch that beast yet," he growled. Rat heartily wished him luck as the Constable left.

The next morning, Grimbledung flipped the sign on the shop, glad to be back in friendly, and more importantly- indoor surroundings. He opened the door and let the breeze blow in. "Here we go people," he called out the door, "back in business."

"And he doesn't remember how he got killed, so make sure you don't bring it up," said Rat emphatically. "Not a word, Drimblerod."

"It was all an accident so he won't hear it from me. I'll try to mention it to Akita the next time I see him. I can't imagine he'll care one way or another."

"Fine."

"He should also know that you're the Shambler."

"What?"

"He's going to find out sooner or later anyway. It might as well be on your terms."

"Fine." Rat looked over his shoulder. "The crazy Gnome cometh."

"Have any more Gatherers come in while I was away?" Grimbledung asked hopefully as he moved to the counter, "The Jamboree is just around the corner and we need as many people as possible, you know."

Drimblerod shook his head, "What we need is wands to come in that we can *resell*, you know. That Jamboree of yours is going to be a big pit that we throw money into if we don't get a good number of unusual wands to sell." He scrunched up his face, "And if all our hopes lie in that Runion Earl character, it's going to be a deep hole that we're going to have."

Grimbledung shook his head, "They'll come through, don't you worry." He looked at the door expectedly, "Why we'll have someone in

here within the next few moments, just you watch."

"Well while you're waiting, I think I'll watch from across town. I'm going to get a haircut and a bath."

Grimbledung gawked at his partner, "A haircut and bath? What for?"

"I was thinking of going out on the town tonight. It's been a while," he remarked offhandedly.

Grimbledung flailed his arms, "I wanna go too! I wanna go carousing! I wanna go out too!" He kicked himself mentally for not bringing up his carousing requirements earlier. Now he could get left behind tending the shop. "Wanna go!" He tugged on his ears.

Drimblerod put his hands up mimicking his partner, "Go? Sure you can go. Who said you couldn't?" He wailed, "I just wanted to get a shave and bath before I did."

Grimbledung wiped a tear from his eye, "Really? 'Cause I was meaning to talk to you about going out once and a while. I'm a young Gnome, after all."

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at his partner, "Young?"

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively, "Well, in the grand scheme of things I am."

"Fine, fine," said Drimblerod, "You tend the store while I get cleaned up, then if you want to go over, I'll tend the store. You *are* going to get cleaned up, right?"

Grimbledung ran his fingers through his hair as he looked down to appraise his attire, "Well, maybe a quick wash and a cut will do me good."

Drimblerod gave a relieved sigh, "Great. I'll be back in a snap, then ..."

Grimbledung thrust his fists in the air and did a little gig, without looking at Drimblerod (lest he stop him) he broke into song-

Aution town'll be singing this song
Who they? Who they!
Aution town's Gnomes'r going strong!
Oh they do, do they!

Gonna drink to - night
Gonna spend my pay!
Aution town'll be singing this song

Drimblerod shook his head as he left the store. As he closed the door he looked back at Grimbledung who continued to sing at the top of his lungs. The jig hadn't stopped either.

As he turned to go down the sidewalk, he ran headlong into a group of Halflings, knocking the lead one to the ground. *There's quite a lot of Halflings in town all of a sudden. Very peculiar. It was like the Mysterious Halfling Migration of 657, right after the Great Strawberry Blight. Maybe Halflings were mad-crazy for strawberries*. Drimblerod looked down at the Halfling who had sat down hard after the collision, "Sorry about that Pal, I didn't see you there."

The Halfling glowered up at Drimblerod, "Watch where yer goin'!"

Drimblerod offered his hand to the Halfling, "Truly, I had my mind on other things." Drimblerod understood the issues that fueled the contrariness of Halflings; except for Pixies and Brownies, they were the smallest of civilized races. *Practically everyone* looked down at Halflings. It gave them a race-wide chip on their shoulders. Individually, they were fine to deal with, but once several got together, the large chip became a Large Chip. "Here let me help you up," he offered.

"I'll help myself up, *Gnome*," sneered the Halfling as he worked his way to his feet. Several of the other Halflings grunted their own disapproval.

"In any case, again, sorry about that. I wasn't looking where I was going." Drimblerod gave a casual, very non-regulation salute to the soldiers. "Carry on." With what looked like ten Halflings, the chip was probably more of a CHIP and he didn't want to have it wacked about his head. "Have a fine day, good Halfling," he said as he tried to walk around the group.

The group spread out blocking his path. "Yer in an awful hurry *Gnome*. Afraid to stand here with us?"

It was the second time the Halfling had turned 'Gnome' into what seemed like an insult. Chip or not, Drimblerod's patience was wearing thin. They were, after all, Halflings. "Sure. Let's stand here for a while." Drimblerod crossed his arms nonchalantly and began tapping his foot. He surveyed the area, then the sky, "Lots of weather we've been having," he remarked, "for the season."

One of the Halflings shoved him. "You tryin' to be funny?"

Drimblerod looked down at the Halfling, "No," he said with a smile to the Halfling that just fed him the perfect straight line, "If I were trying to be funny, I'd say 'A naked blonde walks into a bar with a pooka under one arm and a two-foot salami under the other. She lays the pooka on the table. The bartender says, 'I suppose you won't be needing a drink.' And the naked lady says..."

"Drimblerod!" Nulu called from across the street, "You okay over there?"

Drimblerod looked at Nulu, "Nulu! I was just coming to see you. Got a second?" Drimblerod pushed his way between two Halflings that were penning him in and quickly made his way across the street. "I'm glad to see you!"

"We'll talk later *Gnome*," said the leader of the group -Corporal Colossus- "We've unfinished business."

"I wanna hear the end of the joke," lamented one of the Halflings.

Corporal Colossus punched him in the face, "Quiet you! You'll never hear the end of that joke. We're not here for story time! When we meet up with the Intel Halflings tonight, we'll let them know about this Gnome. I'll get him to the top of the list," he snarled. He looked up at the sign of the shop he was in front of. "Second Hand Sorcery? Psychotic Readings? Drimblerod?" He kicked the side of the shop. "And I'll get this shop at the top of the list too." He kicked the shop again. "Let's go reconnoiter and harass some more." The other Halflings fell in step behind him as they continued down the sidewalk, shoving and insulting as they went.

Drimblerod watched as what appeared to be the lead Halfling punching another one in the face, then kicked his shop. Twice. "What is wrong with those people. I mean, I understand why Orcs are the way they are, but what gives with Halflings?" He asked, even though he knew the answer.

Nulu shrugged. "I think it's some sort of inferiority complex. Because of their size, they always try to make sure they act like the toughest one in the room." She watched the group of Halflings continue down the sidewalk, shoving an elderly lady out of their way as they went. She swapped the mincemeat pie she was carrying to her other hand. "Or the street. So, what did you want to see me about?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "Oh, nothing, sorry. I just wanted to get away from those crazies. I'm going to get a haircut and bath."

"A night on the town?" Nulu winked at the Gnome.

"It's been a while and I *know* Grim has been dying to get out and about. I'm amazed he hasn't mentioned it yet."

He thought back to their exchange in the shop, "You should have seen him when he thought I wasn't going to take him with me."

Nulu gave Drimblerod a poke, "You should be careful pushing his buttons. You don't know which one controls his craziness."

Drimblerod laughed. "That's true. I didn't look at it that way. Say you want to come along? Tonight?"

Nulu shook her head, "I don't think that's a good idea. An ..." She considered her words, "... out on the town Grimbledung and me in the same place? That may not be the best idea." She stuck out her tongue. "The amount of double entendres I'd be ducking would be staggering."

"I understand completely. Well, I'm going to get to the barbers so that Grim can go when I get back. It seems like a pretty quiet day so it seemed safe to leave him alone."

"Well, have fun then." Nulu waved as she turned and continued up the sidewalk.

Drimblerod went the other direction, towards the barber shop.

After an hour, Drimblerod returned to the wand shop. Grimbledung was sitting sad-faced at the counter. "This is no fun," he lamented. "And I'm bored."

Drimblerod smiled at his partner, "Don't worry. Things will pick up. And if not, I've got something that might help cheer you up."

Grimbledung lifted his head off is hands. He still didn't smile, "I can't imagine what could do that. Besides customers wanting to join the Gatherers Division."

Drimblerod moved to the counter, across from his partner, "This will. While I was getting my hair cut, Seville told me there had been another skirmish outside of town to the east. This time the local militia was able to take care of it. It seemed to be another group of mercenaries sent this way."

"Dead mercenaries is good," said Grimbledung, "that's nice to hear at least."

Drimblerod shook his head, "That's not the good part. Seville said that the Mercs had some magic with them."

"Dead magicians is good too."

"No, no, that means that there might be wands out there. You should check it out on the way to the barber shop."

Grimbledung perked up. "Well, that's at least something. Searching dead bodies for wands *does* always cheer me up."

"Great. I've got the shop; you check out the wands and get cleaned up. No matter what, we'll have ourselves a hot time on the old town tonight."

"That would make a good song," remarked Grimbledung.

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at his partner, "What would?"

" 'Check the wands, get cleaned up' of course," said Grimbledung as he moved around the counter and made his way to the door.

"Watch out for Halflings, by the way," warned Drimblerod, "There's a group of them wandering the town looking for trouble."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll make sure I stop by and tell them hello." He stepped through the door and onto the sidewalk. He looked left and right. There was not a Halfling in sight. With a shrug, he headed toward the eastern limits of town.

Chapter Thirty-Four
Wherein Grimbledung Goes Searching for Wands

Grimbledung made his way to the edge of town, searching for Halflings as he went. Dejected, he finally passed the last of the buildings that marked the edge of town. He looked off into the distance and saw several plumes of smoke; a sure sign that a battle had taken place.

Grimbledung picked up his pace, hoping to arrive before everything was burned to a crisp. It was common practice to burn the remains of a battle to keep pests at a minimum. It was not that there was any sort of overarching agreement among people for this to happen, it was a matter of practicality. If an invading force was repelled, the local populace did not want to be overrun by rats and vultures, so they burned the bodies to keep their homeland pristine. If, on the other hand, an invading force was successful, they too would burn the remains to ensure that their newly gained territory was not overrun by rats and vultures. Mutual assured destruction was what rats and vultures hoped for.

After several minutes, Grimbledung's breath became labored; he lamented that he had not thought to bring Rat with him to act as transportation. "I wish I had thought to bring Rat along as transportation," Grimbledung lamented.

Finally, after almost five minutes of walking, Grimbledung reached the location of the battle. He surveyed the area. It was more of a skirmish than a battle; there weren't more than four or five piles burning, and they weren't too awfully tall either; just barely over his head. Also, oddly, there were piles of wood stacked up as well.

Grimbledung moved to the first pile (of bodies)- which seemed to be smoldering instead of outright burning- and began to poke around the edges looking for any unarmored bodies. Finding none, he moved dejectedly to the second pile (still bodies). This one also seemed to be merely smoldering.

"What horrible fire starters," Grimbledung tut-tutted. "These people can't even get a good fire going, how they won a battle is beyond me." He remarked to a very dead warrior as he rolled him over, "you should be ashamed."

"So should you." Someone behind Grimbledung said.

Grimbledung jumped straight into the air, "Ghosts!" He shrieked. In a flash his wand was in his hand. He was greeted by an indeterminate number of Halflings (not only could Grimbledung not read, counting was as of yet, just beyond his abilities). As he saw them, he relaxed. "Sorry, you scared me half to death!"

"Well, we're halfway there at least," remarked the lead Halfling. Or at least he seemed to be the lead one, as he was in front of the others. Behind him, Grimbledung saw several other Halflings dump arms-full of wood. Very odd.

"Hah. Good one," said Grimbledung amicably. Pestering individual Halflings was safe enough. Pestering a group within city limits was also safe since there was always someone around who didn't like Halflings who would jump into the fray. Outside of town, with no potential backup, pestering a group of Halflings was definitely *not* safe. "If this is your area to loot, I'll just be on my way."

The Halfling shook his head, "No, *Gnome*, this isn't our loot."

Grimbledung smiled.

"This is our handiwork."

Grimbledung frowned.

"We were just basking in yet another absurdly glorious Halfling triumph."

Several of the Halflings let their hands rest on their weapon's hilts. "Triumph," they muttered.

"Well then, congratulations on your success, good Halfling." Grimbledung put out his hand. "Congratulations all around." He extended it towards several of them.

The Halfling ignored Grimbledung's extended hand. "So what'r you doing out here, *Gnome*?"

Once again, Grimbledung ignored the way the Halfling said 'Gnome' since he was seriously outnumbered. "Just passing through. I'm on my way to town," he lied. "Getting a haircut. Bath." He took a step backward. "That sort of thing."

"Wanting to look good for your own funeral?" Said the leader of the group.

Grimbledung ignored the threat and took a different approach, "I'm Grimbledung. Grimbledung Sixtoes. Owner of Second Hand Sorcery."

The Halfling just stared at him.

"If you're in the need for a wand or two, we're the shop for you." The urge to turn the phrase into a catchy song started to build. Grimbledung forced it down and set a healthy dose of Self-Preservation on it to keep it there.

"I'm Corporal Titanicus" said the Halfling flatly, "Leader of this deadly Intelligence Squad of the Lord High Priest of the Halfling Empire's Army."

The song deep within Grimbledung grappled with Self-Preservation. "Gah!" Was all he could say as the inner battle waged on.

"What?" Said Corporal Titanicus as he narrowed his eyes.

"It's Gnomish for 'very glad to meet you'," offered Grimbledung. Self- Preservation got the song in a half nelson. Things were looking up.

"Sure it is," sneered the Corporal. The remaining Halflings lowered their hands to rest on their hilts. Of their weapons- Halflings have no patience with dangling participles.

Grimbledung, thinking the situation was defused since Self-Preservation now had the song in a full nelson[35] *and* the Halfling seemed to accept his translation, he relaxed and looked over at the Halfling busily stacking wood. "What's with the wood stacking?" He asked.

Corporal Titanicus smirked at Grimbledung, "It's for the upcoming Festival at the Cessation of Violence."

"Festival? That sounds fun." Grimbledung looked at the Halflings. "Cessation of violence? What violence?"

"Oh, that's upcoming too." said the Corporal. Several of the Halflings nodded.

"Well, I sure want to be invited to the festival."

"Don't worry, you'll have a front row seat. You and your shop."

Grimbledung beamed. Reaching out he took the Halfling's hand and shook it. "Sounds great Corporal! I'll be looking forward to it!" With that he dropped his handshake and hurriedly walked away from the corpse-burning, wood-stacking Halflings bent on destruction.

As Grimbledung walked, only one thing stood out in his mind: get a haircut and a bath so he could go carousing!

"That is one of the stupidest Gnomes I've ever met," said one of the Halflings to the Corporal. The rest nodded.

Sadly, he was correct. And he had met a large number of Gnomes.

The rest of Chapter Thirty-Three
Wherein Gatherer Division Wands
Unfortunately Do Not Begin to Arrive

Drimblerod sat at the counter, hoping customers would come in.

No customers came in for the rest of the day which worked out well because both Gnomes were looking forward to a night of drinking, dancing, and carousing and having to work late would have definitely put a damper on the evening's festivities which turned out to be really, really great.

The next day, Grimbledung and Drimblerod sat at the counter, secretly hoping no customers would come in because they were dealing with the aftereffects of a night (and early morning) of carousing.

To their pleasure, no customers came in for the rest of the day.

Chapter Thirty-Five
Just because we figured there should be one[36]

No customers came in the next day.

By then, the Gnomes weren't too happy about it.

"One big deep hole," scowled Drimblerod, "and it's called Grim's Jamboree." Drimblerod moved away from the breakfast table sullenly. "We're going to lose our shirts on this gimmick of yours."

Grimbledung sat quietly as he ate breakfast- just as he did the day before. And the day before that.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Drimblerod asked. He hadn't been able to get two words out of his partner in a day and a half. Although it was refreshing to have some quiet time, it was difficult to tease someone if they didn't respond. Rat had given up within hours. Drimblerod's persistence was fueled by the profits that were being lost.

"Today will be better," mumbled Grimbledung. He looked toward the front of the shop. "Hopefully." He added as he moved to the curtain. "I'll flip the sign." He ducked past the curtain and moved to the front door. There was a line outside it. Grimbledung peered out the window at the queue that had formed while they had been eating breakfast. "DRIM!" He shouted, "DRIM GET OUT HERE!"

Chapter Thirty-Six
Wherein Gatherer Division Wands Actually Begin to Arrive

Drimblerod looked at the curtain, "How can you already be having a crisis? We've only just opened!" He called.

"Drim! There's a line out here!"

"A line? Of what?"

"CUSTOMERS!"

Drimblerod was off like a shot and through the curtain as Grimbledung flipped the sign, "*A line* of people wanting to get in?"

Grimbledung opened the door, "Come in and peruse the merchandise." He added a welcoming smile for good measure

"What?" Said the human at the front of the line.

Grimbledung's smile faltered, "Ahhh, buy a wand?"

"I'm not here to buy a wand."

Grimbledung moved past the man and looked down the street. There were a goodly number of people in line behind the Human- various races of people but all kind of haggard looking, he suddenly realized. "Are any of you here to buy a wand?" He asked hopefully.

The group had a quiet conversation among themselves. A Dwarf- the second in line shook his head, "Nae Laddy, we're not here to buy wands."

Grimbledung's faltering smile finally gave out completely. A frown replaced it. "Then what are you all standing here for? Is there a parade I don't know about?"

The Human looked at Grimbledung (he was still behind him), "Is this Second Hand Sorcery?" He asked.

Drimblerod stepped forward also into the doorway, "Yes, it is. Is there some sort of trouble?" He looked down the side of the shop. There were at least fifteen in the line.

The Human shook his head, "No, no. The two-headed fellow said you gents bought wands so that's why ..." the man was cut off as Grimbledung hugged him, "Say now. This is a friendly shop. The two-headed guy didn't mention that part."

"Grimbledung, let go of that Human and let these people come

into the store!" Scolded Drimblerod as he pried his partner off him, "Sorry, he gets emotional sometimes."

"Fine, fine. No harm done. Say can we get down to business? I've got to meet a blacksmith about some swords."

"Yes, come in. Let me get our other partner and we'll get started. Grim, show these people in." He moved quickly to the curtain, "Rat! We need your help out here. We're swamped!" Drimblerod made it back to the counter just as the human came to the counter in front of Grimbledung.

'So, kind Sir, what wand do you have to sell?' he heard him ask hopefully. Almost *too* hopefully; a little bit of disinterest always helped when dickering over prices. He would have to give Grimbledung a few more pointers in the fine art of Haggling.

"Don't rightly know. I picked them up and carried them along 'cause that two-headed fellow said you'd buy them." He reached into his pack and pulled out a Levitation Wand.

"Ohhh! A Levitation Wand!" Cooed Grimbledung. A thought occurred to him. "Those are nice to have." He got a bad feeling.

"And here's the other one," said the Human.

"Oh dear. An Incinerator Wand." Grimbledung gulped. "Did you by any chance find a large backpack as well?"

"Yes, I sure did," the Human said. "Taking it to the Haberdashery to see if I can get a store credit or something. That's some lucky guess!"

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "I don't know how much luck had to do with it. Anyway, those are some great finds and we're glad to have them." He stopped himself before he added 'back'.

Drimblerod shot him a glance that foretold of a great deal of ear whacking in the very near future for drooling over wands they were supposed to be buying as cheaply as possible.

Grimbledung returned to help the Human in hopes that the whacking would be forgotten. "So a Levitator and Incinerator then."

"Yes, that's it. Didn't see any others."

"How about two copper for them?" Grim asked in the most emotion-free tone he could manage.

"Sounds good to me. Didn't cost me anything and that'll buy me a drink or two across the street," said the Human.

Grimbledung did a little back-flip in his mind, "Great. Tell them we sent you and you'll get a frosty ale for no extra charge." Mentally he made a note to make sure and tell Nulu about that new arrangement. Hopefully

it wouldn't cost him too much later on.

"Great, great. Nice doin' business with you." He took the coins and walked out of the store.

The next in line – inexplicably the adventurers maintained their line as they entered the store. They were, without a doubt, the politest, orderly adventurers Grimbledung ever saw. "What have you?" He asked the Half-Orc hopefully (again to Drimblerod's displeasure).

"I dunno."

"Do you have a wand?"

"A what?"

"A wand."

"For what?"

"To sell."

"No."

Grimbledung frowned. "Then why were you in line?"

"I dunno."

"How about I give you a copper and you go get yourself a drink across the street?"

"I can do that?"

"Sure. They serve everyone over there." Grimbledung took a copper out and handed it to the perplexed looking Half-Orc. "Here you go. Have a drink on us."

"Sure." The Half-Orc left the store content in knowing that a few moments in line (Half-Orcs were as notorious for cutting in line as they were for pulling arms out of sockets) had earned him a free drink. If he finished the drink quickly, he would try the line at the Furrier next.

Drimblerod shook his head at his partner's annoying charity. There was going to be a list of lessons for his partner once the day was done. "Who's next?" He asked disinterestedly to no one in particular- he was a pro at this.

"Tha ... tha ... tha ... that'd be me," said a shaky looking Elf. He looked over his shoulder twice before Drimblerod could call him forward.

"Step right up, kind Elf" he coaxed.

The Elf looked over his shoulder again and hobbled to the counter. When he got there, he leaned on it.

"Are you alright?" Asked Drimblerod anxiously. The last thing

he needed was another incident that brought Akita by. He had seen the Constable more in the past month than he had in almost five years in town.

The Elf alternated between nodding and looking over his shoulder. "I ... I ... I ... I'm fine."

"This is a safe shop, Elf, you don't have to worry about anything in here," Drimblerod lied. "How about you show me your wands, and then you can get going?"

"Not wor ... wor ... worry? How many toes *you* got?"

Drimblerod shrugged, "Eight. Just like any other Gnome. Why?"

"I got th ... th ... th ... three."

"On each foot?" Drimblerod asked hopefully.

"Toe ... toe ... total."

"Gads! How'd that happen?"

The Elf winced with the one shoulder that wasn't holding him up. "Dunno. I remember sp ... speaking to that Runion fel ... fel ... fellow and the next thing I know, most of my toes are gone." He pursed his lips, "And I just had them done too. Think he had something to do with it?"

"No way. Not Runion," Drimblerod lied again. "So how about you show me your wands, and then you can get going?" He tried again. The Elf, and Runion -by proxy- was giving him the willies.

The Elf gave another half-shrug, "Sure." He took a small bag off his belt, "Go ... got ... They're here." He loosened the drawstring on the bag and upended it. A dozen small wands of different colors spilled out. "Pixie Sticks," he explained.

"Yes. Very nice." He surveyed the pile of wands. They were easily worth two gold coins (retail). "How'd you get them all?" Drimblerod said

"Walking around. I'm a Pixie wrangler." The Elf reattached the pouch to his belt.

"Pixie wrangler?" Asked Drimblerod, "I don't think I've ever heard of one of those. What, do you train them or something? Put on a show?"

The Elf shook his head. "No. I get rid of inf ... infestations."

Drimblerod nodded, "That's a tough job. Once you get a bunch of Pixies settled in, they're real ..." a thought popped into Drimblerod's head, "Wait a grain of sand, Pixies don't use Pixie Sticks. Folks use Pixie Sticks *against* Pixies. How do you get these wands?"

"When I get rid of them, the people give me the Pixie Sticks because they don't need them anymore," the Elf said.

"So, what do you do with the Pixies? Shoo them away?"

"No ... no ... nope. I sell them to the Orcs. They eat them you know," explained the Elf.

Drimblerod blanched. Most people considered Pixies to be pests but even so, he felt they were mostly harmless. "Orcs?"

"Ago ... ago ... gold coin."

"*You sell the Pixies for a gold coin to the Orcs*?" Drimblerod didn't feel sorry for the Elf anymore. "That's horrible!"

The Elf shook his head, "No. That'd be ter- ter - terrible"

Drimblerod sighed, glad that he had misunderstood.

"I give them to the Orcs so they leave me alone." Drimblerod blanched. "I want a go ... gold coin for the wands," the Elf finished quickly.

Drimblerod stuck out his tongue, "Here's your coin, Elf." He frowned, "Take it and go."

The Elf pocketed the coin and daintily hobbled out of the shop.

"Next!" Called Drimblerod.

"Well, what I have are Assassin Wands" said the Human to Grimbledung.

"Wands-*sss*?" Asked Grimbledung hopefully. "You have more than *one* Assassin Wand?" Assassin Wands tended to not make it on the market very often since they were usually discarded after they were used so they couldn't be used as evidence later. They were prized in the wand resale world.

He opened his cloak and showed the inside lining to Grimbledung. Sewn into it were rows of loops to hold wands. He had four wands neatly nestled in them; two on each side. "It's got loops for wands," the Human explained.

"Gads! You're walking around with four Assassin Wands strapped to your chest?" Grimbledung backed up a pace. In all actuality, he would have had to back up a hundred paces to be safe. The counter in between them was inconsequential. "You're liable to just explode at any minute!"

The Human shook his head, "I got this cloak off a Magician. It keeps the wands in check." He winked. "Real handy."

Grimbledung leaned forward, "Say, that's a nice-looking cloak." He reached for it, "May I?"

The Human shrugged. "Sure."

Grimbledung took one of the flaps of the cloak in his hands. It was dark brown and very smooth. "You know; the last two Magicians I saw had these really gaudy cloaks. I thought they were all like that."

"They are. I had the cover replaced and just kept the Magic Inhibitor® lining."

"So where did you even come across four Assassin Wands. I don't mind telling you, those are hard to come by," commented Grimbledung as he continued to examine the cloak. It had a sheen to it as if it had been well oiled recently yet it wasn't wet feeling at all. It was slightly oily though.

"I live in the sewers. People toss all sorts of stuff into the sewers. Sometimes I find Assassin Wands."

Grimbledung shrieked and pulled his hand back as if it had been inside a Thrak[37] . The patrons in the store all turned to look at him. He quickly wiped his hands on the back of his breeches. "Sherman's Ears. That's disgusting."

"You want the wands or not?"

Grimbledung was tempted to not take any of them but the potential for profit was too great. After all, it was nothing a good washing couldn't take care of. "Wait. Do you know where these came from? That's important with Assassin Wands you know."

"Sure thing. I remember which sewer I was in when I got each of them," he explained

Grimbledung shrieked. Again, the patrons all turned to look at him. "You go into *different* sewers?" Grimbledung considered giving himself a good washing after dealing with this particular customer and seriously considered not mentioning the Jamboree to him.

The Human, completely ignoring the shriek, pulled a wand from his cloak. "Let's see. I got this one in West Kilbride. They have really nice sewers there. Lots of ledges you can lay down on, plus plenty of grates to let the sun in." The man considered that for a moment. "Unless of course it's raining, then you just get drenched."

Grimbledung stared at the man. "Weren't you going to tell me about the wand? I don't really want to hear about the sewers."

"They're really nice you know. Lots of space."

Grimbledung shook his head, "Wands. Not sewers."

"Well, if that's what you want, then by all means, here's the tale of this wand." The man smiled hopefully.

"That's what's coming next, right?"

The man's smile broadened. "Sure thing. I'm glad to help," he said. Because he was. "Well you see..."

Drimblerod cocked an ear towards his partner and the disturbingly strange patron he was dealing with. He hoped that Grimbledung was making mental notes on the descriptions of each wand. With normal wands, the pedigree wasn't important. At times, it was purposely forgotten- such was the case with dueling wands. With Assassin Wands, their initial construction and use dictated how much they were worth. He hazarded a glance at his partner. He seemed to be paying rapt attention to the human. With a shrug, he turned to see who he was going to deal with next. It was an Orc.

"You have a wand?"

The Orc nodded, "Yeah. I gots a wand." He held up a polished dark-wood wand with a neatly wrapped leather handle. "Here."

Drimblerod nodded. "A Traveler's Emberstick. Very nice."

The Orc grunted.

Hoping for some opening offer to haggle against, Drimblerod smiled and put his hands on the counter.

The Orc grunted again. "You give coins for wand?"

"Sure, how about two nice shiny copper coins?" Drimblerod tried.

The Orc snorted and put the wand on the counter. "Sure."

"Well, it has been very nice chatting with you Mister Orc" Drimblerod picked up the wand and put two copper coins in its place. "You'll have to come back again."

"Really?"

No, not really, you stupid Orc. Thought Drimblerod. Out loud he said more in line with his self-preservation: "Sure. When you get another wand, of course." The Orc picked up the two coins and with a curt nod, left the shop. "Next!" He hazarded a glance at his partner. They were *still* talking about Assassin Wands. *How many wands does that Human have?* 'You should be a Bard' he heard his partner say.

A Human stepped up to Drimblerod. He put a wand on the counter. A familiar looking wand. "Hey, where'd you get this wand?"

The Human pointed over to the wall, "On yon wall. Need me a levitation wand."

It hadn't occurred to Drimblerod that customers were now also

in the store. He mentally kicked himself for the mistake. He turned towards the curtain. "Rat! Get out here!" He called. "That'll be two copper, Sir," he said to the Human.

Rat yawned as he pushed under the curtain. "What now? I was dozing."

"I need you to work the floor," he said to Rat, "there's customers out there that might need help." He put out his hand to take the two coins the Human was offering. "Thanks very much. If you have any issues with the wand, come back by." With a smile, he waved at the man. "Next!" He called into the room.

"Work the floor?" Asked Rat. "I was busy doing other things."

Drimblerod turned on the rodent, "Like what exactly? Eating for free? Sleeping indoors for free? Snacking for free? Napping, dozing, snoozing, and whatever else you want to call your general loafing, *for free*?" He pointed a finger at Rat, "Go earn your keep, you!"

Rat twitched his whiskers. "Well, if you put it *that* way. I suppose I could offer a little help here and there." With that he moved around the counter into the main selling area of the shop. "Anyone need help?" He glanced at Drimblerod. "Apparently, I'm here to serve since I am a key employee here."

A Dwarf nodded at Rat, "I got a question, Laddie."

Drimblerod exhaled *One crisis resolved.* He hazarded a look at his partner. Who was still chatting with the same customer. *Still?*

"That was a great story." Grimbledung took the wand daintily with two fingers and placed it on the counter. "What's next?"

"Let's see," said the Human as he considered the remaining wands, "I got these last two after the Great Frost Giant Invasion. Do you want to hear about the sewers there? Those are nice too."

Grimbledung shook his head.

"You know; people really give sewers a bum rap. If more people would take the time to go in them, I'm sure more people would live there. Very cozy. Same temperature all year. Want to hear about them?"

Grimbledung stared at the man. "No."

"So what do think? Which ones you want?"

"I'll take them all," said Grimbledung with hopefully as little anxiousness in his voice as possible. "What do you want for them?" Secretly he hoped the man said three gold coins or less. They were easily worth two each.

"How's about we trade for a nice Water Wand?" Suggested the man amicably.

Grimbledung's brain stopped working. A two-copper coin wand for eight gold coins' worth of rare wandage. "That's it? No coins?" He said before he could help himself.

The man considered the wands on the counter and scratched his head. Bits of something fell on the glass. Grimbledung moved to the other side of the wands away from the detritus. "Well, if that doesn't work for you. How about the wand and two gold coins?" He tried hopefully. Usually when people bartered they asked for less. For some reason this Gnome was trying to get him to take more for the wands than he really wanted. Not wanting to offend the Gnome, he tried what he hoped was a reasonable price.

Unknown to Grimbledung, the man had been bewitched several years ago to be overly agreeable by a town Wizard who was trying to get him to live in any town but the one that he was currently in. There was a large collection taken to get the -as he was known- "Disagreeable man who lives in our sewers and gives us the willies" to go elsewhere. The Wizard took the sizeable fee, cast an Agreeability Spell on the man and then suggested he live elsewhere. Since then, the man was agreeable in a personal sense but still, unfortunately, disagreeable in an olfactory sense.

He tended to move a lot.

Of course, the man's entire situation would be reversed if someone suggested "Why don't you move out of the sewers?" Instead of "why don't you go live in someone else's sewers." Unfortunately, it would actually be decades before someone made that slightly different -yet significant- suggestion.

Kicking himself for the blunder, Grimbledung agreed immediately, "Sure thing! That sounds great. If you find any more, bring them here. We'll trade other wands for them. And a little gold too. That sounds great." He kicked himself again as he tried to stop his babbling. "How does that sound?" He finished.

"Very agreeable to me," said the Human. Because it was.

The two exchanged the coins (Grimbledung at arm's length) and the Water Wand (via a short toss) and the man left.

Drimblerod shook his head as he helped another customer. Even at the pace he was going, he would have to help another ten customers to equal the coins Grimbledung just made off his one unusual customer. He turned and looked ahead. There was an Orc standing at the counter. A familiar looking Orc. "Yes, can I help you?"

"Yeah. I gots a wand." He held up a polished light-wood wand with a neatly wrapped leather handle. "Here."

Drimblerod nodded. Again. "Another Traveler's Emberstick?"

The Orc grunted.

Hoping to skip any haggling, Drimblerod reached into his belt pouch.

The Orc grunted again. "You give coins for wand?"

"Sure, how about two nice shiny copper coins?" Drimblerod said. Again.

The Orc snorted and put the wand on the counter. "Sure."

"Well, it has been very nice..." Drimblerod stopped himself. "Sorry, I have to ask. Where did you get this wand?"

The Orc jabbed a thumb towards the window of the shop. "Found it out there."

Drimblerod looked at the window. There was a disheveled Human peering through it back at him. The man's shirt was ripped and he was squinting as if his eye were beginning to swell. "Found it?"

"Yeah." The Orc snorted. It started to turn into a laugh, but he caught himself.

"OK, Mister Orc. The only wands we'd be interested in buying are ones you find..."

"Found that one," interrupted the Orc testily.

"... on the ground or someplace that isn't with someone else. Or that you threatened to get them to hand it to you."

The Orc glanced over his shoulder at the window. The man ducked down.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And because of that, you don't get any coins for this wand."

The Orc narrowed his eyes. "Really?" He looked back over his shoulder.

Drimblerod looked past the Orc at the man crouched down at the window.

"Well, since it's your first time. It is your first time, right?"

"For what?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "Never mind. Here's a copper coin. Go get yourself a drink."

Drimblerod flipped a copper coin at the Orc. He caught it with one hand and examined it. "This less than last time."

"Sure. It's a one for two sale. If you bring in a third, you'll owe *me* a copper coin so I don't recommend you doing that."

The Orc squinted at the coin. "Yeah. Dat make sense." He turned and with another curt nod, left the shop. Again.

As he exited the door, Drimblerod gestured to the man still crouched down and peering into the window. He held up his money pouch and shook it.

The man's eyes got large. Even the one that was previously squinted. The man looked down the street- ostensibly to see if the Orc was looking or not. Seeing that it was safe, he stood and moved quickly into the shop and to the counter. "That Orc's none to pleasant."

Drimblerod nodded, "Most of them aren't. Sorry for the trouble. Here's the two copper that wand would have gotten you. And a silver for the inconvenience." He added to hopefully keep the man from going to the Constable because the incident wouldn't have happened if they were telling folks to bring in wands.

The man nodded as he took the coins. "Thanks Mister Gnome. That's mighty agreeable of you."

"It's the least I can do." With a wave, he turned to find another customer. Hoping that the obviously beaten up one left before he spooked anyone.

The man returned the wave and left the shop. When he got to the street, he looked left and right, then went left. After a few paces, he came to an alleyway. He turned into it and ran into the Orc.

"Hey." The Orc said.

"Hey, Crank," answered the man.

"That work?"

The man nodded. "Told you it would. Let's go get some drinks. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Agreed Crank. "Sounds good."

The Very Last Bit of Chapter Thirty-Six
- Really-

Business was brisk in the shop. A good number of people came in to buy wands, and almost half that many came in to sell them. The till was getting pleasantly full.

"This till is getting pleasantly full," said Grimbledung as he peered into it. He had no idea how much money it was, but it was more than he had seen in one place since the several-days-in-one incident.

"Let's help this last customer then shut down for the day. We need to celebrate." Drimblerod nodded at the lone figure that stood dead still in the center of the shop. It wore a cloak that fell to a mere hair's breadth from the floor- tailored to perfection. The hood, pulled over its head, completely shrouded its features. Its hands were crossed in an imposing manner.

"Can we help you?" Offered Grimbledung.

The Figure shook its head solemnly. "No, you cannot. It is I who can help you, Gnome." It said 'Gnome' with a reverence that neither Grimbledung nor Drimblerod had ever heard. In fact, its booming bass voice made everything sound reverent. "I have a wand to sell." The figure stopped all movement for several seconds. "You," it finished. The Figure still had not moved closer to the counter.

"Well let's see it." Drimblerod was unsure of how to address The Figure, "Sir," he guessed. "We're anxious to see what you have for sale." He tapped his fingers on the counter- window lickers had jaded him above and beyond the normal level of jadedness that being a business owner caused. When it came to mysterious hooded figures, his past experiences had taught him they were, for all intents and purposes, mostly nuts.

With a flourish the man pulled out a gnarled wand, bent and twisted so much it had a complete loop in it.

"This ... is ... the ... wand. *For you.*"

Both Gnomes looked at it in awe. It was a beautifully constructed wand of some ancient root. It was polished to where it caught the light of the lanterns, it seemed to glow. The hilt (what they could see of it) was wrapped in some dark leather. Mounted in the base of the hilt was a red

stone. As red as the sun before it set behind the mountains of Orcistan. As red as rubies floating in blood. RED. It glowed a red like the breath of a dragon at five paces. GLOWING RED.

"That there is a nice-looking wand," said Grimbledung as he leaned over the counter to get a closer look at it. The Figure was still in the middle of the room.

Drimblerod was still wary and as such, did not lean forward. "Yeah, nice wand," he said noncommittally. Even if he did buy the wand, he wanted to make sure it was for the least amount of coins possible- ambivalence helped that happen.

"That it is." His words rumbled out of him like the frequent earthquakes on the Nearly Flat Plains. "That it is." He repeated for emphasis. Even though it wasn't necessary.

No one spoke for several moments. Finally, Drimblerod, wariness transforming to annoyance (and a bit of hungriness) broke the silence. "Well what's it do, stranger?"

"Do?" Rumbled the figure. "Why, it does whatever you want it to." He raised the wand slowly, "This wand will do everything and anything."

Both Grimbledung and Drimblerod looked at the wand- which still was several paces away. There were rumors and even folk tales of ancient, all powerful wands that were able to produce most any variety of magic. Elderly Wands, they were called. Wands used to control other wands, wielded by all- powerful Wizards or Witches. Wands that could topple entire empires, win wars, vanquish gods even. Powerful stuff.

Drimblerod still was not impressed. "Great. How about you give us a little demonstration." Unimpressed did not however mean completely disbelieving- "Maybe something small and non-destructive if at all possible."

"What? Here? Inside you mean?" Boomed the figure, "that would not be wise, good Gnome." The figure lowered the wand to his side and as he did, turned it slightly so that the Gnomes could see the glowing orb in his hilt. The figure's side was bathed in a deep crimson glow.

"So how do we know what it is worth if we don't know what it does?" Asked Grimbledung innocently.

"That is a good question from my partner," added Drimblerod as he peered at the Figure. Within him, warning bells were being

brought out, ready for use.

The figure laughed deeply. It sounded like the laughter came from a full-grown Mountain Ogre. "Yes. Yes. That is a good question, kind Gnomes." The Figure turned his head from Grimbledung to Drimblerod and back. "I shall help you with that problem." The Figure gave a small bow. As he did, he shifted unnaturally backwards.

Drimblerod noticed. Several more warning bells were brought out and placed with the others in his mind. It was a three-part-harmony warning bell choir that Drimblerod kept in his head. "How?" Drimblerod asked as he mentally picked up two of the bells. He was preparing to whack them against the others on the counter of his mind.

"I shall tell you what it is worth," the Figure said as he once again raised the wand. It twisted it in the light to catch the light. "After all, I know its value."

One of the warning bells in Drimblerod's head began clanging. The rest joined in soon after. "But ..." He began, "what does it do, this wand of yours."

The Figure straightened up, "Any and all manner of Magic, as I said before" rumbled out of the figure.

Grimbledung clapped. "Sounds great! What do you wa .... OUCH!" He was cut off as Drimblerod stomped on his foot.

"What my partner meant to say was, is that thing even Magicked?" His patience had run out and his warning bells were now accompanied by angry bells. Lots of them. And they were harmonizing nicely. "What's that thing do? Let me see it do it and we'll talk price. Otherwise I'm going to get something to eat." The Annoyed Bells, seeing an opportunity to add some bass, joined in the cacophony. Even a dinner bell had come out to ensure that Drimblerod's stomach was represented in the clamoring. Drimblerod stared at the figure over the din. It was still looking towards Grimbledung. Strange.

The Figure shuddered. Again- unnaturally. "Demands from you? Your highest achievement, Gnome" it began (this time, 'Gnome' was not said in a revered way), "was to turn over a log and eat the grubs under it. *Mine was to create this wand*!" The figure boomed in its deepest bass voice yet. At the end was a slight cough. Very strange.

"Well me and my belly full of grubs will only offer two copper for it."

"WHAT?" Bellowed the Figure. It sounded like a thunderclap.

Drimblerod leaned over the counter, "It's a stick, isn't it," he said flatly.

"This is an all-powerful wand that with the proper imbuing will accomplish all matter of Magic!" The voice wavered this time.

In a flash Drimblerod had his wand out, "Use it or I'll use mine." The wand gave a hearty Ka-Clack sound to show that he meant business. A purple globule of energy began to form at the end of the wand.

The figure raised the wand and pointed it at Grimbledung who promptly ducked. "TWO GOLD COINS!" It bellowed.

The globule was now the size of Drimblerod's head and attached to the end of the wand by a thin purple tendril. He raised the wand and swung it over his head in a circle. The globule whipped on the tendril. Spikes of energy pushed out of it, crackling menacingly. It looked like a magical Morning Star. "I'll count to three!" Drimblerod lowered his wand. The globule disappeared immediately. "Wait, did you say with the proper imbuing?"

The figure hesitated. Finally, it looked towards Drimblerod. "Yes?" It offered.

"It's a blank? Then it's a stick then. A wand without any imbuing is a stick. *It's a stick*." Drimblerod jabbed his wand at the figure, "Trip!" He commanded.

The Figure leaned backwards, then forwards as he tried to maintain his balance. Unable to do so, he fell sideways. When he hit the ground, he split in half. Cloak and all.

"Well I'm dashed, Drimblerod! You didn't have to cut him in half!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "That's gonna get us in trouble. We need a mop and a bucket." He moved around the counter to the two still moving halves of the figure. Very, very strange. And a bit disturbing. "That's a bit disturbing, and I don't mind repeating, very, very strange."

"It wasn't me," said Drimblerod as he followed his partner around the counter. He moved to the bottom half of the figure. It sat up and a Gnome head popped out of the cloak.

"Whadda ya tryin' tado? Kill me?" The Gnome that was the top half of the figure complained.

"Now that you mention it, that thought did just cross my mind," said Drimblerod. He raised his wand, "Get out of our shop."

The bottom half of the figure stood- another Gnome. "How's about we stay," he said. The words were of an offer, but the tone

was more of a statement.

"We insist," said Top-Half, "We're your new partners."

"No. What you are is another rotten potato to add to the weeks' stew," scowled Grimbledung as he too drew his wand.

"I don' think you two 'erd me right" began Top Half tersely - apparently, the boss of the team.

"Keep your tongue behind your teeth!" Snapped Drimblerod as he poked his wand at Top Half's nose. "And you and your lackey get out of our shop." He raised the wand and now poked the Gnomes forehead with it, "And don't ever come back."

Top Half stood. "You're not seen the last o' us, I'll tell you that!" He warned Drimblerod.

Drimblerod glowered at the Gnome, "Oh, I'm sure I'll see you later. It's been that kind of month." With that he went back behind the counter.

Grimbledung was torn between confronting the two Gnomes from where he was, or to go stand by his partner. He chose the latter and moved behind the counter as well. He turned so they were both facing the interloping Gnomes. "Time to go," he said.

The two Gnomes moved to the door together. Top Half turned to glower at them.

Drimblerod smiled widely, "Say, I'm sorry, I didn't get your names."

"Weber and Seiko" said Bottom Half (Seiko) as he pointed back and forth.

As soon as he did so, his eyes got wide.

Weber's got even narrower.

"Great, great," continued Drimblerod, still smiling as he put his wand on the counter and rolled up his sleeve, "I'll make sure to pass your regards to the Gremlins!" He finished as he showed them his six-toed tattoo. "They'll have great fun with you when I tell them you were trying to get a piece of *their* action." The smile ominously faded away, "Great gobs of fun."

Both Weber and Seiko's eyes got large as they saw the tattoo. They both tried to see which could get out of the shop faster. After a few moments struggle, they piled out onto the street together. Or at least close enough to call it a tie.

Chapter Thirty-Seven
Wherein the Obligatory Bar Room Brawl Finally Occurs

"What a pair."

"You can say that again, Grim". Drimblerod shook his head as he moved to the sign and flipped it to 'Closed'.

"Think we'll see them again?"

"Those two characters? I sure hope not. That would ruin my day, I think."

Grimbledung rubbed his hands together. "So, celebrating then?"

Drimblerod nodded, "Definitely. This was a good day. We need to have a nice quiet drink to celebrate."

"That's celebrating?" Grimbledung frowned. "That's it? A quiet drink? What, upstairs tucked in our beds even?"

"Well, maybe a little more." He winked at his partner, "If we get cleaned up quick, we can get a table at the Mora Tau before the crowds show up."

Grimbledung did a jig, "The Mora Tau?" He clapped his hands and began to sing

Oh we're goin to the bar called Mora Tau
Have some drinks and maybe a little more?

Wow!

And to ease our eyes, there's females there that are lookers!
All shapes and sizes and willing cause they're all…

"Grim," interrupted Drimblerod. "Are you going to sing and dance or get ready to go? We need to beat the crowd or we'll be stuck at the bar instead of a table."

Grimbledung stopped singing but the jig didn't.

"Cleaned up." Drimblerod pointed to the back of the shop.

Grimbledung nodded as he jigged his way to the back.

With a head-shake, his partner followed, Rat close behind.

"Can I go too?" Rat asked as Grimbledung changed his shirt. The act severely interfered with his jig, but didn't stop it completely.

"Sure!" Said Grimbledung as his head poked out the top of his shirt. "The more the merrier, right?"

"As long as you two behave yourselves. The Mora Tau can get rough sometimes."

"So we'll blend in better?" Grimbledung splashed water on his face. "Right?"

"Absolutely. We're rough and tumble. It's rough and tumble. We're a perfect match."

"Wait, which one of us is rough and which is tumble?"

"You're tumble." Rat said.

"Wow, that's rough."

"No, I'm rough." Rat twitched his whiskers.

"Rat," warned Drimblerod, "keep it up and you're staying home."

Rat grinned at the Drimblerod. "I'll be on my best behavior." He looked at Grimbledung. "Him, I can't make any guarantee for." He gestured at the Gnome.

Drimblerod looked at his partner. He had a towel wrapped around his head like an Iranistan warrior. He was still dancing.

"You are *not* wearing that towel on your head."

"I think it makes me look exotic."

"No." Said Rat and Drimblerod at the same time.

Dejected, Grimbledung removed the towel from his head. "Motasefane bedoone kale e-man"

"What's that?" Asked Drimblerod.

"It's Giantish for 'not as exotic'."

"You speak Giantish?"

"Just a few important phrases."

"I don't see how 'not as exotic' is an important phrase." Drimblerod reached down for Rat. "You ready?"

"I'm a rat. What's to get ready?"

"You'd be surprised how often it comes up in conversation." Grimbledung grinned. "Like now for instance."

"Well, in any language, you're not going out with a towel wrapped around your head." Drimblerod picked Rat up. "Let's go then." He squinted at his partner, "Towel-less."

"I've heard it's always important to have a towel with you when you

go places."

"Really?" Drimblerod moved to the curtain. "Never heard that."

"I thought it was important to never panic," offered Rat.

"That makes more sense." Drimblerod reached out and pulled the curtain to the side. "Ready whenever you are, Grim. There's drinking and carousing in our very near future."

Grimbledung picked up his jig again as he moved past the curtain towards the front of the shop.

The three made their way quickly to the Mora Tau Bar and BAR- the sun was beginning to move completely into his nighttime resting place and at that point, the bar would fill up rapidly.

"Ahhh, the Mora Tau," said Grimbledung. He looked up appraisingly at the building. "Let's bask a moment so the narrative can give some background."

The Mora Tau took up over half a block, with the remainder being a parking area for wagons and beasts. Two large Orcs stood at the gate of the parking area. Each held a thick, leather wrapped club. If someone were in the mood to park a wagon full of gold out in the open, there wasn't a safer place in town than the Mora Tau livery parking area. Once the appropriate bribe was paid to the Orcs, of course. The building itself was a massive two-story affair with far too many windows (and not enough structure) on the second floor. In many of these windows, ladies -of various races- leaned out and, in a complete role reversal, cat-called any and all passersby. The windows on the first floor were more evenly spaced and actually had curtains in them. Most of them anyway.

The structure appeared to have been built in stages; there were two distinct architectural styles in use, and one section that seemed to have been designed by someone who had never even heard of the profession of 'architect'.

It was common knowledge that there was also a basement.

Grimbledung opened the door to the establishment and moved to the side for his partner to enter. "Let's go to the basement."

Drimblerod nodded as he entered the bar's main floor. "We'll start there and work our way up."

"I'll just stay downstairs, I think," said Rat. "I don't think I

need to make a visit to the debauchery of the second floor." He leered. "For that, I may head round back to the kitchen".

"Suit yourself, Rat," said Grimbledung as he followed his partner in.

The trio stood in the foyer and took in the sight. There were quite a few tables that were already full. People were already standing at the bar as well. "We're too late," said Grimbledung. "Standing at the bar. Branded a fool. What will they say tomorrow at the shop?"

"Don't you start singing," warned Rat. "The last thing I want is to be thrown out of this place. Yet again."

Drimblerod moved to the stairs. "This floor may be full because these people have respectable jobs and got off early. Well we'll just go to the floor where the folks who go there are still mucking stalls, or picking pockets." As he started down the stairs, he turned to his partner, "Follow me."

Grimbledung fell in step behind his partner as they went down the creaky stairs. Grimbledung slowed as he looked at the sketches that were framed and lining the staircase. *I wonder who all these people are. Are they famous or something?* When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Drimblerod was already at a table. There were several still vacant, in fact.

"Success!" Cheered Grimbledung as he flopped into the chair beside his partner. The chair creaked in protest.

"Careful, Grim. The furniture down here is pretty rickety."

Grimbledung shifted his weight back and forth in the chair. It swayed under him. "With how much business this place gets, you'd think old PalmerLee would fork over a few coins for some better furniture."

Drimblerod raised his hand to summon a wench. "No, if the chairs were comfortably sturdy, they'd be lethal in a brawl. These nice and spindly chairs make terrible weapons." He eyed his partner who was still squirming. "So, stop squirming in that chair before you break it. You're going to get us kicked out of here and we just arrived."

"Not on your life. If there's one place I've never been kicked out of, it's a bar" tut-tutted Grimbledung. "When it comes to drinking, I'm a professional." He smiled as the buxom serving wench approached the table. Even though it was early in the evening, she already had a tired look on her face. She was also the oldest person in the room by a couple of decades. Maybe three. Even so, her corset was cinched tight and her breasts seemed to pour over the top of her outfit in true serving wench fashion.

"Whaddayawant?"

"Tankards of ale," said Grimbledung politely. He winked at his partner. "If you please."

"Anythin' ta eat?"

Grimbledung rubbed his belly. "Prolly. But first I want to get a few drinks down on an empty stomach."

The wench narrowed her eyes at the Gnome. "Ya cheap er sumethin?"

"No, not at all, Miss..."

"Miss?"

"... Missus" tried Drimblerod. "He's just impatient. Bring us a couple of chickens."

"And no vegetables."

Drimblerod glanced at Rat. "And no vegetables."

"If you please." Grimbledung winked again.

"Somethin' wrong wit' yer eye?"

"Errr. No?" Tried Grimbledung. "Just being polite is all."

The wench stared at Grimbledung. Opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. She pointed a finger at him instead. Picking her tray off the table, she moved off to get drinks.

Grimbledung bounced up and down in his chair. "Oh boy, this is fun!"

"All right, Grim. We've got us a table and drinks on the way. That's a good start. I'm going out to the facilities. Just please try and behave yourself while I'm away."

Grimbledung waved a dismissive hand at his partner, "Don't worry, I'm on my best behavior. You go make wee, and Rat and I will wait here."

Drimblerod shook his head as he walked to the stairs. He had to wait to go up because of a group of Halflings was coming down. Once they passed, he went up. The Halflings stopped at the bottom and scanned the room. They nodded at another group of three Halflings sitting in a far corner. After a quick discussion, the four Halflings chose a table next to Grimbledung and Rat and sat down.

Rat leaned over towards Grimbledung. "There's a lot of Halflings down here all of a sudden. Just don't do anything crazy. Drimblerod and I would like to be here for a while. We're celebrating, remember."

Grimbledung nodded at his friend. When he spied the wench

moving towards them, several tankards on her tray, he began to wave at her. "Ooohhh! Ooohhh!" He coaxed her on. "OOOHHH!"

When she got to the table and began to lower the tray onto it, one of the Halflings grabbed her arm to stop her. "Those are our drinks."

The wench looked from the Halflings to the Gnome and Rat, and back again. "Ya stupid?"

The Halfling's eyes got large, "What?"

"There's four of you Halflings infesting that table. There's three drinks on this here tray." She snickered. "Oh, sorry. Which of you two are the couple? I can get you a pair of reeds so you can enjoy yer drink all romantic like."

Grimbledung guffawed at the Halflings. A sharp look from three of them made him stop and rest his chin on the table. Silently. The fourth Halfling hadn't taken his eyes off the wench.

"You're awful bold for a used-up *wench*."

Grimbledung frowned. "Hey now; that's not polite at all."

Rat shook his head. "Don't do it, Grim."

The serving wench shrugged as she turned her back on the Halfling, "Better to be a bold used up wench than a loudmouthed *little bitty* Halfling." As she picked up the tankards, she held her pinkie out. "Little bitty" she repeated as she waggled her pinkie.

Grimbledung guffawed at the Halflings. This time all four gave him a sharp look.

"Grimbledung," warned Rat.

Grimbledung nodded as he picked up his tankard. "Thanks heaps. Can we run a tab?"

The wench leaned down on the table. Her breasts looked like they were on the verge of an exodus of some big old book proportions that involved wandering around in the heat for a long time. "Are you respectable?"

"Well..." Grimbledung looked down at his drink, then at the wench's breasts, then her face. Then back at her breasts. Then back at her face. "Yes? I am co-owner of Secondhand Sorcery. The best used wand shop around."

The Halflings laughed. "Used wand seller," said one.

Grimbledung glanced at the Halflings.

The wench ignored the Halflings and continued to stare at Grimbledung.

"Oh, I know tha' place. Down near Pozzuoli's it is."

Grimbledung nodded, "Sure is. Me and Drimblerod run it. Together." He smiled. "Rat helps too."

Rat nodded. "That is true." He took a sip of his drink. "I'm a key employee, actually. Key."

"And we have a dummy that helps too."

"A dummy!" The Halflings erupted in laughter. Grimbledung glanced at the Halflings.

"Well, I've seen you down here before. And your partner," said the wench as she straightened, "I'll keep a tab for you." She took a charcoal stick from her apron and put three slash marks on the table. "Three so far." She winked and moved off.

"Hey guys, I got a shop" said one Halfling. "And we have a rat that works for us."

Grimbledung glanced at the Halflings.

"Oh, that's grand. Do you have anything else?" Asked a third Halfling innocently.

"Well, we have a dummy too."

The Halflings laughed uproariously.

Grimbledung glanced at the Halflings. He put down his drink.

"Grim..."

Grimbledung stood up and moved to the Halfling's table. They didn't notice him because they were all laughing too hard. "Excuse me."

The Halflings stopped their laughing and looked at Grimbledung. "Which one is he?" Asked one.

"I think he's the rat."

"Or maybe the dummy".

They all began to laugh again.

"Grim..." Rat tried again. "How about you sit down until Drimblerod gets back?"

"Yeah, go sit down until your *partner* gets back," laughed a Halfling. "We saw him on the stairs. He's such a sweet looking partner."

Grimbledung breathed in deeply.

"Look out! He's going to blow!" Another round of laughter commenced.

"Grimbledung, let's take our drinks upstairs," suggested Rat.

"Yeah, go upstairs, Gnome. Back home to your stinking, wand-

selling, garbage-scow shop."

Grimbledung put his hands on the edge of the Halfling's table. "Don't you think you ought to rephrase that?"

One Halfling nodded as he suddenly became serious. "Yes. You're right. I didn't mean that your shop was *selling* garbage."

Grimbledung nodded. "That's what I thought you…"

"I meant to say your shop should be hauled off *as* garbage."

Grimbledung punched the Halfling in the mouth.

"Here we go." Rat took a drink of Ale. If history were any indication, soon there would be no tankards left.

The Halfling leaned back in his chair from the punch, as he did, its back legs gave out and he crashed backwards. The other Halflings quickly got to their feet.

Rat slid a tankard over to the edge of the table. Grimbledung reached out and grabbed it as it began to teeter of the edge. Without interrupting his swing, he brought the tankard around and hit another Halfling on the side of the head with it. It exploded in a shower of ale and clay shards. A large gash opened on the Halfling's cheek. Blood began to wash the ale away.

The remaining two Halflings grabbed Grimbledung by the arms and yanked him onto the table. Thanks to the new coating of ale, he slid off the end and crashed into the table beyond it. It collapsed into splinters. As it did, the drinks on it soaked the three Humans sitting there.

One picked up Grimbledung.

"Thanks!"

Another Human punched him in the face, sending him reeling back towards the Halflings. The four Halflings hefted Grimbledung in the air and tossed him onto his table. Unbelievably, it remained intact. Rat spun the last tankard around and Grimbledung grabbed it by the handle. He swung it at a Halfling, catching him across the bridge of his nose. Dutifully, his nose began to spurt blood and point in a completely different direction.

A Dwarf at a nearby table stood and grabbed one of the Halflings by the shoulder and spun him around. "Ya should pick on someone yer own size, Laddie," he said. Then he head-butted the Halfling.

The Halfling staggered back, dazed. He threw a punch at what he thought was the helm-wearing Dwarf. It was a seated Orc at a completely different table. He was sitting with a Human. On purpose, even. The Orc rose to his feet.

"Time to go Grim!" Said Rat.

Grimbledung rolled off the table and onto his feet. He picked up his chair and swung it at the Orc's back. It exploded ineffectually into splinters. The Orc spun around to see who hit him. As he did, Grimbledung tossed the remaining leg of the chair to a Halfling. Instinctively, the hapless Halfling caught it.

"He did it!" Shouted Grimbledung, "stinking Halfling!"

The Halfling looked from the table leg to Grimbledung, then to the Orc. Then to the table leg. He dropped it as if it were red-hot. "Now let's not…" He began.

"Yeah. Stinkin' Halflin'" The Orc reached for the Halfling who quickly moved out of reach. As he stumbled back, he bumped into another table. Not really needing an excuse at this point, but appreciating it anyway, the two Dwarves at the table leapt to their feet and grabbed the Halfling.

Seeing an opportunity, he would probably never get again, Grimbledung stepped forward to the struggling Halfling.

"Take a shot," offered one of the Dwarves as the Halfling struggled in their grip.

"This is something I've wanted to do for I don't know how long." He reached out and twisted the Halfling's nose roughly. "TWEEEAK!" Grimbledung shouted.

Tears welled up in the Halflings eyes as his nose broke. "You damned Gnome!"

One of the Dwarves let go of the Halfling's shoulder, backed up a step and kicked him in the back. The Halfling, with both hands holding his broken, bleeding nose, reeled forward. Into the waiting arms of two Half-Orcs.

The brawl had spread throughout the bar. The battle lines were -vaguely- the Halflings against everyone else. The two Half-Orcs seemed to be on their own side, doling out punishment in all directions with the Orc lending a familial hand.

Drimblerod came down the stairs to see his partner get thrown over a table by two Halflings. "What is going on here?" He shouted over the ruckus.

As he scanned the room for Rat, a familiar-looking serving wench caught his eye with a wave. She gestured for him to come over. Between coaxing him on, she pointed at the bar. Rat was sitting on it. Holding a drink.

Drimblerod ducked and weaved his way to the bar, only getting glanced with a table leg at one point. "What is going on here?" He asked again.

The serving wench shrugged, "Happens a lot down here. The Halflings started it." Just then, a Halfling staggered back against the bar. She dutifully picked up a bottle and smashed it on his head. He collapsed in a heap. "One down." She smiled, "You know. Those fellows may be small, but they can sure hold their own in a scrap."

"Oh, before I forget, Drimblerod. We owe for four drinks."

Drimblerod looked at Rat. "You're on your second drink already?"

"Well, in my defense, Grimbledung smashed a Halfling on the head with my first one." He twitched his whiskers. "And yours as well."

"What do I owe you?" Drimblerod ducked as a tankard flew by his head. It smashed into the wall showering the three with ale.

The serving wench shook her head, "The ale costs more than the tankards. I wish they'd throw empty ones."

"I'm working on it," said Rat as he tipped his tankard again.

"Five copper," she finished at Drimblerod. She looked at the stairs. "Woops. This will settle things down." She gestured toward the stairs.

Drimblerod looked over. PalmerLee Griggs was standing at the bottom of the stairs. He was old (for a Human) yet still fit-looking. His shoulder-length sweeping hair was all silver-grey; matching his beard and moustache. He was dressed in what vaguely resembled a sailor's outfit. He held a wand in his hand as he looked around the room.

PalmerLee was used to brawls starting out in the lower BAR of his establishment. Early on, when he realized that they were going to be a routine occurrence, he had hired a local carpenter to supply him with lightweight, inexpensive tables and chairs to furnish the room. Nothing was heavy enough to be lethal. As a stabbing instrument, the broken leg of a chair would be a poor choice for a weapon. Even the tankards were made especially thin. He ducked as one of the aforementioned tankards sailed over his head. Being witness to countless brawls, he could easily pick out the instigators. Once he determined who 'us' was and who 'them' was, he could stop a brawl fairly quickly by focusing on removing just one or the other group. It seemed the Halflings were the 'them'. Two Half-Orcs and a full-blooded Orc were also involved. Typically, Orcs- kind fell into a third category: unaffiliated. Getting them out of the fight wasn't as important since there were only three of them. They were also regulars and tended to listen to PalmerLee. Usually. One smiled and waved to him

as he punched a Human in the mouth. PalmerLee waved back amicably. "Hey, Tank."

PalmerLee aimed his wand at a Halfling that had just staggered into his line of sight. Even with an obviously broken nose, he continued to fight. PalmerLee aimed his wand at the Halfling's feet and shot a stream of ice at him. Within a moment, the Halfling's feet were firmly frozen to the floor. *One down.* He looked around and saw a Human and another Halfling grappling. The Human had a knife out. More than a friendly barroom brawl, this was attempted murder taking place. PalmerLee aimed his wand at the Human's knife-wielding hand and blasted it. Suddenly, the Human's hand weighed an extra twenty pounds as it was neatly encased in a block of ice. Caught off balance, he fell to the side, hand thunking to the hard-packed dirt floor. The Halfling glanced over at PalmerLee as he raised his fist to punch the now at-his-height human. PalmerLee shook his head and jabbed a thumb up the stairs. To emphasize his point, he aimed his wand at the Halfling's head.

The Halfling moved to the stairs, grabbing an accomplice as he went. Without making eye contact, the two left the brawl.

Seriously outnumbered, the remaining four Halflings backed into a corner, and regrouped for the assault they knew was coming. As they stood ready, a Gnome crashed into them, sending them all to the ground. As they got to their feet, the Gnome took a position beside the Halflings, facing the rest of the group. His face was bloodied and his shirt was torn, but all in all, he seemed in fair shape. *A Gnome tossing in with a group of Halflings?* 'Bring it on' PalmerLee heard the Gnome say as he shadow-boxed. The Gnome looked left and right at the Halflings that were staring at him. 'Hey fellas' said the Gnome with a smile 'I think we got them on the ropes.' Not smiling back, the Halflings picked up the Gnome and tossed him back into the 'us' crowd. With the battle lines reestablished, silence fell over the room as everyone picked out a target to attack.

In the far other corner of the bar, a loud 'Clink, Clink' was heard. PalmerLee turned to look. So did everyone else.

There was a rat sitting on the bar. It held two tankards- the ones it had hit together. "In the far corner, weighing in at a combined, fairly respectable weight of 17 stone," it said. "are the despicable Halflings." He gestured at them with one of the tankards. Ale sloshed out of it. It took a quick drink. "And in the rest of the bar,

weighing in at considerably more, are representatives of various noble races." The two Half-Orcs nodded in approval at the Rat. "Let's get reaaaady to ruuummmb..." Suddenly the rat was encased in a solid block of ice.

"No, let's not," said PalmerLee. "Let's all get out." He aimed his wand around the room, "After everyone settles their bill, and tips the servers. Heartily." He shook his head. "You should all be ashamed of yourselves."

Most weren't; it's why they came to the Tora Mau.

"Settle up and get out" he said again. He pointed toward the serving wench.

Dutifully the patrons formed a line that moved past the service wench, the frozen rat, and then snaked up the stairs.

"We'll be open again in an hour or so," PalmerLee assured them as they left. Off the main bar was a storage room filled with spare furniture- it was just a matter of dragging it into place. Since it was light, it would be short work.

Grimbledung stayed in line and finally made it to the bar. He tried not to make eye contact with his partner. "I guess it's time to go?"

"Yes."

"Are we settled up?"

"With the bar tab. Yes." Drimblerod grabbed the block of ice that was Rat off the counter. "So all I got to do on this outing was to pee." He looked at the frozen Rat. "You're going to carry him home." He shoved Rat towards Grimbledung. "Have a better evening," he said to the serving wench.

"If you please?" Tried Grimbledung with a wink.

"No."

The two Gnomes filed up the stairs with the rest of the patrons.

"Grimbledung Sixtoes, the next time we go out. When I need to pee, you're going with."

"Ok." Grimbledung nodded. "I'm real sorry about that. The Halflings started it you know. I was minding my own business..."

"Not doing anything to nobody," interjected Drimblerod. He had heard the speech many times.

"Right! And then all of a sudden, I was in the middle of current events."

"Well, maybe we'll try again tomorrow night," said Drimblerod as he put his arm on his partner's shoulder. "Let's go home and thaw out Rat."

"Sure thing. Tomorrow I'll be on my bestest behavior. I promise," Grimbledung said as he exhaled. "Then after a quiet evening celebrating tomorrow, we're on easy street with only the funnest Jamboree in the history of Aution ahead of us!" They turned the corner onto the street their shop was on.

"Don't say things like that, Grim," warned Drimblerod, "that's usually when things fall apart."

"What are you talking about?" Scoffed his partner, "Things are going great. We're on easy street now. What could go wrong? We're living on the corner of Easy and Street. See? We're right there on the corner." He pointed at their shop.

Drimblerod ignored the poor geographical reference and cringed. "Really, Grim- don't tempt Fate like that." He reached for the handle and opened the door. "It's not a good idea."

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively, "Fate. I don't believe in that sort of stuff." He shook his head at Drimblerod. "Honestly, a smart Gnome like you believing in Fate. You know the old Gnomish Proverb- 'There is no Fate but what we make for ourselves.' "

Fate, hearing her name several times, swooped down and peeked into the shop to see what was going on. It was otherwise a slow evening in Aution, so Fate was looking for something to pass the time until the war that was brewing along the borders made it to town. It was a slow-brewing war.

"Fate schmate," finished Grimbledung. "How about we do a late second dinner? That's something real I can sink my teeth into."

Fate seethed and looked at the edge of Aution. It saw two ragged travelers arguing whether to go left or right a few blocks away. One produced a coin with a flourish, and flipped it. Fate reached out and nudged it to tails- down the road the Wand Shop was on. Fate moved across the street and sat down to watch the action. Without realizing it, Fate sat down right beside Destiny. They didn't notice each other because Destiny was looking the other way through town to a dusty and dirty reptile that was also moving down the street in their general direction. They looked at the shop at the same time and finally noticed each other. They exchanged glares.

The race was on!

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Wherein Semfeld and Liverioso Return to the Wand Shop ...soon after Garibaldis does.

"Yes," agreed Drimblerod in an exasperated voice, "*I have heard the proverb*, but that doesn't mean I believe it." He shook his head at his partner. "How about we agree to disagree?" He offered. "That's another old saying."

Grimbledung stared at Drimblerod, "How can we agree to disagree. If we don't agree ... You're just trying to confuse me," he sat on a stool at the counter. "You know what I think ..." He began.

Drimblerod threw his hands up in exasperation and retreated to the back room.

"Say, what about that..." Grimbledung was interrupted when a short squat lizard burst into the shop. It was covered in dust and its claws were mud caked. Several gnats flew around its head.

"There's no time to spare!" GaribaldisGila hopped several times.

"Leaping Lizards!" Grimbledung exclaimed.

"What?" Asked Drimblerod as he came back through the curtain at the same time as the reptile's entrance. Noticing the new, yet unusual customer, he smiled and greeted it. "Oh, hello Sir Lizard, what can we do for you?" A*t least it wasn't wearing a cloak*.

"I think it's a Salamander" said Grimbledung

"Salamanders are slimy. This one's dry. I'd say it's a lizard." Drimblerod appraised the creature as it stood frozen in the doorway, watching the exchange.

"How about a Gila Monster?" Suggested Grimbledung.

"Gilas are Lizards."

"Now don't go trying to confuse me again. If it were a Lizard, why would they call it something completely different?" Tut-tutted Grimbledung. "I think you're still sore about the Fate stuff."

They both moved from behind the counter to make a closer inspection of the creature.

"Listen you two Gnomes," began GaribaldisGila testily, "I *am* a Short-Tailed Gila Monster; it's a type of Lizard. *A poisonous one in*

fact," his voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone, "At the moment." His voice dropped another octave, "But, for your amazement and entertainment..." He drew the wand from his back with a flourish, "I give you the Great Garibaldis!"

He tilted his claws to show they were empty and then waved the wand over his head.

It's
ME!

He intoned

In a puff of smoke, he began to grow and his tail shortened. Soon, he was a full-grown Human; the Great Garibaldis. For a brief moment, he wore a wrist sheath strapped tightly to his back. And nothing else. The strap on the wrist sheath gave out and it dropped to the floor. Leaving him with nothing on. Naked and in the doorway of the shop, he raised his arms over his head and took a deep bow. "Tada!" He exclaimed as he stood upright again.

"What kinda shop you Gnomes running here?" Growled Akita as he appeared directly behind the Great Garibaldis. "I run a rrrrough town, but we have some dignity." He kicked the man into the store and pulled the door closed behind them. "Therrre's ladies out there, pal! Ya can't just moon passersby."

"Told you so," Drimblerod whispered to Grimbledung.

"Fine, I'll stop," Grimbledung said, dejected.

"Watch it, you!" Said Garibaldis as he turned around, "don't you ...." He got around and was face to face with Akita, "You don't...," he tried again. "know?" He offered. "Dealing with?" He squeaked.

Drimblerod pulled the curtain beside him down and tossed it to the man who quickly wrapped it around himself.

The man gaped as he backed away from Akita. "Nice ...d - d – d"

Akita barked at the man. "Don't you even *dare* say it." He warned as he straightened up. "The name's *AKITA. Akita Finnish.* And I'm the law around here." He snarled, yellow eyes narrow but still glowing bright.

Garibaldi's demeanor changed completely. "The *law*! Thank Sheba's

stars!" He did a quick little jig then lunged at Akita, catching him completely off guard. He hugged the constable, whose eyes grew large. Hugs were something that he just did *not* receive. From anyone.[38]

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou!" Babbled Garibaldis.

Akita looked extremely uncomfortable. He grabbed for Grimbledung who quickly moved out of reach. "Let go of me you madman!" He howled. "Someone get 'im off me!"

Drimblerod had never seen anyone flummox Akita. Of course, he had also never met anyone crazy enough to actually try to hug the Constable. It was, without a doubt, a most unexpected and effective tactic. He stayed in place to enjoy the show.

Garibaldis started to sob. He put his head on Akita's shoulder and cried, "Six years I've been away and finally I meet a lawman that I just *know* can stand up to them!"

Akita went from uncomfortable to full blown panic. As he backed away from the wailing man, the man walked with him, still hugging and sobbing. As he did, the curtain dropped to the floor.

They did a small circle in the center of the shop. Finally, Akita threw his head back and belted out a howl. Shelves rattled. Grimbledung covered his ears. Garibaldis finally let go. He picked up the curtain and blew his nose on a corner of it. Then after a moment's consideration- and to everyone's relief - he donned it like a toga, "Sorry about that. I get emotional at times."

Akita stopped the howl and leveled his eyes at the man. "Don't grrrrab me again! Just tell me what's goin' on!" He stepped back from the man, (partly) to give him room to speak, and (more so) to put some distance between him and the crazed, emotional, barely dressed Human, "From over there," he pointed.

"Well you see, what happened was six years ago," began Garibaldis, as he wrung a corner of the fabric between his hands. He had calmed down considerably, "I was doing this Gig..."

Akita barked loudly at the man. "I don' want a historrry lesson. Just give me the facts and keep it short."

"Just the facts? No great story?" The man pouted.

"Save that for yer kids," snarled Akita.

Garibaldis exhaled and composed his thoughts. "Short. Right. I'm a Magician. I was banished to the Great Sandy Desert for not paying my dues. A few months ago, a couple of Magician Guild

Enforcers showed up." Drimblerod slapped Grimbledung's ear as the man told the abridged story. "They stole my Shamblers, food and water and left me to die. They said they were coming after Drimblerod and his partner so I got here before them to warn Drimblerod partly because he gave me a good deal on some wands for a birthday Gig I was doing and partly because they left me to die." He gestured towards Drimblerod, "It was a really good deal."



"Say Mister Garibaldis," asked Grimbledung, "how far ahead of those two Enforcers do you think you are?"

The door burst open and Liverioso barged into the shop. "Ahhh

haaa! Tho now your doom ith neigh! Reap the Liveriotho Whirlwind!" He proclaimed.

Drimblerod slapped Grimbledung's ear again. Hard.

Semfeld pushed past his partner, "Oh yes." He looked around the room as he sneered, "OH YES. This will not go well for you or your ..." He got to Akita. "Your ... cohorts?" He tried.

"Constable," corrected Akita. He flattened his ears against his head and crouched back down. "Constable Akita."

"Thatht's good you're here Conthtable. Thethe Gnomth are wanted for athault aintht Offithial Magithian Guild Enforthers! Those are high crimthes."

One of Akita's ears perked up and he cocked his head to one side. "Honestly, I didn't get half of what you just said." His ear re-flattened as he looked at the other Enforcer, a growl started in the back of Akita's throat, "How 'bout you? You a complete moron too, or can ya' speak common?"

"Oooh!" Countered Liverioso.

Haughtily, Semfeld stepped in front of Akita. "I am the Great Semfeld." He stopped to let that sink in. No one seemed to let it. "And I am an Enforcer for the Magician's Guild." He puffed up his chest. That bit of information seemed to float around the room without sticking to anyone either.

The growl started again in Akita.

Quickly, Semfeld continued, "And *that* man" he said as he bounded across the room to point at Garibaldis "was wanted for being behind on his dues."

"Says he was banished," interjected Akita.

"Yeth. He was," snorted Liverioso, "to the Great Thandy Dethert!"

"And seems to me six years is plenty punishment for not payin' union or guild dues." He whirled toward Liverioso, "*And you say another word and I'll bite yer head off.*" He bared his fangs to show that the teeth required for just such a task were readily available.

Drimblerod couldn't keep from joining in the fun, "Please don't Constable. We just got the place cleaned up from the *last* time."

Liverioso blanched and moved his hands to his mouth to make sure nothing escaped. Even Semfeld seemed taken aback. Cautiously he eyed the Constable as he continued, "And these *two Gnomes* are wanted for high crimes against the Magicians Guild." He pointed at

both of the Gnomes repeatedly.

"Where's yer Warrant?"

"My what?"

"Yer Warrant. If yer takin' them to the Guild for punishment, you'll need something in writin' t' take 'em out'a my jurrrrisdiction."

Semfeld stared at the Constable. "Plus" he continued, hoping he could just move past that pesky legality, "plus, *that* one" he pointed at Grimbledung, "teleported us to the Great Sandy Desert to die!"

"Where he was," said Akita pointing at Garibaldis.

"Yes. To die! That's attempted murder," complained Semfeld.

"Wherrre this man had food and water."

"Yes."

"Before you stole it."

"Well. We were on official business." Offered Semfeld.

"And his transporrrtation. That too?"

"Well. We had to get back here."

"Take anything else to come dole out justice?" Growled Akita.

"Errr… Maybe a wand," Semfeld said. "But that's reasonable because we were trying to get away."

"With his food and water and transporrrtation. Leavin' him in the desert with nuthin'."

Liverioso frowned. "Well, sure if you put it *that* way, it doesn't sound on the up and up. But while we were ..."

"Robbing him." Offered Akita.

"...yes, robbing him… it didn't seem too out of place." As soon as he finished his sentence, Semfeld also moved his hands in front of his mouth. "I want my Guild Rep," he mumbled past his hands.

Liverioso nodded frantically.

Akita looked over his shoulder at Grimbledung, "Ya gonna get it right this time?"

Grimbledung blinked in surprise at the Constable. "Ahhh. What?" He said.

Akita winked a bright yellow glowing eye at the Gnome. "Well?"

Realization beamed across his face. "Yes!" He said again. In a flash, he drew his wand and jabbed it at Semfeld who promptly disappeared. His wand clattered to the floor.

"Ooooohhh I hate you thoooo much!"

Grimbledung quickly jabbed his wand at Liverioso who also

vanished.

"Well ... that 'bout rrrraps that up, I think." He faced Garibaldis. "Get some clothes before you walk around my streets."

Garibaldis moved toward the constable, arms held wide. Tears were forming in his eyes again.

Akita growled as he backed out of the store. "Keep away from me, you!" His tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth, "Yer a real disturrbin' 'uman. I'd hate to find out wishy washy's contagious." Mercifully, Door opened behind him and he quickly backed out of the shop.

Garibaldis exhaled slowly. "So, I'm free now, I suppose." He faced the Gnomes, "And I have you to thank for it." He stepped forward, once again with his arms out wide, "How about a hug?"

"What you need are clothes. *Clothes*. Not hugs," suggested Drimblerod. "How about I get you some coins so you can go to the Clothier. After all, you did come all the way here to warn us about those two." He walked behind the counter and opened a drawer. He removed his belt pouch and emptied it into the drawer. He then began to rummage in the drawer only putting gold and silver coins in the pouch. Once it was full he walked back around and handed it to Garibaldis. "It's the least we can do for saving us. If you need any other help, let us know."

Garibaldis took the sack and smiled. Tears welled up in his eyes. "I appreciate it. Maybe I'll try a different line, maybe go back to my work in Alchemy. It's probably a lot safer."

"Alchemy? Say, you ever think of being a professor?" Suggested Grimbledung, "I know a school that's hiring. South of town in an old Gristmill."

Garibaldis considered it. "Maybe. I might give that a look."

"Tell them Drimblerod and Grimbledung sent you. That's your in." Suggested Drimblerod

"I appreciate it." Garibaldis looked where the two Magician Guild Enforcers had been standing only moments ago. "So where did you send them this time?" He asked Grimbledung.

"Those two?" Grimbledung asked. "The same place I sent them last time. The middle of the Great Sandy Desert. It's the most remotest place I've been."

"Are you sure they took all your food and water the last time they were there?" Asked Drimblerod.

"Every last bit."

"Really sure?" Asked Drimblerod warily.

"Don't worry, partner," said Grimbledung slapping him on the back. "There's no way they'll make it out of there *twice*. No way at all."

Drimblerod slapped his ear, "Don't ever say that again!" This time not so hard.

Across the street, Fate and Destiny stood. Fate frowned and handed a worn bronze coin to Destiny and they parted ways.

For the time being.

Chapter Thirty-Nine
Wherein the First Annual Jamboree is Set up

Grimbledung hopped out of bed as he had done for the past three days- with a flourish and a song. Oh- and a jig.

Today's the day of the Jamboree!
There'll be food and drink, you'll see!!
We'll do a jig and all have some fun,
And toast mallows on the fire when we're done!

It's the day of the great Jaaaam booooorrr eeeee!

"Grim," began Drimblerod yet again, "I'm telling you, I don't want to hear that song again."

"Don't worry," assured his partner, "you won't."

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at him, "Really?"

"Of course," grinned Grimbledung, "because…

Today's the day of the Jamboree!
There'll be food and drink, you'll see!!
We'll do a jig and all have some fun,
And toast mallows on the fire when we're done!

It's the day of the great Jaaaam booooorrr
EEEEEE!

This time, instead of a jig, he hopped back and forth as he sang the song. Rat came under the curtain, whiskers twitching. He looked up at the two. Grimbledung got the milky eye. "I can honestly say I'm glad this day is here. So it'll be an entire year before we have to hear it again."

"Hear what again?" Coaxed Grimbledung.

Rat shook his head, "No, no. Not this time." He moved to the table, "I just want to eat my breakfast in peace and quiet."

"You mock me now, but just you wait- this is going to be the best Jamboree this town has seen," Grimbledung said. "They'll talk about it for years! *It will be famous*!"

"It better be with how much you've spent on it," said Drimblerod testily, "you're way over budget you know. Way over."

"Well, the jamboree is going to be worth it, way worth it. Trust me."

Drimblerod shook his head, "I still can't believe you convinced the mayor to let you use The Square."

"Harangued is more like it," said Rat as he hopped onto the table. "The poor mayor looks like he lost ten pounds just this week. I'm surprised we haven't been labeled persona non grata and ridden out on a rail."

"Pushaw." Said Grimbledung, "he'll appreciate all the business this will bring to Aution. This place is going to be known as *the* place to have Jamborees when I'm done with it." He smiled broadly again. "So anyway, I'll leave you two to break your fast, and I'm going to make sure things are running smoothly at the square." Grimbledung turned and left.

"I really think most all those Pixie bits are finally out of his head," commented Drimblerod as he took a bite of a muffin.

Rat, also with a good bit of muffin in his mouth, only nodded in return.

Grimbledung hurried out of the store. He was giddy with excitement. He had been to several Jamborees and had enjoyed himself. To excess. But at each one, he saw something that he would have done differently if he had been in charge- or someone asked his opinion. Now, as the main planner, he was able to make sure everything was just like he wanted it to be.

Walking down the street, he waved to several shop owners as he went, "Make sure your goods are out on a table and ready to go by sundown!" He called to the baker. In a stroke of genius (at least he thought so) he had gone to several of the restaurant and food stores in Aution and asked them if they wanted to sponsor a food booth at the Jamboree. In past events, Grimbledung was upset that only one type of food was available- by inviting several businesses, he -and everyone else- was assured a wide variety of food.

"I've sent my two apprentices ahead to make sure everything is in order," answered Raffaele Esposito, the owner of the Gamboling Bakery and Pizzeria. "They should have the wood ovens going and the dough proofed by now." Raffaele was looking forward to the advertising (and extra money) an all-night eating affair like a Jamboree created. Not since his gig as a royal Pizza Maker had his shop been so prominently displayed; Grimbledung had promised him the place of honor among the food vendors at the Jamboree. "We'll be the first booth up and running!" He called at the quickly disappearing Gnome.

Grimbledung turned the corner onto the main street of town, just a block away from The Square. He heard loud voices. *Probably workers putting up the stage for the musicians*. As he approached, the voices got louder. And angrier. As he entered The Square he saw that the angry voices were accompanied by an all-out brawl. Tables were askew, and the center of the area was occupied by several Humans, Dwarves, Gnomes, and at least three Half-Orcs (the arm count was wrong for just two) all in a large, writhing mass of anger. Grimbledung could see no weapons but even so, he was hesitant to try and break up the melee. Several workers (who were earlier assembling a stage) also watched with interest. At this point, several bets had been made and they were anxiously awaiting the outcome of the battle.

A long howl pealed through The Square. Grimbledung as well as everyone else turned to look at its source. Akita had climbed up one of the poles on the corner of the stage- a cover was going to be strung across the top in case of rain. Grimbledung had gotten soaked at one Jamboree and decided that covers were definitely something he would have at his Jamboree. So he did.

Akita glowered down at the mass of bodies from half way up the pole. As usual, his eyes glowed. Grimbledung was *sure* that he took some sort of potion to make that happen. "If you are all done makin' complete fools of yerselves, I know I'd apprrrrreciate it if you'd stop actin' like children." He looked at the mixed group. "Or whatever yer particular species calls youngsterrrrs." He hopped off the pole to the stage in a single bound. There were gouges where he had been gripping the pole; deep ones. One of the workers nudged the person next to him and held out his hand; he had been betting on Akita. It was always a safe bet.

The mass of bodies untangled into their appropriate groups- bakers, butchers, brewers, and even two ale wenches. None of them would look Akita in the eyes, becoming keenly interested in their own shoes, it seemed.

"What'rrrr ya doing?" Akita asked no one in particular. Everyone in the group found the ground at their feet the most interesting thing they had seen in weeks (even since their shoes a few moments ago). A growl started in the back of Akita's throat. Suddenly, he was the most interesting thing in town.

"Well, you see, Akita," began one of the Humans, "we were told by our Master, Raffaele, that we were supposed to be closest to the stage, at the place of honor." He stood a little bit straighter, "Since we've served Kings."

One of the Dwarves stepped forward, "Kings? That's all you've served?" He puffed out his chest, "We were told that *our* ale was going to be at the place of honor." He shook his head, "Kings? Our ale is used in the sacred Winter Solstice ceremony." He put his hands on his hips for emphasis, "We serve *GODS*."

The human shoved the Dwarf, "Yeah? How well do they pay?" The Dwarf shoved him back. One of the watching workers banged two hammers together to signify the official start of Round Two of what he hoped would be called the Great Jamboree Melee.

Akita howled again. "That's enough! Who said you two would *both* be at the place of honor?" Grimbledung turned to leave as quietly and unobtrusively as he could. Before he made it two steps, Akita had him by the collar. "Wherrre d'ya think yer going?" He growled on the back of Grimbledung's neck. The hairs there stood on edge and goose bumps ran down his arms.

"Errr. Back to the shop?" Grimbledung began to walk away.

His feet were no longer in contact with the ground. Akita hefted him around and aimed him at the still angry group. "No ya don't. This is yer mess, so yer gonna fix it." He growled to show that there was not going to be any debate. Akita put him down. "So get to it."

"Fine, Akita. Fine." He looked at the Constable. "I've got this. Don't worry." He patted the Werewolf on the shoulders then smoothed his fur. "Easy potatoesy." A few stray strands refused to lay flat so Grimbledung licked his hand them smoothed them again. "There we go." A single hair popped back up so, Grimbledung repeated licking his hand and smoothed it down. It stayed this time.

Akita narrowed his eyes. "Stop doin' that and take care of this misunderstanding!" With that he bounded off on all fours, happy he had diffused the situation, but also a little disturbed he had technically been licked by a Gnome. Twice.

Grimbledung looked at the group. They did not look pleased. Frantically his devious Gnome mind tried to come up with a plan. Years of practice yielded one quickly. "Sorry for the misunderstanding folks," he began. Apologies always put people off balance as it was hard to be angry at someone who was being apologetic- even if, in all honesty, it wasn't sincere. Honestly. "I didn't explain myself well enough and I am truly sorry." The faces of the crowd showed that they were now more interested in listening to him than pummeling on him. *Progress*. "Since the stage is in the center of The Square, the way I saw it, each of the four corners were a place of honor, so when I said that two of you had places of honor..." (Grimbledung was trying to walk the fine line between over-explaining and babbling) "I meant it. And then I'd still have two more places for other shops and then the shops farther from the stage would be the smaller shops which really isn't less honorable as a position (he was right on the line now) but one for a less established shop, which is fair since the shops closer to the stage have been around for centuries and have paid their dues being farther from the stage or other action, so that's what I was trying to do when I put two booths at the place of honor, and I still have two more booths to put there." Everyone in the group looked confused. *Definite progress*. "It's a cardinal direction thing. Or maybe a bishop direction. Either way, it's someone pretty high up making the directions."

Several confused shrugs and half-smiles later, the workers were all back at their own booths putting things in order. "So now we need to move these tables back to where they need to be," Grimbledung commanded forcefully then proceeded to mumble about his bad back and other duties as Official Jamboree Planner.

With some grumbling, the workers returned to their chores.

Grimbledung dusted off his hands as he moved to the far side of The Square to where a large pile of wood had been dumped. It was a substantial pile of almost seven feet. Several sweaty workers were sitting beside it. "Is that all the wood you're going to put on it?" He asked.

None of the workers stood, or even looked at him. "I think

that's as high as it should go, really. You know the wind whips through here some nights and there's a lot of clouds in the sky so it could be windy."

"And my hip's been bothering me today and that means there's a storm brewing nearby."

Another worker nodded- his knees were acting up as well.

"I'm sorry" began Grimbledung testily, "I didn't realize I asked for a weather prophesy. I thought I asked why this pile of wood was so small." He narrowed his eyes at the man, "I can see how 'why is this pile so small *could* sound like 'what's the weather tonight' TO A COMPLETE IDIOT!" He finished at the top of his lungs. "NOW GO GET ME MORE WOOD!" Spittle ran down his chin as he hopped back and forth. "I'm the Jamboree Planner and Mayor Shinn said I got what I wanted and what I want is more wood for my bonfire!"

"You want more wood?" The man said angrily as he jumped to his feet, "You got it. Let's go get some wood, boys."

Grimbledung raised his hands plaintively, "That's all I want is more wood." He then clenched his hands into fists, "SO GO GET MORE WOOD!" The last jamboree Grimbledung had been to, the organizers had set up a small mine cart with wood in it for people to roast Marsh Mallows and Marsh Pixies on. Grimbledung had to stand in line for several minutes while his Mallow tried to bargain its way off the stick. It almost ruined his whole evening. This time, he wanted to make sure everyone could roast their treats all at once and -more importantly- without any pleading. That's how a good Jamboree was run. "That's how a good Jamboree is run" he said to no one in particular- which was good because no one was listening.

For the rest of the day, Grimbledung screamed and cajoled his workers in setting up The Square. Finally, to everyone's relief, the sun finally set and the Jamboree officially began.

Chapter Forty
Wherein the First Annual Jamboree Begins!

Grimbledung stood on the stage with Mayor Camthalion Shinn on one side and Drimblerod on the other. He looked out at the crowd in front of him. It seemed that the whole town had turned out for the event. Even a few Orcs stood head and shoulders above everyone else. Word had indeed gotten out. Here and there, he saw a Gatherers Division button on someone in the crowd- according to the agreement; they ate and drank for free.

"Welcome to the First Annual Aution and Gatherers Division Jamboree!" Said Grimbledung to the large crowd before him. No one responded. "We're really glad you came and I want to thank a few people before we get the festivities started." The silence was overwhelming.

"First to Mayor Shinn, a tribute to Elfkind if there ever was one. This entire event is happening because of him. All him!"

Mayor Shinn's stomach suddenly filled with butterflies. He turned to look at the odd Gnome which now had put his reelection in danger. He took a step away and to the rear from Grimbledung.

Grimbledung pressed on: "And of course my partner Drimblerod Axebreath!" Again, no one made a sound.

From behind the crowd, a howl broke the silence. Everyone looked at Akita who was crouched on the roof of the massive, four-story Guilds House. The tallest in town, it housed the Midwifes, Healers and Undertakers (Local 423) [39]; Miners and Assays (Local 213); and the Scab and Blackleg Guild -which was only a guild by name of course. Obviously.

In any case, Akita was silhouetted in the moonlight. He let out another howl, arms splayed wide and chest out. Everyone took a step backwards towards the stage. A stampede was imminent. Akita leapt in what seemed slow motion.

While in the air he twisted around so he was looking down when he cleared the pile of wood- which was now almost three stories tall. He made it all the way to the stage and landed with two feet and one paw right where the mayor had been standing. The

stage creaked dangerously. As he stood slowly, he winked and whispered to Grimbledung, "Levitation wand." When he reached his full height, the entire crowd took a step back to their original position.

"That's all the talkin' I want to hear from this stage! Get some music and ale flowin' orrrrrr there's gonna be some citations issued!" He raised his arms high. "Let's get this party started!" The crowd exploded into cheers as Akita hoped off the stage and made his way to the nearest Ale booth. Even with his amicable entrance, everyone got out of his way.

The minstrel players took the stage like they were storming a keep. "Outta the way, youngsters!" Warned an olden looking Dwarf who was armed with an equally ancient fiddle. "Let the professionals work." He drew his bow across the strings and they hissed to life. Most of the crowd looked at the Dwarf. The hiss transformed into a lively tune that was quickly accompanied by several other minstrels. Even as the crowd began to mill about, an impromptu dance floor was created directly in front of the stage.

For several hours, the minstrels played in shifts (according to union rules) and a good time was had by all. Not a fight had broken out only partially due to Akita's prowling; the lumbering Orc Brute Squad (hired by Akita) made sure that differences were resolved peacefully. It was common knowledge that there were no innocent parties when Orcs broke up a fight. In fact, sometimes, innocent bystanders were used as weapons *by* them.

"Grim," began Drimblerod as he put down his mug, "I have to say, this is by far one of the best Jamborees I've been to." Grimbledung smiled in response. "There's plenty to drink, lots of different foods to eat, plenty of places to sit, and not a single fight. There's even a great breeze so it doesn't get too stale here in The Square with all these people. I can't imagine how it could be done better."

Grimbledung's smile widened, "Wait till you see the best part." He stood and climbed onto the stage. When he got there, he drew his wand. "Hey-ho, Mister Dwarf, give me a Look-Up-Here riff." He said to the grizzled musician.

Still in the middle of his song, the Dwarf gave a sideways nod to Grimbledung, finished his bar, then drew his bow across the strings and created a jagged sound much like a Stone Golem battle cry. Most everyone turned to look at the stage. "Many thanks," said Grimbledung as he moved to center stage. "I just want to say thanks for coming to the

First Annual Jamboree! Make sure you tell your friends about it and next year it'll be even bigger!" He shouted. Everyone stared at him.

"Let the Dwarf play!" Came a lone response from the back of the crowd.

Several people clapped their approval.

"Yes, yes! The Dwarf WILL play!" Shouted Grimbledung back as he pointed his wand at the immense pile of wood. "While we all roast our snacks!" With that he jabbed his wand at the pile. A stream of molten lava shot out of the wand in a large arc, hitting the pile near the top. It immediately burst into flames and the fire continued down as the lava dripped down. Within moments, the entire mass was ablaze. People near the inferno took a step back from the heat. Quickly the temperature in the square went up several degrees. Grimbledung turned to Drimblerod, "Woo- good thing there's a stiff breeze." He gave a wave to the Dwarf. "If music is the life of this jamboree, play on, good Dwarf. Play on." he said.

The Dwarf picked up his tune right where he left it off.



"Great huh?" Said Grimbledung.

"FIRE!" Someone behind him called.

"Yes! A fire to roast your snacks!" He called over his shoulder, "Bring out the Marsh Mallows and the Marsh Pixies! Two for a copper!" He smiled at his partner, "And you were worried you wouldn't have a good time." He waggled his ears, "Shame on you!"

"FIRE!" Someone else shouted.

Grimbledung hopped off the stage and sat back down beside his partner,

"The fire's a big hit."

"It seems to be."

"FIRE!"

"Well, you know. I was at a Jamboree once," began Grimbledung, "and they had a little ..."

"FIRE!"

" ...cart like they use in mines. You know the kind I'm talking about?" Grimbledung asked.

Drimblerod nodded with his mug to his mouth.

"Right, and they had wood in it and sure it was blazing pretty good but I had to wait ..."

"FIRE FIRE!!"

Grimbledung looked over his shoulder and shook his head, "Some people need to get out more."

"FIRE!!!"

Two people rushed past and bumped Grimbledung as they went. He gave them a sidelong glance and continued, "Anyway, since it was a little mine cart, there was a long line to get to it. I figured if I ever threw a Jamboree, I'd make it big enough for everyone to use at once."

"THE INN!! THE INN!"

Grimbledung winked, "Sounds like people are having a great time. Want to walk around and see how things are going?" He asked as he stood. Another person ran by, knocking him back into his seat. "Watch it!" He called at the rapidly leaving person. He stood again and had to avoid another two people -one of them an Orc- hurrying by. "What's going on?" He asked no one in particular.

"THE GUILD'S GOING UP!!"

"What Guild is going up where?" Asked Grimbledung as he took a drink of his ale. "You gotta watch those Guilders or they'll take over the

place." He put his drink back on the table. "Maybe we can talk to the Blacklegs next year."

"THE GUILD'S GOING UP!!" Someone else shouted.

Drimblerod turned to look.

He was sorry he did.

Chapter Forty-One[40]
Wherein During First Annual Jamboree Becomes the Great Fire of 978

Drimblerod's eyes got wide, "The Guilds?" He quickly clambered onto the table and looked around, "GRIM! The Guilds House IS ON FIRE! How in the Lands did *that* happen?" From his vantage point he was now taller than the heads of most of the human-sized people in The Square. They were all running one way or another. There was a bucket brigade snaking its way towards the Inn. It was completely ablaze. "Huh, the Guilds House."

Grimbledung climbed onto the table as well. "Is that the Stables?" He asked pointed over Drimblerod's shoulder, "Over there?"

Drimblerod followed his partners pointing hand to the far side of The Square, "No, no. That's the Courthouse burning. The Stables are over there" he explained as he pointed to where the Stables were currently burning. Realization washed across his face, "The Courthouse? That's only a block from our shop!"

Glowing ashes flew by as the wind picked up. "We need to check on the shop," suggested Grimbledung as he surveyed the area. Several other buildings were completely engulfed in flames- Aution was, like most other towns, constructed of wood. Unfortunately, Aution was the oldest town in the area which meant all the wood had been drying for two centuries. It was dry, seasoned wood. Perfect kindling in the shape of a town.

"There they are!" Grimbledung heard a familiar voice call. He turned and saw Mayor Shinn moving his way through the crowd. He was making good progress because his path was being cleared by two Orcs. "Don't you move!" He commanded.

"I think it's time to go," suggested Drimblerod.

"Back to the shop?"

"Maybe a little farther than that. At least until things cool down around here." Drimblerod said without a bit of humor. The fire had spread and was moving not only downwind at a frightening pace, but also spreading sideways thanks to the brisk breeze that aided embers from jumping across streets and alleyways.

"I think you're right. I'll follow you," said Grimbledung as he turned

to look towards where the shop was- while he looked, a fire hopped the street to the next block. Their block. Out of the corner of his eye, Grimbledung saw movement beside him and he startled as he turned. Oddly, he saw nothing there.

Fate rested her arm on Grimbledung's shoulder and surveyed the mayhem. She smiled and patted an unseeing and unfeeling Grimbledung on the shoulder. Even though he did not know Fate was there, it still gave her great satisfaction. With one last pat, Fate moved off, smiling. She still had a war developing and she wanted to make sure it was pointed at Grimbledung.

"Think the Merchant Guild will give you a break on your dues while they rebuild?" Grimbledung asked.

"No," Drimblerod replied as he ran. "But at least it'll take them a while to find me before they can harass me again." He pointed to the left as they both veered that way.

"Doesn't hurt to ask," Grimbledung said as he jogged along with his partner.

"We'll deal with that later." Now Drimblerod pointed at their shop. "First things first!"

The Gnomes burst into the shop which was brightly lit by the quickly approaching inferno. "Rat! We need to go now!" Called Drimblerod as he moved behind the counter. He pulled a bag of holding from under the counter and began to rake the more valuable wands into it. "RAT!"

Grimbledung went into the back room (the curtain had never been rehung) and was greeted by a frantically flailing Dummy. "I've got you, Dummy. We won't leave you." He said as he pulled Dummy from his platform and muscled him to the cart in the backroom. "Hang on, we'll be right back." He grabbed a backpack of holding (also from the latest Gally Wuck trader) and moved to the front. The store was as bright as noon. Grimbledung looked across the street. The Stumbling Drunk was ablaze. "Nulu!" Grimbledung tossed the backpack to Drimblerod without even looking. In a flash, he was out the door and across the street. He burst into the establishment at a full sprint (for a Gnome anyway), "NULU!" He called.

"Down here!" He heard Nulu voice from behind the bar- which was completely aflame. She had taken shelter in the cellar. "I'm trapped and the stairs are on fire!"

"MOVE TO THE FAR CORNER!" Grimbledung shouted

over the roar of the flames.

"WHICH CORNER IS THE FAR ONE?"

Grimbledung hopped back and forth in panic. "I DON'T KNOW! JUST PICK ONE! STAND ANYWHERE EVEN!"

"SO WHY EVEN BOTHER MOVING IF I CAN STAND ANYWHERE?"

Grimbledung howled in a combination of panic and rage. "STAND STILL THEN!"

"THAT'S WHAT I'M DOING!"

He drew his wand and aimed it at the floor. A stream of molten lava sprang from it and began to burn a hole in the floor. Within moments, there was a hole straight into the cellar. Grimbledung got on his hands and knees. "Nulu! Can you see the hole!"

"Yes! I was standing right under it when you made it! Why didn't you tell me to stand someplace else?"

Grimbledung stood so he could hop back and forth several times then dropped back on all fours. "Stay out of the way and I'll make it a lot bigger so you can climb up."

"Are you calling me fat?"

Grimbledung stood and hopped back and forth again. *Females!* "Stand back!" He worked the lava stream around the edges of the hole as he circled it. The floor was wood over what appeared to be sandstone so it melted quickly. Finally, Grimbledung lowered his wand, "Now frost the edges and jump out!"

After a moment, the edges of the hole were frosty. Nulu jumped up and made it half way out of the hole. She clawed her way out in an effective albeit unlady-like manner. Even for a Trolless. When she was back on her feet, she stared at the hole. It was over twice as large as she was. "What are you saying, with a hole that big?"

"The town is burning down and you're worried about your *hips*?" Grimbledung flailed his arms around, "FOCUS!" He grabbed Nulu's hand and ran from the burning restaurant. As he crossed the street, he noticed it was bright enough outside that he had a shadow. Glancing up he saw the Magicked moon above the shop basked in orange firelight- it was full. Grimbledung stopped in his tracks.

Nulu, carried by momentum, skidded past him. "What are you doing?" Moving back, she grabbed him by the arm, "Didn't you just yell at me to focus? You need to follow your own advice, you daft Gnome!"

Grimbledung shook his head, "Right, right. But it's such a nice

enchantment I hate to leave it behind." He pulled his wand from his wrist sheath. "Com'ere Moon!" He commanded. Obediently, the moon left its position above and a little in front of the door and moved to Grimbledung's outstretched hand. He tucked it under his arm. "Right. *Now* we need to run! Like I said, focus!" He grabbed Nulu by the hand and pulled her into the shop.

"Stop holding my hand!" Nulu complained.

They entered the wand shop as Drimblerod was finishing adding the wands from the shelves to the pack. "Where have you been? And where's Rat?" Drimblerod noticed the moon under his partner's arm, "Good thinking, Grim. That thing was a Werebear to concoct."

Grimbledung smiled. It quickly turned into a grimace, "We need to get out of here before the Mayor finds us!"

"Wait. You're responsible for *this*?" Nulu gestured out the window at the inferno.

"I don't think we should discuss this now! Let's get out of town!" Behind him Door clattered open and closed. He turned to look, "Door! No, we aren't going to leave you behind!" He turned to Nulu, "Can you put him with Dummy on the wagon?"

"And get on it yourself because we're going. Now" said Drimblerod as he put the last of the wands into the pack.

Nulu stepped outside the store and gripped the door with both hands. With a quick jerk, the entire frame came loose. "Got ya, Door. Let's go." Door rattled its catch in thanks. Turning it sideways, she started to enter the shop as she did, she turned to look at the Stumbling Drunk. The roof was caved in and bottles behind the bar were bursting randomly. With a sigh, she scooted into the shop and made her way to the back of the store. She hefted the door over the side of the wagon. "Get down, Dummy and put this on top of you. You're liable to burst into flame if anything drops on you." Flailing its arms, Dummy fell over. Nulu laid the door on top of Dummy and it grabbed Door from underneath to keep it in position.

"LET'S GO!" She said as she jumped into the back of the wagon.

Grimbledung and Drimblerod were both upfront. They turned to look at her and then at the empty harness upfront.

"You're kidding me. First the big hole in the floor. Then my entire business goes up in flames. Now I'm a beast of burden?" She

glowered at them.

"We're Gnomes! The wheels on this thing are bigger than us," offered Drimblerod.

"It's not our fault we're our size," added Grimbledung. "I blame my parents."

With a snarl, Nulu jumped out of the wagon and kicked the rear doors of the shop open. One came off its hinges and ended up on the other side of the alleyway. It promptly caught fire to match the building it was leaning against. "OK. Everyone hold on and keep an eye out for Rat." Nulu grunted as she shoved the wagon out the shop and into the alleyway. She grabbed the tongue of the wagon and started towards the main street. Flames danced over their heads, carried by the rapidly increasing wind. Fueled by the heat, there was now a substantial wind billowing down the alleyway.

In his shop, Pozzuoli wielded an Ice Wand in one hand and a Disintegrate! Wand in the other. "Take MY store? That's not going to happen! You good up there, Mamma?" He called to the ceiling. With the pandemonium around him, he had dropped his accent. Now was the time for action, not appearances. The entire of Aution would burn to the ground but *not* the Haberdashery.

On the roof with two Ice Wands, Mamma Pozzuoli kept adding to the walls she had created around the store. "It's fine up here, Papa. At least it's not lava this time!" She called down. Merely a fire? No molten rivers of lava barreling down on her? Child's play- she wasn't even panicking. "What do you want for dinner tonight?"

"Hah. That's Mamma. What do you think of her, Sign?" Pozzuoli called over his shoulder to Sign which was wielding an Ice Wand in case he missed something.

"It sounds like she's a great wo wo wo ma ma man" replied Sign.

"What's wrong with you?" Asked Pozzuoli has he looked at his normally well-spoken Sign. "Is the heat getting to you?"

"Thing some not is right," offered Sign. His eyes got big and his wheel began to spin furiously. "No. No! Not like this! NOT LIKE THIS!"

"Take a right at the intersection!" Offered Drimblerod again as he

directed the puffing Nulu through the maze that was the backstreets of Aution. "That's the quickest way out of town and the buildings are not as tall!" Once already, Grimbledung had to put out Door where a large piece of flaming wood had fallen on it.

"Rat!" Called Grimbledung again as he looked back from the wagon. He was not only keeping an eye out for Rat, but was also making sure the wagon didn't catch fire again, "RAT WHERE ARE YOU!?"

"Grim! Up here!" Came a voice from above. Grimbledung looked up and running along the gutter of the building was Rat, "I've been trying to catch up for almost two blocks! For the sake of Vera's Toes, tell that crazy Trolless to stop running for a moment!"

"Nulu, stop. Rat found us!" Grimbledung called to the front of the wagon. Panting, Nulu came to a stop. "It's about time."

"What are you complaining about?" Asked Drimblerod, "You've only been running not even 300 paces or so. Don't be a Trolling."

Nulu turned to glower at Drimblerod. She roughly dropped the tongue of the wagon, "*You* wanna pull the wagon? I'm not built to pull a wagon. I'm built to look good and run a Bar and Restaurant." She looked down at her hands. Looking up, she narrowed her eyes at him, "*I broke a nail*."

Drimblerod sat back in his seat. "Now Nulu, you're doing a great job. Really."

"Let's let Rat get up there and you can ride in back. Nice and cozy."

"And I lost my business."

"We'll get you set back up. Promise!" He offered as Nulu moved by the wagon. Even with him sitting up on the back of the seat, they were eye to eye as she went past. "I promise!" He said again.

Rat moved to the front of the wagon as Grimbledung quickly jumped down and transformed the rodent. Quickly, he slipped the harness on the newly transfigured RatShambler. He gave a thumbs up sign to his partner and ran to the back of the wagon.

"Okay! Everyone on and we're going to make it out of town in record time." RatShambler shook his dingy coat and flicked his half tail. "Say when!"

Grimbledung rolled onto the back of the wagon beside Nulu. "When!" He called. With a lurch, RatShambler was at a gallop.

"You sure you are alright?" Pozzuoli asked again. "You don't sound so good."

"No. It has passed now. I guess that stupid Grimbledung didn't know what he was doing after all. I'll be fi ..." Sign exploded into an inferno. Within moments, the wall was crackling with flames.

"THOSE GNOMES!" Howled Pozzuoli, "THOSE CONNIVING GNOMES! Mamma! We need to go!" He called as he tried in vain to put out the now engulfed wall. In a moment of benevolence, he took a broom and knocked open all the lanterns. "Get out of here Pixies!" He shoo-ed the very relieved Pixies towards the door with the bristle end. "Go Pixies!! Mamma!" He called up at the ceiling. "Time to go!"

Already, Mamma Pozzuoli was moving down the stairs, "Don't wait for me. Get on the Shambler!" She called as she huffed and puffed down the stairs.

When she got there, her husband reached down and swung her onto the back of the saddle. "Andiamo!"

With a kick of his heels, their trusty Green Shambler, Andiamo, took to a gallop. "Drimblerod and Grimbledung. Just you wait," muttered Pozzuoli to himself.

Finally, clear of the taller buildings, RatShambler slowed to a trot. He looked over his shoulder at the glow behind him. It was as if the sun were coming up ten hours early. The entire town was engulfed. There were streams of people leaving in all directions. "Rats from a ship," remarked RatShambler as he turned back to watch where he was trotting. "Where to Drim?" He asked.

Grimbledung was also looking back at the town. He met Drimblerod's eyes. "How many people do you think know the truth?" He asked.

Drimblerod looked around the wagon. "Well," he began, "counting the people that are in the wagon or not?" Grimbledung continued to stare at his partner. "I'd say as far as important people, just Mayor Shinn." He looked down at his hands. "That's it. So, one." That one he knew- he held up a finger. A howl wafted by on the hot breeze from what once was Aution. "On second thought, maybe two," continued Drimblerod sheepishly.

The two stared at each other as the wagon bounced along. Nulu finally broke the silence, "Where do you think would be a good place to ..." She considered her words. "Hide out?"

Drimblerod looked at Nulu, "You're going to stay with us after all we've put you through?" He smiled, "You are one crazy Trolless."

Nulu shook her head, "No, no. You two owe me. And more importantly I owe *you*. If I left, I'd never get my comeuppance. So where to?"

"There's always Big Julie," offered Grimbledung. "She's got a lot of space. We've got a lot of wands. Maybe we can work something out."

Drimblerod considered this for a moment. It would be a good location. It was close enough to the former town of Aution to see how things were going there rebuilding-wise. Plus, he had an Abyssmal Box to retrieve- they were, for all intents and purposes, indestructible. He just needed the coast to be clear to sneak back into town to get it. On top of that, working the school kept the coins flowing. "If she'll let us set up shop that may work out." He turned to look at Nulu, "You know, she wanted to start a town around the school. If it's a town starting up, it's going to need an Inn." He smiled at her, "and every Inn needs a Bar and Restaurant. And seeing as how there isn't a town nearby anymore, she's got a good shot at making it happen."

Nulu considered the business opportunity. Getting in on the ground floor was always the way to maximize profits. The stickler would be Big Julie. Two strong women in one location might cause ruffled feathers. "Is Big Julie easy going? What's she going to think of me moving in on her action?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "She seems pretty reasonable to me. She's a real businesswoman so I can't see her not seeing the profit of having an Inn set up shop nearby. She wants a town and you can't have a town without an Inn. That's what brings people around and makes them settle down."

Grimbledung smiled. The prospect of two large women in close proximity was a dream come true. "Then it's settled!" He clapped his hands once. "We can discuss the details over some drinks," he suggested, "Say Nulu, have you ever tried Melonchello? The last time I drank some, I lost three weeks and ended up dead. You'll love it!"

Nulu turned and looked forward without saying a word.

Chapter Forty-Two
Wherein The Gnomes, Nulu, Dummy, and Rat Make Their Way to Big Julie

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

Drimblerod sat in the front of the wagon, marginally holding the reins. It was more for show since RatShambler knew where he was going and would take (as usual) offence to any offer of direction. Also, Drimblerod was fast asleep.

"Anyone want to hear a song?" Asked Grimbledung, "I just made one up." He was hoping to break the silence because the clouds were moving too fast to actually form anything interesting for him to look at. 'Streaks' just didn't cut it after an hour. "It's about the town," he added hopefully. Dummy turned to look at him and shook its head. Since they had left town, Dummy had switched with Door and was now on top of it. The risk of fire was gone so he no longer needed to cower under Door, and since Door didn't seem to have any way to enjoy the scenery, they decided to swap places. Door was friendly that way. "You sure? It's not very long and it rhymes and everything." Dummy shook his head again.

Nulu, who had taken to walking beside the wagon (on the opposite side of Grimbledung) so as to not have to be close to Grimbledung, moved around to his side of the wagon. "Grim, I don't see how a song is going to make anything better. We lost everything. I lost everything. Everything." She looked into the wagon; none of its contents were hers. "Everything." Her face scrunched up angrily, "Since my money was in the bank in town, it's melted along with everything else. All I have is a Frost Wand to my name and the clothes on my back."

"You have your looks," suggested Grimbledung.

Dummy nodded and elbowed Nulu in the side for emphasis.

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

"My good looks, a Frost Wand, and a head nod from Dummy is supposed to make me happy?" She clenched and unclenched her massive fists several times. Mercifully, she merely moved to the other side of the wagon without giving Grimbledung another look.

The group rode on without another word.

The silence was deafening.

As usual, it lasted for only a few minutes.

Chapter Forty-Three
Wherein Grimbledung is Forgiven By Everyone

Except Dummy

Grimbledung mulled over his current situation. Things looked bleak. That meant it was time for drastic actions. After decades of being involved in bleak situations, he knew that 'sooner' was always better than 'later' for drastic actions. With a howl, he bounded to the front of the wagon, clambered onto RatShambler's back and made a jump over his head. He was hoping for an impressive landing that would get everyone's attention. He landed in a heap. When he got back on his feet, everyone was looking at him. *Mission accomplished.*

"OK. Let's have this out," he began angrily.

"Don't you dare spit at me."

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

"No one's saying anything, Grimbledung." Nulu pointed out.

"SHUT. UP!" He howled, "That's the whole problem!" Nulu opened her mouth to offer a response but a glare from Grimbledung made her just close it again. "Not a word from you people while I talk." He realized that RatShambler had not actually stopped walking and he was now beside the wagon instead of in front of it and he was steadily losing ground. He drew his wand, "Rat, I *swear* if you don't stop walking, I'll cut you in half and we'll see how the enchantment deals with that!" He pointed his wand menacingly at RatShambler's midsection. RatShambler, not wanting to have to deal with what would invariably be called The Great Splitting Incident of 978, stopped.

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

"For Delberger's Hand, what are you getting on about?" It was RatShambler. Since Grim hadn't pointed the wand at him (last), he felt he was in the best situation to demand an explanation. In the back of his mind, he was also fairly certain that cutting him in half - although probably painful and messy - would not actually do him in. And, truth be told, he was actually interested in knowing how his two parts would reattach. Or if each would heal and he would become two of him.

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

No one moved a muscle. A Red Bellied Shambler Fly[41] landed on Rat's shank and chomped down to drink its fill, and even then, he didn't twitch.

"I AM SORRY!" Finally made its way out past the sobbing that wracked Grimbledung's body. He tugged furiously on his ears. "IT'S MY ENTIRE FAULT AND THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO TO CHANGE IT!" He looked up at his companions, eyes red and wet. "I RUINED EVERYTHING!" He fell back and sobbed at the cloud streaked sky. "Streaks." He said.

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

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

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

Grimbledung looked up at Nulu and finally ran his arm across his nose. Nulu's stomach did a little flip. Her biggest fear now became the

probability of a hug at the end of her pep-talk. "Listen Grim," she began again. "It's all right. We can work through this together." It was noncommittal, non-accusatory, and, more importantly, most likely correct.

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

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

RatShambler turned to look at Drimblerod, "Little Fire? Have you not looked over your shoulder lately? Even from here you can still ..." He was cut off as Nulu slapped his flank. Hard. To add insult to injury, she didn't even hit the Shambler Fly. "We can work through this." He finished simply through clenched teeth.

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

"We do," said Nulu.

Drimblerod and Dummy nodded. RatShambler, rear stinging, nodded as well. Even door underneath Dummy clattered his latch.

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

"You really mean that Drim?"

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

Grimbledung stood and wiped his nose again. This time with the other sleeve. Nulu took a precautionary step backward.

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

Dummy flailed its arms around frantically. He had just been going along with the others to ensure his continued employment and

existence. Even with a head full of cotton bunting and straw, he knew what that crazy Gnome was doing. Now, he had no way to warn the others.

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

Drimblerod snapped the reins at RatShambler who begrudgingly picked up a faster than normal (for him) pace. Mercifully, the snapping reins finally made the nearly gorged fly go in search of a nice shady spot for a nap.

Chapter Forty-Four
InTerN Mission: Failure

Corporal Colossus stood on the hill outside of Aution. The fully ablaze Aution. He felt as hot as the flames he was watching. "Any sign of them?" He called again. He had his men spread out along the top of the hill in an effort to spot his compatriots.

After several long minutes, one of the Halflings spied Corporal Gigantus and his squad as they filed out of town. "I see them!" He called triumphantly, "On the northern edge of town!" He pointed to assist his Corporal to see where they were.

Corporal Colossus moved beside his man, "Good work, Mountainous. Go let them know where we are."

With that the private took off towards the line of Halflings, waving as he went. Colossus turned and scowled at the remaining Halflings, "Anyone have any word on *who* started the fire?"

The second in command Halfling spoke up, "No one from *our* group did it, Corporal. Maybe it was the Intel Squad. It's always dangerous when you take Intel Folk and put them out in the wilds." The other Halflings murmured their approval. Whenever something went wrong -justified or not- it was the Intel Halflings that were to blame. It was not mere coincidence that their banner had an old grey Scape Goat on it. The 'Goat of Knowledge' the Intel Folk reverently called it. Everyone else knew the *real* reason.

"If it *was* them. They better hope none of them made it out of town." Corporal Colossus said to no one in particular. He turned and watched as his troop finally caught the attention of the other squad. As he reached the head of the column they seemed to exchange words. Then he saw *that* Halfling punch *his* Halfling in the head. The group marched past the now unconscious Mountainous. "Well, well; Corporal Gigantus, you made it out as well." As they came, he counted the Halflings behind him, "And with all your men." Losing men in battle meant they weren't around to discipline later. If one was going to lose a battle, one should at least have the satisfaction of Criminal Incompetence Assessment (CIA) proceedings. Blaming the Intel Folks *was* fun, but could grow tedious after a while. Having a

CIA to kick around fresh blood solved that.

Finally, Corporal Gigantus and his men reached the top of the hill.

"Any news on who started the fire?" Colossus asked.

"Oh, I know who started it. That I know for a fact."

Corporal Colossus raised an eyebrow at his fellow Corporal, "Who?"

"It was this Gnome. This crazy Gnome. We were at the Jamboree, having a pretty good time honestly, when he started it." Corporal Gigantus got a far-away look in his eye, "I'd swear he was half Halfling with how he acted. Right there in the middle of the entire town, innocents everywhere, he started the blaze. Panic ensued. People were trampled." He looked at Corporal Colossus, "It was glorious."

Corporal Colossus shoved his fellow Corporal. "*GLORIOUS*? Some Gnome burned the town to the ground instead of us and you think it's glorious? Wait till the Lord High Priest hears this." He shuddered involuntarily, "You won't think it was glorious then." There was a CIA in his future, and it would leave a bad taste in his mouth. There was no avoiding it; that's just what a CIA did.[42]

"Only if he finds out," offered Gigantus, "if we get to this Gnome first and shut him up. No one will be the wiser."

The two Halflings turned and watched as Aution burned. "Fine. Fine. We'll find that Gnome and he'll be sorry he ever crossed a Halfling," said Corporal Colossus.

Chapter Forty-Five
Wherein the Group Arrives at Displane's School for Young Wizards and Witches

They all continued in silence as the wagon bounced down the road toward Big Julies. Occasionally, they would turn to look at the receding inferno that once was Aution. Soon, only a thick black column of smoke was visible in the sky. Even as they approached the school, it was still visible. They rolled to a stop in front of the two Gargoyles. They were both facing the pillar of smoke that once was Aution.



A familiar Dwarfling came out one of the doors onto the flagstones. He appraised the motley group for a moment. "Ya got an appointment?"

Without missing a beat, Drimblerod smiled and answered, "Of course we do." He moved the wagon beside the double doors and the group all got out.

"Rat, watch the wagon while we talk to Big Julie," said Grimbledung after he changed him back. "We'll come get you before we go eat. Promise."

With that, Drimblerod, Grimbledung and Nulu followed the Dwarfling into the school (through the left door because that was the Gargoyle that had stopped looking at the pillar of smoke long enough to tend to its duties) towards Big Julie's office.

Grimbledung glanced down at the Dwarfling and smirked. "So, what are you in for this time?" He asked in a conspiratorial tone.

The End

Will the Gang be welcomed by Big Julie?

Can Aution be rebuilt?

How will Grimbledung act with two curvaceous women nearby?

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About the Author



Robert in his natural habitat-with a Peroni in Naples, Italy.
(The Gnocchi are on the way.)

Robert P. Wills is a newly retired U.S. Army, Chief Warrant Officer Four. He and his long-suffering wife have retired to Central Florida where they

are spending far too much time walking around the various theme parks in the area.

Except Sea World.

The employees there tend to yell at Robert for petting the dolphins. At the dolphin petting pool. No, he doesn't understand it either. He wasn't even dressed like a pirate at the time!



(Have Parrot. Will Travel)

He plans to continue his writing antics with several books in the works.

Unless he is eaten by a shark first.

Other Stories by Robert P. Wills

Fantasy

Next in this series are:

Book 2- Gnomes, and Halflings, and Assassins! Oh My!
Book 3: Here's Looking for you, Grimbledung
Book 4: A New Hope
Book 5- Grimbledung and the Horrible, Terrible, No Good Mine
Book 6- It's the Election, Stupid
Book 7- Killing Grimbledung

The Red Brick Road- Take a trip to Oz a week before Dorothy arrives. Young Honus is looking to change his future and get out of his little Kansas town. He didn't expect to go so far so quickly. Follow along as Honus tries to find his way back home with a pushy rooster, a talking goat, and a Lollipop Guild Enforcer Munchkin along for the trip. If you've ever wondered why Glenda lies to Dorothy right off the bat, why the Witch of the South is never mentioned, and why the Wizard wants the Witch of the West dead, this is the book for you.

Horror

Diary of a Madman- The Haunting of Terrance Brushwood. Young Terrance is worried he is going crazy. No one else is seeing the things he is. Are they in his mind? His doctor thinks so. This is a 5,000 word short available on Amazon. Suitable for ages 13 and up due to language.

Easy Street Unpaved- A Vampire's Change of Fortune. Hugh has been a vampire since the early days of the Jamestown colony. He has seen fortunes come and go throughout the centuries. None of that will prepare him for what happens to him next. Suitable for ages 16 and up- Hugh isn't a friendly vampire. This 20,000-word short available on Amazon as a prologue to a three-part series; Hugh – 'Vampire'; 'Hunter'; 'King'. Coming in late 2023. If it goes well, the following three books Hugh –

'Emperor'; 'God'; and finally 'Damned' will finish up this ten-thousand-year saga.

Adventure

The Sailings of Pirate Nonn. Pirate Nonn and his crew sail the Caribbean in search of treasure. Ruthless and cunning, Nonn and his crew are in search of a missing treasure with Her Majesty's Navy in pursuit. This story is suitable for ages 14 and up due to violence. Nonn isn't a loveable pirate. Coming mid-2023

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About the Illustrator



Rio Taylor studied Illustration at the University of Hertfordshire in England. The purpose and drive behind her art is to tell stories. She loves chocolate, wolves and traveling. Rio currently lives in Loveland, Colorado.

She is related to Robert by marriage on his wife's side, so he didn't have to pay her anything for her illustrations.

After working on book 1 and before working on book 3, Rio got married. The author would like to think that her future husband saw her artwork in his stories and fell madly in love with Rio. That's the author's story and he's sticking to it!

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.





View more of Rio's art at-
http://rioburton.storenvy.com/

Check out her work on The Fairy Tale Games the Battle Royale

Print out this page to make a shopping list

___ Bread

___ Eggs

___ Stuff that Vegans eat (if appropriate)

___ Stuff that Carnivores eat (if appropriate)

___ Neccos (best candy ever!)

___ Frozen Waffles (they are part of a balanced breakfast)

___ Stuff to complete a balanced breakfast (optional)

___ Flowers for your significant others (**not** optional)

[1] A derogatory term Halflings use for anyone taller than themselves.
[2] This was of course, an absolute lie. High Priests gained their positions through a Bobbing. The details aren't important right now but it will be discussed later.
[3] Nope. No seasonal narratives, sorry.
[4] This is the term merchants use for people who wander around a store with no intention of buying anything. You are probably more familiar with the more-friendly term 'window shopper' that these people tend to give themselves. But to we merchants, you're window lickers; deal with it.
[5] Field Scroll 3.0
[6] Technically, his winning hand in Trufflidge had gotten him the building. Since he had burst into song immediately after laying down his cards, he opted to believe the song got him the deed.
[7] Testy School Teacher + Four Foot Katana = Let's capitalize the 'A'.
[8] It's a three-star affair. We recommend it if you're in the neighborhood. We *highly* recommend it before the events in Chapter Forty take place.
[9] 1-3 Orcs is a Band. 4-9 =Party of Orcs, 10-20=Orc Troop, 21-49=Heap of Orcs, 50-99=Massing of Orcs. 100+ = Tolkien of Orcs
[10] Grunsday is colloquial for Gwenersday.
[11] Right??!!
[12] Never have more wrong words been spoken.
[13] Honestly, there's already going to be too many moving parts to include the Gremlins. Maybe next time.
[14] This last one is a well-documented fact.
[15] Yes, that is a standard unit of measurement. Pumpkins are routinely sold using this scale, in fact.
[16] Twenty-One was before Twenty (part three)- don't get confused now; it only gets worse later on.
[17] For goodness' sakes; it just means twenty! Twenty of anything.
[18] For the sake of good taste, that Halfling word will *not* be translated. Use your imagination if you must. If you're a minor, just substitute 'going shopping'
[19] Nope. That's all you get about him. He's like those Gremlins. Maybe someday there will be Tales from The Mora Tau Bar and BAR. Some day
[20] The collective for Elves- all numbers of Elves. Honestly, you would never confuse any number of Elves with 10-20 Orcs.
[21] It'll come up again. Much later on.
[22] That's it, sorry. This incident will probably end up in Tales from The Mora Tau Bar and BAR. You won't want to miss it
[23] Look it up. We're not making these collectives up you know!

[24] Yes, any grouping of Brownies; either the mischievous or the chocolaty baked variety are called a Batch
[25] Listen, we're tired of justifying our collectives here: 2=Couple, 3-9=Gang, 10-25=Gross, 25+ = Heaps. (As in 'I hear there's Heaps of Ogres in the Deeping Comb. That can't be good.')
[26] It really does- you are actually on occasion learning honest to goodness facts in these stories!
[27] Legitimate, that is
[28] Orcs are suckers for brown gravy. Honestly- who isn't?
[29] The spiral staircase which ran all the way to the top held up all the floors above the first. Of course.
[30] At an early age, while his schoolmates studied 'The Three R's', Vera busied himself with 'The Three M's'.
[31] Hey- at least they're in order!
[32] See? Once they're dead, they're Saints. Even unstable, Pixie-crazy Gnomes.
[33] Well, at least until the next book. There will be extenuating circumstances but they still won't be happy to see him. Honestly, would you?
[34] Mark I can't talk, Mark II *can* talk, and Mark IV are mounted troops.
[35]Since the wrestling match in Grimbledung's mind was not sanctioned, there was no one to complain to about the highly illegal (yet effective) move
[36] Actually, it was our editor that said we needed one
[37] Not even one of the ends- even in the middle, one never wants their hand inside a Thrak.
[38] Not since his parents died, anyway.
[39] For aesthetic reasons, they split their operations between two floors; neither the sick nor the dead wanted to hear screaming newborns…
[40] It is now officially too late to visit the Sliced Unicorn Restaurant and Ice Cream Parlor. Sorry.
[41] The painful blood sucking variety of Shambler Flies- not the friendly yellow ones that are fun to chat with.
[42] Hah, hah, just kidding guys!