

SESSION 18 – KEY TO THE PAST

March 22nd, 2008

The 7th Day of Kadal in the 790th Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

When they arrived back in the tiny shack at the center of the junk-filled vacant lot, Tee took several moments to subtly rearrange the room – prepping the entrance so that she would, hopefully, be able to detect whether or not someone used it.

“We seem to have gotten covered in blood again,” Tor said. “This is becoming a habit.”

“Well, except for Ranthir,” Tee pointed out. “He stayed clear of it.”

After a quick discussion, it was agreed that the gore-spattered wouldn’t have much luck getting into the Nobles’ Quarter (standards tending to be a little higher there). Plus, if Ranthir went he would be too far away from Shilukar’s lair – the spell of *alarm* he had placed upon the lower entrance would be unable to alert him.

Ranthir was, however, able to use a little magical prestidigitation to clean Dominic’s clothes and Tee always carried a spare set in her bag. So it was decided that Agnarr, Elestra, Tor, and Ranthir would return to the Ghostly Minstrel while Tee and Dominic would return to Castle Shard and break the bad news.

AN UNEXPECTED LETTER

It didn’t take Agnarr, Elestra, Tor, and Ranthir long to reach the Ghostly Minstrel, despite the fact that no carriage would take them in their present state. While Agnarr, Elestra, and Tor headed around to the stables to be drenched by buckets of water, Ranthir excused himself and headed through the front doors.

“Master Ranthir!” Tellith gave him a cheerful smile. “A letter has arrived for you and your friends.”

“Oh,” Ranthir said, slightly startled. “Thank you.”

Ranthir broke the plain wax seal and read the short missive written on the parchment:

I’ve found a lead on the key. Meet me in the alley off Yarrow Street.



He was still puzzling over these seemingly simple words when the other three came thudding in from the kitchens – damp, but no longer bloody. Ranthir moved to show

them the letter, but then thought better of it. “We need to talk. Let’s retire to Mistress Elestra’s room.”

They took a few minutes to change into drier clothes, but once they were safely secluded, Ranthir showed the letter around.

“Do you think it might be something that we... you know... did *before*?” Elestra asked.

“Before we lost our memories?” Ranthir asked. Elestra nodded. “It’s possible.”

Agnarr waved his hand. “Here, let me see.” He stared at the parchment long and hard. “Ah, yes. Of course.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t read!” Agnarr shoved the letter back at Ranthir.

DELIVERING BAD NEWS

Tee and Dominic didn’t have any problems convincing a carriage to take them up to the Nobles’ District, so by the time the others were arriving back at Delver’s Square they were already pulling up in front of Castle Shard.

Unsurprisingly, Kadmus was waiting for them. Silently he gestured them across the drawbridge and led them through the castle’s halls.

Lord Zavere was waiting for them in his map room. As Tee and Dominic entered he seemed lost in thought, but he quickly turned to them and smiled with only a touch of bittersweetness... it was clear from the crestfallen expression on Tee’s face that they were not carrying fair news for him.

As quickly as she could, Tee told him that they had failed and that Shilukar had escaped. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright, Tee,” Zavere smiled his bittersweet smile again. “Perhaps it was meant to be.”

“But there might be another possibility,” Tee said. “We found something down there. Some kind of idol. Shilukar called it the idol of Ravvan. We think it’s very important to him. And maybe, if you retrieved it, you would be able to trade the antidote for it... without giving him sanctuary.”

Zavere’s entire complexion changed as the idol was mentioned. “Shilukar had the idol of Ravvan? Do you have it with you?”

Tee shook his head. “No. We were afraid that it might be tainted. I’ve had enough of the taint.”

“If it is the idol, you were right to fear.” Zavere frowned. “But, quickly, describe it to me.”

And for several minutes, Tee answered an exhausting battery of questions. At last it seemed as if Zavere were

satisfied. He leaned back and then turned his head to the empty air, "Rill. I have need of you."

As if slipping between the waves of a waterfall, Lady Rill slipped through thin air and appeared before them.

"Shilukar holds the idol of Ravvan. I think this takes precedence, even over our debt to our friend. Would you concur?"

Rill seemed to ponder the question for a moment and then nods. "Yes."

"Very well." Zavere turned back to Tee and Dominic. "Would you be willing to retrieve this idol? It is of the utmost importance."

Tee's stomach twisted. "And the taint?"

Zavere nodded. "With the idol even a short exposure could be dangerous. But I shall see to it that you and your companions are cleansed as soon as the idol has been secured."

"Then we'll do it," Tee said.

"Thank you." Zavere stood. "This must be done quickly."

ALARUMS

Tee had asked their carriage master to wait for them. Now, as she and Dominic rushed out of Castle Shard, she was glad of it. As they leapt into the carriage, she cried out a promise of extra coin for his fastest speed.

When they arrived back at the Ghostly Minstrel, they found the others still gathered in Elestra's room. Before they could explain what had happened at Castle Shard, however, they were swept up into the ongoing conversation of the letter.

Like the others, neither Tee nor Dominic had any idea what the letter might be about. But Tee, in particular, was fascinated by the possibility that it might have something to do with the time they had lost.

"Yarrow Street sounded familiar to me," Elestra said. "But I couldn't place it. Do you have any idea, Tee?"

"I think it's in Oldtown," she said. "Near the bureaucratic complexes."

"What key could they be talking about?" Ranthir mused.

"I don't know." Tee shook her head. "But there's something else we need to talk about." And she quickly explained what Lord Zavere had asked of them.

"I think we need to go to this Yarrow Street place first," Agnarr said. "Whoever this person is could be waiting for us right now. There's no time to lose."

Elestra agreed. "We could miss him! Or make him angry!"

Dominic furrowed his brow. "But the letter doesn't specify a time. And you said it was just left with Tellith?"

"That's right," Ranthir said.

"Then it probably isn't urgent," Tor said.

"Right," Tee said. "And Zavere said we need to hurry and get the idol before Shilukar returns. We should head

back there right away. The alarm hasn't gone off, yet, so—"

The magical alarm in Ranthir's head went off. "Um... Mistress Tee...?"

"...you're kidding."

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Their carriage came to a clattering, jolting halt on Brandywine Street before the abandoned lot.

Tee led the way into the ruined shed, taking a few moments to verify the hidden signs she had left. "They haven't been disturbed," she said. "No one's come this way."

At the bottom of the ladder she found the doors of the antechamber still locked. She slid the key into the lock, turned it, and then stepped back – clearing the way for Agnarr and Tor.

The doors swung wide to reveal utter putrescence: The pinkish flesh of the lair seemed to be dying, literally rotting away from the walls. Pus and blood dripped from gaping, ulcerous wounds.

"Oh no..." Tee murmured, already suspecting that they were too late.

They headed down the main hall. Agnarr took the time to sprint down the side passage leading to the sewer entrance. It had been smashed open from the outside. He knelt down: The pulpy, dying flesh had clearly been trampled by many feet, but he wasn't sure how many had passed this way... or whether they were still in the complex.

The rest of the group proceeded down the main hall. When they reached the room where the idol had rested, Tee's worst fears were confirmed: The door had been smashed open with a battering ram which lay nearby. The idol had been ripped out of the floor. It was gone.

"Dammit," Tee cursed, tears welling in her eyes. "I should have just taken it. Why didn't I just take it?"

The idol wasn't the only thing disturbed in the room, however: Off to one side a section of the fleshy wall had been hacked away... revealing a hidden passage.

Heading down this passage they found that it led to a small prison of sorts. Two cells were formed from bars of now-rotting flesh. In one of them, crouched against the far wall, was a hauntingly beautiful man – beautiful, but gaunt. Gaunt almost to the point of starvation.

"Are you with the elf? Or the others?" There was a note of desperate panic in the man's voice.

"The elf?" Agnarr said. "Do you mean Shilukar?"

"Aye, the black-skinned elf!"

"Black-skinned?" Tor frowned. "He had black skin?"

The man confirmed it: When Shilukar had come to him, he had ebon skin. But this only served to confuse them. Was it actually Shilukar they had fought before? Had he come to the man in disguise? For what purpose?

Even Tee had never heard of an elf with ebon-colored skin before.

As they worked to free him, the man – whose name was Carlin – told them his story. It was rather confused and fragmented, but in the end they pieced it together: Carlin had worked as a groundskeeper at Dallaster Mansion. A few weeks ago the Dallaster’s daughter, Tillian, had seduced him in a fiery passion, but they had been discovered by her parents and he had been summarily dismissed. A few days later he was captured by Shilukar and brought to this place. Shilukar had told him that he was suffering from some kind of wasting disease, but instead of curing him the elf had performed various experiments on him. Then, just a few minutes earlier, a group of six people had appeared outside his cell. He had begged them to free him, but they had just laughed and left.

To Carlin’s broken narrative they were able to add details of their own: Carlin’s disease was almost certainly the Lover’s Grip, which they knew had broken out in the Nobles’ Quarter. They knew it was a magical wasting disease that was transmitted sexually and made its victims irresistibly attractive. (Agnarr edged away from Carlin.) After kidnapping Carlin, Shilukar had broken into Dallaster Mansion and assaulted Tillian. (“Or did she assault him?” Elestra wondered.)

“I don’t think we can help you,” Tee told Carlin. “But we know someone who might be able to.”

“I’d be glad of it,” Carlin said. “I’ve been getting weaker every day.”

While they were finishing this discussion, they had successfully freed Carlin and returned to the sewer entrance. They were going to try tracking whoever had taken the idol.

They told Carlin that he didn’t have to follow them into the sewers – he could wait here and they’d come back for him. But Carlin had had enough of Shilukar’s lair and came with them.

Agnarr actually found the trail easy to follow through the sewers: The boots of the trail-makers had been coated with the decaying putrescence of the lair-flesh, leaving clear marks.

The trail led them for several blocks, and ended at a ladder leading up to street level. Unfortunately, the trail emerged onto the bustling Old Sea Road... and was lost completely.

The idol was gone.

YARROW STREET

They flagged down a carriage and began the long ride back to the Nobles’ Quarter and Castle Shard.

Agnarr raised the idea of stopping by Yarrow Street on the way. There didn’t seem to be any harm in waiting to deliver the second round of bad news to Lord Zavere,

so they quickly gave new instructions to the carriage master.

Yarrow Street was a short, cobbled way that curved gently through the cold, grey-faced buildings of the city’s lower bureaucracy. They found what was most likely the alley mentioned in the mysterious letter about midway down its length.

Tee and Ranthir clambered out of the carriage, leaving the others to watch over Carlin.

Even with the afternoon sun still high in the sky, the alley – crammed between two looming buildings with faintly gothic architecture in the Vennocan style – was massed with shadows. After about forty feet the alley took a sharp turn to the left and abruptly ended at a bricked-up doorway. Across the bricks, scrawled in charcoal, was a duplicate of the symbol that had been used to sign the letter.

“Now what?” Tee wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” Ranthir said. Then he walked up to the door and laid his hand on the symbol.

“Good to see you again.”

The voice had come from behind them. Turning they saw a strange figure squeezing his way through a nearly imperceptible crack in the stonework. Their first impression was that the figure was shadowy – but they quickly realized that this wasn’t the case: It wasn’t so much that the figure was hidden from them as it was that their eyes just naturally seemed unable to focus on him, leaving them with no impression of its true features.



Tee decided to bluff it. “Your note said you’d found the key.”

“I haven’t found the key, but I have found a lead for where you might find it.”

“Well? What is it?”

“Money first.”

“How much?”

“250 marks, as we agreed.”

Tee paid him.

“The key was last held by the Crimson Coil.”

Tee arched an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. After the Coil got it, the key disappears from sight. Whatever they did with it, it hasn’t turned up since then.”

“Fine. Thank you.”

THE CRIMSON COIL

As they continued their carriage trip up to the Nobles’ Quarter, Ranthir and Tee quickly filled in the others on what had happened in the alley.

“The Crimson Coil?” Elestra said. “I think I’ve heard something about them. Random acts of violence. Vandalism. That kind of thing. I got the impression they hadn’t been around for years, though.”

“That’s right,” Tee said. “I was still living here. The cult members wore blood-red robes and hoods. They’d spontaneously appear in huge gatherings to wreak random chaos. Then, about two or three years ago, the Knights of the Pale tracked them to their stronghold – I think it was called Pythoness House. Reportedly the whole cult was wiped out.”

“Perhaps their local operations were stopped,” Ranthir said. “But the cult was not wiped out. The Coil is still active beyond Ptolus. In fact they have quite a long history, always following the same pattern: They show up to burn a building or set fire to a field or slaughter a family or deface a monument. They come very suddenly and in such numbers that they simply cannot be stopped – a dozen to murder a merchant walking down the street; a hundred to burn down a building.”

“It never got that bad here,” Tee said. “Random beatings and vandalism for the most part. There were a few murders in the end, just before the Knights took action.”

“Then you were lucky,” Ranthir said. “The cult is said to maintain countless secret temples throughout the Borderlands, but when they appear in the Five Empires they often appear in great strength. All of these temples, however, are referred to as the ‘lesser temples’. The few cultists who have been successfully interrogated say that their greater temples are to be found in the Western Wastes or somewhere beyond the Southern Desert. Although whether that’s truth or grandiose myth-making I don’t think anyone really knows.”

“But what about this key?” Elestra wondered. “What key could we have been looking for?”

“What about the box that Ranthir found in his room?” Dominic said. “It could be a key for that.”

“Maybe it’s a key for those secret doors in Ghul’s Labyrinth,” Tee muttered. The others laughed. The idea of a door that she couldn’t open seemed to be Tee’s personal bane.

A CLEVER IDEA

As they pulled up in front of Castle Shard, Carlin was taken aback. “This is Castle Shard!”

“Yes,” Tee said. “This is where we can get you help.”

“Help? From Castle Shard? Who *are* you?”

Tee smiled. “Friends. Come on.”

As far as the matter of Shilukar was concerned, this meeting went no better than the last. Lord Zavere was deeply worried by the fate of the idol, but seemed to place no blame on them. After hearing Carlin’s story, however, he said he would be glad to see that he got the help he needed.

As they left, Tee turned back for a moment: “Is there anything else we can do to try to help you with Shilukar?”

Zavere smiled sadly. “Only if you can find him before tomorrow.”

They left the castle with their heads bowed. Their failure was hard to accept.

But as they reached the halfway point across the drawbridge, Ranthir suddenly stopped in his tracks. The others turned to look back at him.

“What about the alley on Yarrow Street?”

ON SHILUKAR’S TRAIL

They headed back to the alley. This time all of them headed down the alley. A few moments later, the mysterious informant had again slid his way into the alley. (Elestra leaned over to Ranthir, “That’s a neat trick. I wonder if I could learn it?”)

“I wasn’t expecting to see you again this soon,” he said. And then, catching sight of Tor: “And who is this?”

“Master Torland of Barund.”

“A pleasure to meet you. My name’s Shim. Now, what can I do for you all?”

“We need to find a thief named Shilukar.”

“And there’s a catch,” Tee said. “We need to find him by morning.”

Shim seemed to ponder it for a moment. “That’s a tall order. If it can be done, I’ll need a payment of 7,000 marks. And even if I fail, I’ll need 500 for my efforts.”

It was expensive, but they were out of options. They agreed and paid him the 500.

The carriage ride back to the Ghostly Minstrel – including a stop at the Hammersong Vaults to withdraw the cash they would need if Shim was successful – was subdued. They were excited by the prospect that they might soon have another opportunity to capture Shilukar and recover the idol from him, and they all took the time to congratulate Ranthir again on his quick-thinking, but they knew that they had a long wait ahead of them.

When they reached the Minstrel they quickly retired: Their long and busy day had exhausted them, and

Ranthir in particular would need time to rest and prepare his arcane rites for the challenges of the day to come.

Unfortunately, they were not destined for a full night of rest and recuperation: Shortly after midnight, Elestra woke to find Shim sliding between the panes of her window.

“I don’t know what you’re doing in Agnarr’s room, but Shilukar is planning to attack the Foundry in the Guildsman’s District in less than 30 minutes. If you want him before dawn, this will be your only chance.”

Elestra quickly roused the rest of them. Tee saw to paying Shim and then they were off as quick as a carriage could carry them – their muscles still stiff and their bodies exhausted from their exertions.

THE FOUNDRY (09/08/790)

The Foundry was one of the largest buildings in all of Ptolus. Located in the heart of the Guildsman District, on Smith Street, it was said to be one of the finest facilities for the molding of metal in the world. In recent years it had come under the control of the Shuul.

“The Shuul?” Ranthir asked.

“A highly specialized guild,” Tee said. “Their skill with mechanical guildcraft is said to be unrivalled, and they are dedicated to using it to better their entire lives. There are rumors that they have a close alliance with House Shever.”

“Why would Shilukar be attacking them?” Elestra wondered.

“Perhaps they have the cure,” Ranthir said. “Or something he needs to complete the cure. He’s meeting with Lord Zaverre tomorrow morning. It would explain why he’s going after them tonight.”



They had their carriage drive past the Foundry on Smith Street and then turn right on Vadarast Street. The structure itself was dark and only the thinnest wisps of smoke trickled out of its mammoth chimneys. It seemed that the Foundry was silent for the night.

Moving through the tight and twisted alleys between Vadarast Street and Hammer Street, they found a vantage point from which they could observe the Foundry.

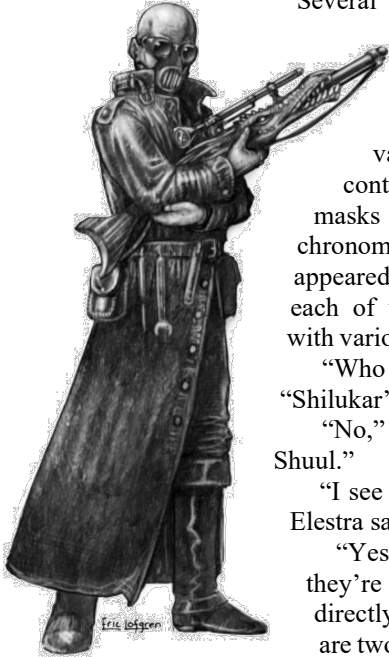


“How much time do we have before Shilukar gets here?” Elestra asked.

“Less than ten minutes if Shim was right,” Tor said.

“It was probably more of an estimate,” Ranthir pointed out. “He could already be in there.”

“I don’t think so,” Tee whispered. “Look!”



Several figures were walking a patrol around the Foundry. Each wore a long black trenchcoat and all of them had various mechanical contraptions: Goggles or masks or wristbands or large chronometers. They carried what appeared to be dragon rifles – but each of them had been modified with various mechanical extrusions.

“Who are they?” Agnarr said. “Shilukar’s men?”

“No,” Tee said. “They’re Shuul.”

“I see two patrols of two each,” Elestra said.

“Yes,” Tee said. “It looks like they’re keeping the building directly between them. And there are two more who are keeping an

eye on a rear entrance on the east side of the building.”

They looked at each other. “So what are we going to do?”

“I’m heading in there,” Tee said. “Shilukar could already be in there. And even if he’s not, maybe I can figure out what the cure is and get it before he shows up.”

“How are you going to get past the patrols?” Tor asked.

“There’s a blind spot on the west side of the building between the two patrols,” Tee said.

“Picking the lock will take time.”

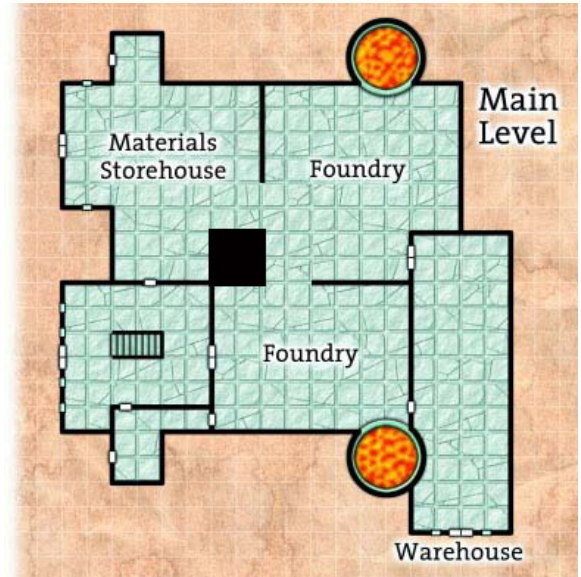
“I don’t need to pick the lock. I’ll climb the wall and head in through the windows.”

With a plan in hand, they split into two groups: Tor and Dominic headed to a position on the corner of Hammer Street from which they could look down the length of the western edge of the building while Ranthir, Agnarr, and Elestra stayed in the alley which overlooked the eastern side of the building.

As planned, Tee took advantage of the blind spot, scurried up Smith Street, and quickly scaled the western wall – easily reaching the roof before the second patrol rounded the corner below.

INTO THE FOUNDRY

Tee spent the next couple of minutes quietly clambering across the roof of the building, peering into various windows until she had a fairly good understanding of the building’s floorplan.



The lower level of the building was dominated by the two massive foundries: Huge forges and anvils worn through decades of use stood immutable, while various molds for molten metal stood here and there – some of them massive almost beyond comprehension; others tiny, intricate, and delicate.

Tee’s attention was particularly drawn to the second level of the building: The stairs in the entry hall led up to a structure that extended through the wall and followed the ceiling of the second foundry. This structure had numerous leaded and thickly begrimed windows that looked out over the foundry floor: If Shilukar was seeking something valuable, Tee was convinced it was probably there.

The foundries themselves had open windows running down their entire lengths – clearly designed to vent the hot air and fumes of the working day. Conveniently these were at a level where Tee, on the roof, could literally walk right through them.

She did so, climbing down the rough hewn walls to the floor of the second foundry. From there she made her way to the entry wall, gently easing open the wide double doors and then shutting them again behind her.

Easing her way up the stairs, Tee heard voices coming from above her.

“Did you hear about Korben?”

“Meddling fool. The sooner we’re done with this shipment, the happier I’ll be.”

“Their coin is good enough. And useful. I understand that we’ll be using it—“

“Wait. Did you hear that?”

“Stay here while I check it out.”

Tee silently cursed. A loose loop of her chain had caught against the metal of the stairs. Hearing the footsteps approaching from above, she quickly slid back down the stairs.

Tee looped around the stairs, disappearing into the shadows beneath them. One of the guards from above – dressed like his comrades outside – descended and peered into the corners of the entryway. Then he began to circle around the stairs. Tee, ever alert, countered his movement – circling the stairs and keeping them between them.

They finished a full loop of the stairs and the Shuul guard shrugged. “I don’t see anything. Must’ve just been night noises.” He began to climb the stairs and Tee, sighing silently, slipped back towards the foundry.

SHILUKAR’S DISTRACTION

As Tee was avoiding the Shuul guard in the entryway, Tor spotted two heavily muscled thugs running up to the chimney on the west side of the building – taking advantage of the same blind spot in the patrol that Tee had. She pointed them out to Dominic, but neither of them could think of anything they could do about it.

A few moments later, the thugs turned and ran away from the chimney again – disappearing down the same alley from which they had appeared. Uncertain of what was happening, Tor and Dominic held their position.

A minute later, just as Tee was re-entering the foundry, the chimney exploded in a huge gout of flame.

All the Shuul guards – both patrols and the guards watching the rear entrance – whirled and began running towards the explosion.

Agnarr’s reaction was immediate: Drawing his greatsword he ran straight across the street and began hacking away at the front door.

“What is he *doing*?” Tor muttered, peering around the corner from Hammer Street.

Tee, taken completely by surprise, shrank back into the corner of the other foundry, trying to find some place to hide. She could hear the guards from upstairs shouting to each other and then clattering down the stairs and she was certain she was about to be discovered... but then Agnarr started hammering away at the front door, and those guards came to a sudden stop, convinced that the true assault was coming from the front of the building.

Elestra, who had hung back with Ranthir and kept a watch down the eastern side of the building, spotted the rear door being swung open... by absolutely nobody at all. “Shilukar! Come on!” She tugged on Ranthir’s sleeve and ran across the street. She shouted Agnarr’s

name to get his attention. The barbarian turned, shrugged, and followed her.

CHAOS IN THE FOUNDRY

The explosion had actually torn a huge hole into the side of the chimney, opening it to the night air. The six Shuul guards outside had now converged on it and one of them quickly took charge: “You two circle around to the front door, make sure it’s secure. You two stay here. You come with me.”

Two of the Shuul guards now leapt through the chimney and across the hot bed of coals – apparently convinced that the breach had been used to infiltrate the building. This forced Tee to constantly shift her position to remain out of sight of both the guards in the front hall and these newcomers.

Tor and Dominic, meanwhile, ran across the street and began making their way down the front of the Foundry. The two guards running from the point of the explosion rounded the corner and lowered their rifles at them: “Stop! Who are you?!”

Tor whirled and, without hesitation, shouted, “We have reason to believe that the mage-thief Shilukar is attacking the Foundry. You have to let us in!”

The two Shuul glanced at each other with a look of slight panic. Looking over their shoulder they shouted back to the guards who had stayed by the hole in the chimney, “It’s Shilukar!” Then they turned back and leveled their rifles, “But you aren’t going anywhere.”

Tor and Dominic raised their hands above their heads, just as the Shuul agents in the entryway unbarred the front door and rushed out into the street.

The guards at the chimney shouted through to their comrades inside: “It’s Shilukar!” Tee heard this, realized that none of the guards who remained were watching the rear entrance, and cursed under her breath. Shilukar’s plan was obvious.

Elestra and Ranthir, meanwhile, reached the rear entrance. It led to a long warehouse stacked haphazardly with various crates. Just as Agnarr caught up with them, they saw a door at the far end of the warehouse swing open – seemingly of its own accord. Agnarr ran right past them and into the warehouse.

The two Shuul agents in the foundry also saw the door open. “I think I saw somebody moving in there!” They advanced.

Ranthir, meanwhile, shoved Elestra into the warehouse and slammed the doors shut behind them. Elestra, seeing the Shuul agents advancing into the room, ducked behind some of the crates... noticing, as she did, that they were labeled “Edarth’s Loans”.

Agnarr, seeing the Shuul agents himself, charged towards them. But the agents lowered their strange dragon rifles and bathed the western end of the warehouse in gouts of flame. Agnarr screamed in pain,

but screwed his eyes shut and carried through. The Shuul, seeing him unswerved, stumbled back – desperately working the mechanisms on their rifles. But before they could get ready for a second shot, Agnarr’s greatsword found them both – chopping one of them in half and laming the other.

Tee, deciding that things had gotten far too chaotic for her tastes, climbed back up the wall of the foundry – pausing just inside the ventilation windows and waiting to see what happened.

Elestra drew her crossbow, stood up, and planted a bolt through the surviving Shuul’s forehead. Agnarr stepped back.

Ranthir waved his hand and the door at the far end of the warehouse swung shut. Then he began using various magicks in an effort to detect Shilukar’s presence, but to little avail. Had whatever the mage-thief wanted been in this warehouse? Had he retrieved it and then escaped through the warehouse doors before Ranthir had shut them? Or flown through the ventilation windows above them? Ranthir didn’t know, but he feared they might have already lost Shilukar again.

Ranthir did discover, however, that the crates here in the warehouse were radiating a magical aura – but a magical aura strangely tinged with some other influence unlike anything he had seen before.

Meanwhile, in front of the building, the sounds of battle and chaos coming from within were clear. Tor continued trying to sweet talk the Shuul into letting them go into the building and help, but the Shuul weren’t having any of it.

Elestra turned to the nearest crate and quickly pried off the lid... to find it packed full of the modified dragon rifles. But unlike the antique that Tee wielded, the rifles looked fresh and new, as if they had just been constructed.

One of the Shuul who had been in the front hall, satisfied that Tor and Dominic were pacified, turned and headed back through the hall and into the materials storehouse. Two more turned and headed into the second foundry, directly below Tee’s feet. In the sudden silence pervading the Foundry, Tee could hear their footsteps echoing ominously below her...

SESSION 19 – THE END OF SHILUKAR

April 13th, 2008

The 8th Day of Kadal in the 790th Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Elestra grabbed a couple of the rifles out of the crate she had pried open and handed one to Ranthir. Ranthir smiled. His magical skills were not yet very advanced, and so he had often felt like something of a sixth wheel whenever they had found themselves in a tight spot. The firepower he held in his hands now might help him to be something more than an observer.

Agnarr, thinking this was all a good idea, wedged his toe under one of the rifles that had fallen from the hands of the Shuul agents lying before him. With a quick jerk he flipped it up into his left hand, keeping his greatsword clenched in his right.

The Foundry was rocked by an explosion, accompanied by a massive gout of flame in the materials storehouse.

The two Shuul agents passing below Tee in the second foundry stopped in their tracks for a moment, frozen in shock. Then they began to turn back towards the front of the building...

Unfortunately, Ranthir's reactions were faster. His ears recognized the aural hints that told him the explosion was a magical extrusion of primal fire, and he leapt towards the nearest door. Ripping it open he was confronted by the two Shuul agents. The agents arrested their turn and lowered their rifles at Ranthir. "Who are you?! Don't move!"

Agnarr reacted quickly, shoving Ranthir out of the way and taking his place. "We're friends! We're trying to stop Shilukar!"

"Get out here!"

SHILUKAR APPEARS... AND DISAPPEARS

Tee missed all of this. Hearing the explosion she vaulted through the ventilation window and back onto the roof. Scampering twenty feet or so across the clay tiles and then looked through the ventilation windows about the first foundry. From this vantage point she could look down into the materials storehouse.

Shilukar! He was standing just inside the wide, open doorway leading from the first foundry into the storehouse – he was just lowering his hands to his side, looking off towards the main entrance. And, as Carlin had described, the elf's skin was the color of ebony and his hair the gray of ash.

Tee whipped her bow off her back, strung an arrow, and let it fly. Her shot was true, and would have taken Shilukar full in the side of the neck, but as it approached within an inch of the elf's black skin the arrow suddenly

stopped in mid-air – a vibrant golden flash betraying the magical shield.

Shilukar whipped his head around, looking up to where the shot had come from. But Tee had already slipped back into the shadow. Shilukar's eyes darted here and there for a moment, and then he ran off towards the main entrance.

Tee ran back across the roof and tried to look down into the main entrance – but the extrusion of the second floor blocked her line of sight. She cursed under her breath and began running towards the front of the building.

Meanwhile, at the front of the building, the sound of the magical explosion had caused the Shuul agent watching over them to glance nervously towards the Foundry, but it didn't look like he was going to do anything else.

Tor stared at him, "Didn't you hear that? We need to do something!"

The Shuul agent seemed to think about it for a moment and then seemed to make up his mind. He called out to another agent who was still watching the front door. "Get over here and watch these two."

The agent at the front door shrugged and headed their way. They were standing near a door leading into the materials warehouse, and the agent closest to them lowered his gun, fumbled for a ring of keys, and unlocked the door.

Tee arrived at the front of the building. Looking down she was aghast to see that the front door had been left wide open and completely unguarded. Shilukar was going to escape! What were the Shuul thinking?

Tor had caught sight of Tee out of the corner of her eye. Tee, looking down the street, saw Tor give an almost imperceptible nod of acknowledgement. Tee gestured frantically down towards the front door, trying to make Tor understand that Shilukar was heading their way.

The Shuul agent fumbling at the door finally got it open. Looking into the storehouse they could see one of the Shuul agents had been horribly burned by the explosion. He was lying very still.

Dominic, seizing the moment, held up his holy symbol. "I can help! Let me help!"

The Shuul agents glanced at each other, then reached a decision. "All right. Help him. But I'll be right behind you."

Dominic nodded and, with worried glances into the shadowy corners, led the way into the materials storehouse.

As soon as Dominic was clear, Tor made his move, breaking into a sudden run towards the front door of the Foundry. The Shuul who had been left to watch him pulled the trigger on his modified dragon rifle, but Tor – anticipating it – rolled under the wave of flame and came back to his feet.

ROUTING THE SHUUL

Back inside the second Foundry, Agnarr’s attempts to bluff his way past the two Shuul agents were falling on deaf ears.

“Drop your weapons.”

Agnarr dropped the modified dragon rifle... but kept his greatsword.

“Drop the sword! Drop it now!”

Agnarr grunted... and suddenly leaped toward the Shuul. The Shuul, surprised, stumbled backwards. The barbarian managed to take one of them down... but not both of them. He was caught by another wave of flames.

Elestra, who had followed Agnarr with some thought of helping him, was caught by the flames as well. But she was able to call upon her connection to the Spirit of the City and soothe their wounds even before the burns could blister.

Tee, seeing Tor run beneath her and into the Foundry, tried to swing down from the roof and through an upper window that locked into the entrance hall. But her grip slipped, and she fell forty feet to the ground below. Fortunately, she had the light and nimble grace of an elf, and although she landed awkwardly and twisted her ankle she was not seriously hurt.

Tor, who had been turning around, grabbed Tee almost as soon as she hit the street and pulled her into the entrance hall before slamming the doors shut. The Shuul agent who had been chasing Tor arrived just a moment too late. The agent threw himself against the door, but Tor easily held it shut. A few moments later, he had lowered the beam to lock the door.

Meanwhile, Dominic – hearing the shout of the Shuul agent outside and then the burst of fire from his rifle – broke instantly into a run. The Shuul watching him was close on his heels, but Dominic reached the small door leading from the materials storehouse to the entrance hall and managed to slam it shut behind him.

Looking for some way of locking the door, Dominic saw that there was a keyhole... but no key. In frustration, he drew his mace and slammed it down on the door handle. The handle snapped off. A moment later, he heard the handle on the opposite side fall to the floor.

Tee, meanwhile, hobbled up to the second level. Reaching the top of the stairs she saw a hallway filled with doors. Lots and lots of doors. She cursed again. Shilukar could be anywhere. She was going to need help. “Shilukar is up here! HE’S UP HERE!”

Elestra, having just finished a second spell to sooth the pain in Agnarr’s badly burned lungs, heard Tee’s cry. She ran through the entrance hall and up the stairs.

Agnarr was following her, but Dominic – seeing Elestra run past him – whirled around and cut him off. “There’s one circling around this way!” He pointed back towards the second foundry.

Agnarr shrugged, turned around, and headed back into the foundry.

In fact, there were two Shuul agents coming that way: The one Dominic had re-directed by destroying the door handle and another who had leapt through the chimney from outside. Agnarr squared himself off and grinned... just as a third agent – the one Tor had locked out – emerged from another door off to one side (which apparently led outside).

The smile started to fade from Agnarr’s face. But at just that moment, the last Shuul – who had been left standing outside just beyond the gaping hole in the ruined chimney – gave a cry. He was being attacked by the two thugs Tor had seen set the explosion!

The Shuul agents, convinced that they were surrounded – and noticing the gutted bodies of their comrades lying on the floor of the second foundry – turned and ran. Crying, in retreat, “Shilukar may have won for now! But it won’t last for long!”

The agent outside, staggering from blackjack blows, managed to bring his dragon rifle to bear and immolated the thugs. Then, he too, ran off into the shadows.

SEARCHING FOR SHILUKAR

Agnarr strolled into the entrance hall.

“What’s going on?” Tor demanded.

“They think we’re Shilukar.” Agnarr grinned. “Which is probably for the best.”

Agnarr jogged up the stairs to Tee’s side. Seeing the doors he blanched in much the same fashion she had.

With Agnarr guarding the stairs, Tee and Elestra quickly searched the rooms. For the most part they were small quarters with minimal furnishings – utilitarian barracks. There was one room that was slightly larger than the rest, but although the furniture was slightly more luxurious it was still almost devoid of personality. Elestra did find a copy of the *Book of Vehthyl* laying next to the bed in this room, and this she gave to Dominic.

Since Shilukar had not been found, the depressing possibility that he had escaped began to set in. Agnarr and Elestra began arguing again about why he had attacked the Shuul here in the Foundry. What had he been looking for? The cure? Had he found it? Or was it still here?

Dominic and Tor, meanwhile, decided that their best hope of finding Shilukar again before the morning deadline would be to question one of the thugs that were apparently working for him. They weren’t sure how

badly they had been hurt, but hopefully Dominic would be able to use his divine powers to wake them up.

Ranthur and Tee decided to search the Foundry again – Ranthur using his abilities to detect magical auras and Tee with more practical means. They didn't know how much time they would have before the Shuul returned, so Tee's efforts would have to be fairly cursory.

But no sooner had the search started, then Tee's sharp elven eyes spotted scrape marks on the floor of the materials storehouse leading straight into a wall. The magical explosion Shilukar had set off had obscured the marks somewhat, but their meaning was still clear: There was a secret passage right where Shilukar had disappeared from her view.

Tee smiled. "It looks like we won't need those thugs, after all."

Elestra ran out of the building and caught up with Dominic and Tor, who had just reached the thugs and were about to begin healing them. With a shrug they abandoned the badly burned corpses and headed back into the Foundry.

THE WORKSHOPS OF THE SHUUL

While the rest of them were gathering in the materials warehouse, Tee had searched the wall and discovered a stone that could be depressed to open the door. Now she pressed it and the wall swung aside to reveal a spiral staircase leading down.

Tee arched an eyebrow. "I like games of cat and mouse... I just wish I knew if we were the cat or the mouse."

After about 20 feet the stairs bottomed out into a workroom of some sort: Several low stone tables ran in parallel down the width of the room, covered in a variety of mechanical devices and tools which seemed dedicated towards constructing and modifying dragon rifles (of which about a dozen lay around in various stages of completion).

Several hallways twisted away from this room, and Tee arbitrarily headed down the nearest one on the left. This ended at a steel door which had been broken open. Tee showed the damage to the others, "Shilukar."

Beyond the door lay a storeroom with several short shelves running around its walls. These shelves were filled with *chaos storage cubes*, which Tee identified from having flipped through the *Lesser Book of Chaos* they had found in Shilukar's lair. She quickly warned the others of how dangerous they could be. Elestra shuddered, remembering the horrible, gasping death she had suffered in the pool of raw chaos beneath Greyson House.

They headed back to the workroom and then down the next hallway. Halfway down its length, Tee heard the unmistakable sounds of someone rummaging around. She quickly raised her left hand for silence while

slipping her right into her *bag of holding* and pulling out a thunderstone.

Rounding the corner, Tee saw a door standing ajar. Someone was definitely on the other side – there was the sound of something metallic clattering against stone.

As Tee prepared to creep carefully up to the door, however, Ranthur suddenly stumbled – scuffing noisily across the stone floor. The noises from beyond the door suddenly came to a stop.

Tee reacted instantly, throwing the thunderstone through the door and into the room while simultaneously signaling for Agnarr to take the lead. The cacophonous boom of the thunderstone seemed to rock the Foundry's foundations, but they were fortunately shielded from the worst of it by the half-shut door.

Agnarr kicked open the door and quickly took in the scene beyond: There were more workbenches here, covered with more strange devices and bubbling tubes of chemicals. Various clusters of these devices seemed focused around a half dozen large metallic spheres. Two of the spheres seemed intact – with shiny, polished surfaces of greenish metal – while another seemed damaged and three others were in various states of disassembly.

Shilukar was leaning over one of the spheres, but as the door slammed open he looked up and his eyes widened: "You! Not just Zaveré, but—You're all working for the Shuul?! What have you done with it?! Where have you hidden it?! WHERE IS MY IDOL?!"

Agnarr couldn't hide the wide grin which split his face. Shilukar was completely baffled by them! Realizing that he needed to keep up the pretense, Agnarr tried lying... and failed rather miserably at it. Fortunately, it quickly became apparent that Shilukar couldn't hear him at all... he had been deafened by the thunderstone.

This didn't stop the ebon-skinned elf from taking definitive action, though. Even before Agnarr had opened his mouth, Shilukar had flipped a switch on the side of the sphere – causing it to emit a loud-pitched humming noise and float up into the air.

Agnarr ignored it and charged Shilukar. Rage and frustration fueled his thews as his greatsword slammed into the elf's side. Shilukar gasped, blood bubbling to his lips, and stumbled away.

Agnarr made to pursue, but the sphere that Shilukar had activated suddenly dove towards him, sprouting large, protruding blades. It plunged into Agnarr's chest, tearing his pectorals into bloody tatters.

The barbarian stumbled back, dripping blood. The sphere pursued, and Agnarr struck at it – but his blade clanged ineffectually against its metal shell.

On the far side of the room, Shilukar was activating a second sphere. But now Tor stepped into the room, whirling a knotted rope above his head. His skills as a

horseman suddenly proved themselves as he dropped a lasso around Shilukar's neck and pulled it tight.

The elf had just been drawing a potion from his belt, but now he was yanked hard across the room. Pulling him close, Tor tried to grapple him to the floor and bind his limbs, but Shilukar – in desperation – lunged out and flipped the switch on the nearest sphere...

The sphere exploded! Shilukar was hurled backwards into the wall and knocked unconscious. His arm was horribly lacerated and two huge shards of metal had embedded themselves in his chest.

Agnarr had been concussed by the blast, but Dominic was able to get him back on his feet quick enough. Meanwhile, with a certain amount of distaste, Elestra was casting a simple charm to seal Shilukar's wounds and make sure he didn't bleed to death... at least, not until they'd gotten the cure out of him.

SEARCHING THE WORKSHOPS

Tee, meanwhile, had missed the entire affair. Hearing Shilukar demand his idol, she realized that he must suspect that the Idol of Ravvan lay somewhere within the Shuul's hidden workshops. She immediately turned on her heels and headed out into the rest of the complex to search for it.

Heading down the next hall she picked the lock on the door to an office. It was austere and utilitarian, but clearly well used. The desk was covered in a variety of papers. Most of these were incomprehensible blueprints and schematics, but on the top of the stack was a letter of some sort that caught her eye.

Brother Savane—

Brother Tannock has brought me strange news. A man bearing the Mark of Vehthyl has come to our temple. He is to return to us on the 9th of Kadal, at which time I shall see for myself. But if the Chosen of Vehthyl has come to us, then the hour has arrived. Can the Iron Angel be made ready?

Maeda

She quickly scanned the letter, pocketed it, and moved on. The door directly across from this one led to another office, but this one appeared to have been abandoned. She moved on.

The door at the end of the hall was made of iron, and from behind it – as she drew near – she could hear a buzzing, crackling sound. She decided that whatever was behind that door had the strong possibility of being too dangerous to deal with on her own, so she decided to head back to the others.

By the time she got back, Shilukar had been securely tied up Tor. Looking down at the body Tee smiled. "Looks like we were the cats."

Tee gave Dominic the note she'd found. As Dominic read it, his face creased with worry.

"What's wrong?" Elestra asked.

Dominic showed the rest of them the note. "I think... I think I might be the 'Chosen of Vehthyl'."

"Do you know these people? Brother Tannock? Maeda?"

Dominic nodded. "No. But I was supposed to meet with some people on the 9th..."

While the others were distracted, Agnarr slipped one of the attack spheres into his *bag of holding*. But the conversation soon turned back to their immediate situation. Some of them wanted to leave immediately, but Tee felt it was important to finish searching these workshops for the idol. Lord Zavere clearly thought it was very important.

They returned to the buzzing, crackling door. Tee picked the lock and Agnarr opened it. Beyond was a large room studded with multiple iron rods protruding from the floor and the ceiling. Electrical arcs in scintillating colors leapt between these rods and focused down onto a *chaos storage cube* which lay on a low platform of obsidian in the center of the room.

They all stared for a moment... and then Tee eased forward and closed the door. "Right. Let's move on."

A small chamber held a battered table, some chairs, and an effluvium of food and the like – clearly some kind of informal kitchen or dining room. A quick tossing of this room revealed nothing of interest, and the passing minutes were wearing heavily on their minds.

Going down the last hallway brought them to another iron door. Swinging it open they found an enormous chamber. The floor here was actually sunk by 8 or 9 feet, with a flight of stone stairs leading down to it. The ceiling was vaulted. And in the center of the room there was a massive, humanoid shaped structure. Huge banks of machinery with rubbery tubes and chemical beakers were attached to it in various ways. A second look revealed that, although it was humanoid shaped, it was also hollow – as if it were some sort of impossibly huge exoskeleton.

But there was no idol.

TORTUROUS PLANNING

They left the Foundry. After a brief discussion they decided to take Shilukar to Greyson House: They didn't want to take him to the Ghostly Minstrel. They didn't think they should take him to Castle Shard until they'd gotten the secret of the cure out of him. And, given the fact that it was one o'clock in the morning, there didn't seem to be anywhere else they could take him.

But it was also decided that someone should take word to Castle Shard. For this task, Ranthir volunteered. They performed a cursory search of Shilukar's body, removing anything that seemed valuable or mysterious – a magical potion, two vials of alchemical fluid, a ruby ring concealing a magical pearl, a minor spellbook – and then packed Ranthir into the first carriage they could find. A few minutes later they found a second carriage to carry them up to the North Market and Greyson House.

When they arrived, Tor and Agnarr bundled Shilukar up to the house while Tee paid the carriage master a rich sum to make sure he'd "forget he'd ever seen them". ("Of course, mistress.") Then she moved to join the others.

But as she crossed the porch into the house, Tee noticed that there were large scrape marks – as if something heavy had been dragged here. She followed them into the house and saw that they led towards the trapdoor in the kitchen (which led down to the cellar and, from there, to Ghul's Labyrinth).

There was a moment of panic, but then they remembered that they'd deliberately sold the knowledge of this place to the Erthuos. (At least, they hoped that's who it was.)

In any case, they did a quick survey of the house to make sure they were alone, and then sat down to a serious discussion about what methods of torture they would use to loosen Shilukar's tongue. The general consensus was ear-eating and hand-chopping. The shock they had once felt in seeing Agnarr bite a man's ear off had disappeared. Life was hardening them...

ALTERNATIVES TO TORTURE

Ranthir, meanwhile, was arriving at Castle Shard. He had been somewhat delayed at the Dalenguard – no doubt due to the late hour – but some of the papers he kept in one of his many pouches soon resolved those difficulties. With a wry grin he noted that Kadmus was waiting for him with the drawbridge down. Nothing seemed to faze the doughty servant.

Lord Zavere awaited him in a small, indescrpt room furnished with a simple, yet elegant, table and chairs. Despite the late hour he looked refreshed and well rested.

"Master Ranthir. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We have captured Shilukar."

"Excellent." Zavere smiled. "I see that he's not with you."

"No. The others have him under guard. We thought it best not to bring him here." Ranthir quickly explained everything that had happened that night.

"And who did you buy this information from?" Zavere asked.

Ranthir hesitated. "I'm not sure that I'm at liberty to say."

"That's fair enough." Zavere said. "How much did you pay?"

"Seven thousand marks."

Zavere nodded and let him proceed with the tale. Ranthir quickly finished, saying, "And so I brought everything he was carrying. If he wasn't at the Foundry, perhaps he had it with him. If not, we'll have to... question him."

"Come with me."

Zavere led him through the chamber of the Shard, taking him to an alchemical and magical laboratory at the far end of the castle. Lady Rill was waiting for them. Lord Abbercombe stood in his petrified doom in one corner of the lab.

One by one they tested the items Ranthir had brought, returning each of them to Ranthir as they turned out not be the cure. More than an hour passed in taut concentration and effort.

But, finally, Rill smiled and her face suddenly radiated with beauty (and Ranthir realized that he had never seen her smile before that moment). "We have it," she said simply, holding aloft one of the vials of alchemical fluid.

She carried it delicately to Lord Abbercombe's side and, with a silk cloth, rubbed it gently on his limbs, as though she were polishing his golden features. And then slowly – almost inexorably – Lord Abbercombe began to move!

His motions were almost imperceptible, but after a few moments of careful observation Rill confirmed that the cure was taking effect: "Within six or perhaps seven hours he will be fully recovered."

Lord Zavere took Ranthir aside. "Castle Shard is in your debt. And we do not forget such debts. In addition, I am not unmindful of the sacrifices that you and your friends have made for us in this endeavor. Hopefully this will serve to mitigate your losses to at least some degree."

Kadmus appeared, carrying a bounty of 140 platinum pieces. "I will take you out, sir."

As Ranthir was just about to leave the laboratory, he turned back to see Rill and Zavere bent in thought upon Abbercombe's slowly moving form. He had one last question to ask: "Lord Zavere... what should we do with Shilukar?"

"Arrest him."

THE OTHER BOUNTY

Ranthir returned to Greyson House. The others had grown increasingly worried – his journey to Castle Shard had taken much longer than they had anticipated – but were glad to hear the news he bore.

During his absence they had performed a more thorough search of Shilukar, turning up one last item of interest: An odd strap-like device that had been bound

around his upper arm. A thin cord leading from the device had been plugged into a strange hole in the back of Shilukar's upper spine. This they yanked out before pulling the device off of his arm.

They decided to not even bother waking Shilukar. They simply hauled him out to the carriage Ranthir had brought back from Castle Shard and carried him up to the major watchhouse along the Dalenguard Road in Oldtown.



There they answered many questions and became the center of attention for a dozen or more of the city watch while they completed the bureaucratic niceties of collecting the 5,000 gold piece bounty on Shilukar's head.

When they had at last extricated themselves from the affair, they took their carriage back to the Ghostly Minstrel and collapsed into bed. It seemed as if the days were getting ever longer and harder, and the nights ever shorter...



SESSION 20 – PYTHONESS HOUSE

April 27th, 2008

The 8th Day of Kadal in the 790th Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

It was only a few all-too-short hours later before they were rousing themselves out of bed once again.

Ranthir was one of the first to wake up. For several days he had been eagerly looking forward to reading the sealed letter that the Iron Mage had given to them at Castle Shard during the Harvesttime party. He had placed the letter on his bedside table the night before, and the first thing he saw upon opening his eyes was the letter lying open.

IRON MAGE'S LETTER

My dear friends—

I am sorry that I could not deliver these instructions to you in person so that I might answer all of your questions. But, sadly, necessities of another nature will make that impossible by the time all of the particulars are known.

By the time this letter opens – which shall be no later than the ninth day of Kadal, if all goes well – the particulars will be known, and thus I have ensorcelled this parchment to reveal them to you.

On the twenty-first day of Kadal, the *Freeport's Sword* – a privateer vessel from the Teeth of Light – shall arrive in the Docks of Ptolus. It carries a crate bearing my seal – a plated visor beneath crossed wands.

I ask that you report to Captain Bartholomew upon the arrival of the vessel, collect the crate, and keep it safe. I shall return for it no later than Nocturdei.

I stress that all of this is of the utmost importance. Many lives could be placed in great danger if the crate is not kept safe from the others who seek it.

THE IRON MAGE

IT WAS TIME FOR A REST

After reading the letter over, Ranthir took it downstairs and showed it to Tee (who was already up). As the others made their dreary-eyed way down to breakfast, each of them read it in turn.

The previous night, the group had postponed the question of what their next immediate goal should be until they could see what the letter might say. Now that it was clear that, even if they decided to do the Iron

Mage's bidding in this matter, it would still be nearly two weeks before it required their attention, their decision had been simplified: They could either pursue the information that Shim had given them regarding Pythoness House; or they could finish exploring the last few nooks and crannies of the complex they had found in Ghul's Labyrinth.

Tee, for her part, was angry that – caught up in the elation of catching Shilukar, saving Lord Abbercombe, and helping Lord Zavere – they had failed to question the dark elf before turning him over to the authorities. The others, realizing the mistake they had potentially made, quickly fell to discussing ways they might be able to get Shilukar back under their control... but none of them seemed particularly practical.

And they had another affair to attend to, as well: The funeral for Elestra's python viper – a companion that had been by her side since she was a young girl – was scheduled for later that same morning. So the decision was made that, after paying their respects, they would use the day for rest and recuperation. The next day they would go to Pythoness House and search for the mysterious key that Shim had mentioned, in the hopes that it would answer the most important question of all: What had happened to their memories?

They spent the next hour or so finding buyers for the treasures they had recovered from Shilukar and the Shuul; shopping for various supplies; and then stopping by the Hammersong Vaults to bank the rest of their money. ("I just don't want to be carrying around 5,000 gold sovereigns," Elestra said.)

(Tee, however, actually made a withdrawal – slipping the coins into her *bag of holding*.)

FUNERAL FOR A PYTHON VIPER

From the vaults in Oldtown they headed back down city, taking the North Gate Road to Golden Elm Way and then following that east along the northern edge of the Temple District until they could see the Siege Tower rising above the cold stone wall of the Necropolis.

As they were walking, Tee spoke to the others of the Necropolis: "It's safe enough during the day, but at night no one in their right mind would go there. The undead have never been fully brought under control – there are catacombs and crypts that delve so deep that it's said no one but the dead has ever seen them."

The Siege Tower itself spoke of the dangers of the Necropolis louder than words could: The passage of stone which passed beneath it into the Necropolis could

be sealed shut with iron doors and double portcullises on both ends. And, when they passed through it, they could see more than two dozen murder holes running the length and breadth of the road. The entire place could be turned into a lethal death trap within moments.

The Siege Tower itself, as Tee explained, was watched over by the Keepers of the Veil – an order of knights dedicated to fighting the undead. Or, at the very least, keeping their threat contained.

Mand Scheben was waiting for them just outside of the Siege Tower. Two priests with him were carrying a small, circular coffin of stained mahogany. The lid of the coffin had been carved in the likeness of a snake.

After greeting them, Mand Scheben led them through the Siege Tower. Entering the Necropolis was like emerging into a city: An avenue of stone ran between massive houses of the dead – enormous crypts of gothic architecture that seemed as old as the hills.

The Necropolis had been built upon a low bulging hill that lay just along the Cliffs of Lost Wishes at the eastern edge of the city. As they moved a little further into the Necropolis, therefore, they were able to look over the top of the mausoleums and see seemingly endless rows of gravestones dotted with crypts of various sizes running up the hill. In the farthest distance, on the edge of the cliffs themselves, they could see an enormous, castle-like building.

“What’s that?”

Tee looked... and barely suppressed a shudder. “The Dark Reliquary. Some say it’s older than the city itself. Some even say it’s older than the Dalenguard. No one goes near it now. People who do don’t come back.”

After more than a quarter of a mile, they came to one of the houses of the dead. From the outside it seemed very large indeed – dwarfing even some of the larger buildings of Oldtown. But once they entered they realized that it was larger still – for much of the structure’s bulk lay beneath the surface.

Mand Scheben led them through countless passages that twisted back upon themselves, before finally coming to a place where a small tomb niche had been left open – the solid stone block levered out and put to one side.

The priests placed the mahogany coffin before the open tomb and withdrew, from various pouches in their robes, ceremonial candles and the like. Once these were lit, Mand Scheben said several prayers and then asked if any of those gathered had any words to say.

Elestra was choking on her sobs, so Agnarr – patting her comfortingly on the back – stepped forward and cleared his throat. “This snake saved my life.” He paused to think about this for a moment, before adding: “Many times.” Then he nodded and stepped back.

The coffin was placed into the tomb niche and the stone slab levered back into place. Additional prayers were said, and then the final words of grace. When it was done, Mand Scheben led them back towards the surface.

(The other priests stayed behind to continue saying the holy words and blessings which would pay honor to the dead and, hopefully, keep the body from being raised by necromancy.)

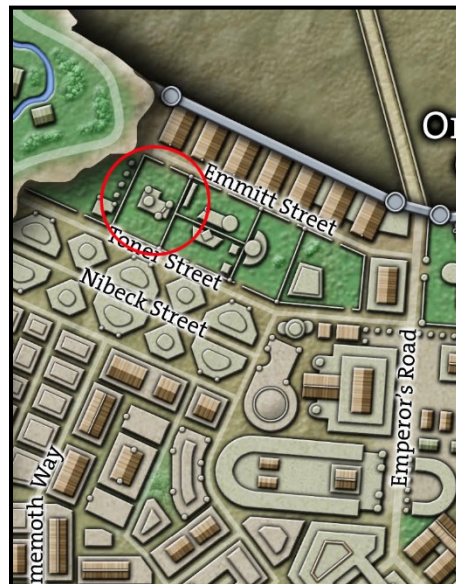
LEARNING MORE ABOUT PYTHONESS HOUSE

Mand Scheben walked with them back to the Siege Tower. The Keepers of the Veil seemed more suspicious of those leaving the Necropolis than those entering it – they spotted at least one of the knights casting a spell which Ranthir recognized as a means of detecting the undead. (Fortunately, all of them apparently passed the test and the Keepers allowed them to pass unmolested.)

Mand Scheben then said his farewells and headed south into the Temple District. After some brief discussion, the rest of them split up as well – some of them heading back to the Ghostly Minstrel while others scattered through the city.

Elestra, for her part, opened her heart to the spirit of the city and listened to what it might whisper to her about Pythoness House. Tee had remembered that it had once been the stronghold of the cult of the Crimson Coil. Tee and Ranthir had also known a good deal about the cult, but almost nothing about Pythoness House itself.

Her questions were soon being answered, starting with the location of the house itself. It stood near the base of the Jeweled Cliffs along the western edge of Oldtown, looking out over the King’s River Gorge.



Pythoness House was, in fact, an ancient manor house. Five years ago it had been established as a popular but illegal brothel with an odd twist: The prostitutes working there claimed to see the future during sexual intercourse and would give their clients a “reading” of their future

based on this sexual ecstasy. This brothel, however, was also apparently a front for the operations of the Crimson Coil cult and, two and a half years ago, the Knights of the Pale had raided it and rooted the cult out. The brothel was shut down and the house had been empty ever since. Before the brothel had moved in, the house had been abandoned for many years. It had previously been owned by an elven historian named Navaen Blueflight, who had lived there for many years before disappearing mysteriously.

The house had originally been built nearly five hundred years ago by a wealthy woman named Darma Kolltis. She had been the head of a minor merchant house which was now defunct.

After learning that the house was reputedly abandoned, Elestra decided to walk past the house itself... just to make sure that it wasn't being watched.

She was astonished to see that it looked more like a small keep than a house. The entire structure sat atop a hill overgrown with weeds, shrubs, and tall, unkempt grass. The property was surrounded by a low stone wall, but the iron gate facing Emmitt Street was in such poor repair that one could easily slip through the rusted, broken bars and walk up to the open stone arch on the wall of the building itself. As far as Elestra could tell, the structure was completely abandoned.

Satisfied, Elestra turned and headed back towards the Ghostly Minstrel – taking her time and listening to the Voice of the City as she went. The news she heard was grim: Another body had been found in the Warrens with

its skin completely flayed from its body. Rumors were beginning to spread that a serial killer might be responsible.

But the news of Shilukar's capture was also spreading like wildfire... and all of their names were being mentioned.

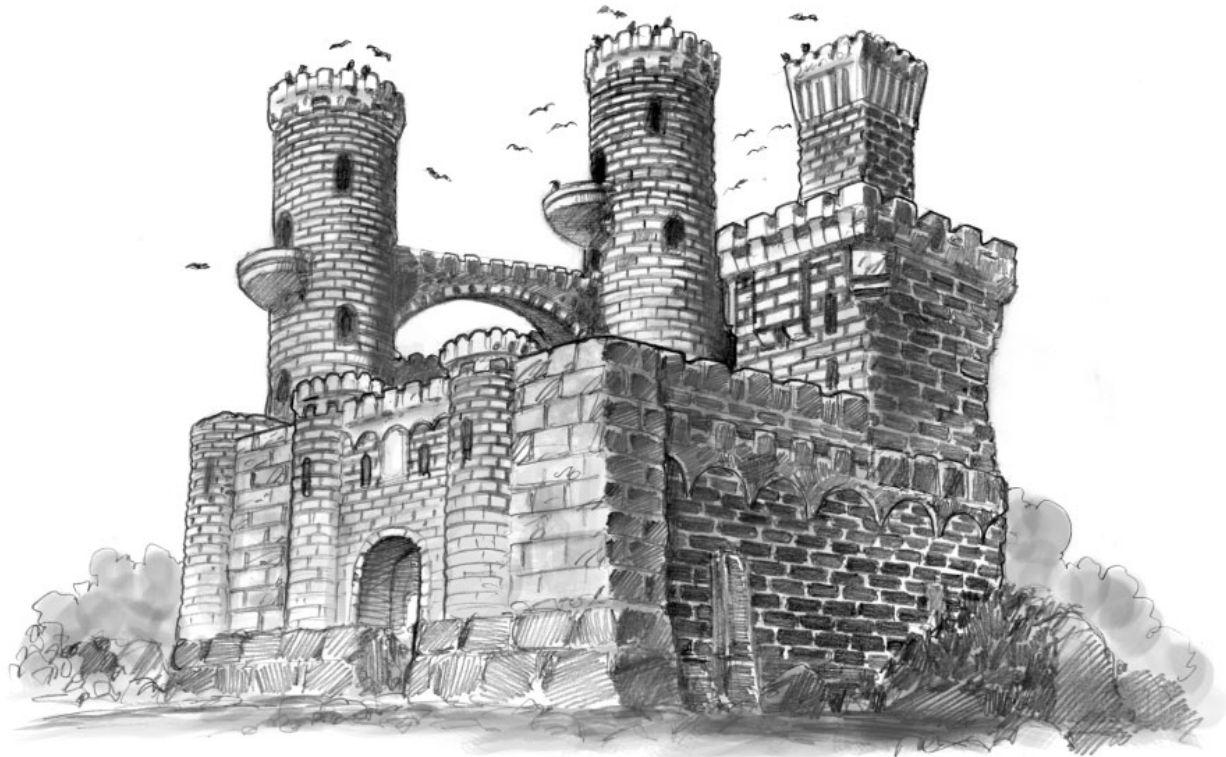
WITH BLUE IN THE GRASSLANDS

Tor headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel and spent a few minutes in the kitchen, packing a light lunch of sweet creams and fruit. Then he headed out to the stables. Blue ninnied at his approach – it had been too many days since they had ridden together. Tor rubbed his nose, whispered in his ear, and with soft, expert motions worked the saddle onto his back.

They headed towards the tourney fields north of town. Tor had been hoping to get back to them since viewing the tourney on Harvesttime and now he finally had the opportunity.

As expected, the tourney fields were abandoned. Tor took the time to ride several passes with Blue, feeling the familiar rhythms of the saddle. After more than an hour, both Tor and Blue had worked up a lather of sweat. Tor dismounted, took the saddle off of Blue, and rubbed him down.

After letting Blue rest for awhile, Tor saddled him again and galloped east across the open grasslands. When they reached the sea cliffs north of Ptolus, Tor stopped again and – letting Blue graze freely on the



prairie grasses – settled down to his own lunch while gazing out over the Southern Sea.

They stayed there a long while, and then Tor mounted once more and rode slowly back towards the city.

AGNARR LOOKS FOR A DOG (AGAIN)

“It’s like there are no damn dogs in this entire city!”

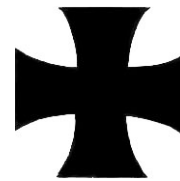
TEE AND THE SILVER FATAR

When they had a moment alone, Dominic asked Tee if she would go on his behalf to see Rehobath, the Silver Fatar of Athor. The note they had found at the Foundry regarding the “Chosen of Vehthyl” had left him deeply concerned about the meeting he had scheduled the next day at the Temple of the Clockwork God. Were they setting him up for something? Were they planning to *do* something to him?

Dominic felt that he was in desperate need of guidance. But he also didn’t want to walk into the lion’s mouth if it turned out that the Imperial Church was as *interested* in him as the Reformists.

Tee was more than willing to help. After leaving Dominic at the Ghostly Minstrel, she headed to the Outer Cathedral of Athor.

The cathedral was ancient, its presence in Ptolus a testament to one of the three Merchant Princes who had gone to the Novarch in Seyrun and begun the Great Conversion. It was designed around Athor’s traditional cross and layered with intricate iconography and complex ornamentation. Graven images of saints and figures of pantheistic significance covered almost every surface, including the ornately carved pews in the sanctuary. Holy knights of the Order of the Dawn could be seen guarding every entrance.



Athor's Cross





Order of the Dawn

Tee had suspected it would be more than a little difficult to get an audience with Rehobath, but she had – if anything – underestimated how impossible it truly was. She was shuffled constantly from one priest to another without ever seeming to get any closer to the fatar, but just as she was about to give up a prelate who happened to be passing by stopped in his tracks.

“Excuse me, would you be Tithenmamiwen?” he asked.

Tee nodded.

“I couldn’t help overhearing that you wished to see the Silver Fatar. He had mentioned meeting you at Castle Shard. If you wouldn’t mind waiting, I’m sure we can find you a few minutes to speak with him.”

The prelate shoed the other priest away and led Tee to a luxuriously furnished waiting room – a place of crimson satins and velvet cushions. Tee was still left waiting for more than an hour, but eventually a priest came in and escorted her to Rehobath’s personal office.

The office was at the apex of the cathedral’s tower. A huge, vaulted ceiling left Tee feeling particularly small as she was led down the long length of the hall. A fire burned in a mantle of marble to her left; to her right statues of Athor in each of his aspects flanked the wall to the right. At the far end of the chamber curtains of crimson silk hung before tall windows looking south across the Temple District and across the lower length of the city.

In front of the windows, Rehobath sat behind an enormous desk of godwood – the pale, almost pearlescent wood glowing faintly with a white light in the presence of divine magic.

Rehobath rose at Tee’s approach and smiled broadly. Tee bowed slightly and then sat down.

“Mistress Tithenmamiwen,” Rehobath said. “It’s a pleasure to see you again. Prelate Adlam tells me that you had some matter to discuss with me.”

“Yes,” Tee said. “I have a friend who I think might be in trouble. I recently... umm... *found* a note that I think is talking about him. I think its very disturbing.”

Tee produced the note and gave it to Rehobath. As he read the note, the look of concern – which seemed like more of a polite façade than anything else – was replaced by one of genuine shock.

“Maeda thinks she’s found the Chosen of Vehthyl?”

“I guess so,” Tee said. “I’m sorry... but what does that mean, exactly?”

“Yes, of course. Let me explain.” Rehobath settled back into his chair. “The Chosen are living saints. The gods themselves have chosen them as direct conduits of their will within the mortal world.”

“You mean the Chosen can talk to the gods?”

“In a way. It would be more accurate to say that they are the living will of the gods made manifest.” Rehobath’s eyes danced over the note again. “Is it true that your friend has the Mark of Vehthyl?”

“I don’t even know what the mark would look like.”

“There are many possible marks, but the Mark of Vehthyl is most often described as eyes which glow with a silver light.”

Tee shifted nervously. “Yes. I’ve seen that.”

Rehobath could barely contain his excitement. “Then your friend has been honored. Would it be possible for me to speak with him?”

“Possibly,” Tee said. “The letter has frightened him. But I’ll talk to him about coming to you.”

“Thank you.” Rehobath paused for a moment and then looked at her significantly. “Your friend Dominic is an itinerant priest, isn’t he?”

Tee quickly denied that Dominic was the friend she had been talking about... and then realized that she’d probably just confirmed Rehobath’s suspicions. Flustered and angry with herself, she made her excuses and farewells.

Rehobath rose and walked her to the door himself, asking her once again – on the way – to have her friend come and talk to him as soon as possible.

DOMINIC AND THE SILVER FATAR

Tee returned to the Ghostly Minstrel and described the entire encounter to Dominic.

Dominic was still uncertain, but Rehobath had seemed receptive and concerned... without the disturbing overtones of the letter they had found in the Foundry. Of course, the Reformists at the Temple of the Clockwork God had seemed nice enough, too. But Rehobath was giving answers... and Dominic was a priest of the Church.

“Will you come with me, Tee?”

“Of course!”

So the two of them quickly returned to the cathedral. Unlike Tee’s previous reception, they found themselves swept straight up to Rehobath’s office. He rose to greet them, but as Dominic meekly approached his desk the godwood suddenly flared to a bright light.

Rehobath stepped back, clearly shocked by the display. Fumbling his words for a moment, he suggested that they retire instead to the small seating area near the fireplace.

The three of them sat down. Rehobath, with an eager air, began by asking Dominic to show him the mark of

Vehthyl. Dominic with a nervous, sidelong glance towards Tee murmured a prayer to Vehthyl:

*Mighty, majestic, and radiant,
You shine brilliantly in the evening,
You brighten the day at dawn,
You stand in the heavens like the sun and the
moons,
Your wonders are known both above and below,
To the greatness of the Magus,
To you, Vehthyl, I pray!*

As he finished, his eyes blazed with silver light. Rehobath was entranced. “It is the mark... It’s hard to believe that one of the Chosen should have come to me.”

Dominic had many questions, but there was much Rehobath didn’t know: Although he could confirm that Maeda was the “head priestess” of the Temple of the Clockwork God (confirming Dominic’s suspicions regarding the letter), he had no idea what the “Iron Angel” she mentioned in her letter might be.

However, Rehobath was able to confirm that Maeda had formed an alliance with the Shuul, who were led by a mysterious man known as Savane. The Shuul had apparently constructed most or all of the Temple of the Clockwork God.

Dominic was most interested, however, in knowing about what had happened to him. How or why had he been chosen by Vehthyl?

But, as Rehobath said, “The ways of the gods are filled with mystery... Vehthyl perhaps moreso than all the rest. To be chosen by them is to have your life placed in the focal point of creation. There is no way of knowing why you were chosen – only that, because you were chosen, you are an important person in an important place at an important time.”

This didn’t do much to give Dominic the guidance he was looking for, but then Rehobath said, “We may not know why Vehthyl has chosen you, but I suspect I know why you should have come to me now.”

“I was once the Gold Fatar of Athor. I served on the Council of Councils and was esteemed. When the last novarch died, it was clear to many that I was destined to follow him – to speak as the Living Voice of the Nine Gods. But when that time came, the Emperor played *politics*.” The last word was filled with venom. “Another was named in my place while I was stripped of my offices and sent here to serve as the Silver Fatar of an outer cathedral. It was the most blatant interference by the Emperor in the matters of the church since the Years of Heresy.”

***Historical Note:** The Years of Heresy began in 615 YD when the Emperor of Seyrun became the leader of the Imperial Church and called for a Time of Reflection. It later became known as*

the Purging. For five years a bloody, internal war was waged against heresy cults. When the Emperor was assassinated in 620 YD, church and state became separate once again and the Time of Reflection came to an end shortly thereafter.

“I believe that you can help me, Dominic. I believe that you were *meant* to help me.”

“What do you want me to do?” Dominic asked.

“Simply to let yourself be known. Your presence here in Ptolus is a sign. I would like to call a convocation in, let’s say, two days. Could you return here on the 10th?”

Dominic was hesitant, but he agreed. Rehobath then summoned in several members of the Order of the Silver God. The Order were the primary scholars of the Church here in Ptolus, and Rehobath wanted them to examine Dominic carefully and confirm the veracity of the mark. This they did – not only observing the glow of the eyes, but also testing its various properties (most particularly its ability to detect magical auras). When they were satisfied, priests escorted Tee and Dominic in honor to the front doors of the cathedral.

GATHERING AT THE GHOSTLY MINSTREL

When they had gotten some distance away from the cathedral, Tee asked Dominic whether he thought they ought to tell Mand Scheben about what was happening. “Even if he can’t advise us, I think he should at least hear it from us.”

Dominic agreed and they headed over to the Temple of Ashe. Unfortunately, Mand Scheben wasn’t there. They made plans to come back the next day. They also tried to meet with Lord Zavere, but he was also out (Kadmus told them that he had gone out with Lord Abbercombe and was not expected back until the next morning).

Stymied (at least for the moment), they returned to the Ghostly Minstrel in time to meet the rest of the group for dinner.

Tee and Dominic gave a brief, but complete, overview of what had happened with the Silver Fatar. Dominic also told them that he had decided to simply not show up at the Temple of the Clockwork God the next day. He still wasn’t sure what Maeda wanted, but he didn’t feel safe about it.

With that decision made, Elestra began telling them everything she had learned that day about Pythoness House; the second Flayed Man killing; and – most exciting of all – the fact that their names were being mentioned all over town as a result of Shilukar’s capture!

“It’s being talked about all over town?” Tee said.

“Yes!” Elestra said.

Tee's face went white. She pushed her chair back and stood up quickly. "Excuse me. I have to go."

She ran out of the Ghostly Minstrel, leaving the others to look after her and exchange puzzled frowns.

ANOTHER INTERLUDE WITH TEE

Tee ran up the hill to Emerald Hill, through the gates of Iridithil's Home, and straight to Doraedian's office.

Doraedian's desk was covered in various bits of parchment and he was sorting through them. He smiled wryly as she came in. "Tee... It seems you've been quite busy."

"Leytha?"

"It's true, isn't it? You captured Shilukar?"

"With the help of my friends."

"Of course. But your name keeps finding its way to the most interesting places." Doraedian smiled. "You have grown beyond your years, Tee. I'm very proud of you."

Tee started to smile, but it faltered. "But I feel lost. I wish I knew if I was following the right path... Do you think I'm doing the right thing?"

"I can no longer judge your choices, Tee."

Tee didn't know how to respond to that. After a moment, Doraedian continued. "Why are you here?"

"I don't know... I..." Tee trailed off.

"The path you're on is taking you to places where I cannot guide. I don't know if you can take any comfort from that, but I do."

Tee frowned. Then she seemed to reach a decision. "There's something else."

"Oh?"

"You remember my friend Dominic? The priest?" Tee quickly described the mark of Vehthyl and the arrangement which had been made with Rehobath.

Doraedian's face was grave by the time she was done. "He's calling a convocation?"

Tee nodded.

"I shall have to bring news of this to the Commissar," Doraedian said. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention."

"Do you think we did the right thing? Do you think Dominic should go?"

"I don't know. If he has been chosen by one of the nine gods, then perhaps he's doing exactly what he should be doing and can do nothing else. I know little of such matters. But if the Silver Fatar is planning a religious gathering like this, then the Commissar should be warned so that proper preparations can be made."

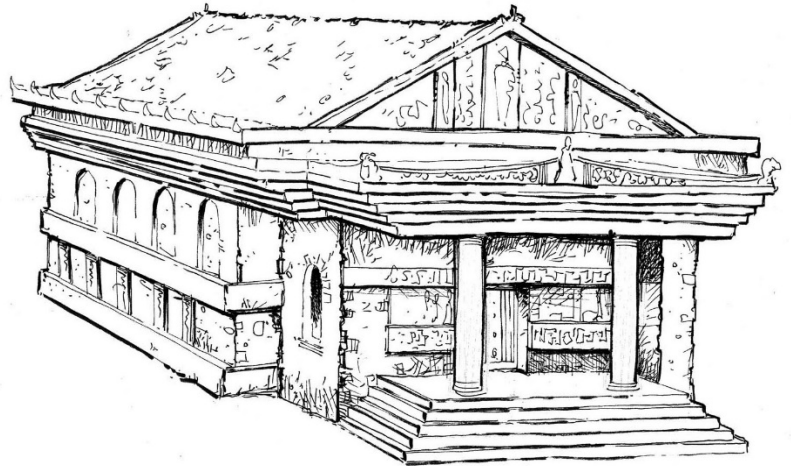
AN EVENING WITH TEE

Tee left Doraedian feeling more conflicted and confused than ever. She felt the need to clear her head – to relax and put the constant cares that plagued her conscience behind her, even if it could only be for a single evening.

Her thoughts drifted to the thousands of gold pieces she was carrying in her *bag of holding*. She realized that she was richer than she had ever dreamed of being. Somehow the reality of that seemed distant to her more often than not.

More than that, she was dressed in some of her finest clothes – she had changed into them to meet with Rehobath and never had a chance to change out of them. She was struck by the desire to go some place expensive. Some place carefree.

She headed to the White House. It was the most prestigious gambling establishment and brothel in Oldtown. Tee was surprised when the guards standing in front of the white marble façade scarcely gave her a second glance as she passed through the doors.



The interior of the White House was luxurious – but a very different sort of luxury than the one she had seen in the Outer Cathedral earlier that day. The cathedral had possessed the regality of age – it was a mature and elegant sort of luxury. But the White House was gaudy – a youthful and exuberant luxury that sought to lavish its patrons with pleasures.

There were only a dozen or so tables – but all of them sported the highest of stakes. Tee dabbled at a gambling wheel, but then settled down to games of green dragonscales.

Tee had been worried that the news of the day might have followed her to the White House, but instead almost everyone she talked to seemed to be most fascinated by the news that mrathrach – a game that she knew had begun down city in the Cock Pit – was moving uptown to the White House. A mrathrach wheel was being

installed and the news was that it would be operational within mere days.

She lost a small fortune (although it was only a minor dent in her current finances), and then slowly spent the rest of the evening earning it back bit by bit.

TEE AND THE DREAMING APOTHECARY

It was very late when Tee returned to the Ghostly Minstrel, but Elestra was still in the common room nursing a drink. She grinned and waved as Tee came in.

“We were worried about you. I thought I’d stay up and make sure you came back all right.”

Tee smiled. “Quite all right... now anyway. Actually, I’m glad you waited up. I was wondering if I could borrow that token of the Dreaming Apothecary that Jevicca gave you?”

“Of course!”

They headed upstairs, stopping by Elestra’s room long enough for Tee to grab the token, and then said their goodnights.

Tee headed straight to her room and placed the token under her pillow. Then she eased herself into a dreaming trance.

After a time, Tee seemed to wake in her own room... but with her skills she quickly identified the telltale signs of the Dreaming.

An elven woman dressed all in white and glowing with a soft, white light floated in the center of her room. The woman’s eyes were milky white and her long, blond hair flowed about her as if she were floating in water.

“What do you wish from us?”

Tee quickly described several pieces of mage-touched equipment. The floating woman named a price that would exhaust almost all of Tee’s funds, and this gave Tee a moment of pause... but only a moment.

“Place the coins in a bag upon the table at the side of your bed. We shall collect it and deliver the items as soon as the enchantments have been worked upon them.”

The woman smiled and began to fade to ethereal nothingness. As she disappeared, Tee felt the blackness of sleep washing over her... but she recognized this as a false impression and fought against it.

She forced her eyes open to find herself still in the Dreaming... but now she stood atop the Spire, able to see for miles in every direction. She looked down and saw, where the city should be, nothing but an empty grassland stretching from the base of the Jeweled Cliffs to the Southern Sea. A black speck was moving through the grasses.

Then, unexpectedly, her vision sharpened like an eagle’s. At first she could see that the black speck was a man and then, suddenly, she could make out every detail of him.



The strange knight seemed to be searching for something. His gaze crossed back and forth across the grasslands. And then, abruptly, the knight looked up at the Spire. His gaze seemed to pierce her. Tee stumbled back in surprise...

... and woke in her own bed with the morning light streaming through her window.

RANTHIR’S LABORS

After returning from the Necropolis, Ranthir had retired to his rooms at the Ghostly Minstrel. He had been hoping for several weeks – almost since waking up in the Ghostly Minstrel for the first time – to have the time to perform a lengthy and complicated ritual. Now that he had a day free, he leapt at the opportunity.

He began by drawing up detailed astrological charts showing the positions of the stars and the planets as they had been reflected at the time of his birth. (He had prepared such charts before, but they had been left behind in Isiltur. The gods alone knew what might have become of them by now.)

He then compared these charts to various magical texts he had collected. These texts were copies of incredibly old works – works almost as old as the practice of magic itself. They outlined a formula and, by comparing this formula to the details of his astrological charts and working in the factors of Ptolus’ geographic location and certain other details, Ranthir was able to work out the particular details of the ritual he would need to perform.

With the ritual designed, Ranthir took the time to bathe – anointing himself with alchemical oils – and

donned fresh garments of clean linen. Then, with his window open, he took a freshly crafted, unused brass brazier and filled it with fragrant wood. Setting it ablaze he cast into it a variety of herbs, spices, fluids, and minerals – each carefully measured and the interval between them precisely timed.

Then, for many long hours – as the brazier burned – Ranthir recited aloud the magical verses of binding. The words fused the rites of the ritual and Ranthir could feel his soul reaching out... calling out...

In the wee hours of the morning, the call of Ranthir's soul was answered. There came a snuffling sound at his window. Rising from his lotus position, Ranthir crossed the room and held out his hand. Into it crept a tiny, white hedgehog.

And Ranthir named his familiar Erinaceidae.

MAND SCHEBEN (09/09/790)

By the time the others had finished breakfast, Ranthir still hadn't emerged from his room. So Tee and Dominic decided that they would head back to the Temple of Asche and see if they could gain an audience with Mand Scheben. They felt strongly that he shouldn't hear about Dominic's alliance with Rehobath second hand.

Mand Scheben was at the temple this morning and was more than happy to see them.

Tee and Dominic had been worried that Mand Scheben would be upset, but he soon set these fears to rest. "The Imperial Church may hold us in low regard, but although I fear that the Church itself has lost its way I have no doubt that many of those who serve it hear the true voice of the gods."

Religious Note: Mand Scheben serves as one of the head priests for the Reformist church known as the Temple of Asche. This temple was dedicated to Asche, one of the saints of Itehl – the patron saint of cities.

He did caution them not to trust Rehobath too much. "Remember that you are the one to bear the mark. Not him."

INTO PYTHONESS HOUSE

Tee and Dominic returned to the Ghostly Minstrel only a few minutes before Ranthir emerged from his room. Ranthir introduced Erin to his friends and grabbed a bite to eat for himself.

Then they headed towards Oldtown and, within a quarter of an hour, they were standing on the street before Pythoness House.

The keep-like house seemed dreary beneath the noon sun – grimed and crumbling from years of neglect. Tee

and Elestra were able to slip through the iron gate facing Emmitt Street, but Agnarr was forced to shove the rusty metal to one side causing it to emit a horrible shriek.

Looking through the stone arch on the front of the house they could see through a short passage into an interior courtyard. As the others came up the hill, Tee took the lead and headed through.

She was halfway through the stone passage when some instinct caused her to look up: A small, black metallic sphere was being dropped through a small murder hole!

Tee leaped forward as the powder bomb landed behind her and exploded. She managed to avoid the worst of the blast, rolling into the inner courtyard as several small mice scattered ahead of her. Agnarr and Tor, seeing the explosion, came running up – only to dash headlong into a second powder bomb.

Tee rolled to her feet and tried to find a target with her dragon pistol – but the opening was too small and the angle poor. She couldn't see anything.

"COME TO ME..." The disembodied voice seemed to spring up from all around Tee – echoing through the courtyard and dancing through the empty windows and doors of the house. Tee whirled around, trying to find the source of it... but there was nothing there.

Elestra, Ranthir, and Dominic dashed through the passage into the courtyard. Agnarr and Tor pulled a rear guard, and barely managed to dive out of the way as a third bomb filled with dung was dropped.

Agnarr hauled himself to his feet, wiping a few flecks of disgusting excrement off of his armor. "That was disgusting. Wait—listen!" His sharp ears had caught the sounds of skittering claws racing across stone – whoever or whatever had been using the murder hole was running off to the west through the upper passages. Then something large was thrown to the floor, and there was a booming noise – a large door being slammed.

Then there was silence.

They took stock of the situation: The walls of the courtyard were so high that it almost seemed like an interior chamber – except that it lacked a roof. The noon sun was beaming down almost directly onto them, but despite that the place seemed to have a palpable chill and an uncomfortable dampness. Mosses and fungi covered the stones moreso than weeds or grass.

Looking up they could see several windows, terraces, and towers arranged in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Off to one side there was a short flight of stone stairs leading to an elevated platform with a well in the center of it. In the opposite direction there was a large, open archway leading into the interior of the house.

Elestra took a moment to run up the stairs to the well, but nearly lost her balance as the moss-slick stones cracked and tilted wildly under her weight. She barely managed to stop herself from sliding back down to the

cobbled courtyard, instead righting herself and then carefully backing down the stairs.

Tee headed cautiously through the archway into a damp room filled with leaves and refuse that had apparently blown in through the open doorway. A red carpet, dark with moisture and grime, covered most of the floor. A staircase along the far side of the room led up to a stone walkway which joined two platforms twelve feet above the floor. The room also curved to the right, although a green, mildew-stained curtain in that direction blocked the passage.

Between the stairs and the curtain there were two doors of battered, weather-beaten wood. There was also a third door just to the left of the arch from the courtyard.

Tee headed towards this third door first. Agnarr had followed her into the room to keep an eye on her, but the rest of the party stayed in the courtyard waiting for the all-clear.

This door was somewhat better shielded from the outside elements, but was still in rather poor condition. Tee eased it open, revealing a small room of barren stone and drift debris. Another door – this one of iron – lay in a curved wall on the far side of the room. Tee crossed to it.

It opened onto the lowest level of the eastern tower. A rickety wooden ladder bolted to the wall led up through a hole in the ceiling. Tee crossed to this and looked up – the ladder went up three flights.

Tee backed out and used her thieves' tools to lock the iron door behind her.

HAUNTINGS

Crossing back through the room with the moldering red carpet, Tee checked the first door on that side. The weather-beaten wood wouldn't even fasten properly, so she easily pushed it open to reveal what had once been a boudoir: Four beds covered with silk sheets and pillows – now layered in grime, dust, cobwebs – were surrounded with ruined draperies of silk and moldy paintings in wooden frames. Two brass braziers lay dust-covered and overturned in the corners of the room. The floors were carpeted with thick, worm-ridden rugs. A thick smell of mold and mildew hung in the air.

A glint of silver caught Tee's eye. A small locket was lying half-buried in the dried muck between two of the beds. Tee bent over to pick it up—

As her fingers brushed against it, however, one of the braziers suddenly jerked into the air as if held by invisible strings. It abruptly righted itself, slammed itself to the floor, and burst into flame.

Tee jerked back, leaving the locket laying on the floor. Agnarr standing in the outer room, yanked out his sword.

From the courtyard, Dominic – seeing Agnarr suddenly draw his sword – called out: “Is everything all right?”

Tee eased out of the room, pulling the door shut behind her. “Yes. Everything's fine.” She glanced meaningfully at Agnarr and moved onto the next door.

This also opened onto a ruined boudoir. After making sure that none of the braziers were going to start flying around, Tee started poking around. The paintings in this room were in slightly better condition. All of them depicted disturbingly lewd scenes, and although Tee estimated they might have some minor value she didn't really want anything to do with them.

Tucked under one of the pillows on a ruined bed, however, she found a small book with a tattered, dark brown cover. Flipping it open she found that its contents were written in a nearly illegible scrawl that could only have been born of hopeless madness. The first several pages were covered in repetitions and variations of a single phrase: FACELESS HATE. (*They wait in faceless hate. We shall burn in their faceless hate. The faceless hate has consumed me.*)

Tee glanced at several more pages and blanched. The entire book left her feeling vaguely disturbed and with a sense of deep disquiet. She decided not to mention it to the others just yet and tucked it away for later. But as she emerged from the room, it was obvious that something had worried her.

“What is it?” Elestra asked.

Tee shook her head. “We'll talk about it later.”

Tee crossed over to the moldering green drapery and pulled it off to one side. The hall continued beyond it, with another door, a wrought iron spiral staircase leading up, and – at the very end of the hall – a life-size stone statue of an obese, naked human man.

The statue's pose and expression seemed to show a diabolical confidence. It stood on a round platform three inches high and four feet across. Just walking up to it, Tee could easily see that there were deep scratch marks in the floor leading away from the platform – leading her to conclude that the platform could be moved out of the way, revealing a hidden way into Pythoness House's basement.

After a brief discussion with the others, it was decided that they would leave the statue alone for now. It seemed too risky to head down and leave potential danger lurking above them.



So Tee headed to the last door on this level. By this point, most of the others had gathered in the center of the hall (near the green draperies) – the only exception was Tor, who was still keeping a wary watch in the courtyard.

This door had been more sheltered from the elements than the others, but when Tee swung it open it revealed the same ruined, tawdry boudoir as the other rooms on this first level...

But only for a moment. An instant later the dusty vestiges of age seemed to be swept away, leaving everything as it must have appeared years ago – luxurious and clean. Three beautiful, scantily clad women stood in the middle of the room looking aggressively seductive. They opened their arms towards Tee and, with seductive whispers drifted across the room towards her.

Tee's senses seemed befogged, but she shook her head and the illusion began to drop away – now everything seemed to become transparent to her, and through the beauty she could see the ruin... and the three dry, desiccated corpses lying on the beds.

Tee pulled her dragon pistol and fired at one of the apparitions. The shot passed right through it.

One of the beautiful, illusionary spirits had reached her now and it reached out its arms and tried to wrap them around Tee's throat. "Love me... Love me forever..."

Agnarr – his firm ground in reality allowing him to quickly shake off the illusion – stepped forward and pulled Tee away from the apparition. The ghostly whores turned to their attention to him, but their seductive whispers didn't dissuade him for a moment: His sword slashed through them.

Tee, seeing that Agnarr's sword had seemingly had as little effect on the spirits as her pistol, shifted her aim: She fired at one of the corpses laying on the beds inside the room. As the shot struck true – sending a cloud of corpse dust into the air – the expressions of the apparitions transformed into gaping maws of rage and pain.

Elestra, seeing the effect of Tee's shot, pulled out one of the modified dragon rifles they had taken from the Shuul. She ducked around the apparitions – which were now drifting out into the hallway – and into the room. Lowering the rifle she bathed one of the bed-ridden corpses in flame.

With a terrifying, spectral scream one of the ghostly whores vanished. The other two, with an air of desperation in their movements, reached out to those around them. "Love me... Hold me... Stay... Stay..."

One of them headed towards Ranthir, who stumbled back against the wall. As her hands wrapped themselves around his neck, he could feel the breath turning cold and dead in his lungs as her pale lips reached for his—

Elestra swung the flaming dragon rifle around, bathing the other two beds in its flame. The remaining

apparitions vanished. Ranthir stumbled forward a step, gasping for breath.

A SECOND AMBUSH

Hearing the commotion from the courtyard, Tor had come running into the house – but he arrived just in time to see the last of the ghosts disappearing.

Elestra stumbled out of the room. The flames were beginning to spread and the entire room was filling with acrid black smoke. Tee took the time to quickly glance around the room and – seeing nothing of value or interest – quickly slammed the door shut.

"Do you think it's all right?" Agnarr asked. "Will the fire spread?"

"I don't know," Elestra said. "Do you think I shouldn't have used the rifle?"

"I think it will be all right," Ranthir said. "The walls here are stone. The door is thick. I think it will burn itself out."

Tee turned to Dominic. "Do you have any spells that might put it out? I'd rather not—"

A powder bomb landed directly behind Tor. His armor took the worst of it, but the blast knocked the breath out of him. He stumbled forward half a step, and by the time he got turned around Agnarr had already raced past him and back to the eastern end of the hall.

A ratman was standing on the walkway above. As Agnarr reached the base of the stairs, two more of the ratmen raced out of the shadows to the south, dropping additional powder bombs as they crossed to the far side of the walkway and pulled out crossbows. Agnarr threw himself to one side as the powder bombs went off.

Tor broke into a run for the stairs as well, but was nearly crushed when a massive ratbrute hurtled off the upper level and nearly landed on top of him. The creature stood at least 8 feet tall and was nothing but rolling mounds of muscle and fur. Six inch, yellow fangs protruded from its stinking mouth and its grime-encrusted claws lashed out at Tor.

Agnarr regained his balanced and launched himself up the stairs. As he mounted the upper level he swung his sword at the nearest ratling – the one still standing on the walkway – but the creature ducked under the blow, hissed, and launched himself at the barbarian's face.

The ratbrute's claws weren't finding their way through Tor's armor, but its powerful blows left him staggering. Then one arm caught Tor and hurled him into the stone wall. Tor felt the sharp pain of a rib breaking, but then he snapped up his sword and began circling warily around the creature.

Up above, Agnarr stepped deftly to one side and let the ratling careen past him. The ratling's claws skidded on bare stone, turned and leapt again... directly onto Agnarr's sword.

Tor fainted, and then – catching the ratbrute off-balance – slashed his sword across its chest. The wound was shallow, but electricity crackled along the blade and the faint smell of burning fur filled Tor’s nostrils.

And then Elestra – who had snuck up behind the ratbrute – pulled the trigger on her modified dragon rifle. From Tor’s perspective, the creature was suddenly limned with flame – and the stench of burning fur was overpowering.

The ratbrute, enraged, whirled towards Elestra. Tor, despite his battered ribs, dived to one side. Elestra stumbled back a step, worked the dragon rifle’s mechanism, and then pulled the trigger again.

The ratbrute – writhing in the pain of the flames – collapsed. A few moments later it stopped moving entirely.

The others had been kept pinned down by the crossbow fire from above, but with the ratbrute down Dominic was able to rush up to take cover under the stone arch.

The ratlings, however, were routing: Both of them tried to rush back across the stone walkway, but Agnarr was ready. The barbarian yanked his sword out of the first ratling’s chest, pivoted, and with a single swing of his sword decapitated them both as they tried to scurry past him. Their heads rolled off the walkway in opposite directions, landing to either side of Dominic.

UNWELCOME TAIN

Elestra reminded them of the bounty on rat’s tails, but Agnarr had already set to work chopping them off.

Tee, meanwhile, remained curious about the brazier which had burst into flame. Had its motion been connected to the locket she had touched?

She asked Dominic to use his holy sight to detect the presence of supernatural evil. The priest murmured a prayer and looked into the room: The room appeared completely normal.

But when he turned back to tell Tee this, Dominic was shocked to discover powerful auras of evil clinging to many of them: The modified dragon rifles they had taken from the Shuul were tainted... and so was Tee’s soul.

The news nearly reduced Tee to tears. She hated the very idea of this filth crawling across her soul. But as the others had not yet been corrupted by it, she dutifully collected the modified dragon rifles from them.

Dominic also carefully checked the unmodified dragon rifle that Elestra had taken, but this appeared to be free of the taint. Ranthir concluded that the modifications the Shuul had made must have used chaositech.

RAT WARRENS AND DINING ROOM

There were two doors on the second level – one at either end of the stone walkway. One of these was an iron door leading to the second level of the eastern tower, but the other – slightly ajar – led to a room that stank of stale urine. It appeared that the ratlings had been nesting here, with trash and scraps seemingly pulled from all over the house. Plates, pots, cutlery, towels, and shredded paper and cloth of all kinds.

Trying to breathe as little as possible, Tee stepped into the room and began poking around through the trash. (She thought there was at least a small chance that, if the key had been in Pythoness House, the ratlings might have found it and added it to their stash here.)

Disturbing the garbage, however, caused at least a dozen rats to come pouring out into the open. They swarmed around Tee, biting at her feet and legs and trying to crawl their way up her body in a frenzied mass.

Tee drew her longsword and swept them off her. Agnarr stepped in and helped to finish them off.

“Careful with that sword,” Tee said, glancing around at the drifts of refuse. “We don’t want to light the whole place on fire.”

The flames of the blade died down and Agnarr set to work hacking off rat tails while Tee resumed her aborted search of the room.

There was nothing of value, and certainly nothing that looked like a key. But she did find a small crawl hole that had been smashed or gnawed through the west wall at floor level.

Looking through it, Tee could see into what had once been a well-appointed dining room – a long, dusty table with a dozen chairs covered in moldy cloth took up much the room, and she could see that there were two doors leading out of the room on its far side.

Agnarr offered to go first, but Tee pointed out that his broad shoulders weren’t going to fit through the narrow hole. Even with her slim, elvish frame it was going to be a tight fit.

In fact, it took a good deal of wiggling for her to work her way through the hole. Standing up with a clearer view on the far side, her eye was immediately caught by the cobweb-ridden chandelier that hung above the table. It had once been set with many gemstones, and she could see that at least six of them still remained.

Unwinding her rope and grappling hook, Tee cast it up and easily caught the chandelier. Her first thought was to climb up and pry the gems out, but after a quick test of the rope she was fairly certain it wouldn’t support her weight. So, instead, she gave it a short, sharp yank.

The chandelier easily pulled free from the damp, moldering plaster of the ceiling, crashing spectacularly into the rotten wood of the table and breaking it like a twig.

“Tee! Are you all right?” Agnarr was trying to peer through the hole in the wall.

“Everything’s fine!” Tee called back, choking on the cloud of dust that had filled the room. She pulled out one of her daggers and quickly pried loose the semi-precious gems. Then, comparing her mental image of the second floor to what they knew of the first, she crossed over to the northwestern door and swung it open.

Her suspicions were confirmed: She was standing in an empty hall of plain stone. The spiral staircase from the first floor passed through this hall and up to the second floor. A window looked out over the courtyard and there was also another door at the far end of the hall.

Crossing back to the hole, she called for Agnarr to tell the others to come up the spiral staircase and then went back to meet up with them.

SECOND HAUNTINGS

Agnarr headed back down and let the others know. They headed towards the spiral staircase.

Tor, who had gone back to watching the courtyard, took up the rear. But as he came back into the house, one of the decapitated ratling heads floated into the air, turned itself towards him, and seemed to stare with its cold, dead eyes – dripping blood down onto the moldering red carpet.

With an instinctive gasp he swung his sword down in a crackling arc, slamming the ratling head to the floor. As his sword connected with a sickening crunch, a horrible spectral howling ripped through the upper levels of the house.

The others whirled at the sound, and Elestra – seeing Tor with his sword drawn – called out, “Tor?! What happened?”

Tor was looking around warily, circling in place. “I think we’re being watched by something in the upper levels of the castle. I think it was using the ratling’s head to spy on us.”

Agnarr prodded the other head with his sword. It didn’t respond. Nor did anything else seem untoward now that the howling had passed. They turned back to the spiral staircase and headed upstairs to meet with Tee, quickly filling her in on what had happened.

Tee summed it up in one word: “Creepy.”

They headed back into the dining room. Tee quickly inspected the other door in the room and then Agnarr opened it, revealing another ruined boudoir. A small alcove projected out from the south wall, holding a window seat that looked out across Oldtown.

The lewd paintings that had decorated the lower boudoirs were missing here. Instead, recessed shelves were built into the walls. It looked as if these shelves had once been covered with a variety of tiny, doll-like figurines, but now only a few of them remained: A pair

of matched acrobats. A porcelain angel. A young girl. A small terrier dog.

Tee idly crossed to the shelves and leaned in to take a look at one of the figurines. Her face was less than a foot away from one of them when it suddenly leapt from the shelf and clawed at her eyes!

Tee jerked back. “Agnarr!” The angel figurine had leapt from the shelf and was now flying towards her. She reached up and snatched it from the air, crushing it easily in her bare hand.

The small figurine of the dog began running around in circles, yipping. Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

The acrobats launched themselves off the shelves – Tee ducked to one side and the two figurines landed near Agnarr as he came charging into the room... and then skidded to a halt in confusion.

Tee grabbed the figurine of the young girl, which was still trying to claw at her eyes, threw it to the floor, and crushed it beneath her foot.

Agnarr, realizing that the dolls were a threat, tried to smash one of the acrobats with his sword... but it twirled up onto the top of the blade and ran toward his face. It wasn’t quick enough, though: Agnarr quickly whipped his sword around and smashed it against the wall, sending flaming bits of debris flying through the room. Then he pivoted and brought the sword crashing down onto the second acrobat (sending even more flaming debris into the air).

The dog suddenly ceased its circling and leapt for Agnarr’s throat.

Agnarr beamed: “A dog!” He caught it deftly in his hand.

The dog continued struggling, trying ineffectually to claw and bite at Agnarr. It also continued its shrill barking: Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

Tee grimaced. “Agnarr...”

Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

“It’s a dog! Not a real dog... but a dog!”

Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip!

Tee grabbed the dog from Agnarr’s hand and smashed it to smithereens on the floor. Agnarr’s face fell... but at least the incessant yipping stopped.

THE GHOST APPEARS

Heading back out into the hallway they went to the last door on the second level. This was another iron door and it led into one of the small towers that flanked the front gate. A ladder bolted to the wall led up to the next level of the tower.

Tee and Tor climbed up the ladder. Tor headed through another iron door, this one leading to the gatehouse immediately above the entrance to the house: They could see where a large stone block had been levered out of the floor and pushed to one side, revealing the murder hole the ratlings had attacked them through.

A narrow wooden table off to one side held the decrepit remains of four crossbows and three quivers of rotten quarrels, all covered with cobwebs and dust. An iron pot filled to the brim with rusty caltrops was shoved into a far corner. There was a matching door directly opposite.

Tor proceeded cautiously into the gatehouse. He hadn't gone more than a few steps, however, before the door suddenly slammed shut behind him. Tee jumped for it and easily got it open again. She turned and called over her shoulder, "Get up here! Something's happening!"

The trapdoor slammed shut.

"Tee?" Elestra called. "What's happening?"

Tee whirled back towards Tor... just in time to see the ghost materialize between them.

The spirit wore the robes of an Imperial priest, but its face was contorted with fury. "Leave this place! The curse will claim your souls!"

Tee hesitated for a moment and then leapt for the trap door, yanking it open. "Agnarr! The ghost is right here!"

Tor, meanwhile, had drawn his sword and – with a single quick swing – sliced it through the ghost's ethereal form. Although the blade crackled and its electrical arcs flashed as it passed through the ghost, the apparition appeared unphased.

Agnarr began clambering up the tower ladder. Dominic, thinking quickly, ran back around the hall to a window looking out over the courtyard. Through this he was able to look up through one of the inner arrow slits of the gatehouse and see the ghost moving menacingly towards Tor.

Dominic raised his holy symbol and called out a prayer to Athor. But whether it was the distance, the thick stone walls, or the sheer tenacity of the spirit the prayer had no effect. Frowning, Dominic ran back around towards the ladder.

Tor swung his sword again... again to little effect. But at the blow the ghost's face was transformed into a black maw of rage "YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!"

Every object in the gatehouse began to shake violently, and then handfuls of the sharp, rusty caltrops came flying out of their cauldron – pelting Tor viciously.

Agnarr leapt out of the trapdoor and drew his sword, bounding towards the door leading to the gatehouse. "FOR THE GLORY!"

The spirit whirled: "LEAVE THIS PLACE."

Agnarr grunted and swung his flaming sword. It ripped through the ghost, and Agnarr could feel it catching and tearing.

The ghost moaned in pain and rushed away from Agnarr... passing straight into Tor's body.

Tor jerked spasmodically, and then a clearly alien intellect took possession of his limbs and spoke through his lips: "Leave this place or your friend will die."

Agnarr paused. "I'll only give you once chance: Get out of his body."

"LEAVE THIS PLACE!"

Agnarr attacked. The spirit clumsily raised Tor's sword and parried the attack. Agnarr moved to attack again, but the ruined crossbows were swept off their table and hurled at Agnarr by invisible hands.

Agnarr stumbled under the assault, and barely got his sword back into a defensive position as "Tor" attacked him. Agnarr parried several more attacks, trying to figure out some way of getting rid of the ghost without harming Tor. But there didn't seem to be any way around it.

"I'm sorry, Tor! Dominic will heal you later!" Agnarr got ready to swing away with all his strength, which would surely sweep aside the ghost's clumsy defense—

When Dominic, having ascended the ladder behind him, raised his holy symbol and with a shouted prayer focused his faith upon Tor's body. The ghost was blasted back, forcibly ripped from Tor's soul, and then faded into wispy nothingness...

"Is it gone?" Tee asked.

Dominic gasped. "I think so."

LOOKING AROUND

Tee cautiously crossed the gatehouse and opened the iron door on the far side. It led to a tower nearly identical to the one they had climbed up. Tee flipped up the trapdoor in the floor, revealing a lower level filled with some badly rotten straw and little else. She shrugged and slammed it shut again.

On this side, however, there was also a trapdoor in the ceiling. Tee swung it open and climbed out onto the tower's parapet.

From here Tee could look down onto an outdoor terrace surrounding three-quarters of the courtyard. Half of this terrace had, at some point in the past, been turned into a rooftop garden. Various boxes and pots – most in disrepair and many spilling their dirt out onto the stone roof – lay here and there. Many of the plants were still alive, although most of the garden had been overrun with weeds.

Almost directly across from Tee – on the wall near the door leading to this terrace – she could see a strange face that had been carved into the wall. Something glinted in the eyesocket of the carving, glittering like a gemstone.

Tee toyed with the idea of trying to jump down to the terrace, but decided against it. She climbed back down to where the others were waiting in the gatehouse and they decided to return to the spiral staircase and climb up to the third level of the house that way.

COOKING RATS

Tee went first, emerging into a room overrun with garbage and debris – tables, chairs, divans, and

overturned furniture of all kinds; broken bits of crockery and various utensils.

But what immediately caught her eye were several huge rats – each the size of a large dog and some with blood-red, pupil-less eyes. They seemed to be chewing on a pile of fresh-looking garbage that had been dumped on the far side of the room, near a heavy purple curtain blanketed with mold and mildew covering the far exit.



Tee thought briefly about calling for Agnarr, but then she shook her head: She wasn't going to be scared off by a couple rodents, even if they were of unusual size. She vaulted over the railing of the stair and pulled out one of the tainted dragon rifles.

The rats raised their head from their sickly meal and began scurrying across the room towards her – their long, grime-encrusted claws scabbling through the debris.

Tee pulled the trigger. Flame gushed out of the rifle's end, catching the rats as they charged.

Then, off to her left, the debris exploded as another of the huge rats – along with dozens of other rats – burst forth and rushed towards her. She swung the rifle towards them, pulling the trigger again and bathing them in flame.

Agnarr came charging up behind her and vaulted over the railing... but by the time he got there the battle was already over. He desultorily plunged his sword into one of the rats which still squirmed with lingering life.

A DEAD PROPHET

After quickly poking around the worthless garbage (and making sure that they hadn't just started another fire in the house), Tee crossed over to the purple curtain and shoved it aside. The next room was largely empty. A large, circular depression in the center of the room held several silken pillows. It was surrounded by four-foot-tall iron candlesticks screwed into the floor and holding the stubs of white candles.

All of these were horribly weather-worn because, off to Tee's right, an archway opened onto the outside of the castle, in midair, about twenty-five feet above the ground.

On the opposite side of the room, however, was a curiously well-preserved human skeleton clad in black robes. The skeletal remains were stretched out across the floor, with one hand flung out towards the wall. Large letters upon the wall, written in charcoal, read:

The Saint of Chaos shall return and the Banewarrens shall ope their maw. And the name of doom shall be Tavan Zith.

Tee kept her distance from the body and went to check out the archway. Directly below the opening was a tangled mass of broken wood. It looked as if there had once been a wooden balcony here that had completely collapsed at some point.

Ranthir, meanwhile, had crossed towards the body and the prophetic scrawl. It looked like gold thread had once been used to embroider strange runes along the robe's hem, but age and weather-wear had destroyed these.

COOKING RATS, PART 2

Tee rifled the ruined pillows in the room's central depression, but didn't find anything of interest. Then she headed over to the far door in the room and made sure it wasn't trapped. She stepped aside and let Agnarr step up to it.

Agnarr opened the door. The next room was almost entirely empty... except for two of the ogre-sized ratmen mounted on rats nearly the size of small ponies. They had clearly been waiting for them (probably having overheard their loud conversation), and as soon as the door swung open they spurred their rat-mounts and charged with lances lowered.

Agnarr was struck by both lances, spun around, and knocked to the ground. Tor stepped forward, but the ratmen leaped from their mounts. The rat-mounts continued on, their slavering jaw biting and tearing at any exposed skin they could find. Tor was overwhelmed by them and, for a moment, it appeared that their position was going to be completely routed.

But Ranthir, seeing the eminent catastrophe, lowered his hand and muttered arcane syllables. A thick, fibrous mass of web instantly filled the room – leaping from the walls and completely enshrouding the ratlings. Tor, recovering his feet, quickly dispatched the half-trapped rat-mounts.

Ranthir stepped forward and, with a strike of flint and steel, set the web alight. The ratlings, trapped in the cocoon-like webs, screamed in agonizing pain as they were roasted alive.

THE DAY'S CODA

After a few minutes more, the webbing had burned away completely with an acrid stench of the arcane (mixed with more than a hint of burnt rat fur).

Able to take a closer look at the room now they could see that holes in the walls and discolored places in the floor gave a vague suggestion that the room had once been more fully accoutered, but whatever furnishings had once been there were long gone now.

Ranthir's eye, however, was immediately captured by what appeared to be runes written in various places on the floor and walls. It looked as if they had been written in blood, but age – coupled with the burning web – had eradicated most of the details.

In the corner of the room there was another spiral staircase leading up to the fourth floor. Climbing this they reached a once-opulent bedroom: Red carpets covered the floor and a large bed made up with red and gold silks jutted out from one wall. There was even a

porcelain bathtub.

A heavy green curtain, moth-eaten and grimy, hung across the center of the room, dividing it roughly in half. On that end of the room there was a wooden bureau, a writing desk of dark wood, and a wooden chair. Ranthir's attention was immediately attracted to the books lined up across the top of the writing desk.

Flipping through these, Ranthir discovered that one of these was a ledger which appeared to show all of the brothel's business from five years ago until two years ago. He tucked that away and turned his attention to the other volume of interest: A journal written by someone named Maquent.

The room was also filled with a variety of chests and drawers. In fact, the more Tee looked the more it seemed that every nook, cranny, and corner was stuffed full of knick-knacks or clothing or something of the like.

As Tee ransacked the room, Ranthir began reading the journal:

MAQUENT'S JOURNAL

In a beautiful, flowing script, this journal relates details regarding the operation of Pythoness House from 786 YD to as recently as 788 YD. Maquent Dellisaria was a seer and prophetess expelled from a group she refers to as the "Fate Weavers". She and her partner, Radanna Scalth, operated the house as a brothel. An ardent follower of chaos, Radanna insisted that the two allow the house to be used as a front for a chaos cult known as the Crimson Coil. Some of the more interesting entries include:

Ulanseyl 18, 786

Urieth says that all of the girls believe the gatehouse towers to be haunted by a lost spirit.

Ulanseyl 22, 786

Urieth has been attempting to communicate with the gatehouse ghost. She says that, in life, it was a priest named Taunell. She has been telling the others girls that he has the ability to see anywhere in the house, but that one can only speak with him in the gatehouse towers.

Ulanseyl 29, 786

No one shall go into the gatehouse towers. I shall lock the door myself. The unwelcome spirit is quite tenacious, and not a little dangerous. We attempted to put it to rest, but it made the process far too difficult, so we shall simply leave it there forevermore. (Which is fine with me—I have no liking for holy men and did not relish the thought of bringing one here for an exorcism when Urieth's attempts failed.)

Duelsayl 10, 786

There is another spirit within this house. At first I thought it was our old friend Taunell, but this is different. It has something to do with the statue of that horrid man. This is Radanna's doing. She smiles slyly whenever I mention it. She keeps so many secrets from me now...

Siythtural 10, 786

Radanna and her friends have become obsessed with the "Night of Dissolution". They will speak of almost nothing else. They are convinced that the "coming changes have arrived"

Thoral 1, 787

The spirit in this house now has the ability to keep out those it does not want, and keep in those whom it does not wish to leave. Only while it sleeps are we truly free to come and go. At other times, I have become a prisoner in my own home. Though, in truth, I rarely wish to leave any more. Where would I go? The filthy city has little for me. I see mostly darkness in its future, with just one possible ray of light. And even then, the light will never reach me. I shall end in darkness, and soon.

Siltarsal 15, 787

Radanna's cultists have hidden some great weapons of power and items of chaotic magic in the cellars beneath the house and used the enchanted statue to seal the entrance. Only the spiral contrivance can move the statue, and it is broken in two halves – one for me, and one for Radanna. She says we are to keep them hidden and safe until the time when they are needed.

The cultists say the hidden weapons will strike down their enemies on the Night of Dissolution. I no longer care. Their true future is too entwined with chaos to foretell with any accuracy. Perhaps what they say is true. I do sense great changes coming in the next few years.

Noctural 14, 787

I have somewhat befriended the Cobbledman. He grows more mad with each day, however. I hid my half of the spiral contrivance in his tower with him. I shall not even tell Radanna. Of course, she will not tell me where she keeps her half, either, but there's only one place it could be. Certainly no one could sneak a ladder up to that secret door without her knowing about it.

Essaseyl, 788

Not a favored day for those in my profession. Radanna and her friends have brought forth a goat-headed demon to live in the high tower. Its presence disrupts my ability to foretell the future. Radanna refers to it as a "servitor of the Gods of Change" and an "earthbound demon". To me, a demon is a demon. I do not care for the way it looks at us—as if we were domesticated animals. I can also feel its oppressive age. Every fiber of my being screams with it. It is so very old.

Taranal 10, 788

The goat-headed thing has called demons from the Dark Reliquary to it here. They join the horrible menagerie of rat-things the cultists already hide in our house. And, of course, the Cobbledman. Soon, it seems, demons will walk the streets of this city, and no one will give it a second thought. I have had a dream of death.

Taranal 18, 788

The name of this month means nothing to Ptolus now. No sun shall shine here again, although strange new stars haunt my vatic dreams.

Ildelial 2, 788

Thabitha lost the key to the square tower. Radanna is furious. I shall have to protect the girl, or Radanna will certainly hand her over as a sacrifice to her terrible friends. Thabitha says that she was on the rooftop garden when she last had the key.

Ildelial 15, 788

It is over now. Urieth says the Knights of the Pale are on their way. The cultists flee. Radanna is slaying the girls one by one. I cannot stop her. The spirit keeps anyone else from leaving. My end comes in darkness.

LEAVING PYTHONESS HOUSE

“I MUST FEED...”

The booming voice echoed through the empty halls of Pythoness House, seeming to come from all around them. Ranthir’s reading of the journal trailed off and Tee, her ransacking of the room almost complete (having turned up little of interest or value), stopped and looked up.

“I don’t really like this place very much,” Agnarr said.

The day was drawing to a close. They didn’t want to particularly stay here through the night and, in any case, Dominic had commitments to keep in the morning. They

were also growing worried by the statements in Maquent’s journal suggesting that they might not be able to leave the house.

They retreated back to the first floor. The courtyard had become very dark. Looking up they could see that dark clouds had swept across the sky from the north – a storm coming in from the plains. The low, rumbling growl of thunder could be heard from somewhere in the unseen distance.

Tee led them across the courtyard... and ran straight into a wall of invisible force stretched across the front gate.

They were trapped.

SESSION 21 – THE SAINT’S SCHISM

May 11th, 2008

The 9th Day of Kadal in the 790th Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Tee turned around. “Ranthir?”

Ranthir muttered a few words of magic and then carefully examined the invisible barrier. “It’s completely impenetrable. And beyond my ability to dispel.”

“I thought we got rid of the ghost.”

“Apparently not,” Agnarr said.

“Or there’s more than one ghost haunting this place,” Tor said.

Tee grimaced. “Let’s hope that’s not the case.” She paused for a moment and thought things over. “All right. We can’t get out this way, but we can always climb down the walls. Let’s head back up to that collapsed balcony. I think that’ll be easiest.”

Tee headed back into the courtyard. A flash of lightning drew her eye upwards... and she suddenly caught sight of a large, hunched figure leaning over the edge of a walkway that stretched between two of the keep’s towers. Instinctively she whipped out her dragon pistol and fired.

The blast of energy struck the edge of the bridge. The figure jerked back and then shambled off towards one of the towers – disappearing from sight.

“What was it?” Elestra asked.

“I don’t know,” Tee said, slowly holstering the pistol. “I couldn’t see it clearly.”

A TORMENTED LEAVETAKING

They headed back into the keep. Their footsteps and quiet whispers seemed muffled. The entire place seemed enshrouded by a preternatural silence.

But they reached the room that had once led to the now-ruined balcony without any difficulty. The gaping hole in the wall looked out across a sweeping view of Oldtown, but their eyes were drawn down along the crumbling stonework of the keep’s wall to the sharp, jagged wreckage of the wooden balcony below.

Given their ill-luck with climbing in the past, they decided that they would need a rope if they were all going to make it safely to the ground below. Looking around, Tee decided the best place to tie the rope off was the wrought iron railing of the spiral staircase in the next room.

Tee took a few moments to make sure the knot was nice and tight. But she was also coming to distrust this entire house and whatever spirits were roaming it, so she decided to keep an eye on it.

It was well that she did, because as soon as Tor put his weight on the rope and began to lower himself, the rope began to untie itself. Tee cried out a warning and

Tor, feeling the rope go slack between his fingers, jumped for the wall and caught the edge.

After a quick discussion, they decided not to try tying it again. Instead, they all grabbed hold of the rope and tried to lower Tor to the ground. But this, too, met with near-disaster: The rope began to fray, unraveling itself before their eyes. Tor scrambled back up into the room and Tee, frowning, put her damaged rope away. (Elestra promised to fix it for her later – her affinity with the creations of man giving her a magical knack for such things.)

They decided to try another approach. Agnarr took the *boots of levitation* from Tee and put them on, then he grabbed Dominic and tried to carry him down to the ground.

Looking up as they slowly descended, Agnarr caught sight of another opening higher up the wall – a second, smaller balcony that had also collapsed. It was a fortunate that this caught his eye, however, because otherwise he might not have noticed – when they were halfway down – that one of the keep’s crenellations was being “pushed” over the edge towards them. As the massive stone block tipped over, Agnarr turned off the *boots* and fell.

Agnarr did his best to cushion Dominic, but Dominic still landed heavily and awkwardly. Agnarr only had a moment to give a last, desperate effort to shove Dominic out of the way—And then the stone block landed right on top of him.

Dominic, unaware of what was happening, stumbled away painfully. “What are you--?”

He turned around to see Agnarr crushed beneath the heavy stone block. His legs and lower body had been caught directly beneath the block, and pieces of the broken balcony thrust up through his shoulder – leaving him twisted awkwardly in the air. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

“I need help!” Dominic called out.

The stone block began to rise back into the air.

“Thanks!” Dominic pulled Agnarr out of the way and opened the flow of holy energy that would slowly knit his bones and heal his tortured body.

But none of the others had been responsible for the block’s levitation: It was the spirit. Resetting the trap to crush anyone foolish enough to try to follow Agnarr and Dominic.

Tor, however, was thinking quickly. When the block was halfway up the building, he jumped for it: Landing on the block and trying to quickly jump again. But he wasn’t quick enough: As soon as he landed on it, the

block began spinning wildly – throwing him into the wall of the keep. Tor tried to grab onto the wall, but the crumbling stonework gave way beneath his scrabbling fingers and he crashed heavily to the ground below. He felt at least two of his ribs break.

Elestra, driven to desperation by the chaos of the situation, suddenly called out to the Spirit of the City – begging it for aid. And the prayer was answered: She felt her body transforming. For a moment she was frightened, but then – as she found herself flying with the wings of a raven – it seemed the most perfectly natural thing in the world. She gently lifted Ranthir’s familiar, Erin, from his shoulder and flew her to safety on the ground below.

By now, however, the stone was hovering twenty feet above the opening they were trying to escape from... waiting for them.

Ranthir, gulping deeply, decided that there was nothing they could do except risk it. He began climbing down the side of the building. At first it seemed as if he might make it... but then it became clear that the spirit had simply been toying with him: The stone fell again. Ranthir let go of the wall, but then felt as if he were being grabbed by unseen hands. These unseen hands hurled him towards the ground, sending him crashing heavily into the sharp, wooden debris. The breath was smashed from his body... and then blackness claimed him as the stone smashed down on top of him.

Agnarr darted forward and snapped the iron collar from Ghul’s Labyrinth onto Ranthir’s body, hoping to trap his soul on the border between life and death until they could figure out some way to get him out from under the stone block... but then, once again, the block began to rise into the air.

Tee, meanwhile, was climbing horizontally along the wall – trying to avoid the stone block. She managed to get almost twenty feet down the wall before another crenellation was “shoved” from the roof. Tee leapt to one side to avoid it, then lost her grip on the crumbling masonry of the wall and fell. She tried to roll with it, but like Ranthir she could feel spectral hands propelling her relentlessly towards the ground.

Agnarr, standing next to Ranthir, looked up just in time to see the second stone block coming towards him – he caught it and, grunting with effort, heaved it to one side.

Tor and Agnarr managed to pull Ranthir free from the wreckage, and then – with Tee and Dominic – hobbled towards the outer wall of the estate. Dominic managed to restore the breath to Ranthir’s body as they went, and they clambered over the outer wall.

The farther they got from the house, the weaker the malevolent spirit hanging over them seemed.

THE TEMPLE OF ITOR

They slowly made their way back towards the Ghostly Minstrel. As they were leaving Oldtown, they were suddenly struck by a downpour – an autumn squall out of the north, blowing out of the lee of the Spire.

As the others turned into Delves’ Square, Tee and Dominic excused themselves and continued north into the Temple District. They were seeking the Temple of Itor: Tee thought it might be good for Dominic to speak with Urlenius, the Star of Itor. Perhaps another living saint might have some advice for him.

Unfortunately, although the priests there welcomed them inside out of the cold rain, Urlenius wasn’t there. Frustrated, Tee and Dominic headed back towards the Ghostly Minstrel to join the others.

SERVANT OF THE SURGEON

The others, entering the Minstrel, glanced into the common room and noticed Urlenius sitting at a table – his familiar halo of *ioun stones* floating around his head.

Tellith greeted them with a smile and a wave. “Is Mistress Tee with you? There’s a letter for her. No? All right.” Then she came a little closer and spoke quietly. “There’s someone waiting for you. On the second floor in the room at the head of the stairs. I put him in there because he was disturbing the other customer. Well, unsettling them anyway.”

“Who is it?” Agnarr asked, but Tellith just shook her head.

They looked at each other, and then Agnarr just shrugged and began heading up the stairs.

Their intention was to go to their rooms first and change out of their rain-drenched and bloodied clothes, but as they reached the second floor the door of the room directly across the hall

swung open and a strange man stepped out. He was short and squat, but their gaze was immediately drawn to his face where his eyes were covered (or replaced?) with large metal spheres set into the sockets. His ears, too, were covered with boxy metallic contraptions. Small antennas protruded from these devices in various directions.



“You are the companions of Mistress Tithenmamiwen?” The man’s voice was strangely metallic and unnatural. “My name is Ribok. I have... business... with you.”

The man backed into the room and they warily followed him.

“I represent the... Surgeon in the Shadows... It has come to his attention that you have... recently acquired certain items. Certain technology of the... taint. Is this true?”

“Yes,” Elestra said.

“Why?” Tor asked.

“The Surgeon would be interested in... acquiring such items. He would pay you well. He would pay... better than others would.”

“We don’t have them,” Tor said.

“Would Mistress Tithenmamiwen have them?”

“Perhaps,” Tor said. “In any case, we would need to talk to her before making any kind of decision.”

“I see.”

“How can we contact you?”

“I will... wait.”

They backed carefully out of the room and headed upstairs.

THE STAR OF ITOR

Tee and Dominic returned to the Ghostly Minstrel. Tee received her letter from Tellith, but immediately pocketed it because she had spotted Urlenius in the common room. He had a massive feast laid out on the table before him.

Tee herded Dominic over to him. “Urlenius? I don’t know if you’ll remember us—“

“Of course I remember you,” Urlenius said. “Mistress Tee and Brother Dominic! ...chicken leg?” He proffered a roasted drumstick.

“No, thank you.” Tee smiled. “I was hoping you might be willing to talk to Dominic. You see, a few days ago...” She quickly spilled out the entire story of how they had gone to Rehobath; how he had identified Dominic as the Chosen of Vehthyl. “And he’s called a convocation tomorrow.”

“I’m not sure what to do,” Dominic said.

Urlenius had become serious, his food forgotten. “Rehobath believes you to be the Chosen of Vehthyl?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true?”

Dominic hesitated. Then he murmured a prayer to the God of Mysteries, and opened his eyes to reveal the silver glow. He only allowed them to shine for a moment before willing it away again.

Urlenius’ lips had parted. “It is true.”

Tee hesitantly interrupted. “Can Rehobath be trusted?”

“I don’t know,” Urlenius said. “I do not trust the Imperial Church, but that doesn’t mean I don’t trust those who are part of it.”

“Why don’t you trust the Church?”

“When I was younger, I was a monster. Bestial like much of my kind. The Brotherhood of Redemption found me and took me in. They taught me the ways of civilization. They gave to me the teachings of the Nine Gods. But the Church condemns the Brotherhood and its works. They have even condemned me upon occasion. It is hard to trust that which does not trust you.”

At the moment, Tellith came over and whispered in Tee’s ear. She wanted to know if Tee could take the time to deal with Ribok. Tee, not entirely sure of what was going on – but gathering that the others were already involved – agreed. She excused herself.

Dominic stayed. “How were you Chosen?”

“I received a vision in which I spoke to the god Itor himself. He told me that there was a path before me and that, if I chose to follow it, great good would come of it.”

“He actually speaks to you?”

“No. I have never been visited in that way again. Except once, and I will not speak of that. Being one of the Chosen means that your entire life is an expression of the will of the gods.”

“That didn’t happen for me. At least... I don’t think so...” Dominic paused for a moment, and then candidly told Urlenius of his memory loss. And of the few memories he did have – including one of waking with the holy symbol of Vehthyl clutched in his hand.

“Most strange,” Urlenius said. “Perhaps you should speak with the Malkuth.”

“Who?”

“The Malkuth. They claim to have stood before the Nine Gods themselves and returned. You met one of them – Aoska – at Castle Shard.”

“And what do you think I should do about Rehobath?”

“If you have been Chosen, then you should follow your own instincts. They will guide you true. And he is, after all, a member of your own Church.” Urlenius smiled, gesturing at Dominic’s shoulder. Then he held out his other hand. “Chicken leg?”

“Yes, please!” Dominic grinned.

TURNING THE SURGEON AWAY

Tee headed upstairs and spoke with the others. They explained the situation. Then she headed back down to the second floor. As she reached up to knock on the door, it opened.

“Welcome... Mistress Tithenmamiwen.”

“You know who I am?”

Ribok looked up into the air for a moment. “Yes... of course. It has come to our attention that you have...”

certain items in your possession. Chaositech. The Surgeon would like... to purchase them.”

“I don’t have them any more.”

“But you could obtain them?”

“I doubt it.”

Ribok looked into the distance again, then back to Tee. “The Surgeon would... pay well... for nothing more than the location in which such items were... found.”

“We’ll think about it.”

“I cannot... persuade you?”

“Not for now. Where can I contact you?”

“We will... contact you.”

Ribok walked past her, down the stairs, and out of the Ghostly Minstrel.

“Creepy...” Tee muttered under her breath.

AT THE COMMISSAR’S REQUEST

Tee suddenly remembered that the items she had requested from the Dreaming Apothecary might have arrived. With a wide grin, she took the stairs two at a time and threw open the door to her room.

... but, sadly, the items had not been delivered.

Standing in her room, however, she remembered the letter that Tellith had given her. She pulled it out and broke the seal.

Mistress Tithenmamiwen—

I would like to speak with you. Please come to the Dalenguard at once.

Commissar Urnst

“Oh shit...” Tee quickly jammed the letter back into her pocket and ran out of the Ghostly Minstrel, hailing the first cab she saw and commanding it to use all haste in taking her to the Dalenguard.

At the Dalenguard’s gate, she showed the Commissar’s letter to the guards on duty. From there she was led up onto the battlements of the Main Keep.

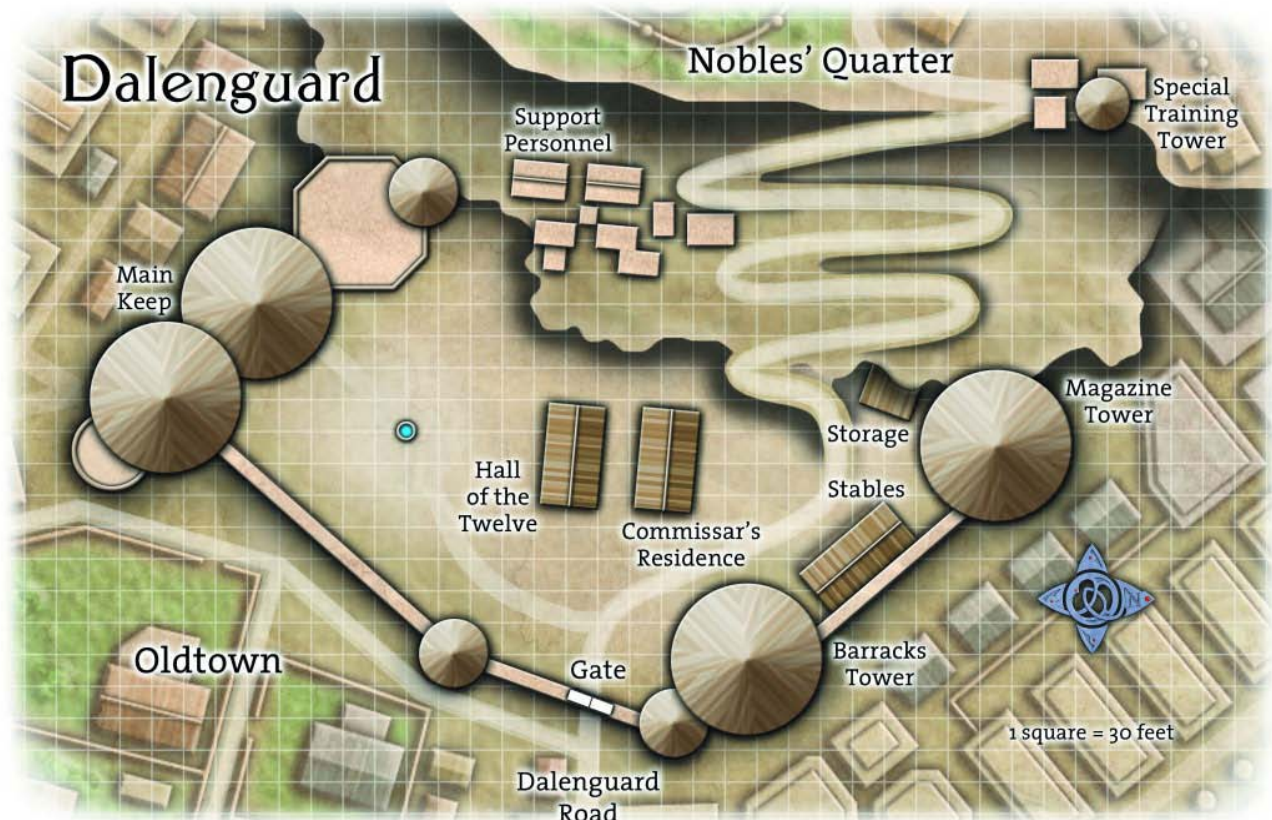
The rain had eased itself into a gentle drizzle, but the sky was still filled with a cold, grey light. The Commissar stood by himself, inspecting more than a dozen cannons.

The guard leading Tee stopped a fair distance away. The Commissar looked up and waved her towards him. She stepped gingerly forward, leaving the guard behind.

“Mistress Tee?”

“Yes, Commissar.”

“I have heard your name many times over the past few weeks.” The Commissar paused and studied her face. Tee couldn’t think of anything to say, so she didn’t. “Leytha Doraedian has told me that the Silver Fatar



believes your friend Dominic to be a living saint. Is it true?"

"I think so," Tee said. "He has the signs."

"I see." The Commissar frowned slightly. "And is it also true that Rehobath has summoned a convocation on the morrow? And that he intends to present Dominic there?"

"Yes." Tee said. "Do you think we can trust him?"

"I don't know," the Commissar said. "But the last time there was an unexpected gathering in this city, I was nearly assassinated." He paused for a moment, then turned and laid one hand on the cannon he was standing next to. "Do you see these cannons, Tee?" She nodded. "They are known as the Commissar's Guns. They are powerful weapons. They were made to protect this city.

Just as I have been chosen to protect this city. From the walls of the Dalanguard they can be fired to the south. And to the north. And to the west. But they cannot be fired to the east. Do you know why?"

Tee looked to the east and, through the silvery gloom of the rain, the answer was clear. "Because of the Spire."

"Yes. Because of the Spire. The greatest enigma. The utter unknown." The Commissar turned back and looked at her. "These cannons cannot protect the city from any danger which comes

from the unknown. Neither can I. I don't know what Rehobath intends. And I can't protect the city against what I don't know."

Tee again found herself at a loss for words.

The Commissar turned back to his cannons. "Thank you, Mistress Tee. I have no doubt that I shall be seeing you again soon enough."

OF PRELATES...

(09/10/790)

The next morning, with doubt still hanging over them, they left the Ghostly Minstrel and headed towards the Outer Cathedral of Athor.

As they approached the cathedral, it was impossible to miss the distinctive navy blue uniforms of the Commissar's Guard surrounding the cathedral at a respectful – but not discreet – distance. They stood all along Sunrise Street and Godsdays Circle.

A crowd had already begun to gather on the grassy avenue between the two artificial ponds leading up to the cathedral. A temporary stage had been erected in front of the cathedral, extending out from its ancient stone steps. Several rows of seating were arranged directly in front

of the stage, with the rest of the crowd arrayed behind them.

The party was met by several priests. Dominic was taken inside the cathedral while the others were shown to seats in the second row. Tee, looking around, could see that here on the cathedral's grounds the Commissar's men were absent – but there were several dozen members of the Order of the Dawn standing guard here and there. Elestra spotted Sir Kabel Dathim, the head of the order, sitting in the front row.

Dominic, meanwhile, was being taken up to Rehobath's office. Rehobath greeted him as he arrived with a friendly smile, although Dominic couldn't help but notice that he met him on the far side of the room away from the desk of godwood. "Dominic! Thank you again. You have given me a clarity of vision and set a path before us which shall see the Church restored to its proper glory."

"Oh... You're... welcome?"

Rehobath gestured to one of the many priests circling around him. The priest brought forth a finely carved box of darkly-stained wood. "This for you."

Dominic opened the box... revealing the purple robes of a prelate.

"Umm... These are above my rank."

"Not any more." Rehobath smiled. "One who has been chosen by the gods can't be merely a priest."

Two of the priests helped Dominic put on the purple robes. Rehobath stepped forward and fixed the symbols of his rank – those of the prelate and the itinerant – on his shoulder.

... AND NOVARCHS

Rehobath led them down to the sacred hall of the cathedral. A procession had gathered there, and Rehobath took his place at the head of it, with Dominic immediately behind him and at his right hand.

Rehobath mounted the stage, along with Dominic and several other prelates. Rehobath raised his arms and the crowd fell silent.

We live in a time of darkness and pain. We live in a time of trouble and despair. We look towards the gods and we wonder when they shall give us the hope of salvation to guide us and light our way.

But the gods have been silent. They have been silent because we have lost our way. And turned our backs upon them. And cast our eyes into shadow.

I come to speak to you today because the Church has lost its way. In its failures we see



manifest the fracturing of our faith. We see the loss of our pride and our hope.

Tee began shifting uneasily, her thoughts casting back to the words of the Commissar the night before. Where was Rehobath going with all of this?

And how has the Church come to lose its way? Not through its own actions – blessed by the gods as they are – but by the meddling of others. A meddling that we have seen before. A meddling that was denounced by the Holy Blood of Barund. Denounced by the councils! Denounced by the Nine Gods themselves!

It is the meddling of the false Emperor. And now it is the meddling of the False Novarch that the False Emperor has raised up in idolatry. I was there in the Council of Councils and I saw these heresies performed. I saw the Nine Gods forgotten in the holiest of all places!

“What?” Elestra murmured, her face turning white. Tor glanced over and saw Sir Kabel glowering, clearly unhappy with what he was hearing.

I have prayed long to the Nine Gods. I have pleaded with them to reveal the path by which I could restore the true light of the Church.

And, at long last, they have answered my prayers. They have sent to me a sign. The chosen of Vehthyl – a living saint – walks among us. He has come to me and he has told me that the time has come to act.

Rehobath turned to Dominic and held out his arm. Dominic, with nervous steps, edged forwards. At Rehobath’s inviting nod, he murmured his prayer to Vehthyl... and his eyes shined forth.

The crowd gasped. Rehobath whirled.

The Nine Gods have answered my prayers. They have named me their Living Voice. They have chosen me as the True Novarch and told me to stand against the False Novarch of the Emperor.

Today is the day we take back our Church and our Faith! If you hold the Nine Gods true in

your heart, then raise your voice with me in their praise!

“Oh gods...” Tee began edging her way towards the edge of the crowd, worrying that things might turn to riot. But the crowd was cheering. The priests nearest them had also risen to their feet, although they maintained a slightly greater decorum.

The doors of the cathedral opened again. The holy symbols of the nine gods – each crafted from glowing godwood – were brought forth. As they passed Dominic, each symbol pulsed with scintillating brilliance, prompting a fresh cheer from the crowd.

The symbols were placed in a circle around Rehobath, who kneeled in the center of them and lowered his head in prayer. After a few moments he raised his face to heaven.

Liquid light in a diamond flask was brought forth. The glowing liquid was poured across Rehobath’s brow, bathing him in its light as it coursed down over his shoulders.

A circlet of elfin gold was produced and placed upon Rehobath’s brow. As it settled into place, the liquid light flowed back up across his body, becoming concentrated in a great glowing bauble that shone forth from his forehead.

Priests bearing the red robes of the novarch emerged from the cathedral. Rehobath rose and the robes were wrapped around him, covering the silver robes of the fatar.

Rehobath turned and led the procession as it returned to the cathedral.

Dominic, following in his wake, was filled with sadness. This had all been a mistake. He had sought aid from the Church when his village had been lost. He had sought help from Reformist and Church alike here in Ptolus. He had gotten none. All of them it seemed wanted nothing more than to use him for their own gain or send him away as a madman. Rehobath couldn’t help him. Or, at the very least, Dominic couldn’t trust him. He was confused by the betrayal of his Church. He was worried that he had failed his friends and placed them in danger.

But perhaps he didn’t need a Church. He communed with the Divine in his own way every day. He would find the answers on his own. He would find the strength of his own resolve in this. And when he needed help, he would rely on the strength and trust of his friends.

The great doors of the cathedral swung shut behind him. The sacred hall seemed to fall into darkness.

SESSION 22 – RETURN TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

May 18th, 2008

The 10th Day of Kadal in the 790th Year of the Seyrunian Dynasty

Dominic was led inside the cathedral. Tee, seeing him go, quickly followed. Agnarr, Ranthir, and Tor came too. The Order of the Dawn moved to block them at the cathedral's door. Tee called out to Dominic, but Dominic – nursing his distracted thoughts and worries – didn't hear her. Fortunately, Tee's efforts were enough to convince the guard that they could enter.

They caught up to Dominic just as Rehobath's procession came to a stop in the sacred hall. The newly-anointed Novarch turned to Dominic and smiled, "Thank you, Dominic. Without your guidance this day would not have been possible. Now I feel as if our paths must part, at least for awhile. We must each work for the gods in our own ways, after all."

This suited Dominic just fine, who had just been trying to figure out how he could get away from Rehobath and his politics without letting him know how he truly felt.

"Now," Rehobath said. "Is there anything else I can do for you... for any of you?" His gaze took in Tee and the others.

Dominic seemed ready to get out of there, but Tee wasn't satisfied yet. "Do you think Dominic will be safe?"

"Two members of the Order of the Dawn are already waiting at the Ghostly Minstrel, as you had requested." Rehobath smiled. "Do you think more guards might be needed?"

"No," Tee said, glancing towards Dominic. "That should be fine."

They headed back outside. Dominic leaned towards Tee. "I need to get out of these robes," he said. "I don't feel right in them."

"You can borrow one of my kilts," Agnarr offered.

Dominic caught a whiff of Agnarr's unique odor as he leaned in close. "Um..." He shook his head. "No thanks."

They met up with Elestra, who had spent her time outside circulating through the crowd. "Everyone here seems pretty excited by this. They're all talking about the dawn of a new age. But I've also heard quite a few of them talking about how they knew to be here. I think the crowd was hand-picked."

"Doesn't surprise me," Tee said. "Come on, lets get out of here."

When they had gotten some distance away from the cathedral, Dominic stopped and pulled off the purple

prelate robes that Rehobath had given to him. He turned to the others. "Does anybody else want to go delving for a couple of weeks?"

DORAEDIAN'S COUNSEL

While everyone else headed back to the Ghostly Minstrel, Tee peeled off and headed up to Emerald Hill – she needed to see Doraedian.

"Tee!" Doraedian smiled, looking up from the sea of parchment spread across his desk. "Your lessons in the Dreaming Arts aren't until tomorrow."

"Rehobath has just declared himself the True Novarch of the Imperial Church and denounced the Emperor of Seyrun."

All traces of mirth fell from Doraedian's face. "We weren't expecting that."

"Neither were we."

"And where's Dominic?"

"Back at the Ghostly Minstrel. Rehobath has cut him loose now that he doesn't need him."

"I see."

"The Commissar warned me that something like this might happen. I should have listened."

"Did he?" Doraedian raised an eyebrow.

"He talked about what Helmut and the Republicans did. Do we think Rehobath will turn against the city? I don't want Dominic getting caught in the middle of something like that."

"No. Rehobath's quarry lies beyond the walls of Ptolus. He won't start a quarrel. But I don't think the Commissar will simply stand aside and let him do what he wants, either. And if that happens, Rehobath will resist."

"Rehobath has put two guards at the Ghostly Minstrel. That's partly my fault – I wanted Dominic protected. But now I'm worried that Rehobath will use them to spy on Dominic. On all of us."

"He almost certainly will. But he'll be keeping an eye on Dominic in any case. At least this way you know who his spies are." Doraedian pushed back from his desk and stood. "I need to be going. The Commissar will be summoning the Twelve Commanders, and I must give Lothao instructions. I may even accompany him. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course." Tee smiled.

LET'S GO DELVING

On her way back to the Ghostly Minstrel – her adrenaline rush wearing off – Tee began to feel very ill. Pulling back the leg of her breeches, she found that the rat bites she had suffered in Pythoness House the day before had become red and swollen. Pus was dripping down her leg.

She turned aside and headed to the Temple of Asche. After a few minutes of prayer, the gods alleviated her suffering. By the time she got back to the Ghostly Minstrel, she was still feeling a little dizzy and disoriented, but had largely recovered.

She found the others gathered in Elestra's room, discussing their plans.

Returning to Ghul's Labyrinth was seriously considered: It would allow them to deal with the tainted dragon rifles they had taken from the Shuul, and they could also finish their explorations there. Tee also argued that Ghul's Labyrinth had proven to be rich with treasure, and if they were going to cleanse her of the taint that had touched her soul they were going to need the gold.

But, in the end, they decided to return to Pythoness House. If Shim was right, then the key would be there. And although they had no idea what the key might be or what purpose it might serve, it was the only tangible path that might lead them back to their lost memories.

RETURN TO PYTHONESS HOUSE

“COME TO ME...”

As Tor, coming up in the rear of the party, entered the courtyard at Pythoness House, the deep, booming voice echoed around them – seeming to emerge from the countless, empty windows that looked down upon them.

They made their way up into the gatehouse towers. From there they jumped down onto the upper terrace and made their way down into the ruined garden that Tee had spotted earlier. According to Maquent's journal, one of the brothel girls – Thabitha – had lost the key to the square tower while she was in the garden. They suspected that Radanna had hidden her half of the “spiral contrivance” in the square tower, and they hoped they would be able to find the key Thabitha had lost.

On the way, they passed by the strange face Tee had seen carved into the outer wall of the terrace. She had thought its eye to be a gemstone, but now that she was closer to it she could clearly see that it was simply a bit of red paint that had not yet been flecked away by rain or wind. Nonetheless, the laughing face seemed queerly malevolent.

The garden was a display of life and death: In places, the plants had overgrown their boxes and pots – splitting them and spilling dirt and greenery everywhere. Elsewhere brown swaths spoke of those which had failed to endure the passing winters without care.

Tee began poking around, but if the brothel sisters hadn't found a key lost here years ago, she didn't think she would have much luck with it. But then she happened to glance over the parapet on the northern side of the garden – a forty foot shaft of sorts had been formed between the wall of the house itself and the wall of the gatehouse.

“If she dropped it down there...”

Tee quickly called the others over and pulled out her rope.

“What if the rope breaks again?” Elestra asked.

“We'll just have to risk it,” Tee said, handing one end of the rope off to Tor.

Tee had climbed down about ten feet when the booming voice returned: “I MUST FEED...”

Tor, distracted by the voice, jerked his head up. As a result, he missed seeing the rope fraying in front of his hands. With a sudden snap, the rope broke. Tee, feeling the rope go slack, attempted to push off the wall and control her fall... but she slipped on the slick, moss-covered stones. She tried to roll in mid-air, but only succeeded in cracking her skull against the far wall.

She landed heavily on her shoulder. Fortunately, her fall had been cushioned by a thick layer of dead leaves and detritus. She felt blood trickling down her forehead.

“CHAOS IS THE KEY...”

“Are you all right, Tee?!” Everyone up above was peering over the edge.

“I'm fine,” Tee struggled to her feet. Probing gently at her aching shoulder she mournfully remembered the *boots of levitation* she was still carrying in her *bag of holding*. “Give me a couple minutes.”

Tee started poking around in the dead leaves. Less than a minute later, she was triumphantly grasping a rusty iron key in her hand: “I've got it!”

RADANNA

Tee had no problem using the *boots of levitation* to lift herself back up to the others in the ruined garden. Key in hand, they began studying the journal again and discussing different possibilities.

They figured they had to find some way into the square tower. From what Maquent had said in her journal, it seemed as if the secret, locked entrance to that room would be located somewhere up high – maybe a ceiling or on the outer surface of the tower itself.

“And that'll get us half of the spiral key or whatever it is,” Elestra said. “But what about the other half?”

“The journal says that Maquent gave it to the ‘Cobbledman’,” Ranthir said.

“But who is that?”

“I think it might have been the guy I tried to shoot yesterday,” Tee said. “I probably shouldn't have done that.”

“FIRE!”

Arrows suddenly fell among them. One of them clipped Elestra's shoulder. All of them were suddenly in motion – diving for cover in different directions.

Somehow six skeletal women – most clad in the tattered remnants of their brothel fineries – had crept onto the upper terrace and were now firing arrows down into the ruined garden at them.

Tee, sliding in behind the limited cover of the parapet, pulled out her dragon pistol and began to return fire. Her first blast caught one of the skeletons in the chest, turning its emaciated ribcage to dust.

Agnarr and Tor, meanwhile, had drawn their swords and were charging up the stairs. Ranthir, quickly assessing the situation, began weaving his magicks and managed to seize partial control over the mind of one of the skeletal warriors – tricking it into believing that its weapons were cursed and “suggesting” that it would be best to hurl them into the courtyard below.

Elestra, following Tee's lead, sought cover behind the parapet and pulled out her dragon rifle. The two of them laid down a barrage of energy blasts, but the skeletal women were implacable. Ranthir ducked out of sight as another arrow came too close for comfort.

As Tor and Agnarr reached the upper terrace, the two nearest skeletal women dropped their bows and drew short swords. Stripped of their skin, the skeletons moved with preternatural speed – forcing Tor and Agnarr into defensive stances.

One of the skeletal women was wearing chainmail. She had been the one to shout the command to fire, and now she drew out a battleaxe and darted towards Agnarr and Tor. She moved even faster than the others, slipping between their ranks and taking a swing at Agnarr that cut deep into his upper leg.

Agnarr, roaring as he let the pain feed his burning rage, swung mightily. His flaming greatsword cleaved its way through one of the skeletons and nearly caught the chainmail-clad leader before she ducked out of the way.

One of the skeletal women broke and ran, opening a secret door in the side of the keep and racing through. Elestra and Tee shot another as it attempted to turn its bow on Agnarr, while Tor cut down another in midstride.

This left only the chainmail-clad skeleton. She fell back towards the secret door, fighting tooth-and-nail with Agnarr and Tor at every step. She was wily and crafty, ducking this way and that – her ancient bones moving with a lithe and vicious life. “You fools! None can cross the power of chaos and live!”

With the upper terrace cleared of archers, Dominic was free to come out from cover. Following close behind Agnarr and Tor, he reached a begrimed window on the wall near the secret door.

He found himself looking into a large and once-sumptuous bedchamber. Unlike those on the ground floor, however, this room featured only a single large bed. It was surrounded by a wealth of furniture – a

dresser, padded chairs, divans, braziers, and tables. He didn't see any sign of the skeletal woman that had run into the room, but he did see another door to the left and a staircase leading up. He gestured towards the other door.

Tee leapt up from behind the parapet and ran down the short hallway leading to the second door. It was locked. She whipped out her lockpicks and set to work on it. Ranthir came up behind her. “What are you doing Tee? Are you going to pick the lock? Oh, I see!”

Tee groaned silently to herself.

“The power of the Crimson Coil shall never die!” the skeletal leader backed into the room. She raised her battleaxe and brought it crashing down on Tor's chest, but Tor's breastplate turned the blow.

“You're already dead!” Tor roared and pressed his attack.

Meanwhile, Tee – unseen – had gotten the other door open. Seeing the skeletal woman with her back turned to her, she pulled out her dragon pistol and fired. Unfortunately, the skeletal woman chose that moment to dart forward, and the blast splashed uselessly across the back of her chainmail.

The skeletal woman whirled. “No! None shall enter my chambers!” In an utter, unthinking rage she charged across the room at Tee. Tee fell back, firing wildly.

Tor took advantage of the situation and followed at Radanna's heels, plunging his sword down into her skull. It cleaved through the top of her head and lodged there, sending purple arcs of electricity bursting from her eyes.

Dominic followed Tor into the room. His eyes darting around – taking in the holes in the dusty floor where skeletal bodies had lain for years; the blood-stained knife laying upon the floor in the center of a pentagram traced with blood. He drifted towards the large bed tucked into one corner of the room... and spotted the other skeletal woman cowering behind it.

He gestured frantically towards Agnarr. Agnarr, taking his cue, charged across the room and leapt full-bodied over the bed. “FOR THE GLORY!”

The skeletal woman shrank back against the wall. “No! PLEASE!”

Agnarr's sword sliced down through her skull and shattered the bones of what had once been her body. As she crumbled slowly into dust, her final whisper drifted into his ears: “Thank you... I am free...”

Agnarr grunted and sheathed his sword. “You're welcome.”

Meanwhile, the skeletal leader – in a frenzied flurry of blades – had been cut down by Tor and Tee. Tee, inspecting the body, discovered the chain armor was of superb quality. The woman had also worn a ruby ring and matching gold bracelet worth a small fortune. On the interior of the bracelet was inscribed a name:

RADANNA

Laying near the gruesome remains of whatever deadly ritual had been held here there was a slim, red book. On the cover, traced in blood, was the symbol of a spiral. Ranthir began examining it as Tee continued searching the room.

THE SCARLET OATH



On the cover of this book, written in blood, is the symbol of a coil. On the first page is an oath:

“I pledge my body, soul, and purpose to the furtherance of chaos. We shall act as one. We shall breathe as one. We shall think as one. And in our crimson coils we shall choke out the life of those who would bring us death. We shall choke out the order which stifles life. We shall choke out the civilization which crushes liberty.”

The rest of the book teaches the ways of the Brotherhood of the Crimson Coil. The cult acts like a virus – their faces hidden; their identities submerged into the Coil itself. The members of the cult do not mix in normal society, preferring to remain cloistered in remote temples or hidden demesnes. The only time the cultists make an appearance is to carry out a Purging. During a Purging the cultists appear *en masse* to carry out some act of terrible destruction.

The cult chooses a target, seemingly at random, and then show up to burn down a building; set fire to a field; slaughter a family; or deface a monument. They are neither subtle nor gentle. They show neither mercy nor fear. Usually, their raids come so suddenly and unexpectedly that they meet little resistance. They usually appear in numbers so great, they simply cannot be stopped—a hundred cultists to burn down a single house, a dozen to murder a merchant walking down the street. They disappear quickly, often using spells to cover their escape.

THE FIFTH FLOOR

While Tee and Ranthir studied the book, Tor shuffled through the cluttered effluvium lying out on one of the tables in the room. There were several bottles of perfume here, still stored in crystal vials. They brought a smile to Tor’s face, reminding him of the faces of his family. He pocketed two of the vials, thinking that he might send them back home as presents for his daughters.

There was nothing else of true value left in the room: Moldering silks and other expensive clothes lay in ruins. However, in one of the wardrobes Tee did find a single red robe decorated with the same spiral symbol as the book’s cover. This robe, unlike the other clothing, seemed to have been perfectly preserved.

Lying on the floor behind one of the divans, Tee found a portrait in a broken frame. Although badly dilapidated, they could still make out a young man with lanky brown hair. His features seemed queerly unsymmetric. A small brass plaque on the frame read:

WUNTAD

They went up the stairs, emerging into a large empty room on the fifth floor. Another staircase on the far side of the room headed up towards the sixth floor, but they turned towards the room’s single door instead. This opened into a small hallway that ended, off to their right, in the ruined remains of a small balcony (which they had previously seen from below while trying to climb out of the castle).

They crossed the hall, opened another door, and looked into a small, oddly shaped room. Four piles of bones had been neatly arranged in random locations on the floor. There were also some old wooden bookcases along one wall.

Ranthir, hearing the word “bookcases”, started forward – but Tee waved him back: There were no books left on these shelves. Instead, three human skulls marked with the spiral symbol of the Crimson Coil sat next to a small iron coffer.

Tee pondered the situation for a moment and then decided not to take any chances. Drawing her dragon pistol, she fired directly into the nearest pile of bones. The pile exploded to no effect.

Shrugging, Tee holstered her dragon pistol and headed over to the bookcases. Grabbing the iron coffer she quickly picked its lock and flipped it open, revealing five vials set into padded lining. Four of the vials contained a black liquid, while the liquid in the fourth was a silvery-gold in color.

While the others remained behind, Tee and Agnarr headed through into the next room – an empty, circular chamber with an open archway leading out onto a balcony filled with dirt and dead leaves.

Tee took the time to move out onto the balcony and look down into the ruined garden below. Turning back, her eye happened to catch a runestone that hung from the wall. Her familiarity with the archaic elven tongues allowed her to recognize it as the rune for “blessed protection”, although it had been badly damaged. Smiling, she reached up to take the rune down off the wall.

As her fingertips brushed against the runestone, however, she felt her mind being invaded by strange, alien thoughts. A horrible compulsion seized her to race for the edge of the roof and hurl herself down to oblivion.

Her right foot twitched, as if to turn her towards the edge... but then her own thoughts imposed themselves again. She gritted her teeth and forced her foot back to the ground. Pulling her hand back from the runestone, she felt the compulsion fading from her completely. She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

But even as Tee was fighting to control her own body, Agnarr caught a sudden movement in the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw one of the skulls from the bookcase floating across the doorway towards one of the bone piles. With lightning reflexes, he hurled himself back into the room, drew his sword, and neatly cleaved the skull in two.

Elestra, her attention drawn by Agnar’s sudden movement, stepped into the room from the opposite direction with her dragon rifle drawn. Seeing the two remaining skulls on the shelves begin to move, she quickly took aim on the one to the right and blew a hole straight through its eye socket.

With one great stride, Agnarr reached the bookcase and brought his sword down on the other, shattering it into countless shards of bone.

Tee came back into the room. “What’s going on?”

Agnarr turned to her. “Nothing now.”

THE SIXTH FLOOR

They rejoined the others. Concluding that there was nothing else of interest on the fifth floor, Tee and Agnarr took the stairs up to the sixth floor. These stairs reached what appeared to be the base chamber of the keep’s central tower. However, the way up to the next level of this tower had apparently been bricked over years ago. However, there was a door off to one side and an open archway led to the bridge between this central tower and the eastern tower.

The door was locked, so Tee knelt next to it and got to work. Agnarr, standing nearby, decided to start oiling the hinges. Tee, remembering the last time Agnarr had decided some hinges needed oiling, began grinding her teeth, but managed to ignore him... mostly.

Tee finished up, hearing the satisfying sound of a tumbler clicking open. Standing up she reached for the

handle. But Agnarr, wanting to test his handiwork, pushed past her and twisted the handle himself.

There was a click and a hiss—And Tee hurled herself out of the room as the entire chamber was engulfed in a massive explosion that blew out onto the balcony and followed her into the lower chamber where the others were still waiting.

Agnarr – on fire and screaming in pain – rushed down the stairs a moment later. They managed to quickly smother out the flames and Dominic channeled a burst of divine energy into his body to undo the horrible burns. Agnarr gasped with the sudden relief of it.

“Well, at least it was me instead of Tee who took the worst of it,” Agnarr said. “It’s a good thing that I was the one to open that door.” Then a thoughtful look entered his eyes. “Wait... is *that* why you always have me open the doors first?”

Everybody looked at each other. “We thought you knew!” Elestra said.

Agnarr, in a surly temper, headed back up the stairs. “Well, at least the door’s safe now.”

It took Tee a moment to realize what he was doing. “Agnarr! No!”

Twist. Click. Hiss.

Agnarr came hurtling out of the doorway and tumbled down the staircase an instant before a nearly identical explosion was unleashed. “I knew that click. I knew that hiss!”

Tee, shaking her head, headed back up and took another look at the door. After several minutes of work she was feeling fairly confident that she had disabled the trigger for the magical explosion.

... but she was wrong. And this time she took the brunt of the blast, collapsing with her lungs blackened and burnt by the scorched air. Dominic was forced to expend even more of the gods’ power to get her back on her feet. Then, out of pure stubbornness, she went back to work.

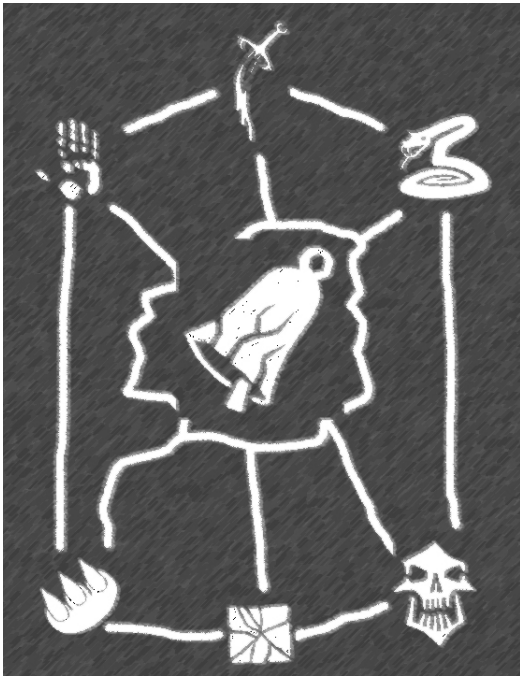
This time she was successful. With a grim satisfaction, she swung the door open.

WORKINGS OF THE CHAOS CULTS

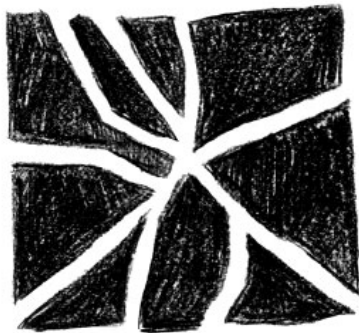
The walls, floor, and ceiling of the room were covered in a haphazard array of magical circles, symbols, and strange characters. The sight was almost dizzying. After little more than a glance, Tee called out for Ranthir to join her.

Ranthir quickly identified the symbols as belonging to a variety of rites, although none were immediately known to him. He did note that many of them bore a more than superficial resemblance to the rites performed by the Seyrunian demon-binding cults of the previous century. And others seemed to have something to do with the creation and binding of energy. Some simply seemed to be mad scribbles to which Ranthir could not ascribe

any immediate sense. One particular section of the wall had been completely covered in charcoal, and then written upon in chalk:



Tee, meanwhile, had discovered that one of the wood panels on the floor was loose. Prying it up revealed a small cache containing two books and a gold ring bearing the device of a broken square:



Ranthir was immediately distracted by the books. Eagerly taking them from Tee's hands he began flipping through them.

TRUTH OF THE HIDDEN GOD



What appears, at first, to be a copy of the *Book of Athor* is nothing of the sort: The pages inside are covered with scrawled diagrams and heretical desecrations of the Nine Gods.

A closer reading reveals this to be a cult manual for the "Brotherhood of the Blooded Knife". The cult venerates chaos in all its forms, focusing their blasphemous rituals around the practice of human sacrifice. These sacrifices are given to a Galchutt named Abthoth, who they venerate as the "Source of All Filth" and the "Lord of the Zaug".

Disturbingly, much of the book is given over to material designed to mock the holy rituals of the Church. It appears that the cult establishes itself secretly in society by posing as other religious orders. Actual followers of the deity may choose to join them, usually to their dismay – either they come to join the cult itself or they die beneath the cult's "blooded knife".

In other cases, a few cultists will infiltrate another religion and use force, blackmail, magic, or simple persuasion to sway its members into secretly worshipping chaos. This process can take years, but eventually the cult eats the other religion from the inside out, consuming it until the temple is entirely a front for the altars of the Brotherhood hidden in their subterranean complexes.

The last few pages of the book appear to be a prophetic rambling of sorts, beginning with the words: "In the days before the Night of Dissolution shall come, our pretenses shall drop like rotted flies. In those days the Church shall be broken, and we shall call our true god by an open name." The remainder of this section is a description of the faux religious practices for a fanciful "Rat God", with the apparent intention being that a church could be openly established for this "god". Eventually, the prophecies, say even this "last pretense" will be abolished and "Abthoth shall be worshipped by all who are not blooded by the knife".

TOUCH OF THE EBON HAND



The pages of this volume are filled with disturbing and highly detailed diagrams of the most horrible physical deformities and mutations. A closer reading quickly reveals that these deformities – referred to as “the touch of the ebon hand” – are venerated by the writers as the living personification of chaos incarnate. Particularly prized are those functional mutations – an extra eye or oversized arms, for example.

The rest of the book describes horrid rites which make it clear that the Brotherhood of the Ebon Hand not only idolizes deformity and mutation, but seek to inflict it and spread it as well: Ritual scarring. Magical alteration. Alchemical experimentation. Chaositech-induced mutation.

Members of the cult have no distinctive garb, but they usually bear the symbol of a black hand in some form: A tattoo. A charm. A small embroidery on their clothes. Or so forth. Of course, most of them are also marked by their mutations.

THE COBBLED MAN

As Tee continued searching, Elestra also came into the room. Looking over Ranthir’s shoulder she pointed at the charcoal wall: “We’ve seen three of these symbols now. The hand, the knife, and the broken square.”

“I wonder what the others could mean.”

“Something to do with the cults, I guess.”

They continued chatting quietly as Tee probed at the walls and the floor.

Dominic, in the tower outside, stood looking in at them. And then pain rushed through his body as a heavy blow landed across the back of his skull.

Stumbling forward he felt a horrible wave of nausea rip through his body. Turning he saw a horrific,

monstrous man: A second head had been awkwardly attached to its shoulder, and the muscles of its arms and legs were grotesquely over-developed. The hair on both of its heads was greasy, lanky, and sparse. The eyes on one of the heads was shut, but the eyes of the other were filled with rage. In its right hand it clenched a silvery rod.

“WHY ARE YOU IN WUNTAD’S ROOM?”

Its voice was a dull boom. Its words sullen.

Tor, reacting almost instantly, rushed up the stairs from below. Emerging into the cramped base of the tower, he was clipped nastily along the side of his head. Like Dominic, he felt a nauseous wave pass over him. Shaking it off, he swung his sword – opening a vicious gash in the creature’s arm.

Ranthir rushed out, as well. “Can’t we just work this out?” But his voice was drowned out in the sudden chaos of the melee.

But then Tee shoved her way past him and her voice carried a greater authority: “Stop it! Wuntad sent us! Stop it now!”

The creature froze, its massive hand hovering to deliver a devastating blow on Tor. “Wuntad sent you?”

“Yes,” Tee lied, putting as much earnestness into her voice as she could. “He sent us.”

“He’s been gone so long. I’ve been alone for so long...” The dimwitted voice was filled with painful sorrow.

Tee softened. “Are you the Cobbledman?”

“... someone called me that. Once. They left too. A long time ago.” The Cobbledman clutched absently at the rags on his chest. “They left me all alone... Do you have any food?”

Ranthir fumbled at one of his pouches and then held out an iron ration. “Why didn’t you leave?”

“Can’t leave.”

“Why can’t you leave?”

“Wuntad put something in my brain. Make me loyal. Make it hurt to leave. Can’t leave until Wuntad say I can leave.”

Ranthir had a sickly certainty that this was a betrayal of the flesh. He could see telltale lumps beneath the Cobbledman’s skin – tubes and... other things.

“What happened to Wuntad?” Tee asked.

“Don’t know. The angry men in the metal suits came. There was lots of angry noise. I hid in my tower. And then everyone left... You’ll leave me, too, won’t you?”

No one had an answer for that.

“Cobbledman,” Tee said carefully. “Do you have a piece of metal that looks like a spiral?”

A look of something very like panic entered the Cobbledman’s eyes. “Yes.”

“Could we have it?”

“No! No! My friend gave it to me! I have to keep it safe! She said so!” His hand groped against the rags on his chest, clutching something beneath them.

“I understand,” Tee said gently. “But if we promised to bring it back, do you think we could borrow it? You could even come with us.”

“Maybe...” The Cobbledman seemed to be losing focus. “Do you have any more food?”

Ranthir gave him some more and the Cobbledman chewed it absentmindedly. “I’m going to go to sleep now. So very hungry...”

He began shambling back across the bridge and disappeared into this tower. They watched him go, sadness and pity filling their hearts.

“Well,” Tee said. “At least we know where one part of the spiral key is. Now we just need to find out where Radanna hid hers.”