



# **The Doom of Evermoor**

## Book One: Heroes Arise

### INTRODUCTION

The ideas for this humble book were given birth as characters in the old-fashioned role-playing game, Dungeons & Dragons. My wife, Elise, role-played the valiant Torga, the faithful Windsong and the lovable brute, Ovak. Our nine-year old son Dylan, practically *became* the wily kobold. The author played the stalwart Rock and the enigmatic wizard, Dhalin Yaro.

In the game, characters and monsters take turns attacking each other and, for better or worse, I have attempted to retain some degree of the turn-based feel of the game in this book. As a result, the scenes switch more abruptly than a casual reader will be comfortable with. In an effort to aid the reader, I have included a list of characters below. I hope you enjoy it.

- Patrick Westfall  
August, 2014

## List of Characters

Aulander Arboguard: A wood-elf druid who can change his shape into virtually any natural animal that lives in the forest. His magic comes from the earth herself and isn't as flashy as the wizard's arcana or the cleric's divine magic.

Captain Krok: The orc captain in charge of destroying the adventurers and bringing the cleric, Fatima Windsong, to his master. Orcs are larger and more powerful than humans but are far less intelligent.

Dhalin Yaro: An elven wizard of the academy who grew up as a ranger. As a result, he possesses skills that few wizards can boast of. His experience, however, is largely academic and he remains untried in the real world.

Dyllonius Blackscale: A wily kobold rogue with an inane sense of humor. Kobolds stand only two-feet tall and claim to be descended from dragons.

Fatima Windsong: A human cleric of Pelor who adheres to a strict code of ethics but struggles against her own impetuosity. A cleric's magic is divine and is conditional upon her behavior.

General Grogg: The ogre put in charge of storming the city wall and obtaining the Relic of Pelor from the temple. Most ogres have green skin and stand taller than orcs.

High-Priestess Herras: Pelor's cardinal cleric in Evermoor who has been entrusted with the safekeeping of His holy relic.

Lieutenant Torga: A dwarven fighter in the City Guard whose tragic childhood taught her many secrets that are usually only known by rogues. She struggles with an acute lack of faith in that which cannot be seen.

Ovak Spearthrower: A dim-witted half-orc barbarian with a noble heart who struggles to control his temper to avoid destructive blackout rages.

Mindweb: The human sorcerer who had become an undead lich upon his death. He is ageless and possesses near-infinite arcane skill and patience as a result of his long, unholy life. He controls the orcs, goblins and ogres of Evermoor through intimidation and fear.

Ratamon: The orc-mage who serves Mindweb but has grandiose plans to inherit Mindweb's power once he falls. He is far craftier than most of the orcs and draws spells as both a wizard and an evil cleric.

Rock Redstone: A sergeant in the City Guard who likes to meet his battles head-on. His prowess with the dwarven war-axe and his noble, soldierly heart make him an ideal bodyguard for the cleric, Fatima Windsong.

Scryx: A lowly goblin in the direct service of Ratamon. Goblins are bigger than kobolds but smaller than dwarves. They are notoriously chaotic and their low intelligence makes them difficult for their masters to employ effectively.

Wraithbone Wishcraft: An ancient wizard who was born a drow elf but has been transmuted into a dragonne and now lives a lonely life in the ethereal wastes.

## Book One: Heroes Arise

The wily kobold watched the crowd carefully. Dozens of townsfolk had gathered at the square to hear the chief constable attempt to explain how he would rid the city of crime. While he spoke, Blackscale spotted his mark.

She was rude, wealthy and wore her purse on a thin string. Her male escort, the astute kobold observed, was absorbed in the chief constable's speech and would be no obstacle at all. *Yes*, he thought, *she's the perfect target, rich and rude!*

The light-footed kobold followed the woman as she moved through the crowd as easily as if she were mingling at a party held in her own honor. The kobold was not concerned with her notoriety but it was possible that others would be so he would have to be careful.

Suddenly, the shadowy kobold watched as a rugged outdoorsman made his way through the crowd. The stranger's formidable height offered him a good vantage and he never lost sight his object, which appeared to be the mark herself.

The kobold rummaged through his pack while muttering to himself in his native draconic language, and withdrew a small, one-ounce vial with a cork stopper that had no label. He also drew a long, thin dagger and placed it in a sheath that was hidden on his back. He then unsnapped the throwing darts that he had hidden within the tongues of his boots. He moved unseen through the tall crowd toward the mark.

The gruff ranger approached the mark with a cruel gleam in his eyes. The kobold had seen that gleam before in the eyes of murderers and blood began to course through his body with sickening speed. His instincts took over and he blended into the shadows under the long folds of the mark's own garments.

He moved deftly as she moved, taking care to remain hidden from all eyes as well as to avoid the woman's feet. He saw the man approach her and grab her wrist. The woman did not cry out in pain, but replied, "Oh, Richard. I knew you'd come with me."

"You're comin' back home with me right now." The man said forcefully while attempting to guide the willful woman out of the crowd.

"I thought you had decided to leave *with* me!" the frightened woman countered. "I'm not going back." Her defiant tone was the last straw in Richard's haystack and he flew into a rage, completely heedless of the nearby townsfolk.

He grabbed her arm and began twisting it behind her back when the kobold snickered loudly. Richard looked down reflexively and saw the small, two-foot tall humanoid smiling up at him. The kobold blew a small dart at Richard's neck who did not even notice it. The big man swung a thick, booted leg at the puzzling creature who tumbled safely away.

The kick landed in the shin of an unknown townswoman. Her cry brought down on Richard the fury of her husband and his cohorts, who did not appear to be lovers of the law themselves.

The kobold had saved the woman from being abused by her boyfriend and he felt proud of himself for the role he had played in it and slipped away unseen.

He didn't know that the woman still had feelings for the violent man and would have been surprised to learn that she attempted his rescue from the enraged villagers he had slighted. He was also unaware that the woman and her boyfriend had both been pulverized during the ensuing altercation. Poor Richard took the worst of it due to the paralyzing poison introduced to his body

through the kobold's tiny mouth-dart, which had prevented him from fighting properly.

The mark woke up alone and found that she had been chained to a hospital bed by the police. Her head pounded from the beating she had taken the night before. She turned to the table that contained her personal effects and began looking through them. The nurse walked into the room and asked her if she was feeling any better.

"I feel alright, I guess, but I can't seem to find my purse."

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The kobold went straight home, that is, as straight as a wary purse-snatcher does who suspects that he is being followed. He turned a hundred erroneous directions, double-backing on himself two or even three times.

*I may be getting so good at losing my pursuers that I'm losing myself, too!* He looked around at the filthy sewer system that ran underneath the city above. Rats were present so he knew that at least he wouldn't starve if he had to camp there for a few days. Yet, he had heard tales of the more formidable vermin who stalked the sewers and they worried him far more than anything else.

"I can't stay here," he said to himself. As he began retracing his steps to the ladder, he stopped and listened. He slowly began to discern the distinct sound of male voices. A few moments of patience rewarded him with the sound of footsteps. He slunk into one of the many shadows and waited as the sounds grew ever nearer. He could soon discern the ugly, pig-like features of a large orc and two small goblins.

"I knew we shouldn't have come this way. No self-respecting guild mage would have agreed to it!" This came from the orc who

Blackscale assumed was a spellcaster because he wore no armor but a simple woolen robe and carried only a mace.

"We are almost there, boss! Just wait, you'll see."

"I'm done waiting!" the orc roared. "You find me a way out of here in five seconds or I'll end your miserable life here among the city's vilest filth." The goblins cowered and squealed in fear.

"There's no call for violence, Sir Wizard." The kobold said as he withdrew from the shadows making confident use of his ample charisma. "For I, Dyllonius Blackscale, can have you out of this labyrinth within the minute."

"Bah! I never trust kobolds."

"Have it your way sir, I'll just continue on my way then."  
"You're going *into* the sewers?"

"Oh yes, they are like a second home to me," he lied, "I have spent many years down here."

The orc, who had a higher intelligence than most of his kind, took a moment to consider the unlikely kobold's offer. He finally answered, "And for what price will you show me the exit?"

"For the mere price of a ring, Sir Wizard." the bold creature responded.

"All right, you may have any that you like, except those on my first fingers, *if* you can have me out of here within one minute."

"Ahh," thought the wily rogue, "so those must be his magic rings."

"First I must examine them, if you please." The kobold fuddled with each ring for a moment but did not appear to touch the rings



on the orc's first fingers. Satisfied, he said, "Fair enough sir, follow me."

The goblins remained mute but their faces wore expressions of utter hatred as they gazed upon the opportunistic creature who was even more diminutive than they were. Goblins are used to being bullied by the larger races but never by a kobold.

The ladder was ten feet away and within a minute's time, the orc wizard was standing outside in a dark alley breathing fresh air once more.

"And now for my ring, sir wizard?" the kobold said.

"I owe you nothing, filthy beast! Begone lest I summon a bear to rend you to bits!" The kobold shrugged his shoulders and descended once more into the sewers, knowing that they would be the last place the foolish wizard would wish to pursue him once he realized that his magic rings had been replaced by trinkets.

Dyllonius had forgotten his fears of the monsters that were said to lurk in the subterranean labyrinth of the sewers. He lit his lamp and examined his two new rings by its light. They were simple gold bands but, when he looked closer, he could discern strange elven writing scrawled on the inside.

"Hmm, I wonder what they do?"

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The orc and his two fumbling goblins moved soundlessly through the streets. They slunk closer and closer to the temple of Pelor, the deity of Light. From the shadows, he began a strange incantation and swallowed the tiny nub of a human fingertip. The porcine features of his face immediately began to soften into those of a human, although a human whose visage bordered upon the grotesque.

Once his transformation was complete, he entered the church. *There she is*, he thought as he saw her on her knees before the altar to Pelor. Her back was to him as he strode quietly up behind her.

"Fatima Windsong!" he bellowed. The young woman spun around in surprise.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"You may end this sacrilege to Baal and raze this temple to the ground!" he said, indicating the pristine, holy sanctuary.

"I will not!" she replied defiantly while raising herself up from her knees.

"You will!" The orc raised his right hand and pointed his first finger at her. Then he spoke a terse command word and touched the ring. A moment passed and nothing happened. The wizard appeared to be confused but was not one to let befuddlement interfere with his designs.

He raised and pointed his left hand in a similar manner and spoke another, different, command word. Once again, no ball of fire shot from the ring to engulf the helpless female cleric in scorching flame.

"Kill her!" he commanded to the goblins then he turned his full attention onto his hands and studied the rings. *Why hadn't they worked? The first ring should have sent acid arrows into the cleric's soft flesh and my work would have been complete!* Then he remembered the kobold.

The cleric seized her small, light mace and delivered a backhanded swing just in time to stop one of the advancing goblins. The frightened but stalwart cleric offered a quick prayer to her god and

the ordinary mace burst into bright yellow flames. The goblins shrieked in panic and cowered where they stood.

Attracted by the light of his quarry's blessed weapon, the orc looked up from his rings. He had expected to see the goblins standing over a bloodied female form and scowled at the sight that met his eyes.

She stood five feet from him and held the mace in her right hand. He thought quickly, *I have prepared only two spells, which shall I use?*

He began to speak a command word but the cleric had readied herself against such an action. Her mace connected with the human-looking jaw and the wizard crumpled to the floor. The cleric stood over the unconscious wizard and watched in awe as his human camouflage slipped away and revealed his true, sinister lineage.

"Ratamon!" she gasped. Upon hearing his name, the cowardly goblins fled from the temple. Windsong bound his arms and legs but doubted that mere rope would be enough to hold him once he regained consciousness.

She slowly dragged him into the catacombs underneath the temple and placed him into a small cell that had been treated with a permanent anti-magic field. *Maybe this will hold him until the priestess or the City Guard can deal with him.*

She knew that Ratamon was a powerful wizard in service to the dark deity, Baal but had never known him to risk his own life in battle before. *It portends ill for the kingdom,* she quickly decided and returned to her fervent prayers.

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Dhalin Yaro looked out upon the rolling grassland below the academy's tower and sighed with longing. He had been born into the nomadic life of a ranger but quickly found out that, though he was an excellent swordsman, his true talent was magic. He had spent more than half of his long life in its study and was growing powerful as he learned the subtleties of magic but was also growing impatient with the studious life at the academy.

*Someday I'll have cause to roam the land once more*, he thought with more than a little sadness in his heart. He was taller than most elves and even more intelligent than most of his mentors but his poor charisma prevented him from gaining allies at the college. He knew that he was scorned by the high elves for his common lineage and often found himself in the company of the working class artisans who were very often dwarves, for which practice he did not gain many friends from among his peers.

He spoke a command word and the twelve-inch tome that he was attempting to memorize opened to the correct page. He applied his considerable mind to the task and didn't exercise another thought for nearly thirty-six hours.

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Torga didn't like thieves, though she had once been one herself. After most of her family had fallen to orc blades in her youth, her parents had been imprisoned. She had kept them alive by stealing food and venturing *into* the orc's jailing caverns by stealth to supply them with food. One day, she stole into their cell to find her parents' dismembered corpses. Her stout dwarven heart had hardened and she vowed never again to steal. She would learn to fight so that she could protect the weak and, someday, exact her revenge on the barbaric orc and goblin tribes that had taken her family.

A decade later, she had become a deadly warrior who exemplified valor on the battlefield. She had learned to use most martial weapons, armor and shields, though she preferred to fight with only a light chain shirt so that she could make efficient use of her high level of dexterity.

Torga was now a lieutenant in the City Guard and her precinct extended to the perimeter of the Academy of Arcana. Her duties included an hourly foot patrol of the city during the long hours of the night. She looked up at the crescent moon and sighed. She wanted more adventure than her respectable commission allowed and she felt herself growing restless.

Suddenly, her keen dwarven dark-vision spotted a subtle shadow creeping up the sheer wall of the wizard's tower. Her blood boiled and she raced to warn the academy patrols.

"Halt, who goes there?" Came the common cry from the ramparts of the perimeter wall.

"It is I, Lieutenant Torga. There is an intruder scaling your tower wall!"

The guard turned and glanced at the tall, dark tower but replied that he could see nothing. Torga wondered why humans were chosen for night shifts at all, for though they were bigger and stronger than most of the other races, they couldn't see well at night.

"Someone is there, whether you can see him or not! Sound the alarm and let me pass." She replied authoritatively.

The human guard grew argumentative. "You have no jurisdiction here unless invited, City Guardsman."

Torga peered through the bars of the lowered portcullis and spied the dark form slip into one of highest windows on the tall tower.

With a mighty heave, she hoisted the portcullis and tumbled inside before it came crashing down again.

"To arms! To arms!" the startled guard cried. He had no idea that a dwarf, especially a female, could raise the heavy portcullis unaided.

*At least I've managed to raise the alarm,* Torga thought, although she knew that her actions, justified or not, would most likely end her career with the guard. She burst into the unlocked tower, found the stairs, and mounted them three at a time which was not an easy task for a dwarf who stood less than five feet tall.

She could hear the rattling armor of the soldiers below who had lost her trail. She called down to them, "Hurry, the intruder scaled the tower and climbed into the third window from the top!"

She bounded up the steps with the nearly limitless constitution and strength of her venerable race and finally reached the third floor from the top.

She was in a narrow hallway and there were doors to her right and left. She stopped and listened for a moment but could hear no sound. She tried the door on the right and found that her hand reached *through* it! She deftly rolled sideways and narrowly escaped falling through the illusory wall.

She tried the door on the left and was relieved to feel its solid mass in her hand. She threw the door open and charged blindly into the room and did not see the mage who was hiding behind the door. She saw only the small, study-chamber and the blood, which had been splattered upon the countless books and scrolls in the room.

A dark-skinned elf was lying face down in the spreading gore. Both of his hands had been severed and lay several feet from him in opposite directions. Torga shuddered as the dying fingers

twitched over the handles of the sinister, curved black daggers they had recently wielded.

She looked closer and noticed that the tip of one dagger had been coated in a slightly luminescent green goo. The other was blue with elven blood.

From behind the door, Dhalin Yaro recognized lieutenant Torga as one of the most efficient of the largely-inept City Guard. He lowered his short sword and spoke quietly.

"He came in through the window."

Torga whirled around and held her large dwarven war-axe in a low guard but did not recognize the young ranger wizard, though they had met once before. "I know, I saw him from outside the wall."

The academy guards could be heard entering the hallway with the excessive noise of exhaustion. Dhalin Yaro spoke a word and the false door in the hallway became solid one more.

Suddenly, Dhalin's vision blurred and his legs grew weak. Torga noticed the festering puncture wound in the wizard's abdomen. He slumped to the floor and began to lose consciousness. Before darkness came, he spoke to the dwarf. "Search him carefully. Why did he come..."

Torga rifled through the drow elf's pockets and found a small leather bag. She didn't have time to open it, however, for the human guards suddenly burst through the door.

"This wizard has slain the drow who was the intruder I spotted from below. You must take him to a cleric quickly or he will die from the drow's poison."

To their credit, the guards did as they were told and conveyed the dying wizard to the temple expediently. The drow's body and

hands were carefully brought before the magistrate and placed in an evidence room.

Torga longed for the end of her shift so that she could study what she had found on the drow. *Then, she thought, I'll go see if they were able to save the young wizard's life.*

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A pinprick of red light emanated from the eyeless sockets of the lich. Thin, withered skin covered his hands which held a scrying orb. He observed all that had happened in the young wizard's study and was cursing the drow's miserable failure.

He muttered under his breath as he watched Torga pocket the drow's satchel which he knew might lead an astute investigator back to him, but he smiled grimly when he saw the book lying open on the table. He read and scribed the two pages that were exposed to his vision and knew that it was the one.

Now that he knew where it was, he could be patient once again. He would wait at least another year before attempting to retrieve it so as to avoid drawing attention to it. He knew that it was impossible for any student or master at the academy to identify the magic contained within the book or learn the secret spell it contained.

"They will never guess that there are countless souls contained within the bloodied grimoire that will someday be the instrument of their own doom!" The undead sorcerer emitted chilling rasps that served him as a laugh and he severed his connection with the book.

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Lieutenant Torga returned to the keep which served as the headquarters for the City Guard. She wrote a detailed report and



delivered it to her superiors then withdrew to her private quarters to examine the satchel she had found on the drow assassin.

She untied it carefully and found that it contained only two items. One was a blank scrap of paper and the other was a talisman of Erythnul, the evil deity of chaos and slaughter.

"I don't know what to make of these, perhaps the young wizard can make sense of them." She bundled them up and hid them in her boot, then removed the insignia from her armor and left the room.

She walked toward the Temple of Pelor. The sky told her that dawn was not far away yet she did not relish the new day. *Something dangerous is afoot*, she thought, *and I don't like it*. Somewhere inside of her, though, she knew that she did like it; a mystery was exactly what she wanted.

Torga was passed on the entry stairs by two hooded monks. She didn't trust people who shrouded their faces. She did not bow or stop to anoint herself with blessed water but walked directly into the large healing chamber. There were twelve beds occupying the room but only two bodies. Several clerics were praying in varying cadences in their efforts to resurrect the lifeless figure of the drow elf.

Torga drew close to the young wizard on the other side of the room and was pleased to see that he had already been cleansed of the poison. She marveled at the healing power of Pelorian clerics and wished that she possessed more of their faith.

"I am Torga. What is your name, wizard?" She began brusquely.

"I am Dhalin Yaro, a mere student of the arcane hardly worthy of your gracious appellation." He said humbly.

"Why did you cut the drow's hands off?"

"Why? Because he kept swinging those nasty daggers at me!"

"Are you such a swordsman that you can sever your assailant's arms at the wrist? I have not met a mage who could make the boast."

"I was a ranger before I donned the soft robes of the magi. I learned many skills in those days and haven't managed to forget them all." He smiled at her and realized that he liked her. Torga's spirit was not so dissimilar to his own, although their race and class dictated a differing course through life to be sure.

"I hope to witness your skill in combat someday but now I have come with more questions. Are you able to leave this place?"

"Certainly, allow me to pay the clerics their fee." The healthy elf deposited a small fortune into the coffer and they left the room quietly so as not to disturb the apparently vain efforts of the three struggling clerics.

Fatima Windsong did not notice them leave. She had cleansed the mage's body of the poison and renewed his health quickly so that she could attend to the resurrection of the drow elf. The High Priestess wanted answers from him but she doubted that she had the power to resurrect him. Still, she and the others wept supplicant prayers from deep within their souls in the effort to do so.

Torga and Dhalin opened the door of the inn and found a relatively quiet table in the balcony that overlooked the barroom below. They spoke in low voices about the attack that had brought them together.

"Do you know why the drow attacked you?" Torga asked.

"No, I can't think of any reason. I have money but no more than the next. I spend a great deal of time and money adding spells to

my archive. I own several small establishments downtown but I am not wealthy."

Torga scoffed inwardly, *Sure, he's not wealthy.* She had to save for months to vacation for a weekend in one of his small establishments.

"This was no common robbery, I agree with you." She looked around the room and marveled at the immense tomes that adorned the shelves. She was tactful enough not to touch anything, which Dhalin noticed with relief.

"I have valuable spellbooks but they contain nothing rare or unique. I have no artifacts or powerful magic items."

"Were you reading this book when you were attacked?"

"Yes. The thief came through the window with a blur spell on him and disrupted my study."

"What is this book about?" She asked casually.

"I don't know."

She looked at the four inches of dense writing that prefaced the open page and said, "Ten thousand pages into the book and you don't know what it's about?" She cocked her bushy dwarven eyebrow up coyly.

"Well, it's complicated. I just received that book in the post. There was no return address or name written on it."

"When was this?"

"About a year ago." Dhalin sighed heavily as he realized that he had been studying the book for a year and was still only a third of the way through it. Sometimes, he missed the wild forests and mountains of his youth, where life was lived rather than studied.

"Is there anyone in the land who might be able to identify this book?" Torga asked, relentlessly pursuing her hunch.

The mage thought for a long time, then smiled. "There is one I know of but it is not easy to see him."

"Why is that?"

"Because he likes to stay invisible. Long ago, he was permanently altered in a duel with a transmutationist and now lives a quiet hermitage far away."

"How far away?"

"How far are you willing to travel?" the mage countered.

"I believe this mystery deepens and is worthy of investigation. I will see justice served."

The mage laughed, "If we're going to travel seven hundred miles together, you're going to have to relax your speech around me."

"How do I know I can trust you?" Even as she asked the question she knew that she already did trust the tall, confident elf.

"I vow my loyalty to you on this quest above the goal itself. You and I must learn to think and act as one," he said gallantly.

"Perhaps."

"Good! I travel light and I suggest that you do the same." Dhalin said as he began to fill a knapsack.

"For a trek that distance, will we not employ mules?"

"Mules can be slain, stolen or scared off, and with them, my spellbooks and your weapons. No, we carry what we require on our backs."

Torga smiled. *Perhaps he had been a ranger after all.* She was pleased at the prospect of adventure and was anxious to begin. "Agreed. I anticipate collecting the hands of many foes in your company."

Dhalin smiled back at her. He continued to throw an enormous amount of gear into the knapsack, including the blood-spattered book of unknown origin as well as his personal spellbooks.

"How can you fit so much into that tiny knapsack?" Torga asked incredulously, but the wizard only smiled.

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Ratamon awoke in the anti-magic cell and roared for three hours. He burned the face of the kobold into his mind and swore eternal vengeance against him. *How could a tiny, insignificant little creature disrupt the schemes of a master?*

He searched the secret pocket in his robe and withdrew a small cockroach. This was his animal familiar and, though tiny, it would be the instrument of his salvation. He spoke to it in a strange, burbling language then set it upon the ground outside his cell.

He waited for a long day and night before a hapless guard came down to feed him. The dwarven guard did not see the tiny anthropod and would never have guessed that it had been instructed to bite him with its paralyzing poison. When he awoke, the orc-mage was gone and he was flogged mercilessly and accused as a conspirator.

The orc-mage flew through the city, seeking a horse to steal, but it was too crowded. He thought it would be wiser to leave the city gates and to prey upon a small farm a mile or two away for a steed. He had no trouble snapping the neck of the inattentive City Guardsman who manned the small gate on the west end. He ran without exhaustion for several minutes until he saw what he was looking for.

Smoke rose in the early dawn from the chimney of a small, hand-built cottage. There were rows of grains and vegetables growing in the lush land that was irrigated by a cleverly rerouted stream. There was one horse in the stable. He attempted to saddle the horse but it resisted violently. The orc-mage muttered a few words and charmed it into acquiescence.

The barbaric peasant farmer thought he heard a noise in the stable so he rose from his chair and moved outside. As he was reaching to open the barn doors, they suddenly flew open and knocked the heavy man onto his butt. He recovered in time to see his own horse leap over him as its rider spurred it on cruelly.

Ovak rose to give chase. Even on foot, many of his clan are exceptionally fleet-footed and have the capacity to maintain their pace for hours. For thirty minutes he lagged only fifty paces behind the horse and its thieving rider but neither gained nor lost ground.

The orc-mage feared even the bare hands of the tall barbarian behind him and began to chant a spell. He found it very difficult to concentrate on horseback but eventually spat out the words and mimed the frantic gestures of a spell that would entangle him.

The barbarian knew nothing of magic and was horrified to discover his own crops growing and encircling his limbs. In another six seconds, he would be slowed to less than half his speed. He stopped running and turned his strength upon the weeds and tore

them out of the ground by the roots. When he finally left the area of the spell, he could see no sign of his horse or the thief.

He flew into an uncontrollable rage he and launched his enormous fists against the nearest tree until they were well bloodied yet he seemed heedless of the pain. When his rage subsided and he could think relatively clearly again, he was surprised to find that he was back on what was left of his farm. His crops were in tatters and his barn lay in utter ruin that he suspected was the work of his own hand. He knew that he often blacked out when the blinding rage overcame him and hung his head in shame.

He saw the sorry state of his treasonous crops of grains and vegetables and realized that he had very little reason to endure the long, foodless winter that was coming. *I will track down the thief and retrieve my horse*, he thought with the one-track mind of a child.

The axe he withdrew from above his mantle, however, was anything but a child's toy. The deadly great-axe had been given to him by his father and it had always been in the family. The weapon was nearly six feet from the bottom of its long haft to the top of its enormous double-blade and he slid it neatly into an x-braced sheath on his back. He then packed a few items into a hand-sewn hip sack and began to give chase at a swift trot that he could maintain for twenty-four hours or more.

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Fatima Windsong was the last of the three clerics to admit defeat, but her efforts seemed to have no effect on the lifeless drow. She retreated to her private chamber utterly exhausted. The healing attempts had drained her constitution and, it seemed, her spirit.

When she awoke, it was to loud rapping at the door and a voice coming from the other side, "Cleric Windsong, you are hereby

summoned before the High Priestess! Answer your summons or we will break down the door!"

She arose and opened the door. Soldiers rushed into the room and placed manacles around her wrists and ankles.

"With respect, I have been charged to bring you before the High Priestess, Cleric Windsong." The master sergeant who spoke was a dwarf named Rock Redstone.

"Am I charged with a crime?" the frightened cleric asked.

"Most certainly, although they have not named it to me, m'lady." She thought the sergeant was rather polite for a dwarf.

"May I dress properly?"

The men turned their backs while she donned fresh clothes. She did not adorn herself with her finest linens, but rather she chose clothes that were appropriate for life-long banishment from the Temple of Pelor and the capital city of Evermoor.

Sergeant Rock and his men escorted her out of the temple and through a small labyrinth that had always been off-limits to all but the highest ranking dignitaries. She was ushered down a narrow flight of stairs and into the High Priestess's private meeting room. Her eminence Herras Martyrkin sat upon a throne that was more ornate than it was comfortable. Sergeant Rock announced the cleric and was curtly dismissed.

The two women looked upon each other for several tense moments. Fatima detected a shift in the High Priestess's alignment, as if she had grown less holy since they had last met. Her ice-blue eyes betrayed nothing of her mind and her thin, tight lips had hardened into a grim scowl.



"Why did you fail to resurrect the drow?" She said finally, her voice betraying the rage that seethed beneath her blank countenance.

"I tried, your holiness, but-

"But your faith was insufficient, was it not?" The High Priestess spat the words out coldly, enjoying their effect. The cleric did not venture a reply. She felt cold, isolated and fearful that she would be cast away from her priesthood and banished to the wastelands forever.

"Your failure has cost the academy their opportunity to glean information from the assailant and, without that, this case will remain unsolved. "Do you have anything to say?"

Fatima Windsong had much that she wished to say but little that she thought would make a difference to the High Priestess.

"Very well, then. Atonement for your lack of faith will be a long and arduous journey. I am sending you after a prisoner who has escaped from the City Guard. The orc-mage you brought to the dungeon."

"Ratamon!" She was angry that the orc had eluded justice once again.

"I will go at once." She affirmed.

"You will travel with the full authority of a Cleric of Pelor but you are to refrain from using any spells above third level. Further, you will be subject to the will of a fighter, whose task is to keep you alive."

"I understand, your Eminence."

"You shall not return without the mage, is that understood?"

"It is, your holiness."

"Surrender to me your holy symbol of Pelor." Although the young cleric had expected them, the words stunned her for a moment. Time slowed down as she unclasped the golden image of the sun which she had wrought with her own hands in her first year of seminary.

Herras took the treasured item from the benumbed cleric and tossed it away casually. Then she clasped another symbol on a chain that was far older than Windsong's own and said, "You shall wear this icon of our holy savior in place of your own."

"I don't u-understand." The young cleric stuttered.

"It is not necessary that you understand. Have faith, Cleric Windsong, and Pelor shall see you through." Herras realized that she drew perilously near to showing humanity toward the poor cleric but her stern nature prevailed and her voice grew colder once more.

"Your escort awaits you outside my chamber. Lose no time. The mage has stolen a horse and travels south. Now go and may Pelor govern your body and spirit."

"And yours as well." Fatima bowed and walked out of the room. In the hallway outside, she was pleased to see the courteous dwarf. "I am Rock Redstone, at your service, m'lady." He said and bowed very low.

"I am Fatima Windsong, fallen cleric of Pelor." She said sadly.

"I, too, m'lady, was chosen for this mission for inglorious reasons. It was I who allowed the devious mage to escape from his cell. Yet, fear not, for we shall return to our former stations with full honors once we have subdued the scoundrel."

The disheartened cleric found his confidence reassuring. "Yes, we shall return with full honors." She affirmed but found herself hoping it was true.

\*\*

The kobold had long made a habit out of sleeping in saddlebags. He liked the way the leather smelled and their size was ideal to disguise the two-foot tall dragonoid and to keep him warm at night.

So it was that he was jounced from his sleep when the orc saddled the barbarian's horse but he dared not move for fear of drawing the orc's notice. He heard the heavy steps of the barbarian approaching the barn just as the mage spoke the word that caused the heavy doors to fly open. He spurred the horse who had fallen under his charm and it flew from the farm at a hard gallop.

Blackscale peeked out from underneath the flap and smiled to see the barbarian giving chase. He looked at the rider who was still unconcerned with his bold pursuer. The kobold studied the orc covertly for a few moments trying to identify an exposed artery or weakness in his bulky form.

*I could aim a good sneak attack at his neck but he might be wearing armor, then he would cook me with his fireball for sure!*  
In the end, the brave kobold decided against swordplay and simply waited for an opportune moment to leap out.

He watched mirthfully as the frustrated farmer had been attacked by his own grain but had been sorry that he had given up the pursuit. The orc-mage rode the charmed steed hard all day and did not stop to rest or water the poor beast. They entered a dense forest as the sun was beginning to set.

As night fell, the orc-slowed the horse. He could no longer disbelieve in the eyes or hope they would simply go away. The

wolves had been following him for miles and would have to be dealt with. He dismounted and prepared himself for the ambush.

The kobold slipped out of the saddlebag and disappeared into the shadows to watch the fray. *Maybe the wolves will do the barbarian's work for him*, he snickered.

\*\*

Dhalin and Torga saddled their mounts in the darkness of the pre-dawn hours. The mage rode a grey-speckled mare by the name of Truefoot while the shorter dwarf rode Trample, the armored war-pony that he had ridden for years in the Guard.

The wizard wore blue robes that seemed to absorb the light and they provided him with considerable camouflage if little armor. The dwarf wore a masterworked chain-shirt that didn't seem to slow her down in the slightest.

For armament, the wizard wore a thin, curved rapier and a long, parrying dagger that was almost a short-sword. On his back he carried an enormous longbow that took considerable strength to pull and sent its arrows truer and faster than most. The dwarf carried a large wooden shield and the stout war-axe that was favored by her strong race but was too heavy for most others to wield properly.

"My friends in the Temple of Pelor tell me that another assassination was attempted last night. A human cleric was attacked *inside* the temple by an orc-mage."

Dhalin's eyebrows raised slightly as he waited for his friend to continue.

"She bested him and took him to the anti-magic cells below the sanctuary. When he awoke, he seemed to place the blame for his

failure on an unnamed kobold who he claimed had stolen his magic."

"Did she say what his name was?" The wizard asked.

"Ratamon." The fighter replied. Clearly, the name meant nothing to her.

"I know of the rascal. He has learned many useful spells and wields substantial power, but he will never be a master. Still, I am certain that he is but a lowly pawn."

"A pawn that answers to whom?"

"Whoever he reports to, we can be assured that they pose ten times the threat that he does." The wizard spoke the words gravely, distaste evident on his tongue.

"Well," Torga said dryly, "you'll simply have to cut his hands off before he can deliver his spell of doom." Dhalin smiled but soon withdrew into his melancholic thoughts.

They rode in silence for a time and passed a small shack and a big barn. The barn had been torn to pieces and the crops had been uprooted and ripped asunder. They considered the sight an ill omen but stopped to investigate the scene anyway.

"In the name of the City Guard, show yourself!" The soldier bellowed authoritatively but no one arose from the bedlam to answer.

"Your imposing title will be of little avail as we travel further from the city." The wizard offered the advice as a polite reminder that few would respect the authority of the City Guard outside the city.

"No one is here." The lieutenant said after searching the small cabin that had survived the barbarian's rage. "I wonder what happened here. I don't see any blood."

"Let's move on, perhaps we will discover that the answer to this enigmatic scene of destruction is entwined with our own path."

\*\*

Ratamon counted eight wolves but knew there could be three times their number still hidden in the shadows. He spoke a low chant and waved his arms, drawing four curt patterns in the air. For an instant, his body was sheathed in a swirling ochre essence, then the effect dissipated. The mage took some solace knowing that his spell had worked and that he had gained the invisible equivalent of a light suit of armor. He did nothing to protect his mount.

The alpha wolf lunged but was struck down by the orc's heavy mace which was engulfed in dull, red flames. Three more attacked in unison and one succeeded in tearing the mage's right leg to ribbons and cracking the bone just above the ankle with its strong bite.

He swung at it desperately but missed by a foot. He saw two more lunge at the charmed horse who put up little of a fight, believing that everyone was his friend; they tore his throat out in seconds.

The orc knew that his fiery mace alone would not deliver him from the bellies of his numerous foes, so he let it hang from a loop around his wrist. The spellcaster drew another attack from an agile wolf as he disengaged from the pack surrounding him long enough to cast another spell.

He winced involuntarily as the remaining wolves lunged at him but maintained his concentration and finished his spell in spite of the

pain. The effect of the *soundburst* was instantaneous. The wolves howled in pain and fled from the laughing mage by the most expeditious route possible.

"That is one pack that I will not have to deal with again." He stuck his chest out proudly before he remembered that his mount had been slain. He unbuckled the saddlebag and threw it over his shoulder. He was too strong to notice that it was twenty-five pounds lighter without the kobold inside.

The angry orc fought the urge to eat the horse himself, knowing that he must continue his journey with all haste. He must get back to Mindweb and report his utter failure.

He drew a strange design on the ground with his hands then knelt in supplication inside it. He chanted and thrust his head up and down violently. Although he could feel nothing, he could hear the bones in his right leg snap back together and could see his skin healing at an alarming rate. He stood up and his sturdy goblinoid body settled into a slow-trot that, wizard though he was, he could maintain for many hours.

\*\*

Against his nature, Blackscale did not wait to see what became of the orc and the wolves but he heard the sonic strike from a quarter of a mile away. He thought that it would have killed him if he had been much closer. *I hate magic*, he thought, *too much sizzle and boom, not enough steel and tomb.*

He considered his options and quickly decided that his best chance for survival was to travel back through the forest to the north and hope to join up with the barbarian that he knew was less than a day behind. *But how could he make contact?* he thought, *Most races on Evermoor would sooner kill a kobold than listen to one!*

He heard a sudden crackle in the bushes to the north and promptly faded out of sight among the shadows of the trees.

\*\*

Puff, puff, puff. The barbarian's swift, unswerving cadence was a feat of athletic beauty. There were few humanoid races that were built to travel overland with such relentless rapidity as Ovak Spearthrower. It is true that he was not a wise man, for he had no education or literacy, yet he was guided by the pure motives of the guileless brute and embodied the simple, honest traits of honor and valor.

Two ideas tumbled over and over in his dim mind; *kill the thief and find my horse*. He covered many miles without so much as a thought to trivial considerations such as exhaustion, nourishment, shelter or pain.

Suddenly, he heard what he knew must be a goddess singing a tempting song and a new thought entered his head; *get closer to the voice*.

\*\*

Sergeant Rock Redstone of the City Guard sat uncomfortably upon the strange war-pony he had requisitioned for the quest. He was a poor rider and gave no joy to the well-trained and fully armored war-pony he mishandled.

"Riding is for the king and his court. A warrior should march into battle on his own two legs." he said grumpily.

Cleric Windsong sat high upon a palomino mare, who wore a thin leather barding upon her haunches and a light steel plate around her throat.



"And what about Formian warriors? Must they march into battle on but two legs?" She countered, referring to the six-legged ant-men that were common in the plains.

"They can walk into my axe on as many legs as they please!" The dwarf was grateful to be on the adventure and his words belied his good mood.

They traveled southward through the long night and failed to notice the ruined farm, for they unwittingly passed it on Windsong's watch. Humans are not blessed with the dark-vision given to the elves, dwarves and other races of Evermoor.

Though their steeds were true, the untrained riders cramped and grew tired quickly. Soon they made camp in a small glade within the vast, dark forest.

"We must keep a fire burning brightly to ward off the beasts." The dwarf said and set himself to the task of collecting firewood and tinder.

"I will commune with Pelor and focus my soul to receive His divine blessings." Her words stopped the dwarf in his tracks.

"With all due respect, m'lady. How long will that take?"

"About three hours." She replied flatly.

The dwarf was astounded. He had never witnessed the dedication of a cleric when there was no one important to observe her piety. He was impressed, but also annoyed, for they could never hope to close the distance on their quarry at their present rate of travel. *She sleeps for eight hours and prays for three, that's half the day!*

He looked down upon her hairless human face as she slept and thought, *She'd be awfully pretty if she had more facial hair.*

\*\*

The southward path brought Dhalin and Torga to the edge of a dense forest. The ranger had little difficulty tracking the southerly direction of recent movement on the trail, but could not identify the individual footprints.

Torga looked up at the crescent moon and felt like she had a prayer in her heart but didn't know who to pray to. She longed for deeper meaning in her life but the practice of the local religions seemed mundane and automatic. *If a deity wanted her to believe in them, they would have to make themselves known.*

Their blood ran cold as they heard the unmistakable roar of a large predator followed by the death-agonies of its victim. Although the terrible sounds arose from mere paces away, they steeled their hearts and entered the dark forest anyway.

"This forest is known as Vermindale. We can be sure of trouble until we are on its thither side." Dhalin spoke the words ominously but without intentional melodrama.

"What do you know of it?"

"The wood-elves of Everleaf once made their home here. They grew territorial as game grew scarce and eventually gained a reputation for slaying trespassers."

"Do they dwell here still?" Torga asked.

"We will find out. There are other tales which are more direful; of misshapen lycanthropes, living oozes and owlbears."

"Those things don't really exist, do they?" The lieutenant asked. She realized that she was hesitant to believe anything that she had

not seen with her own eyes and once again wished that she had more faith.

"I have seen none of them with my own eyes, however, very few who can bear personal eyewitness live through the experience."

The brave soldier merely nodded. "My axe and I welcome the experience to be gained from besting such strange opponents."

"Yes, we are bound to learn much on this journey."

\*\*

Ovak had never known the love of a woman but the voice which called to him awakened a dormant passion within him. He had not the wisdom to question the source or motives of the siren who had thoroughly charmed him with her song.

The woman's face was beautiful but cold and evil. Her body was that of a human except she had two large wings in place of arms and bird-like legs that bent outward, terminating in the sure-footed grip of avian talons.

Without the use of hands, most of her breed became carrion-eaters but Cragbreast had done more. She had observed the sorcerers, who had proven too dangerous for her, and had learned much from them.

Cragbreast was an old, clever harpy long-used to manipulating the weak-minded. *Shall I make him walk off the cliff or shall I seduce the blood from his neck while he yet lives?* she asked herself. She noticed the brute strength inherent in the barbarian and decided it would be safer to devour this one cold; he would walk the cliff.

\*\*

Blackscale heard the charming song of the siren, too, but did not fall under its spell. He pinched his ears and hummed his own tune while he dug in his pack. A thief's pack is his life and it is not uncommon to find many disparate items secreted within, but Blackscale's pack was truly a wonder of the needle. It contained more than twenty secret pockets that few of his ilk could locate and he used them to store all manner of peculiarities that were inherent to his trade.

He grunted and argued with the pack until he found what he was looking for. He transferred the small, gooey substance into a handy pocket on his tunic and moved toward the song of the siren.

He almost laughed when he saw the unfortunate barbarian and thought to himself, *I've seen zombies with higher will than he has!* The barbarian's face wore a blank visage and he seemed to be moaning slightly as the entranced are often compelled to do.

The kobold wrested his attention back to the larger scene before him and shrieked reflexively when he saw the barbarian standing before the cliff. He saw the harpy hovering in front of her prey and knew that he had to act quickly. He raised a leather sling above his head and gave it a quick flick of the wrist.

The projectile bounced ineffectually off the harpy's grey feathers but it succeeded in interrupting her song for a few moments. He could feel her keen eyes raking the horizon for him but knew that she couldn't find him through the concealment of the trees. Yet, this time he did not wish to remain hidden. This time, he must really *do* something.

The entranced barbarian had stopped walking when the harpy's song had been interrupted but the spell had not been broken.

Within seconds he would be willed over the side. The kobold knew what he needed to do.

"Watch out you stupid lunk!" he shouted in the common tongue and sped toward the barbarian on quick feet. The harpy shrieked when she saw him and surprised him by casting a small, green ray that looked like an arrow, which narrowly missed him. *I never heard of a spellcasting harpy before! What are times coming to?*

The barbarian took no notice of the valiant rescue that the kobold was attempting. Blackscale launched himself at the barbarian and scrambled up his hide armor toward his big, bald head.

The harpy shrieked in rage at the audacity of the little draconid. *I'll blast them both!* she cackled aloud and began to cast her spell.

The kobold clung to the thick hides on the barbarian's shoulders and removed the gooey substance that he had readied. He shoved a gob of it into each of the barbarian's large ears so that he would not hear the harpy's song nor fall under its spell if she began to sing once more.

His strategy was sound, but he had underestimated Cragbreast, who finished her spell by pointing a streak of flame from her finger directly at the hulking brute and the tiny, would-be savior on his shoulders, who were instantly engulfed in the flames of her *fireball*.

\*\*

Dhalin Yaro and Torga rode very near to the tragic scene that was playing out between the harpy and her prey but did not see the barbarian's tracks lead off the trail or hear the harpy's song. They travelled on through the dense forest for several more miles when Torga reined Trample to a stop.

"Slow your mount, my friend, I smell blood." Torga said to the young wizard. He looked to the ground and saw the wolf-tracks clearly. He dismounted and followed the tracks on foot. There was no need to hold Truefoot's reigns for she was intelligent and considered the wizard her friend, not her master.

The tracks soon brought him to the dead horse and the bodies of two wolves who had not escaped Ratamon's fiery mace. Dhalin knew nothing of the wielder; only that feral canine's skulls had been caved in by blunt force and not by a blade.

"It is strange that the other wolves left this poor beast whole." he mused aloud.

"Yes, it certainly is and I don't like it." Torga agreed.

They continued on the path and the tracker now noted only one pair of footprints. He quickly guessed that they had been made by the horse's rider and was surprised that anyone had survived the wolf's ambush.

They continued in silence until the sun began to set, then made camp several yards off the trail and decided to chance a fire.

\*\*

The barbarian awoke from the trance with no memory of what had transpired. He knew only that his flesh had been charred and his hide armor was on fire. He fell instinctively to the ground and rolled to extinguish the flames while the incensed harpy resumed her infectious song, not knowing that the barbarian could no longer hear it due to the goo placed in his ears by the kobold.

Ovak could see perfectly well, however, and took careful aim with his longbow at the overconfident avian, who he rightly guessed had set him on fire. He loosed the arrow and it soared through the soft cartilage on Cragbreast's left wing. She shrieked in pain and

her face grew white with fear as she discovered that she could no longer remain aloft. She flung horrible curses at Ovak as she tumbled toward the ground.

Ovak turned from the cliffside and nearly stepped on the inert body of the kobold. His armor and skin were blackened just as Ovak's own and the barbarian compassionately decided to help the small, unmoving creature. *Maybe it will know what happened*, he thought dimly.

Ovak picked the kobold up and placed him over his shoulder then took a quick account of his bearings. *I do not remember coming here, but Ovak Spearthrower is never lost!* He soon ascertained his direction with the unerring intuition of his class and resumed his fast trot southward after the orc-mage and his horse.

He wondered how the kobold had come to be with him when the harpy had sent the fireball at him. *Perhaps it wasn't the harpy at all but the little rascal on my shoulder who blasted me!* He thought with grim amusement. Although he had never seen *anyone* cast a fireball before, he thought that the harpy was the more likely of the two. He couldn't imagine the two-foot tall kobold throwing one.

There were now several thoughts troubling Ovak's simple mind and he didn't like it. He turned his head to see if the kobold had awoken but observed no change. Ovak began to believe that he would get no answers from the small creature who rested on his shoulder, for he believed that it would soon succumb to its burns.

\*\*

Rock Redstone and Fatima Windsong rode hard all day but met with little adventure. They reached the dead horse well after dark and marveled, as had Dhalin Yaro, that the horse had not been devoured by those who had slain it.

They continued to walk through the dark forest, hoping to make up for lost time, though they suspected their quarry to already be far away. They had exchanged little conversation during the long ride but their misery showed upon their countenances like rain on a pond.

"Cleric, I see the light of a fire!" Rock hissed at his companion, startling her from her hours-long reverie.

"Let's dismount here and proceed on foot."

The soldier did not relish taking orders from the cleric but her idea was sound. *Besides*, Rock thought as he eased his sore butt from the horse, *I'll be glad to stand on my own two legs again*. He armed himself with his axe but left his shield on the mount. Windsong carried her light mace on her belt but left her crossbow and small shield with her steed. She understood that they needed to move silently if they were to learn more about the camp before they were seen or heard themselves.

"Before we go," she said, "please allow me to bestow upon you the blessing of Pelor."

The dwarf was impatient for action but permitted the cleric to cast the spell on him. When she had finished, she said, "You shall now be protected from evil. May Pelor bless our deeds."

The dwarf grunted his hesitant appreciation and they tried to move silently into the thick trees where they had spotted the campfire.

\*\*

The barbarian made up for his detour with the harpy by forcing himself to run throughout the night. He was just hitting his stride when he found his poor horse. He circled it warily, unwilling to believe that it was the mare he had raised from a colt.



He mourned briefly, as those who live harsh lives learn to do, and soon noticed that the saddlebags had been removed. Even in the darkness, he was able to see where the trail continued into the forest to the south.

The blood boiled in his veins as he recalled the villain who had stolen his horse. He spoke to the unconscious kobold on his shoulder, "Well, friend, shall we go avenge this vile deed?" The barbarian noticed that he liked having the quiet companionship of the little draconid and he began to converse with it as he ran.

Suddenly, from less than a mile away, he heard a woman's scream, "Stop! Do not kill the sergeant of the City Guard!"

\*\*

Torga relieved Dhalin and had been keeping watch over their little camp for hours, when she heard the familiar cracking sound of a small branch breaking under a stealthy step. Her senses sprang into high alert and she stole silently through the camp seeking out the intruder.

Sergeant Redstone winced as Fatima stepped on the dry branch that had aroused the dwarf who had been watching over the bandit's camp. There was no sign of the orc mage but the sentry was moving closer by the second. He hatched a hurried plan.

"When the sentry gets close, I'll step out to confront him and you stay out of the way." he hissed at the cleric.

"How do you know this is the bandit's camp?"

"Who else would be out here?" he replied angrily.

"We're out here and we're not bandits." The level-headed cleric said.

"Hmmpf," was the dwarf's curt reply. "Quiet, here he comes."

"Who goes there?" Torga called into the darkness.

"It is I, thief, come to deliver you from your sins!" Rock cried and stepped into the open.

"Thief, says you?" Torga replied defiantly, "Now you shall meet my axe and repent those words!" She fell upon him, wielding her war-axe in both hands since she, too, had left her shield at the camp.

The sound of ringing steel pealed through the quiet night. Windsong watched the dwarves' ferocious battle but was uncertain what to do about it. *I'm not as sure as the sergeant that these are the bandits we're looking for and Pelor forgive me if I help him slay an innocent.* Her thoughts grew panicky as the unknown sentry seemed to be pressing her companion to the full extent of his ability.

Dhalin Yaro was a sound sleeper but the unmistakable sound of mortal combat was sufficient to awaken him. He stumbled out of his bedroll and moved toward the sound. He carried no weapon but chanted the strange invocation that would summon a creature to his aid from the celestial plane if he spoke the final word that would complete the spell. He followed the sound of clashing weapons and saw the two combatants dueling fiercely.

Torga aimed a blow at the other's neck, missing by less than an inch. Rock countered with the butt of his weapon which caught Torga underneath the chin. Rock followed through with a vicious swipe that would have cut her in half had it fell where he desired it. Instead, his foe tumbled underneath his swing and placed a kick that sent Rock tumbling backward. Before he could recover his feet, Torga stood over him with her axe above her head. It was already in motion when she heard the woman's voice cry out.

"Stop! Do not slay the sergeant of the City Guard!"

Dhalin Yaro took note of the scene and quickly abandoned the summoning spell in favor of one that would simply hold the intruders in a state of suspended animation. He raised his hands and began the words that would complete the spell. "Ron-eeya-shack-el-burr--"

The barbarian sprang from nowhere and caught the wizard completely unaware. His tackle brought them both to the ground but the barbarian rolled into a fighting stance while the wizard just groaned on the ground. He was already raising his great-axe above his head when he noticed the elven features of his foe. *Elves do not consort with orcs*, he thought and stayed his blow.

"City Guard?" Torga was surprised at the words and turned from her foe toward the human voice that had uttered them.

"Perhaps we should stoke your fire and share our tale." Cleric Windsong said plaintively.

The adrenaline of war waned from her limbs as Torga lowered her axe. The barbarian, too, realized that a mistake had been made and backed away from the fallen wizard, still carrying the burned kobold on his shoulder.

Dhalin raised himself from his embarrassing position on the ground but held no malice toward the barbarian. "Shall we discuss the situation over a cup of broth, valiant brother?" Ovak remained silent but nodded his head. He didn't understand much of what was happening but, to the barbarian's credit, he decided to refrain from cleaving the unarmed wizard and to hear his tale instead.

Torga brought Rock and Windsong to the fire and the tense combatants began to introduce themselves.

\*\*

Ratamon maintained his swift pace throughout the long night and reached the dark waycastle in the early light of dawn. He was stopped at the gate by a crude voice from atop the wall.

"Halt and state your name or die where you stand!" The orc-mage was testy and shot an arrow of acid from his finger that sizzled as it met the flesh of the soldier.

"Ah! Make it stop burning!" the terrified guard cried out. The others on duty recognized the spell, as well as the mage who had cast it, and quickly raised the heavy portcullis.

Ratamon cooled his rage and summoned sufficient dignity to slow his pace as he entered the stronghold. Dark-skinned orcs were sleeping haphazardly on the ground and he took care not to step on more than a dozen of them as he approached the small tower.

He was again challenged by the sleepy sentry but this time simply replied with his name and was admitted within. Large iron braziers held the burning embers of last night's fire and the tired wizard mounted the steps toward General Grogg's receiving room.

Grogg was a large ogre who had risen within the ranks of the lich's army by virtue of his long resume of destruction and death. He was slightly more intelligent than other ogres but Ratamon held nothing but contempt for the dim-witted brute. *Still, he thought bitterly, Grogg outranks me in this army and I'll have to deal with him if I want my plan to come to fruition.*

"Comrade Commander Grogg," he began, "I have ill tidings from the temple of Pelor."

The large ogre raised himself into an upright position on the silken pillows that had been fouled by his unwashed body for too many

moons. He woke his servant with a cruel swipe of his hand and ordered her to bring meat and ale to the wizard.

"What news do you bring, wizard."

The orc-mage realized that he must admit to his failure if he did not name a scapegoat, so he replied, "My plan was thwarted by a great wizard with many soldiers. I was overcome by them and placed into a cell in their despicable dungeon."

"Bah! Do not lie to me, Ratamon. I have already heard from my spies that you were beaten down by a *woman!*"

Shame burned in the wizard's veins and his ears grew crimson with rage but he mastered his emotions quickly. "She is a mighty cleric with the full blessing of Pelor."

"So you say. Have you that which you were supposed to steal?" Commander Grogg asked condescendingly.

"I have not."

"Mmm, I see. Shall I put you to death quickly or would you prefer to die for an eternity inside our leader's Magic Jar? Harhar!"

"I will speak with him directly." Ratamon bowed curtly and busied himself with the haunch of lamb and ale that had been brought to him.

When he had supped, the wizard rose and followed a corridor that led to his private chamber. He spoke the word that removed the magical trap that he had placed on the door to protect his treasured items that resided within. He did not trust Grogg or his shifty, dishonorable battalion of greedy goblins.

He bolted the door behind him and moved toward the scrying orb that rested on a tripod wrought of partially bleached elven bones. He lit dozens of black candles and began to focus his energies into the orb. He gave little thought to the world around him and, as a result, failed to observe the sleek raven that watched him from atop a bookcase.

Soon, he would have to admit his defeat to his master, the ancient lich known to the world as Mindweb. *Will I be simply stricken down by my master's foul will, or will he choose to remove my soul in a bloody necromantic ritual?* Ratamon knew not, but desired to meet his fate with as little time lost as possible. If he survived, he knew that he still had many labors ahead of him.

He closed his eyes and began the low chant that activated the magical orb. Soon, the opaque mist that had formed within the crystal cleared and the hideous visage of the lich appeared within its confines.

"Oh Supreme One," Ratamon began but was interrupted by a painful constriction in his head, as if strong coils of muscle were tightening around his brain. Even as he felt his skull about to crack he knew that his master was probably not going to kill him outright. The lich would be far more likely to steal Ratamon's soul and imbue a crafted item or spell with its power than he was to waste it on mere death. The orc-mage smiled as everything went black.

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"I am Fatima Windsong, cleric of Pelor. I am traveling under the authority of the Temple of Pelor and this man, sergeant Redstone, has been assigned to protect and aid me." Windsong was pleased that the group had elected to talk instead of shed blood but she was concerned that she would not approve of their tales. *If these are*

*murderers and thieves, I shall not remain in their company*, she affirmed to her reticent conscience.

Rock stood and bowed to the group respectfully but said nothing. Lieutenant Torga realized that she was probably the highest ranking officer in the group and tried to muster an authoritative tone.

"I am Torga, first Lieutenant in the City Guard." She was pleased when Rock stood once more and saluted. Torga returned his salute hastily.

"I am Dhalin Yaro, humble wizard of the academy. Lieutenant Torga and I are traveling to the ethereal wastes." This news had the instantaneous effect of chilling all who were present, though only the cleric had ever heard of the ethereal wastes before. Torga, in particular, raised both eyebrows and shifted her weight uncomfortably as she bravely accepted the knowledge of their true destination.

The four civilized adventurers then looked toward the quiet, hulking barbarian. They observed for the first time, the slightly porcine features of the brute who had apparently been born of a union between a human and orc. They saw, too, the inert body of the kobold on his shoulder. Ovak slowly realized that they were looking at him and that he must give an account of himself.

He rose so quickly that Rock and Torga nearly assumed battle positions, for the barbarian stood several inches over seven feet tall and exuded potential violence. His voice, however, was calm and he spoke without embellishment.

"My name is Ovak Spearthrower. I seek an orc-mage who stole my horse."

"Was that your horse who was slain by wolves a few miles back?" Dhalin asked.

"It was." The barbarian was accustomed to bitter disappointments and tried to remain stoic but all present suspected that he had lost a friend when the horse had been killed.

Windsong rose and moved toward the kobold. "And what of your little friend?" she asked.

"I am not certain. I believe that I fell under the charmed song of a harpy and do not know how he appeared with me. The siren cast a fireball at me and I believe that he, too, felt its burst."

Dhalin thought to himself, *This barbarian must be mistaken. Harpies do not cast fireballs.*

The cleric knelt before the kobold and rejoiced to find the little guy still breathing for she knew that her god could save him through her hands! She held the plain relic of Pelor out before her; the one that had been inexplicably exchanged with her own holy symbol by Herras. It, too, was a graven image of a golden sun and it successfully channeled His holy energy into her. She began to utter a brief prayer that ended with, "By the will and might of Pelor the Light!"

As she spoke, she held her hands over the kobold and sunlight erupted from them. The holy light fully engulfed the fallen rogue, washing him in its intense glow.

The kobold's skin, which had been shrivelled and charred, healed with new growth into a smooth healthy, black, which was quite normal for a blackscale kobold. The shallow breathing began to deepen and his eyelids began to flutter as if he was awakening from a deep sleep.

Those present who were accustomed to such wonders paid little attention to the common marvel, but Ovak was overawed. He had



never suspected even the existence of healing magic and he embraced the embarrassed cleric bodily.

"You have raised him from the dead!" he cried.

"I have merely been the instrument of my lord, Pelor. It is to Him that you owe your gratitude. And," she added bashfully, "he was not dead. I cannot yet raise the fallen from that state."

Ovak would have none of her deferment; from that moment on, Cleric Windsong was his queen. He scooped the awakening kobold into his arms and danced a primitive jig around the fire.

The jouncing awakened the kobold, who was understandably irritable as a result. His admonishing tongue, too, had been awakened and he gave Ovak a fine temper tantrum.

"Put me down, you big lunk! What do you think you're doing?" He kicked and wriggled but the barbarian held him high aloft in one large hand. Now that he was eleven feet off the ground, the kobold suspended his struggles somewhat. Then he seized an opportunity and crawled head-first down the long, thick arm toward the barbarian's face.

Ovak, now fearing for his eyes and nose, shook his arm violently and the twenty-four inch draconid flew into the air. He tumbled gently as he landed and didn't look any worse for the fall.

He looked at the laughing faces around the campfire and quickly understood that he was not in any danger. He decided to make the most of his grand entrance and he bowed low and clicked his tongue so rapidly that he sounded like a rattlesnake and a canine barking a cacophonous duet.

"Dyllonius Blackscale, at your service." he said proudly.

"Welcome, friend." The cleric said.

"I am Ovak Spearthrower, little friend. I am pleased that you survived the fireball."

*What fireball? Oh, yes! The harpy blasted the big oaf while I was perched on his shoulder trying to put goo in his ears.*

"I am rather pleased with the fact myself, though I am rather good at avoiding the worst of trouble when it comes."

"How came you to be with me when the harpy blasted me?"

"It's a rather long story, but here it goes." Dyllonius took a deep breath and began excitedly, "I awoke in your saddlebag as the orcmage stole your horse but I escaped when he ran into a pack of hungry wolves. I was traveling back toward your farm when I saw you. You were under the spell of her song and she was leading you to a cliff."

Ovak's face grew pale and he muttered under his breath, "I hate magic."

"I sniped her with a stone to interrupt her song and was shoving hao-tree goo into your ears when she hit us."

"You saved my life?" Ovak the barbarian was not one to make light of such a deed. "You have my eternal gratitude, little Blackscale."

"You are quite welcome, and by the way, I've been living in your saddlebag for several months now and I must say that you keep an exceptionally clean barn!" He did not know that the barbarian had later destroyed the barn in a fit of rage.

Dhalin Yaro said to Ovak, "I'm beginning to understand, it was your farm we passed many miles back. I'm sorry to say, it appears that someone demolished your barn since your departure."

The barbarian flushed and said, "It is of no consequence. I shall build another." He did not want to tell anyone that it was he who had destroyed his own building. He was not proud of his temper.

"And you now seek vengeance upon the thief?" Torga asked him.

"That is so."

"We, too, seek the orc-mage." Fatima offered. "He infiltrated the Temple of Pelor and attempted to slay me, but with the aid of Pelor, I bested him and his goblins. I placed him in an anti-magic cell but he managed to escape. The high priestess holds me responsible and I am not to return to the city without him."

"The responsibility lies with me, begging your pardon, Cleric." Rock admitted. "It was I who fell for his deception and I who is to blame for his escape. My superiors, too, have tasked me with his recapture."

Torga was appalled at the sergeant's failure and thought that he was getting off lightly. If she were his commanding officer, he would be punished far more severely. Yet, she said nothing of this to him for he seemed to be a capable man, eager to right his wrong.

"Do you know why he assaulted you in the temple?" Dhalin asked the cleric.

"I do not. He arrived in the form of a human and ordered me to raze the temple to the ground." She shuddered at the thought.

"He seemed to think that he had more power than he actually possessed for he aimed both of his hands at me but nothing happened. That was how I got the jump on him and his two cowardly goblins."

Dyllonius laughed inwardly but did not reveal to the party that he had stolen the orc-mage's rings and caused the scene that she had

just described. He could imagine the look on the orc-mage's face when he had discovered them missing and was pleased that he had been of some service to the cleric.

"Do you think that you were his sole target?" Dhalin asked.

"I do not know. I have thwarted his plans several times in the past and I am sure that he harbors no love for me, but I am just a lowly cleric whose death would avail him little."

"Since our goals are aligned, I suggest that we travel together and track the down the fiend. I have a few questions that I believe he could answer." Dhalin said.

"And I, too!" Torga said hotly while fingering the haft of her axe. "I am to bring him back alive," Windsong stated, "but I would be glad of your company. I must, however, extract a promise that you will not perform any act that contradicts the teachings of Pelor."

The promises were freely given by all but Ovak and Blackscale had no idea what Pelor taught, or what actions may or may not run in opposition to them.

"The kobold and I will follow you, Cleric Windsong, and we pledge our lives to you." The barbarian's noble heart was touching, but Dyllonius was disconcerted by having someone else pledge his own life for him. *Still, he thought, the big lunk will make a fine steed if I can just get him to do what I say!*

So it was agreed that the three unlikely pairs joined to form one motley adventuring party with the immediate goal of tracking down the elusive Ratamon and returning him to the city for justice.

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Mindweb was a powerful lich, already capable of raising a veritable army of undead to serve him, but he was not yet omniscient. His long life had spanned many centuries and the patience that he had acquired served him poorly at times that required swift action. He had not recently scryed the tome and, therefore, was unaware that it was being carried to the ethereal wastes. He knew only that he wanted to snatch the soul from the wretched servant, Ratamon, for his failure to obtain the relic he desired from the temple of Pelor.

He felt the life ebbing from his victim and wrestled for mastery over his desires. He released his constricting will and said to the gasping wizard within the crystal ball, "You will return to the city and obtain the relic, or I shall bind your soul to the lowliest object, which shall be used to shovel pig filth for all time."

"I understand." The mage managed to reply, making an effort to sound reverent and penitent. Inwardly, however, he smiled at his successful estimation of his master's character. *Someday I shall wrest his power and wield it as my own*, he thought with grim amusement.

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Dhalin thought that Ratamon's trail had grown cold but Ovak, who turned out to be the superior tracker, picked up the scent and the party moved swiftly through the forest after him.

Dyllonius Blackscale rode upon Ovak's broad shoulder as he ran while the others rode their mounts a dozen yards behind them. After several hours of travel, Ovak halted and raised his thick arm into the air to signal the others to stop.

"What have you seen, Ovak?" Blackscale asked.

"Nothing, but I smell goblins, little master."

"Ooh, I hate goblins. I'll sneak ahead and find them." The rogue tumbled easily from the barbarian's shoulder and quickly disappeared into the forest. Ovak knew the little thief could move far more quietly than he could but still wished that he and his axe could accompany his unlikely friend.

When the others caught up with him, Ovak said, "I smell goblins. Blackscale has gone ahead to scout for them."

"Goblins are tribal," Dhalin said, "if there's one around, there's bound to be dozens."

"We should go after him." Torga agreed.

"It is, perhaps, wiser that he scout alone for they are likely to have laid an ambush for us." Rock offered wisely. He was a capable sergeant who studied military manoeuvres for enjoyment and they trusted him explicitly.

Twenty tense minutes passed and the group had just decided to press forward when the sneak-thief came running back through the forest toward them. "They're after me! Dozens of them! Run!"

Flight was impossible, for there was nowhere to run except back up the trail. Torga, Rock and Ovak moved to the front of the line and readied themselves for battle while the cleric and the wizard began praying and chanting. The first two goblins appeared within seconds and fell quickly before the warriors' axes.

An arrow whizzed by Dhalin's ear and he spoke a command word that summoned magic that would shield him from most of their projectiles. Ovak caught one of the tiny goblin arrows, that was smaller than the bolt of a crossbow, in his thigh and he roared with pain and anger.

There was no time to look after him, however, for suddenly the small, red bodies of goblins were everywhere. Rock smashed one with his shield as it launched itself at him from the trees above but three more harried his axe-arm so that he couldn't swing it effectively. He could feel the tiny, sharp teeth pierce his flesh between the bracer and gauntlet.

Torga whirled her axe around her body with marvelous agility and managed to avoid becoming similarly entangled by the swarm. Dhalin Yaro loosed several arrows but was dismayed when most of them missed their wily little targets.

He dropped his bow so that his hands could be free to trace a complicated somatic pattern in the air. A thin stream of clear, sticky thread burst from his fingers and stuck firmly in the trees, effectively blocking a twenty foot section of the forest where most of the ambushers were coming from.

Windsong activated her holy mace which became wreathed in holy light and she boldly entered the melee. She struck down three goblins before they overwhelmed her with their numbers. Dhalin wasted valuable time thinking. *Goblins are too cowardly and foolish to organize such an efficient attack. I wonder if...*

His thoughts were both interrupted and confirmed when he heard a goblin-bugle play a loud, sour note and he saw with intense dismay that three hobgoblin chieftains riding huge, wolf-like wargs were bearing down upon them. They appeared behind the adventurers, clearly hoping to rout them in a single, vicious charge. Dhalin glanced at his friends but their attention was focused on the goblins that assailed them to the front and did not notice the riders behind them.

Dhalin was loathe to do it but felt that he had little choice if he wanted his party to survive the ambush. He hurriedly muttered a

string of incantations and pointed his hand toward the charging riders. A thin stream of fire flew from his finger and exploded into a searing fireball centered upon the middle rider. The area of effect caught all three and engulfed them in scorching flames. Their howls of pain were short but dire and Dhalin would never forget them.

As he feared, the arcane fire also ignited the surrounding trees and soon the combatants found themselves surrounded by a burning wildfire. The goblins broke off the attack to save their own skins from the flames but the party was trapped within the ring of fire.

"What have you done?" Torga admonished the wizard while panting for breath then answered her own question. "You've killed us all!"

The wizard ignored his friend while he wracked his brain for a solution that would save them from his folly. He pulled a single, long feather from his pouch of arcane ingredients and muttered a command word. A pair of immense, transparent wings sprouted from his shoulders and he gained the power of flight. He only hoped that he possessed the strength to carry the heavy fighters to safety before the spell was exhausted.

He grabbed the cleric underneath her arms and with a powerful beat of his wings flew fifty feet into the air, which was high enough to avoid the worst of the heat rising from the fire. The stalwart warriors were pleased that the cleric had been saved but had no such hope for themselves. The flames grew closer every second and they fearlessly prepared themselves for immolation.

Dhalin returned moments later and carried Torga, against her protests to safety. "I'll return for you two!" he called down to Rock and Ovak.



Ovak turned his head to Blackscale who rested on his shoulder. "If the wizard returns, you must go with him. He will not be able to support my weight."

"I'm not leaving you, Lunk!" The kobold was surprised at his own words. He usually worried only about saving his own skin and he wondered at his affection for the barbarian which had caused him to risk it twice already.

"Oh! I have something that might help us!" The rogue said and hurriedly rummaged through his pack.

Dhalin returned badly scorched from the flames. His wing-tips were smoking and he looked exhausted. It was clear that he could make only one more rescue before he was done for.

"Rock, drop your heavy shield and cling to me!"

The sergeant did as he was told although he was loath to lose his shield. He sheathed his axe and held onto Dhalin's legs but the weight of his plate armor made it difficult for Dhalin's wings to carry them aloft.

He laboriously carried Rock to the clearing one-hundred feet away and dropped heavily to the ground. A guilty tear escaped his eye before he lost consciousness. The others looked at one another with large eyes.

*It had all happened so fast!* Windsong thought sadly. *Now we have lost the wizard, the barbarian and the kobold to the sinister little goblins.*

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The hobgoblin witch-doctor named Krigg watched the rescue from his high vantage in the trees and cursed under his breath. His three chieftains and their valuable mounts had been lost and he was already planning the punishment for the survivors of the ambush

party. He smiled with a small degree of grim satisfaction as he watched the wizard slump to the ground. *There will be no winged-savior for the barbarian and his little pet*, he thought with rancor.

He spoke curtly to his second in command, "Finish them off!"

The lieutenant hurried off to carry out his order, relishing the meat that would be roasted that night. He cared little for the loss of his men and of the three chieftains who had been slain. Instead, he selfishly thought, *I deserved a raise in station anyway!*

He led a murdering party of nearly thirty goblins toward the clearing where the cleric was attempting to heal the fallen wizard. The two dwarven warriors attempted to guard their flanks but held little hope that they could hold out against the dozens of goblins that they knew would soon be coming for them.

Cleric Windsong prayed to Pelor for wisdom and guidance and was rewarded with a boon from her deity. She and her ragtag party were granted a small circle of holy *sanctuary* that would last for nearly an hour. She hoped that it would be enough.

She barked instructions to the warriors, "We are protected for a time but the effect will dissipate if either of you attack." The sergeant was outraged. "With all due respect, your clericness, there are dozens of little red beasts with long, pointy sticks about to fall upon us and you don't want us to fight them?"

"He's right, Cleric. They'll roast us on the spit and dance while they dine." Torga affirmed.

"You must have faith, soldiers of the axe. If you swing your weapons, we are lost."

The dwarves grumbled under their breath but agreed to stay their hands. As all worthy soldiers must, they both knew that one day their lives would be ended by the point of steel and they reconciled themselves to follow orders and meet their fate nobly.

As the goblins charged at them from all sides, they found it exceedingly difficult to stay their war-axes. They watched with mild amusement, however, as the arrows were turned from the invisible shell that surrounded them. Goblin spears were thrust at them but they, too, could not penetrate the holy sanctuary.

Krigg roared with rage but knew that the cleric's holy magic would not last long. *Soon, the shield will fail and they shall fall beneath my goblins' spears.*

The cleric knew it, too. Her attempts to revive the wizard had failed, for he had fallen unconscious from exhaustion and not from injury. She wondered how long the three of them could hold out against the goblins once her spell had worn off.

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"Here, drink this." Blackscale said as he handed a small, amber vial of cloudy liquid to Ovak.

"I do not need liquor or poison, little one. I shall go to my death bravely."

"You think I am giving you poison? Haha! Surely our position is not so dire as all that. Drink it my friend and we will both be saved."

The barbarian quaffed the contents of the vial and immediately began to rise off the ground as if his feet were lighter than air. They began to rise faster than the rest of his bulky body so that he lost his balance and soon found himself upside down, as if someone was carrying him by his boots.

"No! Not like that! What are you doing you dumb lunk?" Blackscale cried as he scrambled to maintain a hold on the inverted barbarian's hide armor. He climbed up his vertical legs like a flagpole.

The potion of levitation was working properly although the dim-witted barbarian did not know how to control it. Yet, they rose above the flames and heat and Ovak slowly gained a slight degree of mastery over his altitude and direction, though he could not right himself.

They drifted aimlessly for a few minutes until they were snagged in the tall boughs of a tree. "Not here, you oaf! How are we going to get down?" the angry kobold admonished.

His words drew the attention of Krigg, who was perched only a few feet away from them. The hobgoblin smiled cruelly and withdrew his scimitar. *This will be easy*, he thought as he closed the distance toward the inverted barbarian.

Blackscale leaped from the barbarian and caught himself on a branch above. Krigg took little notice of him, suspecting that he posed little threat. He guessed that the creature was only trying to save its own skin because that's what Krigg would have done. Krigg eyed the flesh of the half-orc greedily and planned to make a trophy of the enormous skull.

The kobold knew that he should abandon the barbarian to his fate but somehow couldn't find the will to do so. He saw the hobgoblin draw closer and noticed a horn on the chieftain's belt. He snatched it as easily as he had pickpocketed the hapless marks in the city.

He raised the heavy horn to his lips and aimed its bell at the hobgoblin's ear and blew hard. The result was both humorous and effective, for the sound was deafening and succeeded in startling

the unwary hobgoblin. He raised both of his hands to cover his ears before he realized that he needed them to maintain his position among the branches. His curses rang loudly as his body fell to the ground far below.

Ovak watched the scene upside down and would have fallen, too, at the sounding of the horn had his boots not kept him aloft. He wrestled himself to an upright position and clung tightly to the tree.

"How long will this last?" he asked Blackscale.

"It should wear off soon."

"What has become of our friends?"

"I don't know but I can see dozens of the vile redskins converging on a spot not too far away. I'll bet they're trying to finish them off."

"We must get to them quickly."

"Oh no you don't! I risked my neck to save you and I'll not have you lose yours in some reckless rescue attempt." The kobold spoke with the authority of a superior but soon realized that he wasn't in control at all; his willful, inverted mount was. The barbarian loosed his hold on the tree and promptly floated upside down once more. The kobold leaped onto his upright legs as the barbarian attempted to will himself to down toward the clearing.

The sounding of Krigg's unmistakable horn of retreat confused the goblin lieutenant, Frigg, but he had been trained well enough to follow orders, not to question them. He gave the signal to his men and soon they abandoned the clearing. The four adventurers couldn't understand why the goblins had retreated but they were too relieved to worry about it for long.

"We must get to a defensible position quickly, before they come back." Torga said.

"Where shall we go?" The cleric asked. Her cheeks beamed with pride in her god for she was certain that it was He who had affected their rescue.

"Oh no, looks like we've got another problem. Look!" Rock said and pointed to the sky.

"Is it a harpy?" Torga asked.

"I don't think so."

As the apparition drew closer, the party's levity was replaced with raucous laughter and relief. The inverted barbarian drifted toward them like a leaf in the wind while the upright kobold could be seen gripping his boots, looking for all the world like a sailor on lookout from the mast of a mighty sailing ship.

Ovak willed himself closer to the ground as the effects of the potion wore off and they fell the final thirty feet to land painfully on the ground. The barbarian's heavy frame sustained significant injury but the lighter and luckier kobold tumbled for almost no damage at all.

The cleric raced toward the fallen warrior and quickly healed the worst of his injuries. Once he regained consciousness and found himself reunited with the *healing angel*, he quickly forgave Blackscale for his potion of *upside-down*, as he called it.

The battle-weary party quickly withdrew to find a safer camp several miles farther away from the scene of the ambush, where the wildfire still raged. The light from its flames reflected in their eyes as they watched it burn for most of the long night. Dhalin

Yaro recovered from his swoon and gazed in mute sadness as his spell consumed a wide swath of the forest.

The party had survived the goblin ambush but had lost a full day on the ordeal while their quarry drew further away. They would need all of Ovak's wilderness experience to pick up the trail in the morning, if the goblin horde and the wildfire had not obliterated Ratamon's tracks altogether.

\*\*

Wraithbone Wishcraft had been born a drow elf but he was one no longer. The sleek, black flesh of his youth had turned scaly and tawny. His humanoid shape had been unwillingly exchanged with that of a four-legged beast with large, bat-like wings. He flew through the night sky for short distances and prowled like the lion he almost was when on the ground.

The herd of cattle, sheep and goats lay below him and he selected one. He encircled the unwitting herd to gain altitude, then pulled his wings back to begin the dive. He hurtled through the air with the speed of an osprey and his four claws caught an old goat which he lifted easily. He arched his back to complete the practiced attack maneuver and rose high into the air with his prize bleating its terror. The dragonne would eat well that night back home in the land that humanoids called the ethereal wastes.

Wraithbone Wishcraft had learned not to call it *home*, preferring the self-effacing, bestial word *lair*. *The creature returned to its lair*, he thought bitterly, using the terms he had always used when referring to beasts. He saw no reason to alter his diction now simply because he was one himself.

He bled the goat and caught the warm crimson in a crude stone pot. He wished that he still had the use of his hands, even for a single day of the year. The worst part of his punishment was the lack of hands with which to craft and build. Without them, he was forced

to make do with crudities only slightly superior to those of a wild beast.

He skinned and cleaned the carcass easily with his claws and placed his meal on the spit then turned to his book. He opened it with the mighty paw of a lion and had learned to turn the pages with his gritty tongue. It is true that the pages often stuck together so that he could rarely reread any tome, but he had an extraordinary memory that didn't often require refreshing.

He had grown into a wise elf and was attempting to endure his punishment with optimism, even if he was to be denied his dignity. As a young wizard from an aristocratic family, his impertinence had only been exceeded by his arcane skill. He had learned too many powerful spells too soon and had been forever doomed to pay for the youthful indiscretion.

Once, long ago, he had foolishly challenged a newcomer in the Arcane Ring, which was a spellcasters' combat arena. The stranger was a small, unassuming kuo-toa druid who specialized in spells of transmutation.

Wishcraft had struck the druid with his rapier on the first round but drew little blood. The kuo-toa responded with a simple spell known as *shapechange* but with the added complexity of *permanence*.

Once he had been transformed into the dragonne, he gave immediate vent to his rage and had foolishly torn the druid to pieces. Perhaps if he had demonstrated more compassion and had allowed the druid to live, or even to win the match, then he would have continued to live the lush life of a wealthy nobledrow. *Bah!* he thought, *It doesn't matter anyway. That was so long ago that I wouldn't even know what to do with hands anymore.*

He looked out upon the ethereal wastes and sighed. The land was cursed with an eternal gloom and spirits of the dead were given



free reign of the domain. Wraiths and spectres from all races warred eternally amongst themselves while the wights and devourers fed on the carnage.

Wraithbone had learned that the undead had little use for the living unless they were under the command of a necromancer. *If that ever happens*, he mused, *the creature will have to find a new lair.*

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Ratamon awoke in his chamber, fully healed of his wounds by the dark-clerics of Boccob. He smiled and licked his tusks with anticipation. He leaped out of bed and summoned his ancillaries to him.

When they had assembled, he spoke to them as if he had never failed at anything. "I will need two new wondrous rings immediately. I lost mine in the sewers." The two crafting-specialists bowed and withdrew to begin their task.

To the lore-masters, adepts and spell-scribes, he assigned the research of a new spell which he described in great detail to them. The listeners' eyes grew wide with lust as the power of the new spell dawned upon them. They, too, were dismissed and Ratamon was grateful to be alone with his most trusted chieftains.

"Where is Krigg?" he demanded angrily, "I'll have him boiled alive!"

One orc-captain stepped forward and said, "Sire, his detachment has not returned from the raid on the party who followed you to our keep."

Ratamon did not know that he had been followed or that a raid had been attempted against those who had dared to track him down. He grunted in frustration then collected himself. *Now is not the time for rage*, he counseled himself.

"Who is the next in command to Krigg?"

"It is I, Sire." said the captain.

"Good, Captain Trok shall be your general for this task. I need to know more about those who have followed me. Do you know who they are?"

"Only that they have a wizard who burns our forest down and a healing cleric of Pelor with them."

"Pelor! Fatima Windsong!" Ratamon screamed. "Captain Trok, send two detachments of one-hundred warriors to them. Kill everyone except the cleric. If she dies, I'll burn you alive." He walked out of the room before the disconcerted captain could respond.

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The fighters grew impatient as the spellcasters prayed and studied but knew that it was time well spent. Without their power, their party could not hope to succeed. *Still, Rock thought, the wizard's intellectual priming takes even longer than the pretty little cleric's prayers!*

Blackscale moved agilely down the tree to report what he had observed. "There is a darkness in the day, two days' journey to the east."

"That bodes ill for us, does it not?" the cleric asked the group. "I do not know what it portends but will make a point of learning more." Dhalin said.

"There's also a long snake crawling along the road."

"A snake?" Ovak asked him.

"That's what I said, isn't it? A long black snake." The kobold looked at the barbarian like he was crazy.

"Hmm." Dhalin reached into his sack and withdrew a short brass monocular. He handed it to the nimble draconid and asked, "Would you mind taking another look at the snake with these?"

The kobold's greedy eyes fixed upon the shiny object and he nodded his willingness so readily that Dhalin suspected that he would never see the monoculars again. He had once looked for an item that he had suspected the thief to have pickpocketed from him but couldn't find *anything* in the kobold's peculiar sack.

The diligent scout scaled the tree and soon called out, "Oh! I was wrong. It isn't a snake although it does look like one."

"What is it that you see, little friend?" Ovak bellowed up to him.

"It looks like a couple of hundred goblins and orcs marching off to war.

I feel sorry for anyone who gets in their way."

"What direction are they traveling and where are they coming from?" Dhalin called up to him.

"Ooh, good question! Hey, this thing is fantastic! Let's see, they seem to be coming from the dark cloud!"

This news surprised no one and Torga called up for more information.

"What direction are they going?"

"Ooh, another good question!" The rascal was feeling playful today.

"I'll check." The adventurers knew the goblins were coming toward them and were just waiting for Dyllonius to confirm it.

"They're coming toward us, I think."

"And how far away are they?" Ovak asked with poorly restrained patience.

"Don't worry, they're really far. It would probably take them at least an hour to get to us!" The kobold was certainly feeling optimistic that morning. The party groaned. "What did I say?" he asked as he began scrambling down the tree.

"We need a plan, Dhalin." Torga said.

"Or faster steeds." He replied enigmatically. "I need time to think."

The party gathered their belongings and secured their weapons and armor. Although they were stout of heart, they did not look forward to the day before them.

"Can't you turn us all invisible?" Rock asked Dhalin once it became apparent that he couldn't find a suitable spell that would save them.

"I could, but they would still hear us." Then he added, "Or smell us." All eyes tried very hard not to look at the kobold.

"Where do we want to go?" Torga asked.

Dhalin sighed, "I guess we have to infiltrate the dark cloud before we can continue to the ethereal wastes."

"We could double back on the army if we could move fast enough. If they've sent two-hundred soldiers after us, they can't have many more in their stronghold or our scouts would have reported it long ago." Rock stated confidently. "After all, you can't hide an entire army."

"Unless the army moved under the cover of an arcane darkness."  
The wizard countered.

"We'd have to move four times faster than the army to get around their flank before they spot us." The cleric said.

"I think I might have something." The kobold said as he reached into his sack. "My father stole, uh, bought this when he was a boy and I've carried it ever since the hangman, uh, angels took him."

He handed Dhalin a small, obsidian figurine that had been carved into the hideous shape of a common housefly. Dhalin was skeptical, for truly the figurine had been crafted in poor taste. "Allow me a moment to inspect your heirloom, please."

He removed a thin, brittle wand from his sack and snapped it quickly as he spoke a command word. "We will now see if your item possesses arcane magic."

The item emitted a dark, eerie light. "It is necromantic in nature, but not inherently evil." Dhalin said.

The kobold was embarrassed and tried to hide his hands which glowed with the two magic rings that he had stolen from the orcmage. Dhalin asked him, "What rings do you wear, Dyllonius?"

"These? Oh, I don't know. They've probably been in the family for years."

"Hmm." He raised his hands and cast a brief spell that seemed to focus blue energy around his eyes for an instant.

"Now I can read the inscription that is written on the bottom of the figurine. I wish there were time to inspect your rings as well." The wizard turned his attention back to the figurine and studied it in detail.

"It is risky but worth a try under the circumstances." He walked a few paces away and said to Torga, "We'll have to release the horses."

"Why?" Torga said, unhappy to have to part with Trample.  
"Because they won't fit."

"Fit on what?"

"Our steed!" Dhalin said, enjoying the banter. He set the figurine on the soil and stepped back. "Flickrokrian!" he shouted.

The figurine glowed with dark necromantic energy. The carved obsidian began to soften into flesh as life entered the figurine. Then the wings began to move and the fly grew in size. Moment by moment the party's awe doubled. The figurine continued to grow until it was the size of an elephant.

The creature created a buzzing sound that caused most of them to cover their ears. Dhalin shouted over the droning roar, "Hurry up and climb on! I don't know how long it will keep its life!"

Everyone in the party was surprised to find themselves actually climbing onto the elephantine housefly, but they did. They clung to its thick hairy spikes as it prepared to take flight.

Upon Dhalin's command, the hoary steed rose swiftly into the air. He found that he could command the creature with his will but found it difficult to concentrate on the task. He could feel the life-essence of the unnatural steed vying with him for control and wondered what would happen if it succeeded in dominating his will.

\*\*

Captain Trok was tired and hoarse from barking orders at the soldiers all day. He knew that they needed sleep but didn't want his quarry to escape him. They had crossed over half the distance from the dark waycastle and he was confident that they would soon find the adventurers.

He forced the soldiers into a double-time march that lasted well into the night and they came across the section of the forest that had been destroyed by the mage-fire. He found the charred remains of the chieftains and their warg-mounts as well as the bodies of several of Krigg's soldiers who had met their end by the warriors' steel. He found no evidence that the adventurers had even been wounded and that began to worry him.

From the scorched scene of the ambush, they scouted a seven mile perimeter for the cleric and soon discovered the remains of the camp and a smoldering fire.

"Their fire is still warm so they cannot be far away." Captain Krok reasoned. "Spread out and find them!"

The goblins divided themselves into twelve units and spread out to find the bold adventurers who had apparently defeated Krigg's men. He remembered Ratamon's threat and the consequences of failure and shuddered.

After several hours, an astute scout reported that he had seen four riderless mounts riding southward. Captain Krok interpreted the news as favorable. *Without their mounts, they cannot travel far! I have nothing to fear from Ratamon's mage-fire after all,* he thought prematurely.

\*\*

There are druids who have aligned themselves with the powers of Good, and those who serve Evil. The wood elf, Aulander Arborguard, was neither. He had learned many lessons about trust over the course of his unnaturally long life and he had slowly come to trust only Nature herself.

*Nothing sprung from root or seed is inherently evil, he reasoned, only magical beasts and humanoids have the intelligence to be truly evil.* As a result of his philosophy and potent skill, he preferred to spend most of his time in the form of a natural animal.

The druid had watched the goblin ambush from the sky while in the form of a great, black owl. He observed the wizard's careless fireball that had burned several acres of his beloved forest. He had cast a divination spell upon the reckless mage and had been truly shocked to discover what he feared to be the Tome of Souls in his possession.

*Why does he carry such a book? Surely he does not intend to deliver it to the lich? Perhaps he does not even know what it is!*

The druid continued to track the party to their campsite and had kept an acute watch on their behavior. He was as startled as they were when the wizard gave life to the enormous insect and he had been forced to fly at a high speed to keep them in sight as they headed deeper into the gloomy waycastle that was cloaked in unnatural darkness. The druid resented the ever present gloom and had no love for the goblins who lived within the waycastle's stout walls.

From his lofty vantage, he quickly discerned their flanking strategy and lauded them for its cleverness. Still, he did not understand why they wished to fly toward the dark castle instead of flee to safety as they had instructed their horses to do.



The old druid would have thought that it was impossible for him to become engrossed in the affairs of the world but found himself enthralled with the mystery.

He spied a large rodent in the field below him and swooped down upon it. Before he ended its life he spoke to his frightened prey in its own language. "*I am not evil, little one, just hungry.*" The rabbit understood the words but did not appreciate the distinction.

\*\*

The gigantic housefly buzzed into the air with the suddenness of a leap. It flew erratically, dipping and weaving on its agile wings. Rock knew that he was going to be sick and tried to vomit over the side. Instead, most of the bile he expelled landed on his plate armor; some of it on the inside. He grumbled constantly and swore off mounts forever.

Torga was an experienced rider but who among them had ever flown before? She was uncomfortable but not in as poor shape as Rock was. Ovak held the kobold with one hand and had a death-grip around the mount's spiky hair. He stared in wide-eyed disbelief at the forest below and marveled through his terror at its serene beauty.

Windsong withdrew deep into her private thoughts. It is possible that flying through the white, puffy clouds had inspired her to commune with her god. She looked calm and peaceful although her emotions broiled within her breast.

Dhalin Yaro was on the verge of madness. The steed had a jittery will that he found extremely difficult to predict. He would block it easily from one direction only to be attacked immediately from another. He was growing fatigued from the ceaseless darting and parrying. *It's as infuriating as trying to swat one of these buggers in my kitchen!* he thought briefly.

He wished that he had possessed the foresight to imbibe a potion of wisdom before attempting to control the wondrous figurine. He knew that the slip of more than an instant would cause him to lose control and they would plummet hundreds of feet to the ground.

The white, puffy clouds grew dense and dark. A sense of dire foreboding loomed about the place. Windsong shuddered as the black magic affronted Pelor's pure, white divinity.

Dhalin had been forced to ignore all questions posed to him which did not make him a popular chauffeur. They had all tried to be patient with him as he visibly struggled to control the behemoth insect, but now that they had flown into the dark cloud itself, Torga thought that he owed them his attention.

"Where do you want to land, Dhalin?" she asked, her voice sounding angry as she raised it to be heard above the wind. He said nothing nor gave any indication that he had heard her at all. She nudged his shoulder lightly.

He reacted with a sudden, raging vehemence. He turned on her and she was horrified to see that he had begun to morph into a fly! Already he had the polyhedral eyes, the puckered mouth and a pair of hirsute antennae were beginning to sprout above his temples.

His voice had a buzzing quality to it as he said, "Let me free! I want out!" He seized the shocked dwarf by her shoulders and brought his probing tongue, which emitted an involuntary sucking sound, toward the cleric's eyes.

"We're falling!" Dyllonius cried out.

The others looked down and saw that he was right. The wizard had lost the battle of wills and the mount was quickly shrinking into a figurine once more. Rock estimated their height at eighty feet and doubted whether anyone would survive the fall.

They lost all forward momentum and began a rapid descent that was only slightly reduced from an all-out freefall. The green circles became discernable trees. Windsong thought sadly, *the branches will tear us to ribbons*, then she offered a prayer to Pelor asking him to accept their immortal souls.

\*\*

Aulander Arborguard felt the trapped soul gaining mastery over the young wizard who was attempting to control it. He knew what was about to happen but found that there was little he could do to avert it. *Perhaps I can save one or two from falling to their deaths*, he thought.

The great, black owl swooped down upon the terrified riders. His great talons screeched loudly on the steel of Windsong's armored shoulders but succeeded in lifting her off the back of the falling mount. He found her armor heavier than he thought and doubted that he could carry any of the stouter riders.

He set the astonished cleric on the ground and set off to see what, if anything, he could do to aid the other victims of the arrogant wizard's second folly.

The hapless party would smash into the trees with seconds so Aulander had no time to gain altitude. He arced upward toward the mount and managed to wrest the surprised kobold from the barbarian's shoulder.

"Do not fear, little one. You are safe."

Dyllonius was not afraid, he was angry. "You put me back so that I can die with my friends, you big stork!" He didn't know precisely how to insult an owl but he hoped that his words would sting its pride.

"Would your friends wish you to die with them?" the druid asked gravely.

Dyllonius said nothing until he was set upon the ground near cleric Windsong. They looked at each other but quickly averted their eyes.

"I am sorry, your friends are lost." Aulander said.

"Maybe not, you big old flamingo! At least we can go check!"

The rogue's rude words recalled the cleric to her manners. "Please excuse us, we have had a long day."

"I know, I have been watching you."

"Thank you for saving us."

"You are welcome. I am sorry that I had not the time or strength to save the others. I will accompany you to the site of their crash and we shall bury them according to your tradition." The wise owl said nothing to her of the matter but he did not fail to recognize the relic that she wore around her neck. *Surely these are arrogant ones! They travel unescorted through the darkest lands of Evermoor with the Relic of Pelor and the Tome of Souls tucked neatly under their arms!*

\*\*

Ratamon summoned his lore-masters to report on the progress of his spell. He could tell from their fearful demeanor that they had not yet completed their task and sent them away without a threatening word. *Loremasters and sorcerers do not respond well to abuse the way the goblins do, he reasoned, and right now I need them to research that spell!*

His crafting-mages had prepared the masterworked gold rings and Ratamon himself cast the spells into them. They were expensive in gold but he knew that a little of his own life went into them as well.

He looked at the two new rings and noticed that they were not identical to the ones he had lost but were nearly so. He had expended more of his life force into the other rings than he could afford to spare for the new ones, so they were slightly less powerful. Yet, Ratamon wasn't overly concerned. They would do.

"Soon the cleric will be in my dungeon and I shall retrieve the relic of Pelor for my master. With it, he shall attempt to slay the god whose soul it holds but it will consume him. Then I will rule all of Evermoor!" he said to the empty room.

He looked out his window, which was little wider than a murder hole. The sky was dark as usual and the orc-mage found himself longing to see the stars again.

"Curse the vile lich and his eternal gloom!" he said. He didn't notice the raven perched upon the black bust of Baal just above his chamber door or the stealthy figure that lurked behind a stack of books. Soon, the mage disrobed and fell asleep in bed.

A powerful wizard's animal familiar is imbued with the extraordinary ability to telepathically project all that they see, hear or smell to their master. So it was that the dark lich saw and heard Ratamon's treacherous words. He smiled a sinister, toothless smile. The lifeless eyes burned red in their sockets and he called the raven back to him.

He had long been aware of Ratamon's lust for power for it had reminded him of his own. He was unconcerned with any threat, however, least of all the orc-mage Ratamon.

The lich's own *unlife* had long become limitless in duration. He wore a skeletal body only to give substance to his will. He knew that even if his body was slain, he would revive in a week unless they found and destroyed the secret phylactery that contained his lifeforce. He would never let that happen.

The patient, ancient sorcerer turned his mind to other plottings. He had been spinning intricate schemes for hundreds of years and Ratamon played a small part in only one of them.

He uncorked a smoky vial and listened to the pleading voice of the soul within, "Please let me out!" He brought the vial to his thin lips and poured the contents into his mouth.

\*\*

The wind whistled through their ears as they fell from the sky. Rock, Ovak and the polymorphed Dhalin Yaro crashed through the thin, upper layers of foliage easily but as the weight of their bodies carried them toward the thicker branches, they received heavy bruises, cuts and breaks.

Rock's plate armor absorbed the worst of these but he was repaid as he fell heavily to the ground with its added weight. Ovak's hide armor was shredded and his skin torn to ribbons. He was barely conscious as he tumbled through the boughs to land like a discarded rag doll on the forest floor.

They were still unconscious when the druid led them to the scene of the crash. The cleric withdrew the relic of Pelor and focused her soul's energy into her appeal to the god of healing. She began with the barbarian while the others attempted to remove Rock's dented armor.

Golden, holy light emanated from her palms and engulfed Ovak.

Dyllonius watched in awe as the wounds first stopped bleeding then began to heal. Then the bones began to crunch loudly as they were mended. Still, the fallen barbarian did not arise.

Windsong turned her attention and prayers toward the wounded dwarf. His injuries appeared to be largely internal, for though the steel armor had protected him from abrasions, the bruising it had caused upon landing had nearly crushed his chest. His raspy breathing produced blood which he would have choked on had he not been attended by his friends.

Torga marched in widening circles looking for Dhalin Yaro. The kobold sat down next to his bulky friend and babbled as if Ovak could hear him.

The druid assumed the form of a wood-elf and watched the young cleric pray to Pelor. Aulander Arborguard cannot be accused of worshipping any deity, but he held a deep respect for Obad-Hai, who was known to be a friend to all who walked in harmony with nature. He knew little of Pelor and was not overawed by the cleric's healing abilities.

Windsong grew exhausted and nearly swooned but the bodies of her two patients still did not stir. She remembered the drow that she had failed to save and felt utterly unequal to the task before her.

"If no one objects, perhaps I will see what I can do." No one did.

The stoic druid asked everyone to step back then he placed a single green leaf of ivy upon the ground and spoke a soft, trilling speech that rhymed, although no one else present knew the language. The leaf grew roots and then began to grow. The magical foliage had soon weaved itself into a loose netting around both of the fallen warriors.

"Shzztik-verdail!" A hazy, green phosphorescence emanated from the enchanted ivy. The druid began a low chant and a sympathetic, harmonic hum arose from the ivy-entombed wounded.

He finished his chant with a sound like the moaning of the wind and the creaking of tree limbs. "They must remain in their cocoons until this time tomorrow." He said flatly.

The druid's natural magic had aroused the holy cleric and she watched him from the ground where she lay. "What have you done?" she asked him when he had finished his chant.

"I have asked the earth to channel its life-force into your friends. She has agreed to do so."

"Is it to Obad-Hai or Ehlonna that you pray?"

"Neither, good cleric. The earth is the mother of all and has no reverence for the fickle gods."

"Why must they remain entombed for so many hours?" she asked the druid a bit naively.

"The mother is patient, as am I. So, too, should you be. Perhaps your party's strength is unequal to the trial."

Fatima Windsong wanted to speak impertinently but held her tongue because she suspected that the mysterious, unemotional druid spoke wisely. *We are now too few to infiltrate even a cattle-barn!*

In time, Torga returned. The sight of her proud head slinking low belied the sad result of her search.

"Did you find the wizard's body?" the kobold asked.



Torga nodded and held out her hand, then she began to weep. In her hand was an obsidian figurine shaped like an elf.

\*\*

The ogre, General Grogg, was irritable. He had been roused from his sleep by Mindweb's eerie wraiths and forced to march alone through the dark wilderness. The secretive lich did not reveal his true location to any of his generals, but rather forced those who could not scry to meet him alone in the woods at night.

The general was also more than a little frightened. He had been summoned only once before, when his superior officer had been sucked dry by the withering touch of his ghouls. It was at that moment that he had been promoted.

The two spectres guided him deeper into the gloom and they were ambushed by a pack of large wolves. Grogg smiled as the ghosts withered the canines with their necromantic touch. The wolves could not retaliate against the intangible ghosts and soon broke off the attack. Two large males began to vie with each other for the newly vacated position as Alpha.

The lich's servants spoke no words out loud but implanted them within the ogre's dim mind. This caused a chilling sensation that he could only compare to the icy touch of a cold-touched weapon. He had been hit with several of those before but never in his small brain. He thought about taking a swing at one of the wraiths when a new voice took over his mind, turned him around and caused him to prostrate himself on the moist, loamy soil.

"Will you pledge to me your soul, General Grogg?"

"Yes, sire."

"Then you shall live." He released the ogre's mind from his command.

"I can not trust the wizard, Ratamon, with this task. It is for you and your men alone."

"Yes, sire."

"You are to storm the city walls of Evermoor with a thousand men and bring to me the holy relic of Pelor."

"Yes, sire. Will a thousand be enough to take the city?"

"I am only concerned with the relic. One thousand will be enough to storm the southern gate. Then you may send your best team of thieves to retrieve the relic."

"So my men are merely a diversion, sire?"

"That is so."

"Many good soldiers will be lost."

"That does not concern you. If you are successful then you will live."

The ogre swallowed the lump in his throat and mumbled, "Yes, Sire."

"Fail me not, General Grogg." The shadowy form of the lich dissolved into vapor and wafted away on the wind.

The general turned around and expected to find his necromantic guides waiting to take him back to the waycastle. He cursed under his breath as he realized that he would have to navigate his own way through the dense forest. Worse still, he had not been permitted to bring a weapon with him when he was summoned. He listened to the baying of the wolves and hoped that they had found prey elsewhere.

\*\*

After a full day of searching, Captain Krok grew nervous. His men had found no sign of the adventurers and he grew violent from his fear of Ratamon's wrath should he fail to locate them. *Where could they have gone?* he wondered and posed the question to his sergeants, who had no answer for him.

"Keep searching, you lazy scoundrels! One hundred gold pieces for the one who finds a clue!"

His men leaped back to their futile work with a zealotry that gave Krok a small degree of confidence. *If they traveled away from this spot, my men will discover their tracks.* He glanced at the roaring campfire and the boar whose flesh roasted on a spit above it and shivered. He didn't want to die by Ratamon's mage-flame.

\*\*

The adventurers who were able, rose early the next day. There appeared to be no change in the green cocoons so the cleric went off to pray by herself.

Dyllonius' mood was sorely dejected and he found little enjoyment in the grubs he caught and ate for breakfast. Likewise, he gleaned little mirth from the numerous mind-games he liked to play when he grew bored, which was typically every three or four minutes. Although he offered to share the grubs he had collected, Torga declined and set off into the forest to hunt game suitable for a dwarven palate.

"Is there nothing you can do for our friend?" Blackscale asked the druid, referring to the obsidian figurine in which Dhalin Yaro was trapped.

"There exists only one wizard that we may hope has knowledge of such items. He dwells far away in the ethereal wastes."

Dyllonius laughed at the irony, "That's where Dhalin was going!"

The druid raised his bushy eyebrows that resembled foliage themselves. "What was his reason for seeking out the wizard of the ethereal wastes?"

"He said something about a book that he couldn't understand. Can you imagine that? Reading a book for a year and not understanding any of it?"

"Hmm."

"What happened to all of his clothing and items when he was transformed into the figurine?"

"It is likely that they were imprisoned with him."

"Well, maybe he will have time to read it wherever he is."

The druid would speak no more and withdrew deep into his memory. Torga returned with a large wild turkey and they passed the long day. They ate, sharpened their blades and Ovak attempted to repair Rock's armor but there was little he could do to straighten it out.

Windsong surprised everyone when she had cast a spell of mending that straightened out the knurled edges of the many plates that comprised his suit of armor.

"I can do more than heal broken bodies, you know." She said in response to their astonishment.

When the hour came at last the party gathered around their fallen friends and watched as Aulander removed the leaf from the soil.

The vines undid themselves and withdrew into the rich soil of the earth.

Ovak rose with wild-eyed terror, gasping for breath as if he had been underwater. He looked at his friends and smiled. Rock awoke slowly and resisted it as well as he was able to, saying, "Just let me go back to bed, Ma. I never get enough sleep!"

The kobold played his pan-flute and danced his trademark jig around the camp. He took hold of the cleric's tunic and spun around happily to the cheerful tune of his pipes. Torga was very grateful to see that the sergeant and the brave barbarian had survived the crash landing but her mirth was tempered by sorrow for the fallen wizard, Dhalin Yaro.

The druid had finished the work that the cleric had started and the warriors rose with an appetite that was as healthy as their rejuvenated bodies. The adventurers shared the harrowing details of the previous day but soon began to discuss a plan for the following day.

"It had been Dhalin's intention to infiltrate the waycastle and discover the wizard, Ratamon. I think we should hold with that plan." Rock said firmly.

Torga jumped up and replied hotly, "The druid says that he can guide us to the ethereal wastes, which was where Dhalin originally wanted to go. I must take him there without delay."

The cleric shook her head with regret and said, "I am tasked with the recapture of Ratamon. I can undertake no other quest until I have completed the one I have been assigned." Windsong said. "I hope you can understand."

"And I, too, have orders to aid Cleric Windsong in her quest. I can consider no other path."

"I go where the good cleric goes." Ovak said simply.

"And I go where the lunk goes!" Dyllonius chirped from his shoulder.

The druid looked grave but said, "Perhaps it is well, as I can carry but one rider. Torga, I will take you to the ethereal wastes and if we are lucky, we will find Wraithbone Wishcraft in a hospitable mood." The dwarf nodded her assent briskly, her jaw set to the task.

"I shall remember you all in my prayers," the cleric said good-naturedly.

"I shall expect a full report from you upon my return, Sergeant Rock Redstone." Torga said to the lower-ranking soldier.

"And I look forward to giving you the details on Ratamon's recapture." He replied as he snapped to attention. There was an element of parody within their exchange that amused them both.

"Thank you for all you have done for us, kind and good druid of the forest." The cleric's words surprised the old elf, who hadn't heard the adjectives applied to himself in ages.

He nodded and smiled, then stood and spoke a word, "Eglis-Andor!" His body flashed with green light as it quickly morphed into the form of an enormous condor. They were all surprised when it spoke with the druid's own, elven voice, "I despise the food that I must eat in this form but she is the mightiest flyer. We shall make good time, master dwarf."

Torga, remembering the near-fatal fall of the day before, hesitated only a moment before she climbed onto the condor's back. She could tell that she nearly doubled its own weight and wondered how far it could carry her.

The druid flew off and the remaining adventurers quickly broke camp. They would need to see the lay of the waycastle before they could organize a plan to infiltrate it and recapture Ratamon, so they moved cautiously in the direction the druid had told them to travel.

Soon, they could discern its tall, black walls looming in the distance. They were hoping that the detachment of two hundred goblins had been the bulk of the stronghold's army and were shocked to observe the thousand that were mustering for war in the courtyard.

The adventurers watched from the cover of the trees as the formidable strike force marched out of the waycastle amid the pomp that is typical of such occasions. Two questions tumbled around their troubled minds; *where were these soldiers going and how many were now left to guard the waycastle?*

\*\*

The little goblin, Scryx, was not precisely evil himself, but he was loyal to his villainous superior officers. He prided himself on being a good servant and an excellent scout and hoped only for a long career or a swift death. He had snuck into his master's room to replace the daggers that he had stolen only to sharpen. When he heard his master's step outside the door he panicked and hid behind a stack of spellbooks.

A raven flew in the narrow window and alighted above the door. It saw him immediately and emitted a tattle-tale caw, but remained silent as Ratamon entered the chamber.

Scryx heard his master plot to rule when the lich's plans failed and considered it treason. *I should report this immediately, but to whom?* Then he recalled the undying loyalty he had felt for his master only moments before and grew confused. *A servant*

*shouldn't inform on his master*, he thought as he cowered behind the spellbooks.

He was relieved when the raven flew away and his master fell asleep. He slunk out the secret door and padded quickly down the covert passageway and soon emerged into the general quarters where he belonged. His conscience twisted this way and that as he struggled to choose a side in the matter. He wisely decided to do nothing for the moment but dine on his small stash of dried meat and go to sleep.

In his dreams, Scryx walked a tightrope high above a chasm. On the ledge before him stood a kindly Treant and it was to him that the tightrope was tied. He glanced behind him and saw his master, Ratamon, standing on the other ledge. His hand held one of the knives that Scryx had just sharpened and he was using it to cut the rope! His hands grasped at the Treant's lifeline but he missed it and fell into the chasm below.

\*\*

The giant condor soared on expansive wings which it rarely had to flap. It glided through the long day and well into the night. As dawn arose, Aulander spoke to Torga.

"We are approaching the wastes. What do you know of them?"

"Nothing at all." The lieutenant replied honestly.

"It is well. There are many tales told of them that are untrue. The place was intended by Wee Jas, the goddess of death and magic, to be a place of rest for her many soldiers."

"Sounds tranquil," Torga said.



"It is not. The will of a warrior is like mithral; hard and unyielding. In the wasteland, the strongest of them still vie with one another for power. It is not the place of peace that Wee Jas intended it to be."

"What can we expect to find there?"

"All manner of undead, from every race in the multiverse."

"That sounds rather dangerous. How do we find the wizard, Wraithbone Wishcraft?"

"It is for him to find us. We will merely make ourselves known. There are many illusions but if your will is strong, they will not deceive you."

*Is my will strong enough?* Torga asked herself subconsciously. She had lost comrades in arms before but somehow the mutation of the wizard, Dhalin Yaro, had shaken her to the core.

She steeled herself to her task once more. "We will brave the undead and disbelieve the illusions. We will find Wishcraft and restore life to Dhalin Yaro." She affirmed with renewed vigor.

Aulander Arboguard carried the emboldened fighter deep into the thick, ochre haze of the ethereal wastes. The sun was all but blotted out and nothing natural grew from the blackened, acidic soil.

"The power of nature is weak here," he said. "We will have to proceed on foot." He paused a moment before adding, "You may perceive many things but believe only in yourself." Torga nodded, hoping that she understood the druid's cryptic statement.

The druid guided them gently to the ground where he assumed his natural, elven shape once more. Torga thought that his equilibrium may have suffered from the transformation for the mysterious druid seemed to stagger and sway on his feet.

They walked several miles through the marshy, boggy terrain. Mist clung to their clothes with thin tendrils that looked like fingers and Torga found herself swatting at them to chase them away.

They moved quietly and carefully enough to see the ghouls and ghosts feeding on the corpse of a fallen spellcaster. They gave the carnivorous undead a wide berth and pressed farther into the gloomy plains.

Torga felt pain in her leg and she swatted at it reflexively. Her hand met with the dessicated skull of a wight that had once been a gnome before necromancy had corrupted it. The fingers were hideously elongated and terminated in strong claws. Its spine was twisted and hunched and its tiny fangs were sunk deep into Torga's leg.

She felt necromantic energy enter her body and spread like poison. She instantly felt weaker in the limb and cloudier in the mind and didn't immediately take any action at all. Aulander, however, transformed into a large, black bear and swiped at the despicable wight. Torga felt better as soon as she saw its mauled corpse on the soil.

"A wight is vulnerable to our weapons but there are spirits dwelling here that are not." Aulander explained and smiled sheepishly as he added,

"And not all are illusions."

"How will I know the difference?" Torga asked.

"If you can see the creature attacking you, then swing your axe boldly. If you cannot, then run swiftly." The druid's mouth cracked into a smile that sounded like dead leaves rustling in an October wind.

The dwarf's resolve had strengthened and she was without fear, although she was surprised to realize that she didn't expect to outlive the adventure at all. *Perhaps that knowledge is what gives me strength*, she mused stolidly.

She felt a prick on her neck and whirled to engage another undead abomination but no foe presented itself to her eyes. She felt another painful prick in her neck and the black, necromantic energy nauseated her pure body. She remembered Aulander's words and began to run.

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The soldiers had marched out of sight and the adventurers saw the gate-guards relax once their superiors had dismissed everyone and left the courtyard.

"We could use a diversion." Rock suggested.

"But how do we get in?" Windsong queried.

"I can climb that wall easily," the kobold boasted. "Once I'm up, I can either go get Ratamon myself or lower a rope down to the rest of you." An awkward moment passed as they realized that he was serious and quickly voiced approval for the latter idea.

Rock, who had been studying the sentries on the wall, made a decision. "The guard seems to complete his patrol every two minutes, will that be enough time to get up there and hide?" Rock asked as the kobold nodded and prepared himself with gear for the climb.

"Ooh, I didn't think about that. I sure hope so." He replied nonchalantly.

They watched tensely from the shadows a mere thirty feet from the foot of the black stone walls of the goblins' waycastle. The sure-footed draconid climbed halfway up the thirty-foot face before he pulled out his rope and unfolded a small grappling hook, all while supporting his weight on a single bony toe.

He threw it up and its sharp edges caught something. He scrambled up the last fifteen feet in a matter of seconds. The guard was just performing his about-face for the second half of his two-minute circuit.

Dyllonius looked around quickly but saw nothing more than a barrel on the rampart nearby. He leaped deftly over the wall between the crenelations and scrunched himself tight behind the barrel. He could hear the guard's footsteps get closer and he began to wonder if he had made the right decision. While he awaited discovery, he found himself wondering if death was going to *hurt*. He suspected that he would soon find out.

The orc on wall-duty was arrogant, vindictive and cruel. He felt that he deserved a raise in pay and a more favorable shift than nights on the wall. He plodded slowly along the ramparts looking far above the horizon for any signs of an enemy horde. There were, as usual, no sign of anything under the lifeless, dark cloud. Then he saw the thin, black rope that had been tied around a crenelation in the wall. He moved closer to inspect it and was about to raise the alarm when the hidden rogue struck.

Dyllonius Blackscale prided himself on thievery, not murder. Yet, he had learned many tricks and could strike an artery with devastating results if he could surprise his foe. The arrogant guard who thought he deserved a raise in station was certainly surprised.

The heavy body fell quietly after the tiny kobold had succeeded in tilting it over the side. He descended the wall using the rope and regrouped with his friends below.

"He saw the rope so I had to take him out. No one saw me but they'll miss him at some point I suspect."

"Let's get going." Rock said and ran toward the rope. He wore most of the heavy armor that had been repaired but still pulled himself swiftly up the ladder using only his short, strong arms.

Ovak followed moving swiftly. He felt practically weightless with only his shredded hide armor and axe to slow him down. Fatima Windsong struggled only slightly as she scaled the vertical surface using a slow-but-sure upright walking motion. The nimble kobold skittered up behind her and stowed the rope in the barrel in case they needed it to escape.

They crouched low and moved quietly along the rampart toward a door in the wall. As they approached, it suddenly flew open and revealed a very startled guard. He fell mutely with a single blow from Rock's swift axe.

"They will be on high alert soon. We must find Ratamon quickly." The cleric warned.

"He is likely to be in the tower." Rock suggested.

They entered a descending staircase and pulled the door shut behind them. Voices were heard coming from a room to their right but the door was closed and they snuck by undetected.

They followed the damp, stone corridor another two-hundred feet and suspected that they were underneath the tower. The hallway ended in a pair of identical doors. "Which path shall we take?" Windsong asked.

"Let me have a listen and a look at those doors," the rogue said cheerfully. He took his time and searched both doors intently while the party waited nervously. Suddenly, he said, "This one!" and he opened the door confidently.

The trapped door made no noise as it released the poisonous gas just as it had been designed to do. The unlucky rogue fell asleep where he stood.

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Torga didn't run far before she recognized the futility in running in the eternal night of the wastes. She bravely turned to face her unseen opponent. She swung wildly at the soundless foe without apparent effect and fought the panic that threatened to seize her. "What do we do?" she asked the druid breathlessly.

"Keep swinging. I believe there's a chance we can strike it!" The words sounded odd coming from the large brown bear but Torga kept swinging.

The sound of battle drew many ferocious undead toward them and they were soon hopelessly outnumbered. Torga thought of the inert figurine of Dhalin Yaro and mumbled an apology to him. *I will not rescue, this day, but die.*

Suddenly, a large, tawny creature that Torga had never seen was in their midst. It had the body of a lion but its skin and head more closely resembled a dragon. It began to slay the undead around them with its fearsome claws, which shone with a holy brilliance.

"You fool! Have you journeyed here to feed your corpse to these fiends? Climb on my back and I may be able to save you. I can do nothing for the bear."

Torga did as she was told but absorbed another jolt of necromantic energy from an ethereal ghoul in the process. Aulander Arborguard morphed into a large hawk and followed the dragonne into the air. The ethereal undead could fly but were easily outrun by the winged beasts.

They flew high but could not escape the gloom that permeated the necromantic wasteland. Wraithbone Wishcraft navigated them to his lair and quickly apologized for its condition.

"Had I the hands of my youth, my home would be far tidier."

"Thank you for rescuing us," Torga said. "I thought we were done for."

"Even if they had slain you, it wouldn't have been over. In a day's time you would have risen as one of them, doomed to lust only for death and flesh."

"I am Aulander Arborguard. I do not know if you remember me." The dragonne paused to think. "You are not the hermitic druid known to the elder folk as the Druid of Death?"

"Aye, but that is an overly dramatic appellation. I am pleased to see you again, old friend."

"Are we friends? I seem to recall something about falling from a waterfall when I was a young drow. I remember screaming your name as I fell."

"You did, and your cries have haunted me since. However, I did not cause your fall directly." The druid said in his own defense.

"No, you merely dared me to cross the rapids high above the falls."

"We were indeed foolish then and you were an arrogant nobledrow with too much power and not enough years."

The dragonne was stung by the words but reacted to them by laughing.

"That is true, Aulander, and I am pleased to see you again. There are not many of the old breed who remain to walk the lands of Evermoor."

Torga was happy that the strange magic-users knew each other and even happier that they had reconciled their troubled past peacefully, but she took the first opportunity to extend her hand with the wondrous figurine toward the dragonne.

"This is my friend, a wizard named Dhalin Yaro." She wanted to give him more information but didn't know where to begin. *Would he believe me if I said that he had first transformed into an elven fly?*

The dragonne inspected the figurine though he did not attempt to grasp it himself. "Would you please hold it upside down so that I may read the inscription on it?"

Torga rotated it so that he could discern the writing. He growled the words softly as he read them, then turned to Torga and said, "If I am to restore your elven friend, I must replace him with something. What would you have me choose?"

"How about just another fly?" she replied.

The dragonne deftly snatched one from the air and pinned it gently to the ground with one enormous paw. "Please set the figurine next to the fly."

Torga did as she was told and Wraithbone Wishcraft began to chant in yet another language that she had never heard. She felt a pang of sorrow for the hapless insect but would have traded far more than its life to restore the wizard; she would have traded her own.



With no sentient will to oppose it, the figurine simply flashed once as it changed shape once more. Dhalin Yaro stood before them, his weakened frame and sunken eyes were the only telltale signs of his torment. He bowed to the dragonne and to the druid, not knowing which one had effected his rescue. Then he turned to Torga and embraced her tightly. He looked down at the obsidian figurine of a fly.

"What was it like in there?" Torga asked him.

"It wasn't so bad," he lied. "It was a little like being in a tiny cell with all the lights turned out."

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Captain Krok knew that he was doomed. Another day had nearly passed and still he had found no sign of the adventurers he was looking for. He decided to turn back to the waycastle and make his final report to Ratamon.

His detachment of two-hundred goblins turned and marched in disorderly rows back toward the waycastle. They soon encountered General Grogg and his strike force of one-thousand soldiers and the captain quickly decided to throw his force in with Grogg's. The small army of twelve-hundred goblinoid soldiers marched on the unsuspecting city of Evermoor and would soon cause mass amounts of bloodshed, horror and pain.

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The gas continued to spray from several nozzles that had been hidden within the mortar of the walls and began to fill the room with its noxious vapor. Ovak grabbed his somnambulating friend as Rock threw open the second door. There was little time to look for traps even if the fighter had known what to look for. He felt several small darts bounce ineffectually off his armor as he crossed the threshold.

They found themselves in a small room with no distinguishing features, save for a stone staircase that wound a lazy spiral into the tower above them. The brave adventurers paused long enough for the cleric to awaken the fallen kobold, who resumed his cheerful demeanor upon waking.

"I had the most wonderful dream! We were-"

"Sshh." Rock hissed. "Not now."

The rogue was nonplussed but agreed to be silent as they began the ascent. He, being the sneakiest of the lot, took the lead and was followed by Ovak, Windsong and Rock, whose armor was nearly impossible to muffle.

They passed several doors but reasoned that the orc-mage would tenant the highest floors his station would allow. The long stairway terminated at a stone door. Rough characters were etched crudely into its surface but no one present could read them.

"Let's see if Ratamon's home," Rock whispered and kicked the door open. A magical alarm pealed in their ears and Rock was singed by the flame-trapped door. Windsong crossed the room and stood over the helpless orc-mage who was still groggy with sleep. His eyes narrowed and his porcine nostrils flared as recognition dawned on him.

"Cleric Windsong!" he hissed as she gagged and bound him. She felt pride well up at her success and almost engaged in victorious taunts but wisely fought down the urge.

"How do we get him out of here?" Ovak asked, raising his voice to be heard above the alarm.

She hesitated for just a moment but that told him all that he needed to know. The brave barbarian moved to block the door. Windsong ran to the window and looked out, hoping to see winged

angels coming to rescue them. She turned back when she saw that there were none.

"I'll bet Ratamon has something around here that we could use." Dyllonius said, drawing the attention of the orc-mage who went nearly mad with impotent fury at the sight of the insignificant little thief who had caused him so much trouble.

There were numerous wands and staffs but the cleric had no experience with arcane magic and could not identify the items any more than Ovak could.

The unmistakable sound of armor-clad soldiers came from the stairway on the other side of the door. Ovak and Rock readied themselves for the bloodbath that would ensue the moment the goblins hacked or burned the door down. Although their position was easily defensible, they were only two versus the veritable hordes that would be hurled upon them.

The holy cleric looked down upon her captive quarry and noted a triumphant gleam in his eye. He knew they were trapped and was enjoying watching them squirm. The arrogant gleam in his eyes was replaced by abject terror as she approached him with her mace drawn and poised to strike.

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The dragonne shared palatable dried meat with his guests while he listened to their tale. When they had finished, he curled up near the fire and breathed in the smoke.

"You were wise to seek me," he said to Aulander. "There are few who remember the secret of crafting wondrous figurines." Then he turned to Dhalin and said, "I understand that you were seeking me for another reason?"

"That is so." He crossed the room and withdrew the book from his sack.

The dragonne studied the tome for only a moment then recoiled from it.

"It is as I feared, then. You have brought the Tome of Souls through the realms of darkness and death and laid it upon my door."

The wizard felt the sting in his accusatory words but asked, "What is the Tome of Souls?"

"I know little that is fact, only ancient rumor and superstition."

"Sometimes rumors are better than no information at all." Torga suggested. She was growing tired of the wizards' bantering temperaments that could cost them valuable time.

"Perhaps you are right. It is said that the Tome of Souls was created along with the world herself and contains the true names of all sentient creatures who have ever lived and died upon her soil."

Silence overcame the group until Torga said, "That doesn't sound too dangerous."

The dragonne smiled ruefully, "It also contains the most powerful spell known to exist. It is said that one who truly comprehends the spell and speaks the names, can summon and control countless legions of undead beasts, soldiers, clerics and spellcasters."

The dragonne paused to let the import of his words sink in. He could tell by their wide-eyed stares that he had their full attention.

"This tome must not fall into the hands of the lich!" The dragonne's subsequent roar startled them all but was a fitting exclamation to drive his point home.

"What shall we do with it?" Dhalin asked.

"I will think upon the matter. Until then, please rest and prepare yourselves with prayer and study." He then retired to his private room and the weary adventurers fell asleep around the warm fire.

Wraithbone Wishcraft was far too tense for sleep. *The Tome is one matter, he thought, but the holy relic the young cleric wears is another altogether. I must weigh my options and choose which item poses the larger threat.*

He opened a book with his paw and growled angrily when he found the pages were stuck together. He lapped at them with his tongue in an effort to separate them and cursed his lack of hands and fingers once more. He finally succeeded in opening the right page and he began to read lustily.

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Horns sounded throughout the waycastle as myriad feet ascended the tower. The goblins and orcs were effectively bottlenecked at its summit, however, by two axe-wielding fighters who were as stubborn as they were skilled.

The goblinoid bodies began to pile up on both sides of the door which proved to be a perilous impediment to both attacker and defender. The muscles in their arms and legs began to ache and they felt their agility slowly drain from them. They could last only minutes longer.

Cleric Windsong did not know what to do. Only moments ago, she had nearly caved in the head of the vile, orc-wizard. She feared the violence that sought to dominate her actions and began to pray fervently.

As Rock fought the goblin horde who were trying to gain entry to the room, part of his mind wandered from the carnage. *There's something I'm forgetting. Something about Ratamon.* The tip of

a sword penetrated his armor and he winced as he retaliated with a puncturing jab that sent the goblin reeling back toward the countless number who were waiting to vie for its place.

Ratamon knew that he was in trouble but he also knew a secret. He spoke telepathically to his tiny cockroach familiar, which had saved him from the anti-magic cell underneath the temple of Pelor. It scrambled out of his pocket and turned its acidic and poisonous bite to the rope that bound its master's hands.

Ovak was drawing near to the limit of his patience and fought the urge to fly into a murderous rage that would probably end in his death. The cleric stood behind the fighters and healed them as well as she could although her strongest spells had already been used and she could feel herself growing weaker. *Soon I will be nothing more than a below-average fighter swinging a mace.*

The kobold was enjoying himself and was thoroughly unconcerned with the carnage at the door. He picked up a delicate wand from Ratamon's table and said, "It's probably priceless." Then he looked at Ratamon and bit it in half. He had broken several items already when he found the rings. He placed half a dozen of them into his pouch when he heard a tiny voice.

"Psst. Hey you, Thief. Pick me up." Dyllonius zeroed in on the voice and decided that it came from a small, ornate dagger.

"Oh no, I've heard about you intelligent items; you're probably cursed! If I pick you up you'll make me kill my friends or something."

"I am not cursed, little one, I am blessed. You will know for certain once you pick me up."

Dyllonius tried to stop his hand from grasping the jeweled hilt but could not resist the temptation. Red smoke issued from the hilt of

the dagger which he tried to drop but was unable to. The crimson cloud formed into a small Djinn who bowed to the kobold who was only slightly smaller than he.

"Thank you for releasing me, bold adventurer! I, Bodhma T'orkin, am at your service."

The kobold quickly overcame his surprise and his eyes gleamed as he considered the possibilities of having a djinn at his command. The goblins began to retreat from the door but Ovak and Rock soon realized that it was only to allow room for the tall, muscular ogres to reach the fore. The barbarian's eyes met the sergeant's and they were pleased that they would die as brothers in arms.

Cleric Windsong wept as she cast her last healing spell and advanced on the helpless orc-mage. She knew that she could not allow him to live but was loathe to commit murder in cold blood. She turned to see the ogres battering at her friends then remembered nothing more.

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The City Guard had not seen any action since Torga had spotted the intruder scaling the academy's wall. Corporal Mynos patrolled the wall above the south gate and gazed with longing at the unchanging horizon. Suddenly, he saw the long line of goblinoid soldiers advancing upon the city.

He put the bugle to his lips but his breath wouldn't come. He tried again but produced a sorry, misshapen wail that would alert no one. He cried out with his voice, "There! Goblins! They're coming! The goblins are coming!"

The City Guard reacted lazily at first, preferring to disbelieve that war was upon them. Once the goblin's arrows started to rain over the walls, they moved with considerably more hustle. Orders

were given and carried out admirably. They succeeded in mustering nearly six-hundred soldiers and militia to the walls before the mass of goblins, orcs and ogres were upon them.

During the long march, General Grogg had personally slain two of his goblins for insubordination and realized that he felt better than he had in years. He viewed the human opponents as pathetically thin and weak, although not so weak as the elves, who were his favorite enemy. He began to think that he could overthrow the entire city if he could gain entry without the loss of a frontal assault.

He sent a small detachment of sorcerers forth to open the portcullis and they were guarded by soldiers who carried large tower shields above them like umbrellas. The human defenders rained wave after wave of arrows at them but the goblins did not waver from the assault.

Corporal Mynos sent for his commanding officer and wondered why the goblins were attacking the city at all. *Their numbers are insufficient to overwhelm us, so why forfeit so many soldiers on a futile charge? And why now?*

Deep within the city, high up in the temple of Pelor, Herras the high priestess watched the approaching goblin army. She knew what they were after and she was grateful that they would not find the relic. She had already sent it far away and the cleric who wore it could not hope to guess its secrets.

Her heart ached for the lives that were being lost by the moment in the city below her tower but her heart was resolute; she had acted wisely. *The relic must not come under Mindweb's control, she thought, or the clerics of Pelor shall be turned to the will of evil. Once he learned its location it would never be safe. She had to get it out of the city!*



She issued the command to have the temple sealed off and guarded but held little confidence that the soft-hearted temple guard could hold out against the goblins. Her attendants helped her don armor that she hadn't worn in nearly three decades. She held the haft of her enchanted morningstar and quickly grew reaccustomed to the weight of her spiked shield. *I was a holy warrior in my youth and I shall go to my death as one!*

Bitter oaths and screams of agony tore at the hearts of the arrogant but soft-hearted human defenders. The sorcerers had succeeded in corroding the door with the acid and the bulk of the goblins were pouring into the city. The humans were the superior fighters in all respects save one; the goblins knew how to fight dirty. They managed to evade blows and counter with extraordinary agility when they outnumbered their enemies. As a result, many fine duellists were lost in unfair battles.

Corporal Mynos was not surprised when his commanding officer did not present himself on the wall. *He is probably warning his family and flying from the city, which is what I'd rather be doing.*

Suddenly, four goblins leaped over the wall and landed ten feet in front of him. He advanced upon them bravely and severed the sword-arm from one of the little red beasts but two of his brethren were quick enough to take attacks of opportunity against him. He felt their short swords pierce his abdomen and he swung his axe only once more before he fell.

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Dhalin Yaro was glad to be free of the hellish confines of the figurine but his gratitude was not sufficient to calm his tortured heart. He knew that he alone was responsible for the wildfire and the fall from the wondrous mount. He felt like a liability to the cause and he slept poorly as a result.

Torga was pleased that Dhalin had been restored but felt nothing but death waited to reward their triumphs. *How are we supposed to hide or destroy the book from an ageless sorcerer and his army of goblins?*

They awoke early but Aulander Arborguard had been up for hours. He was preparing a meal that he had foraged of wild mushrooms, carrots and peas which he had been simmering in a hearty vegetable broth.

"This meal is in your honor, Wraithbone. You have saved our lives and restored our comrade, and I thank you." Aulander said. "A breakfast prepared by hand is a rare gift indeed! You are welcome to such aid as I can provide. Unfortunately, you may not savor the counsel I must give you all."

"Your words bode ill for digestion, fair Dragonne, let us first dine then we shall begin our work."

When they had finished eating, they began to discuss the book. "The Tome cannot be destroyed by any known means, so it must be hidden from those who would seek it."

"And we must destroy the lich, Mindweb, and his goblin army." Torga said fiercely.

"I doubt that you will be able to accomplish so much. You cannot hope to defeat the lich without many powerful allies. For now, we shall judge our success by every second that the tome remains hidden from evil."

"Where shall we hide it?" Dhalin asked. "It is possible that he has seen it before, which would make him capable of scrying its location."

"That is so. It must, therefore, be placed somewhere that permits no magic. I suggest that we take it to Koraden, the king of the dwarves. They are no lovers of magic and would have little use of the tome's powers themselves. I believe King Koraden's palace is lined with a mineral that thwarts arcane power."

"What do you know about the king, will he readily accept such a burden?"

"We shall ask him when we get there. There is an entrance to his underground domain not far from here. I believe we can get there in less than a day and night."

Torga looked at Dhalin and they both nodded in assent. "That settles the issue, let us prepare to leave."

The dragonne laid a heavy, padded paw on her shoulder, "There is another matter."

"What is it?" Dhalin asked Wraithbone but it was Aulander who answered.

"The cleric of Pelor, with whom you have traveled. She is in possession of the lost relic that Mindweb is searching for. In his hands, it is nearly as powerful as the Tome of Souls." Realization dawned on them simultaneously, "The same relic that Ratamon was after?"

"The same. It was forged eons ago when Pelor himself still walked the land. If it is destroyed, so dies the immortal god of goodness and light."

"The lich is wise, make no mistake. Should he obtain the Tome and the Relic, he could literally reshape the face of the world."

"Tell me, bold adventurers. Does the cleric know what she wears so confidently about her neck?"

Dhalin looked at Torga and they answered in unison once more, "I think not."

"It is as I feared. She must be warned and turned from her quest. If she enters the tower to capture Ratamon, her ageless god will die."

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Ratamon's animal familiar, the detestable cockroach, had successfully eaten through his bonds. He rose like a flash and struck a blow to the cleric's helm while her back was turned. Then he raced toward the kobold seething with malice.

"Uh oh. Would you freeze him for me, please?" Dyllonius asked the djinn.

The djinn spoke a single syllable and the orc-mage froze where he stood. His claw was extended and the kobold had only to reach forward an inch to bite it. Still the mage did not move.

"That's impressive, indeed. Can you help me one more time?"

The djinn was amused by the kobold, whose curious and impish nature was so different from the other races who were far too serious. "I will assist you once more."

"Oh, thank you, thank you." The kobold gibbered, "Please get me and my friends out of this room. With Ratamon shrunken down small enough to fit in my pocket."

The djinn laughed at the strange request but said, "It shall be done." Blackscale watched with glee as the powerful orc-mage

was shrunken down to the diminutive size of three inches. He put the little figure carefully in one of his secret pockets.

Rock and Ovak shared more blood together in the doorway than most brothers in arms do in a lifetime. Blood sprayed from their foes as their heavy axes bit into ogreflesh. Likewise, blows and slashes from the ogres' powerful fists and sharp claws drew much blood in return.

Ovak stepped on the wrist of a fallen goblin and lost his balance. As he fell he saw the victorious gleam in the ogres' eyes. The terrible claws came down toward his face.

Rock Redstone had never fought harder or with more agility than he had for the last fifteen minutes, but he was growing tired. His axe felt heavy in his hands and he knew that it would all be over soon. He took a reckless swing that the big ogre easily ducked and countered. The fists pummeled him repeatedly and temporarily dazed him. *It will be over soon*, he thought stoically.

The amiable djinn chose that moment to fulfill the kobold's wish. The adventurers blinked out of Ratamon's tower, fell a short distance and landed with a splash. The smell told them where they were but only the kobold knew what had happened.

*Why didn't I ask him to send us to a comfy inn with music and food?* He chastised himself as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Then he remembered the fallen cleric.

"Where's Windsong?" he asked the others. They began searching the foul, shallow water for her.

Rock's hand blindly brushed against her soft cheek and he cried out, "Here she is! Help me get her out of the filth!" They raised her out of the water and coaxed her to consciousness while Blackscale produced a tindertwig for light. The tiny flame

illuminated a low, stone ceiling over a narrow corridor that stretched out of sight in both directions.

"Where are we?" Windsong asked, "And where's Ratamon?"

"We're in a sewer, of course, and don't worry about Ratamon. He's right here!" Dyllonius proudly produced the tiny, squirming figure of Ratamon which he dangled upside down by one leg. The party was speechless. They looked at the happy kobold and noticed that he was carrying a small, ornamental dagger.

"What do you know of this wonder, Kobold." Rock asked sternly while pointing to the knife.

"Well, uh, I don't know really. This dagger made me pick it up and then a genie popped out of it and said that he'd help us. He shrank Ratamon down to fit in my pocket then teleported us here.

"Is that the dagger?" The cleric asked.

"Yes, I can't seem to let it go." He tried to open his fingers but they were clearly stuck to the handle. Ovak applied his strength but Dyllonius cried out from the pain.

"It must be removed through arcane magic. Until then, you'll have to make due." Windsong said with a slight degree of mirth in her voice.

"What! I can't do anything with this dagger stuck in my hand!"

"I could lop off your arm if you like?" The barbarian teased.

"No thank you, this fine dagger suits me just fine!"

"Which direction shall we go?" Rock asked the cleric.

"It is difficult to say since we do not know where we are. I suggest we follow the direction the sewage is flowing. We may be able to find a way out."

The cleric augmented the light from the kobold's tindertwig by casting a spell that set her mace alight with bright yellow flame that enabled them to see twenty or thirty feet around them. They began to move cautiously through the rank liquid but their feet made substantial noise as they swished through the shallow water. Rock began to worry that something would hear them. His concern would have tripled if he had known that something already had.

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General Grogg ordered a large unit of his most inept soldiers through the gate that his sorcerers had opened. As they were decimated he led a small team of his best soldiers discreetly over the wall while his regular foot soldiers reinforced the frontal assault. General Grogg and his eleven elites lurked through the empty streets of the city toward the tall spires of the temple of Pelor.

Several human guards stood at the door. They were clad in bulky, polished heavy armor and their halberds looked like ceremonial pieces rather than battle-ried weapons. General Grogg stepped out of the shadows and advanced toward them.

"To arms! To arms!" The soldiers cried out but there were no reserves to come to their aid. The twelve temple guards realized that they must combat an equal number of larger, more experienced and bloodthirsty enemies by themselves.

A guard swung his long polearm that Grogg parried easily. He pinned the long, unwieldy weapon to the ground with his foot and

swung his long scimitar through the air in a fierce uppercut. The human guards were now eleven.

The sight of their fallen brother emboldened the soldiers and they fought valiantly to the end. When the last of them fell beneath the brutes' steel, there were but five ogres remaining. They streamed inside and began to loot every item they could fit into their grubby knapsacks.

"Just the Relic, you fools! It is shaped like the sun and has symbols etched upon it." His men began to topple statues, bookcases and tables in their search for the relic and did not notice the high priestess, Herras, enter the room.

"You will not find the relic here, General Grogg."

The startled ogres snarled in savage rage but Grogg held them in place with a grunt and asked her, "Where have you hidden it, Holy Witch?"

"I sent it far away. It lies in the ethereal wastes now, where it belongs. Dare ye to seek it there?" She spoke a few beseeching words to Pelor and he heard them. Three of the weak-willed villains were smitten by the supernatural fear of her god and attempted to flee the temple but only two of them made it out the door.

"Treasonous cowards!" Grogg said and caught the slowest of the three with a devastating blow that buried his scimitar deep into its helm. While his weapon was thus employed, the holy priestess of Pelor fell upon the two ogres with a savage flurry of blows from her blessed mace.

The ogre who yet remained with Grogg was a low-born thug named Norn who had been a childhood friend of the general's. He parried her blows and countered with a low swipe that forced



Herras to dart backward to avoid it. This afforded Grogg time to ready his weapon.

The ogres stood together now and seemed to be even larger than their actual height of over nine feet tall. As the ogres realized that they were facing off against a single elderly human, they smiled evilly. *This will be easy*, Grogg thought as he closed the distance toward her. Green ogre blood mingled with the red of the human guards' and dripped from his wicked, curved blade.

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Dhalin Yaro, a wizard of the academy, felt more than a little nervous as he was carried aloft on the back of the dragonne. His last experience with flight was less than satisfactory and he held his fear at bay through the extreme exertion of his will; the same ability that had failed him the last time.

"What kind of reception can we expect from King Koraden?" He asked the dragonne.

"He will have to be successfully charmed or he is likely to slay or imprison us all."

"Will he keep the Tome safely hidden from evil?" Dhalin accepted the loss of his own life readily as long as his quest was successful.

"I believe that he will."

Dhalin looked over at Lieutenant Torga who appeared to be enjoying herself. *Indeed*, he thought, *she looks truly valiant astride the great bird*. He looked down upon the forest below and smiled. *It looks so peaceful from up here, as if nothing could ever go wrong*.

A shadow overtook them and they felt a charge of electricity sizzle unseen through the air around them. They looked up to see a young blue dragon looking down at them with electric blue eyes that belied his elemental nature.

"Follow me, it is not far!" Wraithbone said as he tucked and dove toward the trees. Aulander and Torga followed silently behind him, the awe of dragonfear teased at their minds but their resolve prevailed.

The blue dragon launched an erratic zig-zag of lightning through the air that missed the druid but knocked Torga from his back. He raced after her but she fell faster than he could dive. Aulander saw Wishcraft and Dhalin narrowly escape another bolt from the dragon's breath-weapon. They crashed through the trees and landed safely on the forest floor where the mighty blue dragon was too large to follow.

Torga's inert body was thrown mercilessly from branch to branch but the soil was bouncy and soft. She landed with a dull, wet thud and did not move. The great condor landed hard as well but the old druid rose quickly and moved to the broken body of the dwarf who had been his rider and, therefore, his responsibility.

In elven form, the druid quickly removed Torga's helm and breastplate so that he could try to heal her dying body. He looked up to see a flash of lightning strike the treetops high above him. They ignited in white-hot flames that spread quickly through the upper canopy.

He turned his attention and energy back toward healing the dwarf. He muttered strange words that sounded like a stream babbling lazily over the rocks. Green mist enshrouded the dwarf and she began to stir.

"I feel terrible." She moaned.

"I can heal you further but you would have to remain in the cocoon for twenty-four hours." The wood-elf said smiling broadly.

Torga noticed the flaming treetops and began to put her armor back on. She winced at the hot touch of the steel that had conducted the electricity but buckled it on anyway.

The dragonne and Dhalin appeared and called to them. "Hurry, this way! We've found it!"

Aulander Arborguard growled a word and transmuted into a large brown bear. Torga climbed on readily and they moved swiftly through the trees toward their friends and the secret entrance to the underground kingdom of the dwarves.

S'zhock, the blue dragon, grew furious as his quarry escaped them. He broke off his attack and flew high into the air to look for an opening in the forest. He was a prideful young dragon with the single-mindedness of youth and would not let them go so easily.

He snorted as he found what he was looking for and dove from the sky like a bird hit with a slingshot and disappeared under the canopy of trees several miles away to stalk them on foot. He moved with incredible agility, covering fifty feet with each lithe bound of his azure body. He licked his lips in anticipation and relished the thought of their bones crunching between his teeth.

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"I think we should stop moving every fifteen seconds to listen for trouble." Cleric Windsong said. "We're making so much noise that we couldn't hear a forest troll sneaking up behind us."

They stopped moving and listened as the ripples died away. They heard nothing but repeated the process every ten paces. They followed the narrow tunnel until it terminated in a rusty iron grate. They breathed a hint of fresh air and ran toward it lustily.

Ovak pulled and kicked at the stubborn grate but couldn't get it to budge. Rock tried his strength with the same result while the cleric searched for a hidden switch that might open it. Dyllonius leaped down from Ovak's shoulder and slipped through the bars easily.

"I'll go see what I can see!" He said cheerfully and disappeared from sight. The sewage, which hadn't been at all offensive to the kobold, poured thickly down a chute and into an underground river comprised of mostly fresh water.

"Oh, they're going to love this!" Then he remembered that his oversized friends couldn't get through the grate. After he thoroughly explored the area, he went back to the grate and began to tell them what he had seen.

"But did you find the switch that unlocks these accursed bars?" Rock boomed angrily. The kobold had been exploring for nearly an hour and the ammoniac sewage burned his eyes.

"Oh! Well maybe I should look around for it!" He looked up and saw an iron lever set into the wall near the iron grating. "There's a lever here, do you think I should pull it?"

Torga bellowed her opinion so loudly that the pair of rust monsters momentarily halted. They watched their prey swinging tantalizingly from the humanoids' weapon belts. Rock's steel plate armor was the juiciest item on the menu for the two beasts that fed exclusively on metal.

The rust monsters were of average size, about seven feet long including their long corrosive tail. Their primary attack was a paralyzing and highly corrosive stun that could be delivered by either of the two long antennae that grew above their bulbous black eyes. They advanced greedily toward their prey.

Dyllonius jumped up and pulled the heavy iron rod that he hoped would lift the heavy grate. It didn't move so he used both his arms and put whole body into the effort but it was no use; he didn't have the weight to pull the lever.

"Hey guys, I think one of you need to come out here to pull this thing, it's too heavy for me."

Rock was wishing that he carried a warhammer instead of an axe so that he could bust through the rock. Suddenly he cried out in pain and splashed to the ground. The party turned to look and saw a tawny, round-bodied beast chewing the plate armor off Rock's motionless body.

Ovak rushed forward to strike with his father's axe but the cleric cried out, "No! It will destroy your weapon on contact. We must hit it from a distance or else kill it with our bare hands."

Ovak and Windsong tossed their weapons to the kobold through the gate and turned to their base adversary. Rock lay partially submerged within the slimy, chunky sewage and was in danger of drowning. Ovak tried to approach him but the second beast kept him at bay by flinging its paralyzing tentacles at him.

Windsong loaded her crossbow and aimed for the creature's eye knowing that it might only enrage the beast and cause it to charge. She held her breath for a moment before she released the bolt. It sank deep into the eye of the creature that was standing over Rock. It squealed pitifully and ran down the tunnel.

The cleric began to reload her crossbow and did not look up when Ovak yelled, "Watch out! The other one is charging!"

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Herras raised her shield to deflect a jab from Norn's scimitar while she parried a lateral swipe aimed at her neck from the general.

She retreated to the staircase so that they could not flank her and prayed quietly to Pelor for help.

She spoke a word and her skin hardened into a hide so thick that it negated most damage that she would receive from slashing weapons. She spoke another word and a ring of holy light covered the floor around her. *As long as I remain within this healing circle, I will prevail!*

The ogres felt the divine magic hinder them as they attempted to bear down upon the cleric. They struck viciously but every time her shield or mace deflected the blows.

"You are proving harder to kill than I thought, High Priestess Herras." Grogg said arrogantly.

"Perhaps Pelor does not wish a vile brute such as you to be the instrument of my death, General Grogg." She replied haughtily.

"Norn, take a step back. We will bullrush her to push her out of the holy circle!" The ogres charged her simultaneously with their blades held out in front of them. With incredible agility, she turned Grogg's blade aside and ran her own through Norn's heart. His legs gave out and his weight came crashing down upon her. She lay pinned underneath him as the general stood over her.

"Now, High Priestess, we shall see if Pelor wishes you to die." Herras closed her eyes tightly and held her hand out to him palm-forward. He realized that she was about to cast a spell and plunged his sword into her stomach but he was too late to save himself. From her outstretched hand he was smitten by unseen holy power like a blow from a hill giant. He flew backward with such force that his bones crunched loudly as he hit the wall.

"Pelor be praised," the dying priestess said quietly. Her breath was growing shallower and she spat blood from her mouth but she

would not die yet. *I must live a little longer, to explain to the young cleric that which I have hidden from her.* She lost consciousness while trying to escape from underneath Norn's four-hundred pound body, which bled green gore that stained the high priestess' immaculate robes.

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Dhalin and Torga met up with Aulander and Wraithbone, who paused to inspect three large rocks that seemed out of place within the heavily wooded forest. The dragonne walked around the stones and muttered to himself as if he were reading aloud but no one could admit to seeing any writing on the boulders.

"Oh, yes. Now I see. One is south, two is east and three is facing me." He lowered his shoulder and applied the strength of his four muscled legs to move the sharp tip of the largest stone so that it faced due south. Then he adjusted the middle stone to face east.

"This last one is not so easy as the others. To solve it, one must know where the dwarven kingdom lies. Otherwise, we would spring a nasty trap, I am sure."

"But you know where it is?" Dhalin asked hopefully.

"Oh, yes, though I haven't been there since before you were born." Torga's keen eyes spotted the dragon sneaking up on them when he was still seventy feet away. "The dragon is upon us!"

Dhalin whirled around just in time to see the electricity crackle from the dragon's mouth. It knocked him backward through the air and he landed hard. The smell of burnt hair and clothing filled the area.

Aulander said to Torga as Wishcraft turned the final stone, "Get the wizard inside quickly!"

He turned into a large hawk and flew directly at the dragon's eyes. Had the young blue dragon not closed them in time, the hawk's cruel talons would have blinded him forever. Yet, he was as good as blind if he couldn't open his eyes so he knew that he had to get rid of the meddlesome bird.

As Wraithbone Wishcraft completed the combination, the ground beneath the boulders began to tremble. The soil began to fall inward like sand through an hourglass and revealed a spiral staircase that wound down into the earth.

S'zhock swatted at the hawk who dodged the blows nimbly. His efforts afforded Torga the time she needed to carry Dhalin safely into the staircase. Torga set the ailing wizard down and grabbed something out of his tunic, then she raced back up the staircase.

She saw the druid in the clutches of the laughing blue dragon. The desperate elf shape-shifted dozens of times hoping to escape the scaly cage that held him prisoner. He nearly slipped through in the form of a snake but was caught by the tail in mid-air as he fell to the ground.

Torga raced forward and thought, *I hope I remember the command word Dhalin used.* She raced up to the dragon and cried out, "Flickrokrian!" as she threw the hideous figurine of the fly into S'zhock's grinning maw. A moment passed and nothing happened. Torga stood shieldless before the immense blue hulk and prepared for the lightning blast to come.

The iron-like claw released the druid who ran toward Torga uncertainly on his native elven legs. The dragon looked uncomfortable at first, then he howled in pain. The figurine was growing into its elephantine proportions within the belly of the beast!



The adventurers did not wait to witness the spectacle but they were not displeased to hear a loud tearing sound that was closely followed by a deafening sonic boom and an explosion of electric light from above them that signalled the horrific end of the dragon, S'zhock.

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The brave cleric, Windsong, turned on her heel and ran toward the grate where she turned and fired at the charging rust monster. She missed but managed to launch herself headlong over the beast and it smashed into the iron grate with its tentacles lashing wildly. It turned around to meet an enraged barbarian wearing no metal at all.

Ovak's face was bright red and veins popped unnaturally on his face, neck and arms. He smashed his foot into its eyes three times before it could strike an effective blow back at him. The tentacles stung him repeatedly but he would not succumb to its paralytic effect; not while he was raging.

He pummeled the beast with his fists mercilessly with a ferocity that frightened everyone in the room. He continued to rend its corpse long after life had fled from it but none of his party wished to interfere with him.

Finally, the indefatigable kobold said, "I think you got him buddy! Hey, look, Rusty corroded the bars for us!" The barbarian held still while the group inspected the bars, then he fell over from exhaustion and the cumulative doses of paralyzing attacks which his adrenaline had blocked while he had been lost within his rage.

The group retrieved their weapons and succeeded in reviving Ovak as they attempted to drag him through the jagged bars of the sewer and into the relatively open air of the underground river.

"Have we a boat?" Ovak asked with a sardonic smile.

"We shall have to swim." Windsong said.

"Will someone please help me take off the rest of my armor?"

Rock helped him remove his greaves and gauntlets so that he stood in only his padded under-armor. He kept his boots on.

They dove into the water and found it to be refreshing after the stench of the sewage which they had just endured. They all swam easily downstream and eventually the darkness of the cave relented into the darkness of the night sky. They rejoiced to breathe fresh air once more as they crawled out of the cold water.

They were surprised to find themselves within the city walls of Evermoor. They were not far from the temple of Pelor and they began to move toward it confidently. As they navigated the maze of tiny streets, they began to sense that something out of the ordinary had occurred in the city the day before.

Cleric Windsong was eager to return the escaped orc-mage, Ratamon, to justice. They could hear him squeaking out his rage from the kobold's pocket and weren't overly concerned with whether they would be able to restore him to his natural size or not.

As they approached the temple they were horrified to see the bodies of the ogres and temple guards lying unattended outside the door of the holy sanctuary. She had known the guards and wept a short prayer over each of them before they opened the heavy doors of the temple

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Dhalin's party was soon challenged by the dwarven guard who must have been extremely unused to intruders in their lonely post. They rose slowly as if disbelieving their eyes as they commanded the adventurers to halt and give an account of themselves.

"I am the banished wizard, Wraithbone Wishcraft, an old friend of your king. I bring ill tidings from above and seek his counsel on the matter."

The dwarves were taken aback by the eloquent dragonne who spoke for the group. They would have preferred to speak directly with Torga and told him so.

"As you wish." Wraithbone replied patiently.

Torga stepped up to them and introduced herself. She spoke several curt commands and the officer on duty sent his runner to fetch an escort. While they were waiting for it to arrive, the officer began to ask idle questions and babble forth seemingly random information.

"King Koraden will likely be glad to see you. It is known that he seeks outsiders for a particular quest into the ancient dwarven crypts."

"We are not here to explore his crypts." Wraithbone said testily.

"What can you tell me about your king?" Torga asked the officer.

"He's a good king, wise and fair. Maybe he's a bit too old-fashioned for the younger folk but they just don't know what's good for them. They want him to allow certain types of magic in the kingdom and he stands adamantly against it. Still, he's getting older and the times are changing, aren't they?"

The dwarf who had been dispatched by the officer returned with an armored escort that looked and behaved more like mercenaries or bounty hunters than a royal guard.

The adventurers were led further down into the dwarven city that was becoming more populated as they descended. *Some of these dwarves may never have seen the sun or the beauty of trees and grasses that make life worth living*, Aulander Arborguard thought and shivered in the stale, dank air of the cave.

Torga had never been to a dwarven city before and was truly awed by the spectacle. Massive pillars supported the ceiling on each level and the high degree of craftsmanship in the halls, door and rich embellishments bespoke of the skill of dwarven hammers and picks.

They were ushered into the royal chamber and told to prostrate themselves before the grim dwarf who sat upon the throne. The party began to understand that they were not guests but prisoners. Although they were not bound, the dozens of stout guards brandishing war-axes served as their assurance that the party would not escape or cause harm to their king.

King Keraden was dressed in a brilliant blue robe and carried a stout warhammer where other kings would hold a mere sceptre. His crown was gaudy with gold and jewels that glimmered in the torchlight.

"Who are these who enter the kingdom of Keraden through the secret stairs?" The king bellowed the question loudly but was speaking to the nobles of his court and not to the adventurers themselves.

"Sire, they say that you were acquainted with one of them long ago and have come to ask you a favor."

"Which of you ruffians knew the king in his youth?" The king asked in the royal third-person.

The dragonne rose and spoke bravely but with respect evident in his voice. "I am Wraithbone Wishcraft, though you knew me as the nobledrow wizard who aided you in a matter long ago."

The king remained silent while his mind flew through the years. When recollection dawned upon him, everyone in the court was relieved to see their king's grim lips break into a broad smile. "Forgive me for my mirth, fair nobledrow, but you have changed somewhat since I looked upon you last."

"Yes, sire. That is so. Nearly six hundred moons have passed since I was *blessed* with the form of a beast."

"You always were too big for your shoes, young wizard!" The dragonne sighed at the indignity but held his tongue in part because he knew that he had deserved his fate but also because he needed the king to accept the Tome of Souls.

"It is true, wise king, and I pay my penance willingly."

"And what am I to make of these knaves with which you travel?" His words were chosen to elicit a response from the hot-headed among them and nearly succeeded in drawing Torga's ire but Dhalin's eyes kept the fighter in check.

"The party flew from the capital city of Evermoor all the way to the ethereal wastes in order to consult me on a tome, your highness."

"Ah, now I see that we draw nearer to the issue. What is this tome and why do you bring it to me? Doubtless it contains powerful magic that you must know is unwelcome within my halls."

Wishcraft motioned for Dhalin to produce the book. "Behold, your highness, the Tome of Souls!" Dhalin held the book out toward the king who made no motion of wishing to receive it.

"That accursed book again? I have heard tales of it since my youth and it always brings terrible curses on any who attempt to keep it hidden."

"That is so, sire, but those stories do not tell of the powerful dwarven king who hid the book in his palace's anti-magic walls."

"That is true, perhaps you have done well to bring it to me. I have no use for it personally, but I could seal it up forever within my halls."

Hope entered the party's hearts as they seemed to have heard the king agree to hide the tome. Their spirits fell as the king spoke again.

"If I do this for you, Wraithbone Wishcraft, there is a task that I would require you all to undertake for me. Does that sound fair?"

"It does, your highness, and the favor you do us is a favor to all of Evermoor. If Mindweb were to possess it, even the might of the dwarven army could not avert the doom of Evermoor."

"Perhaps, prideful wizard. But what say you to my terms?"  
The party looked at each other and knew that they had no choice. One by one they nodded their assent and pledged obeisance to the powerful king of the dwarves.

"We agree to your terms," Wraithbone stated. The king ordered his guard to take the book and place it in his private chamber.

"I shall hide the tome myself so that no living being can learn its location."

"And us, sire, what task shall we perform in return?"

"Oh, it's just a small matter really, but one that cannot be undertaken by any of my clan. Our family crypts encompass a vast complex far below our city and it has recently been overrun with undead abominations."

"Surely your own soldiers can rout them from your sacred burial caves."

"That is true," said the king who looked uncomfortable for the first time, "but there is more. The vile necromancer who lies hidden below now wields the power over our fallen ancestors and we dare not slay them ourselves. It would be sacrilege to my people."

"I understand. My party, who have no blood ties to your venerated ancestors, shall help them find peace in death once more and the necromancer will be laid low."

King Koraden was pleased and it showed on his face. "Come then, let us feast and make merry for truly this is a fortuitous alliance for us all!"

The adventurers were given lush apartments that were complete with fresh water and clothes that fit each disparate physique perfectly. They bathed and returned to find the celebration, held auspiciously in their honor, already well underway.

They were relieved that the Tome of Souls was now hidden safely underground where Mindweb could not scry its location but they grew concerned about the task the king had set for them.

*Without my magic, Dhalin thought, the undead dwarves will very likely slay us all.* He looked at his three stalwart companions and smiled. Torga was a very capable warrior and the dragonne was truly fearsome in battle. If the druid retained his ability to shapechange then perhaps they might survive their task after all.

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The City Guard had gained a bloody victory over the goblinoid horde. Captain Krok had no more reason to fear Ratamon's fiery punishment because he now lay dead on the battlefield with most of his detachment of two-hundred goblins.

Horns blew triumphantly throughout the city but no sound came from the temple of Pelor. Cleric Windsong rushed toward the doors, which had been smashed inward with incredible violence. The twelve temple guards and the seven ogres they had slain were strewn grotesquely about the holy antechamber.

The warriors stayed close to the cleric as she moved through the carnage.

"I must see the high priestess. I know that she is still alive!" The others did not share her optimism but wisely held their opinions to themselves, for the fair cleric was already dangerously close to despair.

"We will find her, Cleric Windsong." Ovak said reassuringly. Rock followed a trail of blood to find the cowardly soldier that Grogg had slain for attempting to flee Pelor's righteousness. Fatima Windsong moved toward the steps and her breath caught in her throat.

She saw the frail form of Pelor's highest disciple lying underneath the brutish bulk of the ogre who had been named Norn. She rushed toward the priestess and took her hand. Herras's eyes opened slightly and her bloody lips cracked into a smile.

"I knew you would come before Pelor took me home." Her voice was so thin and raspy that Windsong had to put her ear close to the high priestess's mouth to hear her words.



"I have returned with the orc-mage, Ratamon." Windsong stated as a tear fell from her eye.

"Show me the holy relic that I gave to you." Windsong lifted it out of her tunic and held it toward Herras, whose smile widened into a grin.

"This is the one, Fatima Windsong, Pelor's one true phylactery. His immortal soul resides within the relic you wear around your neck and you must protect it at all costs. It must never be possessed by one with evil in their heart."

Herras coughed up blood but she was anxious to speak her mind before Pelor came for her.

"It was our beloved Pelor who was guiding my hand when I replaced your own symbol with His ancient relic. He has chosen you to be named, Cleric Fatima Windsong, High Priestess of Pelor!"

Herras looked up and she said, "Yes, my lord. I am ready." Her eyelids fluttered rapidly and the adventurers watched in awe as her body became engulfed in golden, holy flame. High Priestess Herras uttered no cry as her god carried her home.

Windsong reeled as the shock overwhelmed her. She swooned but was caught by the strong, stout arms of Rock Redstone. He and Ovak carried her to the spare but comfortable chamber that belonged to the High Priestess where Ovak and Dyllonius remained to guard her.

Rock left the temple to requisition the aid of the City Guard and soon returned with a detachment of men who would remove the bodies and clean up the gore that defiled Pelor's holy temple.

When High Priestess Windsong arose from her swoon, she smiled to see the loyal faces of her stalwart band of heroes grinning back at her.

Ovak cried big barbarian tears of gratitude that his healing angel had arisen. Rock stood near the door and offered her a curt, soldierly nod that meant, *it's over and we've won!*

The kobold broke the tender mood by dangling the powerful but diminutive orc-mage by his boots and slapping his face with a small, stringy haunch of old rat meat. In spite of their better natures, they laughed at the little draconid's antics so openly that tears ran down their cheeks.

They failed to notice the sleek, black raven fly from the chamber to begin the long journey home to its unholy master whose plans had been merely postponed by the unlikely heroes of Evermoor.

*The End*