

Adventure Incorporated Presents

Secrets of New Meritta

A Short Story Collection



Collected Stories

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Foreword

Greetings adventurers! It is with my sincerest gratitude that I present to you this volume of collected short stories about the world of New Meritta.

Two years ago my friend Mike reached out to me. He wanted to play a game of Dungeons and Dragons with our old improv troupe from college. We hadn't all been in the same room in nearly a decade, and there was at least two thousand miles between us at our longest. I thought about it, I was very interested; but I'd been in similar situations before. I couldn't even get home games with geographically close friends to last more than a handful of sessions; but I really wanted this to work. I told him we could do it, but we should record it and put it out as a podcast; that way, even at the first sign of difficulty scheduling or feeling tired or sick, we would still play. There would be something keeping us coming back to record beyond our own will. That's you.

That's you who has poured yourself into our show enough that you are excited to read even more stories from our world. You are the show's lifeblood and we could not be more grateful that you and your fellow listeners find what we are doing interesting enough to give us your precious time and thought. This show means the world to us, and your interest in it means that by extension you mean the world to us.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Everything you will read in these pages is canon. It has happened in the world of New Meritta and it affects our world. The Many Pennies may not be aware that this has happened, it may never come up in the podcast, but it's there. It gives you just a little more understanding of the world of New Meritta. A little more magic, kings, gods, and secrets. A little more Adventure Incorporated.

Big special thanks to Adam L. Vachon whose stories are such a fun companion to the world. I do very little content editing on Adam's pieces, only telling him if something doesn't fit with something secret but important. Everything else I try to incorporate and run with.

Special thanks to Stephanie and Mike for being a part of this (and all) projects with me.

And of course, a big thanks to my wife, who puts up with the hours I put into the show and the vacant stares when she knows my brain is working on plot. I love you.

Thank you all again for being a special part of this. Let's get started.

Jaques Slysong: Bard from Across the Sea

The man who walked into The Rusty Goblet was distinctly not from Emberfall. It was the cut and style of his clothing mostly; knee high boots that folded over at the top, pants that were snug but cut in a manner that did not restrict movement, baggy shirt, leather vest, pristine blue cloak and gloves, and a fancy wide brimmed hat with a feather in it... a merchant perhaps, although the man also carried a musical instrument case, a number of daggers strapped to a baldric, and not one, but two swords. One appeared to be a sailor's cutlass and the other a dueling saber. A nobleman perhaps, on business from Varina. Kahl Sourtap, the proprietor of the Goblet kept a neutral face while taking note of this particular man. He had seen far stranger, but then again he always took note of non-regulars entering his establishment; especially when they appeared to be the type of patron who had plenty of coin available to them. Very special note indeed when the individual in question also looked like they themselves might be worth plenty of coin.

"What can I get for ye" Kahl asked the man, who sat down at the bar with a sigh, clearly distracted and apparently thoroughly troubled by some demons which Kahl didn't particularly care about unless they caused the man to buy more drink.

"What iz ze most vile drink you can create, good man?" the man asked. Kahl lifted an eyebrow curiously, and poured a flagon of ale and a glass of milk.

"White American," he said matter of factly and pointed to a sign; "Though ye wretch it up ye clean it up".

The mysterious man shrugged and downed both. Kahl tried to hide his surprise when the man simply wrinkled his nose after swallowing both down in one gulp; most men tossed the disgusting drink back up again almost immediately.

"Truly dizgusting," the man said. "For ze next round I'll take your finest wine" and the man plopped far more than enough coin to cover the wine and the foul concoction that was quickly becoming a popular drink in the taverns of Emberfall, as measure for boasting one's' drinking fortitude as much as practical jokes. Kahl licked his lips, scooped up the coin and hurriedly fetched the man his wine. Before he set down the cup however, he pointedly looked at the man's swords.

"Look, I appreciate the coin, but ye better not be causing trouble in the Goblet. We have 'nough trouble as is. Yer kind makes some o' the regulars... itchy, if ye know what I'm sayin'. Best not to be stayin' too long; I'll not be held responsible fer yer well being is all." The tavernkeep's eyes flicked rapidly to a corner of the room where a particular set of regulars sat, a mean bunch whom he had an arrangement with. The arrangement was along the lines of Kahl not asking questions when patrons of note (new, or poor, or foreign, or female, or especially if they seemed

particularly wealthy) disappeared, and occasionally ignoring various cries coming from the backroom where said patrons would go with those rather nasty looking regulars. He winced at that thought. He wasn't particularly proud of the arrangement, but the men paid him well to let them continue operating, and who cared about foreign strangers besides?

The Mysterious Stranger grinned broadly at the warning, "Perhaps zis iz an opportunity to make some friends zen, yes? Good sir, will you allow me ze privilege of playing a song for ze guests of your fine establishment? I am a traveling minstrel you see, and have had the honor of performing at the Royal Court in Varina. But for you my good Tavern Master I shall play for free. First, however, shall I tell you ze tale of how I came to be here today? Zis iz what ze bartenders do, yes? Listen to ze problems of ze patrons? Do zey do zat here in Emberfall az well? As I am sure you could tell by my accent, I am not from around here," and as he spoke those last words the man slid his hat off and placed it on the bar with a flourish, and suddenly he was much less than a man, and much more than one at the same time. He had the large, slitted yellow eyes of a predatory cat, his ears were pointed similarly to that of an Elf, but his ears were covered in fur and much more round and curved at the base, like a wild animal. His nose was somewhere in between that of a man and a great cat, and when the man smiled he revealed the sharp teeth of a beast as well.

Kahl raised his eyebrow and harrumphed; "Never seen yer type before, and I'm not impressed by yer fancy tricks neither. But ye do 'ave me curious," Kahl said, loud enough for his friends in the corner to hear. It was one of the signals they commonly used to draw attention to particular targets. "Aye tell yer story then and be quick about it, I'll be 'avin other customers t'day no doubt."

"Ah, most excellent! Zen you may call me Jaques Slysong," the man said, grinning wider to reveal more sharp teeth. "You know, my good friend, eleven years is a long time..."

* * *

Eleven years is a long time. Much can change in that time, especially if you consider that time itself can be molded like clay, and eleven years, in truth, has very little meaning. It seems unfair if you do return to a place, especially if it was not your choice to leave to begin with. I was snatched from my home at the tender age of nine, and my memories of Erwest are of great sweeping structures, monuments, flying ships, horseless carts, and many many wondrous things. I was always a curious boy, and recently it had been discovered that I had a talent for magic, and in my culture this was a thing to be celebrated!

The day of my manifestation celebration came and I woke up much earlier than the rest of my village; it was a sound, I thought I heard. I went outside and saw a strange sight: down by the sea the air rippled and was distorted. Every sense in my body screamed at me, saying "this is magic!", and curious as I was, I went to take a closer look. It was difficult to tell where the magic started and stopped, and the world seemed to twist and distort the closer I got. And then all of a sudden the world was clear again.

I was at the edge of the woods, where the sands greet them that I saw the ship; a great hulking thing with three masts. It was then that I was snatched by smelly, strong hands from behind and thrown below deck. I did not recognize any of the other captives on the vessel and none of them spoke my language, not did I speak the language of my captors. It was only later in life that I learned that this vessel, the Chained Man, was here simply looking for new “recruitment” grounds. Slavers. I was exotic, the only one of my kind I have met outside of my home in Erwest. On board the ship I was... abused. In ways one should never abuse a child.

The ship docked in Varina where the slaves were all sold on the black market. I was sold for a very high price to a nearby brothel, where my exoticness bread curiosity. The patron was a kind mistress; my first years were spent learning to perform and entertain. My teacher was the finest court bard in all of Varina, who also happened to be a lover of the mistress of the house. I was schooled in magic (as they discovered quickly I had a talent for it) and, when I was old enough, in the art of love... for peoples of all types and genders.

My bardic talents grew, as did my recognition; being the only one your kind means you cannot keep a low profile in Varina if you are a bard. In time, it was requested that I perform for the King, who respected my talents, found me interesting, but cared little for me otherwise. Yes, I was “exotic”, but to her eyes also too similar to lycanthropes in this continent. She tolerated me, but viewed me with suspicion. One of the nobles, however took a fancy to me and fell in love with me. Her husband, on the other hand, grew quite jealous; thankfully he was also a very shrewd man. For my “services” he rewarded me with a gift: the chance to go and search for my homeland. I took his offer immediately. I had sung many songs of my homeland, and the many things I remembered from my youth. Most, of course, said that these were all fairy tales, and that I was but a cursed young human boy, or one in a very elaborate magic disguise. The noble, a sorcerer of some renown figured he could both be rid of me AND perhaps learn of new and wondrous things from this far away land. Of course, I did not know at the time that this was a conspiracy with the King to get me out of Varina! Apparently the King and some of the nobles did not like the fame and renown I was collecting... Former “slaves”, brothel employees, and most importantly those who may or may not be distantly related to lycanthropes are not suitable to the court of Varina.

The ship he chartered was a not the most reputable, but one whom he paid handsomely. In return, they were to bring back wondrous things from my homeland and I was to secure “first contact” with others of my kind. The journey took months, and I became close with the captain and crew; my talent for entertainment was sorely needed on the long trip, my magical abilities greatly helped face the dangers on the sea, and many of the crew also appreciate my gifts when it comes to pleasure...

When we finally reached Erwest it was a nerve wracking day; what would I find on this distant shore? Once we were close enough to land we started to sail north from our position, following the coast looking for something I recognized. Tall buildings from my memories, other ships, docks, really any sign of civilization. Days became weeks, weeks months as we followed the

coastline up and down before I recognized the very beach from which I was taken. My heart sank. Where were the soaring towers? The skyships? The Great Domes? Something wasn't right. There was only jungle here. We took a boat ashore and began an exploration of the area nearby and found nothing. Simply nothing but jungle.

Months went by, and eventually we found signs of the inhabitants of the area... True lycanthropes, living in barely tribal communities. We spied on them from afar, for we had no desire to run afoul with the beasts. They were deep into the jungle and far from our ship. From my memories, I knew they occupied the area my People called "The Cradle"; what we believed to be the origins of civilization itself. I felt my face go pale when I realized where I was, and I went numb from the shock of it. No not where, WHEN. I refused to believe it at first, but after days of carefully watching the creatures (some could not even fully shift to animal forms!) I could not deny the truth: I was looking at my ancestors. I had been thrown into the past, literally thousands of years. I called off the search. There would be no reunion with my clan.

While the concept manipulating time was not new to me, I could not conceive of spells powerful enough to restore me back to my own time. There was no going home. And in a strange way this was a relief: I had a life here, and a good enough life. Besides, despite some rather overzealous and xenophobic Lords and Nobles, the people of New Merrita were largely rather wonderful and interesting!

Back on board the ship, after a long conversation with the Captain, who now knew he had been set up for this fall as well, we began to formulate a new plan. It was obvious there would be no reward for myself or the crew, and infact we would be, by Varinian law, indebted to the Lord who funded the expedition. Going back to Varina empty handed was not an option, but this was what the Lord had hoped for. Indentured servitude. Captain Avery, however, suggested a different approach: take from this Lord instead. Steal, smuggle, and sell his treasure somewhere else. It had a strong sense of appeal to someone who could never get home and had just figured out that going back to Varina meant more slavery or worse.

For the next five years we acted as little better than pirates, though pirates with a very specific code: We would only target ships carrying items of value for the sorcerer, Lord Silverstorm, we would leave the crews of said vessels as unharmed as possible BUT would meet resistance with a fight, and we would take no slaves or prisoners. In addition, we made it a point to free any slaves in the process. On more than a few occasions we even came across an entire slaving vessels, though not for Lord Silverstorm. For these vessels, we slaughtered the crews and freed the slaves.

Suffice it to say we made quite the impression on the Lords of Varina, and in due course the ship decided to disband and go our separate ways in order to not be caught. That is when the hunting began. We all kept in touch, and soon enough word went around that members of the old crew were disappearing or being killed off. Some were captured by peacekeepers for our "crimes" against the lord, others died in mysterious accidents, others were simply never heard from again, and whether that was Silverstorm or the crew members themselves I shall never

know. I knew then that Silverstorm was a patient man and would not so easily let our actions go “unrewarded”. And so I went to Emberfall, the land of thieves, one place that Silverstorm would have a harder time reaching.

* * *

“And so you zee gentlemen, my story iz a sad one indeed! For here I am, with a price upon my head, and adrift upon ze road.”

Kahl smiled on that statement, “A bounty, eh? Ere now, looks like we’re gonna ‘ave to keep this one around a bit longer den usual boys, te figure if he’s worth more to dem slavers or more to that fancy Lord Silverstorm he was gabbing on about!” and sure enough the men from the corner were almost upon Jaques, weapons drawn as Kahl gave an greedy little chortle. “Now come easy kitty cat and we won’t be harmin’ ya too much.”

Jaques sighed, finished his wine in one gulp, and looked up at Kahl and the pupils of his eyes narrowed to deadly slits that gave Kahl and his men pause, “You said somezing about slavers, yes? Now zat, my good man, will make it so I do not feel quite so terrible about zis”, and all of a sudden Jaques feature shifted. He looked more feral; it could have simply been a trick of the light, but his teeth seemed longer and sharper, more hair seemed to cover his body, and he now appeared to carry himself with the same presence as a panther does before it pounces on a helpless beast in the forest. And he began to sing. Or hum. Or purr? It sounded more like a growl!

Several moments later, the men from the corner lay dead in pools of blood, and Kahl was cowering behind his bar.

“Now zis was a shame my good friend... and I had so hoped to play in your establishment, as a bard must perform to make a living. But I cannot sit idly by when I know zat my employer may ‘ave connections with slave traders, you see. But it zeems I must now take my leave. Be careful who you keep az your friends Master Sourtap, I may pass by zis way again in ze future.”

Kahl couldn’t recall ever telling this man his name, which lead him to believe that there was a good chance that none of this was a coincidence. He had been marked by this mysterious man with whom he now wanted nothing to do with.

Jaques flipped his cap back on his head and instantly transformed back into a normal human man, but one dressed in more common attire. Kahl stared dumfounded as the strange bard, now disguised as a perfectly average commoner, simply walked out and disappeared down the street. And then Kahl made a choice. With the goons from the slave trade dead in his tavern, and without a culprit to blame for their deaths, he was now considered fair game for the slavers. There was only one thing to do.

Soon, the shouts cried out around town: The Rusty Goblet was ablaze. Kahl Sourtap was already out the gates, and a long ways down the road before the fire was under control. He did not know where he was going to go, and he did not care. He was no goody two-shoes, but he had held no true love for the slaver either; so he was done with them. Perhaps he'd go to Varina, where money seemed to flow easily. Or maybe he'd go the Carapath. He had a cousin working in Mughamara, where that fancy adventuring company was from. Whatever his path, he intended to stay out of trouble, and hopefully never see that man, Jaques the Cat, The Bard From Across the Sea, ever again.

O Golden Gates of Fae

O Golden Gate shine bright across the span.
From fields of light leaves forth our caravan.
Out to the world of stone and wood and grass.
A marking left for us to find repass.

A sigil glowing brightly like the dawn.
Two oak trees stand to mark our path bygone.
Their twisting branches form a passageway.
And through them passed the golden host of fae.

Ri Allalir doth feast with shining lords,
A celebration of our new accords.
Across the land the fae begin to move.
We travel as we like, beyond reprove.

For centuries we dance under the sun.
Our reverie has only just begun.
We gather singing underneath the moon.
The song is heard from mountaintop to dune.

Ri calls for convocation every year.
And save for one, the host will all appear.
Our shining brother, draped in golden light.
He looks upon the world with different sight.

What made him so enthralled with life's unclear.
But we have come to understand Llaniere.
He told me of his time among the elves.
He saw them animals, unlike ourselves.

Until the elves began to sing their song.
So beautiful, so fair, he must be wrong.
With heart and love the elven songs did ring.
To Llaniere it was pure joy they did bring.

He looked upon these fair creatures anew.
It was that time he knew what he must do.
He gave the elves a very special gift.
But sharing of his light soon caused a rift.

“You’ve changed this place, and all who dwell within.
Destroyed our way of life, committed sin.
The elves will wake from instinct into fear.
You have brought doom to them you fool, Llaniere.”

For Elves it was the dawn of a new day.
They never had the means to feel this way.
Their minds had cleared of all the fog and rage.
Like animals set free from iron cage.

His gift brought thought and culture, that was true.
But for the elves that’s not all it would do.
It took the creatures hidden ‘mong the trees.
Let magic flow between them like a breeze.

From that point on an elf would never die,
Lest it slain, it would not mortify.
No sickness, rot, nor age would take their life.
Immortal soul bereft of afterlife.

Llaniere watched as his light took hold of elves.
They grew, they learned to understand themselves.
He saw the good his magick brought to them.
He hatched a new subversive stratagem.

He turned his gaze to frightened tribes of men.
He sought to share his gift of light again.
It made them strong, and brave; it gave them thought.
But like the elves, that isn’t all they got.

For men were prone to spread across the land.
The light took that inside and made it grand.
For men would not live long and dodge their fate.
But like no other they’d proliferate.

To breed with those who were not like their kin.
A starting point for races here begin.
Half elf or orc, part human they would be.
The race of men spread wide from range to sea.

Llaniere, he brought the light to mountain caves.
The creatures found, to darkness they were slaves.
With thought of light the dwarves were born anew.
Their admiration for the fae, it grew.

The dwarves discovered culture like the rest.
With metal shaping they became obsessed.
From light, the craftsmanship their special gift.
Their legacy in artistry was swift.

With weapons, armor, statues, well designed,
The craftsmen and the artifacts entwined.
The Dwarven path to immortality
Through beautiful design done expertly.

The halflings showed Llaniere another side.
The light instilled in them a different pride.
They'd laugh and sing with food and drink for hours.
Pure joy and merriment seemed their great powers.

My brother looked at all that he had done.
Despite his good intention still we shun.
He felt he understood a hidden truth.
A something glorious inside their youth.

He tried once more to reach out with his light.
This time to orcs, though prone to kill and fight.
The power Llaniere gave enhanced their mind.
They learned the best techniques to kill mankind.

This was the first of New Meritta's wars.
The Men, and elves, and dwarves, and halfling roars.
It would not be the last the land would see.
Blood would be spilled too many times with glee.

T'was not a part of poor old Llaniere's plan.
Orcs slaughtered all: elf, halfling, dwarf, and man.
He'd meant to bring the heart and joy he'd seen.
The spirits of the orcs were dark and mean.

Disheartened, Llaniere turned to run away.
He knew what he must do, he sought the fae.
We did not think him wise nor understand.
Why give light to the creatures of this land?

He gathered dust and gems from dwarven hall.
He gathered mirth and love from halfling ball.
He gathered grace and song from elven den.

He gathered heart and spirit from the men.

He mixed his light into these disparate things.
From them was born the first of the faelings.
Its eyes were wide with curiosity.
We fae stared down upon it breathlessly.

We gazed upon this creature and saw truth.
The Faerie Magick leaking from this youth.
The life of Onmeneth could show the way.
The light had made them greater than the fae.

We formed a pact with Llaniere called "The Oath".
We would protect these races, tend their growth.
T'was light of fae that gave them thought and soul.
It made them part of us to form a whole.

We watched them grow, create, inspire, and thrive.
Defended them from evil, saved their lives.
With pride we worked to stop each vile threat.
Gave greater races life devoid of fret.

We saw ourselves as perfect, vigilant.
But we were fools, too blind and arrogant..
We thought each evil force we could repel.
We failed; were not prepared when shadow fell.

A slow corruption took its slimy hold.
A tentacle that moved like creeping mold.
It turned the hearts of men and dwarves and elves,
And twisted them to creatures not themselves.

The gods could not even resist the shade.
The golden dragon raising up his blade.
He threatened spreading darkness to the rest.
Was made to slumber in his earthen nest.

Too late did we begin to fight the dark.
We moved to rally forth the patriarch.
Ri Allalir squared off against our foe.
His magick, strong, could not land single blow.

He was the first of faerie folk to fall.
Our strategy Llaniere did overhaul.

He took the crown and placed it on his head.
“We must stop this corruption from its spread.”

His call rang out to people of the land.
He formed a group and told them what he planned.
He poured his light into the order new.
Their forms had changed, from them the Sylvan grew.

We sought the scar that bled into the world.
The point of entry where the shadow swirled.
We found a symbol on the earth like ours.
Not golden gates but towering black spars.

The Sylvan light was power they could wield.
They smashed the gate and left the pathway sealed.
The flow of shadow to this realm had stopped.
The Greater Armies Sylvan magics propped.

But Ri Llaniere knew threat was far from gone.
Our time had come, we fae must be withdrawn.
He'd leave the land of Onmeneth to all.
On your backs it will stand or it will fall.

Beyond the world, inside the astral plane,
The veil between two worlds began to strain.
A link between the shadow and the fae,
We must return to block the passageway.

The Ri, Llaniere, led us to shining gate.
Preventing shadow's breach was now our fate.
He asked the Sylvan “Shut the gate behind.”
Protest they did but Llaniere was resigned.

So we, the Host, prepare to leave this land.
This record kept so you might understand.
Be man, or orc, or gnome, or dwarf, or elf.
To find the fae, you must look in yourself.

Jaques Slysong: The First Snowfall in Greenfield

It was the first snowfall of the year, but the hearth in the tavern was well stoked to keep out the cold. Mulled wine and brandy made the folks in the common room merry, and Jaques easily collected coins here and there simply by plucking his mandolin to provide some cheery tunes. He didn't need the gold; he was far more content to see the folks in this tavern simply smile and laugh for a change.

Jaques Slysong had been in Perrinith for weeks monitoring the situation in what used to be Heartholme. It was a true tragedy what had happened there; Jaques had been inside the cave complex at the time. One of his contacts inside Adventure Inc. let on about the mysterious machine, and Jaques believed it had some connection to all of the many strange events happening around the continent.

He escaped more out of pure luck than anything else; when the gnolls and lizardfolk arrived, he had surveyed much of the cave already, and was on his way out to find a place to stay in town. The sounds of fighting and screams made him cautious, and sure enough, Heartholme was under attack. The villagers were rounded up, whether to be kept as slaves or for food he did not know, and as much as Jaques was disgusted by the idea of people in captivity, he was not stupid either. This was not merely a random inter-species raiding party; this was an army, and the neighboring towns likely had no idea of the threat. Based on the chaos within the small town, this attack came by surprise, and if Jaques did not get out of Heartholme, no one would even know the town was occupied by a monstrous army.

He had to use a potion of invisibility to get through without being caught, but eventually he cleared the danger, and made it to a nearby hill where he surveyed the scene. It wasn't good. The army was there to stay, and in fact, despite only having arrived in the last few hours, construction of what was sure to be a fortress had already begun. Jaques suspected that it was not simply gnolls and lizard folk behind this; this was planned by someone with a long term objective, someone rather upset that the Many Pennies had intervened and cleared out the complex previously.

So Jaques had set himself up in the neighboring village of Greenfield, telling stories and singing songs in the tavern in the evenings, and observing Heartholme during the daytime when the Gnolls were less active.

The door to the tavern swung open and a one legged man, hopping more than relying on his crutch, entered with a very large smile. He sat down at a table next to Jaques and boisterously asked the nearest tavern maid for a cup of wine. He was obviously not from the region, but it was plain to see that this man had been here before; he called the tavern maid by name, and while she put on her best airs and graces while she spoke to him, her body language suggested that she knew the man and was not entirely pleased to see him. Put upon seemed like the right descriptor to Jaques, as if the man was that one annoying regular who had never really done

anything wrong, per se, but that you dread seeing them come into the shop. So Jaques started paying attention. The man looked familiar for some reason.

Soon enough, Jaques learned that the man's name was Evan and that he was a carriage driver for Adventure Incorporated, and he was biding his time until his masters returned from their mission. It was also quite obvious to see that the man drank like a fish, and in reality, was a very sad man. He loved to tell stories of his former days as an adventurer, and truthfully Jaques was impressed by his abilities to tell a tale; Evan could easily have trained as a bard and done quite well for himself!

Jaques needed information, though, and he believed Evan might be the key. Finishing his song up, he plopped down next to Evan and waved the tavern maid over, "My dear beautiful cherie, a round of mulled wine for myself and dis fine gentleman here."

Evan eyed him with a bit of surprise but grinned widely, "Ah, thank you my good man! How kind of you, but have we met before? I must say, your accent is terribly peculiar, and yet familiar, but I don't remember your face... Well, never look a gift horse in the mouth, I say! My name is Evan, with whom do I have the pleasure of sharing a drink with tonight?"

"Jaques," Jaques responded with a bow, "a humble bard simply looking to pass on some good cheer on ze first snowy evening of ze year. You have come a long way, no? Did I not overhear zat you came from Mughamara, driving a carriage for a troupe of adventurers from ze legendary Adventure Incorporated?"

"Ah, you, sir have spectacular hearing!" Evan replied. The tavern maid returned with their wine. "A toast," said Evan, "To fine companionship on this first true night of winter!" he drained his cup, and proceeded to order another. Jaques simply took a sip of his own. There was a tickle in the back of Jaques mind. Something familiar, but very distant. Something he should remember.

"You know," said Evan, clearly already intoxicated, "this weather reminds me of the time that I..." and proceeded to tell Jaques an elaborate tale of when Evan had been an adventurer and had been stranded in Perrinith during the winter season, finding shelter in a cave occupied by cave bears. By Evan's telling he had challenged one of the bear to a wrestling match, beat it, become friends, and ended up cuddling with the bear for two weeks until the weather turned warm enough for him to return back to Adventure Incorporated. Evan was a wonderful storyteller. Some of the story may even have been true. He consumed two more cups of wine in the process. Jaques was only halfway through his first, while part of his mind tried to tease out what was so familiar about Evan.

"A wonderful tale," said Jaques, "you know, you could have been a very talented bard with ze right training."

"Oh, I applied to the Colleges!" Evan slurred, "I even had a scholarship all lined up to help pay my tuition, but sadly the very week before I was to start my training was when I lost my leg. I

was young, I was stupid, I was in love..." and for a brief moment, Jaques saw it as plain as day on Evan's face: the man was deeply in pain. Not physical pain from the leg or an illness, no; Evan was drinking and smiling to forget or rather to try and relive his glory days.

"Ah, love," Jaques mused, "now zat iz something I know a great deal about my friend. I was trained in a brothel you know! In Varina! Ze finest brothel in ze city, ze -"

"The Silver Maiden! That is what you were about to say right?? Ah my FAVORITE place in all of Varina! Why my cousin, Elsa, is the owner! Though I suppose things have been a bit strained since..."

For the first time in a very long time Jaques was speechless. He remembered this man. It had been a very, very long time since he had seen the man, almost since he had first arrived on New Meritta and taken in by his adoptive mothers. "Uncle Evan? It iz me. Jackie."

Evan blinked, squinted, and stared skeptically. "Jackie boy? Jaques the Cat? My little Kitten?? But... you look... how? What?"

"Uncle quiet!" Jaques said, trying to keep Evan from revealing too much. "Please, we are in public. I look zis way because of ze hat; a gift from Elsa and Gisele before I left the Maiden. Powerful Illusion magic. It is *very* useful. But Uncle Evan, your leg?"

"Ah, yes... It is a long story. But not one to share right now! Look at you! All grown up! And an incredible Bard no less! And no stranger to trouble; did I not see that you are a wanted man in Varina? And quite the bounty too according the the posters! I dare say you have followed in your old Uncle Evans footsteps!" Evan said quite pleased, as he wobbled drunkenly and miraculously kept his balance on his stool. "Tell me, tell me all about what you have been up to my dear boy! Why I haven't seen you since... erm... well..."

"Since I was 11. If I remember, dear Uncle, Elsa threw you out because in one of your drunken stupors you stumbled in on one of ze clients and lost your stomach all over ze bed while Catalina was attending to him..."

"Ah. Yes. That. Elsa was not happy. But that is not why I left the city dear boy! No no, I was driven off by a common enemy of ours. One Lord Silverstorm? HIs wife is a firebrand in the bedroom is she not?" Evan asked, and Jaques nearly choked on the wine he had been sipping. "Oh yes M'boy, you do take after your Uncle, and Lord Silverstorm certainly has a long memory! Why, that is one of the reasons I joined Adventure Incorporated!"

"Yes, Uncle about zat, you work for ze Many Pennies--" Jaques began, but was cut off by an insistent tapping at the window they were sitting next to. Jaques peered out and saw a woodpecker staring back at him. He concentrated. Magic; the woodpecker itself was natural, but its presence here was not. Jaques opened the window and the bird flew in, and landed on

Evan's shoulder, tittering loudly. To Jaques the birdsong was unintelligible, but he *felt* the magic behind it. This was a messenger.

Evan was just as surprised, but listened intently to the message. His face went pale as the woodpecker finished its obligation, and flew back out the window into the night. "Uncle, what iz it? What was did ze bird say?"

"We... They... Army. There is an army of gnolls and lizardfolk headed this way!" he said quietly, stunned by the news. Alarm bells went off in Jaques head. There had been no indication this morning that the army would march. Something had changed.

"Uncle, we need to go. We need to get ze villagers out of here! Uncle? Evan?!" Evan had passed out on the bar. Jaques heaved a sigh and poured a pitcher of ice water on Evan's head, who spluttered back to consciousness. Jaques took off his hat.

"Wha.. who? You rogue! Why I'll see that you-"

"Uncle Evan! Wake up! Ze Gnolls? You are needed! I cannot evacuate zis village by myself. 'Az anyone ever told you you drink too much dear Uncle?? Monsieur Brightfire?" Jaques called out the the Tavern Master, who gave Jaques a look somewhere between awe and fear in his natural form; A man, mostly, but with pointed cat ears, slitted animal eyes, a light patchwork black and orange hair covering his skin, his tail floofed and twitching. "Where iz ze Mayor??" Jaques growled, "Zis village is in danger!"

It was going to be long, long night.

* * *

The army descended on the village of Greenfield in the predawn hours, the quiet peace of the village suiting their purposes perfectly: Catch not kill. With surprising stealth for a force so large they infiltrated, groups of two or three at each door, ready to burst in at the appointed signal.

A flaming arrow shot up into the sky.

Unlocked doors swung open; gnolls and lizardfolk burst into homes only to find them empty. The villagers were gone. Bowls from evening meals still sat at the tables, and a few embers still burned in fireplaces. Candles had burned down completely. The villagers had vanished. A search followed. There was no evidence of where they had gone. Scouts were dispatched, but turned up nothing. Somehow, the townsfolk had escaped, and Gorm would not be pleased.

* * *

It had taken considerable effort, but the citizens of Greenfield now slept in their makeshift shelters in a large grove of trees a few miles down the road. Between Jaques' Bardic magic and

the help of the town's hunters they had covered their tracks extremely well; the near foot of snowfall during the night helped considerably. As long as the army didn't do a massive and very widespread search in the next few hours, they would escape seamlessly.

It had been a long night. Fortunately, Evan's cart had been large enough to carry the elderly, the sick, children, and others who could not move swiftly enough on their own. Evan himself had been the hero of the day, telling stories to the children, and providing comfort to those overwhelmed with fear; while Jaques was normally one to seize attention for himself and preferred the role of hero, he was quite pleased with how his adoptive uncle had stepped up to the task. The town of Greenfield viewed Evan as their Savior, and Jaques believed that Evan needed what that title bestowed: confidence and the realization that his adventuring days were not over, despite having only one leg.

They had decided to take the townsfolk in the direction of High Grove; enroute they would find a suitably sized village or city for them to take refuge. Jaques had already magically sent word of the invading army to his contacts in both High Grove and Mare Glade in Bradmont. As for Jaques and Evan, once they had made sure the former residents of Greenfield were safe and cared for they would go back and wait for the Many Pennies.

* * *

It had been nearly a month since the Many Pennies had disappeared. The days had grown colder and darker, but Jaques, Evan, and the horses still waited despite dwindling supplies. Jaques scouted for the Many Pennies by day, carefully avoiding the Gnoll and Lizardfolk armies, while Evan cared for the horses and made sure their encampment was not discovered. At night in their time together at camp the two talked of many things, and Jaques grew to respect and admire his uncle. He was a quick study for one; Jaques had begun to teach Evan the fundamentals of Bardic magic to help while away the long dark nights, and as Jaques had predicted Evan was a natural.

"Uncle," Jaques said one night, as the two sat near their fire after teaching Evan a song that was meant to fortify the morale of your companions, "There iz something I have wanted to ask you. It iz, I imagine for you, a bit... personal."

"Ah," replied Evan, a resigned smile on his face, a slight nod, "You wish to know about what happened to my leg?"

"Actually, I wanted to know what iz weighing down your heart. If I had to guess yes by ze way you talk about your leg zey are connected, but am I correct in assuming it iz not ze primary reason for why you are so sad? Zere iz more to it zan zat I think. And if I *truly* had to guess, it iz about a woman, no?"

Evan smiled widely, this time in admiration, "I can see why you took the surname Slysong, my dear boy... you are very perceptive! Very well. Yes, they are connected, and yes it is about a

woman. Actually, you may very well even know her! Are you acquainted with Belinda Darkheart?" Evan finished his question with a wry grin. Jaques blinked.

"Ze Lady of... You refer to ze Lady of Knives by her given name?! Which could only mean... Uncle, you never cease to amaze! You were lovers I take it zen?"

"Of course, and I'll have you know that I am the only individual who has been able to call her 'Belinda' to her face in front of an audience and live to tell the tale! Ah we were a pair: I had the charm, she had the cunning; why, we almost became royalty in Emberfall you know! Perhaps we could have even ruled the province in time."

"So I take it you lost ze leg and she left you? Zat seems a bit extreme for a pair so in love."

"Well my boy, as you know yourself, love is not so simple, and that was especially the case for us. You see, at the time there was a bit of a bid for power in Emberfall. Those with money and powerful artifacts, especially magic ones, controlled the crown. Belinda and I got word of a very magical and important book of enchantment that we believed would help us secure a spot in the Royal Court. We had decided on a two pronged approach: I would go retrieve the book, and she would play the femme fatale and distract said book's owner, one Callien Garhand --"

"Ze King of Emberfall?!" Jaques interrupted Uncle are you insane? You tried to steal a book from ze King of Emberfall??"

"Oh, well he wasn't the King at the time my dear boy! He was close with Markus, sure, but so was Belinda. She was not on the Royal Court, no, but we believed Callien was using the book to influence Markus, you see. We figured we could do something similar, although we had no intentions of being quite as direct as Callien was. Callien was always... impatient. I still think he murdered poor Markus, but there was never a way to prove it."

"In anycase, Callien knew we were coming and had laid his traps well; all of the men I took with me died in the attempt, and I... I lost my leg to a very cunning combination spike pit/bladed pendulum trap; the pendulum was the second stage of the trap. Suffice it to say, I was rather surprised by it."

"Wait, wait, uncle... Were you not already working for Adventure Incorporated by this point?" asked Jaques.

"Ah, my wickedly smart little kitty cat!" Evan positively beamed at his adoptive nephew, "Yes I was. At the time, I may or may not, have been playing a bit of a long con with the company. Maerifa knew of course; I discovered that much later on. She was the one who told me about the book you know! I think that she was playing an even longer game than I was. It is... well, too late to ask now, but in hindsight I believe Maerifa intended to have Belinda on the throne of Emberfall, and influence the country through me as her advisor. But I digress. Callien was waiting for me, you see, and made sure I did not bleed out in his trap room. He had taken

Belinda captive as well. I was barely alive when he took me to her, but by that point... By that point he had used the book to erase her memories. Of our plan. Of our ambitions. My dear beloved Belinda has nor memories of me at all now. After he was certain that I knew what had happened he threw me out into the streets. He did not ban me from Emberfall per se, but he made it very clear to myself and all of my contacts that I was powerless; and being powerless in Emberfall is a very, very dangerous thing indeed. So, I did the only thing I could: I returned to Adventure Incorporated. I revealed my scheming to the masters, apologized profusely for my own transgressions towards the company and was quite surprised when they offered me a job driving coaches. I have been in their employment ever since." Evan stared at the fire.

Neither man spoke for quite some time. Jaques, for the second time since he had been reunited with his uncle, was at a loss for words. Evan broke the silence first.

"It feels good, you know... Like a weight has been lifted off my chest. I've never told anyone about that night except for the former Masters of Adventure Incorporated, and they swore me to secrecy about the whole ordeal. But I think enough time has passed."

A small alarm bell started to ring in Jaques head. Sworn to secrecy? Had not Maerifa been the one to tip Evan off to the book he had try to steal? Something was not as it seemed. Evan had almost certainly been used, that much was obvious; his uncle had a keen mind, and Jaques believed that Evan was correct in his assumptions that Maerifa had wanted the Lady of Knives leading Emberfall. Belinda, Jaques knew, was ruthless, but she took care of those loyal to her and would have extended her ideals to an entire Kingdom if she had become king... So who was Callien really? And how was it that Maerifa, by all accounts (both publicly and through more secretive channels) one of the most powerful wizards of their time, had plans like those foiled simply by a war hero. A war hero who had access to a powerful book of enchantments, and apparently knew how to use it. Something was not right with that picture.

"Uncle," Jaques said slowly, rubbing his hands together for warmth, "I think tomorrow I must leave you... Az much az I so dearly want to meet your Many Pennies, I am finding zat I have business to attend to... elsewhere."

Evan nodded, "To Emberfall, I take it? Know this my boy: Callien is not what he appears. I do not know his secrets, nor have I tried to learn. All I know is that he is extremely powerful. Be careful. Do not try to make amends for me; Callien no doubt still watches over Belinda, and I value her life far too much for you to risk your life and hers. But if you do discover anything worth knowing, return to Mughamara; the Many Pennies will know what to do. Myself, I will head back to Adventure Incorporated tomorrow myself; at this point I doubt they will re-appear here"

"If zey ever return, you mean." said Jaques.

"Oh they will," Evan said with a smile, "The Many Pennies always return sooner or later."

Jaques nodded and began to prepare his belongings for the next day. It would be a long trip to Emberfall on foot.

An Illusionary Stroll

He felt incredible loneliness, but Snake wouldn't ever admit that to his comrades. The life of a grifter isn't especially hospitable to kindness from cohorts, nor is it especially rare to be lonely in the role. Either way, he'd never say it because it'd become something to tease him for, further dividing him from the rest of the Illusionary Scroll. That he wasn't gifted in magic the way they were wasn't enough for them, apparently. He also had to be the butt of their jokes and the subject of their ire. "If it weren't for me, we'd never even have figured out where magic came from. I've gotten us closer to our goals than anybody else in this stupid group anyway, and I'm still on the outs. We wouldn't even be here if it weren't for my connections, but even still we've come up short."

"Stupid Jebeddo, yelling about trying to walk the planes and collecting magic and all that. He's who got them all into this mess in the first place; if he'd have just shut up and made up some dumb story about a girl or a bomb, they'd have just continued digging through the tunnels, trying a practical heist." The idea of concentrated magic was too much for them though. All of a sudden they'd stopped progress on the tunnel, they'd stopped the ritual preparations, and they'd all poured into the libraries around the city. Once they discovered Penelope's research, making Snake talk to Penelope because of their shared connections only felt right.

It only took Snake a bit of social engineering to get Penny to loosen up - massaging Jebeddo and his relationship, fabricating some stories of late nights drinking and various flatteries Jebeddo'd never said about her, expanding on just how true they were - and she went into as much detail as she could about the sources of magic in the world. She gushed about how right she'd been: jumping into a leyline would transport you to the plane of that magic. She explained she'd never done it but knew Jebeddo and his gang had gotten through the other side of them and come out with concentrated pieces of that magic that held wondrous powers. She theorized there must be a similar concentration of Material Planar power in these magic planes, allowing a traveler safe return passage.

When Snake returned to the Scroll with this information, he... embellished a bit, as was always his way. "Penelope explained everything about the magical planes and she says just as there's a path into the plane of magic, there's a path back to the Material Plane and it's just on us to find it, but it shouldn't be too hard."

Really, if these incredible magicians can't recognize an illusion being described, it was their fault, right? Either way, there was bound to be even more value hidden on the planes than just these concentrated pieces of magic, and Snake was ready to score big and get out of the game. Varina was, after all, getting increasingly dangerous. Maybe he could go back to Saol and try to settle in with Penelope? Snake found her beautiful in a small-town way... and she was smart, and in power. Helping her to run a town, however small, felt like a real opportunity to hide in plain sight.

And, like that, the plan was set. Step one: break into the Vault of the Kingmaker as violently as necessary - who cares, when we'll be coming back with enough illusion magic to make anyone see whatever we want. Step two: jump into the leyline. Step three: collect enough raw magic (and other goodies) to fortify the crew's abilities. Step four: hop back into the Vault from the plane. Step five: grab as much as we can carry. Finally, escape to the tunnels under the city, divide the spoils, and split. Easy.

* * *

Snake finished packing his bag, wicks of explosives, caltrops and ball bearings, powders and garrotte wires pushing against the canvas. Aeradar's was full of potions, tinctures, scrolls and wands at the ready. Lanotte packed light - her bag sat nearly empty, a flagon of ale strapped to the outside, and she slung a cloak over her shoulders, covering the bag. "If the Vault of the Kingmaker is as full as they say, I want to make sure I can take as much of it out with me as possible." She spent most of the time allotted to packing oiling the creases in her armor, making it silent as possible. She'd wrapped the sheaths of her blades in cloth to lessen the noise produced by walking. "I don't know about you all, but 'Last Capellini Caught in Catastrophic Caper Collapse' is a headline I'd rather die than read."

"Snake, you're sure Penelope said the exit to the plane would be clear?" Aeradar was clearly concerned; as the days counted down to the execution of their plan, trepidation sank into the Illusionary Scroll. It was clear that they were theorizers and not actors. It would be on Snake to lead the group through the completion of their mission. This is where his strengths lay anyway - convincing others of things they aren't so sure about themselves.

"Absolutely, Aer. She made it seem like there's a very clear exit to these things; I mean, you met Jebeddo. If he and his crew can figure it out, I think we've got an upper hand. They've got someone with the blood of a dragon, but they don't have a re--"

"A REAL WIZARD? I know." Aeradar interrupted, sternly. "Sorcery is, of course, the inferior arcane pursuit." He kept his true identity a closely-guarded secret but Snake knew Aeradar's truth and felt confident that a real silver dragon, infused with the power of illusion, would be able to get them out of any trouble they encountered on the plane. With a trump card like that, what trouble could befall them?

* * *

The underground vents from the palace were easy to follow to a main entrance just below the kitchens. The Illusionary Scroll members waited, Snake rigged charges under the vent to blow while Aeradar concentrated on a ritual designed to muffle the sound of the explosion. Lanotte cleaned her fingernails with the tip of her dagger. When given the go-ahead, Snake detonated his explosives, caving in the ceiling above them. Working in the alchemist's guild alongside Jebeddo for so long had taught him more than anyone had any right to know about blowing things up, and the blast created an easily-accessible rubble pile to climb into the kitchen.

Aeradar created a gust of wind to blow the dust from the explosion into the venting and out of the palace, mended the floor behind them, and they continued on their way.

Lanotte led the way through the labyrinthine palace corridors, stopping to listen for the sounds of guards or passers-by, and waiting for them to pass before moving on toward the Vault. The team moved supernaturally quietly; no doubt aided by Aeradar's abilities to manipulate the realities experienced by others. Finally, they reached the antechamber to the Vault, protected by two guards. Motioning for Snake and Aeradar to hide around a corner, Lanotte removed the two items she'd brought with her: a hand mirror and a small, black stone. She palmed the stone in her left hand, and held the mirror in the same hand with her back against the wall just outside of the chamber. With her right hand, she began tracing arcane symbols in the air, staring into the mirror and whispering an incantation. Snake thought he recognized the spell she was casting, and had his suspicions confirmed when he noticed a pale green glow emitting from the room beyond.

"Hey! Mark, sound the alarm! You're glowing!"

"Fuck you, Richard. *You're* glowing, and you're not my boss. I'll sound the alarm, but not because you told me to."

As the spell finished, she grabbed the mirror in her right hand and tossed the black stone into the room. A thick, black smoke billowed into the hallway, obscuring everything.

"Shit, where's the ala-" and Mark's voice gurgled to a stop. The unmistakable sound of a lifeless body hitting the hard stone beneath him mixed with the hissing of her smoke bomb.

Seconds later, another thud.

Snake followed the wall until he felt the archway and turned into the antechamber. He saw two crumpled, green glowing lumps on either side of the room. Aeradar again blew the smoke away, and Lanotte was wrapping something small in a piece of cloth. "Okay," she cooed, "you're up, half-man."

Snake sauntered up to the massive door of the vault, its imposing steel towering over him. The hulking, five-spoked handle of the door resembled a massive ship's wheel, just barely within reach for him. The locking mechanism was a series of levers and keyholes, designed to be operated in a certain order to open the door. Staring hard at the Vault door, he realized how difficult this truly would be to break in, and thought for a moment. Then, he turned and checked the pockets of the two guards. Sure enough, in one of them he found a slip of paper explaining the order of operations. He grinned, nodded, and went to work picking locks and positioning levers. Each correct movement slid big metal bolts open, unseen but heard. Finally, with a satisfying click, the last lock was picked, and he nodded at Lanotte. She grabbed the handle and turned, freeing the last bolt, and pulled the door open.

Magical silvery light poured into the antechamber - "Classic Varina excess," Snake thought - and the party of three saw the true source of the light: a strong, uninterrupted magical beam of energy running perpendicularly through a hole in the vault. Along the walls were chests of untold goodies, they were sure, but right now the focus had to be on diving into that silver light. Snake wanted to be the first badly, so he sprinted through the opening door as Aeradar started to speak: "No, you idiot, not ye-" but it was too late.

Snake's foot no sooner crossed the threshold of the vault than an ear-splitting alarm echoed throughout the palace. Knowing the might of the Varina Palace guards would be soon upon them, Aeradar and Lanotte followed quickly, angry that their otherwise-stealthy entrance had been ruined by a moment of impatience, but excited to find out what awaited them on the other end of this portal. The three of them leapt into the leyline, with Snake catching a squad of guards arriving at the antechamber out of the corner of his eye.

Shining more brightly than imaginable, the silver light blinded Snake immediately. Even when he closed his eyes, it seemed to persist; not the way the sun shines through your eyelids, but directly into his eyes the silver light burned. His body felt like it was moving, but nothing appeared before his eyes, nor could he hear the sound of wind rushing past him. Instead, he heard a loud ringing in his ears, like the result of standing too close to an explosion. He couldn't feel the passage of air against his skin either, but still, he knew he was traveling. He felt stretched and pulled, strongly, until suddenly his body came to rest. When his vision returned, he found himself at the back of a cavern of sorts, dark but for glints and streaks of silver in the walls, pulsing and moving in the same direction. Next to him he saw Lanotte and Aeradar, both rubbing their eyes.

"Can you see?" Aeradar asked nervously.

"Getting there." replied Lanotte.

"Yeah, I'm good. Luckily." Snake answered.

"Great. Let's find the source of this and get out of here." Aeradar wasn't interested in overstaying his welcome, but Snake wasn't sure why. Then, Aeradar walked through the wall of the cave, headed directly toward where the silver streaks were moving.

"Huh..." Lanotte clearly saw the same thing Snake did.

"Yeah you saw him walk right off through the wall, right?" Snake needed confirmation that he wasn't seeing things.

"I mean, it *is* the plane of illusion; this wall isn't real." Lanotte, full of confidence, walked toward the wall, putting her hand out and expecting fully for it to pass through. It didn't; Snake heard her fingers crack hard against the rock. Discomfited, they glanced at each other, around the cavern, and back to one another.

“What if we just follow the path?” Snake offered, and Lanotte agreed.

For a while, the path meandered in the general direction of the silver streaks’ travel, here or there weaving unexpectedly against the flow and then back in the same direction. Sounds were everywhere - a gentle babbling brook was heard at the same time as a stampeding set of hoofs, loud arguments in languages neither of them understood, beckoning cries of familiar voices seemed to pop from the walls at times. Once in a while, the two would find a small, silver stone shimmering in the same way as the streaks in the walls. Most times when they picked up the stone, it’d disappear. Sometimes, it’d stay in their hands. Pure illusion, perhaps?

They walked. Time passed, though they couldn’t say how much. The pitch of the tunnels started to increase, and they felt themselves short of breath; they were definitely climbing uphill at this point.

“Do you think this place actually opens up into something above-ground?” Snake attempted small-talk, but his lungs felt empty; walking uphill was really tough on the halfling, especially as he felt himself starting to stumble over the higher steps. He was uncomfortable and nervous, and knew it was his fault they were here, without any idea of where to go, so he wanted to take his mind off his own guilt.

“I guess it could, but certainly if it does, we’re headed in the wrong direction right now...” Lanotte sighed. “My knees are starting to hurt. How you’re not jumping down some of these steeper steps is beyond me.”

Snake froze in place. “What do you mean? We’ve been traveling uphill for so long now.”

Lanotte chuckled, lowering herself down another step gingerly. At least Snake wasn’t taking their situation too seriously. His ability to stay lighthearted in trying situations had made him an asset to the team, and endeared him to her even though she’d never said it. “Yeah, at this rate, we’ll probably start to feel dizzy from the lack of oxygen.” She sarcastically replied.

Relieved that she was being honest again, he agreed. “Yeah if it keeps going once we get out, I might have to put my jacket on. Do you mind if we take a minute now so i’ll be better-prepared when we get there?” There was a light growing, and what had seemed quite a distance away was closer now; he thought he could hear the whistling of wind.

Snake’s earnest reply stopped Lanotte in her tracks. She looked down into the abyssal cavern ahead, watching the silvery lights in the wall trail into the darkness. “Are you really walking uphill right now?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’ve been walking downhill for as long as I can remember.”

They stopped and looked at each other. Snake was leaned forward, Lanotte backwards, and they were both on the same angle: flat. When they turned back to look at where they'd come from, again it was flat. Now, indeed, looking forward, the path seemed remarkably... flat. They adjusted their postures. They looked at each other for a long while. Snake's eyes searched for acknowledgement; Lanotte's for hope.

They walked on, following the pulsating silver streams in the cave walls.

Slowly, subtly, faces began appearing in the walls. At first, it was like seeing a face in the moon; something that surely wasn't there, but the eyes recognized it in a search for pattern recognition. Increasingly, the faces became more obvious, more real. Eyebrows and grimaces, teeth, tongues and beards, and then voices would come from the open mouths. The faces seemed to be following them, moving, freezing, disappearing, then reappearing. They'd take the shapes of animals and pace back and forth within the walls, reaching out. Snake started to follow directly behind Lanotte; Lanotte stopped looking at the walls.

After walking for what felt like hours, they came to an open room, and saw a huge symbol carved into the floor. This symbol, they realized, was also carved into the floor of the Vault.

Aeradar was standing in the middle of it, smiling. Flanking him, Lanotte saw the images of her brother and father, nooses around their neck as she'd last seen them, pale, grey, and unnervingly stiff. She screamed, crumpled to the ground, and sobbed. Snake watched her look back up as if to confirm her suspicion, and saw her body go limp.

Snake looked at Aeradar and realized there was nothing but darkness surrounding him; Aeradar waved, smiled sadly, and said "Snake, there's no way for you to leave here; I'll be going now, and you'll be staying. Alone."

Aeradar's words reverberated in Snake's head. Darkness enveloped him. He looked around, reaching out for Lanotte, and found no one. He was truly alone, in the dark, by himself.

* * *

There was a clicking sound in the darkness, and a slurping. "You two... shouldn't be..." --Click Click Click-- "here. No matter, may as well play with you before" --Click Click Click-- "sending you off to my sibling."

The Child King

A single candle illuminates the throne room. It stands, freely dripping gold flecked wax onto the cool stone floor, as a memory and a promise. The wind that usually screams through the castle is simply sighing tonight, gently lullabying all of High Grove to sleep. A lone figure kneels in front of the golden throne, dwarfed by its imposing regality; the candle casts shadows that dance across a shimmering silver cloak gently rippling in the breath of the wind through the windows. Thick braids and waves of deep brown hair cascade, weighing down the already-burdened shoulders of Evian Redridge IV, King of Perrinith.

The air in the room begins to cycle in rhythm; Evian, in deep meditation, moves the breeze to follow her breaths, and the flickering of the candle slows to a gentle pulse. Her nearly translucent hands tightly grasp a goblet set with the rich gifts of Perrinith's stubborn earth. The thick liquid inside mirrors the rubies that adorn its exterior, and a thin vapor of steam rises up towards her bowed head.

She begins to breathe faster, and the rhythm of the room follows, speeding up its cadence until a peal of thunder breaks the silence and flash of lightning illuminates the room. Evian's head snaps up and her eyes open to reveal completely black spheres. No rain follows, but the static storm begins, and the blackness of her eyes melts away. She stretches the goblet out in front of her face, the face of a six year old girl with deep red lips and gentle violet eyes that show nothing of the secrets her fragile body keeps.

A knock on the steel door blends with the dry thunder, and Evian wipes a drop from the corner of her mouth with the sleeve of her gown. She frowns at the spreading red stain but tucks the fold of the flowing sleeve under her thumb to hide it. Setting the empty goblet on the table beside the throne she takes a deep breath and picks up the lone candle. She closes her eyes and silently recites a prayer before tipping its flame into the base of a cauldron. Her icy breathe encourages the embers to ignite and soon the flame explodes and spreads through the intricate system of oil-filled troughs and chandeliers to light the entire hall.

"Enter," she calls out, the echo of the arched stone ceilings padded by the flames, and climbs with the awkwardness of youth into the center of the throne. Although she barely fills its seat and her feet dangle a foot from the floor, an inexplicable majesty stretches far past its constraints and fills the room.

The iron doors swing inward, pushed by a hand possessing the strength of ten, and beat against the stone walls, already imprinted from years of the same. Three bodies move through the smoke towards the throne; when they reach it, they kneel.

A chorus of reverent "my king"s are muttered and Evian waves them to their feet with a swish of her unstained sleeve.

Evian looks at her council, trying to guess the reports from the field before they are relayed. She stares into the solid gold eyes of her political advisor, Virtue Moir, a tiefling with royal blue skin and horns that angle straight back into his oiled black hair. Only finding the reflection of flames and no answer, her gaze darts to his right where the general of the High Grove Guard stands. Annisina Peizerat, whose tall and slender elven frame hides unparalleled strength, tucks a flyaway strand of white-blonde hair into a braid away from her tanned face but her steel grey eyes remain emotionless.

Evian's eyes move again, and her eyebrows raise at the panicked expression her economic advisor is trying, and failing, to suppress. Standing a foot shorter than his two council counterparts, though still tall for a human, Grishuk Platov's brown eyes are fixed directly on a spot at the top of the throne, far above Evian's head, making him look crosseyed. His knees are locked and hands are clenched in fists at his side as he tries desperately to contain the news.

"Virtue," the pitch of her voice is surprisingly smooth and soft, "tell me the worst."

"Scouts have reported," Virtue takes a step towards the throne, "that we have one battalion definitely heading for High Grove and three more on the move, unsure of their target."

"Numbers?" Evian crosses her legs up under her and leans forward, resting her chin on her folded hands.

"They're all similar, roughly two hundred Lizardfolk and half as many Gnolls, three catapults each."

"Our scouts are sure they're heading here? How long do we have?" Her voice shows no sign of concern, but a slight frown sets at word of the impending attack.

"Well," Virtue glances quickly back at Annisina who gives a quick, small, nod, "it looks as if they will be on us tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Evian bolts up from her throne and slides down to meet her council. Although she only reaches Virtue's waist, he takes a defensive step back. "How have they reached us so quickly without our scouts reporting?" She glares at Annisina, violet eyes bright with anger.

"Their scouts reached ours first," she said, with a lightness to her voice that contradicted the urgency of the matter, "we sent out a new line yesterday and just now got their report."

"Do we have a unit ready to meet them before they reach the base of the mountain?"

"Awaiting dispatch on your approval."

"Fine," Evian walks back to the throne and sits on its edge, "do we think this threat can be eliminated before tomorrow night?"

"I have full confidence of that." Annisina waits a moment, and on Evian's nod of approval kneels quickly, turns on her heel, and glides across the hall. She lets the iron door slam behind her and the room is still for a moment.

"An army of Lizardfolk is definitely not on the guest list for the party," Evian whines softly, more for herself than anyone else in the room, but Grishuk shuffles his feet uncomfortably.

"There is some good news," Virtue breaks the tense silence after giving Evian a moment to pull herself back together, "their fortress at HearthHolme has been destroyed."

"By who?" Evian's voice perks up a bit.

"We don't know," Virtue's deep voice, typically mesmerizing, stammered a bit, "but our scouts reported that all weapons have been taken out of commission and only the bodies of Lizardfolk and Gnolls remain."

"Well good," Evian takes a deep breath, "this should slow their recuperation after we slay their battalions. Will you alert the other Kings?"

"Naturally," Virtue replies, "I'll send out messengers after I leave you."

"Fine. They already don't trust me" her voice sharpened with bitterness, "I don't need them blaming invasions on my lack of warning."

"They will be well-warned, I assure you."

"Grishuk," Evian turns her attention to the shuffling human, "how are preparations coming along for tomorrow?"

"Uh, well," he stammered, "everything's fine, everyone's excited."

"Run me through the timeline. By late afternoon we'll have conquered a couple hundred enemies, then..." she holds out her hand for Grishuk to continue.

"They've made a, uh, a slight change in the annual procedure to make the transitions run smoother than they have." Grishuk shuffles his feet and continues. "Pre-celebration parties outside the castle will be discouraged this year on account of the, uh, the Lizardfolk...issue...But as the sun sets, the people will gather and you will honor your father's memory. Then, they will toast the anniversary of your coronation. The Adventure Funds will be awarded last so that we can move the teams inside afterwards, and with the other invited guests, retire to the ballroom for a banquet. On the stroke of midnight we will toast to your turning of age, public guests will be escorted to their carriages, and our own private banquet will commence."

“Do you need anything from me?”

“Only your final approval on expenditures.”

“Bring them to me in the morning, and leave us now.”

Grishuk jerks forward in a combination bow and kneel, and lets his feet fall heavily on his way out leaving Evian alone with Virtue.

“I’m tired, Virtue.” Evian pulls herself to the back of the chair, tucking her knees up beside her, “and I’m old.”

“Look in a mirror and tell me that again,” Virtue says with a slight smile and a wink, Evian rolls her eyes. “Anyway, I would not call thirty old. What must you think of me?”

“You’re ancient.”

Virtue’s golden eyes shine with laughter as he sits on the step below the throne.

“Really though,” Evian rests her head on the arm of the throne and her dark hair falls almost to the floor, “should I be more worried? War is coming and I don’t know how to appeal to the council of Kings without sounding as helpless as they assume I already am.”

“We’ve won wars before and we will win them again.”

“This one feels bigger.”

“They’re just Lizardfolk and--”

“I don’t mean the Lizardfolk,” Evian sighs, “something bigger is brewing. I can feel it growing under the earth, these battles are easy compared to what’s next.”

“The coming war will be fought by all of New Meritta, not you alone. You’ve led this country for so long--”

“*You* have led this country for so long,” Evian interrupts.

“Your father chose me to guide you,” Virtue’s voice softens, “but your ideas have always been bigger than your age. You have always run, it is only up to me to keep you within the path.”

“I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“No,” Virtue pats Evian on the head with slightly patronizing affection, “you do not know what you would do without Grishuk. Policy is your strength, not money.”

"I'll accept that," Evian laughs. "Have The Defenders brought word of any threats?"

"Ah, now there is a unit that could use more action. Anni tells me that they are asking to be put in rotation for the regular Guard."

"They can't, we must keep them--"

"Don't worry, she of all knows how important their duties are. But Slayers seem to have grown accustomed to your rule. Or they simply think you no threat now that you are *so old*."

Evian wrinkles her nose at the jab, and Virtue bellows another laugh.

"I do suggest though," Virtue continues, "working on *The Chronicles*."

"I don't want to," Evian whines, "I don't plan on dying any time in the next century or two."

"I should hope not, but with the war looming it would be nice to have the records updated."

"Fine, I'll start them. But now, I should get some sleep," Evian starts to climb out of the throne with the effort of a thirty year old in a six year old's body, "big day tomorrow."

"They need it, you know," Virtue holds out a hand to help her down the stairs, "the celebration."

"It's a memorial," she says, squeezing his hand.

"It's a celebration of you," he corrects, "they remember your father but he was King for a year. You are their light, you are their leader, you are their hope and when you celebrate they can breathe easier."

"You always know what to say."

"I will always try."

"Write *The Chronicles* for me?"

"No."

"Fine." Evian scrunches up her face again in a lighthearted annoyance and as her lips curl, two long, sharp points extend from the tips of her canines. She gives a short, taunting hiss and Virtue responds in the same way, his fangs far more impressive than the ones that grew from Evian's baby teeth. She giggles and asks, "Have you eaten?"

“No, but we captured a few enemy scouts yesterday. I’ll head to the dungeons after I see you safely to your chambers.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard, Virtue.”

“No, but I made a promise to your father that--”

“I know, I know,” Evian rolls her eyes again, “let’s go.”

They walk, Virtue slightly behind Evian, golden eyes searching every stone along the short walk back to her chambers. He gives a small nod, she gives a small smile, and the door closes between them.

Evian sits at the ornately jeweled desk in her chambers and stares at empty pages that have been waiting years to be filled. She rereads her father’s last entry, from the day of his death, and blinks away tears.

Then, she picks up a quill, dips it in black ink, and begins, carefully, to write.

On my sixth birthday I became an orphan, a vampire, and a king. I remember sitting by my father’s bedside as the blood from the wound in his stomach leaked through the third layer of bandages. The nurses had just been in, but I stood to go fetch them again. My father said nothing, but took my hand and shook his head. I sat back down, watching the blood spread across each fiber of the linen bandage, outlining rectangles then filling them in as more of the deep red liquid spouted from the gash. I could hear whispers outside the door, attendants pressing their ears to the walls trying to sense if my father was still alive, and turning to their peers wondering what would happen next. It had been just shy of a year since he had taken the throne; his armies had overthrown King Agosto Belbin, who had drained the coffer of all its resources in the five short months of his reign. My father was the fifth new King in the span of my lifetime and he had wanted so badly to end the streak of terrible luck and darkness that had surrounded us for so long.

His rocky path to the throne had caught up with him though; Agosto’s teenage son had been studying in Ishtarra during the full course of the King’s reign, never appearing in the court to support his father, so when he applied for a position in the castle my father had no reason for suspicion. Dean spent the year as my tutor, and he was the best friend I had ever had. He used to make jokes about the boring old books I had to study, acting out the History scrolls, jumping around the room and putting on voices for each of the past Kings. My father trusted him implicitly and I loved every minute I got to spend with him.

Then, once he had secured his place in our hearts and our home, he enacted his revenge. He had been invited to sit with us at the head table during a banquet celebrating a milestone of success in my father’s journey to rebuild our economy, and at the first reference of King

Agosto's fading legacy Dean jumped out of his seat and ran his dagger into my father. He shouted, a lot, before the guards were able to subdue him, but the room had gone quiet to me. All I could see was a milky shadow cross my father's eyes as the healers hovered their hands above his body.

They were able to stabilize him, but Dean's dagger had been tipped with poison and he did not have much longer to live. I had not been allowed near him, as his advisors came in and out, whispering huddled close to his face. Everyone was so gentle with him, as I watched them hold his hand and stroke his face from across the wide chamber, except his chief advisor, Virtue.

I had watched them argue, wild gestures and stifled yells were such a break in the calmness that it caught my attention immediately. My father was tired, but after several minutes Virtue seemed to give in to his request and with a painful look at me, left the room. That was when I finally got the chance to sit with him. It seemed that all of his affairs had been taken care of, and he chose to spend his last hours with me.

Sitting there, watching the blood pool around his waist, I longed to be back away from him across the room from the heaviness of death. From there I could pretend that he was just resting, tired from a long day; up close there was no pretending.

The clock struck midnight as we sat there, silently, and with extreme effort my father's eyes fluttered open on the sound of the bells. The corners of his dry, cracked lips spread, and he mouthed a feeble and soundless 'happy birthday' to me. He squeezed my hand and the door behind us opened.

Virtue was back, with two other members of my father's court. Annisina and Grishuk stood several paces behind Virtue, all holding a golden chalice adorned with gems. Virtue walked slowly to my father and tipped the contents of his chalice into his mouth. The clear spirits seemed to revive him a bit, making his breathing easier and returning his speech very slightly.

"Evian," my father's throat was still dry and the words were labored and slow, but I leaned forward, eager to catch every word. "My gift to you is life in my death. I signed a decree naming you as my immediate successor, as soon as I am gone you will take the throne."

I started to protest, my freshly six year old brain unable to comprehend what it would mean to rule a country, but Virtue put a hand on my shoulder and I fell silent.

"Perrinith needs you," my father's hoarse final words continued, "and they need you for a long time. You will guide them to peace, comfort, and stability. The only way I can protect you in my death, is to take yours from you. Trust no one but these three; only they will know your truth until the rest of New Meritta is ready to accept you, and they will guide you through your rule. Grow strong, live forever, and remember me."

He nodded, and the rest happened without words. Annisina came forward with her chalice, and held it at the side of the table where the blood from my father's wound was dripping to the floor. Once the cup was filled she held it out to Virtue who, to my horror, raised the cup to his lips and drank.

He then motioned Grishuk forward, and, cutting a small slit in his own side, filled that chalice with his blood. Through this, his hand never left my shoulder. Although he was not restraining me with force, the gentle pressure of his hand was enough to freeze me in my place. Once the last chalice was filled with his blood, the sense of his hand was replaced with a stinging in my neck. The shock came more as a surprise than as pain, but it was enough to make all my other senses fail me.

When I awoke, lying next to my father, feeling as lifeless as he looked, Virtue raised the chalice full of his blood to my own lips. I started to turn my head away, but the smell was better than any food I had ever eaten, and the steam spiraling up from the liquid was tempting my frozen lips. I drank.

"It is done," Virtue's deep voice filled me with warmth as much as his blood had, and he placed his hand again on my shoulder.

My father smiled, it was true and easy. He mouthed a thank you at Virtue, an expression of love at me, and with one final squeeze of my hand he was gone.

The pain came all at once. My heart felt like it was exploding through the holes in my neck and my stomach tried to revolt; the next hours were agony for me emotionally and physically, as I tried to--

The walls of Evian's chambers shudder with the force of an attack blow. She drops the ink, thick, black liquid pooling around the words she had just written, and she runs to the window. She is able to dodge just in time as another boulder hurtles towards the place she is standing.

She runs to the door as the rock shatters the glass of the window and tumbles into her chamber, scattering the pieces of furniture it has demolished on its entry.

Virtue is at the door as soon as she opens it; he swings her up over his shoulder and they run.

The walls of the castle vibrate with the force of the attacks and as they run the sound of yelling increases. They make it to the Council Chambers as soon as Annisina breaks through the door on the opposite side.

"Anni what's going on?" Evian shouts as she jumps from Virtue's shoulders.

“They found the tunnels,” Annisina wipes the mixture of sweat and dirt away from her forehead, streaking it through her hair, “our troops were just about to head down to meet them at the base of the mountain when they came through.”

“How could they have known?”

“I have no idea, they must have gotten someone on the inside to talk.”

“Can we push them back? Just one battalion?”

“Just one, and I sent out all our forces before coming up here to fill you in.”

“All?” Virtue’s eyes narrow into golden half moons, pressing Annisina for the truth.

“All,” she repeats with confidence, “the Defenders are more useful in the field right now than on the sidelines.”

Evian shifts uncomfortably. All the Kings of New Meritta know that Perrinith is lead by a vampire, but at the beginning they were so upset with a six-year-old King that they did not have the energy to hate the thought of her being a vampire as well. With time they have grown accustomed, but her exposure has lead to different factions across the country calling for her execution. She is especially unpopular with the Divine Court. The Defenders are charged with keeping a constant ear to the ground on proposed attacks and vampire-specific threats, but she imagines that Annisina is right, they are skilled fighters and at this time of surprise it is best to use their full strength.

“We need to get you to safety,” Virtue’s voice breaks through Evian’s thoughts, “with the Defenders in the fight and the enemy up front you are out first priority.”

“Take her to the tower,” Annisina exchanges a salute with Virtue and begins gliding back to the door she came from.

“Fight well,” Virtue calls to her as the door slams behind her, “let’s go,” he says to Evian.

They move quickly and silently through the castle, climbing the several stories of stairs to reach the top of the tower. From the window here, in the bright moonlight, they can see the battle more clearly. The High Grove Guard, coupled with the force of the Defenders, were succeeding in pushing back the Lizardfolk and Gnolls, and Evian takes a deeper breath. She and Virtue watch in silence as the first catapult is destroyed, and the brown of the enemy armies begins disappearing into the low mist under the tide of red guard uniforms.

Evian takes a step up onto the ledge of the window, holding onto the stone frame for balance. The blazing violet in her eyes, now on the same plane as Virtue’s, are reflected in his gold, but the reflection turns dark as Evian focuses her energy. Now a solid black, her eyes turn down

towards the battle. She holds out her hands, fingers like pale needles, and they begin to shiver with the force of her magic.

The door behind them bursts open and Grishuk runs, panting into the room.

“You’re late,” Virtue hisses, in an attempt to not disrupt Evian.

Grishuk makes no attempt at an apology, his heavy breathing won’t allow it, but moves up to the window flanking Evian’s now-rigid body with Virtue.

The screams signal that her spells are working. Below, the Lizardfolk and Gnolls are falling, trying to avoid the monsters that taunt them. The shadows of the dead roots and brambles that adorn the castle grounds reach out with thorny claws and tug at the minds of the attackers. The mist rises to suffocate them, snakes of thick white air wrapping around their throats, and under their feet a hundred rats scurry to bite at their heels.

The panic swells and the corner of Evian’s lip curls up in a smile. Virtue’s eyes glow with admiration, Grishuk’s blink in surprise: her powers have grown more than either of them had realized. She holds her spells until the signal breaks through the fog. A small bat shoots up above the action and circles the tower the three vampires are in: Annisina is satisfied with her army’s position and the way is clear to move Evian to safety.

They practiced this drill many times in the young king’s childhood, the plan always resting on her absolute safety. They were determined to maintain her father’s last wishes and see that Evian rules Perrinith for an eternity. There is a safe house on the edge of the country that will allow them to regroup until the threat is better assessed. Virtue and Annisina will scout the terrain on their own, instead of trusting the word of their armies, while Evian remains in Grishuk’s custody. She protested for years that she did not need a babysitter, but in this moment of their first real threat she is glad to know she has the protection of her three advisors.

Annisina pauses a hundred feet in front of the window, holding her flight until the others can catch up. Virtue places a reassuring hand on Evian’s shoulder, and the effects of her magic below slowly begin to fade. In a flash and a pop the three humanoid shapes are replaced with pulsing wings. They move out of the tower, meeting Annisina, and the four disappear into the thundering night.

Jaques Slysong: Time and Space

“Would zat not be ze same thing?” Jaques asked, “An alternate plane of existence, especially one whose events are happening at a greater or lesser pace zen ze events of our own timeline, would simply be a branch of our own timeline, yes?”

Jaques looked over at his lover, his mentor, the beautiful elf lying naked next to him on the bed. The year was 1524, and Jaques was 26. He had returned from his voyage to find his homeland the previous year, and immediately used his few remaining contacts in Varina to connect him with the foremost expert in the fields of time and planar magics.

Halarian Quisoth paused and mused dreamily, “HmMMM, you make an excellent point my dear young protege.” She rolled over to face Jaques and traced a finger down Jaques well-toned chest and stomach, eliciting a purr from the bard. “But you forget, when I peer into these other existences, I use Divination magic; if you had been paying attention to your lessons like a good kitten you would know that magic that manipulates time stems from the school of transmutation.”

Jaques sighed. It was an “argument” that they had had many times before. Still he pressed on. They were on the verge of publishing some groundbreaking theories!

“Yes, yes, *but*, what about ze spell Teleport? Is zat not ze folding of space and time to create a gateway from one point in ze space time continuum to another point? Zat is conjuration, and in theory is zis not a manipulation of time and space?”

While making his point verbally, Jaques kissed the elf’s neck seductively. He would win her over to his point of view...

“Mmmm... Or,” Halarian said, enjoying the attention, “It could simply be a magical gate that connects one place to another.” She punctuated her argument by tilting Jaques head up and kissing him deeply on the lips. After the kiss Halarian looked Jaques square in the eye. Her face was very serious. “Jaques, why are you so obsessed with Time magic? I know you believe you come from the future, which I still say is just alternate version of our world, but you know how dangerous that magic could potentially be! A powerful enough spell could tear a hole in the fabric of reality and destroy EVERY possible reality! It could destroy existence itself! That is the kind of magic it would take to send you back to your world... would you really risk that?”

Jaques paused. His heart sank a bit. A part of him still wanted to return, but he knew the theoretical risk. The destruction of all existences, of all planes. He shuddered involuntarily. “No, my dear beautiful elven minx, no, I hope to learn how to stop such a zing from happening. After all, if creatures such as you and I can muse upon such topics, what of ze dragons? Or liches? What of any creature with a long enough lifespan and adeptness in ze high magics? No, I shall

be a defender against such zings if zey should could come to pass.” He said, caressing Halarian’s cheek.

The elf smiled, seeming satisfied. She closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around Jaques and laid her head of his chest. “Jaques,” Halarian’s tone was different now; he could detect sadness in her voice, but also resolve; “You know this has always been a temporary apprenticeship. I have taught you as much of Time magic, magic regarding alternate realities, and of the planes of existence that I can. Your training is complete... which is good. I have been summoned. I can no longer be your mentor as I have duties to fulfill for King Elletrix.”

Jaques sighed heavily, “Yes. I suppose I knew zis day would come. This is to do with his “Adventure Incorporated initiative, yes? In truth, I probably should have moved on sooner myself; I do not want to get you in trouble with Lord Silverstorm or ze other Varinian nobles... will I be able to see you again?”

Halarian looked up at Jaques coyly “My Dear Jaques Slysong, have you not realized I have been obscuring that buffoon of a noble’s attempts at locating you these longs months? His tricks are amature. And yes, you will hear from me, and perhaps, if the stars align properly, we shall have another... meeting such as this. I do not know when or where, but believe me that I will contact you in time. And no, I cannot confirm that I will be going to work for Adventure Incorporated... I will not deny such a claim, however, as long as you keep that secret to yourself,” Halarian said with a wry grin, “But for now, let us enjoy this last night together my pet.”

Jaques kissed the beautiful elf deeply. He would miss her dearly; ‘Perhaps’, Jaques thought to himself, ‘this is what normal people mean when they talk about love. Yes, I think in another time or place we could have been happy together...’

The Pact

The four stood in the cold curling mist on the edge of the hill. Far below, the calm waters reflected the twinkling stars in the field of dark blue, purple, and black above. Behind the four, the muffled voices of laughter and reverie that always escaped from the wooden walls of the great hall. The aasimar and the angels and the other celestials would feast and carouse long into the night. A hold over tradition from better days; different days. Usually the four would be inside, enjoying the delicious foods and wines, listening to the stories and songs told loudly and joyously, and basking in the warm glow of the crackling sconces and drunkenness.

Tonight was different.

For a while, no one spoke. Sallius glanced around at their faces, reading their expressions for some hint at how the discussion would go. Murkas was furious, as he usually was. His expression was sour and his red dwarven eyes smoldered more than they normally did. His horns were freshly scarred like he had been slamming them into a wall all day. This was Murkas' way. He hated when things got complicated. If it couldn't be destroyed at the end of his blade he wasn't interested. That's something he would have to curtail if Sallius' plan was going to be accepted. Something to work on for another day perhaps. He was going to hate this plan.

Oliander was staring up at the night sky. Her long red brown hair hung from her head, its ends coiling on the wet grass. It was brightened by her beautiful dark green robes that seemed to drape on her perfectly. Her focus was no longer on the mortals of the material plane. She cared more now for the land itself. The trees, the animals, the waves and stone. Sallius could almost hear Oliander's voice in her head. "Those mortals have enough of us looking out for them all ready. Hairix calls them 'greater'; I say fie! I could find a dozen races greater still in one tree down there!" Sallius did her best to suppress a smile. Oliander was quiet and reserved most of the time, but if you got her worked up she would bluster for hours. Secretly, Sallius loved to push her buttons. She loved the way Oliander sounded when she was full of that passion. There was something pure about her strength that Sallius found so attractive. Oliander was likely not to care about the plan Sallius had concocted. She'd be willing to go along with it; as it would not impact her goals.

Then there was Iora. Strong, wise Iora. He stood silently, staring straight ahead at nothing and yet at everything in the world. Not truly, like the All-Seer Colliesto might from her perch in the Astral plane, but in his mind he carried the weight of the universe. He twinkled with silvery light making his long white robes appear to glisten, a visually pleasing contrast to his dark skin. The recent turn of events had weighed heavily on him, she could see that much. The fae had overstepped their bounds attacking a celestial directly as they had, but only she and Iora knew the truth of why they did this thing. Hairix had been corrupted, something none of them had thought possible. His angels, the dragons, ravaged the lands even now; but the fae feared what Hairix was capable of. The seed of shadow had taken root, perhaps that is what weighed on Iora the most. Still, it was not guaranteed that he would go with her plan. Iora was good at

taking facts and weighing options, but he had strange values that guided his decisions, values Sallius had difficulty understanding in the past. If there was anyone who would need convincing, it was Iora. He had to say yes. How could she ensure it?

The silence between them drew longer still until it was broken by Iora's commanding voice quietly in the night. "We have a lot to talk about." He said, taking a pause. "I know that this conversation is overdue, and I know that it is uncomfortable." He shuffled slowly in place and brought a hand to his face. Sallius had never seen him this shaken; this unsure. "There are parts of this we are still not certain about, and there are no easy solutions."

"I've got an easy solution. I grab Gnar and Heifel and hitch them to my chariot. The four of us take to the material plane and we murder every last one of those damn fae for the insult they have laid at our door." Murkas spit into the cold air. Sallius could sense the rage bubbling inside him. To Murkas, this was no time for talk. This was a time for action.

Iora put a hand up. "Old friend, stay your goats. There will be no blood shed by us today. Besides, the fae have left the world."

Sallius eyed Murkas and Oliander. They didn't know yet, and she was curious what their reactions would be. Oliander snapped back, her attention now on the group for the first time. Murkas was dumbstruck, his beard dropping from his agape mouth under his shimmering armor.

"What do you mean they left the world?" Murkas choked out.

"They returned to the realm of faerie today," Sallius said, "and they shut their gate behind them."

Oliander perked up. "They shut their gate?"

"They used Llaniere's Sylvan to close the connection. They no longer have any presence on the material plane. The fae have left." Sallius said with a nod.

"But Hairix still slumbers?" Murkas asked incredulously.

Iora delivered the news he knew Murkas did not want to hear. "Yes, our brother still sleeps beneath the world. Hairix did not wake up just because the fae left."

"So what of the shadow that plagues the land?" Oliander asked. Sallius knew that was what drew Oliander to this meeting. The shadow threatened everything she held dear, not just the foolish mortals and their fancy society.

"Supposedly, the fae have driven it back and sealed it in its own realm." Iora stated calmly.

“That makes no damned sense, Iora.” Murkas steamed, pacing back and forth in his spot, pounding the ground with each footfall. “They attack one of us, they beat back our mutual enemy and seal them away and then they turn tail and flee? How does that make any sense at all?”

“Because they weren’t attacking us.” Sallius snapped. She hated when Murkas was this riled up. He would barely listen, and if you did get anything through his head it only served to make him angrier usually.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!” Murkas snapped at Sallius, “If they didn’t attack us where is Hairix? Where’s our brother?”

Iora eyed Sallius quickly. She could tell from the look he wished she’d left it alone but he did what he knew he must. “Hairix had been tainted by shadow.” Iora’s voice was so clear and strong. He did not speak loudly, but he had such command over the others with so few words. Sallius envied it in a way. A long silence hung between them. They had seen the shadow corrupt on the material plane, but to know that they were susceptible to its power was terrifying.

“The damn fool.” Murkas whispered under his breath. “He should have left the mortals to die.”

Oliander pushed on, “So what now? The shadow has been driven back, the fae are gone. It’s just us and the mortals?”

“It would seem that way,” Iora said, “and we must decide what that means for us. I think it’s best we leave Hairix asleep, lest the seed of shadow spread.”

“Then my rams can take us to the material plane. They mortals bow to us as their masters. We can keep something like this from happening again.” Murkas stomped as he made each of his points.

Iora was clearly contemplative. “We could take a more active role in the control of their lives, It would be nice to bring some order. I fear with no enemy the races might turn on each other.”

Oliander shook her head. “The people down there, I’m not always happy with the choices they make, but they get to make choices. We shouldn’t be stripping them of that. They are different from the other creatures because of what the fae did. For us to subjugate them, we become the enemy.”

Iora let out a heavy sigh, his breath mixing with the wisps in the air. “What would you have us do, Oliander. Should we close ourselves off as the fae have?”

She paused for a moment and stared up into the dark sky above. “No.” She took another long pause. “I tire of this. I do not have an answer, but there is too much that must be done. I trust you all to decide what you are going to do; and I will play what part I must. I’m going back to the

material plane. The shadow is gone, but there is much in the natural world that was hurt by the war that will not fix itself. Do not put the mortals in a box. Let them rule themselves, but support them; as I will support the other parts of their world. I'm not fond of them, but I don't want to see them lose their spark either."

Sallius couldn't help but smile at the words that Oliander spoke. They were stern and a little sad, but they were filled with so much compassion and love and sweetness. She watched as Oliander turned away from the group and walked off, her beautiful brown hair sliding across the ground behind her like a dress train and the swirling mists filling in behind her as she walked.

lora let out another heavy sigh. "This is not how I wanted this to go."

"Well what did you expect?" the words seemed to burst out of Murkas. Sallius could see that familiar fiery anger come over him. "What are we supposed to do with any of this information lora? What now?"

"That's what we are trying to figure out, Murkas, if you just-" lora was cut off by Murkas' rant.

"Maybe I ride Gnar and Heifel to the material plane and we all just start over." Murkas threatened.

lora looked aghast. "Murkas, you wouldn't."

"I don't know what to do anymore lora. All of this seems so far beyond what we do. We fight. You, me, the aasimar and the angels. We fight. Hell, that's what Hairix was doing when he was touched by this" he gestured wildly "this corruption. He was fighting the shadow, lora. We were up here, plotting and scheming instead of sinking our blades in the enemy. Have you forgotten what it feels like to rain fire and light down on your enemies? Have you forgotten the feeling of holy steel in your hands?"

"No one has forgotten Murkas." lora interjected.

"Really? Because it sure seems like it. What are we even talking about here?" Murkas had been pacing in a small circle through the mist. It created a lovely pattern in the air that was almost mesmerising to Sallius, but the question woke her up from her stupor.

"We have no enemy to fight, Murkas." Murkas paused, staring at her for a moment with wide eyes. "The shadow, the fae, they might have been enemies. The mortals aren't our enemies. If anything, I think we can draw our strength from them. Support them too, like Oliander said. I think we can lay down the swords and form a court to guide and embolden the mortals. That way if there is ever another threat they can fight it themselves. They won't need us."

Murkas stared at her dumbfounded, like he might finally be hearing the words she was saying for the first time. He would probably need to hear it again for it to truly sink in, poor bastard. lora

eyed her suspiciously. “Okay,” he said, his eyes twinkling in the starlight for the first time since the meeting began. “What is it?”

“What is what?” Sallius asked, a sheepish grin taking its place on her face.

“Show me the plan.” lora said, putting a hand towards her.

“What in the twelve planes are you all talking about?” Murkas asked, still letting the freedom from an enemy wash over him.

Sallius dug through the bag on her side. It was filled with parchment, scrolls and tomes. A few rolled up scrolls of considerable size poked out the top. She fumbled through these as she spoke. “Oliander is right, if we subjugate the mortals, we become the enemy. They will resent us, they will hate us. Already they fear Hairix’s angels as they stalk across the land. They have a gift we do not have; free will. We do what we do because we have a purpose, we are our purpose. It is your purpose to try and control them just as it is Murkas’ to fight.”

“We *could* fight, though.” Murkas said, as if he had just stumbled onto a great idea. “Take the blade to the enemies of the mortals. Protect them with blood and steel. Burn those who would threaten us to the ground and revel in their defeat. lora can rule, and those who stand against us shall fall to my blade. Sallius can gather information about our enemies and we can use it to their detriment. None could touch the mighty gods that ruled the land with an iron fist.”

lora gave Sallius a knowing look and turned back to Murkas. “Hold on to your fire brother. Bottle it, I’m sure we will make use of it; but today is not that day. Sallius, what is your point?”

“We cannot overcome our purpose unless we are bound to a new one. A pact. Something to define what it means for us to live in this world and how we interact with the mortals.” Sallius pulled open the scroll and handed it to lora. The text of the pact required the perfect wording, everything needed to be just so to keep the magic working. lora’s eyes moved swiftly over the lettering, the glittering light from his robes providing the light for him to read by. Sallius studied his face carefully looking for any clue of his thoughts on the plan now that it was unveiled.

From this day forward, the celestials and their angels would have little impact on the mortal realm. They could not interact directly in disrupting the mortal’s plans and lives. They would instead draw energy from the faith of the mortals and their purposes would be shaped by the mortal belief. In turn, they could empower those who worshipped them; embolden them, strengthen them, support them. But the things the mortals did with that power was up to them. It was of their own devising. This pact would be binding between the people of the world and the celestials. No celestial, nor their angelic servants could break this pact. Their purpose would be to uphold this pact above all else. In some ways this was a self-imposed prison; but one that allowed the mortals to flourish.

lora finished the page and continued to look thoughtful. Murkas stood next to him, staring at him expectantly, and Sallius expected his expression was not unlike hers. lora looked thoughtful and finally broke his silence. "This is a big risk Sallius." he stated flatly. "If our enemies are to return, there would be nothing we could do. By this pact, we would be powerless to help."

"Perhaps I could be of help in that regard, eternal counselor." Old Wild Eye's head popped up from below the swirling mist just a few yards away from the group of four. Sallius and Murkas scowled but lora's face brightened.

"Vorillian! How long have you been there?" lora asked through a warm smile.

Vorillian, in his new form as a gnome, grinned a wide smile and his giant eyes sparkled. He wore a simple brown tunic cinched with a small chain that was visible through the mist from time to time. He was much closer to the ground than any of the others though and was occasionally swallowed up by the swirling shadows. "Since before the four of you arrived. The Fate Weaver Colliesto recommended I stop by."

Sallius bristled. While she might not understand why lora was so fond of the little scamp, she really did not understand the relationship he had with Colliesto. Colliesto wasn't a celestial like them, not really. She was something else, something beyond even their understanding. The power she wielded to watch and guide all the parts of the multiverse was mind numbing to think about. Sallius had made it her life's work to learn and understand as much as she could about their existence and the planes beyond, it was her purpose after all. Colliesto did not need to seek information, she saw all and she guided it through her gentle pushing of the planes.

And yet, she spent time on Vorillian. Sallius had always hated how cavalier the trickster god was. He would be so gravely serious about the most sophomoric pranks and laugh through the most important moments of the multiverse. He was a fool, in every sense of the word. His interactions with the mortals were so strange and asinine. Travelling the roads as a merchant with a large sack to play pranks on greedy mortals and to reward those with pure hearts. On its surface it seemed a great service, but in practice it seemed only to amuse Vorillian.

Murkas seemed to have soured on him as well. "Why did you take the form of a faeling, imp?"

Vorillian smiled wider and fired back at Murkas, "Alas, dear Murkas. I fear you will never understand. However, once I find a way to wield my meaning I shall thrash you with it about the head and neck until it makes sense." Murkas flushed with anger and embarrassment.

Vorillian dropped into a deep bow in front of lora, his bald gnomish head dipping deep into the mists as he did. "O Guiding Light," he began formally "The humble lady known as the World Binder sent me here because she believes what you are doing is a mistake. She sees great value in the proposal your scribe has put together," Sallius scoffed, flushing, but Vorillian pressed on. "But she sees great danger still in this world. She believes that such an

arrangement with no end would spell certain doom for all of the mortals and in turn the celestials of this realm if we were to come to rely on them.”

“She sees a great darkness in the future of this land, one that the celestials could help fight if we were not bound so. However I fear we might not make it there if we let other options persist.”

“What are you saying?” Sallius asked inquisitively.

“I’m saying that, for the most part, I agree with you dear lady. You managed to sift through all of your guarded secrets and unimportant learnings to find a good plan in there. Bravo.”

Sallius rolled her eyes. At this point Vorillian’s foolish wit was an annoyance, not something to take personally.

Vorillian continued. “My good sir, let us take this oath, let it bind us to inaction. Most importantly, let it protect the land from Hairix and his dragons that they too be bound by its strictures. But let us have a failsafe. A way to break the pact if the need arise.”

Murkas grunted. “A pact easily broken when it is convenient is no pact at all.”

Iora seemed troubled. “He is not wrong Vorillian. Your point is well taken, but how do we protect our ability to save this pact?”

Sallius set her mind to the task of unravelling the puzzle. If there were other voices around her they faded away while she pulled out piece by piece. Perhaps, she thought, it could rest with the will of the mortals. If they called to the celestials, they would come and their bonds would be released. But the mortals were frail and scared, and what if they called the gods upon other mortals. It was too much to ask of them to hold the key.

So a celestial then. Her initial thought was to give it to Iora. His nature proved problematic though. He would look upon the world and the chaos caused by free will and would feel compelled to strip it away. Murkas was similar. The pact would make him stay his blade but he would soon itch with longing to campaign across the material plane. Perhaps Sallius herself, the First Secret, should keep the key to unlocking the binding. Hide it away where it could not be found unless it was needed. She already held far darker secrets. However, she felt a pang of fear at having that particular power. Part of her, deep deep down, wanted to ignore Oliander’s impassioned plea. If they took control over the people they could keep them safe and they could delve deeper into the secrets of the material plane than they ever had before. If that was in her heart, it would be too much, too heavy, to trust herself with such a burden.

But what of him? Old Wild Eye, Vorillian, the trickster and scamp. What if he were to carry the burden. Would he have a purpose to release them from the binding? Would it please him to see their purpose changed?

“Sallius?” lora’s resonant tones snapped her out of her stupor. “Are you okay?”

“What if we have him hold the burden.” Sallius posited, not totally sure of herself as she did. “He suggest we create a failsafe, then let him be the failsafe. Each of us would be fine if he never released the bonds. However, if he feels the time is right, if he feels it must be done, then he can release us and we can take control of the world.” As she spoke, the plan made more and more sense. It was the best way to make sure the safeguard would be protected. lora turned to look at the gnome with the mists swirling just beneath his chin. Vorillian looked so silly with just his head above the swirling white mass, like tendrils licking his face. He seemed pensive.

“If that is your wish, I will do it; but I have a request. I fear that if you leave this option too easy I will do it just to watch the aftermath, as it seems terribly clever to release you as soon as you’ve just done the ritual.” He smirked a bit just thinking about it, “Instead I would ask you to craft your binding such that to undo it, make it so I must perform a lengthy ritual filled with boring talking and dreadful singing. Make it so unfun that there is no way I would ever do it unless I truly worried the world would be destroyed. Your pact will be safe as long as the cost is an ennui so great that I will spend every moment of the ritual hoping the world will actually end just to spare me from the torture.” A grin spread further across his face.

“I really hate this form you’ve taken.” Murkas muttered.

“Ah, but it suits, little sheep. Like a fine glove.” Vorillian winked.

lora took a long moment thinking. A small smile tugged at his lips. He had always been amused by Vorillian and his silliness but Sallius thought that perhaps he found wisdom in the rantings of the Joy Maker. lora turned to Sallius and made a contemplative expression with his face. “What do you think?”

She had never really liked Vorillian but his solution made the most sense. She didn’t see a world where he would do anything that wasn’t to amuse himself. While undoing the binding at an inopportune time might amuse him, he certainly wasn’t malicious, and if the barrier to doing so was great enough he would not find it worth it he’d likely abandon the plan altogether. She turned to lora, took another deep breath, and nodded.

lora turned to Murkas who looked back at him. “I will always be your instrument lora, if this is how I am to serve; then so be it.”

lora took the scroll and jotted a few extra lines to the bottom. Then he dropped to his knees, burning away the mists around him and setting the scroll in the damp grass.

“We form this pact to bind the celestials in service of the mortal races of the material plane.” his voice was clear and calm. It carried such authority. It resonated in Sallius and she could not help but close her eyes to its sound. “To seal this pact I would ask my brothers and sisters

gathered to give of themselves. Murkas; you are a brave warrior and a strong ally. To what would you offer to bind this pact?"

Murkas reached to his belt and pulled a silver blade with a jeweled handle. "I would offer this dagger, that it might punish those who would break our pact and keep us sharp against our purpose." Murkas tossed the dagger onto the scroll and lora nodded.

"Sallius," he continued, "It is your keen mind that developed this plan, your knowledge of the world that brought us this concept. What would you offer to seal this pact?"

Sallius withdrew a goblet, also covered in jewels and placed it on the scroll. "This chalice shall collect our will and keep it contained. In it we place our hopes our dreams and our purpose, so that a new purpose may take their place." lora nodded again.

"To bind this pact I give of myself in a way that I do not ask others to. To put your belief in something is to know it wholeheartedly and to be an example of that commitment." He withdrew the blade from the scroll and slashed it against the palm of his hand. Golden liquid pooled in the cut, collecting until it was heavy enough to start to stream down into the chalice. He squeezed his hand, urging the shimmering golden liquid to pour quickly and fill the cup. Then he waved his good hand over the cut and it vanished. The blood in the cup had solidified to small golden stones of impossible luster.

"We offer these bindings to seal our pact that it might guide our people and protect the material plane. We are their servants, and they will be our worshippers." lora said with some finality.

Vorillian cleared his throat. He gathered the small metal chain from around his waist and he wrapped it around the items. The dagger, the chalice and the liquid inside lay inside the circle of chain. "This chain will hold your pact. It will bind it; make it unbreakable by any of our kind." The chain began to glow, and Vorillian tugged at it, tugging a link free and pulling the two ends tight to reform. He held the link in his palm and it seemed to melt down into his hand. With that the chain flashed and all of the items on the scroll turned to bright sparkles that filled the air around them, illuminating the mists.

"It is done." lora said. And from then the world had changed.

Jenuvera's Journal

Volume I

1st Entry

Another day has wound down and another tavern has been found. I cannot quite say I sit in peace as I write this, as Jebbedo is on his third song of the night. He keeps throwing money at the barmen every time they ask him to stop—nothing new. Looks like we are in for a long night, I may as well sip a drink as I write.

Our trip with the merchant ended this afternoon when we dropped him off in Mughamara at the Adventure, Incorporated compound. I had heard the name before in passing, but some of the others were much more familiar with its pull in the adventuring world. Apparently if one is to be a 'professional adventurer', this is the ideal place to end up. They provide a consistent stream of contracts if your group is capable enough, and the money is much better than what we have been making so far.

I am not convinced our group is capable; we have never had to face anything of real skill or danger and I am afraid for when we do. Keth, of course, is capable of anything. He is strong and composed, and I am sure he could lead us through any danger we faced. I am not sure if Jebbedo could stop talking long enough to take part in a fight that were happening around him, though he is quick and sneaky, and can slide into places Keth or myself surely could not. Plus he can do a backflip. I am not sure how that may help, but he has shown us several times and seems quite impressed with himself. Gillick I still have trouble reading. His intense faith in the Divine Court is unsettling at times, though that may be a bit of jealousy on my part. I have nothing to believe in. Perhaps his faith will prove useful. Maybe we could be capable after all. Anyway, we arrived at Adventure, Inc and met with a fierce looking one-eyed half orc—who had little patience for our self-appointed spokesman. He asked our company name....it was not something any of us had thought through before. We have been traveling for some time together but I think today was the first time we have actually started to think of ourselves as a real band of adventurers.

The music is getting rowdier and Keth has started singing! I feel there is much ahead of us, but perhaps I should enjoy this moment and join in; it does look like fun.

2nd Entry

It has been weeks inside the Adventure, Incorporated compound, and while the others have grown restless, I find a certain sense of home here. I spent my whole life in the library, underground in the tunnels of Ishtarra and all I wanted was to be free, to live in the world. After the latest adventure, seeing death so close and giving way to a destructive nature that I've felt growing inside of me for quite some time, I cherish the solitude and time that I can spend in these libraries and halls regaining my sense of self. I cannot explain the feeling to my companions, that there is a darkness inside of me that I am frightened to explore. I see a bit of it in Keth's eyes as he fights, as if he is almost ashamed of what his strength can do. I wish I could say that our biggest fights are behind us, though the warnings of Grimlock have made it clear our investment in danger is only just beginning.

Sitting in the library in the North Wing of the compound, I can close my eyes and almost feel myself back in Ishtarra, except the dull muttering of my father while he worked on the other side of a thin wooden door has been replaced with the clanging of metal and shouts of action in the courtyard below.

Jebeddo has just come in and told me that Grimlock is here to see us, he must have our weapons ready.

Well, we are off on another contract, making our way slowly across Carapath, through Bradmont, to the edge of Emberfall where we are supposed to meet a scout to assist us. We all have our new weapons with us, as well as a fifth: a scimitar for an owner unknown. Grimlock said we should not ask questions and would know who to give it to when the time was right, and I am willing to trust him. Etaha is the name I have given my crossbow—a constant reminder of its personal purpose to find Adonan and in finding him to find my past—is the most intricately beautiful weapon I have ever held, its beauty defying Grimlock's purpose for it to kill. The bolt shoots through the mouth of a dragon like fire; it is balanced and light in my hands and when I hold it I feel a surge of energy coursing through me. I hope that this will help me in future combat, being more accurate in aim and helpful to my friends. Jebeddo, in true Jebeddo fashion, has named his rapier "My Swishy"; he has not stopped making swishing noises this entire trip. He has barely touched the rapier, but has been audibly sound designing potential battles. Keth's short swords have been named "Redeemers", a single blade that pulls apart into two, and then melting back into itself. Gillik's war hammer "Verdoon" looks too light and fragile to amount to any damage on impact, its head carved with fine metal threads in a puzzle-like design, but I am sure the magic imbued into it will bolster its strength.

After Grimlock gave us our weapons, Master Klug (who apparently had been watching our interaction) approached us. He told us that he is familiar with Grimlock's work and even has a sword of Grimlock's in his office, which he hopes to be able to use one day. He was so giddy and excited about our new weapons, even moreso than I think we were, being overwhelmed

with the serious business ahead of us, that he gave us this contract in secret. He said that it would be a quick “grab and go” job, retrieving a locked, leather bound Shi’ay Tome from a deserted Temple of Sallius.

We’re to meet with a scout on the edge of Emberfall, which we will soon be approaching, and he will hopefully help guide us around the rumored bandits to the temple. I hope Master Redbridge does not find out that Klug gave us this contract, I would hate to see the repercussion from that.

I see the Ashen Observatory in the distance, we are almost there.

A HYENA. OUR SCOUT IS A HYENA. When I accounted for possible danger we would face on this journey, having our ally be a giant, raging hyenaman was not on my list. When we approached, we were worried that maybe the sleeping hyena had eaten our scout, but no. He transformed in front of us and after what I saw him do to the bandits we just faced, I am hoping that he trusts us and we can remain allies.

After brief introductions with Asher, we went to face the bandits he had been supposedly studying (not very well, he did not seem to know much about them besides the fact that they would want money...). After an unsuccessful attempt to convince them that we were sent from their bosses and a disagreement on how much it would take for us to cross through Emberfall safely, we had to do it Jebeddo’s way and fight our way across the bridge. I admire Keth’s dedication to attempt dealing with opponents civilly first, but I wonder if this will ever prove to be a successful tactic. Maybe Jebeddo’s ‘fight first’ mentality is worth something after all. The battle was swifter than some of our previous altercations with the gnolls. Our new weapons are working nicely for us and with the added rabidness of Asher in hyena form, we killed all of the bandits more easily than I would have thought.

We are now continuing our trek into Safehold, disguising ourselves in the bandit’s clothing in hopes to blend in. I have to say that while slaughtering a half dozen bandits is as far away from ‘fun’ for me as possible, watching Jebeddo sauntering in front of me in a giant bandit shirt tied up into a knot at his chest, constantly rerolling his sleeves and pulling up the pants that could fit three of him, is one of the most ‘fun’ things I have witnessed in our travels thus far.

As we approach Safehold, ironically named as it is a den for thieves and assorted other criminals, the tension starts to build between us. None of us has any idea where to go from here and hope that our disguises are not betrayed by our obvious obliviousness. Gillik is whining that there are no apparent temples, but his general frustration strikes in us a similar fear that we will not be able to find the Temple of Sallius.

Maybe we can just trade Jebeddo out for hyenAsher. Good ol' Oneshoe found a fellow guild member who pointed us towards the Guild Hall and a man named Horton, very much in charge of Safehold. Our plan was to blend into the Guild Hall and see if we could overhear some discussion from 'fellow' bandits, maybe jump into a conversation or two and see what we could find out about the layout of Safehold. We saw Horton as we walked in, a dwarf on a giant throne with hats to rival Jebeddo's selection—all stacked on his head. In order to begin to blend in we went straight to the bar, but that is where everything fell to pieces.

Jebeddo ordered milk, and with the raised eyebrow of the barman, asked to add grog to it...A "white American" he called it. He drank it and then ordered five more—one for each of us. No. Keth managed to hold his down, but poor Gillik threw up immediately after he drank his. Of course, Jebeddo found it hilarious and began rolling around on the floor laughing loudly. This, coupled with the heaves of Gillik, of course attracted the attention of the entire Guild Hall—Horton included.

Thankfully we managed to convince him that our purpose was as honest as any other thief's and promised to give him 20% of the treasure we find in return for protected and uninterrupted access to the Temple of Sallius.

Right now we are waiting for Gillik to regain his composure and after calming down about the way that it happened, I suppose I cannot be so mad at Jebeddo. We will get the guidance we need and it happened faster than we would have figured out on our own. Giving up 20% of what we find is not so bad, as long as the tome is not the only treasure inside.

I am immensely grateful to Grimlock and the added effectiveness of our weapons for getting us through these fights and hoping that we continue to absorb and be influenced by their power as we face what is on the other side of this door. We are taking a rest after a series of intellectually and physically draining challenges. The Temple is riddled with traps and puzzles, zombies and skeletons.

First of all, I am glad for the assistance we had in finding the Temple. We never would have seen it among the rest of the buildings in Safehold. An unassuming front led into a massive temple that must also be taking up the interiors of the two building front surrounding it outside. Banners hung down and rows of desks led to the altar which was backed by a giant stained glass mural. As we walked through the desks laden with stacks of old documents, I wanted so badly to spend time in this room, soaking up knowledge of those who had been here before. But, dead bodies rose. A mixture of zombies and skeletons attacked. Gillik's hammer proved its incredible power by smashing the skeletons to dust. Through a team effort we defeated the zombies, as they kept surviving more damage than we could have believed.

Alone in the temple, we began to investigate our surroundings, assuming that the tome would be more heavily protected. Jebeddo managed to slide the altar and expose a large stone button

in the floor. Without pausing to assess the danger it could pose, he pushed it. Two of the six banners rose into the ceiling, and we set about trying to discover any other buttons in the room. Keth found one behind a chair, and I found the third under a set of desks. Before I could even push it, Jebeddo ran over and basically jumped on it. If I could roll my eyes through pen and paper....

Once all of the banners had risen, a section of the stained glass swung open revealing a hallway behind it. We walked through and down the hallway in front of us stood a giant door with an intensely intricate locking mechanism blocking us from entering. There were two hallways that went in either direction, seeming to surround the inner chamber.

We chose to go right first and found a chamber that was empty except for a pile of bones in the center and a pedestal at the back. On the pedestal was a button enclosed under a locked glass case. Jebeddo began rifling through the bone pile and finally popped up with a large bone which he stuck in his back pocket. Then he walked over to the pedestal and began tinkering with the locking mechanism on the case. As soon as he touched it, the door slammed shut and the bones began to tremble.

A giant minotaur skeleton rose, as well as two others—one now missing a bone in its leg thanks to Jebeddo's early thinking—and they attacked. The sheer size and power of the minotaur and its axe, which stood as tall as Keth, was overwhelming. Gillik disintegrated one of the skeletons before being knocked unconscious by the minotaur's axe. Asher proved himself more useful than just in combat as he healed Gillik, bringing him back to life with strength enough to demolish the second skeleton. I took over trying to unlock the puzzle, letting Jebeddo jump into the fight. I was glad for the reprieve, a chance to use my brain instead of my crossbow, and it was a good decision. Jebeddo killed the minotaur and I unlocked the case, revealing the button. I pushed it before Jebeddo could reach it.

The door opened and we could hear the sliding of metal through metal. Part of the door in the main hall had been unlocked, but since it was not completely open we knew we had another fight ahead of us, waiting down the other hallway.

Walking into the second chamber we saw the same type of button set on a pedestal (whoever designed this temple was quite enamored with buttons), but before we entered could hear groans from above us. Arms of zombies were reaching through a grate in the ceiling and Jebeddo's quick thinking helped us gain an incredible advantage over them. He set up a trap with burning rope and caltrops so that when they fell, they would be instantly injured. Maybe we can keep him.

This battle was big for me; over our weeks confined to the Adventure, Inc compound I had been working on my spells and trying to gain confidence in using them. Fighting the zombies I finally used my fire breath. It was not as successful as it has potential to be, but it is a start. We struggled; the battle took a lot out of us, but we succeeded, I unlocked the button, and here we are back in the main hallway in front of an unlocked door.

It looks like Asher's berries and Gillik's divine magic have begun to take effect and we are ready to enter the inside chamber. Jebbedo is slamming himself into the door to try and make it open. I hope that the book is just sitting inside, but as Keth begins to push the door open I hear the low growl of something very familiar.

The disappointment of our journey is tangible; we are traveling in silence for the first time—even Jebbedo is quiet. Not only did we fail to retrieve the Shi'ay tome, but we let Viltroth escape.

As we entered the chamber we saw a sorcerer, Viltroth, with his back to us and the young black dragon slowly approached. Viltroth was holding the Shi'ay tome and Asher tried to thorn whip it out of his hands. On this assault he commanded the dragon, and two skeletons that had just appeared, to attack. The dragon hurled acid at us, and although it wounded me badly it was nothing compared to how badly it affected Keth and Asher. I responded, unable to bring myself to use my inherent dragonborn abilities towards another dragon—evil or not—and directed acid of my own at the skeletons. Through a frenzy of fighting the dragon was killed, and when it dropped I felt a rush of emptiness flood through me—more than it should at the defeat of an enemy.

I shook it off and tried to direct a new spell at Viltroth. In the library at Adventure, Inc, I found a book of jokes which made me laugh and helped bring me out of worrying so deeply about Grimlock's predicament. I focused them into a spell that would (hopefully) leave the hearer unable to operate due to intense laughter. I tried a few jokes on my companions at the compound; they did not seem to find them as funny as I did, but I was so excited to try the spell on an actual opponent.

I used the spell to attack Viltroth and his expression barely even changed. I still cannot believe it did not work. I will write the joke here, so I do not forget it.

"How does a wizard get from place to place?"

....."A flying SORCERER".

Anyway, Viltroth is terrible and did not laugh at my joke and also was protected by a giant shield that surrounded him. That was probably shielding his sense of humor. Asher in hyena form eventually broke the barrier and I threw my True Strike spell to know exactly where to hit him. Before I could use it though, he cast Dimension Door and vanished with the book. We failed; it was over. We did manage to pick out several items that stuck out to us from the many shelves of artifacts and items. They include a ring that encases the feather of an owl, a bottle of grey, swirling mist, a ring with 3 gemstones, a cape with an embroidered design of a vial with gold liquid, a helm with twisting horns, a packet of dust, and another vial containing a potion.

Horton showed up and we bartered for him to only take 10% of the gold we found as well as whatever he wanted from the items on the shelves as long as we could keep the items that had appealed most to us. He agreed and we parted ways.

As we approach Carapath the mood has lightened-Jebeddo has broken the heavy silence and given us back a liveliness—but I am still very nervous. What will we tell Klug, how will he react to our failure? It certainly was not the 'quick and easy' contract he had suggested. Could he have known? Was Viltroth just waiting there for someone to attempt to retrieve the book? ...Or did he know we were coming? Something is just not sitting right with me, but we fought our best and hopefully that will be enough for Klug.

3rd Entry

Well, on the heels of one disappointment and our first failure as an official team, we are off on our way to attempt to redeem some of our standing as adventurers.

Almost to the border of Carapath we ran into a merchant who told us he was heading to Adventure, Incorporated with a contract. He offered to pay us to take the contract to the compound, for it would save him days travel. We accepted and took the contract from him, but after looking at it Jebeddo suggested we just take on the contract ourselves. The town the merchant had come from was less than a day's walk away—the contract was dated just this morning—and we had experienced the lag in time that the Adventure, Inc processing could take. If an alchemist had been kidnapped as the contract said, we could be the difference in making it in time to save him. Besides, this was a good chance to potentially redeem ourselves from our last mission. If we returned to Adventure, Inc having saved an alchemist, maybe Klug would not be as angry that we do not have the Shi'ay Tome and that we let Viltroth escape into the portal.

As we are walking towards Tanner Hill, we have a renewed sense of determination. On the journey back we learned much about our new companion Asher and realized that the extra blade—the scimitar—that Grimlock Ironshaper had given us must belong to him. Looking back, we should have realized that it belonged to him much earlier, as the first weapon he used in a fight was a scimitar...but at least now he will have it to aid him in future fights.

I also am in possession of a new and fascinating magical asset. The ring that I picked up from the Temple of Sallius holds three rubies which will each cast a powerful spell without using my own energy. I am hoping that on this adventure we will not need the aid of such magic, but my companions each have an object of their own to assist if we do meet any danger.

It weighs somewhat heavily on my mind that no one at Adventure, Inc will know as quickly about the existence and escape of such a powerful wizard as Viltroth seems to be, but hopefully we can rescue this alchemist with haste and return right back to the compound.

We met with the tavernkeep in this seemingly deserted town and he gave us the details of the man who is being held in his tower by goblins. It rests uneasily with me that this alchemist has had an account with Adventure, Inc and told the townspeople to go to them if anything should ever happen to him. It seems as if he knew danger may follow him, so I cannot help but worry as we approach the tower. In the heat of the midday sun as we walk towards the tower, we can see several shapes in the distance that must be guarding their prison. We will soon find out what monsters await us.

The first of the battles has ended, but there is much more still to come. As Asher heals himself with his berries, as Jebeddo and Gillik explore the room, and as Keth takes his time cutting skin from the goblins he just killed, I am sitting on the bottom step of the staircase hoping to steel myself for what we will fight on the floors above us.

Before entering the tower, Asher displayed his new ability to turn into an owl and reported back to us that a hooded figure, presumably the alchemist, is strapped to a chair on the top floor but on the floors below are several bugbears, gnolls, and goblins.

We spent a good deal of time trying to figure out the best way to approach the tower, Jebeddo, as usual, throwing out any idea that crossed his intensely creative mind. If we want to avoid mistakes like we made in the Temple of Sallius, we must work on our communication and try to get better at planning. We decided rather weakly that we would simply walk up to the tower and be on guard to fight, but partway through the walk Jebeddo had another idea and began pointing at the contract like a map, pretending he was a tour guide. We ignored him, but the goblins and bugbear that were guarding the door suddenly ran inside.

That was surprising, but we made our way to the door and were quickly forced up against the tower as arrows rained down from windows above. Jebeddo was able to make his way through one of the locks on the heavy wooden door, but he was not able to make it through the bolt that was securing it shut. Keth stepped up, and within two tries had completely kicked the door down.

As the splinters of wood exploded into the room, Jebeddo jumped in and looked to be performing a spell of sorts, but to no effect and we readied our weapons. As we stepped in for a closer look, we saw that the goblins were glowing with different colors. They seemed to be encased in an aura of a color that was swirling around them. The bugbears though, looked perfectly normal and perfectly ready to fight.

I have to say with no small amount of pride, that my second attempt at casting my laughing spell in battle worked brilliantly. For posterity:

What do you call a bugbear with a broken leg?

A hob(lin) goblin!

The bugbear remained on the ground laughing hysterically through the rest of the battle-sustaining gruesome injuries and sputtering laughter through it all. Part of me almost felt bad, but my confidence in my spells is growing and I refocused back to the fight at hand. Asher, with astonishing force, threw a thunderwave and killed three of the goblins immediately, as well as the bugbear under the influence of my spell.

I was keeping fairly good track of the fight, seeing Asher get struck hard with the bugbear's mace, when a goblin's arrow sunk deeply into my leg. I managed to see Keth easily cut through the remaining bugbear and I made my way back into the action, breathing fire onto the three

goblins. Two of them fell instantly, but interestingly enough the goblin that was covered in an aura of red seemed resistant to my fire. Jebeddo easily killed that red goblin and here we are. Asher looks quite refreshed and Keth has slipped all of the newly cut skin into his pouch, I think it is time we move upwards.

We have fought through four floors and if Asher's initial surveillance is correct we have only two gnolls standing between us and rescuing the alchemist. We are so close; I am certain that we will succeed.

On the second floor we found six different orbs sitting on pedestals that are glowing in different ways—one has flames twisting up in the air around it, another is covered in frost. One is crackling with lightning, one swirling with a purple gas, another shining with an intense white light, and the final bubbling, hissing, and smoking with a thick, green liquid.

I was drawn to the fire orb immediately and when I walked towards it I felt heat rising through me. I am no stranger to fire, but this was a heat that seemed to be pushing me away. I felt the crystal orb rejecting me and pushing me away, so I backed down before getting too close. We all watched as Jebeddo approached the frosted one and he tentatively moved closer and closer to it, until finally he was able to place his hands on the orb. He started to glow blue for a moment but then regained his normal coloring.

Asher tried to approach the lightning and the white light, both of which seemed to reject him in the way the fire rejected me. Gillik almost immediately attuned to the orb with the blinding light, glowing with a white aura for a moment before returning to normal, just as Jebeddo had. Keth also quickly attuned to the orb with the purple liquid.

I decided to move towards the second orb that stuck out to me, the one hissing with the green liquid. I was able to move closer and closer, with each step feeling like my strength of character, my ability to interact and connect with others, was being challenged and tested. Jebeddo afterwards said that he felt, when he attuned to the frost, that his intelligence was being tested in the same way. I did not feel a rejection though, and pushed my way to place my hands on the orb. With that attunement, I realized that I had gained a resistance to acid—a power already within me, but somehow I still felt the new strength within myself.

After Asher attuned to the fiery orb, we moved up the stairs to where we encountered five goblins. While their backs were still turned, Asher entangled them which gave us a head start in our attacks. In the ensuing battle, I found myself intensely focused on killing the goblin glowing with green. Something within me knew that he was endowed with the same acid resistance as I now was, and I felt an intense hatred and deeply seated need to destroy him. In my blinded focus I was able to kill him, and only after that did I notice that my companions had killed the remaining goblins.

We quickly moved up to the fourth floor where three gnolls were waiting. Jebeddo ran into the middle of the room and a spout of rainbow glitter emerged from his rapier. The four of us (and the three gnolls, also) stared for a moment in utter confusion, but as Jebeddo quickly backed out from the center of the room, we readied ourselves again to fight.

I was able to use my chromatic orb ring for the first time, but it missed its target. In this battle, as I had been focused on the green goblin on the floor below, the gnoll that was glowing green seemed to be just as intent on killing me. It hit me once and knocked me back quite a bit, but I was able to focus all three of my magic missiles at him, wounding him severely in retaliation. Keth was able to finish the green gnoll, Asher in hyena form began biting as many gnolls as he could, and Gillik crushed his hammer into another. Jebeddo shot something sticky across the room, and trapping a gnoll in its web made it easier for Asher to rip out its throat.

We are tired, but we have been lucky. Our weapons are strong and our injuries have been light; we have two gnolls left to fight and one alchemist to rescue. I feel a sense of happiness surging inside of me at the closeness of our success, and we are ready to move up to the last floor.

My hands are shaking. My mind can barely hold or process this all and I am unsure how legible this entry will be, though nothing in the universe could make me forget what has just happened. I look ahead of me at the man we have rescued. We have completed more than a simple contract today; I have received so many of the answers that I have been searching for my whole life and yet somehow I am left with even more questions surging through my entire body.

When we reached the top floor of the tower we encountered two gnolls, but in a moment they were dead. I killed one with a second stone from my ring and Keth easily sliced through the other. When we unbound the alchemist from his chair, it sent me reeling with awe when he recognized me and introduced himself as Adonan Gellantara.

I have been looking for this man ever since the day my accidental acid splash dissolved the life out of my father. With his dying breaths he gave me a book which I have carried with me through all of these adventures and told me to find Adonan. He told me that Adonan would be able to answer all of my questions, tell me why I felt such power and magic inside of myself. If I had only been able to harness it earlier and control my temper, control my power, my father would still....

It does not do to dwell, and yet the familiar pangs of guilt at the thought of his death turned to piercing stabs when Adonan inquired about my father. I had to tell him, but having to speak those words and relive that moment is painful beyond belief.

Adonan told us he had been kidnapped by Gorm and expressed his surprise at the fact we had attuned to his spheres. He then mentioned that the process could only be found in a very specific alchemy book, one of which was in my father's possession. I could not restrain my questions any longer and I began to speak to him in draconic, knowing that my friends could not

understand. I did not want them to know the answers to the questions I had waited so long to hear.

I tried to keep my composure as I was finally given the reason my father had been banished so many years before. Adonan told me that he and my father were friends and alchemists who had been working together to help protect their clan against the black dragons that had been raiding them.

They thought that if they could infuse the blood of their young with the blood of black dragons, they would be able to strengthen the lines and protect future generations. My father made a mistake though; he chose a black dragon that had been cursed and when he infused that blood into mine, I was in turn tainted.

He told me, so plainly and so calmly, that this is where my sorcery came from and that I am part black dragon. I felt as though the world around me began spinning out of reality and yet strangely at the same time I felt comforted. My father had refused to destroy my egg and was exiled for that; I will never be welcome back to my clan until the curse is lifted.

I pulled out the book from my bag and handed it to Adonan. He began to speak of the secrets the book holds, at which mention Jebeddo suddenly became very interested. As their words buzzed through the thick air I went to a corner of the room and crumbled onto the floor. The darkness that has hung over me for my entire life began to dissipate ever so slightly; knowing where my power came from and knowing the new enemy within my blood has given me an absolute purpose and direction to move towards.

Adonan passed the book onto Jebeddo who held it as if it were the most precious gift he had ever received. I felt slightly upset as he slipped it into his bag, knowing that it was the last of my father's possessions that I had with me and suddenly wanting it back. I was able to stop myself though, only having gotten to my feet; the book in Jebeddo's hands would at least be used. I have no skill in alchemy and I know that my father would not have wanted it to just sit in a bag- Jebeddo's commitment to learning and creating is exactly what my father would have wanted the book to be used for.

We agreed to help Adonan find the other two Manuel de Alchems, but as we started to leave a portal opened and a dark, evil looking man appeared. Before we could even register what was happening, Adonan yelled "that's Gorm!" He had time enough to twist the bodies of the dead gnolls into a giant flesh monster before disappearing and closing the portal.

We fought in a frenzy of yells and clangs of steel; I threw a cloud of daggers into the creature while Gillik used his divine smite. It was difficult to kill and our energy was drained, but the final blow by Keth sent it down for good.

With a mixture of exhaustion, surprise, and happiness in the successful retrieval of the prisoner, I watched as my friends led Adonan down the steps of the tower and back out into the fading light of the evening. We had been inside for only hours, but my entire life had changed.

At this point I feel I could believe anything anyone tells me; I have heard so many fantastical stories in the past few days that my head is a constant well of confusion.

We arrived back at Adventure, Inc to the fury and suspicion of Redbridge, Maeriffa, and Klug. There was a mix of anger at the fact Klug had sent us on a contract to begin with, and then our failure on top of that did not help our cause. Jebeddo was explaining why we failed, and when he mentioned Viltroth, Redbridge looked even more maniacal than I have ever seen her before. I very quickly backed out of the way of her wrath, but Klug calmed her down and explained to us that Viltroth was a member of the original Adventure, Incorporated.

He explained that he fell into a portal when they were fighting years ago, but that the contract is still open. Maeriffa, who had been listening intently, spoke suddenly and informed us that there was a plan but that it would take time to bring about. Maeriffa left, Redbridge stormed away, and Klug was left to excitedly question us about the adventures and pay us for the rescue of Adonan (once he got over the initial shock and anger that we took it without telling anyone in the first place).

We left the compound to find Ironshaper who then revealed more unbelievable news. The number of things that have been thrown at us this week is incomparable and I find it almost difficult to write this as the idea is so preposterous.

Ironshaper told us that he has come back from the future to warn us and try to help us defeat Gorm before he rises to the power he has in the future. He says that in the future, Gorm had brought the entire kingdom to its knees and we were the only adventuring group to ever even come close to defeating him. We did not succeed though...which even now thinking back on the conversation leaves a grim feeling about our future deaths.

Grimlock continued to describe how the dragons combined and overthrew Gorm, but their leading New Meritta was no better than Gorm's had been. Gorm had found Grimlock and demanded his help in crafting weapons to overcome both the dragons and all of the races of New Meritta. He refused, so Gorm punished Grimlock by killing his family and sending him back in time.

All of this led Grimlock to us because we, in his timeline, did not have the magical weapons that he has provided for us now. He hopes that the addition of the new magic will help us succeed in defeating Gorm before the worst of his power is displayed.

We sat in silence for a moment, trying to soak in what Grimlock had just told us. I took that moment to ask Grimlock the question that had been on my mind all day. Since the original purpose of my crossbow had been to find Adonan—something that I had achieved well before Grimlock made us believe we would be able to—I wanted to know if it would still possess its magic.

Grimlock inspected my weapon and, seeming surprised, told me that it was showing him a new purpose. The new purpose of Etaha is to fight the corruption of the black dragons. Not wanting to tell him more than I had to about my newly discovered bloodline, I accepted his explanation and retired quickly back to the compound.

I cannot imagine that Klug will send us out on another contract very soon, so I will take this time to try and absorb the obscene amount of information that has been thrown at me. I need to process, I need to try to wrap my head around the stain throughout my blood, but more than all that right now I need to sleep. I am weary from this long journey and hope that as each dawn rises I will find solace and strength in my new mission.

4th Entry

They say no news is good news....but after the intense amount of news I received days ago, I am aching for something new to direct my purpose. I know what it is I have to do now, but trapped in the Adventure, Inc compound I seem to have fewer means to get there than I did before.

I have spent the majority of my time in the library researching the strain of black dragons and the curses that have followed through their bloodlines, but the library has yielded few results. My companions have done their best to keep my spirits up—they see that I was especially shaken by our meeting with Adonan, but since we kept our conversation private in draconic, they do not know the extent of my pain. I am afraid if they found out what I know now, what I am, they might see just the cursed blood and might leave me behind. I have never felt so connected with a group before; I cannot stand to lose them, so I will keep the darkness inside of myself for as long as I can.

At this moment though, trying to shake off those thoughts, at least we are moving forward towards something new. It has nothing to do with Viltroth or Gorm, but it will keep us busy and fighting.

Klug came to us this morning and after his carnival man show of his magical items (through which I was lucky enough to purchase a scroll for dispelling magic, and also to help Gillik to purchase a protective cloak), he gave us a contract that was taken out by the King of Carapath himself.

We are on our way towards the Shrine of the Seven in the Forest of Dakoul to battle mysterious shadow creatures that no one can seem to explain further. So essentially, we have no idea what we are headed towards. The comforting fact is that we are riding out to our adventure on a cart driven by an amazing man, Evan. He has already told us incredible stories of his own adventuring days; we have all been entranced by his compelling voice. It does not hurt that our horses are incredibly strong and wonderful creatures—Poesy and Violet are gorgeous and I got to feed them an apple after Asher had a brief conversation with them. It was a wonderfully light moment in the heaviness that has surrounded us lately.

The sky is darkening, and the eeriness of the approaching forest is beginning to consume us. The darkness and emptiness is palpable—there is no sound, no stirring of life.

We learned from a Peacekeeper we met before entering the forest that they began with seven—two had been killed and three had broken ranks to run away. Something that could make a Peacekeeper abandon his post we knew would be quite a bit for us to handle.

We tried to get Evan to agree to turn back and make sure himself, Poesy and Violet remained safe, but he insisted on following through with the journey. The Peacekeepers gave us their blessing, but even as we began to follow the trail Asher shuddered and warned us all about the absolute lack of natural life around us.

The intensely unsettling feeling when the scales on the back of your neck tingle with a simultaneous numbness and hyper awareness washed over me and my whole body began to prickle with fear of the unknown as we rode deeper into the forest. I cast dancing lights so that we could see our way better, and we came across a wounded Peacekeeper.

We pulled him into the cart and with his limited breath he introduced himself as Calhouna. Asher was able to heal him a bit, enough for him to fill us in on the situation in the forest. He told us about the shadow creatures, and how the monsters came from the Shrine of the Seven. Each monster took a light from the shrine and is carrying that with them, energy representing each of the Divine Court.

This helped us a bit to focus on our opponents, we knew how many there would be yet we still did not know how to fight them or defend ourselves. As soon as we took a breath to assess the situation, seven shadowy creatures rose up in front of us. They were as Calhouna described: each had a shining light within them. Poesy and Violet took off in a panic and we hurtled down the path in the cart, the shadow creatures flying in front of and around us, ready to attack. In the chaos of the fight, I have to recognize Evan and his ability to keep us all inside the cart and able to fight. He never lost control of the horses and never veered away from a clear path. He is truly remarkable and we are lucky to have him and his expertise.

As the first shadow creature swooped down on us, the wounded Peacekeeper took Gillik's hands and as they murmured their prayer, the light within the creature glowed brown.

We struck at the creatures with our weapons and though they were hard to hit we managed to work our way through them. Their attack patterns were erratic and seemed to change with the very air around them. We could barely keep track of their movements but swung as passionately as we could. Our magic did not seem to have as much of an effect on them as it should have, my spells were rendered almost useless and I resorted to solely relying on my crossbow.

At one point, through the chaos and confusion, as the cart hurtled through the woods at top speed, one of the creatures—the one glowing blue—struck me and my entire mind felt like it was on fire. Nails raked across my very brain and I was thrown completely out of the moment. It took some time for me to feel like I accurately recovered.

The battle raged on in a blur around me although I felt as if I was watching myself and my friends rather than actively participating. I know that while Gillik focused and prayed with the Peacekeeper we flung our weapons at the creatures and managed to slowly cut them down one by one. The orbs, once they were freed of their shadow masters, flew to Gillik's hands where they expanded and then seemed to explode into the night.

Once we had eliminated most of the shadow demons, a cry came from the back of the cart as Jebeddo hung off of the edge outside. Gillik shortly afterwards was thrown and Jebeddo was able to grab him before he hit the ground. I shudder to think what would have happened if Jebeddo had not been there to save him, I do not believe there would have been any way Poesy and Violet would have been able to collect themselves, calm down, and turn around to retrieve him. Asher managed to reach over the side of the cart and pull them both back in, allowing us to all take half of a breath before continuing with our fight.

Finally, in an immense show of force from Gillik, the final creature—the one glowing gold—was defeated, and we all slumped back in our seats within the cart. Evan seemed visibly shaken-and who can blame him, the presence of these creatures was enough to chill me through my soul-but he calmed the horses and got us back on the right path.

We approached the Shrine of the Seven in the center of the forest where seven orbs were floating above the altar. All of a sudden there was a blinding flash of light, the earth trembled, and a giant demonic creature appeared in front of us.

At this, Evan turned the cart around with the horses and he took Calhoun away back into the forest.

This fight was exhausting on all levels and tapped into our every resource. Asher began our attack by raging into a hyena, but got thrown far into the woods. Without having time to worry about whether he was okay or not it was my turn to attack. I threw my laughing spell at him with a joke that was as clever as I could manage in the moment:

“What’s the best way to get rid of a demon?”

.....”You need to exorcise a lot!”

He did not think it was funny. Coincidentally, neither did any of my companions....I made a mental note to spend time testing jokes out on them when we get back to the compound.

The fight continued and Gillik was rendered unconscious at one point from a blow by the demon and Jebeddo was also thrown far into the depths of the forest. But, working together we managed to defeat him—my crossbow delivering the final blow—and he burst into flames that produced a shining golden orb.

Expecting emptiness in its ashes though, we were surprised to see a giant rabbit with a full rack of horns standing in the place of the monster. Asher immediately fell to his knees and performed a ritual offering to this creature and its wounds faded away while Asher prayed.

I had never seen Asher so overwhelmed with devotion and intensity. We all stood in awe of the godlike creature and Asher’s ritual until it spoke, thanking Asher for his healing prayer.

He told us that we had succeeded in restoring some light into the forest, but although he is the guardian he could not explain exactly how the darkness overrun everything so quickly and mercilessly. He was surprised that our weapons were able to have an effect on the shadow creatures and felt the magic that they had been imbued with.

We asked for guidance as we continued on our journey, and the deity gave us more than just advice. He offered Asher a leaf: once dried and thrown into a fire it could summon the guardian and he would appear to answer one question. He also healed Gillik completely and offered him seeds from the first spring of New Meritta which would energize him more quickly.

As Asher meditated silently, Evan came back with the horses. They seemed much calmer than when they had fled, and we were so grateful to see their return. The guardian sent us on our way, and as we ride back to Carapath the mood is mixed with awe of our godly encounter and pride with our success in the forest.

As I watch Poesy and Violet trotting along the path towards the dawn, all I can think of is how much love and apples these two must receive when we get back to the compound. The thought fills me with a glimmer of hope for the innocence of all creatures we are working to protect. I have trust in us and our abilities now—we are finally working as a team to face any challenge that is thrown at us, and this thought carries me through the fear of what I will have to face within myself.

5th Entry

As we spend more time thinking about the adventure we just completed, I find myself becoming more and more distrustful of Master Klug. Every time we seem to need something he is the first point of contact, he is the one who has sent us on secret contracts without clearing it by the other Masters first...he is the one who has severely undersold the danger we would be facing.

Gillik came close to death on this last trip and although we were successful, who is to say that Klug is not trying to set us up for adventures we cannot handle? We came such a short time ago, it seems, to the compound and to that point we had never faced true battle.

I suppose we knew what we would be getting ourselves into... I know I must be reading too much into Klug's encouragement of our abilities as a team, but part of me just feels a tugging sense of unease in the pit of my stomach.

Well, my mind is slightly settled after confronting Klug about my worries but even more distraught at the news we just received, I can barely remember why I even doubted Klug's intentions.

After satisfying my mind that he truly believes in us and our abilities-maybe even more than we might believe in ourselves, Klug informed us that Maerifa has returned to the compound and has devised a ritual that might lead us to answers about Viltroth. He brought us through the compound down through winding staircases into a large chamber in which, on normal occasions, we would never be allowed. Walking into the room, a chill went up my spine seeing the eerie shadows thrown across the various trinkets on shelves and the five hay piles on the floor. I looked over at Jebeddo and noticed that the hats he was rifling through on our way up had disappeared and he was settled with a stillness that I have never seen previously in him as he stared at Maerifa.

Maerifa explained that we are already involved too deeply in the mystery of Viltroth, and now it will be up to us to take part in the ritual. Apparently Jebeddo's imagination combined with a sophisticated ritual will be able to send me, Keth, Gillik, Asher, and Master Klug back into the past, back to the day Viltroth disappeared. We will be embodying the original Adventure, Incorporated team, guided by Klug as he is the only one who was actually there.

The warning that Maerifa gave us regarding Jebeddo is ringing in my ears: that if we stray too far from the actual events of that day, Jebeddo's grasp on reality will disintegrate and he will die. He is willing to risk his life for this mission, and though I suspect that his infatuation with Maerifa might have something to do with the fact that he agreed so quickly, ultimately it is his choice to make. I believe, though still incredibly worried, that we will be able to stick to the characters we are playing, or embodying, or...I mean I am not entirely sure how much of ourselves we will be

and how much of the other person we will be influenced by...but I think that my companions and I will be less tempted to stray from the past as much as we might be if Jebeddo were actually coming with us.

Once we all were in agreement that this is the best and possibly only course of action for us to take, the next step was to decide who will be embodying which of the original members. Klug was essentially assigned a Paladin named Thanlon whom none of us has ever met since he died long before we even knew Adventure, Inc existed. The next match seemed fairly obvious in nature, as Keth's strong personality and fighting style mimics Klug's quite a bit. Although Klug may have much more of a penchant for fighting and killing than Keth does, I think he will easily inhabit Klug. Asher will embody Master Redbrige; their connection with the animal world will hopefully make the transition simpler for Asher. Gillik volunteered to be Viltroth, brave as ever.

And finally, I have been matched with Maerifa. Jebeddo and I were pulled aside and warned that anything we learn about Maerifa's past and history cannot be repeated to anyone--even our companions. I understand the urgency and severity in this warning and am anxious for what I may be about to find out.

Maerifa is beckoning us to come lay down on the hay piles so that the ritual can begin. My head is full of fears and worries, but I have total trust in Maerifa and if there is anyone's imagination I would stake all of our lives on, it is Jebeddo's.

I remember Maerifa's voice echoing throughout the room, the words ringing through my entire body and visions of my childhood flashing before me. Sitting in the library reading books on magic. The explosive indication that I might be a sorcerer. The first spell I ever performed on purpose. The discovery of my past and my powers.

I remember Maerifa's control and confidence filling me with a sense of calm and admiration. I understood the intense power that we were under and I was entirely at ease.

I remember that feeling of control vanishing entirely as I felt myself reforming outside of my own being, landing on a floor without a tail and with an entirely different center of gravity.

I remember the ruins-or were they the beginnings-of a compound, a man in desperate need, and an adventure to be had.

I remember the stillness of the forest, the attack of the cobalts and the gnolls, and filling the clearing with fire from the long, thin fingers extended in front of me. They were mine but were not mine and almost moved on their own, attached to an innate power I cannot describe.

I remember the constantly changing architecture of The Downs, people all the same defiantly separated from each other with pride and suspicion.

I remember the maze of dampness and despair, trudging through tunnels that hid traps underhand and foot. There was panic in the faces and voices of our hired predecessors as they dragged their petrified companion to safety and the fear that we were not equipped to tackle the monsters ahead even with new magic at our sides.

I remember the pain at finding Evan alone and incapacitated but having to move the memory of his present-day self from my mind as the recognition of his name shook the walls of our dungeon and Jebeddo's mind.

I remember the fomorians and trolls, raking their fingers through the minds of my friends and seeing their faces twisted in psychic pain--then seeing Redbridge's body twisted in physical deformation. A pang of guilt at my previous apprehension towards her beginning to melt at her vulnerability.

I remember a cut and the burning sensation of poison creeping up the veins in my hand, then my borrowed body on its own, forcing the intruding toxin out.

I remember the throne room, the luxurious decadence and the false feeling of security and familiarity.

I remember the skeletal form of the lich, stunning Thanlon before we could even assess what we were fighting.

I remember pain, searing, freezing, intense pain tearing through my mind, my soul, my being.

I remember Viltroth's body standing beside me then in an instant dead on the ground, the brightness of Gillik's faithful eyes diminishing with every second.

I remember the battle, the pain, the chase. The magic bringing Viltroth back to life, the collapse of the room around us, the momentary defeat of the immortal lich, the indestructible phylactory slipping through our fingers, the blinding purple light sucking Viltroth into an unknown dimension.

But most of all, I remember power: an intensely satisfying power radiating through my body. I felt that the entirety of the world was in front of and behind me, that I have existed in this mind forever with memories and mysteries weaving themselves together through each moment in time.

As reality began to bleed into an aching awareness of my actual self I tried to latch on to the remnants of power fleeting from my mind into oblivion. Each scale on my body was buzzing as my eyes adjusted to the chamber's candlelight glow.

There is so much more that I know and so much that I wish I could describe, but Maerifa's warning is soldered to my mind and I can no more risk writing it here than I could tell any of my companions.

6th Entry

Sitting back in our new quarters at Adventure Inc, with the honor of being the first group to hold Executor status freshly heaped upon us, I cannot help but wonder what the residual effects of Maeriffa's spell will be. The actions of our journey into the original crew's memories are fading like a dream, streaming into wisps of smoke that I can almost see lingering in front of me, waiting to be caught and forced into concrete record. I have written down as much as I dare, but the rest must be left to be consumed by the monsters of our minds, dragging details into the depths as they are actively replaced by new moments of adventure and discovery.

I fear for my companions at this moment: the look on Gillik's face as he was forced to recall the moments when Viltroth was pulled into the abyss; Jebeddo's overcompensation of cheer when I could see uncertainty behind his eyes; Keth's struggle to keep Klug at bay inside his mind are all flashing through my thoughts. Jebeddo has gone to see Adonan, but I am trying to keep a close eye on the other two as we adjust to our new homes. Gillik's silent meditation is nothing new-usually he spends his time devoted to the Divine Court in silence, but Keth is visibly struggling. I can see him inside his own mind, fighting with the desire to hear Klug--hoping some experienced advice might give a clue into waking up his body--and wanting him to stay at bay to allow for a moment of peace. Asher is restless, constantly on the move as if he cannot contain himself to his human body. I see in his pacing that the need to break free and bound like a hyena or fly like an owl is tearing at his skin.

We are currently discussing what we will pursue first as executors and what we would like to set the researchers on. We believe that solving the mystery of the machine we first encountered in Quian would be beneficial while we continue on our quest to learn more of Gorm and Viltroth. At this moment I would much prefer to stay at the compound and work on that research than dive immediately into another adventure, but we have so many paths to take and I know cannot abandon my friends for the comforts of a library.

I feel so wonderful and horrible; my brain is split in two. Jebeddo was worried about feeling like someone was watching us but that does not matter, nothing matters now that there is Clyde. We received a contract from Horton to go save him...but that does not matter. Nothing matters besides Clyde.

Clyde.

My mind is a mess and my fingers are trembling, my vision is blurring and my stomach is churning. It is unfair that such beauty, strength, and power could exist inside one man. His brusque tone encompassed by the deep tan on his rippling muscles and the effortless wave of his white blond hair....Also, anyone who can talk to these boys with such authority and such a tone is amazing in my mind. He is an idol, a god among the rest of the unwashed, grunting, murder-happy adventurers.

I have only ever felt this way one time before now...but that I struggled to bury as immediately as it rose. This is different. There is no stopping this flood of desire rushing through my cursed blood.

Clyde.

Clyde Harper.

Jennuvera Harper.

I thought, if I wrote down what I learned through Maeriffa's memory spell, I would die if this journal fell into the wrong hands...Now I am sure of it. But I have no one else to turn to...My friends would not possibly understand. They do not see his beauty, his strength. Jebeddo would mock me relentlessly. Gillik would pray to the Divine Court to heal me of my lustful thoughts. Asher would probably try to compete with me for Clyde's attention--I can see his crush of respect already forming. I just couldn't possibly tell Keth, and besides at this point Klug would no doubt try to rise up in his mind and tell me to knock it off, there are adventures to be had. So there is no one for me to turn to besides myself.

When he walked in to scour our quarters for evil magic, I could barely get out a word. He captured my tongue as well as my heart and I know no spells to release his hold. When we saw him at breakfast this morning I became so nervous and flustered that acid sprayed out onto his entire meal. I have never so badly wished I, myself, could melt into a puddle, disappearing from existence as easily as his tray. We made it to the stables and Evan, which was a delightful reprieve from the horror I was experiencing, but now as we ride I find myself barely able to listen to Evan's stories of love and loss as I am living one of my own.

We met with Horton under the bridge where we first attacked his bandits and he led us to the safe house he has been staying in. While there he filled us in on all of the details of his life since we left him. His men turned on him and burned the guild hall down. Then, the King of Thieves stole something from him and he needs us to help him get it back. I have read of adventures, of heists, like this in my books and I have to say I am very excited to try my hand at this sort of escapade. Clyde is still on my mind but an adventure like this may be just what I need as a distraction.

After he explained the situation, we got right to planning. It took several hours of tossing ideas around, arguing and settling and arguing again, then trying more plans. Horton showed us a place in town where we could get supplies; I bought three potions of invisibility and we got a draught of confusion and scroll for gaseous form.

We also got to go to a store to pick out clothes for the ball...It was quite overwhelming to be surrounded by garments of such splendor. So many amazing gowns that I am sure Clyde would love....but on another, not on me. I rarely am self-conscious about my race but the more I think about beautiful way other ladies can move and the radiance they exude, the more I wish I could retreat back to the libraries of Ishtarra where I had no one to impress. In the end I picked out a simple black dress, fitting for someone who wishes to dissolve into the shadows.

Gillik went quite the opposite direction, finding the loudest possible suit-bright white with rhinestones all over. Jebeddo found a simple black suit in the smallest size possible and still swum in it, hacking off the excess with his dagger. Asher pulled random pieces off of shelves and flung them together, while Keth showed a remarkable interest in proper fashion. No matter how well I think I know my friends, they are always full of surprises. After outfitting ourselves with potions and clothes, we headed back to Horton's safe house to concretize our plan. What we have settled on is as follows:

- Jebeddo will cast Gaseous Form on Horton before we enter the party after we have all eaten the bread that allows us to communicate through our minds.
- Asher will wildshape into a mouse with all of our weapons and enter the party that way, and open a window to let Horton up into the conservatory
- I will turn invisible and Jebeddo will help me get into the basement without being noticed, then meet Asher and Horton upstairs
- I'll take the blank keystone and go down to the basement to try and break the code
- Gillik and Keth will pour the draught of confusion into the punch in the main dining area to create a distraction
- I will move upstairs to use the keystone to unlock the magical barrier to the vault

...we really do not have an exit strategy from there, but I think it will go well!

I wish Clyde was there to see me. I am so proud of what we accomplished as a group, but especially proud of myself for solving a puzzle and successfully completing my part of the mission.

We entered the party easily, after Jebeddo cast gaseous form on Horton. Asher seemed to have a bit of trouble with the guards as a rat, but he eventually made it upstairs alright. Once we were settled inside, I cast invisibility on myself and made my way to the basement. I thought I was going to be caught for a moment when I entered the room to the stairs and there was a man working! I was so nervous I know I made too much noise, but I was able to hide myself well enough to pass by him.

In the basement I encountered a puzzle: in order to solve it, I needed to move five rings of arcane energy, increasing in diameter as they descended, from one column to another (with one

in the middle). The rings had to be moved one at a time and a larger ring could not be placed on top of a smaller one. It took me a moment to get my bearings and start to work out the puzzle, but in the end I was able to successfully solve it and create a copy keystone!

I rushed upstairs to unlock the magical barrier to the vault and saw Jebeddo passed out along with several guards down. I was unable to discern if the draught of confusion had worked downstairs, but I knew we needed to move quickly. Horton grabbed a short tube out of the vault after Asher shouted some numbers, and then almost immediately more guards ran into the room and threw a vial of orange liquid at us.

The blast was explosive enough to break through the outer wall, and I watched, helpless, as Horton fell (or jumped?) out of the wall and Asher followed, hoisting Jebeddo onto his back. I was still invisible so I stayed in the room, tossing the invisibility potions down to Asher as subtly as I could, and tried to catch what the King of Thieves was saying to his guards...Besides his anger and commitment to hunting Horton down, they did not reveal much, so in the confusion and chaos of the mass exit from the party, I snuck out and met the rest here at a tavern in town.

From what I can tell Gillik passed out as well, but neither he nor Jebeddo wishes to share what happened. It sounds like the rest all had interesting experiences during the party while I was in the basement, but we will have more time for sharing details later--we need to get Horton to the docks before the King of Thieves can catch up with us.

I knew we should not have spent so much time resting at the tavern. I understand we needed to prepare ourselves, but I still feel we may have had time on our side if we had rushed Horton to the docks. Instead, when we got there, we were facing Perkins, guards who seemed to keep multiplying in number, and a pair of elven men who we soon identified as the Bisu Brothers. The fight began with Jebeddo arguing semantics and Horton promising us more money if we help him defeat his enemies rather than just dropping him off at the dock to fend for himself. Keth and Asher also tried reasoning, but to no avail. The battle began.

Jebeddo quickly disappeared, along with one of the Bisu Brothers...Asher hit Perkins with fairy fire and later ripped his jugular out as a Hyena, Gillik compelled the other brother into a duel and killed him with divine smite, I cast chromatic orb and acid splash, Horton threw his daggers with incredible, deadly precision, Jebeddo flew out of a window with his sword drawn-landing straight through Perkins.....And Keth...Keth was just hitting the guards with the flat of his blade. I was so confused and so thrown off; usually he tries reasoning with enemies and when that inevitably does not work, he gets right down to fighting and is one of our strongest. For him to not seem to have any interest in winning this fight was frustrating and disorienting. He refused to meet my glance when I tried to get a sense of his purpose, but I will make a point to ask him on the way home.

We did win though, despite Keth's mild participation, and despite the fact that the second Bisu ran away once his brother was killed. We got Horton onto a ship, and he gave us the tube in which his treasure was held. I only got a brief look but it seemed to be a simple letter, written in a woman's hand. I am not sure why anyone would go to the trouble of stealing it in the first place, or the trouble we just went through to get it back. The case it was in is remarkable though, when a pass phrase is whispered it will lock and unlock, but at the wrong command it will become a solid cylinder. I am sure we will have use for this in the future.

We are sitting back at the remnants of the burned guild hall now, Jebeddo found the 12,000 gold pieces that Horton had left for us. Overall the job was a fantastic haul, though I am anxious to get back to Mughamara to see what the researchers have learned about the machines and to hopefully see Clyde. Maybe if I tell him about our success he will be more interested in me. Or maybe I am getting my hopes up over a cause that has been lost before it has even begun. Either way, I cannot wait to see him as soon as we cross back into the compound.

7th Entry

I miss Evan. And Clyde. Mostly Clyde, but right now also Evan. We are sitting, surrounded by deep maroon velvet cushions, enclosed in a carriage that feels more like a hearse. Evan is busy escorting Maeriffa somewhere, so we have to settle for another driver, Todd. He is incredibly intimidating and I am not sure how safe I feel as we approach Perrinith to find the person who has information for us pertaining to the machines.

This morning has been awful. The compound was deserted, and even though I took a wandering route throughout the entire space, I could not find Clyde anywhere. I didn't even know what I would have said to him if I had seen him, but I haven't stopped thinking about him since we met and I can't wait to see him again. I have this image of him hovering in my mind, sitting just beyond my field of vision, everywhere I go. At this point I have just that to hold onto, and the deep desire to see him again. I want to study every line of his face, absorb every sound his voice makes, trace the veins along his muscular arms...

But I can't because I'm trapped in this spooky carriage being pulled by a spooky undertaker for the next, most miserable two weeks of my life.

Interesting detour. As we were moving, Klug perked up within Keth and made us pull over because he sensed that a mendicant was around. He was correct, and after making several donations we picked up some amazing magical items. Of all his fascinating choices, I purchased a tome that will allow me to learn and cast a wizard's spell and a cloak of protection. Additionally, Asher bought several potions of healing and gave one to each of us.

Before we departed, the mendicant waved his hands over us and I could feel an energy rushing through me. It was an odd sensation, warm and comforting, and even now as we are back in the carriage I can feel the protection following us.

Why do we bring Jebeddo anywhere? Today has been a ridiculous ride of emotions, I cannot even believe it. We made it to the town of Heartholme and to The Great Arbiter Tavern to meet our contact, and IT WAS CLYDE. He is even more beautiful than I remember him and honestly I did not process a word he said the entire time he was talking to us I was too busy basking in his presence. Unfortunately, my friends are unbearable. Asher ordered White Americans and tried to make Clyde drink one, then Jebeddo, always needing to take part, drank one and vomited all over Clyde. I could not believe what was happening. What could Clyde possibly think of me based on the people that I surround myself with? I am sure he will not want to have anything to do to me, and I just don't think I can bear the thought of him trying to avoid all of us.

I have to try and put it out of my head though, because he has led us to this cave and apparently it is where the machine in Quian is getting all of its magical energy...But I should

stop writing and listen to whatever Gillik is trying to tell us since I was too busy looking at Clyde to listen to what he was describing.

This cave has proven to be so much more than we could have anticipated. It is the entire foundation upon which all of the 'ground pounding' machines are operated and much more vast than we initially thought upon entry. Gillik, using detect magic, was able to identify several glowing lines that vined along the cave walls and down under the floor. We could not see any further doors or other paths to lead us further into the cave, but Jebeddo (in true fashion) pushed all of the buttons possible on the small terminal at the back of the cave until something happened.

The ground began to shake and then move up and down quickly, jerking us all around, and then the platform lowered us down into a deeper, wider tunnel. The walls and ceilings are cluttered with metal, gears, and pipes; it seems as if every inch of this cave is part of a huge, intricate machine. Scampering around us were several goblins, working on various parts of the machine. There was no reason to bother them as they were fully entranced in their machine.

When we turned a corner, down the hallway, we saw a few Lizardfolk but before we could even talk about it as a group, Jebeddo pulled out his bottle of smoke and filled the hallway. None of us could see anything, which made fighting the Lizardfolk incredibly difficult. We were swinging blindly and I was trying to call out to the Lizardfolk in draconic to get them to respond so we could at least differentiate their bodies from those in our own group.

We struck with little aim and lots of hope and ended up working our way through the Lizardfolk despite our obstructed views. Suddenly a gust of wind blew me down the hallway, throwing me against the cave floor. Far at the end, through wind and smoke, I could make out a Lizardfolk Shaman casting the gust. I felt like I was moving through mud, unable to see clearly and unable to make my way forward. I was hit several times by different Lizardfolk before I was blown back again further down the hall from the Shaman's wind.

I breathed fire on a goblin nearest me as my companions finished off the Lizardfolk and cleared the hallway for us to move forward. We snuck down the hall into the room in which the Lizardfolk had started and saw several blueprints and glowing yellow terminals. I was able to make out the blueprints as they were in Draconic, and relayed the information on the rest of the group.

The cave was enormous, and extraordinarily complicated, spreading out through different chambers centered around a main room. From what I could tell on the blueprints, there were four chambers designed to function in different capacities. The main center chamber seems from the plans to hold all of the power, and it seems to be built around some sort of natural feature. Surrounding it, the eastern chamber looks like it re-routes the energy from the center, the middle one attunes the frequency of the flow of energy, and the westernmost chamber

siphons some of the power to run the complex. There are also several mentions of “breaking the slaves”, and that is happening--whatever that might be--in the western chamber.

After careful study, I think I figured out that the energy from each chamber needs to be rerouted in a certain order in order to force the door to the central chamber. Jebeddo wanted to start in the room with the slaves, but I worried that that might cause too much commotion. We ended up coming to the eastern chamber and I am hoping that it was the right decision.

When we got into the room the alarm on the door began chiming so we rushed into the room with little thought. I could barely assess my surroundings when a bolt of energy struck me and suddenly I found myself standing outside a cave in the middle of a desert. Angry and scared, I helplessly spat a bolt of fire into the sand and then as quickly as I appeared there, I was back in the chamber. The fight had already begun and I struggled to catch my bearings. The nozzle at the back of the room tried to fire at me again but Gillik bravely jumped in the way and he disappeared! I had no time to wonder if he was in the same desert I had just been in, as a Lizardfolk hit me with his club and stabbed me in my side.

Now confused, angry, and in pain, I started firing as many spells as I could at the Lizardfolk. In the midst of the fighting Asher threw a bleeding Lizardfolk into his Dust Devil and blood sprayed throughout the entire room. The fight continued with Gillik reappearing then disappearing again, then Asher doing the same, coming back with fistfulls of mud and sand. Keith tried attacking the control panel in the back of the room which led to all of us being hit by the beam and ending up in a deep, deep cave with just a single beam of light shining down into a pool of liquid.

We reappeared in the room immediately and Jebeddo was able to shut the machine down by pushing all of the buttons and just eventually getting lucky. We decided to take a rest in here so that we will have enough strength and energy to tackle what is facing us in the other chambers. It is time for me to wake up Asher, hopefully I can get some rest.

I did not think I would be so happy to be sitting in Todd’s spooky carriage. With we have faced in the last short hours, the fact that we are all alive and on our way back to Adventure, Inc is nothing short of a miracle.

After leaving the eastern chamber Jebeddo finally convinced us to go free all of the slaves, and even though I did not think it was a great idea I eventually gave into his chanting. We faced three Lizardfolk, but the nozzle at the back of the room in this chamber did not make everyone disappear, it shot shields of protection onto each of the Lizardfolk in turn. This made it extraordinarily difficult to fight them, but we kept pushing and we defeated them.

After the battle we found the terminal in the back of the room, hidden in a torture device, thanks to one of the ‘slaves’ we freed: a Lizardfolk named Slask. Asher and Gillik healed him and he told us of corruption filling the hearts of Lizardfolk and of the unnamed Master. Feeling stronger,

Slask vowed to help us as we continued to work our way through the compound and warned us of a beast we had yet to face.

It turns out the beast was a giant. Almost immediately, when the giant stood up, filling the room, he threw his chains down on Keth who passed out unconscious. Asher heated the chains that were feebly restraining the monster which slowed him briefly, but we still struggled to take him down. Amazingly, in the midst of the fighting, Klug came out of Keth's consciousness and began fighting in his body. I cast cloud of daggers and magic missiles, hitting him with everything I had, but then as Keth (healed by Gillik and back in his own mind) sliced the giant at the knee, he toppled over and fell on me and Gillik. I have never felt so helpless: my whole body pressed into the floor with no hope for air in my lungs. As the world around me began to fade and I felt my end approaching, relief came and the giant's lifeless body was thrown across the room.

We took a brief rest while Slask expertly fixed the terminal to finish forcing the central chamber door, but I was too shaken and weak to write and I am glad I saved my energy as we had yet another major fight ahead of us.

It was a trial to even get into the central chamber, as the doors were moving, gnashing sharp points as they opened and closed. Between them, I could see a huge machine hanging down into what looked like a deep pit. My companions and Slask jumped through the doors but I stayed outside them, casting spells from my vantage point. It was hard to keep track of the action with the doors opening and closing within my field of vision, and when I finally jumped through them to enter the chamber my tail was caught between them in a rush of pain.

We defeated the Lizardfolk and their King, and Slask threw his magical trident into the deep pit. It disappeared so Jebeddo pushed a Lizardfolk down too, and we watched as it disappeared in the same way we each had when the nozzle hit us. I was able to translate the terminal in this room to discover that energy has been siphoned from a natural pattern in the ground and is spreading out into every corner of New Meritta. One line of energy is flowing to each kingdom where we have assumed there is a machine like the one we discovered in Quian.

Unfortunately, the energy is so powerful that we cannot just shut it off...We end up leaving it the way it is because the alternative is stopping it from leaving the compound (which would make the compound and surrounding town explode) or focus it all on one machine (which would also be destroyed). For as much as Jebeddo wants to take the chance to blow up a town we have never been to, I cannot let that happen. We decide to leave it as is and hopefully we will find another way to disable it.

On the Lizardfolk King Jebeddo found 10,000 gold and wanted to push him into the pit, but Slask stopped him before he could. He reached down and ripped out his heart, then let Jebeddo roll him into the pit. I will miss Slask, it makes me realize that even though we had never previously encountered a Lizardfolk that wasn't trying to kill us, they are not all bad they have just been affected by a darkness. I hope Slask find happiness and is able to discover the source of the corruption and heal it.

For now I am grateful to be in this carriage heading back to Adventure, Inc. We have such work ahead of us but if we can defeat a giant, there is no limit to what we can conquer.

8th Entry

Dear Ironshaper,

I'm sorry. We were too late. If only we had travelled faster... If only we hadn't taken such a long rest after completing some of our tasks... I was so in shock when Todd demolished the undead on the road so easily, but seeing Mughamara up in smoke ahead of us as we approached only increased the feeling of dread and panic.

You have given us purpose and you have given us strength beyond that we could ever have imagined. Every time I fire or cast a spell through Ehtaha I will remember you and your dedication to saving all of New Merrita.

I believe in you; I believe in what you have told us. I promise you that we will find and defeat Gorm for you and for your legacy.

Dear Maeriffa,

I'm sorry. I'm sorry that the first time I saw your face was in death, but I am grateful for all you have done with no recognition of your true self. You were part of an idea, a concept, and your death represents the entity that was Maeriffa but it does not represent you. I promise I will learn who you were and will honor the memory of one so brave. You helped us seek truth, you grounded us and brought us to new worlds, and most importantly you gave me something to strive for. I know it may not have been you specifically, but Maeriffa as a force showed me worlds of magic and power that I can only dream of achieving.

Thank you for giving me that dream, thank you for putting every bit of your soul into the mask of Maeriffa. I will honor you and remember you as long as I continue to fight for the good in this world.

Dear Klug,

I'm sorry. I know little else to say but that. We fought off the skeletons, zombies, and specters—well, we kept them at bay. I have never seen the group of us fight so tightly together. That was you, you know... You taught us how to be a team and encouraged our strength. When we first arrived at the doors of Adventure, Incorporated it was you who took us in and gave us unity. It's funny, the very first thing you asked us was what our group name was... We had, in our months together, never considered or thought of ourselves as an official 'adventuring' team. We had been traveling together as friends but you set off the chain of actions that has unified us and made us more dependent and reliant on each other than I ever could have thought possible.

You sent us out on secret, unsanctioned missions—risking the backlash from your fellow masters to help us prove our worth. You sacrificed yourself during Maeriffa's ceremony in order to help us find the answers we sought. You stayed with us in Keth's mind and I can only pray to the gods that you are still with us, inside there somewhere.

When I saw your lifeless corpse come towards us I must admit I panicked. You taught us to fight enemies, but there you were: an enemy, and I could not fight you. We all tried to subdue you

while Gillik and Jebeddo urged us to kill, told us that you were already dead...I was so angry, so blindly furious that they could refer to you as an 'it' and strike at you. It wasn't until your soulless body attacked Jebeddo that I snapped into the reality of the moment. The magic missiles flew from the mouth of Ehtaha, Ironshaper's spirit guiding them forward, and they took you down. I am so sorry. Every impact sent a shudder through my entire being, but at the end of the day to save my friends, it had to be done.

You would have been proud of us, I think, the way we moved and fought as one. I promise I will honor you and fight as you would have wanted. I will be strong and I will carry you with me with every step forward I take.

I have seen death before. I have caused death before. Never has it impacted me so fully, so deeply. I want to scream and curse and cry all in the same breath. I am tired. But all I can do is fight to end the corruption in New Merrita and find the answers that I have sought since leaving home so long ago.

The sun will rise tomorrow and we will be here. But we will be much emptier than we were yesterday.

9th Entry

Words cannot express the sorrow, desperation, and confusion that have been flooding my thoughts since the funerals. We had to say goodbye to two dear friends and yet, it almost feels like we have not had to say goodbye at all. We paid our tributes to Klug's empty body and one of the three spirits of Maeriffa, yet this afternoon King Elletrix came to speak with us, revealing to Keth, Gillik, and Asher the secret of his identity. Even though we have lost two Masters of Adventure, Incorporated, there is hope that Klug is somewhere still in the depths of Keth's mind and we still have Elletrix to go to in case of an emergency. The worry now lies in the difficulties in contacting those who have been our mentors especially as Elletrix has given the five of us full control over Adventure, Incorporated.

The shock of this new responsibility was eased slightly Elletrix's confidence in our destiny: he says we have been touched by Calliesto and that all of the Masters sensed that there is a greater plan in store for us, but none of us has any leadership experience and the daunting task of running this business is weighing on my mind.

In our first act with the whole compound under our command has been to place Clyde in charge of regulating the day to day activities. He knows the business much more thoroughly than we do, and even though it took a bit of convincing for Jebeddo and Asher to be on board, I think that this is an exceptionally strong choice. Plus, rather selfishly, it gives me a bit of an opening for conversation with him. I no longer need an excuse to approach him! I cannot believe though, that this will help me act less insane when I am in his presence....Only time will tell.

As of now, we are on our way to visit Ironshaper as he is in our present. Although the visiting future version of him fell to the undead invasion, we believe that the Ironshaper that exists now will still be able to assist us in our journey. King Elletrix gave us many leads to ponder as we move forward trying to stop Gorm from harnessing the energy of the magical ley lines, but we have agreed that finding Ironshaper and making sure he is safe should be our first priority.

It is lucky we did prioritize Ironshaper's safety, because when we arrived at his house in Varina we found it surrounded by lizardfolk! After a tense battle that most sadly injured Poesy and Violet, we defeated them and were able to ensure the safety of Ironshaper and his family. Unfortunately, the fight was an easier task than convincing Ironshaper and his wife that we were friends and had known a future version of him.

Ironshaper made sure his wife and children were at a neighbor's and then told us that he had been dreaming of our weapons, only much more powerful and with different names than we had christened them. My crossbow he referred to as 'The Dragon's Wrath', which previews the fury and power it will one day embody. Jebeddo's rapier he knows as "The Unseen Blade", Keth's short swords as "The Pillars of Strength", Gillik's hammer as "The Hammer of Twilight", and Asher's scimitar as "The Earthen Call". He spent time with us, giving us insight into how we can

work towards harnessing the true power of our weapons, and we left him to return to Mughamarra.

CLYDE ASKED ME OUT ON A DATE. HE ASKED ME TO GET FOOD WITH HIM. That is a date, right? Oh goodness, what if it's not what he meant? He just asked me if, when this is all over and we get back from going to see Penelope (the gnome that Elletrix sent us to to get information about the leylines), I would like to get food. Does that mean he just wants me to get food for him? In the way that Jebeddo (being Jebeddo) keeps asking Clyde to get him tea....? What if he is just thinking that it would be nice to get food with someone who isn't mean to him? Or what if he is only interested now because of the new position of power that I have? Oh I cannot bear to think that there is any other reason for his asking me besides the fact that he is genuinely interested in spending time with me!!!! I have thought about this moment for months and finally it has happened, I can barely breathe!

Jebeddo has been talking the entire time we have been riding, I guess we are going to his home burrow and he knows this woman that we have been sent to find. He has also been (finally!) telling us where the name 'Oneshoe' came from! An amazing story of romance and picnics. I wonder if Clyde would like a picnic? I bet I could put together something that he would enjoy! But where would I start? Maybe I should ask Evan instead of asking the boys-I know they will continue to tease me mercilessly, but Evan might help! Well, we are pulling up to Saol now, I suppose I will have to refocus my thoughts towards the information we are supposed to be retrieving!

We should have known something evil was coming, you could feel it in the air when we arrived in the Burrow. It was desolated and as we rode in, everyone was eyeing us suspiciously. It turned out that Jebeddo was not as welcome in his hometown as he assumed he would be. The townsfolk hurled their anger towards Jebeddo and told us they would not believe he would come back here, pointing out his family home which was completely dilapidated. With newfound courage boiling inside me from the confidence I had gained through Clyde's sudden interest in me, I put them in their place (well, at least it felt like it to me) and demanded that we get to see Penelope.

She immediately showed up and, supporting the anger of the crowd, dragged us into the Town Hall. As soon as the doors were closed she wrapped Jebeddo in a huge hug and apologized for treating him the way she did in front of the others. It turns out that Jebeddo's parents fell in with a cult called The Forbidden Dawn and that is why everyone distrusts Jebeddo.

Penelope was not able to give us much information about the leylines since she had not worked with them for over twenty five years. She was able to tell us that the Ancient Druids can travel to the leylines to absorb energy, and each leyline channels a different type of magic.

Our discussion was interrupted suddenly by a massive earthquake that sent us all tumbling. We ran outside to see three giant fire elementals and five magma mephits bursting out of the crack in the earth that had just opened. We fought through the heat and the smoke and the flames, and although it was difficult and extremely painful I was able to try out one of the new spells I have been working on. Focusing my attack on one of the creatures, I was able to damage while also rerouting its energy back into healing myself.

I also found success with Tasha's Hideous Laughter with this amazing, amazing joke:
What word starts with F and ends in uck....
FIRETRUCK!!!

We eventually defeated all of the creatures and even though we saved the entire town from being destroyed by fire monsters, they still screamed at us to leave! Horribly ungrateful, it seems they felt that Jebeddo somehow brought this bad luck and danger onto them even though there was no way for that to be possible. They couldn't have been here because of us, could they?

As we have been traveling we have seen other effects of the earthquake--the waterline of the river has changed and several trees have been uprooted. I can only hope this damage does not extend all the way to Mughamarra and that the compound is alright. I know that if any trouble has come to them, Clyde will handle it perfectly.

We are not quite back yet, but Evan is slowing the carriage down. I can just make out two hooded figures blocking our way.

Well the good news is that we are back at Adventure, Inc....the bad news is that the Bisu brother we did not kill all those months ago has been raising tons of money to hire people to kill us, and there is a female tiefling invisible somewhere in the world waiting to possibly cash in a favor from us (or get revenge?) and Keth told her where we are.

Immediately when we approached the bandits, I cast a charm on one so he would treat me as a friend. It was the first time I had used this spell, and I was very excited to see how well it worked. From the noises of battle, it sounded as if the bandits put up a good fight and Keth, Jebeddo, and Asher took them on while Gillik disappeared into a cloud of mist with the tiefling. During their battle I tried to get as much information from my new friend as possible, and that's how I learned that they were hired by the Bisu. Eventually I convinced him that we were certainly not the Many Pennies and he retreated to the woodline to wait for some other group.

Back in the battle I cast my joke on one of the bandits and honestly, it was not my best work. Usually I am so prepared....but I must have been thrown off for some reason. It certainly was not my best, but regardless, the bandit thought it was hilarious and this gave Jebeddo the

opportunity to strike him down easily. We finished the fight and Evan called Poesy and Violet back--as they had been cut loose by the bandit, and our short journey back to the compound provided no further difficulty.

We have quite a lot of work ahead of us in the next few weeks as we plan our next move. I know that we will keep researching the leylines, and there are several letters we will send out to round out the information we need on different fronts. We toyed with using the leaf Tezcatlapoca gifted Asher, but I believe there will be a more pressing question in the future that we will need answered.

But there is one thing that seems most important at this precise moment: I have a date to plan :)

10th Entry

We have been tried and we have survived. Colliesto tested our strength, our morals, and our will and we have come out of the astral plane three times alive. Well...most of us...but in the end all is well and as we listened in awe to the angel before us, moments of peace filtered through the cloudy darkness we know is ahead.

Before the agent of Colliesto arrived, we had started to really take our places in Mughamarra as the leaders of Adventures, Incorporated. I retreated mostly to the libraries to work on researching all of the opponents we have encountered and collected during our time here. My one major foray out yielded...unexpectedly and devastatingly confusing results.

I had been looking forward to my date with Clyde for so long and when the day finally arrived I could barely breathe. I must have changed a thousand times--put every item in my small closet on and off and back on again. I even went to Keth for advice on what to wear, but he was in the middle of a training session and I did not want to interrupt him. Next on my list for advice was Gillik; the way he speaks about Redbridge is adorable and inspiring, and usually our time in the library overlaps but when I went to see him he was not there. I thought about heading down to the kitchens, since all of his breaks recently have been spent there, but I wanted to avoid the risk of running into Asher or Jebeddo on my way down. They were the last two people I wanted to see and I had been avoiding them for the whole week leading up to the date.

Finally I settled on wearing exactly what I always do, and went down to the tavern to meet Clyde. It started off wonderfully, we chatted with the innkeeper who was working on rebuilding the structure since the undead attack on Mughamarra and he showed us around the new parts of the building. This was good because it allowed us to keep our Adventure, Inc hats on for a time and made the transition easier into more relaxed conversation. We continued to try and ease into the small talk, relying on the latest compound news to keep us going, when we started talking about our powers. Clyde is a wizard and at one point, when we were comparing spells, he made a comment, saying that his magic was 'real' and mine 'just happens'. He continued talking, easing into fluid stories as the night went on, and I am sure that he did not mean the comment in a vindictive or evil way, but it did not sit well with me. I know that I am new to magic and it really is touch and go sometimes, but to think that he might look down on me because of the source of my power made me feel weak and inferior. I had only just gotten over the worries of him looking at me differently because I am a dragonborn; I finally felt like he saw me as someone he liked and respected and digging at my magic, even unintentionally, just muddled my mind and now I have no idea how I feel about him.

Later that night, back at the compound, I couldn't bring myself to even speak to my friends. I have been gushing over Clyde for months and now that my mind and emotions have been so affected, I don't even know how to speak. Thankfully, the representative of the Church of Colliesto arrived shortly after, and our trials began.

Miven, the representative, was a tall, slender elf with deep blue eyes and dark black hair. He explained to us that it was the last day of the Festival of Colliesto and in the tradition, trials would be held to judge our worthiness. He told us that we needed six players in order to endure the trials, and although I worried about my emotional investment, we decided that Clyde should be our sixth.

Miven pulled six stones out of his bag; they had twenty sides with different symbols on each side and these would determine our fates within the contests. We started with rolling for teams. Naturally, Clyde and I rolled the same number so we were assured to be on the same team. Keth also rolled onto our team which left Jebeddo, Asher, and Gillik on the opposing team. Miven took out a scroll and when he read from it a golden bubble appeared on the ground. As it grew, he explained to us that it was a small piece of Colliesto's realm and even though we were to fight each other to the death within, we would return whole outside it.

We stepped through the bubble and appeared in a black, purple, and blue void standing on a sheet of glass. Jebeddo and Gillik became very agitated and nervous, it seemed that this was exactly like the place they disappeared to when they saw the giant tentacle monster. Before we knew it, the battle had begun and I was fighting my friends. As much as Clyde's protest that his magic was better than mine bothered me, he really was amazing. He cast ice storm and cone of cold brilliantly, but then Gillik 'killed' him and he disappeared from out of the astral plane. As for myself, I cast several magic missiles and fireballs, but it wasn't enough. With both healers on the opposite team I stood no chance once Clyde and Keth had both been eliminated. At the end, Gillik cast divine smite on me and I could barely register the pain before I appeared back out in the room with Clyde, Keth, and Jebeddo. I was so glad to see that we were all alright and that Miven had not lied about the parameters of the bubble. Miven awarded Jebeddo, Gillik, and Asher (as the winning team) with a new six sided stone each. They rolled the stones and were granted a resistance that coincided with the symbol they rolled.

For the second trial, Miven had us roll two more of his several-sided stones, and before we could know what they represented he created another Astral Plane bubble. We walked in, holding hands with each other in solidarity, and found ourselves facing several elementals based on the symbols we rolled. We began fighting, throwing everything we had at them (Clyde even cast fireball!) and began eliminating them one by one. At one point I was hit by the fire elemental, and hoped that the searing pain would disappear as soon as we exited the astral plane. The fight continued and before I knew it, I was on the ground unconscious. It seemed as if barely a moment went by before I opened my eyes from Asher's healing spell. I looked around to assess the rest of the team and saw Clyde lying dead on the ground as Keth killed the last elemental.

As before, we appeared out of the bubble but Clyde was not with us. Because he died within the astral plane, he was lost. I could not believe the panic that washed over me. Only that morning I had been struggling with my feelings towards Clyde and now he could possibly be gone forever. Miven had already begun explaining the next trial. The third trial involved no stones, but Miven

began reading from the scroll and I walked into the astral plane eagerly, looking for Clyde but he was nowhere to be found. Miven instead, was in front of us in flowing golden robes. He began asking us questions and encouraged us to answer honestly. He asked me if I performed a heroic action and that destroyed another town, would I be to blame? Of course I answered that I would be to blame, though blame is subjective and I was inclined to argue the connotation of blame versus credit. The second question he asked me was if I became ill, whose fault would it be. I argued that unless I did something actively to make myself ill, then it was no one's fault.

Once all of the questions were asked, we were given options of items. Miven presented me with the choice of a ring or robes. I had the feeling that the ring would interact with my spells in a positive manner, so I chose that. Keth chose a pair of boots, Gillik a helmet, Jebeddo an iron ball, and Asher a claw.

When we stepped out of the bubble, the items had disappeared, our hands were empty. Miven explained to us that fate and free will are not mutually exclusive, that our ability to make choices is what give the Greater Races their power. We cannot control fate but we have control over our own actions. He spoke with us at length about fate versus free will and then pulled out his scroll for the last trial.

When we stepped through the bubble for the last time, we were again on the astral plane and Clyde was hanging limp in the air across from us. In a flash of blinding light, tentacles sprung from Clyde's body and our battle began.

I cast true strike to try and get insight into how best to attack the monster inhabiting Clyde, but before I could use the information I had gathered, I was struck into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. The joke the Clyde monster had cast through Tasha's Hideous Laughter was not even funny, but I was under its spell and could not help myself. Infuriated, I was able to shake off the effects right as I got hit with a fireball. I threw my own back at him, as well as magic missiles to him and the water elemental he had cast. Spells whizzed around me and weapons clanged, there was cold and then there was darkness. In the next instant I awoke to Asher's healing power for the second time of the trials, and I watched as Keth punched the life out of the monster. The light flashed again and we were back in our room with Clyde next to us alive and well.

We looked at Miven and he was shaking as the words on his scroll began to glow. The bubble disappeared and a gate opened from the ceiling to reveal a beautiful blue skinned angel with wings of glowing space dust. The angel of Colliesto spoke to us on her goddess' behalf to give us information on the leylines. She held out her hands and a model of our planet Onmeneth appeared from dust. She zoomed out to reveal other planets: the material plane. From different planes we received the elements, not native to our plane but their effects were leaked into our world through gates between the planes. The same is true for magic, each form of magic trickles from the eight planes where each is pure into ours and that is how we get our magic.

The angel zoomed out again to show us three rings that don't cover the entirety of the outer planes. They are the celestial, shadow, and fey realms, and they created the leylines as doorways for the planes and can be accessed from either side. If one were able to tap into the power of the leylines, it would give them untold power. The only way to get rid of that threat would be to close the doorway completely, but then magic as we know it would eventually disappear from Onmeneth. The energy from the leylines travels to the core of the planet and there reside the gates to the realm of fire, earth, air, and water. She explained that another force was sleeping in the center of the planet, but she could not answer what it was. If we wanted to close them, we would have to somehow tether ourselves to our realm so that we weren't lost forever. The angel left us with a parting gift: she pressed her forehead to Gillik's and he was gifted with the knowledge of all locations of the leylines. We watched as she disappeared and left us all in awe. Miven, incredibly happy, left us, and we consoled Clyde though he had no recollection of the event that occurred while his body was host for the monster.

After we were alone again, we discussed using the leaf Asher had received from Tezcatlipoca to ask the question of what the fifth force in the center of the earth. Asher burned the leaf and from a font of smoke, the face of Tezcatlipoca appeared before us. He told us an entity sleeps: Gorm's master. He said he burns a candle at both ends, the god of dragons waits. Every fiber of my being stood on alert. Hairix, the god of the dragons must be who he is referring to. I know that there will be intense trials ahead-much worse than we have been through today. Gillik is right, Gorm is going to try to reset the whole world and destroy it, but I am more concerned that if Hairix wakes what he might try to do with his creatures, the dragonborn...me...

11th Entry

Our enemies until now have seemed so tangible, though as we have been discovering the root of the evil in New Meritta, those foes have become more difficult to comprehend. Not so long ago an angel had been our ally, granting us gifts from Colliesto after passing her tests. Then, the godlike Tezcatlipoca rewarded us with the answer to our question of what lies in the center of Onmeneth, the answer to the evil that we will ultimately will face. Now, though, we have seen an angel of gold dissolve into an angel of blood and we have fought an enemy we could not touch; we are lucky to have survived, but what luck will help us defeat the heavens and the men who walk with their power?

Just yesterday we were traveling in the comfort of Evan's carriage, wrapped in the stories of love, wars, and favorite foods to meet with Elletrix at his castle in Morevia. The vibrancy of life as we bounced over the uneven wooden streets of the city caught me off guard; these people had no idea the horrors the world will be facing if Gorm succeeds in waking Hairix, and the weight of our destiny pressed on my shoulders even heavier than it had been before.

On our way in we met Heinrich who had played the third Maeriffa, before Elletrix had decided to end the façade of the spymaster, and it was amazing to see how different-in build and personality alike-he was compared to the elven woman I had seen dead at the compound and compared to Elletrix. The magic of the mask and outfit they each wore as Maeriffa must have been powerful, but as we were being led into the court there was little time to contemplate it.

Elletrix, sitting on his throne, looked far more regal than when we had seen him at the Adventure, Incorporated compound, but the hint of exhaustion behind his eyes was still apparent. After dismissing all of the attendants he asked us what progress we had made learning about the leylines. We told him what we know, but he had little to add to the information we had received from the angel of Colliesto.

Instead, he shifted our focus away from Colliesto and to the church of Iora. In doing so, he also unknowingly shifted the pain and weight of our adventure directly onto Keth's shoulders. He told us that a priest of Iora had led a band of clerics, soliders, and fallen peacekeepers to overthrow the ArchPriest and declare Iora separate from the Divine Court. He has been trying to change the way people worship the god, and Elletrix needed a group of adventurers to combat him. Initially my thoughts were focused on the honor that it was to have been selected personally by Elletrix to fight for him, but immediately when he mentioned the priest's name, all of our focuses shifted to Keth.

Dunglaris, years ago, convinced Keth to kill everyone aboard a passing caravan, but it turned out that that caravan was full of innocent people. Keth has spent the years since trying to atone for his actions, but knowing that this man we were about to face was responsible for most of the guilt Keth carries today was a heavy note to hear. Keth also told us that Dunglaris wears an idol that protects him from all harm. Elletrix's mission was going to prove difficult to fulfill, but we were ready to try.

We exited Elltrix's court and looked across the swamp towards the cathedral. Knowing that Evan was in a tavern somewhere, wasting the day away, we decided to call upon Todd to take us to the church. When Asher rubbed the stone though, it turned to dust. I do not know if Todd's service had been somehow disrupted, but in any case it was a strange event to occur. Perhaps the evil that is infiltrating the church (since Todd is a priest of Iora) has affected him too...

We walked across the moors, devoid of horse and carriage, and the guards at the doors would not allow us entry. No matter what tactic we took (even my charm person spell had no effect) they would not let us in.

As much as Jebeddo tried to waylay the situation through talk, which usually was his strength, they would not budge and the team resorted to fighting. Throughout this initial battle I was absolutely shaken. I understood Jebeddo's argument for why we should try not to hurt them—they were following their leader, they meant no ill towards us, but I was also motivated by our company's higher purpose. Overwhelmed by the action, I decided to turn myself invisible to try and infiltrate the inside of the church. Moving down the hallway though, all I saw was an army of fighters and too many doors to try at once. I moved back to my team and saw that they were struggling, so I used my fire breath to eliminate some of the guards. It didn't feel good, but it was better than feeling useless roaming the halls trying to find a way to the central chamber where Dunglaris was.

Once we finally got through the doors, more disaster seemed to await us. We fought, but the servants and fallen peacekeepers proved too evil for us. One threw a dagger at Gillik and when it hit the ground, the grass around the point shriveled up and turned brown. I couldn't believe the force of evil we were up against, but it did not stop us from trying to keep moving forward. I tried a couple of times to cast cloud of daggers on the guards, but only the last time did it seem to deal any damage. The knight yelled at us that 'blood will rule all', but still I kept throwing my spells and at last we got through the guards and into Dunglaris' chamber.

Keth moved forward, but Dunglaris proved too strong, he paralyzed Keth immediately upon attacking. Gillik moved forwards and tried to turn the fire in his hammer from gold to purple—it worked, but only for a moment. In an instant the fire in Gillik's hammer turned from purple to a deep, fiery, crimson and then an angel descended, its bright wings glittering gold.

All of a sudden, its skin seemed to melt, the shining gold burned red, and crimson trickled from each pore, turning it to a bloody red. Gillik tried to compel the angel into a duel, but soon they both returned, and we all had to fight. At one point Gillik seemed to be trying to heal the angel, but finally he agreed to help the rest of us take it out and we fought with spell upon attack upon spell upon attack to finally defeat our ethereal foe.

It was my magic missile that ultimately killed the angel, and I cannot describe the level of guilt and grief that accompanied that strike. As my last missile hit, the angel whispered a harsh 'thank you', as we freed him from his blood-fueled cage. The line between good and evil had never been so blurred, and it pains me even now to recount it.

Collectively exhausted, confused, and out of a plan, we took a short rest in that church of Iora. Before long we saw peacekeepers running towards us—the same that Elletrix had promised to send, but we were so on our guard that we did not know whether to trust them or not. They finally convinced us that they were on our side, and promised to hunt down Dunglaris and fight him for the good of the world.

We checked back in with Elletrix and he told us that he will be in our debt, but I cannot describe the comfort that I feel being back in Evan's carriage headed towards Adventure, Inc—even though he was more than slightly inebriated while driving. The formality of Elletrix at his court—denying that he knows us on a hyperpersonal level is unsettling, and it is nice to be back with the four people I can trust most in this world.

12th Entry

When I set out into the world on my own, the only romance I had ever known had been dramatized and overly romanticized in books. My parents were no great example: my father went behind my mother's back to perform experiments on my egg and my mother left our exiled family as soon as her precedent time was up. If you had asked me then, I would have told you there was no way I would ever find any type of romance but now, huddled in the corner of Todd's Spooky carriage, sitting across from a beautiful blue dragonborn and thinking about Clyde at the same time, I know I was right.

When we arrived back at the compound, Clyde was there to meet us and tell us that we had a visitor. My stomach was in knots as we spoke to Clyde—I haven't yet had the time to work through my change in feelings for him. On one hand I still think he is the most handsome man I have ever seen, but on the other, his superiority complex when it comes to magic is still grating on me. I swallowed the panic down the best I could though, to go meet our new guest.

As soon as we walked into Clyde's office I had to choke down a bubble of acid that was quickly rising in my throat. Maybe it was because I had not come across many other dragonborn in my travels, but this male in front of us—his boots resting casually on Clyde's desk, arms folded behind his neck—absolutely took my breath away. His name is Jator Sakesh, and Redbridge sent him to us to find Viltroth. It had been so long since any of us had thought of Viltroth, there were so many things that had popped up as diversionary foes that it was a surprise to all of us to hear that Redbridge was still looking and had commissioned the help of an acquaintance in her search.

After Jator told us that he had located Viltroth in Perrineth on an island, we quickly moved to the stables to begin our journey. Unfortunately, Evan was sleeping off the drunkenness that had followed him home from Morevia, and the stone Todd had given us had crumbled to dust (after a prank of Asher and Jebeddo's, no doubt). Thankfully Todd appeared, and after much capitulation by Asher, he agreed to take us to Perrineth.

As we ride, all I am trying to do is keep my eyes down from staring at Jator but so much of me cannot help it! He says that he is a man hunter, which sounds dangerous and exciting, and absolutely too cool of a profession for someone in it to take notice of someone like me, so I might as well bury my head in my books and wait for that perfect romance to appear elsewhere from some unexpected source.

Well, my initial attraction to Jator has only been amplified by watching him fight. And after the day we have all had, there was little else to do besides watch him in action. I mean, I suppose we were all engaged in high stakes combat for the better part of the day, but there is a strength and focus to his actions that made him impossible to tear my eyes away from.

We reached the banks of the lake at nightfall and decided to wait until morning before crossing to the island in the middle. Jator focused his energy onto his weapons to make sure that he could still sense Viltroth, and the power radiating from him was palpable. We took turns on watch but halfway through the night a trio of undead attacked us and we had to jump into fighting. It seemed slightly too easy to defeat them, but we finished out the night of rest anyway. In the morning, Asher wildshaped into a giant toad and took us across the lake to the island within. All around us the smell of death permeated the space. It was barely possible to breathe without soaking in the sense of rotting corpses, but Jebeddo volunteered to dive into the cave as a scout. He reported back to us that it seemed the walls and floor were growing thicker with spider webs, and as we all entered and moved through the cave, we found ourselves face to face with an entirely webbed wall.

We kept pushing through, our mission to find Viltroth at the top of our priority, and found ourselves in a chamber with stone spikes sticking up from the ground. A meek voice called out to us from across the room, begging for help, and although Asher warned us that it might be a trap we freed the voice from her captivity. All of a sudden, the dark elf we freed turned herself into a giant spider and several other vicious spiders followed her into the room.

I found myself surrounded by complete darkness, unable to move, unable to act. It took until Asher cast fairy fire for me to even be able to identify our opponent. I attempted to subdue our enemy with humor, throwing out the best joke I could think of in the moment: "What do you call an undercover arachnid?"

..."A spy-der!"

I thought it was fantastic, worthy of the spell's full weight, but the Night Strider was not affected in any way. I resorted after, to more aggressive measures, firing chromatic orbs and magic missiles until I was able to injure her significantly. Eventually we were able to eliminate the spiders and the Night Strider too, using our full strength to fight through the webs of protection to burn into our enemies.

I wanted so badly to fire breath through the whole cave, setting all of the webbing ablaze and making sure that we would not meet any other arachnid foes on our journey, but Asher took out his flint before I could even prepare. As soon as a small spark hit the first bit of spider web, it spread within moments through the entire cavern.

We've been watching the smoke billow out from the cave, and as the plumes have gotten smaller and smaller we're gearing up to head back in and continue our hunt for Viltroth.

I want to say that I am a supportive addition to our team. I want to say that I can carry my weight in any fight we face. I want to say that there's no enemy that sets me so off guard that I cannot fight to my full potential. But, if I said those things I would be very wrong.

We moved our way back through the cave and after collecting a few healing potions and some gold from the cavern the Night Strider had been in, we kept moving forward. We got to a stone wall that did not feel quite right, and it turned out that it was full of transmutation magic. Gillik sensed evil on the other side and through some strength and some of Asher's wildshaped magic, we were able to push through it into the room adjacent.

A circle of sigils was drawn on the floor in the back of the makeshift lab we stumbled into, and beds drenched in blood and scattered papers lined the walls. Jator tried to locate Viltroth but could not find him, to all of our dismay. After some trial and error on Jebeddo's part, we found that the circle of markings on the floor served as a portal—his mage hand and also a glass disappeared into thin air when thrown into the center.

It looked as though things in this room were grabbed in a hurry to escape, but thanks to Jebeddo's quick thinking, and also due to his expertise in alchemy, we were able to get some answers. He pulled out his spirit charm and when he rubbed it we heard a strained voice yelling. We were introduced to Patrick, a spirit who had died at the hands of Viltroth. He told us of a friend who supplied power to Viltroth, who helped him as he searched for something inside. His memory faded with his spirit, and Gillik sent him into the abyss with a blessing.

After Patrick disappeared, Jebeddo decided to just walk into the portal, so I followed. I found myself with him on a sheet of glass in space surrounded by purple and blue. Across the glass two men hunched over a book, furiously flipping through pages. It was Viltroth and a mage wearing dark scale mail underneath an open robe of shimmering black. As soon as we moved close and started fighting, the mage turned into a black dragon.

I stood, shaken, not knowing what to do. I watched my friends fire and deal damage but I could not bear the thought of harming this dragon, of harming this creature whose blood I shared. I tried to subdue him with a joke but it was halfhearted and simply an attempt to look as though I was on the offense. Between Jator's intense strength and Gillik's divine power, we defeated the dragon and I did not even have to raise a hand against him. Something inside me was celebrating, knowing that I did not harm one of my own, but the rest of me was wailing in defeat, having left my team to fend for themselves.

After the dragon was felled, we faced Viltroth alone. He summoned two undead (including Patrick) to try and diffuse the fight, but we were able to retrieve the book from him, defeat the undead, and bring Viltroth to yield. Finally we had attained the Shi'aye tome that we had fought to get so many months ago, and Viltroth revealed to us that he has been working for so long in hiding in order to protect Redbridge and the other members of Adventure, Inc. He explained to us that he is very close to finding the Shadow Lord but that in conjunction with the Shi'aye tome he needed a Sylvan scroll to complete a ritual. Jebeddo has had the Sylvan scroll since we encountered Viltroth the first time, but it was still difficult to trust Viltroth in the moment right after the heat of battle.

Viltroth, after I desperately tried to bring him and Jebeddo together in a path towards saving our universe together, opened a portal back out of the cave. I grabbed his arm in panic, unsure if he would disappear again as he did before, but we all went through without harm.

Jator accompanied us back to Mughamarra so that he could get paid, but something inside of me hoped that it was a chance to stay with us a bit longer. When we got back to the compound we were met with wide eyes and expected confusion.

We met Clyde and in a halfhearted attempt to make him jealous, I offered for Jator to stay at the compound with us. We are working on sending a message to get Elletrix here as soon as possible, to help us deal with Viltroth, but we are also looking down other avenues. We are waiting to contact the church of Sallius and Asher is going to contact one of his druid friends, Donal.

Sitting in my room, reflecting on the events of the past few days, the weight of important and trivial matters is messing with my entire being. I am fully aware of the dangers we face and the enemies we're up against, but at the same time my heart has been twisted and turned into so many different paths of friendship, love, and lust that I don't know where it is going to take me next. All I know for sure is that there is much pain ahead of us and that hopefully the happiness it's accompanied with is enough to offset the trauma of the war we are facing.

13th Entry

One moment of tense reunion: a new quest
One moment of independence: a massive mistake
One moment of focused teamwork: a closed leyline.
Three months.

We are on our way to meet with Elletrix, but the thought of our King has never filled me with more dread and desperation. I can only pray to whatever god will listen that the Magic Man did not beat me to him.

There has been little time for pause since we set out on our journey to close the leyline of abjuration, but so very much has happened. We have lost a loyal friend, gained a new problem to solve, and fought new enemies. In some ways we have grown closer as a unit and in some ways our brief separation has marked an unclear rift between us. As I look at the shield Gillik now carries, the pure source of concentrated Abjuration magic, I cannot help but think of what we lost to get it and question if it was even the right thing to do.

It does not seem like three months has passed since we met with Asher's Druid friend Donal in the ritual tower of Adventure, Inc. Time on the plane of Abjuration must have been skewed in some way, but we are lucky to have made it back at all. The Sylvan scroll Jebeddo had taken so long ago and Asher's Sylvan blood gave us the anchor we needed to get back to our compound from the planes, and the knowledge Viltroth gave Gillik and me to create the orbs of concentrated magic and gave us the power we needed to close the leyline.

The reunion between Elletrix and Viltroth was heated, but it was understandable that they both would be on edge after years had passed since Viltroth's disappearance. I was adamant to make it clear that Viltroth was not acting against us when we met him the first time as we tried to recover the Shi'aye tome, he was simply acting in self-defense. The rest of the group seemed to be much more wary of the situation though, especially Asher. He still felt that Viltroth was a villain who must be guarded at all times.

In their argument, Viltroth told Elletrix that from birth he had been promised to the Shadow Lord: a repercussion of the cult his parents were members of. Elletrix, naturally, was upset that he had brought that evil into Adventure, Incorporated, and I felt (as they were busy shouting at each other) that it was as good a time as any to let my team know of the black dragon blood that resided in mine. It had been so long that I had been keeping that secret, and I had been so guarded about it, but the spirit of admission swept through me and I was able to let it out. Fortunately, none of my team seemed to be too affected by it. We all have shadows inside of us.

Anyway, we had the knowledge we needed to move towards our first leyline, and we decided upon Abjuration. Moving to the stables, we saw that Todd's carriage was gone, but Evan was still there, sleeping off the after effects of what must have been an exciting night. We woke him and he agreed to take us to Perrinith.

On our way we met a Mendicant on the side of the road; it was nice to buy new items to empower us in our future fights. Then, a free and natural magic was gifted to us: it started to snow. Giant white flakes surrounded us, creating an incredible, real life snowglobe. Evan did not seem to be too thrilled with the change in weather and neither did Asher, but I was positively mesmerized. Having grown up underground in the desert, and making my temporary home also in the south, I had not experienced much snow. But living and breathing in the cool, crisp, air I felt alive and refreshed. There was a new white blanket covering the earth and I felt so lucky to be able to experience that new beginning.

When we got to the outskirts of HearthHolme, Evan told us that we would need to make our way on foot. We knew that an army of LizardFolk and Gnolls had destroyed the town to build a fortress, so it would be important to sneak up to them. Exiting the carriage, Evan turned around to spend his time and money in the town as we moved onwards through the rugged terrain. It was not long before panic struck. We encountered a battalion of LizardFolk and Gnolls, with two catapults in their artillery. There must have been a hundred of them, but the most miraculous thing happened. Jebeddo simply nodded in their direction as they noticed our presence on the hill, and as we all held our breaths in stunned silence, they nodded back and moved along their path. I could not believe that his confidence worked; I was sure up until the moment they kept walking that we would be either dead or left fighting a hundred enemies. Excited by our narrow escape, but terrified of the numbers and movement of the army, we set to work to try and alert anyone we could of the impending attack. Asher was able to perform a ritual for animal messenger that would alert Evan of the battalion's approach. Hopefully he would be able to send word to town officials and Clyde, so that Adventure, Inc could get a sense of offensive attack rather than waiting for the army to get to Carapath too.

As Gillik and I were sitting with Asher, Keth and Jebeddo wandered off to scout the area. It was not long before Keth returned, but he did not come back alone. Slask, the LizardFolk we had freed from Gorm's ground pounding machine compound the last time we were there, had saved Keth's life! It was so wonderful to see him again; knowing that he had been using his freedom to work tirelessly against the enemy that had imprisoned him made me so proud of him and what he had accomplished.

We followed him back to his camp where we found Jebeddo waiting for us! Slask told us of the destruction in HearthHolme and of our possible options for approaching the base. He told us we could either move through the mountains on a dangerous path, or that there was a group living in a cave within the mountains that had access to a route leading straight into the fortress. Naturally gaining the group's favor stood out as the easier path, but as Slask kept explaining, he told us the name they go by. The Forbidden Dawn. It was the cult that Jebeddo's parents had joined so many years ago.

Unfortunately, meeting the Forbidden Dawn presented new challenges and a new urgency for us to return to Adventure, Inc. We first met Clyde's parents, Pryce and Meredith Harper, but they did not seem very willing to listen to me speak about all of Clyde's amazing qualities (how

embarrassing for me to make such a fool of myself in just my first interaction with them!). In fact, they did not seem very willing to speak with us about anything.

Jebeddo's reunion with his parents was so sweet, but tense at the same time. The rumors of their tarnished name were clearly weighing heavily on him, even as he tried lightening the mood as usual. Like Pryce and Meredith though, they would not give us answers. The basic information we got was that the Forbidden Dawn was in charge of trying to bring back a powerful creature who protected the world and knew the secrets of the Fey. Even that small amount of knowledge was too much for Pryce, and he cut Jebeddo's parents off, telling us that we could know more only after we had been initiated.

The initiation ceremony was dramatic (Gillik was ecstatic), as we were hooded and led through the turns of the cave. We entered a room full of crystals that were trapping monsters of various kinds and ended up having to fight a banshee. The battle was easy enough for us (I got to tell this amazing joke as she turned into a snake:

What do you get if you cross a witch with two snakes?

Addercadabra and Abradacobra!!!

She didn't laugh. We killed her anyway.

To finish the initiation we were given the sight of the Couatl: the magical creature created by the Fey to protect Onmineth. It is a golden, feathered serpent who must always hide. It is bound by telling the truth in all cases, it is too pure for lies, and its fate is to be guided back home to save Onmineth when the darkness has become too much.

Now privy to all of the secrets of the Forbidden Dawn, we learned the price of their search for the Couatl. They had kidnapped hundreds of people and were using their essence to try and locate the creature. Obviously shaken, especially after learning that his parents aided in the capture and finding out his former girlfriend was one of the ones taken, Jebeddo lead us through to the town where the prisoners were kept. It was poor, dirty, and the air was weighted with desolation. I left the group to explore on my own and caught up with them just as Jebeddo reunited with Aiden. Her anger was justified; and even though she was living with a husband and a child who make her happy, it was clear that all they want is to go home.

Jebeddo had to cast sleep on himself in order to get any rest that night, and his mind was obviously distracted as we began the next day. We were able to get enough information from Pryce to go through the tunnels and attack the base of the LizardFolk and Gnolls in HearthHolme, but tragedy struck again.

As we eliminated the enemies, Slask got caught in the crossfire from the Ballista Keth had sieged, and in our efforts to complete our mission we buried him in the ruins of the fortress. I know that to die in battle, helping the friends who saved him so long ago, would have made Slask proud; there is no time to mourn, we had to push forward.

We found the symbol of abjuration, and we jumped in.

Through all the injuries I've sustained in battle, nothing has compared to the pulling, twisting, stretching sensation that manipulated our bodies through the portal. Everything was glowing yellow and it felt like I was going to explode. Then, in an instant, I was home. It was not the place I had come to think of as home though, the Adventure, Inc compound, it was the place I had left so long ago to begin the journey that brought me here.

I could hardly believe it was real; the place was exactly as I had left it. I never had any intention of returning, but seeing my father's books and journals made me hungry to stay and absorb any insight I could into his experiments. There was so much research on dragons and magic, and I scooped up as much of it as I could fit into my bag. The air tasted of Abjuration; I knew I didn't have long. Just as I heard a growl from a creature in the room with me I noticed a letter sitting in an open desk drawer addressed to me. I paused to open it but at that moment a shadow leapt toward me.

The beast looked like a giant cat that had six legs, two tentacles coming out of its back, and a glowing yellow crystal on its head. Before I could panic, it split itself in half creating two identical monsters. Without my team to back me up I was nervous to fight, but those nerves quickly disappeared as I fired spell after spell on the creature. It was only able to hit me once before I eliminated it with a scorching ray and the whole body disintegrated, leaving the yellow crystal suspended in the air.

I was moving towards the crystal to get a better look when a voice appeared from nowhere. A voice that will haunt me for the rest of my days.

My hand will not stop shaking as I write this, so I will be brief. The Magic Man has been watching us. He challenged me to a game of questions, surrounded by a truth bubble. I tried to avoid his tricky questions, but in his pressing revealed that the identity of Maeriffa was Elletrix. I do not know what he wants with Elletrix but I do know that if he dies now, it is completely my fault.

The Magic Man left me with a coin, after I chose to end our game in panic, so that I could call on him again in the future to continue it.

After he disappeared, leaving me in a panicked sweat, I grabbed the crystal, was reunited with my friends where we fought and defeated a hoard of displacer beasts and a beholder, was able to mend the shards of yellow abjuration magic (my friends had each collected one like mine while we were separated) into one, and Asher performed the spell that brought us home. Obviously my first act when we tumbled onto the cool stone floor of Maeriffa's tower back at Adventure Incorporated was to exclaim the urgency of our visit to Elletrix, so that is where we are headed, aided by the speed of Todd's sleek black horses, I just hope it isn't too late.

14th Entry

Elletrix isn't dead. That's all I have to keep telling myself. I messed up, I'm disappointed in myself, I'm embarrassed, but at least he isn't dead.

There are no words to describe the pain in my stomach as we approached the palace and they asked us if we were there for the funeral. It felt as if I was back, traveling inside the leyline, pulled and twisted into a thousand different pieces. Inside though, we met Heinrich (the third Maeriffa) who told us that the funeral was a front. Elletrix found out someone was trying to track him so he went into hiding.

My relief was overwhelming, but Heinrich did not seem very phased by my mistake. He was more concerned with what Asher experienced when he was alone: Gorm is a Giant Blue Dragon and has already taken control of Southern Ishtarra.

Encouraged by a new sense of urgency, we travelled instantly back to Adventure Incorporated through a portal Elletrix had created before he left, and were able to meet with Clyde to discuss our next moves. It was sad to see that Clyde and Jebeddo could not connect further on the common ground of their parents being part of the Forbidden Dawn; I just wish that everyone would get along with Clyde better. It would be easier for me to justify trying to move this relationship forward if I knew that my team would support it. I guess I can't even really use the word relationship, that's a far cry from the awkward interactions we periodically have. I wish though...

We decided to go after the Divination leyline to try and gather magic that could help us free the prisoners of the Forbidden Dawn, but before we left we got the first piece of good news we had in what seemed like forever. Ironshaper and Adonan had succeeded in creating a robotic body and were successful in transferring Klug's soul from inside Keth's mind into the robot! I couldn't believe it, we had Klug back! It was impossible not to celebrate, even briefly, this achievement.

I knew that returning to the tunnels of Ishtarra in our attempt to find the opening of the Divination Leyline would be disorienting, but it felt like as soon as we crossed the border we were all thrown into a twisting fit of blue, landing in the bottom of an impossibly long hallway. We were surrounded by translucent walls, tangible blue energy swirling outside around us. We moved for what seemed like an eternity before Keth put on his Helm of Hearing and warned us of a creature growling in the distance.

Instantly two Displacer Beasts, with crystals of blue at their heads, appeared in front of us and two more popped up behind us. We were surrounded.

As soon as we started attacking, strange things began happening. When hit by a Displacer Beast, Gillik froze. Not magically, but his eyes glossed over and he fell to his knees. I watched as each of my friends were temporarily incapacitated by the beasts, their eyes going blank and

then popping back into reality to continue the fight. It was not until one of the creatures avoided my attack that I understood what had been happening.

There was a flash and I was in a cave watching a scene unfold before me. It was my father, alive but frightened. His hood was pulled down over his face and as he entered the cave a ring of fire sprouted, revealing an old Black Dragon. Their exchange was heated, the dragon was angry that my father had failed to find a cure to the darkness, the corruption in the black dragons' blood. He pushed a small whelping towards my father and explained that he should take the baby, his son, and through his blood my father should find a way to cure their corruption. I knew instantly that it was the blood of this black dragon that I had inside of me. The vision was gone and I was back in the fight. As soon as we had defeated all of the displacer beasts I molded the crystals into one piece of pure divination and in a flash of blue we were blinded by different moments playing before us.

I saw my mother as she returned to her tribe where she was greeted by Adonan, wishing to know of my father's success. Her words were harsh and disappointed, telling Adonan that my father, of course, had failed in his mission.

With a loud crack we were all brought back to each other right as the floor and walls surrounding us shattered. As we were falling, Jebeddo called upon his spirit charm to tell us what was next. The spirit cycled him through different emotions: sadness, fear, joy, companionship, love, and hope. Left with an uncertainty but the residual feeling of hope, we hit the floor: a ring of glass.

Pipes all around us were siphoning Divination energy, and the symbol of Divination was etched into the glass below our feet. In order to continue, we had to fight a beholder who gave us several other visions.

I saw Heinrich at the court in Morevia bowing before the Lady of Knives who sat on the throne. He was pleading to stay but deaf to his requests, she banished him.

I saw armies of gnolls and LizardFolk raging war in Perrinith; all around me was death and destruction.

I saw the Tezcatlapoca in the center of a dark forest trying to keep it sealed from the corruption, weakened and drained by its effort.

I saw a camp in the swamps, Adventure Incorporated scouts were disturbed by a voice. Tom Allofus emerged from the woods followed by a giant, staggering hoard of zombies.

I saw Gillik's father in an abandoned temple, half of his face destroyed by the corruption in his blood. A hooded figure approached and told him that they would hear the call by their blood. He took down his hood: it was Dunglaris.

Asher, fighting the visions, was able to perform his ritual thinking only of peace lying before us. We pressed our weapons into the ring and were once more surrounded by a flash of blue, landing in Maeriffa's tower.

We had no idea how long we had been gone, but time instantly contradicted itself. The walls of Adventure Incorporated were crumbling, but Maeriffa stood before us demanding to know who we were.

The panic of the situation was increased when, after we had explained that we were the Many Pennies, Maeriffa told us that the Many Pennies had died years ago. After abrasive questioning and some mistrustful explaining, we realized that we had not made it home like we had thought. Maeriffa took off her costume, revealing Hilarian Kwiesoff – the first Maeriffa we had seen killed last year.

After we told her we had come through Divination, she explained that Divination magic allows us to peer into different realities from the millions of others that exist. We found out that the difference in the reality we had landed in compared to the one we had come from was that this was a reality in which Gorm had almost won, but his defeat cost everything. Elletrix was able to convince an angel to break the pact that kept the dragons from rising up against the other races. The dragons succeeded in making Gorm flee, but they did not stop there. They convinced someone to kill Elletrix and take his throne, and now the dragons were ruling New Meritta.

As Hallie was telling the history of her reality, I was drawn by the inherent magic of Gorm's escape—the fact that he had carved a path through Divination that lead him to our reality—and the pact with the dragons, but the last detail she revealed shook me beyond my scope of comprehension. She told us the name of "The Usurper", the new King of Carapath...and it was Clyde.

Just hearing him referred to as "King Harper" and knowing that he killed Elletrix to take the throne cast a veil over my senses and it was a long time before I was shaken out. It was in a daze that Hallie held out the costume of Maeriffa for me to wear: she told us that people were distrustful of dragonborn and it would be best for me to hide what I am. I barely had the consciousness to get angry at it, slipping the mask on over my head and tying the cloak around my neck, feeling the weight of my tale displaced into thin air. I had been Maeriffa once before, but this was different. I had none of the added strength or skill; the only thing I had gained was more confusion.

She told us that she was working with a secret group to try and reapply the pact that held the dragons in place. In order to bind them we would need the pieces that each god involved in the pact had offered. Sallius gave a chalice, Murkas gave a dagger, and Iora gave his essence. We moved with haste through Carapath, Asher turning into a giant elk to transport us faster, and finally made it to a cemetery behind the castle in Morevia. Hallie had told us that this was where they had located the dagger of Murkas, and it would be up to us to retrieve it.

We moved into the crypt, down stone steps, and ahead of us down a long hallway the dagger sat on a pedestal. We stepped forward and a shimmering barrier appeared behind us, trapping us inside. In front of us the dagger had become blocked by three other barriers: one blue, one red, one white.

In order to break the first barrier, it needed a secret. Jebeddo whispered into it and the shimmering stopped.

The second barrier needed blood, and as Keth, whose face was dripping blood, ran through, it disappeared.

The final barrier needed light, so I cast dancing white lights into it and it dropped. Of course though, that was not the end of our quest. Fire sprayed up around the dagger and suddenly a giant red humanoid with metal wings stood before us, holding the dagger in his chest. Felathis, the angel of Murkas, told us that the time had come. We tried to fight the angel and remove the dagger, which we finally did as Jebeddo tied a rope around its hilt and Keth pulled with all of his strength.

Felathis dropped to a knee, blood pouring out in flames from his chest, grateful that his job had ended and he could return to the celestial realm. Before leaving, he warned Gillik that he is walking down a dangerous road, then he burst into flames and disappeared.

With the dagger in hand, we started back on our journey to meet up with Hallie's resistance group. It took several weeks, through which I could see Jebeddo's impatience rising. He knew that every moment we were gone from our reality was more time before we could save the captives of the Forbidden Dawn. There was nothing we could do though, to make time move faster, besides hope that our own timeline was somehow moving at a slower pace.

Finally we made it to their safehouse in Bradmont where we saw Heinrich sitting with the Lady of Knives and Farrah, the tiefling assassin we had met in our own timeline. My acting as Maeriffa was helping Heinrich and Hallie maintain the appearance that Maeriffa was still alive, so I was glad to be able to serve that purpose, but I couldn't help but worry as we were questioned upon entering. The others hadn't expected anyone new to be joining them and were understandably skeptical of newcomers.

As Hallie explained that we should wait for the others, the Lady of Knives ran up to Keth and slapped him across the face. We were just as surprised as he was, but apparently in this reality they had been building a life together and she couldn't believe that he had disappeared on her with no word. We ended up explaining, as another member of the resistance (Kaolith, the first enchanter to the King of Bradmont) entered, the entire story of how we arrived and what we were doing there.

Finally, the final member came. It was Evan, but he was not the same Evan we knew. He was surly, brooding, and a giant scar ran diagonally across his face.

Once we explained more of who we were and showed the dagger as proof that we were on their side, the rest of the resistance started to perk up. Only Evan remained sullen. Hallie explained that the only way for us to return to our reality would be to travel again through Divination, and that the King of Bradmont, a blue dragon inherently endowed with Divination magic, would be the most helpful (as well as the most dangerous) point of contact.

She went on to explain that there was a tournament being held and the winner would receive a favor from the King. This would be the easiest option, if we could find a country to enter us into the tournament and win we would have a much better chance of getting home.

We ended the meeting deciding to try and gain Clyde's favor to put us forward into the tournament.

It's amazing how we will enter a situation with a plan and immediately that all goes to hell. I must try, when we get home, to improve our level of communication. We crossed into Carapath with the plan to put Gillik and Keth up for fighting, and for Jebeddo mainly to try and win the favor of the crowd. We approached the castle with Gillik and Keth in purple and yellow spandex costumes, naming themselves "The Bears", Jebeddo in a sparkly suit holding a megaphone screaming about how great they are, and Asher transformed into an actual purple and yellow bear. I walked twenty steps behind. Who knows how we made it past the guards, but we were let inside the castle.

As I watched my friends, more ridiculous than ever which I had trouble believing was possible, approach Clyde sitting on the throne, I wanted to vomit. Seeing him with that much stature, that much power, stirred something in me that I can only ever admit to myself. Knowing what he did to get there though, twisted that feeling of desire into shame, anger, and hatred.

In the end it was me who secured our ability to compete for a spot in the tournament, but I still do not feel good about it. The way he looked at me, the dismissal of the other dragonborn from his side, the dinner he led me to where he proceeded to talk about himself for hours...through it all I just felt so grateful that this was not our reality. I have no idea how I will be able to look at him the same when we return home.

The next day, after resting in the most beautiful chambers I've ever been in, dressed in gowns of expensive silks that felt at the same time, too cumbersome and too delicate for me, I entered the practice ring where I watched with horror as Gillik and Keth's opponents were lead out in chains. They were Klug and Redbridge.

I don't know how Gillik managed to get both of them to submit, but with pained and confused expressions they were led back out of the ring and we were on our way to the tournament.

The weeks leading up to the tournament I was showered with gifts and treated like a Queen. It is honestly difficult to reconcile the feeling of regality I experienced with the hatred and guilt that accompanied each present. I am ashamed at how quickly I became accustomed to the softness

of the bed, the luxury of the food, and the freedom to go where I wanted, read what I pleased, and relax in the castle. I knew that my friends were suffering, but I was not allowed contact with them and so I tried to do my best to gather as much information as I could from the members of the court I interacted with.

I would be lying if I said I never wanted to have that experience again, but I would be lying too, if I said I didn't hate myself for loving so many seconds of it.

Finally the tournament arrived and the day seemed to race by. I was seated in the Kings' Box where I got to observe the other Kings. Of course there was Clyde and the King of Bradmont, in human form as a fragile old man, but then Horton entered the box! I tried to conceal my surprise at his being there, since I knew he would not know me, but found out that he had become the King of Emberfall. Evian Redridge, the Child King of Perrineth and Victoria Kalace, the King of Ishtarra followed and the tournament began.

I wrung my hands as I watched Keth battle a seven foot tall half orc named Bloodbath. He was much more intimidating than he ended up being at fighting, and Keth won the match easily. Clyde seemed a bit disappointed until I reminded him that Keth's win was better overall for him. Gillik was next, and again I was struck with paralyzing fear when Mati Bisu walked into the ring. Gillik barely broke a sweat as he swung his hammer repeatedly down on Mati who dropped to a knee in defeat.

After the first round it was clear that we had made a positive impression on the crowd, and I was able to join the nobles in the box where the bidding war was happening. The team that won the highest bid from a noble would be given an advantage in the final round, and only the top four teams would be allowed to compete. I knew that with Jebeddo making deals we would be in good hands, but I was worried when I didn't see Asher in the box doing his part to help sell the team.

I decided to step in, but was turned away from an incredibly rude noble before finding someone who would help me. His name was Burth and he was so nice, leading me towards the families that would be most willing to support our team.

After waiting for a member of the Caris family to finish talking to the King of Bradmont, I approached and plead our cause. He told me that the King had barred any Bradmont noble from backing our team, but I ended up casting charm person on him and his perspective shifted, absolutely willing to help.

Meeting back up with Jebeddo I discovered that he had met someone named Vlathen who wanted to back us, but didn't have quite enough money. Between my charm and Jebeddo's suggestion spell, Caris offered to make up the difference in gold and with our combined scheming, the Bears took first place.

As I started to move back up into the box Asher stopped me and insisted we have a conversation in the stairwell, surrounded by prying eyes of nobles and Kings moving back to

their seats. After throwing out some meaningless statements about something he was supposed to do, and my impatient pressure to get back to my seat before being missed, he became overwhelmingly frustrated and just took off without ever telling me what it was he wanted me to do.

In their first fight, Gillik and Keth fought a team called Dobbin and Murt. They won easily enough, Keth actually killed Dobbin by smashing his frozen form, but the Bisu brothers absolutely annihilated in their second fight.

Nervous, I slipped out of the King's box to give some of my magic items to Jebeddo, hoping he could give them to Gillik and Keth to improve the odds in their fight. Amazingly, it worked. It was a long and stressful fight, Gillik was rendered unconscious for a long portion of it, but they came out on top. I could not help but stand and cheer loudly when they were announced as the winners. Clyde did not seem as excited as I expected him to be, but this-reality Clyde was full of disappointing surprises.

All five of us were led, as a team, into the ring where the King of Bradmont questioned us. Filled with divination magic he knew that we did not belong in this reality but could not understand how we had gotten there. In an effort to appease him and explain ourselves while staying in his favor, we told him of our attempt to stop Gorm and the state of the reality we came from. Instead of simply granting us our wish and sending us home, the King also supplied us with surprisingly helpful information on Gorm's motivations.

He told us that he doesn't know where Gorm came from, but that he feels bound to Hairix and think it's his own purpose to wake him. The Fey had trapped Hairix in a sleep to prevent the corruption that had taken hold inside of him from spreading, and the King looked sad when we told him that corruption still existed in our reality. He seemed to understand how important it was for us to get home to stop Gorm, and he gave us a stone—transforming into a brilliantly giant Blue Dragon in the process—so that we could contact him in our reality if we needed. Agreeing to send us home he warned that the portal would be unstable and we needed to go quickly in order to make sure we made it back and to make sure their reality did not collapse in the process.

His horn crackled with lighting and a tear appeared in the world before us. It widened and we ran, following his instructions, but as we jumped through the portal Asher turned around and cast a spell on the dragon. As soon as he did so, explosions began detonating around the entire arena and as the portal zipped closed we were left only with the image of fire.

Asher turned to us to start to explain, but a rage filled me and I walked away from him. How could he be so careless? What was his goal, what was he planning that took precedence over all of our lives, all the lives in that reality, our mission? If he had been left behind would the four of us have been stuck in this Divination leyline forever with no connection back to our world? I had a million questions but could not articulate any of them, my fury was suppressing my ability to speak.

As we connected our weapons to the symbol of Divination and were pulled back through the twisting leyline we started to hear something try to stop us. I thought maybe it was the voice of the Blue Dragon, punishing us for interfering with his ritual, but then two giant beholders with purple skin and grey robes floated around us. They warned us that if we tried to close another leyline they would stop us, that we would not be allowed to continue this quest.

As quickly as they appeared they vanished, and we were left on the floor of the tower. I stormed through the halls to find Clyde, our Clyde, to make sure that we were truly back home. When I found him lounging in his office, casual as ever, I knew we were home. Part of me was relieved, but part of me was still fuming.

15th Entry

I never thought that a trip to the underworld would leave me with such a renewed sense of fulfillment, hope, and purpose. I mean, I never thought I would take a trip to the underworld and return to tell about it, but there are a lot of things that a year ago I could never have imagined happening to me.

They say timing is everything, but I can't help but think that the timing of this journey was something of Colliesto's doing. After returning from closing the Divination leyline I was so angry with Asher. He had acted recklessly, with no thought for anyone in the alternate reality—and even now who knows whether their unstable universe managed to survive or whether it imploded—and most of all with no thought for us. He said he did not care if he made it back, he was willing to sacrifice himself, but without him we have no way to return to Adventure, Inc. He is our link to our home out of the leyline and did not even pause to think what the consequences of his sacrifice would be. I was blind with fury and frustration, and he was angry that no one seemed to understand why he was motivated to help the Alternate Evan no matter what the cost.

Unfortunately it came to an awkward head in front of Clyde, but with a lot of yelling, huffing, and resolving to communicate more as a team, we sorted it out. Asher came to visit me later on, while I was reading in my chambers, and I really thought it would be the start of a more secure and supportive friendship. Then, sitting in the tavern with the rest of our team, Dunesong suddenly appeared in the middle of our table. None of us knew where Asher had gone, but Ironshaper gave us the grave news that his sword's return certainly meant that Asher had died. I couldn't believe it. We've lost so many, but to lose one of our own was unimaginable. We had no idea where he was, what he had been doing, who he had faced, but we all agreed on one sure fact. We would get him back.

We called Todd—if anyone would be able to help us revive someone from death it would be him—and sure enough he told us of his group: The DeathWatchers. He explained that they were in charge of guarding the Soul Engine which was the place where the veil between life and death was the thinnest. Normally, the DeathWatchers were in charge of returning souls back to the underworld if they came back through, but Todd agreed to take us there and see what we could do. He also warned us that the residents of the Soul Engine were black dragons. My heart leapt into my throat, afraid at what I might find there, but for Asher we convinced Todd to take us. It was a long and stressful journey. We were all anxious to get to the Soul Engine, but none of us really knew what we would face when we got there or even if it would be possible to get Asher back. Along the way we had to face Earth Elementals, but we were resolved to make our trip as short as possible and easily defeated them. Though the carriage was destroyed and the horses ran off, Todd was able to conjure up new ones and we continued on our way. Finally, we reached the area where the Soul Engine was. Todd told us that those of his order would be beyond the black dragons and we would have to pass them in order to continue. He warned us that they might test us, so we should be on our guard. Again, my stomach turned, but we moved forward.

There was no test, there was only hostility at Todd's arrival. The black dragon guardian refused to let him pass, telling him that his kind had killed all of the remaining Deathwatchers when they had started to attack the dragons. In fear for his own life, Todd fled. I had no idea that in the face of a danger like this he would run; he seemed like the most willing to dive in headfirst, but I guess we were all wrong in making that assumption. Thankfully, before he left he called in his final favor with the dragons to let us pass.

Without him, we moved forward. We walked past piles of bone, too large to be human, and came upon a giant black dragon sitting on an altar. As soon as I saw him I knew. This was the dragon whose blood runs through my veins. His son, Isthlym, was sick and my father transferred his blood into me to try and cure the corruption. Facing this dragon who knew my father was emboldening and terrifying at the same time. His anger was apparent, blaming my father for failing to save his son and the corruption through his own blood. As he turned, I saw that half of his body was wrecked by the disease, with bone revealed and flesh melting away even as we stood before him.

I tried to assure him that we were on a mission to cure the corruption and that access to the Soul Engine was the best way we could continue on that journey. He told us that the Soul Engine was the gateway to the leyline of Necromancy, and the machine upon which all others were modelled. He seemed to support our purpose, and as he agreed to take us there he granted the guard dragon, Sithalum, the power of his throne. He carried us further forward and gave us instruction. We moved into a cave near a lake and Jebeddo, in true fashion when faced with more than one button, pulled both levers in front of him. The cave flooded as the lake water drained, and even though we were tossed and drowning and thrown around, we managed to reveal the entrance to the Soul Engine.

It was Voristhlan's last act, opening the Soul Engine for us. He gave us a cue and we pulled the right lever as an explosion rung out around us. Moving towards the symbol of Necromancy at the bottom of the empty lake, I spotted his defeated bones at the edge. We had lost too much already to stop now, there was still hope to save Asher.

We jumped.

We fought skeletal Displacer Beasts.

We were reunited.

Seeing Asher in spectral form was strange and unnerving, but it pushed us forward with even more purpose. Also, Slask was there!!!! We were lead through the underworld, watching souls in line to be consumed by the Death Lord. Asher showed us the camp where he had been spending his time, and we were pleased to see Hallie there, leading the resistance against The March towards the Death Lord.

Gillik wanted immediately to go face the Death Lord and kill him. I struggled, because I had no preconceived notions on what death would actually be like. Everyone seemed to think that the

Death Lord consuming souls was evil and unnatural, but who was to say that this wasn't what had been happening for all of time? We talked though, and decided that the first thing we needed to find were the pieces of pure Necromancy that would get us home. Hallie told us that there were two souls living outside of the zone of the march who might be able to help us in our quest, so we set off.

When we got there...the two that were meant to help us were Kris Bisu and Perkins. Finding enemies who we were responsible for killing was not the help I thought we would be receiving. They were able to take us though, to two caves where they were told answers might lie. We promised to bring them with us if we were able to escape the underworld, but that was never actually a plan we intended to follow through with.

The powers that Kris and Perkins lead us to were a djinni, Couldath, and his brother an efreeti, Ry'en. We freed them from their underworld prisons and they were able to give us our pieces of Necromancy in exchange for memories...As hard as I try to recall what we gave up, their powers took everything from us. Hopefully what we gave was carefully thought out and our loss will not hurt us in the future.

In possession of the Necromancy, we made our way towards the Death Lord. I still did not want to face him, I just wanted to get us home, but I was outvoted by my peers. Approaching the Death Lord, everything about him was horrifying. His voice, the way he just slurped up the souls in front of him, the emptiness in his eyes.

He told us, though, that he was willing to make a deal. He would give us Asher back in exchange for a promise. We could take two other souls with us, trapped in our piece of Necromancy, but if Asher died again, he and Keth plus the two souls would be instantly consumed.

As we were discussing the deal, I had an idea. If I could trade a soul for Asher's, the Death Lord should take it. I flipped the coin that the Magic Man gave me, hoping that he would appear and we would be able to push him forward into the clutches of the Death Lord. Nothing happened though, and I was left standing in front of a plain coin on the ground...

We turned back to the deal the Death Lord presented, but before we could agree, several creatures began raining down on us. The Death Lord quickly told us that he and his siblings have been guarding the leylines for as long as they've been around and he is happy for us to be able to close them off, but his siblings are less than thrilled. His information that they've been around for so long made me feel much more comfortable with the idea of him, but the fact that his siblings were so enraged was frustrating: just another battle for us to face.

We fought two Beholders: one was yellow, an outcast of the Abjuration leyline that we had closed and the other was blue, closed off from his Divination leyline. The fight was intense and I spent most of it charmed, unable to attack. When the two were defeated and rose up into a giant skeletal Beholder, the stakes were raised even more. It continually attacked Keth, who had

been warned that if he were to die in the underworld, his soul would instantly be consumed. Again I was unable to fight, charmed by the monster, but my companions were strong and resilient and we came out victors.

Exhausted, we faced the Death Lord once again. He looked as if he had never been happier or stronger. Fighting and consuming the souls of his enemies strengthened him to a point of ecstasy. He explained to us that when a creature dies, its soul is moved into his world of Necromancy. When he consumes them, he is able to convert their energy into magic and release it back into the other leylines. Death fuels magic.

This information shook my very being. My magic is fueled by the souls of the dead. We made the deal with the Death Lord. We got Asher back. We stood on the edge of the Necromancy symbol as he got ready to transport us back to Adventure, Incorporated.

I could not help but think of my father. He put this talent in me, transferring the magic as well as the corruption of the black dragon blood into mine. It was he who gave me magic and it was my magic that killed him. In turn, it was his death that fueled my magic more. The circle of life, death, and spirit consumed my thoughts and in an instant all fear of death was relieved. If I die, my soul will fuel the magic of this world. What better reward could one ask for?

I was so preoccupied with these thoughts that I failed to take full notice of the trip I was taking. It started off the same way every leyline adventure does, with a twisting and pulling of my whole body, but it ended too abruptly.

I was not back in the tower of Adventure, Incorporated. I was alone in a cold, stone hallway. I looked, in horror as two creatures in grey robes hobbled down the hallway towards me, a huge piece of tapestry in their hands. As they hug it, I saw depicted our fight with the skeletal Displacer Beasts. The whole tapestry, spanning the wall, showed all our adventures since we became the Many Pennies. It was disturbing enough before the cold, laughing voice broke through the silence.

It was the Magic Man and I was stuck, alone, again.

He knew I had tried to call on him in the underworld, but he said he wasn't able to come. Instead, he brought me here to be with him. I reluctantly, at his request, agreed to continue our game. The only good luck I had was the I was able to ask the first question. In order to satisfy what I had wanted for so long to know, I asked him who he was.

He paused, seeming to falter a bit, and he delayed our game. I couldn't believe it. Those weren't the rules the last time we played, but as quickly as I had appeared in his hallway I was gone, stumbling back into the tower at Adventure Inc, yelling into thin air about how unfair things were. We went to see Clyde, finding out that about a month had passed since we left for our rescue mission of Asher. As we were in his office, my crossbow began to hum and glow, growing into

an even more improved version of itself. Flames shot out of its eyes and mouth as its energy reverberated through me and I could feel its power grow.

We decided, as a group, to take the piece of pure Divination that we had and immediately depart for the Forbidden Dawn, desperate to finally free their captives as we had promised.

16th Entry

I just wish I knew what was going on in Clyde's mind. One second I feel like there's no one in the world but him, that there's a look in his eyes telling me he feels the same way about me as I do about him. Then things like today happen and I just don't know anymore how anyone exists in any sort of romance in the whole world.

I asked him to practice with me, for the next time I had to face the Magic Man. I thought that maybe it would help to have a different perspective and to try answering some different questions in order to come up with cunning answers.

Things started off fine, he threw out some questions that the Magic Man might ask and we talked about how weird and awkward the whole situation made us both feel. Then, out of the blue, he asked me what I thought about him. In Magic Man mode, I spewed out a hateful answer, but when I realized that Clyde was actually asking about me and him, I clammed up and could barely speak. I don't know how it's not obvious that he's so much of what I think about every day. I tried to express something close to that, but he told me that he 'couldn't do this' and left. He 'couldn't do this'. What does that even mean? He couldn't even stand to be in the same small room with me?

I was devastated, trapped in my own brain as we set off for Perrinith to the Forbidden Dawn. We fought LizardFolk, Gnolls, and an Ogre on our way through the war-torn country, but I barely was invested in the fights. My spells were all off. Maybe Clyde was right, that my powers as a sorcerer aren't all that good afterall.

We made it, though, to the secret cave where the Forbidden Dawn lived, and with much more ease than I had imagined, convinced Pryce Harper (HOW AWKWARD WAS THAT? VERY) to free the captives in exchange for the piece of pure Divination to fuel their Couatl-finding-ritual.

Before the ritual started, Asher wanted me to go with him to the Conservatory where he was going to ask the spirits of the grove questions. For some reason he seemed to think that I would be an assistance in coming up with good questions to ask. Maybe if he had seen me interact with the Magic Man he wouldn't have had the same thought, but I went with him anyway. It was crazy to see the branches and vines start to sway as he focused on his ritual. I could not hear what they were saying, but he was able to relay the information that they gave. We were able to reinforce that the Couatl would bring the Fey back in Onmineth's greatest time of need, and that finding him was a true and noble purpose.

The next day we all woke with the pride of having succeeded in our journey to free the captives of the Forbidden Dawn, but nervous about the ritual we were about to go through. Jebeddo and his parents had offered themselves up to assist in the ritual 'no matter the cost' which made me nervous, but it was their firm choice. Keth, Asher, Gillik, and I were tasked with protecting the ritual from the monsters in the crystals that might be released.

Pryce and Meredith focused their energy into the ritual and it began. The crystals around us started to smash and creatures came towards us. I threw clouds of daggers, burning hands, and fireballs at the rotting corpses, giant snakes, amphibious monsters that threatened us. We were able to hold them back but then suddenly, from the center of the room, flames exploded. The ritual had drained all of the life from Jebeddo but because he had taken a drink of the Phoenix Potion, his death sparked his rebirth in a engulfment of flames.

The ritual was over, but our journey was not.

From the process, both of Jebeddo's parents were left unconscious. The energy drained from them was too much for their bodies to handle. Asher rushed in with healing, passing by the frozen look on Jebeddo's face, and was able to revive his mother but not his father. Jebeddo had seen the location of the Couatl, but at that point it was impossible to be inspired to keep moving forward. Watching his grief and that of his mother, made it difficult to leave. We stayed in the caves for a few days after, and even then with difficulty we left for Varina to find the Couatl.

My heart broke for Jebeddo and his mother, but there was nothing I could do and even though I had been through the same, I felt miles away from him emotionally.

We walked through Varina until we found a hut on the outskirts of town where Jebeddo had seen the vision of the Couatl. Knocking on the door we were amazed to find Viltroth greeting us. We pushed through the door and Elletrix appeared behind him.

We all knew the truth but only Asher was brave enough to ask. Since one of the Couatl's curses is that he cannot lie, Elletrix was forced into revealing his true form. Angry at all of us for our betrayal, mine especially, a golden serpent with glittering wings exploded out of Elletrix's mortal form. Before we could convince him to stay though, he burst through the roof of the hut, disappearing into the brilliant afternoon sky.