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1 *Gunmage At Night*

The rain had ceased, but the night's wind rattled over the cathedral's slate roof, driving the rainwater down into the stone gutters. From there it sluiced along drainpipes that ran the length of the building's flying buttresses and poured out the stone mouths of a dozen gargoyles. The infernal sentinels crouched, ever-vigilant, on the end corner of each buttress, vomiting rainwater into the church yard, thirty feet below. Empty shadows lurked under the unmoving wings of each statue, but under the south-most gargoyle crouched an extra, more substantial shadow. The dark clad figure pressed up under the granite limbs, one hand clinging to the cold, hard stone, the other grasping the butt of a magelock pistol, each grip as desperate as the other. Shivering in the frozen wind, the figure stayed stock-still, fearful even of breathing too deeply.

From his vantage point the entire south side of the Five Fingers could be seen, where lamplight and red lanterns glittered from a dozen dozen windows. Business was still brisk despite the late hour and the bitter weather. The cathedral though was built on the city's only high hill, to be a bastion of holiness in the sea of the city's corruption; a beacon to the lost. For Matthias Warlock, gunmage and heretic, it was more like a prison tower. The magic spell that had allowed him to attain the cathedral's roof had faded now and he was precariously positioned. Looking over the rooftops, he fancied he could pick out Catskinners' Alley, where his assailant had first ambushed him. He had made good time to reach the cathedral, leaping on spell-shod feet from rooftop to rooftop, but the hunter had kept pace most of the way. There was a moment he thought that he had lost her over the Wild Houses, but now he was not sure. Blinking through the rainwater that dripped down from the gargoyle's wing, Matthias scanned the ground of the churchyard, the gravestones and the statuary, looking for any little sign of movement in the shadows.

"Where are you, you damned zealot?" he muttered to himself.

Seeing no movement, Matthias carefully clambered around onto the top of the gargoyle, ending up lying on his back between the two bat-like, granite wings. Staring up at the sky, he flicked open the two breech locks of his double barreled sidearm. He reached into his ammo pouch on his belt and made an unpleasant discovery. There were only two shots left, powder and balls deftly wrapped in his best tamping paper. Even in the dark his arcane senses told him that both shots were rune carved, capable of channeling his spells to their targets. What troubled him though was that one of the two was a bullet he had all but sworn never to use, carrying it on him every day since the night he took it from a pistolwraith's ephemeral corpse. He did his best to keep his fingers from trembling with cold and fear as he slid the accursed shot into the under-barrel and then the other shot into the over-barrel.

"Normal shot first," he thought. With luck he wouldn't need to dare the pistolwraith's curse. He flicked both breechlocks into place with his thumb. Clutching the magelock to his breast like a beloved pet, he stared up at the sky, the rain clouds being blown out toward the coast. As the stars appeared, Matthias thought to pray.

"Would you hear me up here, Morrow?" he thought. "And if you heard, would you listen? Or are you like Menoth, impassive to the sufferings of those who fail your teachings?"

As the bright moonlight burst from behind the storm clouds, Matthias decided that it was probably best for a heretic not to pray, lest he incur further divine wrath. He placed his faith in his magelock and resolved to meet his fate. Flipping over onto his belly, he crawled forward slightly, so that his face was over the gargoyle's head. Carefully, he pushed his gun hand out over the edge, sweeping the pistol carefully back and forth. Like many of his profession, Matthias had

mastered the arcane ability of seeing through the barrel of his sidearm. Though his head and body remained hidden, he could see the entire church yard from his weapon's vantage point.

The new moonlight revealed a graceful figure, cloaked and hooded, carefully stepping over the flagstones of the churchyard. In her hands was a long, single-edged blade, the polished steel glinting subtly in the moon's radiance. Her movements were cautious and plainly she was searching for her prey. With slow, deliberate steps she approached the foot of the buttress where Matthias hid above. Never once did she look up, instead anticipating an assault from between the gravestones where so many hiding places could be found.

This was an opportunity that Matthias could not pass up, though it offered only a slim chance of success. He had expended most of his arcane energies simply in keeping the magehunter at bay. What little power was left might be enough though, if his strikes were sure. He would have to take the gamble.

"Be light as the breeze, yet descend like a thunderclap," he whispered to himself, reciting the maxim he had learned years before, as a novice of the Order of Keeping. "It seems that I will depend upon you after all, Lord Morrow; or at least upon your training."

Matthias drew his legs up under his body and then launched himself in a graceful somersault out over the front of the gargoyle and down the side of the buttress. His left hand traced the masonry as he fell, controlling his descent by means of a mystical technique known to the monks of Morrow's most sacred orders. He fell as swiftly as any man might, but in a manner of control few men knew. With his right hand he took careful aim, and when still ten feet above the magehunter, fired the first bullet. The rune etched shot erupted from the barrel, carrying with it an enchantment of electrical energy, and struck the woman's shoulder with both bullet and shocking arcane power. She staggered backward, her hood thrown back revealing her blonde elvish hair and pointed ears.

"How do you like that, Retribution bitch?" Matthias snapped, landing on the flagstones as comfortably as stepping from a cart or dismounting a horse. He went immediately to one knee in a strong firing stance, ready if the second shot were necessary.

But the second shot was the cursed one, the bullet he was loath to ever fire. When the Retribution assassin recovered and charged at him with her sword, he hesitated. The moment was crucial and the magehunter's blade struck his sidearm cleanly from his hand, causing it to go sailing into the dark shadows amidst the gravestones. The elven woman smiled as she swung razor edged blade in a vicious backstroke.

"Mother Scyrah will be avenged," she whispered triumphantly in the Shyrlic tongue, the language of her people.

"I've never even met your damn mother!" declared Matthias, who knew his fair share of foreign languages. The magehunter's blade came close, but he avoided it by stepping inside the swing. Before the assassin could react, he had engaged her in a grappling embrace, one hand on her sword arm, the other clutching for her throat. If he could force her to relinquish the sword, he would have the advantage.

For a time the two of them struggled together, Matthias seeking to disarm the magehunter, the elf seeking to disengage herself enough to use her sword to full advantage. At least once, he felt the sword's sharp edge deflected by the enchanted cloth of his midnight blue mage robe.

The gunmage began to feel he might be able to gain the upper hand when both combatants were distracted by an ominous whooshing sound. Matthias looked over his shoulder in time to see a tiny ball of rushing flame, just before it struck the ground beside them. There was an earsplitting eruption of flame and noise. Matthias launched himself aside with the impact, responding as he had long ago been trained. The fireball scorched his body, even through his magical protections, and he fell heavily against the foot of the cathedral wall, dazed and badly wounded.

The magehunter was not so lucky, and she received the spell's fiery blast fully. As she fell dead, a tall, strangely armoured figure, stalked from the graveyard shadows. It carried a baroque trident with iron tines that twisted and flared in an alien design. About its person it carried numerous other weapons, equally strange in their manufacture. The figure was armoured, but the armour was more akin to the shell-like skin of a crustacean, with articulated segments like fine plate armour, but lighter and far more maneuverable. In the few spaces between the armour it seemed the creature's skin was a deep blue. About its waist was a fine leather belt, in which was tucked the magelock pistol of Matthias Warlock. On its left arm it bore a buckler of steel and leather. As it shifted in the moonlight the leather showed itself to be a human face, skinned and cured to form an unspeakable trophy.

While the monstrous new attacker bent over the body of the dead magehunter, Matthias stirred from his daze. Badly burned, and with two ribs broken by the explosion, he was in intense pain. He shook his head to clear his vision, while the newly arrived stranger ignored his suffering groans. By agonizing stages, Matthias levered his wounded body up from the ground, using the cathedral wall for support.

"You bastard, what umbral pit did you spring from?" he muttered, spitting blood from his burnt lips.

The alien hunter turned its head slowly towards him, two slitted eyes staring out from its carapaced head with a gleam that seemed like madness or bloodlust. Standing up from the magehunter's body, it stalked casually over to where Matthias stood, sucking ragged painful breaths into his lungs. It paused only a few paces away from him, watching for a moment. As much by arcane instinct as by sight, Matthias recognised his pistol in the thing's belt. The thought of his precious sidearm being stolen from him filled him with rage.

The strange trident lifted, the deadly tines pointed to his throat as he stood stock still, not having too try to hard to look helpless. As the killing blow came, he dropped low beneath it and then surged at his enemy. The surprised hunter staggered as the first blow landed with stunning force. Matthias did not hesitate this time, but rained a cascade of strikes upon the shell like armour, using fists and elbows, feet and knees. The force of his onslaught drove the creature from its feet and he threw himself upon it, landing with both knees upon its chest. In his rage he felt none of the pain from his wounds, intent only upon his foe. As he struck again and again, he stared into the thing's eyes, thinking to see fear or anger or hatred; but those lidless eyes stared out at him showing no sign of any human thought. It was thoroughly alien to him.

Before he could stop himself, Matthias seized his pistol from the creature's belt. Thrusting the barrel up under the monstrous chin, he depressed the trigger for the second barrel. The pistolwraith's shot blasted through the chitinous helm, its cursed power slaying the creature outright. The light from the alien eyes faded and with it the rage left the gunmage. The pains within him rose like the murmuring of a crowd growing swiftly to a roar. His hands ached from the continual strikes against the monster's armour. He pushed himself up from the corpse, but his

legs were too weak to hold him up and he fell heavily sideways, sucking in rough breaths that scoured his lungs like sandpaper.

“Cursed is the man who cannot retain his temper!” ran the adage of the Order of Keeping; the order that had cast Matthias out as a heretic. Remembering the words, he shrugged painfully. What was one more curse to him?

In his hands, the butt of his magelock pistol gave him an anchor, a sense of himself that slowly steadied his swimming head. He wondered if that last, evil shot would come to haunt him, as so many other of his decisions haunted him in life. He was uncertain, but his sidearm was there with him, like the comfort of a true friend; perhaps his only friend.

2 *On the Streets of Five Fingers – Part 1*

The rays of the dawning sun turned the rain-sodden streets to liquid gold, the wet flagstones glistening brightly. Blinking against the glare, Matthias Warlock made his way slowly back to his lodgings. The night had been long and difficult. Following the battle in the churchyard, he had stripped the two bodies of whatever he could find that might have been valuable and then headed straight to the house of an apothecary he knew, just off the Serpent's Way. There he traded much of the 'loot' for two healing draughts, which he had consumed without delay. With his wounds now healed for the most part, he returned to his rooms he kept above the training hall of the Corvis' Knight Dueling Academy.

The Academy hall was the largest in its ward, with a stone walled hall occupying the ground floor, and then two levels, built of wood, above. In the upper levels were lodgings for Academy members in good standing, a private training area for advanced students, the Master's rooms and, it was rumoured, a substantial armoury. The Academy had been founded nearly a century previously by a veteran of the Cygnar army. How he had come by the wealth he expended in the construction of the impressive school was still the subject of some speculation.

Swiftly climbing the Academy's stone steps, Matthias ducked his head under his collar to avoid the heavy droplets of water falling from the eaves high above. Once inside the door, he straightened his knee length robe and kicked the water and mud from his boots. Arrayed around the walls were racks of training weapons, some of wood, others of iron. Against the back wall was a shrine to Ascendant Markus, patron of soldiers and guards; students were expected to pay homage before every class. In the middle of the training floor two young men drilled with quarterstaves. It was unusual for the Academy to be so empty at this time.

Matthias was struck by the mighty figure of an ogrun male standing at the foot of the stairs. The ogrun was easily eight and half feet in height and heavily muscled. He leaned indolently against a stout warcleaver, but there was an alert look in his dark eyes. Though probably not expecting trouble, he was clearly ready for it. Sparing him a sideways glance, Matthias climbed the stairs. As he made his way down the hallway, the gunmage heard voices coming from behind the door to his rooms, which was ajar. It occurred to him that the Academy's bursar might be clearing out his belongings, having long threatened to do just such a thing. He burst in to confront the old coot.

Instead he found a woman dressed in leather armour, studded with iron and dyed a deep scarlet. The armour was cut to resemble a ladies' corset, with the woman's cleavage fashionably displayed, and had been clearly tailored to suit her hair, which was pinned high in a font of fiery curls. It was her thin face that drew Matthias eyes, however. She had the high cheekbones, emerald green eyes and point tipped ears that were characteristic of the people of Ios. Down the left side of her face was a long scar, possibly from a sword stroke, which drew the eyes but did little to mar her graceful features.

Reacting to the woman's elven heritage, Matthias instinctively drew his magelock and pointed it at her face, fearful that she was a sister to the magehunter he had fought in the churchyard in the night. He was completely surprised when the elven woman threw down herself, drawing a brace of elegant, gilded pistols from holsters that Matthias had not at first noticed. Scanning from the woman's gunbelts up her body to the two guns in his face, he smiled.

Matthias' attention was drawn by the sound of steel scraping free from a scabbard. Glancing sideways he saw a second woman, who had been standing out of sight behind the door. Like her companion she was also armoured, but hers was a steel breastplate, with greaves and gauntlets. Her hair was shoulder length, the colour of ebony and she held a fine hand-and-a-half blade, with competence and confidence. Most striking of all though was her beautiful face, with dark eyes beneath fine arched eyebrows. Her skin was the colour of cream. While the elven woman was striking, the scar notwithstanding, her human companion was stunning in appearance.

"Put up your weapon, sir," said the woman with the sword. Matthias shrugged and withdrew his pistol. The elf in red held her guns on him a moment more and then withdrew them too, returning them to their holsters.

"Nice pair," Matthias said.

"Excuse me?" she asked, looking up suddenly and clearly offended.

"Your pistols," explained Matthias with a nod. "Fine workmanship." The woman's offense appeared to ease.

"Now," continued the gunmage. "Would you two ladies mind telling me why you are waiting here in my rooms? I assume it is not to ambush me, since you've surrendered your opportunity for that."

"We are seeking a man called the Warlock," said the redhead. "Are you he?"

"It depends why you are looking."

"Do not try us, sir," rebuked the swordswoman.

"Would you stop calling me sir; it is like being back in the army!" snapped Matthias, the long night at his back wearing his patience thin. "Now please, I have returned here to rest after a long and unpleasant night. Do me the courtesy of stating your business clearly."

He pushed past the swordswoman and through the door to his bedroom. Walking over to the battered old side table he pulled his robe over his head, leaving himself naked to the waist. Instead of a belt, he wore a sash of burgundy coloured cloth. The sash was wound about his middle several times and the two ends hung at one side. There was embroidery, in black and white stitching, on each end. Matthias plunged his hands into the washbasin on the side table, scooping up the water and splashing his face and chest. He rubbed himself clean and then toweled off the water with a cloth left for the purpose.

Outside his bedroom door, the two women continued their conversation, as if he were no longer present.

"This barbarian is the one you wish to hire?" asked the dark haired one. "I cannot believe it."

"I don't know," answered the red head. "He has a certain appeal."

"Do not be lascivious!"

Matthias rubbed his fingers through the short, ash-blond hairs on top of his scalp and then down

the lone braid that hung from the back of his head. When he was done, he pulled his robe back on. Then he emerged from his bedroom.

“Ladies, allow me to stop you there,” he said. “I am not a mercenary for hire and I am not currently accepting new students, so whatever purpose you sought me for, I am afraid that I am unlikely to accept. I am sorry if your journey has been a long one but...”

“You haven’t even heard our proposal,” protested the pistoleer.

“True,” said Matthias with a shrug. He was about to usher them out and take his rest, when there was a knock at the door. “Enter,” he called.

A young boy poked his head through the door, a page of the Academy. This one was an urchin named Brent, rescued from the squalor of a beggar’s life by the Master of the Academy.

“Beg pardon, master Matthias,” he said seriously, tugging at his forelock. “Gosling boys ‘s in the street, callin’ you out.”

“Are they indeed. Thank you Brent. Please go tell the Master that I am out the front speaking with them, would you?”

“Yes master,” said the boy with a nod, but he stood staring at the two beautiful armoured women in the room.

“Run along, Brent!” commanded the Warlock as he headed to the chest against the wall behind the door. With his reverie broken, Brent the page rushed off down the hall.

“Gosling boys?” asked the elf.

“Gosling Street Runners actually,” replied Matthias, reaching into the chest and producing a pair of hand axes with spikes projecting from parts, like the heads of a halberd.

“Katrena’s hooks?” asked the dark haired warrior rhetorically, recognising the weapon.

“Can’t you tell them to wait till you’re finished with us?” the elven woman asked, clearly somewhat peeved at the interruption to her business proposal. “They called upon you second.”

“They are not paying me that kind of call,” Matthias said with a half smile. “I tell you what ladies...what are your names?”

“I am Viridian Swift,” said the elf. “My companion is Honour Pendragon.” The woman named Honour scowled that her name had been revealed without her permission, but said nothing.

“Well then, Lady Viridian; Lady Honour,” Matthias said bowing slightly to each one in turn. “If you will please excuse me, this is business that may not wait. If, at its end, I am still here, I would count it a signal honour for you to accompany me to breakfast at the pie shop on the corner; Harris’s it is called.”

“If you are still here?” Honour asked, plainly unsure of his meaning, but Matthias had already left the room. The two women followed him as he walked with a confident gait with the twin axes held in his left hand. He descended the stairs, slipping easily past the ogrun waiting at the bottom.

As the two women rushed up behind him, the ogrun looked to them for direction. Honour shook her head, while Viridian also slipped past the armed giant-kin.

As he headed to the door, Matthias paused momentarily to raise both axes in salute to the shrine of Ascendant Markus, out of respect for the traditions of the Academy rather than a belief that Markus might actually bless him. Then he turned and stepped out onto the wet street. A crowd had gathered, standing back several dozen paces from the Academy's entrance. Standing on the cobblestones, in the middle of the ring created by the spectators, were four individuals. Two were skinny men, barely more than youths, rough-shaven and shirtless, with rough woollen knickerbockers and runner's slippers; each carried a quarterstaff. Another was a much burlier man with a bushy, black moustache. He wore a long, leather blacksmith's apron and wielded a heavy sledgehammer. The last figure was almost finely dressed, at least in comparison to his comrades. He wore doeskin breeches and elegant leather boots, though these were badly scuffed. Over a developing paunch he wore a purple silk blouse. Like the hammer wielder, he also had a bushy moustache, though his was well trained and greying. He carried a rapier, scabbarded and hung from a broad leather baldric. On his head was a leather hat with a turned up brim on one side that sported a rosette of dyed goose down; gosling feathers. All four were members of the Gosling Street Runners, a gang of street thieves and stand-over men that dressed their activities in the pretence of being bearers and messengers. The aging dandy was the gang's leader, Oily Hermes Forstaff.

"There you is, Warlock," declared Hermes loudly when Matthias appeared. "I come from two of my boys who breathed their last 'afore dawn, you bloody dog!"

"Would these be the two fools who crossed me at Catskinner's Alley last eve?" asked Matthias in an equally loud voice. With the many events of the preceding night, the two street thugs from the start of the evening seemed a distant memory.

"Don't know nothin' 'bout that Warlock, but I know it was you what done for 'em!"

"I do for all thieves stupid enough to try me, Hermes; you know that!" declared Matthias. Hermes hand went involuntarily to a scar hidden beneath his blouse. Two years previously a bullet from Matthias' gun had nearly slain him; even the best healers could not remove scar.

"You bastard!" spat the man with the hammer. Oily Hermes put his hand on the man's shoulder and then drew his rapier.

"We've got grievance, gunmage. We come to take the blood what's owed to brothers."

There was a moment's pause. Behind him, Matthias heard Honour, Viridian and their ogrun companion as they stood in the entranceway, looking out through the door.

"No guns?" he asked.

"No guns!" said Oily Hermes.

"Right!" Matthias undid his gunbelt and dropped it onto the steps. He scanned his eyes around at the spectators, addressing them directly. "You here are all witnesses. I fought alone; the Corvis' Knights were never part of this. When the greencoats ask, that is what you will tell them."

Taking one axe in each hand, Matthias walked down the steps and onto the street. The crowd

murmured in excitement as the four Goslings fanned out to surround him. Matthias ignored the other three and walked straight for Oily Hermes. The gang members had almost no time to get close to the gunmage before Matthias' confident stride carried him straight into melee with their rapier wielding leader. Hermes lunged with his rapier, but Matthias was ready. He struck the blade away with one axe and stabbed with the end point of the other. Hermes desperately put his hand in the way, trying to deflect the axe. Instead the point pierced his palm and he cried out in pain, staggering backwards. Blood sprayed onto his silk shirt.

There was a loud crack as one of the staff armed men struck Matthias on the back. Matthias grunted and then staggered sideways as the other staff wielder tried to knock his feet out from under him. He managed to keep his feet, however, and quickly charged back at the attacker, his right hand axe raised over his head. The young man raised his staff to block the strike, but this only made him more open to the left hand axe, which Matthias drove point first into the young man's stomach. The ganger doubled over, dropping the staff, and then the right axe fell, staving in his skull.

The man with the hammer and the second staff wielder looked to each other, uncertain whether to proceed.

“Don't just stand there, have at him!” cried Oily Hermes.

The hammer man lunged forward, barrelling into Matthias, who staggered backwards, feet slipping on the wet flagstones. He went down on one knee, which saved him, as the quarterstaff arced through the air above his head. Sidestepping the quarterstaff that had missed Matthias, the burly man swung the hammer above his head and brought it crashing downwards. Defending with both axes, the gunmage tried to stop the assault, but the heavy weapon had enough power to continue some way on its course, falling into Matthias' shoulder. The struck arm sagged under the pressure, seemingly broken, but when the hammer wielder tried to draw his weapon back for another stroke, he found that Matthias had it trapped between the hooks of the two axe heads. The man shifted his grip to try again, but Matthias was ready and when his grip was weakest, he found the haft twisted from his hands. Even as the heavy iron head thudded to the cobbles, Matthias spun himself backwards, keeping low and swung his back leg in a clean arc that tripped the now disarmed man. Not rising from his crouch, Matthias axe rose and fell upon the man's right hand, severing fingers and tendons. The man gasped in pain, but to his credit did not cry out.

The second staff man thought to charge while Matthias was down, but before he even brought his weapon to bear, the gunmage threw his right hand axe, striking in the sternum and dropping the runner dead on the spot. Matthias transferred his remaining axe to his right hand and began to stalk towards Oily Hermes, who stood cursing in pain and trying to staunch the wound in his hand. As the gunmage approached, Hermes could make out a growing bruise on his face. The downward hammer blow had struck not only his shoulder, but also cracked his cheekbone and jaw on the way past; the ugly swelling was quickly turning a purple and black. Before Matthias could close the distance between them Hermes looked upward, as if perhaps about to pray, and nodded.

There was the loud crack of a rifle's retort, and Matthias was knocked from his feet, spun about like a kite in the wind. There was a burning pain in his side, and his sight darkened. As he struggled to rise, he heard Oily Hermes' voice almost crack as the gang leader screamed out, “Again! Shoot him again! Finish him!”

Two more shots rang out over the crowded street, and Matthias' collapsed into the rising

darkness.

Following the final two shots, there was a cry from the second story window where Oily Hermes' sniper was hiding. The gang leader turned to see his man fall from the window to the streets with a noise like a falling sack of grain. Hermes looked around the street to see a red headed elf in red leather standing on the steps of the Academy, two pistols smoking in her hands. Hermes screamed with inarticulate frustration and lunged forward, thinking to finish off the downed Matthias Warlock with his rapier.

Before he could reach the unconscious man however, he was confronted by a huge, muscled ogrun with a warcleaver. The heavy blade was pointed directly at Oily Hermes' chest and it was clear that he would never close with the ogrun before the huge blade cut him down. Looking from the ogrun's stern gaze back to the Academy entrance, Hermes observed a second armoured woman behind the elf, wielding a battle blade. The elven woman was herself in the process of reloading her pistols.

"You poxy bitches can't watch over 'im all the time," he shouted, waving his fist. "He'll get his!"

"Clear off, or you'll get yours!" declared the elf. To emphasise her words, the ogrun stepped forward menacingly. From down the street, as if to finally make up Oily Hermes' mind for him, there was the piercing sound of a brass whistle; the greencoats were coming. Oily Hermes turned and pushed his way through the crowd, leaving his underlings to face the law without him.

Matthias came to, his eyes blinking in the cold morning sunshine. Before his vision could clear though, he heard the murmuring of a calm and serious voice offering prayers to Morrow. For a single moment he wondered if he were still a monk, his life since leaving the temple no more than a dream from which he was now awakening.

Then he felt the pains, the various wounds that wrapped him in a burning grip like a gauntlet, red-hot, fresh from the forge. As the prayers continued, the pains began to recede. Slowly the piercing glare began to fade to less painful morning light. Clouds sailed across the sun; one of the clouds resolved into face of a celestial beauty. As the wound in his face was healed by her ministrations, Matthias realised that it was Honour's face he could see. She was kneeling over him where he had fallen in the street.

"Can you hear me?" she asked. He nodded, and then a puzzled expression came over his face.

"I was sure he said, 'No guns'," he said with a smile.

3 *On the Streets of Five Fingers – Part 2*

The horse trough's icy water turned vaguely pink as Matthias Warlock plunged his head beneath the surface, washing away the blood from his recent street battle. The elven gunfighter Viridian Swift, and the lady warrior Honour Pendragon stood by at the entrance to Harris's Ale & Pie shop, along with their anonymous ogrun companion. Matthias sluiced off the excess water with his hands and then bent to recover his paired axes. The two Katrena's hooks were even more bloody than he had been, but he did not wash them. Instead, he hailed a washerwoman as she passed with her basket of clothes. He offered the bent woman two galleons for one of the cleaned blouses in the basket. The woman accepted the sliver coins readily and handed over a shirt of course cotton fabric. The gunmage carefully wrapped the still bloody axes in the shirt so that none of the blood was on the outside of the wrapping and then motioned to his companions that they should repair to the pie shop.

The inside of Harris's was beneath the level of the street, patrons having to descend a flight stairs to find themselves among tables and benches and the mingled scents of simple cooking and rich Ordic tobacco. Glass windows at street level allowed some of the morning's light to filter through above the patrons' heads. Two serving wenches danced adroitly between customers with large trays perched upon their hips, maintaining a steady circulation of full tankards of ale and pastry cases stuffed with pork, lamb and onions.

Matthias lead the others down the stairs and across the eatery to an empty table. Few of the other patrons cared to notice the two women with him and even the ogrun warrior bringing up the rear raised little attention from the jaded patrons of Harris's. The waitress glided up to ask if they would like to eat or only to drink. A golden royal from Matthias purse bought pie and ale for all. The wench skipped away to fetch their order, sparing a moment to glance jealously at the two warrior women seated with the gunmage.

"I must thank you for your aid," began Matthias as the serving wench vanished into the kitchen behind the bar. "Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"I served, with the Cygnar pistoleers, 1st regiment," answered Viridian with a knowing look.

"Indeed," said Matthias. "The King's own?"

"That's right."

"So what is this business you wish to discuss?" the gunmage asked with a strange smile.

"You know Prelate Marsendat, don't you?" asked Viridian.

"Aye...though it's been several years since he and I last spoke. Last I heard he had been commissioned by the Church to preach in Corvis."

"He died in Corvis," announced Honour, flatly.

"The recent troubles, no doubt," Matthias said. "A great loss to the Church and to Cygnar."

"Yes," agreed Viridian. "It is a great loss to us as well. It is because of his death that we are forced to seek you." Silence followed this cryptic statement, as Matthias searched the faces of the

two women.

“No,” he said at last, as if they had asked him a question. He looked over his shoulder to see if the girl was bringing their ales.

“What do you mean, ‘No’?” asked Viridian, looking puzzled.

“I mean, ‘No, I am not going to take you to that island’,” answered Matthias.

“You must! You are the only one living who knows the way!” blurted Honour, her patrician demeanor lapsing momentarily. The Warlock leaned in suddenly, fixing her eyes with an intense stare.

“Marsendat and I were shipwrecked on that island with nearly thirty others and we two alone escaped with our lives!”

“Morrow spared you for a reason,” said Honour. “Even a heretic such as you could see that!” Matthias glared at her but said nothing.

“Look, just hear us out, would you,” said Viridian quickly, trying to cover her companion’s ill chosen words. “I mean, as a brother veteran; there’s the honour of the swan between us, right.” Matthias chuckled and shook his head. Viridian and Honour looked at each other in concerned surprise. “How can you refuse?”

“There are three ways that I can refuse,” explained Matthias. “First, Marsendat and I swore an oath to Morrow never to reveal the island’s location; I may be a heretic but that doesn’t make me an oathbreaker. Second, it is precisely because of the events on that island that I was put out of the Order of Keepers, so you understand I have no love for the place; and finally, I’m not impressed by third rate con artists trying to play upon my loyalties.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Viridian. The ogrun who had otherwise stayed silent, growled at the gunmage’s insults. Before anything could happen though, Matthias thrust his right arm across the table and pulled the sleeve up to the shoulder. On the muscle of his upper arm was a tattoo of a crown over crossed pistols.

“Second Pistoleers are the King’s Regiment. It’s the Homeland Loyalists who’re the First!”

“I thought you served with the First,” said Viridian.

“I could not, I am Scharde,” explained the Warlock with a sneer. “Loyalists are all native born. They would not have taken me; neither would they you, like as not.” Viridian looked away, ashamed by having her ruse so easily torn away. From the moment she had opened her mouth about service with Cygnar, Matthias had known she was a liar.

The gunmage stood to leave, pulling down his sleeve as he did so. With desperate speed, Honour reached out her gloved hand and grabbed his arm. All pretence of superiority left her and her eyes implored the angry gunmage to hear her.

“We are desperate and have no other hope,” she pleaded. “I would not normally try to play upon a service done, but we could easily have left you to the mercies of that treacherous dandy and his sniper ambush. You owe us your life!”

“Mayhaps,” agreed Matthias reluctantly. “But that is a small debt, I assure you.”

“We have a comrade, a beloved friend, trapped upon that island. The Prelate described you as a man of honour and loyalty. You would never have left your comrades to die; help us to show the same loyalty to ours!”

Listening to Honour’s words, Matthias wondered churlishly if she would be easier to ignore if she were not so achingly beautiful. Even begging, she was as fine a woman as had ever deigned to speak to him.

“The Prelate would never have told you these things about me,” he protested.

“He didn’t have to,” agreed Viridian, reaching into her belt and producing sheets of fine paper. Neither vellum nor rough parchment, the paper was fine and expensive. Taking it from her hand, Matthias unfolded the sheets, noting as he did so that the folds were well worn and feathery at the edges; these sheets had been folded and unfolded, read and re-read many times. The pages were topped with the seal of the Church of Morrow and the sign of the Exarch of Caspia on the bottom. They were copies of high level church correspondence. Just holding them in his hands gave Matthias a chill, for these two women and their ogrun bodyguard were clearly more important and influential than he had imagined. He sank back down on the chair as he began to read the report detailed on the pages.

“Marsendat made that report soon after you both returned,” explained Honour. “He credits you with his survival.” Matthias shook his head in good natured disbelief.

“You would not believe it,” he said, a wry smile twisting his lips. “I keep my oath to Morrow and get expelled as a heretic; Marsendat breaks his oath and gets promoted to Prelate.”

“Our friend was with an expedition that was following Marsendat’s report,” Viridian said, ignoring Matthias’ comments about the dead Prelate. “They have been gone for too long and no divinations of the Church can obtain any word of them.”

The words on the page and the two women’s story was much to absorb in one sitting. Matthias looked up at the windows, trying to order his thoughts, when a flash of green cloth in the streets outside caught his attention.

“Speaking of reports,” he said. “Did no greencoats turn up to see what was going on while I was unconscious.”

“Only one,” said Viridian, a strange smile playing across her face.

“It appears that I owe you for that too, then,” said Matthias, his eyes tracking movement past the windows. A number of green clad legs were visible from where he was seated.

“No debt there,” said Honour with pride. Her ogrun companion chuckled deeply, like gravel rattling and echoing in a large wine barrel. “We saw the little weasel off.”

“What?”

“We saw him off,” Honour repeated “The corrupt worm was demanding a bribe to prevent your

arrest. I cuffed him for a cur and then Dokor chased him away with the butt of his cleaver.”

“Are you touched in the head?” Matthias asked, slapping his forehead in disbelief. The numbers of green clad individuals in the windows was rapidly growing and they were moving towards the pie shop’s front door. “Paying the fine is how things are done. You can’t just give the law a kick in the bum!”

“He was corrupt,” Honour protested. “I will willingly face trial for my actions; no magistrate will convict me. My actions were perfectly just.”

“This isn’t Caspia, woman! There are no magistrates or courts here, not for commoners or foreigners. The greencoats keep order, not justice. You pay the fine and tug the forelock and are thankful when they go their way!”

The door to the pie shop swung open and four greencoated lawmen with chain coats and short barrelled muskets smartly took up position on the stairs. Honour was taken aback by the Warlock’s rebuke and Dokor the ogrun growled ominously. Conversation dropped to nothing as the clack of the musket hammers being drawn back echoed through the shop. There was a loud clattering thunk as the serving wench nearly dropped their order onto the table with surprise. From the top of the stairs an authoritative but unseen voice called out; “Matthias Warlock and companions, you are under arrest for the crime of violence against an officer of the law. Come quietly or we will shoot.”

Honour Pendragon spat a curse, but the words were lost as chaos suddenly erupted in the pie shop. Patrons and serving wenches bolted, scattering chairs and tables in desperation to flee the line of fire. Perhaps unnerved by the crowd or perhaps simply apathetic, the musketmen on the stairs fired their first volley. Members of the crowd fell wounded while two younger men in uniform quickly darted down the stairs and replaced the empty carbines with freshly loaded muskets. As the marksmen took aim again, Matthias wrenched up the table, flinging it onto its side and diving behind it for cover. Viridian, Dokor and Honour swiftly joined him, crouching behind the heavy wood.

“They didn’t even give us a chance to surrender,” protested Viridian, both her pistols drawn and ready.

“Welcome to the Five Fingers,” quipped Matthias as the next volley of musket fire struck splinters from the table.

4 *The Green Knight*

Splinters flew from the table top as another volley of musket fire struck home. Honour swore reflexively, her mouth twisted into a scowl and Dokor hunched down closer to the bare earth floor, hiding his large body as best he could behind the single piece of furniture.

“It appears our surrender has become moot,” observed Matthias wryly. “I hope everyone has made their peace with Morrow.” The two women cast him stern glances, their eyes slitted in disapproval of his levity.

“Look,” said Viridian. “If all they want is money, why don’t we pay them and have done with it?”

“All they wanted was money, but it’s gone beyond that now!” said Matthias. “Now it’s about pride and honour.”

“What pride can corrupt dogs have?” spat Honour, her tense hands gripping the hilt of her sword. She seemed to be frustrated rather than frightened, as though having to hide for her own safety were a burden. Matthias was reminded of the kinds of young knights who get themselves killed chasing vainglorious victories; ‘all heart and no scars’ as veterans say.

“Your attitude doesn’t help us. You humiliated their man in full view of the street,” said Matthias. “They will probably kill us simply to reassure the populace of the power of the greencoats.”

“Heavy handed,” muttered Viridian, as the sound of breeches being locked echoed across the pie shop; the musketeers were preparing to fire again.

“Order, not justice,” answered the Warlock. He seemed about to say more when he noticed a fine cloud of plaster dust fall from the ceiling. Cocking his head, he listened. There was a dull, distant thud and more plaster dust fell.

“The lamps are shaking,” observed Honour, looking up. For his part, Dokor placed the palm of his hand onto the floor, feeling the vibrations as the thuds continued. He sniffed the air and then looked out the windows along the south wall of the pie shop, as if expecting to see something.

“Something large approaches from the south,” declared the Ogrun simply, taking a better grip upon his warcleaver.

“The Green Knight,” said Matthias, shaking his head wearily.

“Green Knight...?” asked Viridian.

Before Matthias could answer, there was a loud hissing sound in the street beyond the south wall. Two massive cast iron feet could be seen through the windows, as well as a new cluster of greencoated figures. There was a moment of silence and looking over the lip of the upturned table, they could see that the musketeers were at the ready, awaiting only the signal to fire.

“We must go now...!” said Matthias, though his words were all but consumed by the sound of the south wall and ceiling being torn asunder. Support beams creaked and cracked; masonry erupted in an explosion plaster and debris; bricks shattered like glass. In the midst of the destruction, a

massive, iron figure shouldered its way through the pie shop wall. Cogs and gears larger than a person's head, turned and ground, as forge-black, metal fists struck again and again at the walls. Eyes of green glass stared out from its head, which seemed like the helmet of an armoured giant. Steam hissed from its boiler-plate body, on which was painted a device in emerald green; a knight's shield.

"Morrow preserve us," whispered Honour, as the steamjack known and feared throughout the Five Fingers as the 'Green Knight' continued to pound its way through the shop wall, threatening to demolish the building as it did so. The ceiling's support beams, foot thick pylons of solid hardwood, creaked ominously as the 'jack's assaults began to take their toll.

"That roof's gonna go!" shouted Viridian over the thunderous noise.

"So are we!" declared Honour.

She nodded an unspoken instruction to Dokor, who hefted the upturned table onto his shoulder. With a bellowing battle-cry, he charged towards the musketeers on the stairs, using the table like a shield. Taken aback by the suddenness of the assault, two of the musketeers failed to even fire their weapons before the table crashed down upon their heads. Coming from close at Dokor's side, Honour used the table like a boarding ramp, running across it to reach the two other musketeers on the higher steps. Her armoured boots landed on a step between the two men and she laid about with her long blade. The first rifleman fell without firing, but the second managed to get a shot away. To his horror, the musket ball ricocheted off the shoulder plate of Honour's armour and embedded itself in the wall. Honour grunted at the pain of the impact and then her sword bit deep into the man's neck. He fell dead and his musket clattered over the stair rail to the floor of the restaurant.

"Shall we?" offered Honour, gesturing to the door like an usher or a footman standing by his carriage. Viridian and Matthias dashed for the stairs, squeezing past Dokor. On the top of the step, Matthias paused to survey Honour and Dokor's handiwork.

"Impressive," he said with a nod and a smile. Honour smiled back with ferocious joy.

The Green Knight half fell into the pie shop's main serving room with a dusty crash after finally smashing a hole large enough for its cast iron bulk. It's gears rattled loudly as it turned at the waist to face the fleeing fugitives. Then it paused. Matthias and Viridian dashed out the door just as a slender, green-coated man clambered over the rubble of the hole left by the Green Knight. He reached the floor of the pie shop in time to see Honour exit through the door.

"Get them," he shouted at the steamjack, which hissed and rattled back into motion. With a belch of coal smoke from its exhaust, the Green Knight tossed the broken remnants of the pie shop's furniture aside and charged towards the fleeing Dokor. As he ran up the stairs the ogrun warrior tore off one of the upturned table's legs and threw it at the steamjack's operator. His aim was askew however, and his makeshift projectile only bounced harmlessly off the girder's of the Knight's right arm. Then he was out the door, into the midday light.

Captain Horace Fauxall, commandant of the watch, was pleased to see the fourth fugitive emerge from the pie shop. The ogrun came to a halt next to the other criminals, who stood still in the street, like timid deer. Between himself and the fugitives was the entire of his command, fully one

quarter of the greencoats' total strength. Most were armed only with the brass-bound batons that were the standard issue amongst the Five Fingers watch, but some held swords or spears and at least a dozen carried pistols. It was clearly overkill, turning out so many men at arms for only four lawbreakers, but Horace understood well the integral relationship between power and the appearance of power. Street fights between rival gangs were one thing, openly beating one of his watchmen was another thing all together. The Captain wanted to make sure that everyone in the district understood who was in charge. The gunmage Matthias Warlock had skirted around insolence and lawlessness for a long time. Now it seemed he had gathered himself a crew and was prepared to flout the greencoats' authority openly. Horace would not tolerate it!

Behind the emerging ogrun the walls of the pie shop began to groan and spit pieces of brick. Horace cast a wary eye upward as he noticed cracks extending from the pie shop in the building's basement all the way to the top floor, three storey's above the street. Like so many steamjacks, the Green Knight was a simple machine, powerful but not given to sophistication. It needed to be kept on a short leash or else it could easily run amok. Horace turned to his sergeant of the watch, who was standing beside him.

"Tomask needs to call that bloody thing off," said Horace. "Where is the little bleeder?"

"In there," replied the sergeant, horrified, as the pie shop building began to topple into the intersection. The ground shook and a vast cloud of rubble and debris cascaded onto the cobbles of the street. Horace tried to shout a warning to his men but was knocked flat by a piece brick that struck him in the chest. Dazed, he watched the dust blow over him like a dirty pink fog. Vaguely, he thought that there was something he should be concerned with but he couldn't remember what. The important thing danced like a will-o-the-wisp at the edge of his mind. Whenever he tried to grasp it, it flitted away, teasing him. In spite of this though, he felt warm and quite restful. He lay for some time, enjoying the peaceful silence

Horace's restfulness was disturbed by the face of his sergeant, which appeared, blood-streaked and dirty, in his view. The sergeant seemed very worried about something. Then another face appeared; it was Rector Habrann, priest of Ascendant Solovin. The Rector was saying something that Horace could not hear. Then he felt a hand grip him under his head and he realised that his hair was wet. He wondered vaguely if he had fallen in a puddle. The Rector's mouth continued to move and as it did so, Horace's hearing began to return. At first it was only the priest's words, beginning as a far off whisper and then growing in tone and timbre till the rich syllables of the healing prayer washed through him. Then gradually came other sounds, such as the occasional rattle of settling masonry, intermingled with pained groans and moans. Last of all came the panicked calls of his men, rushing to see to their wounded. As his sergeant and the Rector levered him upright, Horace finally grasped the will-o-the-wisp. Sitting up he could see the carnage that the collapsing building had wrought.

"Your head is healed," said Rector Habrann in his gentle voice. "But you still have other wounds."

Captain Horace shrugged off the priest's hand and made to stand up, but he was struck breathless by a savage pain in his chest. His head swam dizzily.

"You have three broken ribs," explained the Rector apologetically. "It's a good thing that you were wearing your chain shirt, or the brick which struck you would surely have killed you."

Horace absorbed the man's words as he looked about, seeing easily half of his men wounded or

worse. Tempers were frayed, several of his men bickered even as the dying needed aid. Fury like a blossom of red hot blades bloomed in Horace's heart. He fixed his sergeant with a glare.

"The Warlock's mob?" he asked in a growl equal parts pain and anger.

"Escaped, we think," said the sergeant with a shake of the head.

"Send a runner," began the Captain, then he stopped as a fit of agonised coughing shook his body. He swallowed painfully and regained control of his battered body. "Send a runner; close the bridges and tell the Commander. Get every spare 'coat over here. They're going to go to ground somewhere! We want to keep them in the district and we want a ratter down every hole they could hide in. We'll flush the bastards out and when we do I'm going to tan their bloody hides for a new cloak!"

The sergeant dashed off, certain that the Captain meant every word. As the man rushed off, the Captain cast another eye about, making a more thorough assessment of the damage. When he realised that he could not see the greencoats' steamjack, he called to another of his men, sitting nearby; "Where's the Green Knight?"

The man nodded to the pile of rubble where the pie shop had once been. "Buried under there," he said. "Someone said the dust had put the boiler fire out, clogged the pipes!"

Horace wanted the steamjack back up and operational as soon as possible. "And where's Tomask?" he asked.

"With the Knight, I guess!"

5 *Thane of the Red Serpents – Part 1*

The sunlight shining in the window of Matthias' rooms was tinged orange by the dust cloud floating over the district from the collapse of the pie shop building. Inside, the four new met companions were grey from the same dust and the dry scent of broken mortar filled the room. Viridian sat upon Matthias' bed, massaging her calf, which had been struck by a small piece of flying brick from the collapsing edifice. When the three storey block had fallen, it had been into the intersection and away from the part of the street where Matthias and the others had been standing. Seeing their chance, they had fled back down the street as the avalanche boomed across the cobblestones and struck down the waiting greencoats. They managed to outrun the havok in the street, except for Viridian's minor wound; when the flying stonework had knocked her from her feet, Dokor had ducked back and scooped her up without a word. Now they were holed up in Matthias' rooms at the Corvis Knight Duelling Academy.

Dokor crouched under the frame of the open door, with Honour standing next to him, watching Matthias Warlock move back and forth between the bed and his chest, packing a kit bag. With a practiced eye the gunmage swiftly sorted through his possessions and neatly packed them into the canvas bag. It was striking how little he actually owned; only a spare pair of trousers, three leather bound books, an assortment of odds and ends and a hardwood box which held his gunsmith's kit, bullet maker and pistol cleaning tools. Last of all, on top of everything else, the Warlock packed the two wrapped axes into the kit bag.

"You still have those things?" asked Honour, incredulous that he would continue to carry the bloody weapons.

"I suspect that they will come in useful quite soon," answered Matthias.

"Well at least clean them," Honour urged.

"That would substantially reduce their usefulness."

Honour was astonished by this comment. She looked to Viridian, to see if the red haired pistoleer understood his meaning, but Viridian shook her head, equally at a loss. Matthias pulled the cords on his bag and tied it closed. Hefting his worldly possessions onto his shoulder, he turned to the others.

"Time to go ladies; gentleman," he said.

"Where do we go?" asked Honour.

"You may go where you wish," Matthias offered with a flourish of his free hand. "I mean to leave the Five Fingers as soon and as directly as I may. To stay would be to tempt my greencoated fate, I think."

"Why do you fear these watchmen so?" asked Viridian. "They seem to be little more than thugs."

"Of course they are thugs!" snapped the Warlock. "They are thugs with the law on their side. Look, Five Fingers is full of competing interests. It is a maelstrom, a storm at sea, with every wave crashing continually against all others. Riding in a ship atop this roiling ocean, protected from its dangers, are the nobles and the Merchant's Guild. Like the passengers of any ship, they

do not genuinely care what happens beneath them as long as they stay afloat. The greencoats are the crew of this ship of state, charged only with keeping the vessel seaworthy and keeping the maelstrom at bay. Do you understand?"

"Yes," muttered Honour. "A poetic description, I'm sure." Matthias stalked the short distance between himself and the armoured woman, coming to stand in front of her with his face mere inches from hers.

"I would wager that a fair number of the greencoats are currently buried under that rubble, never to arise to draw breath again," he said in a low, terse voice. "When the maelstrom sweeps some of the crew into the sea, do you know what a Captain does? He orders the entire crew on deck to ensure that the ship still sails and does not flounder. That is what is happening right now, I can assure you. The entire watch being mobilised to find us and kill us!"

Dokor shifted forward awkwardly under the low roof. He put his hand between Honour and Matthias, laying his palm on Matthias' chest, pushing the gunmage a step backwards.

"Stand down!" Dokor ordered with a surprisingly clear and clipped pronunciation. It was the surprise of the ogrun's erudite speech, as much as the strength of his push, that caused the Warlock to step off from the confrontation. Dokor and Honour both glared at Matthias and the gunmage returned their ire, as the tension in the room grew. The Warlock's fingers twitched involuntarily, his hand hovering dangerously close to the butt of his magelock.

"Where will you go?" asked Viridian quickly, seeking to defuse the imminent conflict.

"To the docks, probably," Matthias explained. "As long as I can get to the lifts before they are closed. Then I will look for a ship heading out as soon as possible. Put some distance between me and here as fast as I can."

"We have a vessel," said Honour smugly. Matthias snapped a cold look at her. "It seems that our Lord Morrow is showing you the righteous path. Coming with us makes so much more sense now, does it not?"

Matthias turned his eyes upward and let out a long sigh of frustration and exhaustion. All he wanted was to sleep somewhere safe; now even that was denied to him. Eventually he looked back to the confident lady warrior. "Why are you so desperate to find that island?" he asked wearily.

"We told you, a beloved comrade of ours is there. We go to her rescue!"

"She is already dead, you know that," said Matthias. "Everyone dies there!"

"We believe otherwise," countered Honour.

"And we must try, regardless," added Viridian.

"Alright, I will show you the way," agreed Matthias, shaking his head with a sour frown on his face. "But we have to get to the docks as fast as possible."

"To the lifts then," Viridian said as she jumped up from the bed, a grimace passing over her face when she landed on her injured leg.

“No,” Matthias disagreed. “Not the four of us; not to the lifts. There is somewhere else we need to go instead!”

The four companions made their way through back alleys and streets so narrow that the sides of the surrounding buildings crowded out the sky above. Matthias Warlock guided them through midday shadows, under eaves and past open doorways that led to commerce so unspeakable that daylight would never shine upon it. They passed by the back of a leather tanners yard, the noisome stench of the curing hides causing them to cough and their eyes to water. At last they made their way up a wooden stairway to a balcony running the length of the back of a brick tenement. The hardwood steps creaked under Dokor’s feet, the struts beneath swaying more than was comfortable, but the structure held.

The gunmage strode along the balcony, past windows shuttered or curtained against the cold and the evil of the world outside. Halfway along, two burly men festooned with knives of myriad styles and designs, confronted the advancing group, blocking the way.

“I am here to see the Thane,” said Matthias. The two men glanced at each other.

“You got business?” asked one. His breath smelt rotten and his brown, stained teeth showed several gaps.

“No I just thought I would pay the bloodthirsty little monster a social call.”

“You got a smart mouth!”

“Yes, well,” Matthias conceded. “I am sure you could discuss it with my friend here.” He looked over his shoulder at Dokor, whose eight foot frame filled the walkway at the back of the group. In spite of the distance between them, Dokor’s traditional ogrun polearm would easily have reached either of the two men blocking the way. With a grunt that was meant to sound like disinterest but still sounded like fear the bad-toothed man stepped aside, as did his mate. Matthias, Honour and Viridian pushed past, but Dokor took up a position standing in front the two knife men.

“I shall await your return here,” said the well spoken ogrun.

The three continued down the balcony a little way until they came to a doorway, blocked by a heavy curtain, more like a blanket, plainly capable of keeping the cold at bay. Matthias pushed the dark weave aside, offering the way to Viridian and Honour.

“Dokor will watch out backs,” said Honour confidently as she stepped past the gunmage.

“No doubt,” agreed Matthias, looking back down the wooden walkway to where the two knife wielders stood uncomfortably in the presence of the gigantic warrior.

“Who were they?” asked Viridian.

“Red Serpents,” whispered Matthias, following the two women into the dim quiet beyond the curtain.

“Another gang?”

“Yes.”

The room that the three of them stood in was dim, with the only light coming from a fire crackling in a grate in the far side wall. There were two men seated on the floor, with tattered cloaks wrapped about them, to ward off the cold. They were ready to rise and confront the new arrivals when a sour voice called from beyond the room’s only other door; “Who let in the bloody draft?”

“We are here to see the Thane,” Matthias explained. The two men appeared to relax. One of them nodded to the other doorway, but as he did so he drew forth a heavy crossbow from under his cloak. He smiled in a knowing fashion, making sure his message was clear. Matthias smiled back, predator to predator.

“Who is this Thane?” asked Honour quietly as Matthias led them to the inner room.

This room was as bare as the antechamber had been. Another humble fire burned here to light the room in a wan, yellow glow. In the middle of the room three sat about a table, playing cards. One was a human, willow thin and dressed in dirty leather and moleskins. The second was a gobbler, a bright gold ring in his nose and another three in his left ear. The last was a dwarf, a typically solid Rhul, with long black hair in numerous plaits. His clean shaven face was marked with numerous tattoos in some foreign tongue. As the three companions entered the room, he rose from his seat and threw his cards to the table.

“What d’you wankers want?” he demanded in a heavily accented voice.

“Honour; Viridian,” said Matthias with a sardonic smile. “May I introduce Garreck Three Fingers Short; the Thane of the Red Serpents!”

6 Thane of the Red Serpents – Part 2

Garreck Three Fingers Short, Thane of the Red Serpents put down his cards and stepped out from behind the table. As his body shifted, a large bore pistol was visible tucked into the back of his trousers. He cracked his knuckles noisily as he stood surveying the gunmage and his two female companions.

“You better be ‘ere on business,” he said, cocking his head lazily on one side. “I’m losin’ at the table an’ ain’t in no mood for payin’ court.”

“It’s business,” said Matthias. There was silence for a moment as the Thane waited to see whether he would go on.

“Well? What, then?” asked Garreck, making a show of his impatience. The Warlock reached into the pack on his back and drew forth the parcel of wrapped axes; the two katrena’s hooks he had used in the morning’s street battle. With a deft throw, he tossed the parcel onto the card table with a heavy clatter that scattered coins and cards.

“There is the blood of four Goslings on those,” Matthias explained as Garreck’s gobber companion unwrapped the package. The inside of the blouse was smeared with drying red streaks and it made a ripping sound as the clotted blood was pulled from the blades. The Thane looked at the two weapons, stroking his tattooed chin as he did.

“Only two of ‘em’s dead though,” he commented, showing that he had already heard of Matthias’ combat outside the Corvis’ Knight Academy.

“Plus the sniper!” protested Viridian.

“Plus the sniper,” repeated Matthias. “That’s good service by the Red Serpents. You still pay bounty on Gosling feathers.”

A wordless conversation passed between the Thane and his men, their eyes debating the pros and cons of the Warlock’s presence. Finally Garreck turned back to face the visitors.

“What you want?” he asked.

“We need your help getting to the docks.” The Thane guffawed with puzzled laughter.

“Do I look like a mekanik?” he asked. “What you need to come to me for that?”

Three Fingers Short’s laughter made Viridian and Honour uncomfortable. The human at the card table also payed them close attention. Their skin crawled under his gaze and Honour in particular felt on a ready edge. She rested her hand on the hilt of her sword, a provocative gesture.

“There’s a green gate we need to get past,” Matthias explained. Garreck fixed him with a cold gaze through slitted eyes, then cast glances back at his men. He noticed that one of them was too busy undressing the women with his eyes to pay attention.

“That trouble with the Green Knight?” said the Thane, crossing the short distance to the card table. He gave his lustful cohort a heavy handed cuff across the back of the head. The man rubbed

his scalp in angry discomfort, glaring at his boss momentarily and then lowering his eyes in submission. “That was you? You done a lot o’ damage there!”

“T’was their ‘jack that did the damage,” Honour declared. “We were offered no opportunity to make a peaceful resolution to the event.”

“Ooh she talks as fancy as she looks!” declared the gobber with a cackling laugh.

“Aye, ‘at she does,” agreed Garreck. “E’en fancier ‘an you Warlock!” Matthias nodded.

“You get your information very fresh indeed if you know about the Green Knight already,” said the Warlock. “The dust has not even settled yet.”

“This be my quarter,” Garreck declared with savage pride. “Nothin’ ‘appens ‘ere as I don’ know ‘bout it!”

“And yet the Goslings walked straight up to the Academy steps and issued me a challenge in broad light. What was that about?”

Garreck’s eyes narrowed angrily at Matthias’ implicit accusation. “You’r’ wearin’ out’cha welcome, gunmage!”

“So let us down your tunnels and we will be out of your hair!” snapped Matthias. The three Red Serpents recoiled as if slapped by the Warlock’s words. “Oh honestly, don’t look at me like that,” Matthias continued. “They are not the Five Finger’s best kept secret, you know!”

“Them tunnels’re the most precious asset of the Red Serpents,” said Garreck through gritted teeth. “No one not blooded to our brother’ood ‘as ever laid eyes on ‘em and lived.”

“Then we would become the first, would we not?” said Honour. Her words were like an icy wind that blew away the conversations. Three Fingers Short lapsed into silence, considering Matthias’ request. He was plainly loath to take non-Serpents anywhere near the ‘secret’ tunnels, but since they already knew of the tunnel’s existence, it made keeping them out seem a little pointless.

“No, it ain’t worth it!” Garreck declared at last. As the companions absorbed his decision, the man seated at the table made a foolish suggestion.

“‘Ere, Garreck,” he said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “Maybe ‘e could give us each a go ‘round wif’ ‘is whores. I’d sell me own muvva for a taste o’ that one!”

In a single swift stroke, Honour’s bastard sword swept from its scabbard and bit deep into the card player’s throat. She drew the blade back with a wrench and he slumped to the table, dead.

“Well that was a damn fool thing ta say!” declared Garreck as the man’s blood flowed across the cards and coins scattered on the table. Honour stood by with her blade still drawn, blood dripping from its edge. Looking back at his man one last time, Three Fingers Short noticed the cards that had fallen from the dead man’s hand.

“Oh, ‘t looks like ya saved me some money,” he said, realising that he had another losing hand.

“Enough to buy us a trip through your tunnels?” asked Viridian cheekily. Garreck couldn’t help

but smirk.

“Yeah, alright. I’ll take you three there...”

“Four,” corrected Matthias. “We have a companion awaiting our return outside.”

“Four then,” said Garreck with a shrug. To the gobber he said, “Get this cleaned up while I’m gone, will ya Greyfingers.”

Greyfingers the gobber nodded.

“And tha’s my money right there,” Garreck added. “I know how much was bet, it better be there when I get back! You can have ‘is pocketwatch if ya likes.”

Garreck pointed the party to the doorway and led them out. The two guards in the outer room seemed surprised by the sight of Honour’s bloody blade as she paused to clean it on the room’s rough woollen curtains. They had heard no sounds of struggle, so they were not sure what had happened. When Greyfingers called them in to clear away the corpse, their thoughts turned immediately to the question of who would replace the Thane’s fallen lieutenant. By the time the body was out the door, the Red Serpents had all but forgotten about Matthias Warlock and his strange and pretty companions.

7 Smuggler's Tunnels

The bronze hinges of the ancient gate screeched in the flickering shadows as Garreck Three Fingers Short opened the way into the secret tunnels of the Red Serpents. He thrust his glass lensed lantern through the open gateway and then paused on the threshold. Bending down, he inserted a flat piece of wood underneath a section of the gate frame, wedging it in tightly.

“Trap?” asked Viridian with a professional interest.

“Drop down spikes,” said Garreck, pointing to a series of finger-wide holes in the lintel of the gate. “Nasty if they run through you.”

“And they form a second gate to block entry,” Viridian said, admiring the thinking behind the lethal security device. “Very nice!”

“Yes, well shall we continue then?” asked Honour. She looked over her shoulder at Dokor, mentally sizing up his chances of fitting into the narrow tunnel. Garreck recognised her concern.

“He should be alright,” said the gang leader. “S’ not as tight as’t looks. We ship a lot o’ cargo through these tunnels. Now you’s better follow me, since there’s lots o’ traps twixt ‘ere and the bottom!”

Holding the lamp overhead, Garreck stepped through the gateway and headed down the carved stone steps. The others followed, one after another, and found that, true to Garreck’s word, the tunnels past the gate were much wider than they first appeared. Nonetheless, Dokor was cramped in narrow passages and forced to duck his head continually. The butt of his warcleaver frequently smacked against the walls, as he manoeuvred the awkward polearm around twists in the passageway.

“Do you trust this dwarf?” asked Honour of Matthias in a whispered voice that echoed regardless in the tight space of the tunnel. Three Fingers Short disarmed another pressure plate, not bothering to explain the danger it might have triggered otherwise.

“Not in the slightest,” answered Matthias. “But I see no other choice for us. Right now the streets above us are swarming with the Greencoats, out for blood I would expect.”

“They are corrupt; how do the people abide them?” Honour shook her head in disbelief.

“The people have little choice,” explained Matthias, carefully stepping over a puddle on the stair below his foot. “It grows colder.” Off to one side an unlit passage yawned, cold and impenetrably dark.

“We’s deep in the Finger, now,” echoed Garreck’s voice from below. “E’en in high summer this place’s cool and damp! We used to store contraband down ‘ere, for years, but everyfin’ rotted away in the wet.” Viridian chuckled, plainly amused by the notion of smugglers losing their inventory because of their obsessive secrecy. Even Garreck’s black disapproval did nothing to dim her amusement.

They continued downward, careful to step only where Garreck approved. “Only me an’ me most trusted knows every one,” he declared of the passage’s seemingly vast number of traps and

dangers. For a time the stairs grew very steep and the companions were forced to walk with one hand always upon the walls for support. Twice Dokor slipped, his booted feet too large for the steps, and nearly tumbled down upon his comrades. His size spared them however, as he never had to reach far to save himself. By the time the stairs began to shallow though, he was scraped and scratched and his leather tunic was badly marked and torn.

The shallowing slope of the stairs gave way to a single passageway, and then the tunnel widened further until it became a chamber, several yards across. Garreck walked confidently up to the dead end wall at the other end of the chamber. Set in the stone was a rusted iron ring, in the middle of a flat circle that might have been a door if not for the lack of an outline or gap to separate door from wall. The air of the chamber was moist and smelt of the sea; salt and rotting seaweed. Viridian wrinkled her nose at the air.

“So this is it?” she asked.

“Aye,” agreed Garreck. “Now we wait.”

“For what?”

“For night fall!”

“Why?” asked Honour as she drew close to the lamplight, her suspicious eyes shadowed in the pressing darkness.

“Rhulic hands carved these tunnels, centuries ago, during the occupation of the Orgoth,” Garreck explained. “Talented with stone like no man nor Ios ‘as ever been, they started the smugglin’ trade ‘ere in Five Fingers. They set this door so it won’t open, won’t even seem like more’n a piece a rock ‘til no sun shines on the outside.”

“A smuggler’s door,” observed Viridian with an approving nod. Garreck returned the nod.

“So we simply wait?” asked Honour, frustration furrowing her brow.

“Does anyone have a deck of cards?” Matthias asked pleasantly.

The hours passed slowly, with Garreck crouching in silence against the rough stone wall and tending the lantern. He showed the patience for which his people were famous. Honour and Viridian quickly lost their patience with the waiting though and they took to alternately sitting on the ground and pacing back and forth. At length, Dokor invited Honour to prayer and the two knelt upon the rock and prayed to Morrow. Honour’s impatience abated as she sought solace from her god, leaving Viridian alone in her frustration. For his part, Matthias sat crosslegged upon the floor with his back against the wall, apparently sleeping.

After what seemed an interminable time, Garreck pushed himself up with a groan, stretching his stout legs. He trimmed the lamp’s wick till the glow was extinguished. In the sudden darkness, an oval of glowing light appeared in the stone wall around the iron ring. Three Fingers Short gripped the handle and gave a hard shove. The magical, stone door swung outward in a smooth motion, revealing the night sky beyond. The starlight shone into the chamber and Viridian, Honour and Dokor breathed audible sighs of relief.

“You mob’d never survive a day as Rhul,” said Garreck with a snide smirk.

“I have neither the desire nor the need to survive even an hour as a dwarf,” said Honour.

“Never know, you might like it,” Garreck quipped. “I suppose we should wake the gunmage.”

“No need,” came Matthias’ voice from the shadows. “Are we going or staying?”

“We’re going.” Garreck led them out onto a rocky ledge, some twenty feet above the lapping waves of the river. “We follow this around not ten yards and end up on the back of the south docks.”

The companions made their way around the rocky bend and were struck at once with the sight of the bustling docks of the Five Fingers, the ancient wood and stone network that linked the bases of all five mesas of the city. While the city itself rested upon the tops of the vast pillars of natural stone, each more than a mile across, around the base were the docks, stone footings supporting jetties, berths and bridges. A hundred ships of every nation rocked gently on the tide while far to the north, the hiss of the massive steam driven lifts could be heard over the gulls and the shouts of a thousand dock hands. While there were occasional ladders and the odd secret tunnel, like the Red Serpents’, the main method of transit between the river level and the city above were the huge, steam-powered, iron lifts that ran up the side of the largest mesa, climbing on cogged wheels like a monstrous black beetles. Even in the dark of the evening, lamplight lit the whole of the lift track, from river to roof, as the locals put it. If the companions had tried to make their way down to the docks via the lifts they would surely have been spotted by the greencoats.

Walking onto the dock footings, the group emerged from between to stacks of wooden crates, bearing the mark of a Khador trading house. As they did they were confronted by a group of armed men, and a few women. A motley gathering, all wielded a blade or mace of some kind, and in the centre of them was Oily Hermes, his wounded hand bandaged, but still wearing the blood stained blouse of the morning’s battle.

“Been waitin’ fer ya, Warlock,” declared the boss of the Gosling Street Runners. “Figured we’d turn out the whole crew fer this party!”

8 On the Waterfront

“A trap!” hissed Viridian, hands to her pistols.

“We are betrayed!” declared Honour, looking to Three Fingers Short standing at the back of their number. The dwarven bravo shuffled his feet backward, apparently preparing to bolt back to Red Serpent’s tunnels. His flight was stopped though, as Oily Hermes called out to him.

“T’ain’t no escape that way, Garreck,” shouted the leader of the Gosling Street Runners. “You’ll find that door’s locked for good, far as you’re concerned!” From behind Oily Hermes the small, greyskinned figure of a gobber appeared, his nose and ears pierced with gold rings.

“Greyfingers?” said Garreck in surprised and confusion. “ ‘Ave you betrayed your brothers?”

“Not me brothers, just you, ya daft dwarf,” answered the gobber, his eyes slitted and his lips twisted in contempt. “The Red Serpents’s mine now. An’ me name’s Roggilint; you were the only fool as ever called me Greyfingers!”

“There’s a new way of things, Three Fingers Short,” declared Oily Hermes, eliciting chuckles from his gang. “The Goslings and the Serpents is allies now, and we embrace our new brother Roggilint.” He reached a hand down to rub the gobber’s ear affectionately, as though he were a pet or a favourite child.

“You fool,” said Garreck, a strange compassion mixed with anger in his voice. The deposed gang leader drew out his pistol and a long dagger, holding each at the ready. “Ready to shed some more Gosling blood, Warlock?”

“You would fight with us?” asked Honour, astonished by the fast moving politics of the Five Finger’s streets.

“Not much choice now!”

There was the familiar ratcheting of musket hammers and several Goslings moved aside to allow riflemen and pistoleers to step to the fore. There was a fraction of a second and then smoke and fire erupted in the space between the two forces, followed closely by the sound of musket balls striking home. Oily Hermes had told his gunners to focus upon two foes, the gunmage and the ogrun, thinking to remove them from the fight at the first and then to make an easy job of the remaining foes. It did not work out the way he hoped.

Knowing that danger was coming, Matthias Warlock conjured a shield of arcane energy that managed to deflect the bullets aimed at him; two shots deflected harmlessly and a third bit its way into the wooden dock mere inches from Viridian’s booted foot. She never even noticed. Only three of the four bullets aimed at Dokor found their target, and none of those fatally. Rather, it seemed that the shots served only to enrage the ogrun warrior, for he bellowed a deafening warcry that echoed over the noise of the docks, and charged through the smoke at the Gosling marksmen. Two fell under the executioner strikes of the giant’s cleaver before any could even think to defend themselves. The stand-off dissolved into chaos as the battle was joined, and Matthias rushed forward to support Dokor.

Still standing between the stacked crates, Honour drew her blade and lifting it high, offered a

swift prayer to Morrow and Katrenna, ready to charge into battle. It was this that saved her, as looking up she saw the crates being pushed just before they fell. Her adamant battle blade smashed one heavy box as others fell into the gap and she shouted warnings to her comrades. Swiftly following the crates came several Goslings, wielding fighting knives and thinking to drop down in ambush. Instead they found themselves confronted by three ready opponents. Viridian fired a volley from both pistols as Garreck and Honour used their blades to good effect, and all four gang members were dead almost as soon as they landed upon the dock.

Dokor continued to attack the other Goslings, laying about with his long-hafted weapon. In short order, all of the gunners were wounded or slain and the other Goslings were circling about him, trying to get inside the reach of his warcleaver. His strikes were too swift, driving back assailants, even as he sought new opponents. Dokor's sheer power would be enough to give even battle ready knights pause; the street fighting Goslings were at a loss to do aught to even slow his raging assault. Nonetheless, like swarming flies, they continually did their best to flank him and at the same time avoid his blows.

For his part, Matthias weaved through the battle like an expert dancer on the dance floor. Weaving, bobbing and dodging past opponents more concerned with the roaring giant laying about them, the Warlock quickly found himself confronting Oily Hermes and his new-found gobber friend.

"Twice now the gods have spared you when you faced me Hermes," said the Warlock. "Are you just too stupid to live?"

"I'll survive you this day gunmage!" spat Hermes.

"I think not."

Matthias began a spell, eyes focussed on the Gosling leader, but he was interrupted when Hermes seized up the surprised Roggilint by his shirt and hurled the little gobber one handed, like a bowling ball. Matthias dodged to his left as the gobber traitor went sailing past, barrelling into a Gosling behind them. Even as Matthias dodged though, Oily Hermes was lunging with his rapier, the weapon's fine point tracing a scarlet line along the Warlock's neck, a half second from tearing his throat out. Not pausing to reflect upon his luck, Matthias stepped into Hermes, using one hand to grasp for the gang leader's rapier, while the other punched at his face. The blow crashed into Herme's face, cracking his cheek bone and jaw. The Gosling leader staggered back, but managed to keep control of his rapier, wrenching it from Matthias grip. Now some way from the main of the combat, the two men faced one another; Hermes face was filled with venomous hatred.

Keeping his breathing steady by force of will, Matthias cursed his luck, having had not one chance throughout the day to stop and buy more ammunition. He could feel the comforting weight of his magelock, tucked into the back of his sash and yet it could not serve him as it should. Hermes lunged again, a clever series of thrusts. This time Matthias merely retreated, drawing the Gosling leader farther from his gang. As the last stroke of the rapier fell short, the Warlock lunged inwards with a sweeping uppercut. Hermes saw it coming and managed to shift his head out of the way, taking the impact on his shoulder. Matthias danced back again and the two men continued to circle, looking for a new opening. Oily Hermes leaned forward, about to lunge again, when he hesitated. Matthias could see by his expression that Hermes had seen something behind him. Leaving one hand out to guard against an attack from Hermes, he sidestepped and looked back over his shoulder to see the diminutive figure of Roggilint charging toward him. He put his other hand up to guard against an attack, but was astonished as the Red

Serpent's new leader rushed straight past him and jumped at Oily Hermes. Completely surprised by Roggilint's attack, Hermes did nothing to defend himself and fell backwards as the gobber returned treachery for treachery.

"Throw me will ya?" screamed Roggilint. "I'll show you! I'll show all you stupid long shanks and your stupid games. I'll show you 'ow a gobber kills 'is enemies!"

Oily Hermes screamed as Roggilint stabbed him time and again with a short bladed dagger, no larger than a paring knife. The gobber was lost in a rage of repressed hatred, stabbing the Gosling's leader in the face, neck and chest. The furious assault had not abated when Garreck Three Fingers Short came up behind Roggilint and, wielding his own short sword swiftly and adroitly, slit the gobber's throat. As Roggilint rolled off Hermes, Garreck looked to Matthias, who stood by.

"I guess I never did show ol' Greyfingers much respect," Garreck observed. "Still, don't make it right that 'e betrayed me!"

Matthias only shrugged and then stepped over top Oily Hermes body. Crouching down, he could hear the gang leader sucking his last gurgling breaths through his slashed and torn larynx. Roggilint's knife had ravaged Herme's face and as Matthias leaned close, he realised that his enemy could not see him, for his eyes were too damaged.

"I spared you twice Hermes," Matthias whispered. "It is a shame to waste mercy."

The gunmage swiftly conjured a spell, and touched his fingers to Hermes chest. A charge, like a tiny shock of lightning, leapt into the Gosling's body and he breathed his last. Matthias stood up over Hermes corpse and faced the melee. With a loud voice he cried out; "Oily Hermes is dead! The Gosling is dead!"

The combat paused, and then ceased altogether. Dokor, the rage seeping from him with the blood that flowed from his wounds, leant upon his warcleaver wearily. Honour and Viridian held weapons at the ready, unsure of what might happen next. Those Gosling Street Runners still standing began to drift away, like revellers dismissed from a party. Some paused to carry off their dead or wounded, most walked off like mourners at a funeral.

"That ended quickly," observed Viridian, holstering her pistols.

"They was only 'ere on Oily's business," explained Garreck, cleaning his short sword. "Nothin' ta fight for if 'e's dead!"

From across the docks there came the fluting cry of brass whistles, along with the shuddering thump of giant, iron feet. Matthias and Garreck looked swiftly in the direction. Honour ignored the noises, instead prayerfully tending to her ogrun companion's wounds. Viridian shared the concerns of the two Five Fingers dwellers.

"What is it?" asked the elven pistoleer.

"Looks like they've dug the Green Knight out," Matthias said.

"And they's comin' in force," Garreck added.

“So what now?”

“Now we flee!” declared the Warlock. “Perhaps you would care to show us the way to that boat you mentioned?”

9 New Allies

The companions' boots thumped upon the thick hardwood planks of the jetty as they rushed to their boat, a small steam paddler named the *Puffing Bey*. Honour leapt with confidence from the dock's edge to the gunwales, calling out to the pilot to stoke the boiler and get them under way. Viridian led the others to a single plank gangway, skidding slightly on the wet wood. She was quickly followed aboard by Dokor, who ducked into the cabin and rushed to help with the boiler. Lastly came Matthias and Garreck. The two of them paused at the gangway and looked to each other.

"My thanks for your help, Three Fingers Short," said Matthias. The dwarf nodded with a grim face and then looked over his shoulder to the dock. In the distant lamplight they could make out greencoated figures rushing about the dock, seeking out survivors of the Gosling Street Runner's ambush.

"It looks a bit hairy back there," Matthias observed.

"Will be for some while, I'd say," agreed Garreck. "It's not goin' ta be business as usual and that's even if I manage ta get the Red Serpents back under heel!" The dwarf sighed like a man defeated, too weary to contemplate the next leg of his life's journey.

"Come with us!" invited Matthias. Garreck shot him a suspicious look.

"You serious?"

"Yes. Of course where we are going is no fest day, I assure you, but at least you won't have to deal with the Greencoats. And I think I could use a street smart blade at my side on this little voyage."

Garreck considered the offer quietly. When the day had dawned he was powerful, feared and secure in his position. Now, his most trusted lieutenant had turned on him, his gang's power base was rapidly eroding under the power of the greencoats and he was in fear for his life. In all likelihood, even if he stayed, this would be his last day in the Five Fingers. With a wry smile he nodded and then walked down the gangway. Once on board, he and Matthias pulled the plank after them and moved aft to help Viridian cast off. The elf noted Garreck's presence on board with a raised eyebrow and a shrug. Then the three of them drew in the lines and the *Puffing Bey* began to pull slowly from the jetty.

Soot-filled smoke belched from the twin iron stacks, as the paddle wheels at either side of the main cabins started to creak and turn. From the wheel house at the top of the vessel a voice called to someone in the bow. Following the shouted orders, a crewman leant out over the gunwales and pushed the bow further away from the jetty with a heavy gaff-hook. For many moments, the little steamer made slow progress away into the darkness of the river at night. From their place at the stern, Viridian, Matthias and Garreck could make out the figures of the greencoats working their way along the docks, arresting anyone suspicious. Two guardsmen armed with brass-shod clubs worked their way down the jetty, checking each moored boat in turn. By the time they reached the *Bey's* moorings, the steamer was just reaching the main course of the river's flow, beyond sight. Silhouetted by the lights of the docks, the two men were clearly visible. The passengers on the *Bey* breathed a sigh of relief when the guards turned and walked back down jetty.

“Do you think they knew it was us?” asked Viridian as Matthias and Garreck sank down to the deck, sitting with their backs against the gunwales.

“Maybe,” answered Matthias with a shrug.

“Even if’n they di’n’t, they soon will from the Goslings they arrested,” added Garreck, slipping further down and stretching out on the deck. In spite of the uncomfortable position, he was soon fast asleep, snoring loudly. Viridian took up a place sitting next to Matthias. As she lowered herself she noticed a trickle of blood running down her left arm; investigating, she found a small dagger cut just near the shoulder.

“Tsk, I took a hit,” she said, plainly annoyed. “I didn’t even notice.”

“It can be like that when the blood’s up,” said the Warlock, staring up at the stars. Viridian fished in a pouch at her belt and drew forth a small, silver case. Opening the case, she drew forth a cigarillo. She put the cigarillo to her lips and flicked back a covered section of the case. She pressed the cigarillo end into the opened section and sucked it to life with obvious satisfaction. She was about to close the case when she noticed that Matthias was watching her.

“Want one?” she offered. Matthias shook his head.

“No thanks; forsaken vice.”

“What?” asked Viridian as she packed her cigarillo case away.

“It’s a church thing,” explained the Warlock. “From my days in the Order. Novices are often asked to show their commitment to the faith by forsaking a vice, taking something worldly that they enjoy and swearing off it for life. All the members of the Order do it at least once, most more than once.”

“What sort of things?”

“Tobacco; beer; strong drink; sex; gambling; any form of dissipation; that sort of thing.”

“So you swore off tobacco?” asked Viridian. Matthias nodded and the two of them sat together in silence for a time, watching the stars and listening to the sound of the paddles in the water. Then Viridian turned back to face her companion.

“I thought you were a heretic?” she said bluntly. With a weary breath he looked down from the stars, searching her face by the light of her cigar.

“I was put out of the Order for heresy, yes.”

“So, why do you still stick to an old commitment?”

“Because I do not consider myself a heretic,” said Matthias. “The heresy I am accused of does nothing to negate my beliefs and it is no justification for breaking oaths that I made in all honesty.”

“See, I don’t understand that,” said Viridian with a shake of her head. “I can’t see any point in staying loyal to folks who become your enemies. That just seems dumb to me.”

“It is more complicated than that.”

The pair lapsed once again into silence. Eventually, Viridian came to the end of her cigarillo and stubbed out the last little bit on the palm of her glove. She threw the stub away overboard. From the wheelhouse came the sound of voices and then of footsteps coming down the stairs to the deck. A man emerged onto the stern deck where the three were seated or sleeping. He carried a lantern with him and by its light, Matthias was able to get a clear view of him. He was young, several years younger than the gunmage; his hair was dark brown and close cropped. He was wearing a long and fine tunic over equally fine leather breeks. On his feet were black leather shoes with polished silver buckles. In spite of the man’s young age, he held himself with an air of contemptuous confidence, like that of an arrogant noble. Behind him came Honour, wearing only her tunic and sandals, her breastplate and greaves put off.

“So this is him,” said the young man with a sneer, staring down at Matthias.

“Yes,” said Honour, then she noticed Garreck’s sleeping form. “What’s he doing here?”

Viridian cast a casual eye to where Garreck lay.

“It looks like he’s sleeping,” she said. “But it might be a trick question.” Matthias smirked to himself.

“Don’t try to be smart, Viridian,” said the young man. “It doesn’t suit you.” He turned to face Matthias again. “I’m not happy about you being here, you should know that. We don’t need low-born heretics with pretensions to arcane power on this trip. You’re only function is as a guide. Remember these words and your time on board will be pleasant enough.”

“And just who are you?” asked Matthias through slitted eyes.

“He is Jonneran Kelter, mage of the Fraternal Order,” said Honour with pride. She clasped his hand.

“Her fiance,” finished the young mage, placing a proprietary kiss upon Honour’s cheek.

“Of course you are,” said Matthias with a sigh, though he couldn’t help noticing that the mage’s public display of affection was not entirely welcome. “I am just sure it will be a pleasant voyage.”

10 Life Stories

The heat from the open firebox door scoured their faces as Garreck Three Fingers Short threw a final shovel full of coal on the fire. He nodded to Matthias Warlock and the gunmage pushed the heavy iron door closed with a long handled stoker. Garreck wiped the sweat from his dirty face with the cuff of his discarded shirt, then he struck the roof of the boiler room with the shovel's handle. Above the sound of feet running could be heard, as the ship's crewman rushed to the wheelhouse to tell the Captain. Soon enough the valves opened and the steam engine began to chug noisily. The *Puffing Bey's* paddle wheels turned faster, the sound of the splashing water clear even through the ship's wooden hull. Garreck put down the shovel, took up his shirt and headed onto the main deck, followed by Matthias Warlock.

"It's funny you know," said Garreck, shrugging his shirt back over his sweaty torso. "Me da used to be an engineer on the first Khador railroad, stokin' boilers. He was always hackin' an' coughin' with soot-lung; it killed 'im in the end, an' broke me mam's heart. I swore I'd never do tha' kinda work; now look at me!"

"I am not the man to talk about broken vows with, Three Fingers," said the Warlock. "My list is so long, I do not even remember it all."

"Pheh! Two years you was in my territory an' I know you never broke yer word tha' whole time!" Garreck declared.

"You *know* that do you?" asked Matthias, his eyebrows arched in suspicion.

"You drew a lot more attention than you knew, gunmage."

Matthias shrugged. He leaned on the gunwales and looked at the rushing river beneath them. The water darkened as the little ship was reaching the mouth of the river. Even now, the north bank was receding and the ship's course was tending south to follow the coast. In another few days they would reach the north-most of the Scharde islands, the Warlock's homeland. Then they would head west, out to sea and on to their final destination. Garreck leaned next to the Warlock and tapped him on the elbow, drawing his attention to the prow. There on the foredeck was Honour Pendragon. She was kneeling in prayer.

"What's her story, d'ya think?" asked Garreck. Matthias shrugged.

"Paladin and devotee of Katrena, near as I can determine," he said.

"There's more to it than that, I can feel it. I'm a good judge of folks."

"Like with Greyfingers?" asked Matthias with a sly smile. Garreck scowled.

"We're never going to be close friends if you keep bringing up painful memories," said the dwarf, reminded of his former lieutenant's betrayal.

Matthias chuckled. Over his shoulder he heard footsteps coming down the gangway steps from the upper cabin. Turning he saw Viridian making her way down the stairs, buckling her armoured leather bodice in place and blinking in the sunlight.

“Here is one who could tell us the tale no doubt,” declared Matthias. “Didst we wake thee from thy rest, sweet lady?” Viridian flashed the gunmage a sour look and then stepped down onto the deck with a stretch and yawn.

“What time is it?” she asked, not sounding fully awake.

“An hour after dawn.”

“Gods! Why are you both awake at this hour. Your chattering out here made me think I’d overslept.” The two men exchanged smiles.

“Sorry m’lady,” said Garreck with a low bow that caused his plaited hair to drag over the boards of the deck. “I have been showing the young sir here the finer points of boiler stoking, to while away the fresh hours of the new day.”

“Are all dwarves as funny as you?” asked Viridian, reaching into her cigarillo case and lighting herself a morning smoke.

“Oh no, I’m quite exceptional in this regard,” quipped Garreck.

“Humph,” snorted Viridian, leaning back against the ship’s railing while the other two went back to looking over the side again. “So what was it you wanted me to tell you?”

“We were wondering about Honour,” explained Matthias. “Who she is? Where she comes from?” Viridian spat over the side in disgust.

“Of course,” she exclaimed. “You want to know about Honour! Everyone wants to know about Honour. What’s wrong with me, hmmm? Why doesn’t anyone want to know my story?”

“Alright,” said Garreck with a shrug. “What’s your story? How come a pretty thing like you is chasing around getting into gunfights and lawbreaking? I mean sure, you ain’t noble born like the other one, but I know two dozen rich merchants who’d take a pretty thing like you, marry ‘er and pamper ‘er to the end o’ their days, even with that scar o’ yours!”

“How do you know I’m not noble born?” asked Viridian, staring with slitted eyes through the smoke of her cigarillo.

“It’s obvious!” declared Garreck. Viridian’s look darkened further, her smoke dipping downward as her mouth twisted in a scowl. “It’s yer ears!”

“There are no noble half-elves,” confirmed Matthias. Viridian softened suddenly, realising that there was no implicit insult to their reasoning, only an awareness of obvious truths.

“Sorry,” she said. There was silence for a moment, as the two men from Five Fingers waited to see if their questions would be answered. After a long drag and a deep sighing breath, Viridian began her story.

“I met Honour when we were both little girls,” she said. “I was a sewer-rat orphan, cutting purses for the poor-house boss. Honour was an abbey brat, cloistered away to get her convent education. I used to scale the convent wall in the morning and she’d feed me fruit from the orchard, while I told her stories of the poor-house and lifting coins. She was so sweet. Even then she was more

beautiful than any girl I'd ever seen. I loved to talk with her, but I was jealous too. She's the reason I got this." Viridian waved her hand around her face.

"The scar?" asked Garreck.

"No the face," Viridian replied. "You don't think an orphan street thief grows up to look like this do you? I used to be a right poxy little bitch!" Matthias and Garreck were plainly puzzled by what she was saying.

"When I was about fourteen, I was running with a crew, kinda like the Red Serpents, only all younger. We took down a silk merchant, robbed him blind. Really daring, we were. When we split the proceeds I took every crown of my share to a witch I knew. I paid her the lot for a beautiful face; saved my life too, 'cause a week later assassins hired by the silk merchant started tracking us all down. They were looking for a ugly little street girl with a dirty mop for a head. They never imagined that the fine looking young lady with the perfect cascade of red curls was the one they wanted. I got work in a whore house and made a pretty coin for a few months, until some drunk drew a knife on me 'cause he didn't feel like paying. I got the knife from him and cut his throat, but not before he left me his mark. Maybe a merchant might marry me, but I know only the beggars would sleep with a hacked up whore."

Viridian lapsed into a thoughtful silence, her fingers absently tracing along the fine, white scar on her cheek. For a moment there was only the puffing of the boiler and the splash of the twin wheels as they turned the water. Overhead, a gull called as it winged its way over the river mouth.

"So how's it that you're running around with pistols and an ogrun?"

"While I was a whore, Honour didn't have much to do with me," Viridian said quietly, as though the memory were painful. "Then, afterward, she tended my face with her sisters in the Order. They do charitable works for whores and low born women. After that, Honour left the abbey and we both joined the army for a time, travelling around and seeing the world with Dokor."

Matthias cocked his head, puzzled by something. "Honour left the abbey and joined the army?" he repeated. "How does that happen? Convent education is not something you waste on a soldier. It's for the daughters of nobles and rich merchants."

"Tell me about it," Viridian replied. "Honour's family stopped paying for her education. They decided not to waste..."

"Must you parade my shame and dishonour like a fishwife's tale?" came a serious voice. The three of them turned to see Honour standing nearby, listening to their conversation. Her face was stern, but her eyes were red rimmed, as if tears were forming. Nonetheless, her voice was clear and commanding in the morning air. "I thought whores knew how to keep secrets!"

Viridian recoiled, stung by the rebuke, but Matthias only chuckled.

"Not any whores that I have ever met," he said with a sardonic smile.

"Nor me," agreed Garreck. "Biggest gossips you'll ever meet, is whores. Not like the tight-lipped pistol maiden 'ere! Wouldn't you agree, gunmage?"

"Oh surely," said Matthias with a vehement nod. "Viridian's nothing like a whore!" He flashed

the red-haired half-elf a comradely smile. Then he turned to face Honour fully.

“Besides,” he said. “There have been enough secrets and half truths on this journey to last a good while. It’s time we began to trust one another!”

“Fine! What do you want to know?” asked Honour, with the appearance of one staring into the abyss and contemplating the jump. She looked directly into the gunmage’s eyes and they searched each other for a moment, seeking out soulful truths. Matthias saw deep hurts, fears and pains that were usually buried under the rampart defences of pride and honour. Before he could say anything though, Garreck jumped in with his own question.

“Alright,” said the dwarf. “What’s this island we’re going to and why?”

As Matthias watched, the pain sank and hid away, like a drowned swimmer sinking into the night-dark ocean. Honour’s pride and dignity straightened her back and she steeled herself for her answer, looking away from Matthias Warlock’s eyes.

“Very well,” she said, but she was interrupted as Jonneran Kelter, her fiance, arrived on the deck. He placed his right hand on her arm gently and she stopped speaking.

“There’s no need to waste breath explaining our mission, if you don’t wish to,” said Jonneran, indicating the others with his free hand. This hand wore a fine metal glove, similar to a knight’s gauntlet, but not so bulky or solid looking.

“It’s not a question of wasted breath Jonneran,” said Viridian tersely. “When you travel with comrades, you don’t keep needless secrets.”

“‘Comrades’; is that what they are?” asked Jonneran with another dismissive wave of his hand. “No, I don’t think so, Viridian. You may not understand this, but familiarity breeds contempt. Once you make friends, it’s so much harder to give orders.”

“What would you know about giving orders, whelp?” scoffed Garreck. He turned and folded his arms, staring up at the young mage with a belligerent glare.

“I was born to it, Rhul!” Jonneran retorted. He seemed ready to go on, but Honour cut him short.

“Oh, just let me tell them!” she said, exasperated. “Otherwise it will only breed trouble for the rest of the journey.”

“But sweetest one...,” protested Jonneran, until he saw the hardness in Honour’s eyes. It appeared that she did not like being called ‘sweetest one’ in front of others.

“Oh well fine!” he spat. “Tell them if you must! It’s a waste of breath, I assure you!”

He broke away from Honour and stalked across the deck to sit on the gunwale on the opposite side. She watched him go, her face showing some momentary confusion. Then she turned back to face Matthias and Garreck.

“We are traveling to this island,” she explained. “Because of a holy vision I received in a dream, a year ago.”

“A vision?” repeated Garreck, incredulous. “You’re kidding.” He looked from Honour to Jonneran to Viridian; their serious expressions put paid to his disbelief.

“What vision?” asked Matthias Warlock.

11 Visions and Desperations

Everyone on the aft-deck watched Honour intently as she began to tell the tale of her vision. While Viridian and Jonneran had both heard it before, they nonetheless paid close attention, absorbed by the details, as though the vision were about them. Honour herself stood with one hand upon the gangway rail, steadying herself against the rocking of the waves as the *Puffing Bey* steamed southward through the coastal shallows.

“My dream begins at a manor house,” Honour said. “It is a fine building, built for a noble family. There is an enclosed courtyard, with a high wall and a strong gate. I am in the courtyard, but in the vision I am not a woman; I am a dog, a puppy hound.”

Garreck gave an snort of a laugh, but his humour was cut short as he realized that no one else present shared his amusement. Honour gave him a withering glance of unrestrained contempt and in response he sank down to the deck, sitting with his back against the sides. He studied the decking, eyes down, avoiding her gaze.

“Yes, I am a puppy in my vision,” Honour continued. “I play in the morning light; there is food and water for me in the courtyard. It is lonely, but I am content. Sometimes, over the wall I can hear the baying of wild dogs, or wolves. Then the day begins to wane, the sun dips beneath the wall, and the shadows lengthen. In the late afternoon, my owner comes into the courtyard and his face is concealed in shadows. I am happy at first, and I run to play at his feet but he does not play with me. Instead he takes me by the scruff of the neck and hauls me to the courtyard gate. Before I even realize what is happening, he throws me out beyond the wall.”

A single tear formed in the corner of Honour’s eye as she recounted this part of her vision. The sense of loneliness and rejection in the scene she was recounting seemed palpable to all listening. Matthias closed his eyes, cocking his head to one side to show that he was still listening.

“The day finally ends and I am left whimpering at the gate, in the darkness,” Honour explained. “Soon though I hear the baying of the wolves and I am afraid. A pack of them gathers about me and I expect to be devoured. Instead, they bring me food, a fresh kill, and they invite me to share in their meal. As I eat with the wolves I realize that I am not a hound. I too am a wolf; I am one of them. I tear the flesh with vehemence and as I eat, I grow from a puppy to a she-wolf. I eat with my pack and then I run with them into the nighted of the forest, unafraid of the darkness.

“In the pack are two other she-wolves and we are especially close, we three. The pack gathers about us; we are its core, its heart. We hunt and range together, strong and unafraid. Then, nearing midnight, a shadow comes amongst us and one of my sister wolves is stolen away. We two who remain, we snarl and wail, but the shadow ignores us and swiftly disappears into the woods. The pack tries to follow, tracking our sister’s scent, but soon we are lost. As we race through the woods, hoping to catch her scent, we come to a frozen lake. In the middle of the lake is an island. Between the woods and the lakeshore, the hoarfrost glistens on the rocky ground.

“In the moonlight we see another wolf, a stranger to us, upon the stony shore. He is a mighty timberwolf, with a thick pelt of grey and black. His eyes glitter in the moonlight and he has claws of iron. He does battle with shadows as we meet him, shadows like the one that has stolen our sister. He rends the shadows and they attack him without mercy. Then he defeats them and they do him homage, then they withdraw into the woods.

“My sister and I stalk forward with the rest of our pack and the wolf with iron claws leads us across the ice to the island in the lake. He sniffs the air and finds our sister for us; she is safe. The pack crosses back over the lake. As we do the shadows emerge from the woods again, but the wolf with iron claws howls a challenge and we all do battle with the shadows. Together we win through the darkness and flee into the woods, to our freedom.”

Honour fell silent in the telling of her tale. Viridian watched her friend with a mixture of pride and concern, feeling her vulnerability, but respecting it as well. Matthias stood quietly, his eyes still closed. Garreck still stared at the deck, not really taken with the story, but unwilling to break the atmosphere again. Jonneran though leaned forward eagerly.

“Tell them the rest,” he urged. Honour cast a slow look at him, but eventually nodded her assent.

“When the four of us go into the woods together, the timberwolf and I...,” she stumbled over her words, losing her way in the story for the first time. “Uh...the...ah...wolf...the wolf with iron claws and I...we...ah...we mate. There’s more, but I don’t wish to tell it now.”

Matthias opened his eyes, looking at Honour, who seemed confused and troubled. He looked at Viridian, who was glaring across the deck at Jonneran. For his part, the Fraternal Order mage had a look of triumph on his face, as though he had just won a race or been awarded a great prize. Matthias studied him for moment and then turned his face back to Viridian.

“You are one of the she-wolves, are you not?” he asked her. The half-elf pistoleer nodded.

“A priest in Caspia, famous for the gift of interpreting visions, explained much of the dream to me, though not all” said Honour. “Viridian is one of my sister wolves. Tarleen, the woman we go to rescue, is the other.”

“And tell them who the ‘wolf with iron claws’ is,” Jonneran all but commanded. Matthias and Garreck looked at the man in open disbelief, the pieces of the vision connecting in their mind with the realities of Honour’s life. Jonneran stiffened at their doubtful stares; “Do you doubt me?” he demanded.

Garreck could not stop himself from chuckling this time. “Sorry lad,” he said with a smile. “It’s jus’ tha’ you don’t strike as the ‘wolf’ sort.”

“Tell them, Honour, how we met,” said Jonneran. “How we met, the very day after you had the vision!”

“It wasn’t the ‘very day after’,” said Honour quietly, but she continued with the tale. “Tarleen, Viridian and I were on the streets in Caspia, when we heard screams further down. We rushed to see and found that an iron statue of a woman was attacking people randomly on the street, laying about it with a sword and with long spikes that projected from its skin.”

“It was an iron maiden,” added Viridian, interrupting for the first time. “A wizard’s construct that had gone mad.” Honour nodded.

“It was killing without restraint,” continued the paladin. “We were wondering how we could arrest its rampage when Jonneran emerged from the crowd. He confronted the iron maiden and when it charged him, he reached out with his magical gauntlet. The magical touch rusted the construct’s skin, and it soon corroded into pieces.” Jonneran brandished his gauntleted hand,

triumphantly.

“Claws of iron,” he declared. “I had only just completed the gauntlet’s construction. It was fortuitous and fateful.”

“So that’s how you got engaged?” asked Garreck, a dubious tone in his voice. “Just like that.”

“Jonneran proposed to me as soon as he heard of my vision,” replied Honour, nodding. There was a seriousness in her face, neither sad nor happy. For a moment there was quiet among them, with only the sounds of the sea. At last, Matthias let out a sigh.

“You have my sympathy,” he said. All heads snapped to look at him, Honour and Jonneran glaring.

“What?” demanded the paladin of Katrena.

“Do you think to mock me?” Jonneran nearly screamed over top of her, his voice causing gulls upon the waves nearby to take wing, crying to each other with their high pitched voices. Matthias fixed Jonneran with a level gaze, stern and unafraid, but he spoke to Honour.

“It is never easy to live one’s life according to the vagaries of prophecy,” he said in a steely voice. Honour’s angry look softened momentarily, then hardened again.

“My faith carries me over any uncertainties!” she declared. “Katrena guides my steps!”

“No doubt, lovie,” said Garreck. The dwarf shook his head in wonder. “But vagaries is right.”

“Enough of these insults,” ordered Jonneran. The young mage gathered the shoulders of his robe and straightened his back. “This is fate; the will of the gods! Your faithlessness only proves that your status as a heretic is well deserved!”

“I figure ‘e’s talking to you there,” said Garreck to Matthias with a flippant nod. Then the dwarf fixed Jonneran with a hard look. “Tell me mage, if yer faith in this vision is so pure, ‘ow is it you two is still only engaged? Why ain’t you ‘mated’ already?”

“Remember the vision, dwarf!” answered the mage with a contemptuous sneer. “The wolves don’t mate until after the sister wolf is rescued! It is plainly obvious!”

“Tha’ may be, Jonny lad, tha’ may be. But if we’re going by the vision, the lady wolf ‘ere don’t even meet ‘er ‘mate’ ‘til after ‘er sister is stolen away by dem shadows. ‘Ave I got tha’ right? I thought she just said tha’ the three of ‘em was together when they met you?”

Garreck’s observation stilled conversation, as all present contemplated the implications. Jonneran and Viridian both tried to speak at once then stopped, waiting for what the other had to say. Before either could speak their piece, Dokor the ogrun staggered out onto the aft deck, his grey skin pale almost to white. He was naked to the waist and had many bandages where he had been wounded in his battle with the Gosling Street Runners. He staggered to the stern gunwale and poked his head out over the water. A strangled groan escaped his lips as he was violently ill, vomiting loudly into the ocean.

“I guess that’s why ogrun don’t make good sailors,” quipped Viridian, in between the sickening

noises that Dokor was making. Matthias and Garreck both laughed, the formerly tense mood broken by Dokor's surprising arrival. The gunmage made his way fore-ward, while the dwarf headed back down to the boiler. Honour and Viridian looked to their giant companion, to see if they could care for his needs in some way. Honour laid her hand gently upon his massive, bare shoulder.

Jonneran stood on the aft deck for a moment, as if refusing to acknowledge that the confrontation had concluded unresolved. He glared at the deck, then at the ogrun and two women, still present and yet ignoring him. At last he strode from the deck, heading alone into the cabins.

12 Secrets and Shot

By the time the day had passed, the *Puffing Bey* was far from shore, heading south west. The sunset bathed the horizon in orange and gold while the darkness crept in from the east, trailing stars in its wake. Viridian stood on the fore deck, listening to the regular chugging of the boilers and watching the sky. A little way off, seated against the gunwhale, was Matthias. Cross-legged on the deck, he had his gunsmith's kit opened on his lap. His eyes were narrowed in intense concentration and he seemed barely aware of the boat beneath him, let alone Viridian standing nearby. She casually sauntered over to him, drawing a cigarillo from its case as she approached.

"Given that I am working with unmixed powder," said the gunmage without looking up. "I would really rather that you did not smoke or carry a naked flame."

"Fair enough."

Viridian looked closely, watching Matthias packing his shot. With practiced motions, he spread out squares of strong paper, a little larger than the palm of his hand. Onto each sheet he poured a single line of grey powder, one half of the alchemical mix which exploded to launch bullets from the barrel of a gun. Each thin trail of grey granules was neat and regular, in the same place on each square of paper. As a pistoleer, Viridian admired the precision of the gunmage's powder craft, especially considering he was working field-style, moving quickly and doing the whole thing in his lap. Alongside each of the grey powder trails Matthias next laid a thin wrapped package of red paper, the size of a half-smoked cigarillo. These packages contained a second powder; when the two were mixed, they exploded automatically. Inside the breach of a gun, the hammer would pierce the two pieces of paper and force the powders to mix. Lastly, onto each sheet, at the head of the twin lines formed by the grey powder and the red tubes, Matthias placed a single lead ball, the shot. Viridian noticed that several of the lead shot seemed inscribed or engraved in some way.

"You engrave your balls?" she asked. Matthias looked up to see her smirking at him.

"I take it you are referring to my ammunition?" he asked with a smile.

"Of course," answered Viridian with a look of mock innocence on her face. "Why sir, what else did you think I might be referring to?"

"Well in answer to your question, yes I do," Matthias said with a chuckle, returning his attention to the ammunition in his lap. "These are rune carved bullets. The sigils will carry my spells for me when I fire them."

"The runes are engraved with gold?"

"Yes."

"The fabled golden bullet?" Viridian mused, referring to the soldier's nickname for a shot that should kill but for some reason never actually hits, such as a misfire at point blank range.

"It's not the gold," said Matthias, shaking his head. "There's barely a royal's worth in this whole lot. The real cost is in the other alchemical ingredients needed to enchant the sigils. Each shot is worth close to a hundred a piece." Viridian whistled in surprise.

“It’d be cheaper to make them solid gold!” she said. Matthias nodded.

“People wonder why mages are not interested in gold for its own sake,” he said. “It is because we already know of a thousand different things worth ten or a hundred times their weight in gold. You don’t have to study magic too long before gold ceases to impress.”

He cleared all of his other tools from his lap and began to fold the little papers into the shape of ammunition. The thick paper took the creases neatly and his deft fingers turned all of the corners precisely.

“You can see you’ve served with the Cygnar military,” observed Viridian. “I remember the first time my master sergeant-at-arms caught me just twisting the ends of my tamping paper, civilian style. I thought he was going to shoot me right there and then.”

“Twisting leaves too much paper at either end; it can over tamp the shot. Makes the breach filthy too!”

“I know that!” Viridian said, a little exasperated by Matthias ‘teaching her how to suck eggs’. She was about to say something more when the sound of raised voices came from the cabins, followed by Honour charging out onto the twilight deck, her face in her hands. Viridian rushed to her friend’s side. As she drew closer, she realized that Honour was crying.

“What?” Viridian asked, concerned by her comrade’s tears. “Honour, what is it?” She made to put her arms around Honour’s shoulders, but the paladin shrugged her off and turned away. Viridian thought for a moment that she heard Honour praying quietly into her hands. Then the proud female knight turned back to face her friend. An ugly red mark on Honour’s face was visible even in the poor light of the lantern hanging just inside the cabinway door, but it faded, as Honour’s prayers healed the injury.

“You’re hurt? What happened?”

“I...uh...we...” Honour struggled to explain. “We...um...fought. We argued and...”

“You argued?” asked Viridian, not quite understanding what she was hearing. “With Jonneran?”

Honour nodded. Surprise bloomed on Viridian’s face, quickly blossoming into furious anger.

“He hit you?!” she demanded, her voice rising in volume.

“Shh, please, Viridian, don’t shout,” Honour begged. “It was just an argument.”

“But he hit you!”

“I provoked him,” Honour said weakly, turning away to face the gathering darkness of the ocean. She walked forlornly to the bow, as small as Viridian had ever seen her seem.

“You shouldn’t say that,” Viridian said, coming up close to her best friend. “It doesn’t work that way, not with people who are supposed to love us.”

“But...I said things. Things I knew would make him hit me. We were both angry and I...if we’d

been in some tavern somewhere, if it was some bravo, I'd have expected a fight." Honour's words made a kind of perverse sense, but Viridian would have none of it.

"If Jonneran got into a bar brawl with you, he'd spend the next hour looking for his teeth," she said derisively. Honour smirked in spite of herself. "So why did you let him hit you?"

"I...he is going to be...we are betrothed," was all Honour could think to say.

"You think he'll be different after you marry?"

"I...hope so." Honour stared out at the stars becoming visible upon the horizon, then turned back to her friend suddenly. "You must not tell anyone about this; promise me!"

"That might be hard to..." Viridian began to object, but as she turned to where Matthias Warlock had been sitting only moments before, she saw the space was empty and he was gone.

"Hard to what?" asked Honour.

"Nothing."

"Honour, darling?" came Jonneran's voice from the cabinway, his robed form silhouetted in the lamplight. "Can we talk?"

Honour nodded and walked slowly to him. The pair spoke quietly and went back inside together. Viridian watched them go with a scowl on her face and then nearly jumped when she heard Matthias' voice beside her.

"Women bear some astonishing burdens," he said with a quiet tone.

"Where'd you come from?" asked Viridian.

"It seemed like you two needed a moment in private," was Matthias' response. They both looked back to the open cabinway door, though Honour and Jonneran had already disappeared from sight.

"Right now he's telling her how he's sorrier than he's ever been before," said Viridian bitterly. "He's probably on his knees, crying, begging for forgiveness and swearing that it'll never happen again. Until the next time." She fell quiet, unable to find any more to say. Finally, Viridian turned to Matthias with a request on behalf of her friend.

"You must never tell anyone," she demanded. "Nor let slip that you know. The shame would kill her! She's very proud, but it's a defence against the hurts of her life. You wouldn't think it to look at her, but when we signed up together she cried herself to sleep every night for the first week. She's tough and strong and as sure a blade to have at your back as anyone could ever want, but..."

"But she has deep hurts," said Matthias, finishing the sentence. "And her betrothed can strike at her when she is most vulnerable."

Viridian nodded sadly.

“I will never reveal this,” Matthias promised.

“I want surety!” Viridian demanded.

“Such as?” asked Matthias, surprised.

“You know one of her secrets, I want one of yours!”

Matthias considered Viridian’s words for a time. At last he nodded.

“Alright,” he said. “I suppose you have gathered that this robe is no ordinary piece of clothing?” He tugged at his sleeve, rubbing his thumb over one of the darkly embroidered runes.

“I figured,” replied Viridian with a nod. “It turned that hammer blow like a coat of mail, back in Five Fingers.”

“Yes, and that’s only one of its benefits. It serves me well in the practice of magic as well,” Matthias paused in his tale, weighing carefully how much he wished to reveal. “There isn’t a mage alive who wouldn’t want this, unless they already had one of their own. Jonneran in there would in all likelihood cheerfully kill me in my sleep for it, if he knew what it was.” The gunmage gave a nod in the direction of the cabins.

“Expensive?”

“Extremely, and good luck finding someone to make or sell one to you. The secret is closely guarded.”

“So how did you come by it?” asked Viridian, sensing a deeper story.

“I received it soon after I left the island that we are traveling to,” Matthias recounted, staring out at the stars and the firmament above the black, ocean. “It was a gift; a gift from a lover.”

“A lover?” Viridian probed, surprised at the thought of the Warlock letting anyone close enough to become lovers. “Who was she? Or he?”

Matthias didn’t answer, but continued to look out over the bow. The quiet stretched between them.

“Wait a minute,” Viridian said as she realized that Matthias would not share any more of the story. “That’s not much a secret!”

“It is half of a secret.”

“So what’s the rest?”

“I hope never to have to tell you,” Matthias said in a quiet voice. “But you may find out soon enough.” A sense of premonition carried by the gunmage’s words sent a shiver down Viridian’s spine. She took a deep breath of the salty air and then fished out her cigarillo case. For the second night in a row, she shared the starry night with the mysterious man who refused to join her in a smoke.

13 The Orca Men – Part 1

The stars glittered in the moonless sky and the sea lapped against the bow of the steamer. Garreck Three Fingers Short leaned against gunwale railing, staring into the predawn blackness of the ocean. He wondered what would happen if they missed the island they were heading towards; could they just sail on forever into the west? Would they wash up on the homeland of the Orgoth? Or would they merely float on, day following night following day until they starved or were eaten by monsters. The prospect unnerved him. From the direction of the main deck cabins, the hunched form of Dokor emerged, apparently less sea sick than the previous day. The ogrun walked to the side of the boat and stretched himself upwards. His wounds were almost healed and his bare chest was no longer bandaged. Dokor thrust his head over the edge of the boat and into the water. Then he came up again, snorting and huffing like an angry warhorse, the sea water running down his muscled torso. Garreck watched him closely for a moment.

“So what’s your story?” the dwarf asked after a moment.

“I’m sorry?” replied Dokor in his distinctive clipped speech and rumbling voice.

“You speak like a priest or a scribe,” Garreck explained. “Not a lot of ogrun as are that well-spoken!”

“On close terms with a lot of ogrun, are you?” Dokor asked, with a slight edge to his voice.

“I’ve known enough o’ yer kind to know ye ain’t common for your folk!” Garreck stared at Dokor with a fearless, steely gaze. If he was the least bit intimidated by the ogrun, he showed no sign, in spite of the four feet difference in height between them. After a tense pause, Dokor sighed.

“Your observation is true enough, as far as it goes,” Dokor conceded, looking out to the darkness. “My birthplace has a long standing relationship with a nearby contemplative temple of the Church. The temple clergy educate the young of our village and in return we offer protection to the temple in the form of patrols of the surrounding woods and bodyguards when the priests travel.”

“Mutual benefit,” observed Garreck.

“Precisely! And, as a consequence, my village is substantially more well educated than others of our people. I grew up in the same kind of hut that most ogrun live in; playing the same rough games that build stamina, strength and speed; but of an evening, my father would read poetry to the family as we sat by the fire. My mother once debated theology with a prelate from Orven for over three hours.”

“I think the closest t’ theology I ever heard me mam get to was swearin’ at the gods when she was birthin’ me brothers!” Garreck declared and Dokor smiled. His smile faded quickly though as he sniffed loudly at the air, his eyes ranging back and forth over the ocean.

“What is it?” asked the dwarf.

“I think I smell...” said Dokor, but before he could finish his sentence, a lamplight sprang into existence. It bobbed up and down on the waves inside a shade of waxed paper. As the two

companions on the *Puffing Bey* looked, they were able to make out a small craft, no bigger than a jolly boat, riding the chop beneath the mast that held the lantern.

“Ahoy, the steamer,” called a voice from the newly apparent boat. As the tiny vessel drew closer, Garreck could see a cloaked figure riding in the bow, while further to stern, four oarsmen strove hard, driving toward the *Bey*.

“Ahoy,” called the Captain’s voice from the wheelhouse over Garreck and Dokor’s heads. “What be the call?”

“We call for parley,” the newcomer replied and his boat continued into the radiance of the steamer’s lamps. There was the sound of footsteps on the gangway as the Captain sent his mate to wake his passengers. Garreck watched the approaching boat, with one hand on the hilt of his fighting knife.

“Strange that they were traveling without lights,” Dokor observed, giving voice to Garreck’s suspicions at the same time.

“I thought your people had eyes to see in the dark?”

“Perhaps you don’t know us as well as you think,” Dokor quipped with a wry smile. It quickly faded though. “I’ll be back.”

The ogrun entered the cabins just as Viridian and then Matthias emerged. The two looked out at the boat and its approaching lamplight. It was now within range of shot, and closing.

“Any ideas?” asked Viridian.

“None at all,” the gunmage answered, clearly puzzled by the newly arrived strangers. The figure in the bow of the boat had an ominous air. The opening under his hood was completely shadowed in the lamplight and the hem of the hood was strangely ridged, so that it resembled the open maw of some monstrous creature. “They’ve called for parley, which should be a good sign.”

From the wheelhouse there came the sound of voices in discussion, which rapidly became heated. “Warlock?” called Jonneran from above.

“The master o’ the voyage is callin’ for ye, boyo,” said Garreck with a sardonic smile on his lips.

“Hedge-wizard? Where in blazes are you?” called Jonneran again. There was a rising anger in his voice. “Answer me!”

“I am on deck,” Matthias called back. “Underneath you!”

“Well? What are these lot about? Do we trust them or see them off?” Jonneran asked loudly. Matthias sighed and rubbed at his temples as if in pain. Viridian and Garreck winced as well.

“Warlock? You’re supposedly here as our guide,” continued Jonneran archly, his voice strong and doubtless carrying over the black water to the approaching vessel. “Can you offer no guidance? Are you that much of a waste of space.”

Matthias strode to the gangway and grabbing the railing all but flung himself up the stairs in fury.

Viridian rushed after him, fearful of coming violence. Garreck followed along with a more casual gait, confident to arrive in time to see any fun. He had just reached the bottom of the gangway when Dokor emerged from the cabins, carrying his warcleaver and pulling his leather jack into place. The ogrun watched in puzzlement as three sets of feet disappeared up the steps to the next deck.

Matthias strode along the narrow deck around the outside of the wheelhouse to where Jonneran was standing leaning on the railing. The Fraternal Order mage noticed the Warlock's approach, his eyes glittering with a contemptuous anticipation of coming conflict.

"So? Do you have not one piece of helpful information? Should I ask the fish...?"

"Would you shut your damn mouth!" hissed Matthias, rushing straight up to Jonneran. Matthias was slightly taller of the two, with a much more substantial physique. As the Warlock leaned in angrily, Jonneran was intimidated in spite of himself.

"Don't speak to me like..."

"Morrow's mercy!" Matthias swore. "Are you feeble-minded? We have no idea who this is or what they are about! Pompously discussing them at top volume is the act of a total lackwit!"

"Insult me again, hedge wizard, and I'll kill you!" Jonneran declared, taking a half step back and withdrawing his hands inside the sleeves of his robes. Matthias recognized the gesture as a precursor to spell casting, the mage hiding his fingers from sight while they made the arcane gestures of his art. The gunmage's hand reached to the hilt of his magelock, drawing and cocking the pistol in a single motion. The two arcane spellworkers stared at each other in fury, each daring the other to make the first move. Viridian came up behind the Warlock while Honour emerged from the wheelhouse.

"Jonneran," said Honour to her fiancé.

"Matthias," whispered Viridian. The two men ignored both of the women, their hard eyes unwilling to see anything but the foe. "Matthias, we still have guests!"

Viridian's words pierced the gunmage's fury and he turned to look over the edge of the deck at the boat, which had now rowed to within a few yards of the *Puffing Bey*. The maw-hooded leader was easy to see now, though his face was still lost in the shadows of his cloak. The ridged hem of his hood was in fact strung with rows of teeth, now clearly visible and further enhancing the sense that the opening was the mouth of a predatory sea creature.

"Will you parley?" the man called, his voice strong and fearless in the cautious lamplight.

"Well, gunmage?" asked Honour. "Do we parley?"

14 The Orca Men – Part 2

Looking down at the tooth-cloaked man and his crew in their small boat, Matthias had a deep feeling of misgiving, like a man climbing a cliff when he feels his grip beginning to slip. He suppressed the sensation and closed his eyes momentarily to gather his calm. With a long sighing breath, he released the hammer of his magelock and returned it to his belt. Then he opened his eyes, sparing a cautious glance for Jonneran, before addressing the men in the boat below him.

“Speak your parley,” he said.

“We are the Brothers of the Orca,” the hooded man declared. There was a ferocious tone to his voice, a mixture of pride and something darker; it sounded like bloodlust. “You have wandered into our hunting seas. These waters are holy!”

“Holy waters? Hunting seas?” repeated Jonneran. “What nonsense is this?” If the Orca leader heard the mage’s words, he ignored them, continuing to speak to Matthias.

“It will soon be dawn, and we will begin a sacred hunt,” the man explained. Behind him the four oarsmen sat dour and silent, their backs to the *Puffing Bey*, as if showing their contempt. With the steady strokes of their oars, they matched pace with the steamer, an impressive feat. “Your presence here is unwelcome!”

“We have not come to disrupt you,” Matthias replied. “Is there a way we might divert around your hunt? We mean no disrespect to you or your ways.”

“You could not in time divert away from our hunt, for our range is vast and leagues may be covered this day.” Watching the calm power of the oarsmen, no one on the *Bey* doubted the leader’s words. “However, we are not pirates and would not waste strength on you that must be kept for the hunt. This is what you will do: cease the noise of your vessel’s steam belly. When the hunt is underway and we have drawn up our prey from the depths, you may commence again your journey, careful always to remain behind the hunters. If the prey turns and heads towards you, you must again cease your noise, until the prey has passed.”

The Orca leader stood calmly in the prow of his boat, his arms folded, as he awaited the *Puffing Bey*’s response. Matthias looked to the others around him. Viridian and Garreck seemed unperturbed by the demands and merely shrugged.

“There’s no margin in not doin’ what ‘e asks,” said Garreck.

“What? Concede? To handful of peasant fishermen?” Jonneran asked, incredulous at his companions’ easy acquiescing, but mindful enough to finally lower his voice. “Why should we honour the crew of this bathtub? What matter to us if we disturb their hunt?”

Matthias looked past Jonneran to Honour, to gauge her opinion. She said nothing, neither agreeing with her fiance, nor crossing his words. As Matthias met her eyes, he was sure he saw discomfort there, that something about the Orca men troubled her, but she did not reveal what it was. While he was trying to think what it might mean, Jonneran took over the parley.

“We do not care for your terms,” he announced. “We will travel where we will.”

“No you shall not,” answered the Orca leader. As if this were a signal, dozens of lanterns like the one on the little boat sprung into existence on the ocean all around the steamer. Each lantern was tied to the mast of another boat, most as small as the first, but some considerably larger, with two or three times the crew. In the front of every craft was another cloaked figure with the toothed hood pulled over their heads.

“They’re all about us,” declared the mate’s voice from the other side of the boat.

“I count twenty two, just on this side,” said Viridian quietly, and a grumbling growl came up from Dokor on the lower deck.

“That makes things a little different, wouldn’t you say?” said Matthias. He looked back from the crowded ocean to Jonneran and the others.

“We could out pace them,” protested Jonneran.

“They are keeping up easily enough for now,” observed Honour. Jonneran turned to face her, as if surprised to hear her talk.

“Well, yes,” he conceded weakly. “But for how long?”

“Long enough,” answered Matthias. “We will do what they say. Captain, stop here! I will go down to the boiler room with Garreck. We will disengage the main axle and vent some steam.”

“Aye, aye!” answered the Captain. “How long do we stand by?”

“What? You don’t give orders!” Jonneran declared, his voice rising again to a shout. “You have no authority!” Matthias ignored his protests, but Viridian fixed him with a withering glance.

“Oh, for the gods’ sake, Jon! What else are we going to do?” she said. Jonneran considered her words, casting his eyes back and forth to the others standing with him on the upper deck. It was clear that none cared one wit for issues of authority. He straightened his robes and lifted his head in a dignified manner.

“We shall honour your traditions,” he announced to the Brothers of the Orca with a regal sweep of his arm. Then he turned and went into the wheelhouse. Garreck rolled his eyes and Viridian suppressed a smirk, for Honour’s sake. Then the two of them looked out over the sea and realized how exposed they were, under the cold eyes of over a hundred strangers. With heads downcast, they went back down to the lower deck.

The horizon was lightening to dawn when the *Puffing Bey* came to a full stop. In the grey awakening of the day, near to fifty boats arrayed themselves west of the steamer’s bow. The *Bey*’s passengers stood on the foredeck, watching as the Brothers of the Orca began their ritual hunt. At the bow of each Orca boat stood a cloaked figure. Each had his arms raised and together they sang a song in an unfamiliar tongue that rose and fell in a disturbing fashion.

“What are they singing?” asked Viridian. She looked to the others, but no one had an answer for her.

“Could it be the Orgoth tongue?” Honour asked.

“I would not be surprised,” answered Matthias. Jonneran snorted loudly.

“No one has heard their language spoken in several generations!” declared the mage.

“So, I guess we would never know,” Matthias said with a shrug, not rising to Jonneran’s bait.

“But I can decipher the words nonetheless,” said Jonneran and he quickly invoked a spell. His eyes became unfocused and he tilted his head slightly to one side. He smirked at what his magic let him comprehend.

“Well?” demanded Garreck, curious. “Well?”

“Yes, Jon,” agreed Honour. “What is it they are singing?”

“It is gibberish,” Jonneran said with a bemused smile.

“Gibberish?”

“Yes, something about ‘raising the giants from the deep canyons’ and ‘flying under and over the horizon of breath’,” related Jonneran. He continued to listen, appearing to enjoy what he was hearing in the same manner as an adult listening to the songs made up by children at play. The others continued to wait for tidbits of translation, save for Dokor and Matthias, who leaned forward at the bow, fascinated by the scene. For some time the Orca men’s ululating song played over the waves, while the oarsmen in every boat held firm, unmoving with their hands ready at the oars.

“There,” declared Dokor suddenly, pointing away to the south. A dark black shape had emerged from beneath the choppy waves of the sea. A long, thin triangle, it cut the surface of the water like a swift slashing knife. Soon it was joined by several more, each one the fin of a mighty water creature. The squadron of fins circled eastward and north in between the *Puffing Bey* and the Orca Brother ships. As they passed in front of the *Bey’s* bow, Matthias and Dokor could see their dark shapes just beneath the water. Each was close to the size of the Brothers’ longboats, and their rounded snouts had toothed mouths, reminiscent of the Orca men’s cloaks.

“Surely they do not mean to hunt such monsters?” said Dokor, awe struck by the speed and power of the sea creatures. Viridian and Garreck rushed to the bow to see them swim past. Honour watched as well, but stood by where Jonneran was still listening to the song. The squadron swept westward and swam between the boats.

“Some’uns goin’ in the drink,” said Garreck, but as they watched, the sea creatures swam through the flotilla of boats without disturbing any of them and for the first time the Brothers of the Orca smiled, wild ferocious grins. As the sea creatures reached the front line of craft, so the singing reached a crescendo and with a wailing cry that should not be uttered from a human mouth, the cloaked men threw themselves into the water.

“They’ll surely be slain,” cried Viridian and everyone on the foredeck strained against the gunwales to see where the men now swam amongst the song-summoned predators. Not one mortal body could be seen, but the squadron’s numbers had swollen. The companions on the steamer struggled to accept what they had witnessed as the squadron swam west a way before

diving beneath the waves. Every hooded Orca man had become one of the summoned creatures, and now they swam together in the depths beneath the waves. These creatures were the Orca, and the men were truly their brothers.

“What magic is that?” asked Honour, turning to her fiancé. When Jonneran did not answer, she looked to Matthias, but the gunmage also said nothing.

“Well I for one am glad that we did not decide to interrupt these men at their ritual,” said Dokor reflectively. “Who knows what other powers of the sea they might have at their command.” The group were silent then for some while, watching the oarsmen in their small boats. Once again, the Orca men had dour faces with looks of stern readiness.

“Is that it then?” asked Garreck. “What’re they waitin’ fer?”

No one knew the answer to Garreck’s question and all waited uncertainly, to see what would happen next. After half an hour a strange noise was heard from the ocean, many hundred yards to the south west of the Orca Brother’s boats. Viridian ran up the gangway steps to get a better look. The Orca men cheered loudly and then from all boats was heard the repeated call; “Pull away, ye squids! Pull away!” The oarsmen all began to row with a passionate effort, quickly reaching speed and chasing away over the ocean to the south west.

“What can you see?” Matthias asked Viridian, who had reached over the wheelhouse helm to grab the Captain’s collapsible telescope. Extending the instrument to its full length, Viridian studied the sea. Out beyond the chasing boats, she could make out shapes running across the surface.

“It looks like those creatures, the Orcas, they’ve brought something up from the depths,” reported Viridian.

“Brought something up?” repeated Jonneran. “What? What is it?”

“It looks like a capsized boat,” Viridian explained, puzzled by what she was seeing. “A big one.”

“They can’t have brought up a boat,” muttered Jonneran in frustration. He mounted the stairs and took telescope out of Viridian’s hands. Scanning the ocean, he gave his own report of the Orca men’s behavior.

“It’s not a boat, it’s a whale,” he said in a tone that clearly suggested that Viridian was a fool for thinking otherwise. “These Orca creatures are herding it.”

“Herding? Like goatherds or shepherds?” asked Honour.

“More like wolves, I would think,” said Matthias. Jonneran lowered the telescope from his eye and was about to say something to the Warlock, when there was a sudden loud spurt of water from the ocean, not twenty paces south of the *Bey*’s bow. Another whale had surfaced, blowing water and air from the large hole in its back. It seemed to dive for a moment, showing its full length, almost twice that of the *Puffing Bey* from stem to stern. The whale quickly returned to the surface however, as around it a dozen Orca crowded in. As the companions watched, two of the Orca near to the whale’s sides darted in and bit at its flanks and flukes. It was clear that the Orca were keeping the whale on the surface and harrying it southward. The mighty sea beast twisted itself around, perhaps trying to use its flukes to beat away its tormentors, but to no avail. The

swift Orca churned the water with their continuous series of herding assaults.

“Quite like wolves,” observed Dokor, watching the tactics of the predatory sea creatures. Some of the Orca men boats detached from the chase of the first whale to follow the newly surfaced prey.

“Giants from the canyons,” whispered Honour, recalling the words of the summoning song. The twin hunts ranged swiftly away to the south west. Matthias tapped Garreck on the arm.

“Come, let us get that axle back into gear,” said the gunmage. Then he called up to the wheelhouse. “Get us underway Captain, but try to keep some distance from the hunters and their prey.”

Matthias and Garreck headed to the boiler room, but Matthias stopped and turned to face the remaining group.

“Unless of course someone has other orders they wish to give,” he said in a neutral tone that might have been mockery. All eyes went to Jonneran who blushed and sneered, but said nothing. With a quick grin and a cheerful wave, Matthias followed Garreck down to the boiler room. In short order, the steamer was underway, following the strange whale hunters and their mystical ritual.

15 The Orca Men – Part 3

The Orca men pulled at their oars for hours, following the hunting packs that herded the two mighty whales southward. On the foredeck of the *Puffing Bey* the companions watched with interest and some awe, except for Jonneran, who had gone bellow by mid-morning.

“Their endurance is astonishing,” said Dokor, fascinated by the demonstration of sheer strength.

“How long do you think they’ll keep it up?” Viridian mused.

“All day, I’d figure,” said Garreck and everyone on the deck felt it was a fair guess. The two whales were beginning to slow in their flight as well, and the foam on the water about them was ruddy with the blood from dozens of tiny bites the herding orca took from their blubbery hides. As the sun drew higher in the sky, approaching noon, the mystical hunters began to turn to the west, apparently heading even further out into the trackless ocean. From the foredeck, Matthias called to the wheelhouse.

“Stay on a southward heading,” he shouted to the Captain.

“Giving orders is becoming something of a habit, hmmm?” asked Honour.

“You brought me along as your guide,” answered the Warlock. “I’m giving guidance.” He and Honour fixed gazes for a moment, like two animals sizing one another up. At last Matthias looked away, turning his face to look south over the prow. After a short moment he pointed to an object on the horizon.

“That’s your heading, Captain,” he called. “Keep east of that marker.”

“What is it?” asked Viridian, squinting her eyes to make out the object.

“I’m not sure really, I just know that it’s the marker we need to steer by,” Matthias answered. “It’s a spike of rock that points up out of the water in the middle of nowhere. We passed it on the first voyage and our guide that time said it was exactly north of the island.”

“You had a guide then?” asked Honour, surprised by this revelation. Matthias nodded. “Prelate Marsendat’s report said nothing of a guide.”

“I imagine the Prelate neglected to include many details in his report,” Matthias said, keeping his gaze fixed upon the spike of rock jutting from the waves in the distance.

“Do you impugn the word of a Prelate of the Holy Church?” demanded Honour, her eyes burning with fury and her sword hand resting on her hilt. Seeing the motion, Matthias turned to face her, his stance plainly ready for violence. They regarded each other coldly for a moment, but Matthias did not answer Honour’s question. The tense silence was broken by Viridian, who pushed herself between them.

“Look it’s possible that our copy of the report is missing all sorts of information,” she said in a placating tone, facing Honour. “It is only a copy after all. Maybe we should have Matthias review it, see what’s missing. We brought him as a guide after all; we might as well make use of him, don’t ya think?”

For a time, Honour ignored her friend, keeping her eyes locked on the gunmage's. Then at last she blinked and turned to look at Viridian.

"I suppose you are right," Honour said. "The report is in my cabin."

"Maybe we could get it then, what do you say?"

Honour allowed Viridian to lead her into the cabins to retrieve the copy of Prelate Marsendat's report. As she left, she scowled and muttered something under her breath, though Matthias could not hear what. The two women disappeared into the steamboat and Garreck Three Fingers Short made his way quietly to stand next to the gunmage. A cool ocean breeze blew across their faces momentarily and Garreck scratched at his scalp.

"I think ye two's past foreplay," said the dwarf. "'Bout time ye jus' drew a circle on the deck an' went at it!"

"Excuse me?" asked Matthias, astonished by the dwarf's comment. "You know the woman is engaged!"

"Well yes, but I can't see 'im countin' fer much!"

"Is that right?"

"Oh aye," said Garreck with a nod. "In fact, in a fair fight, I would'na be surprised if ye could take 'em both, gunmage!"

"A fight?" repeated Matthias, finally understanding Garreck's point.

"Aye, a fight! Why, what d'ya think I meant?"

"I would not allow it," rumbled Dokor in a stern warning.

"Never mind!" said Matthias, answering Garreck's question though looking at Dokor. Garreck seemed about to say more when there was a cry from the ship's hand, standing atop of the wheelhouse.

"Sail ho!"

"Where's that?" called the Captain from inside the wheelhouse.

"Sou' sou' west," answered the hand. Matthias, Dokor and Garreck strained to look and could just make out the shape of a sail, dark cloth billowing on the southern horizon.

"Purple sails?" mused Dokor. Matthias closed his eyes and sighed heavily.

"Go get your toolbelt, Garreck," said the gunmage, using the Five Fingers street slang for a man's weapons. "Best get your warcleaver too, Dokor."

"Why, what is it? Pirates?"

“Of a sort.”

“We are traveling in a steamer,” Dokor observed. “Can we not outrun them?”

“They are right in our path,” countered Matthias. “And even if they were not, we’ll not outrun them, believe me.”

Garreck and Dokor regarded Matthias uncertainly for a moment. His shoulders were slumped and a sense of despair clung to him like morning fog in deep fjords. They looked back once more to the sail growing on the horizon, then went into the cabins to seek their weapons and armour. For a time Matthias continued to stare at the approaching vessel. His trigger finger absently traced the gilt inlaid hilt of his magelock, tucked into his sash. He blew out a long breath and turned from the gunwales just as Viridian emerged from the cabins.

“Garreck tells me we’re about to be attacked by pirates,” she said quizzically. Matthias nodded over his shoulder towards the approaching sail. Viridian stared hard at it, her elven, almond shaped eyes narrowing even further. “They’re a long way off, are you sure they’re pirates?”

“I recognize the sail,” said Matthias with a nod.

“So you know them? Who are they?”

“You remember I told you I got my robe from a former lover?” Matthias explained. He looked back at the sailing ship now clearly visible in the approaching distance. “Well that is she!”

“You’re not expecting a happy reunion, are you?”

“No.”

“Oh well,” said Viridian with a shrug and drawing her matched pistols from their holsters at her hips. “I don’t carry these as fashion accessories!”

In spite of himself, Matthias smiled.

16 Barracuda

“Pirates?” repeated Honour. She buckled her sword belt around her waist as she climbed the gangway steps. “How does he know for sure?”

“He said...” Viridian began to answer, but checked herself, feeling acutely Jonneran’s presence in the narrow passage behind her. “He says that he’s had...dealings with them before.”

“Dealings?” said Jonneran with a snort, showing the contempt that Viridian had feared. “I’ll just bet that he has!”

“Jonneran, would you give it a rest!” Viridian snapped. The Fraternal Order mage was taken aback, more surprised than offended by Viridian’s outburst. He followed the two women quietly into the midday sunlight. The three of them stood on the gangway next to the wheelhouse. They looked to the south to see a sailing ship swiftly cutting through the swell towards them, barely a league distant. It had a slender hull of ancient grey timbers and sails of purple silk trimmed in gold. With the Captain’s spyglass, Honour could make out the ports of four guns down one side of the hull, which she guessed were partnered by a similar number down the other side. Far from heavy armament, but more than the steamer could match.

“They make good progress, Warlock,” Jonneran called down to Matthias, who was standing on the foredeck with Garreck and Dokor.

“Remarkable, considering,” replied Matthias, enigmatically. Viridian and Honour glanced at each other, puzzled by his words. Looking back to the sails approaching, Viridian realized to what he was referring.

“Aren’t they...?”

“Running into the wind? Yes!” called Matthias, completing her thought.

“Gods!”

Realizing the power that the approaching vessel possessed over and above her guns, Honour and Viridian rushed down the stairs to the foredeck to consult with the rest of their companions. Jonneran also followed more calmly, his eyes scanning the vessel for clues to its magic. It had now closed enough of the distance that he could make out several crewmen scrambling in the vessel’s rigging and what he took for a helmeted figure standing proudly on the wheeldeck. Even at this distance, something about the figure’s commanding stance drew the eye and Jonneran knew instantly that this was the pirate ship’s Captain.

“No more mysteries, Warlock!” Honour commanded Matthias. “Whatever criminal past you have with this crew is by the by; tell us everything you know about this vessel. We must be prepared!” Matthias raised an eyebrow at the phrase ‘criminal past’, receiving a sheepish glance from Viridian in reply, but otherwise ignored the comment. Looking back at the vessel that was now nearly in cannon range, he told the others what they wanted to know.

“The vessel is the *Barracuda*, out of some unknown cove in the Scharde Islands north of Cryx,” Matthias explained. “Her crew are a cursed mob, dragon-blighted mostly. Expect their appearance to be shocking, and for gods’ sake, don’t stare! Their captain is a sorceress and an

expert sword, more dangerous than most of her crew combined.”

“Sorceress?” asked Honour, surprised. “The captain is a woman?”

“Yes.”

“The’s more woman pirates ‘an ye might think,” said Garreck.

“Is she the one in the helmet?” asked Jonneran, looking past his friends to the *Barracuda* which was now pulling up close. The crew were slackening the sails and slowing the fast moving cutter, but even as they did so the preternatural wind that had been carrying it forward to its prey died upon the waves. The pirate vessel slid smoothly across the steamer’s bow and the steamer captain cut the engine with a hiss of vented steam.

“That’s not a helmet,” said Matthias, correcting Jonneran.

“Then what are those...?”

“Her horns!”

“Horns?” asked Viridian and Honour simultaneously.

“Satyxis,” breathed Garreck in realization.

“Aye,” nodded Matthias. The simple statement sounded like a whisper. The *Barracuda* drew alongside the *Puffing Bey*, several crewmen casting across grappling irons and hauling the small steamer up against their own gunwales. True to the gunmage’s description, the pirate crew were a blighted lot, misshapen by the power of the Father of all Dragons and his magical influence over the island realm of Cryx. Many of them had skin with patches of scale, some with bony protrusions at their shoulders, their elbows, even the ridges of their knuckles and their eyebrows. Almost all had fingers that ended in cruel talons and more than one had a mouth rent with fangs like a dog’s or a shark’s. Though all were armed, their weapons went virtually unnoticed by the passengers of the *Puffing Bey*, so fearsome was their appearance.

Matthias and his companions did their best not to stare at the crew, but their efforts were in vain when it came to the figure of the *Barracuda*’s captain, who strode to the railing of her vessel and surveyed the foredeck of the steamer. She was a tall woman with long, slender limbs. On her feet were long boots of black leather that reached past her knees. She wore a skirt of fine, steel mail and a breastplate polished to the brightness of silver. The breastplate was of the finest manufacture, tailored precisely to its wearer, and shaped to resemble her naked breasts. Two nipples of gold were fitted at the front. A thin leather baldric hung between the steel breasts, carrying a rapier in an elegant leather scabbard. The captain’s skin was the colour of morning milk, in spite of her life upon the open sea. Her face seemed carved from alabaster, with prominent cheekbones and a high forehead that swept back to a long fall of lustrous, auburn hair. Here though, her beauty gave way to her own blighted heritage, as from beneath the hairline her skull sprouted two strong, goat-like horns that twisted upwards above her head. The horns marked her species, satyxis, a race of warrior women, once human but now no longer. From her perfect face two glittering, amber eyes gazed mockingly at the *Bey* and its passengers, who instantly felt forlorn and vulnerable in her sight. Her gaze lighted at last upon Matthias.

“Monkling,” she said, her voice sounding like the shattering of glass made into music. “I scarce

believed the oracle when she told me that you would once again be upon the seas this day. My crew and I could scarcely pass up an opportunity this sweet.”

The accursed crew of the *Barracuda* chuckled with the laughter of the damned.

“How could you know this...this...woman?” asked Honour of Matthias.

“More intimately than you would ever imagine!” answered Matthias, as his eyes were drawn once again into the amber gaze that led him into damnation.

17 Satyxis

“Your crew really do not need their arms,” the satyxis pirate captain said sweetly to Matthias, her auburn hair stirring in a gentle sea breeze. Involuntarily, Garreck and Dokor allowed their weapon hands to go slack. For his part, the gunmage kept his hand upon the butt of his magelock pistol, his eyes fixed upon the witch’s face. When he had first encountered the satyxis’ seductive gaze, many years before, she had seemed irresistibly beautiful. Now he was more wary, but he still felt the riptide pull of those eyes, full of promises of pleasure and beauty; irresistible, immeasurable and unending.

“Why do you seek me out, Alliissa?” he asked, trying to keep in mind the damage the she-devil had done to his life the first time they met. He dredged past suffering into the forefront of his mind, guarding against the promise of pleasure with memories of pain. “Did the breeding not take? How fares the spawn of your loins?”

The satyxis captain smiled even more sweetly, and dark chuckles could be heard from some of her crew. The fingers of her left hand lazily traced the lines of her armoured breastplate, enticingly toying with the polished cleavage. Standing next to Matthias at the gunwales, Honour Pendragon spat vehemently at the *Barracuda*.

“Licentious slut!” she swore in disgust.

“Your concubine does not approve of me!” Alliissa declared. “Jealousy is such an ugly trait in a lover.”

“I am not jealous of you...!” Honour began, but her denial was overridden by Jonneran’s shouted reply.

“She’s mine, not his!” declared the Fraternal Order mage. His shout caused Alliissa and several of her crew to spare him a withering glance. As he gazed into her eyes, Jonneran seemed to raise himself up on his toes, as though his body felt itself rendered weightless. His mouth opened as though he wanted to say something, but his lips were unable to form the words.

“Do not interrupt, little boy,” said the satyxis with a voice like a honey-dipped razor. “The adults are speaking.” Then she turned her gaze away from Jonneran. He almost seemed to fall, as if dropped from a height, his shoulders slumped and his face downcast.

“What do you want, Alliissa?” Matthias asked again.

“What I wanted the last time! Your seed was potent, and you did indeed ‘get me’ with it!”

Everyone on the foredeck of the *Puffing Bey* turned to look at Matthias as they realized the reason for the satyxis’ interest in the gunmage. Matthias winced, as if in pain.

“Only a pity that it was male,” Alliissa continued. “Else I don’t doubt it would have grown to be straight and proud. Your blood is very rich in strength.” The satyxis pirate fell quiet, apparently awaiting Matthias acquiescence. Her crew stood by relaxed and confident. On the *Bey* Viridian stood quietly behind her companions, absorbing the pirate captain’s words and their meaning. Standing to the left of Jonneran, she watched as he fished inside his robe and drew out a roll of parchment. As he cracked the seal and unwound the scroll, Viridian saw the look of wild fury on

his face. The satyxis' rejection, or the implication that Honour might be Matthias' concubine, or both, had enraged the young mage. Through terse lips, he began to utter a swift combination of magic phrases. The air about him began to crackle with static, the electrical charge building inexorably to the power of storm lightning. Out of reflex, Viridian threw herself to the deck.

"Beware; magic!" she shouted; it was the cry of warning a soldier would make to their comrades on a battlefield. Matthias, Dokor and Honour threw themselves down instinctively, saved by their own military experience as Jonneran's spell discharged in a bolt of blue-white fury over their heads. The lightning struck the astonished Alliissa full in the chest, casting her body backwards against her ship's mast. After striking the satyxis captain, the bolt split into two and leapt to her two nearest crewmen. Wherever it struck, the lightning divided again, gradually weakening but striking again and again upon the crew of the *Barracuda*. Dozens of the blighted men fell, burned to death, their electrocuted muscles twitching and convulsing even as their last breaths fled their bodies. The powerful magic danced across the pirate ship's deck, striking almost all of the crew and finally collapsing like deadly sparks onto the ship's tack, boiling away around the vessel's brass and iron fittings. Seeing no choice but to press the attack before the pirates recovered, Matthias, Viridian and Honour leaped over the gunwales and clambered up to the *Barracuda*'s deck.

The crew still alive fought to defend their vessel, using cutlass and claw against the invaders from the *Puffing Bey*. The companions drove amongst them, dispatching the wounded and laying arms against those who still resisted. Recovering his wits, Dokor took hold of his warcleaver and clambered up to the pirates' ship, only to find himself confronted once again by the satyxis captain. Though wounded, she had not been slain by the lightning bolt's initial blast. As the ogrun moved towards her, he once more found himself entranced by her bewitching gaze. The satyxis moved forward groggily, keeping her eyes fixed on Dokor's; she was no longer smiling, but grimacing now in pain. With her rapier poised, she ran Dokor through the belly, the thin blade flexing almost to the breaking point as it pierced the mighty warrior's muscled torso. Dokor sank to his knees with a grunt, his sight still fixed upon the pirate captain's as she drew back her blade and held it poised to run him through the eye.

Honour clove a pirate through the shoulder blade, the man collapsing under the blow. Finding herself with a moment's breathing space, Honour looked across the deck to see the satyxis' rapier pierce Dokor's belly. In a fury, she drew back on her sword, but found that it was lodged fast in the dead pirate's body. Desperate to save her friend, Honour abandoned her sword and ran across the deck, seizing up a powder barrel on the way. Just as Alliissa positioned her rapier for the killing blow, Honour hefted the barrel over her head and brought it crashing down upon the satyxis' skull. As the pirate witch collapsed insensible to the deck, Honour fell upon Dokor, praying for the healing of his wounds and sheltering him with her body from the melee that raged about them both.

With their captain gone and the shock of the lightning spell, the pirate crew were unable to defend effectively for long. Almost all of the crew had fallen when Viridian noticed two pirates loading a small cannon with chain shot near the vessel's prow. Realizing that the gun was a decksweper and could shred almost everyone on deck in a single shot, Viridian drew one of her pistols from its holster. She had already fired both her sidearms soon after she had boarded the *Barracuda*. Now she flicked open the breech of the empty pistol with one hand while she drew ammunition from her bandoleer with the other hand. Her eyes fixed on the two man cannon crew, as they raced to load their weapon. They slammed the breech of the decksweper home just as Viridian drew her aim. One pirate sighted down the barrel of the cannon and looked dead into the eyes of Viridian as she sighted down her pistol. A shot rang out and the pirate gunner fell back dead, a

bullet in his eye.

His companion ducked involuntarily and then looked down the deck to see Viridian as she cleared her pistol's breech and loaded a second shot. The pirate dived at the loaded decksweeper, leveling the barrel in panicked haste. His hand reached for the firing pin as Viridian calmly squeezed the trigger and her second shot took the him in the neck. He clutched for the firing mechanism as he collapsed to the deck, sending the decksweeper spinning on its pintle mount. The blighted man's black blood gurgled from the ragged hole in his throat as he clawed at the air and deck, before he died at last. Viridian sniffed at the smoke in the air as the quiet after the battle settled across the deck of the *Barracuda*.

"Impressive," said Matthias as he came up beside Viridian.

"Panic never won a battle," replied Viridian, quoting the Cygnar military motto for pistoleers and riflemen.

"Help me," called Honour suddenly. "Dokor is wounded."

"You go," said Matthias to Viridian. "Garreck, let's see about securing our prize!" Three Fingers Short joined the gunmage in checking over the dead, systematically looting the bodies and searching for survivors.

18 Aftermath

Garreck Three Fingers Short looted the dead *Barracuda* crew with the practiced efficiency of a professional. From corpse to corpse, he swiftly located rings on fingers; purses on belts; coins and occasional precious stones sewn into the seams of clothing; as well as weapons, ammunition and scant pieces of armour. He was using the tip of his short sword to wedge open one fallen sailor's jaw to look for gold teeth, when he felt taloned fingers clawing at his left calf. Spinning about in a crouch, he expected to find a dying man seeking either aid or final vengeance. Instead he saw only a scaled hand, severed at the wrist and trailing blood and tendons. With sickened disgust he kicked the disembodied member from his trouser cuff. It skittered across the decking and struck one of the vessel's port side guns. Like an undead spider, the battered hand began to claw at the air, trying to right itself. Before it could though, Matthias pinned it with the point of a gaff hook, spearing it through the palm. The Warlock threw both hook and hand over the gunwale and into the sea.

"I suspect many of them will regenerate like that," observed the gunmage. "We will have to burn the bodies." Garreck suppressed a shiver. He looked to the wheel deck and the shadowy gangway opening that led below decks.

"I was figurin' on going below next," he said. "Don't know as tha's such a clever idea now!"

"Take Viridian with you," Matthias suggested. "It looks like Honour has made Dokor stable for now."

On the foredeck of the *Puffing Bey* Dokor the ogrun was laid out where Honour and Viridian had managed to carry him. Honour had one hand upon his chest and her other raised in prayer to Ascendant Katrena, the holy patron of paladins and warrior maids. With no other help to offer, Viridian stood by watching and worrying. Dokor's face looked pallid, his breathing shallow; the dark blood still seeping from his belly was soaking into the grain of the deck.

"Viridian?" called Matthias, but she appeared not to hear him.

"Ay, pistol-whore," called Garreck in a rough but not unkind tone, hoping that his insult would rouse her from her worry. "Git yer skinny elf butt up 'ere!"

Viridian started in surprise and then managed a wan smile to her two companions on the *Barracuda*. She clambered up the hull of the pirate ship to join them.

"How is he faring?" asked Matthias, looking down at Dokor. Viridian shrugged.

"There's a limit to Honour's healing ability," she conceded. "Ogrun are tough, but that's a savage wound he's got. I don't like the look of it."

"Ogrun's tough alright," said Garreck, reaching up to pat Viridian in the mid-back. "Don't ya fear too much fer 'im!"

"Where's Jonneran?" asked Viridian, realizing that she didn't know where the young mage was. Garreck and Matthias cast their eyes back along the deck to where the man stood watch over the bound and unconscious figure of Alliissa the satyxis.

“Is that wise? He didn’t handle her too well earlier!”

“I am keeping an eye on them both,” said Matthias, his expression hard and cold.

“You know he probably saved our lives?” Viridian asked.

“What?”

“It was a dangerous stunt to be sure, but his spell probably saved us,” Viridian explained. The Warlock hardly seemed to hear. “I mean...you know...it’s not worth...getting angry over. I just...”

“I could not care less about Jonneran,” Matthias said with a flat tone.

“Oh? I just thought...,” said Viridian, but Garreck cut her off before she could finish.

“Leave it, girl,” said the dwarf. “Come wif me an’ look down below!” He grabbed her wrist and led her away.

“What are we looking for?”

“Loot, ya daft bird! What else?”

The sound of Viridian and Garreck’s footsteps receded as the two adventurers went below, leaving Matthias by himself on the deck. For a time the gentle breeze and the lapping of the waves were the only motions. The soothing stillness of the calm ocean belied the violence and wounded nature of the two vessels’ meeting. At last a moan sounded across the deck, and Matthias looked to see Alliissa stirring from unconsciousness. He crossed rapidly towards her, weaving his way between the dead bodies and ship’s rigging. By the time he arrived, Jonneran was already helping the imprisoned satyxis to a more comfortable kneeling position.

“Do not touch her!” Matthias ordered.

“Do not presume to tell me what to do with my prisoner!” Jonneran retorted.

“*Your* prisoner?”

“Yes,” Jonneran confirmed with a nod and a smile of strange pleasure. “I intend to interrogate her at length, to see what we may learn.”

“You could learn all manner of things from me,” said Alliissa looking up from her kneeling position. Matthias spared her only a sidelong glance; even with the wounds of battle and a burgeoning bruise that threatened to swell her left eye completely shut, the satyxis nonetheless exuded an aura of passion and unbridled lust. Wounded, bound and on her knees at the feet of her captors, she seemed as in control of the situation as she had standing the wheel deck of her ship, with her whole crew at her back.

“Shut up, witch!” Matthias ordered.

“Yes; you should learn to be silent when your betters are speaking,” added Jonneran. Matthias wanted to slap him.

“I’ve lived a long time and traveled very far to find my ‘betters’,” quipped Alliissa with a coquettish smile. Then she turned her eyes upon Matthias exclusively. “Tis a pity he thinks he doesn’t want me.”

“Not him!” Jonneran shouted, his hands balled in enraged fists. The sound of footsteps heralded Honour’s arrival. The paladin pushed her way between Matthias and Jonneran, eyeing each man suspiciously and then looking down at the *Barracuda*’s captured captain.

“My friend shall live, no thanks to you,” Honour said. Fury burned in her eyes and her lips turned in a hateful sneer. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you right now?”

“I wasn’t the one who turned to violence,” Alliissa objected sweetly. “It was your boy here who threw down, with his magic spell.” The truthfulness of this protest caught Honour by surprise. Though she had no doubt that violence would have eventually resulted from their encounter, it was still true that Honour and her companions were the ones who had drawn first blood; she fell silent, trapped by the moral implications.

“You’d have killed us if we hadn’t struck first,” snapped Jonneran. “It’s just your ill luck that we were the faster and the stronger – your *betters*!”

“You don’t even understand the meaning of the word,” said Alliissa. With a dismissive turn of the head she looked to Honour. “Don’t be angry with me, I only want to borrow him. I promise to return him when we’re done.”

Honour glared at Alliissa in fury. Inside her she could feel a calm, wise part of her spirit counseling caution. The satyxis had astonishing powers to influence the hearts of men, seemingly of all races. Emotions were running high and if they were not careful, Honour was sure that Alliissa would turn them against each other, to her own infernal advantage. In spite of this inner wisdom though, the paladin wanted to smash the smug witch’s teeth down her throat. Honour was unable to stop herself from turning her ire on the gunmage standing next to her.

“Is it true, what she says? Were you truly lovers?”

“It is not that simple,” said Matthias, with a pained frown.

“Oh my dear, have you not told her about us?” asked Alliissa, her face an unlikely mixture of deep sympathy and cold amusement. “Why all the secrecy? Do you yet yearn for me? For my touch? I see that you still wear my gift. Perhaps I am as sweet a memory to you as you are to me.”

Honour’s eyes scoured Matthias’ form, ranging over his midnight blue robe, realizing that it was the ‘gift’ to which Alliissa referred.

“A gift?” she muttered. Jonneran snorted, but whether in disgust or from some other motive, none could tell.

“Fear not my dear,” Alliissa continued. “You shall have me again; you should see the gifts I have for you this time.” The satyxis’ words were cut short as Matthias thrust his magelock pistol at her face. He cocked the firing hammer with a loud clack. For a moment Alliissa stared at the weapon, then she looked up into Matthias’ eyes.

“Do you really want to hurt me?” she whispered, her stare fixing on his, consuming all of his vision. She leant forward and her tongue reached out, licking and caressing the muzzle erotically. “That might be fun.”

Matthias stared down at the lascivious display, conflicting emotions roiling within him under the influence of the witch’s beguiling power. Likewise, Honour and Jonneran were transfixed, disgusted and fascinated; Jonneran’s ragged, open-mouthed breathing sounded loud in the strange quiet. With the desperation of a drowning man, Matthias threw himself after the slimmest hope of control, the bitter reminder of a truth too horrifying to believe.

“What happened to our son?” he forced himself to ask. Alliissa sat back on her knees with a petulant sigh, like a child forced to admit to a naughty secret.

“He’s dead; alright!” she said, her words spitting out like acidic venom. “I sacrificed him to the sea, as is our way. Boys cannot bear the curse; they grow to be abominations, a thousand times worse than any of the ugly brutes you killed on my crew.”

In spite of the witch’s petulant tone and angry words, the cloying, erotic atmosphere created by her powerful presence was not dispersed. After the outburst she leaned back in seductively.

“If it makes that much difference to you,” she whispered. “Then let us try again. Get me with a girl and I promise you can see her one day. I could even keep you as my consort if you like. You begged me to release you both last time, but you don’t have to make that mistake again. I want your strength inside me again.”

Tears pressed their way onto Matthias face, fighting against the thick air of passion that Alliissa’s words created. Clenching his teeth, the Warlock embraced his rage, reaching into his heart and pulling forth pain like a shield. As the thin tears moistened his eyes, his finger trembled on the trigger guard. With a supreme effort of will that nonetheless seemed like the feeble tremblings of a withered old man, he pressed his finger closed. The hammer fell seemingly slowly, as though through molasses and the paper charge ignited like a blossoming flower. The spell-charged bullet tore into Alliissa’s face and the former captain of the *Barracuda* collapsed to the deck, slain in complete surprise. The ensorcelment of her presence faded and the Warlock cast a defensive eye over his companions. Honour stared first at the corpse and then at Matthias. Her eyes were filled with anger and disgust. Beside her, Jonneran’s thoughts were a mystery, his face a blank mask. Turning away, Matthias noticed Viridian and Garreck standing a few paces off, apparently watching carefully.

“Couldn’t rightly tell which way that was goin’ ta go,” declared Garreck. In his hands he held a cloak that had been twisted into a makeshift sack. It appeared full of silver cutlery and other table wares. Viridian was carrying an elegant box of dark hardwood, inlaid with gold and silver.

“I think this is the new gift she was referring to,” said the red headed elf. She propped the box on one knee and opened it away from herself, showing the contents to Matthias. Inside, laid in the black velvet lining, was a matched pair of fine pistols, with revolving chambers and long, adamantine barrels. Arcane sigils ran in spidery lines along each barrel, the mystical symbols picked out in gold against the dark alloy. In a pocket inside the lid of the box, was tucked a pair of fine leather gloves. Matthias stared dumbfounded at the magnificent weapons.

“Pistols?” asked Honour, coming to Matthias side and peering into the box.

“Magelocks,” said Matthias. Honour snorted derisively and turned away, heading back to the *Puffing Bey*.

“I hope you enjoy them,” she said archly, before she jumped to the steamer’s deck, disappearing from sight. Jonneran also swung his legs over the side, pausing to give Matthias a smug smile before also jumping back to the companion’s boat. The Warlock closed the gun case and took it from Viridian’s hands.

“Did you want them?” he asked the half-elven pistoleer.

“Magelocks? I don’t think so,” answered Viridian, shaking her head vehemently. Then she followed her friends back to the *Puffing Bey*. Matthias watched her go.

“What now?” asked Garreck.

“Now we burn it!” Matthias said. “We burn it to the waterline.”

He walked to the nearest ship’s lantern and opened it, splashing the oil over the boards of the deck. Garreck followed suit and soon they had doused much of the *Barracuda*’s main deck. They headed back to the steamer and as it pulled away, Matthias conjured a spell of flame, sending it arcing over the water and into the rigging. The *Barracuda* ignited and it continued to burn for many hours. Even after sunset, the light of it could be seen on the horizon as Garreck and Matthias watched from the *Bey*’s stern. The two sat in silence, but towards midnight, Garreck thought he heard Matthias whisper two words.

“My son.”

19 Loves of a She Wolf

Honour Pendragon ducked as Jonneran's spellbook flew end over end through the air towards her. It missed and struck the cabin wall behind her instead, falling to the deck with its pages splayed open, threatening the binding. Straightening again, Honour forced herself to meet her fiancé's glaring eyes. Inside herself, she trembled. She tried to steady her breathing, but the anger in his face scoured her like a flailing whip.

"What did you say?" Jonneran demanded. His voice was low, but it trembled with restrained fury.

"I was just saying that witch's power over men was astonishing," Honour answered, surprised by how angry her words made him. "It is true! Even Dokor was bewitched. I thought for a minute that none of us would have the strength to defeat her."

"Even Dokor? You compare me with the ogrun?" asked Jonneran. "You think I'm no better than a beast?"

"Dokor is no beast!" Honour protested, defense of her friend steeling her nerve momentarily.

"No, apparently he's another man like all of us; like your precious hedge-wizard!"

"What are you talking about?"

"It was so obvious, how jealous you were!" Jonneran declared. Honour struggled to understand his words. "Do you lie awake at night, hoping that he'll come to you? You slut! I expected more from a sworn knight and member of the Church!"

"Are you mad?" Honour spat back. "How dare you? If anyone was jealous, it was you! You were like a suitor vying for that witch's hand!"

Jonneran surged across the cabin and slapped Honour across the cheek. Even though she had survived countless affrays and suffered numerous wounds, Jonneran's contemptuous, hateful blow brought tears to her eyes and hurt in a way that few others could. She backed away, tripping on his spellbook and falling against the cabin wall.

"Have a care, you clumsy cow," Jonneran rebuked her, dipping quickly to retrieve the fallen tome. He gathered it in his arms and brushed off its covers, fussing like a parent with a child. "This just sums it up completely! You have no respect for me or my things! Do you seriously think I would abandon you for some pirate whore? You must think I'm no better than your fancy-man gunmage! Why don't you just go to him, then!?"

He walked to the cabin door and flung it wide.

"Get out!"

Panic rose in Honour's thoughts, welling up from her deepest wounds like the ichor of an infected soul. Abandonment and rejection; these were the demons that hounded her. She trembled in Jonneran's disdainful gaze, not moving at first, but then slowly making her way out of the cabin. At the door she paused, looking to Jonneran's face for a hope of mercy, a flicker of a memory of love, but there was none to be found. She turned to leave and was confronted by Viridian,

standing impassively in the gangway. Honour swallowed heavily and cast her eyes downward in shame. Beside her, Jonneran sighed.

“What do you want, whore?” he said. Honour flinched at his words and then shuffled out the door like a chastised servant, head bowed and spirit crushed. In the silence of Honour’s departure, Viridian and Jonneran stared at each other for a time. When the mage moved to close the cabin door in her face, Viridian thrust her boot against it and stepped in close to him.

“I’ve stood beside that woman and faced Khador steamjacks, Cryxian bilethralls and far worse than that!” Viridian whispered angrily. “She has the courage of a lion and the dignity of the Church itself. Somehow you can make her forget that about herself, but I don’t forget.”

“Get your foot out of the door or I’ll...”

Jonneran’s words were cut short as Viridian pulled forth her pistols in one swift motion, bringing one to bear on his face and pointing the other at his chest.

“Or you’ll what, mage? You’ll what?” she shouted at him.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jonneran said, trying to sound confident, but not succeeding.

“I’ve killed mages before,” Viridian assured him. “And on the battlefield, too! Real masters they were; so a bookworm journeyman like you isn’t gonna give me any pause, truly!”

Jonneran took a step back from the door, his face a pale mask. He had never regarded Viridian with more than thinly veiled contempt. For the first time he was forced to accede to her. It galled him, but it frightened him even worse. He stood silently and waited to see if Viridian would make good on her threat.

“Lay a hand on her ever again,” Viridian said, lowering her voice once more. “I mean even once, and I’ll put your corpse over the side and into the sea. Maybe the Orca-men’s deep sea beasts might find your body but I swear your family and the Fraternal Order never will! Do you understand me?” Jonneran nodded slightly, moving his head barely a fraction, as though he were too fragile for normal movements. Viridian held her guns on him for a long moment, then turned away and followed after her friend, holstering her pistols once more.

Left alone in the cabin, Jonneran gently closed the door and sank down upon one of the two bunks. For a time he didn’t move, struggling with his emotions and thoughts. In a burst of sudden fury, he punched the mattress then recoiled, flexing his hand in pain. The bones in his palm stung from where he had struck Honour’s face. He regretted that.

“Damn it, she ought not to have provoked me like that!” he thought. “Don’t women know any better than that? Gods, no wonder the Order won’t admit them! Don’t they understand pride; honour; respect? You’d never catch a brother mage speaking to me with such disrespect. How can a woman be named ‘Honour’ and yet understand so little of what the word means?”

He pushed himself up from the bunk and moved to the table, placing the spellbook back where he had been studying it, before the whole unpleasant business had begun. It had been annoying enough when Honour had interrupted his study in the first place. Why did women always want to talk?

“And then to compare me to those others,” he thought. “The beast, the dwarf and the hedgewizard? I’m the truest man on board and she lumps me together with the scum. As if I’d fall victim to that witch’s charms? Of course she was beguiling, but I’m not about to fall for the charms of some monstrous slattern!”

Jonneran paused as this last thought resonated through his mind. Images of the satyxis’ pirate’s beauty and sensuality danced in his inner vision. The truth was that few things seemed as enticing to him as a tryst with her, even a fleeting one. Though he would never admit it to himself, he would never have been able to resist, to pull the trigger, in the way Matthias had.

“And even that witch rejected me!” he thought. “She got what she deserved, choosing the dregs over the cream like that.”

The satyxis’ disdain for him dawned in his mind, a scalding sun of hateful derision. The burning of it re-ignited his fury, a mixture of jealousy and unfulfilled desire. And the pirate bitch had been worthy of desire. At least she had known what a woman’s beauty was for, not like Honour! Like a deluge of icy water quenching his ire and chilling his heart, a new thought washed through his mind.

“What if she goes to the gunmage now?” The notion terrified him. “Every time I’ve cast her off before, she’s come back with her tail between her legs, suitably chastened. But what if now...?” New visions crowded into his mind; most unwelcome images.

Jonneran turned and rushed to the cabin door, eager to get to Honour before the gunmage did. Even as he laid his hand upon the latch though, he heard his father’s voice in his head, echoing from his memories.

“Show some spine, boy!” he heard his father say, as he had a thousand times in Jonneran’s life. “You are of a proud family, with a glorious tradition. Damn well act like it!”

Jonneran took his hand from the latch, standing in the middle of the cabin with his shoulders slumped under the burden of his duty to his family and his family name.

“Dignity; tradition; honour; pride; these are the cardinal virtues! They are the mortar and brick that built the glorious mansion that is your family!” said his father’s voice in his memories. These were the words his father had spoken on the day Jonneran had been accepted to the Fraternal Order; a callow youth about to take the first steps on the path of a magnificent career. “Do you know how much has been suffered to build this mansion into which you have been born? If you laboured every day until you died, you would never pay back the debt that you owe your honourable name! Remember this while you are away. We are what you are! Be proud of yourself as you are proud of us! Dignity in all of your dealings; pride in your achievements; fulfill the traditions bequeathed to you; and make yourself worthy of honour amongst men of honour! Do this or else do not return!”

Jonneran doubted that his father had known that when his son went out into the wild world, he would not just meet men of honour, but even a woman named Honour; a woman so exceptional that he had desired her almost as soon as he had seen her. He shook his head. Desire was not one of the cardinal virtues.

“I will not disappoint you, father,” Jonneran whispered to himself. He sat down at the table and, opening the spellbook once more, set himself to his studies.

20 *Thoughts of a Whore; Hopes of a Saint*

The *Puffing Bey* rocked unsteadily as it crested a breaking wave, slipping down the other side like a sled on a snowy slope. Viridian Swift reached out for the nearest lifeline as she was thrown against the cabin walls. She regained her footing and pushed herself to where her friend Honour stood clinging to the gunwales, looking into the ocean.

“These waves are strange,” Honour said to her friend as the half-elven pistoleer grabbed at the gunwale railing. “It is as if we are in a storm, but the skies are clear!”

“I think we’re going over a reef,” said Viridian, but she didn’t really know for sure.

“I think I am going over a reef,” Honour mused. She sighed and bowed her head to the railing. The waves soon began to calm and Viridian risked taking one hand off the railing to fish her cigarillo case out of her belt pouch. She put one to her lips and tore the end off with her teeth, spitting it into the ocean. Flicking back a small cover on the silver spine of the case, she exposed an enchanted pin of metal that remained continuously red hot. Touching the pin to the other end of the cigarillo, she puffed studiously, working hard to keep the smoke alight, in spite of the salty spray coming off the sea. In the end she gave up and threw the damp tobacco overboard as well.

“Isn’t that a bit of a waste?” asked Honour, looking up.

“Whole thing tasted of bloody sea water,” Viridian said in disgust. “I think I’ll save my last two for when we reach land.” Honour smiled.

“Remember that gunnery sergeant on the Protectorate Frontier?” she asked. “He threw that whole pouch of Amber Llael into that river when he found you smoking on sentry duty.” The pair of them chuckled at the memory.

“Cost me three months wages, that pouch. The finest tobacco you’ve ever smoked, I swear! I think that’s what switched me from pipes, you know,” Viridian recalled. “Besides, a cigarillo is so much more lady-like.” She affected the pose of a fine lady in a Caspian salon and the two of them laughed again. They looked back out over the ocean, taking a moment to enjoy the endless anonymity of the sea together. After a time of silence, Viridian broached the real subject between them.

“He doesn’t love you, you know!”

“He does...I...no, no he doesn’t!” Honour lowered her head again. She kicked at the scuppers with her boot. “What should I do about it?” Viridian only shrugged.

From the wheelhouse came the sound of the Captain ordering his mate to lash down equipment that had come loose on the foredeck.

“Perhaps he will grow to love me,” Honour ventured, as Viridian looked momentarily to the bow. “You know the vision...”

“The vision is wrong!” Viridian snapped, then immediately regretted it. She turned to see her friend staring at the ocean with an empty expression, no emotion. “I mean, maybe we don’t have the right of it. That mystic said interpretation was really difficult and as often wrong as right.”

Honour nodded slowly, her eyes showing her inner turmoil. When they had been girls, Viridian had envied her friend, so pretty and with such privilege, waking every morning from her own warm bed and being educated in the abbey. Now that they had grown to womanhood, Viridian pitied Honour, even as she loved her as her closest friend. Viridian's harsh childhood had strengthened her in the end, readying her for the buffeting of life's ocean. Honour had had her future wrenched out from under her on the very threshold of womanhood; now she was like a drowning swimmer, bereft and clutching at anything that promised stability. That was why she embraced the harsh discipline of a paladin's life and why the vagaries of prophecy were like unwavering law to her. At least, that's how it looked to Viridian. She crossed to her friend's side and embraced her.

"Don't worry about it," she urged, listening to Honour's sighing breaths. "Whatever way it turns out, Jonneran is wrong!"

"No he's not," Honour whispered.

"What?"

"He is not wrong, not about everything."

"What's he got right then?" Viridian asked, puzzled and curious.

"I do think about him," Honour said quietly, in the manner of someone confessing their most shameful sin.

"Who?"

"Who do you think?" Honour snapped, her discomfort getting the better of her for a moment. She softened immediately though. "The heretic; the gunmage!"

"Matthias?" Viridian pressed, not understanding Honour's revelation. "So you think about him; so what?"

"I think about him, all the time," said Honour. She raised her face again to meet Viridian's eyes. "Even when I am alone; especially when I'm alone!"

"When you're alone? Oh...oh!" said Viridian as her friend's meaning finally dawned. The two exchanged meaningful glances for a moment and the half elf reached reflexively for her cigarillo case. She drew one forth and put it to her lips before she realized the futility of the action. With a snort of frustration, she pulled it from her lips and thrust it back into the case.

"Well, look," she said uncertainly. "Is that really such a big deal? I mean, he's not unhandsome and I must admit it's crossed my mind, once or twice."

"It does not just cross my mind," Honour protested. "It infects my thoughts. I can barely concentrate on prayer, let alone anything else. When I am near him, I feel like I am standing near a powder keg with a lit fuse. I can't relax. And when that witch was talking to him..."

"You wanted to protect him?"

“I wanted to kill him!” retorted the paladin vehemently. “And her! I hated him for having been with her and I hated her for having touched him! And for wanting to touch him again! Most of all I hated her for thinking I was his concubine, because...” Honour’s voice trailed away.

“Because...?”

“Because a part of me wanted it to be true!” Honour let her shoulder’s slump and the straps of her pauldron creaked as she leaned, deflated, against the gunwale railing.

“Oh girl, you got it bad,” said Viridian softly. “Do you think he knows?”

“Gods, I hope not!”

“He might; you said that Jonneran knows.”

Honour shook her head in vehement denial.

“Jonneran suspects,” she said. “But that’s just jealousy. He’s got no real insight.”

“Ain’t that the truth!” The two women laughed together, but their laughter dissolved into wan smiles. The pain in Honour’s eyes was still clear. Viridian felt tears of compassion rising in her own. She looked south, nodding over her shoulder.

“The Captain says we’re almost there,” she said. “Let’s keep Tarleen foremost in our minds and let the men take care of themselves, huh?” Honour nodded.

“You won’t speak of this, will you? Not to anyone!”

“I have never and will never betray your confidence,” Viridian assured her friend. “You are my battle sister and I owe you more than that!” Honour smiled. The two began to make their way to the bow, looking south for their island destination.

“I am sorry, Viridian,” Honour said, following her friend.

“Sorry?”

“For calling you a whore and...and for insulting you!”

“I was a whore,” Viridian said. “And worse.”

“You are the most loyal and honorable person I’ve ever known,” said Honour.

“Yeah, but you haven’t known a lot of people,” said Viridian with a shrug and a wicked smile. “I mean, you were raised in an abbey.”

They both laughed again.

21 The Fish in the Bay

The sun scattered its dawning rays across the ocean's waves and the golden shards revealed for the first time the *Puffing Bey's* destination. Rising from the surface of the sea, the island was dominated by a rocky crag, standing amidst a skirt of forested slopes that fell steeply down to a ragged hem of swampy mangroves. Approaching from the northeast, the steamer pressed towards the concave shore of the island's only visible bay. Soon after dawn it was already close enough that a single structure, in the form of a stout wooden jetty, could be seen thrusting out from between the tangled roots of mangrove trees. The sea beneath the vessel's prow was a glittering pale blue, with the bay's shallow bottom growing increasingly visible. The dark rock of the island's crag seemed almost fortress-like, but on the bridge of the steamer, the island's approach was greeted with enthusiasm and a rising of spirits. After the tensions of the journey, the arrival helped to reaffirm the hope of success.

"So what's this island called?" asked Garreck, watching the steamer's approach from the bridge with Jonneran and Honour, as the Captain piloted the vessel into the shallows. The weather-beaten sailor's rough hands made continual fine adjustments to the wheel as his eyes scanned for sand bars and other sudden dangers in the bay.

"It does not have a name," said Jonneran in a flat tone, as though he considered the question fatuous and distracting.

"Oh, mysterious," replied Garreck in an equally flat tone.

"Many of the islands in the Scharde chain have no name," said Honour. "Most are uninhabited and even those that do have people living there are often so small that only the locals know the name." Jonneran and Garreck both looked at Honour quizzically.

"Viridian and I spoke to the scribes in Caspia before we left," she said with a shrug. "It made sense to find out as much information as we could."

"A sensible policy, I'm sure," confirmed Jonneran, returning his attention to the island and its approaching jetty.

"Speakin' of findin' out as much as possible," said Garreck. "Wha's the gunmage's thoughts; now that we're here?"

"I think we've come to the end of his 'usefulness'," said Jonneran with a sneer. "Now that we've arrived at our destination, his role as a guide is virtually finished." Garreck turned in surprise, looking first to Jonneran and then to Honour. The mage seemed sure in his dismissal of Matthias, but Honour appeared much less confident. Given the little information that was being shared about the island, Garreck felt an unpleasant knot in the bottom of his stomach.

"Maybe we'd better jus' check," he said warily, turning to leave the bridge.

"No need," countered Jonneran haughtily. "Viridian has already gone to find your hedge wizard friend." At that moment, as if upon cue, Matthias and Viridian appeared on the bridge's port side gangway, the gunmage in the lead. He thrust himself into the wheelhouse and past the others to come directly to the Captain's side.

“You cannot put in here!” he said, more in earnest than as a command. “You must go around to the west.” The Captain spared Matthias a questioning look, then glanced back to Honour and Jonneran. Over the course of their voyage, he had become increasingly wary of the apparent power plays between the two arcanists on his ship and he wanted to stay apart from it as much as possible. Jonneran nodded imperiously to the Captain and then addressed Matthias.

“I think it’s time you realized your limitations,” began the Fraternal Order mage. “Yet again you are proving that your knowledge and expertise is insufficient to the role of guide. If you knew even the least thing about sea travel, you would be aware that ships do not land on western side of islands, as they are exposed to the open sea, making them wilder and more dangerous. Isn’t that right, Captain?” The Captain nodded slowly, though he scowled and didn’t take his eyes from the bay. He resented being dragged into the conflict.

“It’s typical to avoid the west sides o’ islands that is further out,” he agreed in principle. “It ain’t a law though.”

“You see, gunmage,” said Jonneran, ignoring the Captain’s equivocation. “We approach from the east; it’s only sensible.”

“The west is the only safe way,” said Matthias through gritted teeth. “There are dangers here we must avoid.”

“We do not need you to tell us of the dangers,” responded Jonneran with a dismissive wave.

“We do have Prelate Marsendat’s report,” offered Viridian in a conciliatory tone.

“Marsendat was a fool!” spat Matthias and then immediately regretted it. Up to this point, Honour had seemed noncommittal, perhaps even willing to listen to Matthias’ protests. However, as soon as Matthias insulted the Prelate’s memory, she stiffened and her eyes hardened to angry opals that burned with unremitting fury. Without a word, she pushed Matthias backward out of the wheelhouse and then slid the wooden door closed, shutting him out. He looked at the weathered surface of the door and then looked down, shaking his head and inwardly cursing his mistake. A moment later he looked up at Viridian, who was still standing beside him on the gangway.

“That was an error,” he admitted to her. “Sorry.” He pushed past her and headed back down the gangway to the deck.

“Look, maybe I can persuade...” Viridian offered quietly as she followed, but Matthias shook his head.

“There will not be time!”

“Why?”

“Just get your things,” Matthias said, leaving her behind and heading into the cabins to fetch his duffel bag.

In the wheelhouse, Honour stood next to the now closed door and focused her attentions on the waters of the bay. She felt her emotions and thoughts at war with themselves in her mind.

Matthias' insult to a ranking member of the church, especially one who had passed beyond the veil, was almost unforgivable. Nonetheless, she believed that he had, in all likelihood, had something to say that was probably worth hearing. Staring assiduously out the front window, she heard Garreck quietly leave by the wheelhouse's other door.

"We should expect no better from a heretic," said Jonneran after the dwarf had left. Honour was glad that he had at least held his tongue that long. It was strange to think, but she was convinced that Garreck and Matthias, a gang leader and a gunmage, who had never been friends or allies until a few days previous, had a more honest and unguarded relationship than the one she enjoyed with her fiancé. Dour thoughts occupied her mind and she was chewing on her bottom lip when she caught sight of a strange shape in the waters of the bay.

"What's that," she wondered out loud.

"Bluff reef," answered the Captain immediately, already aware of the object that had caught Honour's attention. "Trick o' the light an' the wind. Makes it look like'n there's a big object just under the water's surface. Mostly 's just water grasses. Get 'em all 'time on the river."

"But where not on a river," mused Honour as the shape appeared to vanish into the ripples on the ocean's surface. Her attention was diverted by Jonneran.

"What is that fool doing now?"

Looking down onto the foredeck, Honour could see Matthias standing with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder and his magelock pistol drawn. The gunmage was searching the surface of the water, looking back and forth on both sides of the steamer. The ship's mate came up beside him, carrying a long, boarding pike. The two looked somewhat like fishermen searching for a good place to cast their lines, but for the worry on their faces. Jonneran snorted in derision and was about to fire more insults the gunmage's way when the Captain's fearful voice cut him off.

"Tha's no bluff reef!"

Not thirty paces off the steamer's port bow, the relatively calm surface of the water was being churned to a fine foam by what looked to Honour like a carpet of pearly white daggers. Row after row of spine like blades, each one longer than the length of her forearm and apparently wickedly sharp, cut through the surface in a formation that was easily half the length of the *Puffing Bey*.

"What is that?" she asked the Captain. The man's face had gone pale and he shook his head in disbelief.

"It can't be," the Captain muttered to himself. "They don't grow that big!"

"What doesn't grow that big?" asked Jonneran, his own concern evident in the rising tone of his voice.

"Hull grinders," answered the Captain. Looking down to the foredeck, Honour could see that Matthias and the ship's mate had now also spotted the approaching menace. The mate seemed genuinely shaken by the sight.

"Hull grinders are just a fish," declared Jonneran with unpersuasive derision. "They might grow to the size of a man and many can wreck a row boat, but they don't menace ships this size!"

“You think I don’ know tha’?” snapped the Captain. His remark was punctuated by the barking retort of Matthias’ magelock as both barrels fired at the approaching sea creature. There was a moment’s silence after the two bullets splashed through the foam amidst the approaching spines.

Then the beast struck the *Bey*. Everyone in the wheelhouse was thrown against the starboard walls and the ship’s timbers resounded with the scream of the hull being torn open. On the foredeck, Matthias was thrown against a coil of rope, sprawling awkwardly on the deck. The ship’s mate fared even worse, as the force of the impact jammed the butt end of his boarding pike into the scuppers. Being so anchored at one end, the pike arced through the air, flinging its wielder like a catapult shot. The mate cartwheeled through the air and struck the water on the steamer’s starboard side. It was just a moment before the mate’s head broke the surface and, quickly taking his bearings, he began to swim for all his worth towards the *Bey*. Matthias stood up from the deck and reached his arm out over the gunwales, ready to assist the mate back into the relative safety of the boat.

While he was still many paces distant from the ship, the mate’s body seemed to rise up on the crest of a sudden swell and from beneath the surface, he was entrapped in the grip of a spiny maw, over a yard across. The terrified man had a moment to scream before the giant fish bit him in two, its body flexing suddenly as it dove back beneath the surface, a crimson trail left in the water behind it. Matthias recoiled from the predator’s presence, but could see the dreadful beast through the clear water as it swam away beneath the boat. Its pearly white skin was the same colour as the sand on the bay floor, making it normally too well camouflaged to see, but the blood that trailed from its mouth ran in streamers down its length, highlighting its size and shape. It was easily two thirds the length of the *Puffing Bey*. Matthias collapsed against the gunwale, fighting down despair, as Garreck charged up, his own pistol in hand and a sack slung over his shoulder.

“What in all the bloody hells was that?” demanded the dwarf.

“Just one of the many reasons I never wanted to come back!” said Matthias and he began to reload his pistol.

22 Death of the Bey

Honour fell against the wall of the cabin gangway as the *Puffing Bey* shuddered under the impact of another strike from the giant hull grinder. From the wheelhouse up the stairs behind her she heard the Captain struggling with the rudder wheel and swearing violently. There was the cracking sound of a rope snapping under strain and the Captain cried out in pain. As she pushed herself back to her feet, Honour saw the beset sailor appear at the top of the stairs, blood trickling down the side of his face, from where the wheel had apparently struck him.

“That’s it, we’re free-wheeling!” he declared.

“What?” asked Honour as the Captain headed down the steps to her level.

“The rudder cable’s gone, we’ve got no steering!”

“What can we do?”

“Founder,” said the Captain bitterly. “The bay’s not that deep, so probably we won’t fully sink, but if that sea hag out there holes us any worse it won’t matter none, no how!”

“Why?”

“‘Cause if the sea water hits the boiler, she’ll rupture like a cracked egg and the whole *Bey*’s gonna go up in a cloud o’ steam. Seen it happen once to a paddler run aground in a storm. Force o’ it’s like a bomb goin’ off in the hold! Least we won’t drown!”

“No?” asked Honour, surprised by the man’s assertion.

“Sure ‘nough that bitch’ll eat anyone the explosion don’t kill!” said the Captain and he pushed past her and down into the hold.

“Where are you going?” she called after his retreating form.

“To go hug the boiler! I’ll be blown up and cooked ‘afore I’ll be fish food!”

Honour’s shoulders slumped and she gave up chasing after defeated mariner. Jonneran emerged from their cabin into the gangway, carrying a leather bag stuffed with his spellbook, writing implements and a number of loose leaf scrolls.

“I’ve got everything,” he said breathlessly. “Let’s go before it’s too late.”

“What about my armour and weapons?” Honour asked.

“Are you mad? We’re abandoning ship; you can’t swim away with that kind of weight!”

“I’m not leaving,” she countered with a hard tone. “I’m going to stay and fight!”

“Fight?” Jonneran repeated. “How exactly do you propose to do that? We’re sinking – I heard the Captain himself say so – either we make for the shore or we all drown. Trying to fight that monster is just a fool’s errand.”

“What about your magic? You made all the difference against the pirates; why not today as well?”

“That was a scroll I used!” said Jonneran, shaking his head.

“Well use another!” Honour all but shouted at him. The timbers of the *Puffing Bey* creaked loudly and it began to list to port.

“I don’t have another,” the mage retorted. “That was my only one, and my most powerful! What I have left is for finding *your* lost friend. Nothing that will work against that damnable fish!”

“We still have to try!”

“Fine, you try! I’m leaving!”

With that, Jonneran struggled along the gangway and out onto the stern deck. Honour went into the cabin and quickly gathered up her armour, weapons and other possessions. With a campaign veteran's speed she worked her way into the pieces of her armour. In spite of its weight and the coldness of the metal, she found it comforting as she buckled and clipped each part of her panoply into place; in short order she was dressed for battle. Settling her weapon belt around her waist, she hooked her sack of personal belongings around it, drew her sword and made her way out on deck.

“It’s comin’ round agin!” declared Garreck, looking out over the starboard gunwale of the foredeck. Clinging to the rail for stability, he swung his heavy pistol out to point at the oncoming monster. He fired and the crack of his pistol was sharply followed by two more as Viridian also fired her brace. Garreck cast a glance over his shoulder to where Viridian held her graceful balance upon the listing deck, some paces behind him.

“Bloody elves,” he thought to himself as the sinking motion which Viridian seemed to barely notice made him sick to his stomach. He struggled to open the breech of his pistol one handed, unwilling to relinquish his grip on the rail.

“Did we get it?” he asked the elven pistoleer.

“For all the good it did,” Viridian answered with a nod. She swayed gently upon the deck, keeping her balance and reloading her own two sidearms. “It’s too big to be much worried by pistol shot. It’s ramming our ship, for gods’ sake. I doubt we’ve got much chance.”

From the prow there was a loud roar as Dokor, armed with his ogrun warcleaver, leaned out over the rail and swung at the hull grinder as it passed close across the bow. The heavy blade sheared away several of the long, white spines, but appeared to do no substantial damage. As the sea beast swam away its large, spiny tail whipped about and struck the steamer’s prow. Dokor was knocked from his feet and nearly tumbled into the ocean. He was saved by Matthias, who quickly grabbed the back of the ogrun’s thick, leather belt with both hands. Groaning with the effort, the gunmage hauled his comrade’s heavy body back from the edge and onto the decking, before collapsing to one knee. Having regained his balance, Dokor reached out a hand to help the kneeling Matthias to his feet. The Warlock took the offered hand but paused before standing as he sucked air into his

lungs with a violent, coughing gasp. Dokor pulled him upright with ease and then fixed him with a serious look.

“My thanks,” said the ogrun.

“My pleasure,” responded Matthias, still slightly breathless from the effort of hauling on the ogrun’s heavy body. The two turned to see the fully equipped Honour emerge onto the foredeck.

“Dressed for the party, I see,” said Dokor with a smile.

“Best foot forward,” Honour replied, smiling back. With a stray thought, it occurred to Matthias that he had never seen her smile so fully or so readily as she did in combat. Perhaps she was most comfortable when the battle lines were clear; a common enough trait in a paladin. Now that Honour was on the foredeck with the others, a hurried conference occurred.

“What does the Captain say?” Dokor asked the paladin. “How long until we sink?” Honour shook her head.

“He thinks the water’s not deep enough to fully submerge us,” she answered. “We’ll only founder, but that’s not our worst problem.”

“Why’s that?” asked Viridian.

“He thinks the boiler will blow first,” said Honour. “If enough sea water hits it at once, it will crack and go off like a bomb, or so he says.”

“I heard o’ tha’ happenin’,” Garreck said. “Never wanted to see it close up though!”

“There’s nothing else for it,” said Matthias. “First we need to kill the beast; second we need to get off this boat.”

“Some of us have already moved onto the second part, it seems,” Viridian observed sourly as she noticed a figure retreating over the water’s surface. The others turned to see Jonneran floating no more than a foot above the surface of the water. He stood straight upright, moving forward as if riding in the prow of an invisible boat, though he moved with greater speed than any boat could muster. As they watched, they saw the spines of the hull grinder rise above the surface and the fish seemed to leap from the water to snap at Jonneran’s legs. It missed however, as the mage simply rose higher into the air, leaving the fish to sink back beneath the surface.

“Mayhaps he leads it away, to give us a chance to escape,” ventured Dokor.

“You give him too much credit,” Honour exclaimed bitterly and everyone turned to stare at her in surprise; everyone, except Matthias. He turned from the others and unslung his duffel bag. Scanning the water’s surface for the hull grinder, the gunmage rifled through his kit, locating a roll of parchment tied with a piece of faded blue ribbon. Using only his left hand, Matthias slid the ribbon away and unrolled the scroll; the yellowed parchment creaked softly from age and gave off a dusty odour. Were it not for the powerful magic bound into the sigils on its face, the ancient document would surely have rotted to dust long before. With the palm of his hand, the gunmage pressed the scroll open against the gunwale railing and pointed his magelock pistol out over the ocean. He began to read the spell from the scroll, gathering the bound arcane energies and preparing to unleash them. Although he kept both eyes upon the words on the scroll, reading

and intoning the phrases of the dweomer, he still took flawless aim at the hull grinder, which had now surfaced again and was rushing on towards the *Puffing Bey*. By the arcane skills peculiar to his craft, Matthias could see his target perfectly, as though looking out through the barrel of his gun. It was his companion, his familiar; closer to his heart even than family.

The spell's intoning grew in intensity and the magic began to leave the parchment, gathered under Matthias' control. The invisible energies swirled through the ether and transferred themselves to the gold-inscribed shot that sat ready in the breech of the Warlock's pistol. As the spell was transferred the parchment faded away, consumed by the magic it had held. Finally, when all the energies of the spell were contained in the shot, Matthias closed his eyes, taking aim by his arcane skills alone. The runes carved in the metal of the magelock's barrel glowed with silvery light. In the water, the hull grinder surged towards the foundering steamer, the spines on its back churning the surface to foam. Amidst the white froth an arm was visible, remnant from the dismembered first mate, caught in the brutal spines and already bled nearly white by the monstrous fish's swimming and diving. Matthias drew in a calming breath before the shot and for a fleeting moment it seemed that he hesitated. Then he fired.

The arcane shot seemed neither louder nor more forceful than any other pistol shot. Save for the glowing of the magelock's barrel, there was nothing to pick it apart from any ordinary bullet. That was, until it struck the hull grinder's hide. The bullet bit its way into the beast's flesh near the dorsal fin with a tiny red fountain, which was momentarily visible before being swallowed by an eruption of intense green light. For a moment it seemed to those on the foredeck of the sinking *Bey* that the grinder's body was a like covered lantern and that within it there glowed a bright green flame, which cast light through a myriad of seams in the 'lantern's' surface. Then the green light faded and where it faded, it left neither flesh nor bone, only empty space, into which the foaming sea water rushed. The corpse of the great fish sank almost instantly beneath the waves, a large portion of its body simply disintegrated from existence by the arcane, green light.

On the *Bey* the survivors cheered, though Matthias bowed his head, his pistol hanging limply in his hand. The barrel that had fired the enchanted shot now warped so significantly that it cracked the wooden butt of the pistol. The arcane energies channeled through it proved too much for the sigils to contain and so the weapon was damaged beyond repair. As Viridian came up beside him, Matthias dropped the ruined magelock into the bay.

"Farewell, friend," said the gunmage, his whispered voice grey and hollow.

"The magic was too much for it?" Viridian asked with the concern of a fellow gunfighter.

"It's been coming for a while," Matthias answered with a heavy shrug. "Spells and magics consume all but the finest Rhul-made weapons. I've felt that it would be soon for that one for a while. I probably would not have risked it, were it not for the two we took from the pirates." Viridian nodded thoughtfully. She was about to say something more when a loud hissing came from the hold, accompanied by an anguished cry.

"The sea water's reached the boiler," shouted Honour. A dull, thudding explosion resounded through the deck planks, and wisps of steam curled through every crack and flaw in the crippled vessel's timbers. A vast cloud rose up through the cabins and expelled itself through the windows, the gangways and finally, the boiler stack.

"That wasn't as bad as I expected," commented Viridian.

“Cap’n prob’ly managed t’ vent some o’ the steam,” said Garreck. “Lessen’d the blast.”

“And gave up his life in the doing,” observed Dokor. No one doubted the ruptured boiler had slain the Captain.

There was a rising, creaking noise that ended in a violent crack and the prow of the dead vessel dipped suddenly into the water.

“Explosion or no,” said Honour. “We cannot stay here!” The others agreed with her. They swiftly moved to organize their evacuation, rigging ropes and barrels to make rafts. Then they left the *Bey* to its fate, making their way to the island that held theirs.

23 The Island

Viridian sat herself down on one of the jetty's aged, wooden pylons, the heel of one of her boots catching in the grooved and rotted surface. With a bedraggled flick of her head, she cast all of her hair to one side and, clasping the soaked, red tresses like a bundle of old washing, began to twist and squeeze the excess water out onto the dock. With her head held sideways while she forced the seawater out, she watched Dokor crouching on the dock's edge and fishing the last of the party's salvaged supplies from the sea with his warcleaver. Finally, he thrust the polearm down over the edge and yanked first Matthias and then Garreck out of the water, where they had been clinging to the dock's edge and handing up the valuable flotsam. Viridian shook the last, loose drips from her hair and raised herself up straight, flexing her stiff shoulders. She smiled at Matthias and Garreck who stood dripping water onto the dock like miserable, wet cats. The gunmage returned her smile, but Garreck only scowled and stamped his feet, trying to shake off the excess seawater.

"Rhul don't swim!" he declared flatly, to no one in particular.

"They don't do much of a job of floating, either," said Matthias with a half smile. He ignored Garreck's angry glare and stepped past the surly dwarf to where Viridian was standing. She was about to speak when they both heard raised voices coming from the landward end of the jetty. The speakers were out of sight behind mangrove trees.

"The happy couple?" asked the Warlock.

"Not for much longer," replied Viridian, hopeful that her oldest friend was at that moment ending her disastrous engagement. The overhanging branches of the nearest mangrove trees burst apart as Honour's steel shod boots drummed an accelerating cadence on the pier's deck. The paladin strode so swiftly towards the rest of her companions that she nearly tripped herself up. Behind her came Jonneran, his face showing first pleading despair then violent anger in a boiling succession of emotions. It seemed as if Honour was doing her best to end the conversation, but Jonneran, like a harrying sheep dog, would not let her go, instead nipping at her heels with protestations and arguments.

"You're not being fair!" Jonneran declared as Honour came to a halt in front of Matthias and Viridian. The paladin whirled on her heel to face her fiancé.

"You left us to die!" she said, her fury burning in her face and lending her words a savage vehemence.

"No, I didn't!" protested the mage, then realised that he was now arguing in front of an audience; an audience he had left behind on the sinking steamer. "It's not like that..." he added, more weakly.

"What's it like then?" asked Viridian, inserting herself into the argument. Jonneran glared at her momentarily, his face a mask of withering contempt.

"You keep out of this!" he spat venomously.

"No, Jon'," countered Honour. "You should answer her question. What were you doing, if not abandoning us to our fate?"

Jonneran's gaze searched the jetty surface, his face downcast; he felt acutely the stares of the others. The fundamental truth was that he had not expected any of them to survive the hull grinder's attack and now he could not think of the right way to make his pragmatism not seem like cowardice. He ventured a glance up and looked into five pairs of hostile eyes. Like a deer caught in a circle of hunters, he lashed out feebly but without reserve.

"Why are you so angry at me?" he asked, his voice going up in pitch with his rising panic. Mostly he addressed Honour, but an idea occurred to him as he was speaking. He turned on Matthias. "He didn't even warn us about that monster! He knew about it all this time and he never mentioned it!"

Some of the others cast querying glances in Matthias' direction. Viridian came to the Warlock's defense, more as a way to oppose Jonneran than because the gunmage genuinely needed support.

"He did try to warn us," she said.

"No he didn't!" Jonerran retorted.

"He did, but you didn't..." Viridian paused, remembering the altercation in the wheelhouse of the *Puffing Bey*.

"He did," Honour agreed quietly. "But we did not listen to him." Jonneran stared at Honour with incomprehension. He couldn't believe that she would publicly accept the blame in the way that she was. He had expected her to side with him, if only to avoid the shame of admitting she had been wrong in front of the others. Still hoping to draw her on to his side, he pressed the attack against Matthias.

"But the gunmage knew all along!" he accused. "He didn't think to say anything until it was too late. And what about those pirates? We didn't hear a word about them until they were right on top of us! He's been sabotaging us all the way along!"

"Enough, Jonneran," said Honour. She frowned sourly, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Can't you see, he's working to undermine us..."

"I said enough!" Honour shouted, her voice ringing out with the authority of a captain on a parade ground. Viridian smiled to see the strength returning to her friend, but Jonneran recoiled as if physically struck. Honour continued her rebuke, addressing the group as a whole. "This expedition has had quite enough rule by committee! From now on everyone remembers that I am in command here! I will hear advice and weigh the issues, but second guessing my decisions stops now! If anyone objects, they are free to make their own way!"

Honour cast her eyes over her companions, each in turn. No one spoke and even the sound of the waves lapping against the jetty pylons seemed muted. A hushed sense of crisis blanketed them, suppressing all other sound. Dokor and Viridian nodded their acceptance of Honour's command without hesitation. Garreck shrugged, though with no sense of churlishness.

"Fine wif me," he said quietly. Honour turned to Matthias and the gunmage met her gaze levelly. He seemed to be searching in her eyes again, as he had that night on the deck of *Bey*. This time she let him look, her back straight and her demeanour unashamed. At last Matthias smiled his wry grin and also nodded his ascent. Finally, she turned to face Jonneran once more.

“Well,” she said calmly, but with an iron tone in her voice. “Can you accept me, Jonneran, not as your betrothed, but as your commander.”

“Darling,” Jonneran replied. “You’re being rash. You don’t have to...”

“No,” Honour commanded, cutting him off. “No more pleading. No more persuading. Either accept my orders or find your own way.”

Jonneran stiffened under Honour’s ultimatum. His eyes narrowed to slits and he fixed her with a hateful glare. The he drew himself up to his full height and cast a disdainful glance across the collected group.

“Very well,” he said. “Since you will not see reason, I think there is no point in us continuing our association. Honour Pendragon, I no longer consider our betrothal as valid; from this point on you will have to seek your own way in the world, without my assistance. As for the rest of you, we’ll see just how long you last on your own. Without my magic I imagine this quest will only result in your death.”

Before anyone could respond to his declaration, Jonneran turned on his heel and strode confidently down the jetty and into the mangroves. Honour and Viridian watched him go in silence, but Garreck smirked and Matthias shook his head.

“It is as if he has dismissed us from his company,” observed Dokor, more puzzled than offended.

“In his mind, I imagine he thinks he has,” said Matthias. “So what now?”

“Now, you have some questions to answer,” said Honour, turning to face Matthias. “And you can start by telling us how you knew about a sea monster that Prelate Marsendat never refers to once in his report.” Faced with this direct question, Matthias sighed with a long breath, then crouched down on his haunches.

“Take a seat,” he said. “This is not a simple story.”

24 Matthias' Story – Part 1

Matthias crouched down on the jetty and picked at a long sliver in one of the planks. He pulled out the sliver and began to turn it in his fingers. Then he sighed and looked up, studying the horizon momentarily, as if hoping for some sight or sign that would deliver him from his difficult tale. At last, he began to relate the painful story of his first journey to this island.

“I was a young novice,” he began. “Of the Order of Keepers. My master in the Order was Brother Harriun, a Master of the Fifteen.”

“Fifteen what?” asked Garreck. Honour and Viridian both shot the dwarf hard glances, fearful that his interruption, coming so early in the story, would derail the telling.

“The Fifteen is one of the Order of Keeping’s system’s of combat. It refers to a set of fifteen stances on which a whole series of techniques is based,” Matthias explained. “Its practitioners also have particular responsibilities within the Order. We...they are entrusted with protecting weapon relics; holy items of war.”

“I have heard the term,” Honour said quietly. “But did not understand the meaning.”

“The Order is quite tight-lipped, especially about the details of our...their training and responsibilities.” Matthias paused, as he realized for the second time he had spoken of himself as though he were still a monastic of the Keepers. He looked back down at the grey wooden splinter in his fingers once more. The roughness of it teased his fingertips. In the silence, Viridian chewed her lip and Honour leaned in closely. Garreck was less patient.

“Well, go on!” he urged.

“The Church mounted an expedition by sea here, to the Scharde Isles,” Matthias continued with a grimace, returning to the tale of his past. “The expedition had a number of aims. The first was to investigate reports of faithful amongst the smaller uncharted islands. Records indicated that two separate missionary groups set out in the last century to preach to the islanders and, very occasionally, word came back that the faith had indeed taken root amongst some of the fishers and corsairs, especially in the north, further from Cryx.”

“Astonishing,” whispered Dokor in wonder.

“Bloody foolish!” declared Garreck. Dokor ignored him, but Honour scowled.

“The reports were reliable enough to bear investigating,” Matthias explained. “Besides, there were the two missions. They had not returned, but auguries indicated that they had not died by violence. That was the second purpose of our expedition, to find out for sure what had happened to the missionaries that had come this far. The last part of our purpose was to recover, if possible, the relics that the missionaries had taken with them. This last was why Brother Harriun was aboard and I as his novice, went as well.”

“So this was an official mission of the Church?” Viridian asked, more it seemed, to emphasize the point than to clarify a misunderstanding. The notion of Matthias Warlock on an official Church mission did not seem to sit well with Honour, who cast her eyes out over the waves of the bay.

“We were near sixty in number, when we set sail,” said Matthias. “Priests and men-at-arms for the most part. The soldiery were commanded by an old paladin with a long moustache named... what was the old man’s name...?” Matthias’ voice trailed off. His eyes were unfocused and it seemed to those watching as if he might be seeing his past, as the images of his memory played fresh in his mind. At last his eyes refocused and he shrugged.

“Well whatever the man’s name, the expedition set forth and we sailed around a couple of islands, closer to the coast, putting in to various little villages and fisher communities. For the most part we posed as traders.” Matthias paused again in his tale and smirked to himself. Viridian cocked her head.

“Why so funny?” she asked.

“Oh we were abysmal traders,” laughed the gunmage. “You should have seen us all, trying to pretend we were ready to haggle and barter. The only thing we really wanted from the villagers was information, but we couldn’t say that without revealing our true identities, and the only things we had with us were things we wanted to keep. We posed as traders who never said exactly what they wanted and wouldn’t offer anything in exchange. Marsendat was pretty useful – he had a more pragmatic mindset and tended to get snippets of information. It was he who got the location of this island from a pair of blighted fishermen in an outrigger. Brother Harriun didn’t trust them, but most of us on the voyage were so desperate for the slightest whiff of hope that we were ecstatic to hear of our new destination.”

“It don’t seem tha’ bad a place t’ set sail fer!” said Garreck, scanning the jungle clad slopes of the tall, thin peak. Then his eyes went back out to the bay, and the wreckage of the foundered steamer. “ ‘Cept for the fish, o’ course!”

“I imagine we were not the first to see it like that,” said Matthias. He frowned and cast a glance over his shoulder at the mangroves behind him. “I know we were not the first to wash up here, even back then, and there have probably been others in the years since.”

“I don’t see too many ships out there with our little steamer,” Viridian observed, scanning the bay. Honour nodded, looking out to the water. Matthias smiled, an ominous, predatory smile.

“No,” he agreed. “There’s a reason for that. Getting back to the story; almost as soon as our coaster was headed west things began to go awry. Little things at first, things that only the sailors noticed. By the time we were only a day out from this bay, even some of the chaplains were muttering about Toruk’s influence.”

“The Lord of Cryx?” breathed Viridian. Matthias nodded.

“Ye think th’ father o’ all dragons was out to git ye?” asked Garreck dubiously. “Ye don’ think tha’s somethin’ o’ a bold claim?”

“Not really,” Matthias answered. “Remember that we were bringing the power of the Church of Morrow with us. We were like burglars stealing into castle while beating drums and dancing about with bull’s-eye lanterns. We were asking for trouble.”

“You speak as though Toruk would have a right to oppose the righteous work of the Church,” Dokor growled.

“Indeed!” Honour agreed vehemently. “The righteous truth shines like a light in the darkness!”

“Oh please, spare me!” Matthias protested, his hand slashing the air with a cutting gesture. “This was not about righteous truth! This was about a greedy church hierarchy hopeful of extending its power-base and acquiring important magical artifacts to do it with. Even if we had the right to invade Toruk’s domain, we should have at least have been smart enough to know that that was what we were doing!”

An unseen bird cried out from its treetop roost somewhere behind them in the mangroves. Several of the party started with fear, scanning the canopy of the island’s forest.

“So this is a Cryxian island?” Viridian asked, her hands resting on the butts of her pistols. “Are Toruk’s minions here?” Matthias shook his head.

“No,” he said. “At least I do not think so.”

“So what is ‘ere, Warlock?” Garreck snapped, his voice full of a mixture of restrained fear and less well restrained impatience. “What happened t’ yer ship?”

Matthias sighed and stood, casting the splinter he held into the water under the jetty. It plunged beneath the surface and then bobbed back up to be tossed upon the chop.

“The last night’s voyage we were struck by a wild storm; preternatural, the Captain called it,” Matthias said, continuing his story. “The wind seemed to come from every point at once. Men were thrown over the ‘wales by wave after wave. Even the wind seemed strong enough to cast men into the deep. The sails shredded and the foremast cracked. It was so loud; I thought someone had fired a cannon shot. A man in the rigging fell to the deck not ten feet from me, his body just lay like a crumpled heap, like a puppet with its strings cut. A falling coil struck Marsendat across the back and the force of it rammed him head first into the main mast. There was blood everywhere. Brother Harriun charged me to watch over him and see him safely home. In the end, even the sailors gave up hope of keeping to the watches and every man just bound himself to the ship and prayed for dawn. Through the wind I could hear the voice of one faithful man, crying out in continual prayer, counting the hours. For myself, I clung to Marsendat’s unconscious body like a mother to her child and waited to be taken with him into the depths.”

Matthias paused again in the telling of his tale, but this time no one chided him to go on. His eyes were dark and it was clear the horrors of that night were alive once more in his sight. At last he seemed to breathe normally once more and the light came back into his eyes. The torment was locked away in its stronghold cell once again. Matthias and Honour’s eyes met for a moment and the gunmage was reminded of the first night on the *Puffing Bey*, when it had been Honour’s turn to hide the depths of her pain behind a mask.

“Well obviously, I did not drown that night,” he said with his customary smile, though in this one moment it seemed less charming and more pitiable. “Nor indeed did Marsendat, poor sod. When dawn came the clouds cleared and this bay was in sight. The Coaster had been all but shaken to pieces and was barely seaworthy, but we rejoiced. The clerics pronounced Morrow’s mercy upon us, having seen us through the unspeakable wilds of the night. The ship was limping towards the jetty and a rough service of thanksgiving was underway when the bay’s denizen hit the coaster amidships. Normally she’d have been fifty times the strength of the *Bey*, but after the night’s storm, she was holed immediately. The ship began to founder and break apart. As men went into the water, the hull grinder tore their bodies to pieces.”

“So what did you do?” Viridian asked.

“Much the same as we did today,” said Matthias with a shrug. “We clung to the ship until it became clear that we would have to make for the shore and then we made for the shore. There was a crowd of us, all pressing on together. Some few stayed behind to save what they could of the coaster and see if they could slay the beast, but most abandoned ship. I tied the unconscious Marsendat to a pair of empty water barrels and pushed him like a raft through the water. The grinder pursued the crowd of swimmers and every now and then it came up and took one of us. It was the longest swim of my life, pushing Marsendat’s body through the water and foam, swallowing salt and praying with every breath. I remember thinking that I would never reach the jetty, that the thing would sweep up from the depths at any moment and shred me as it had the others. Someone pulled Marsendat and then me out of the water. I fell on the deck, amidst thirty-odd survivors, and I wept for joy, at being alive. If I had known what was coming, I might have merely wept.”

25 Matthias' Story – Part 2

“Marsendat was unconscious?” Viridian declared, the spark of sudden realization in her eyes. “That’s why there’s no mention of the hull grinder in his report!” Matthias nodded.

“Yes,” said the gunmage. “By my reckoning we were here for twenty seven or twenty eight days and Marsendat spent the whole time in and out of sleep. There were days where he never woke; many times I thought he would never wake again, only drift into death. When he did awaken, he ranted like a madman, now praying to unseen angels, now cursing and blaspheming like a thrice-damned infernal. While Marsendat was with us here, his mind knew nothing of its condition.”

“You didn’t abandon him though?” Viridian interjected. There was a tone of emphasis in her voice, as though she was trying to mark an important point in the story. Honour cast her a sour, sidelong glance. Their eyes met and they exchanged a knowing look. Honour looked away first.

“Brother Harriun had charged me with Marsendat’s care,” Matthias said in reply to Viridian’s question. If he noticed the unspoken exchange between Viridian and Honour, he did not acknowledge it.

“Yer takin’ yer sweet time gettin’ ta th’ point, gunmage!” Garreck grumbled. “Wha’s ‘ere an’ wha’s it goin’ ta do ta us?” Matthias nodded and looked over his shoulder at the island once more.

“I did not know what they were,” he replied eventually. “And I have never seen even one of them since the day Marsendat and I escaped. From my description, a scholar I consulted named Pendrake, called them cephalyx.” Matthias Warlock paused in his exposition, as if he feared the cephalyx might simply appear at the mention of their name. The silence between the group stretched eerily, while the lapping water almost seemed to take on the character of wet, flopping footsteps upon the jetty’s planks.

“So wha’s a cephalyx then?” asked Garreck, deliberately accentuating his typical gruffness, to emphasize just how ‘unafraid’ he was.

“They are under-dwellers, are they not?” said Dokor softly. Matthias nodded. “I had heard they were but legend.”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Well, what of them?” asked Honour, apparently more annoyed than concerned. “Will they hunt us down? Do they drink the blood of the living or devour children whole? We are not babes, gunmage! We need to be informed, not teased with fey tales!” Matthias’ eyes narrowed and he fixed Honour with a cold glare.

“What the cephalyx eat or drink, or even indeed if they do, is not information I have to share,” he said icily. “What I can tell you is that they are in possession of arcane knowledge that is both extensive and alien to any known in the Iron Kingdoms. Each of them is akin to a mage of great power, garbed in robes of black leather and floating through the air like umbral specters. If they have voices, they never use them, communicating instead by thought. The touch of their thoughts in your mind is like having an oily talon scraping itself along your spine; it makes you feel violated, as though your mind has been raped by their presence.” Matthias paused, his cold anger

swamped by his memories of the cephalyx and their invasive telepathy. He sucked in an uncomfortable breath and swallowed visibly.

“I’m not sure where they are from or what their greater motivations are, but Pendrake said, and my experience confirms this, that they engross themselves in scientific inquiry.”

“Scientific inquiry?” repeated Viridian. “Into what?”

“Life,” Matthias answered simply. “To the cephalyx, life itself is a resource. They mine the flesh in the way we mine ore and gems; they fashion bone and sinew the way a smith might forge iron into a plow or a weapon. They refashion the bodies of their slaves, and their own bodies, mingling blood with quicksilver; bone with iron; flesh with brass. The night after we swam ashore, the cephalyx sent their drudges amongst us, to herd us and bring us down the way hounds harry wild horses into corrals. Most of us were too weak to fight after the ordeal of the night storm; those that did fight were clubbed unconscious by fists encased in massive brass gauntlets.”

“What is a drudge?” asked Dokor.

“Drudge is the name the cephalyx give to their servitors,” Matthias explained. “Ordinary mortals fitted with devices that make them thoughtless slaves, void of will. As with so many mages, who consider the menialities of life beneath them, the cephalyx maintain drudges to perform all the tasks which they...consider beneath them.”

“Mindless slaves don’t sound too dangerous,” said Honour. “How did they capture hardened warriors and priests of the church? Your story lacks...” Honour paused, leaving her thought hanging in the air.

“Lacks what?” asked Matthias. Honour stiffened and then straightened her back with an almost hateful resolve to complete the statement.

“Credibility,” she replied. The rest of the group tensed, their eyes flicking back and forth between Honour and Matthias, wondering if this confrontation might come to blows. Honour looked ready to fight, but the gunmage only shook his head wearily. He stood and walked away to the very seaward end of the jetty, several paces from where the group had been talking.

“What is your problem?” asked Viridian, cuffing her old friend across the shoulder, her gloved hand making the metal pauldron momentarily ring like a poorly tuned bell.

“Ever since we conceived of this mission, we have had men, mages, eager to come along, to help us upon the way,” Honour hissed angrily. “First Jonneran, then this hedge wizard. Now suddenly, we discover that there is a conclave of powerful creatures here with arcane knowledge sufficient to over-power an entire contingent of the Church’s most devout.” Honour’s gaze was fixed upon Matthias’ back, a kind of wild hatred boiling in her eyes.

“What are you saying?” asked Dokor, his deep voice rumbling loudly, even as he tried to whisper.

“I am saying that it is too convenient,” Honour replied, rising to her feet, her voice increasing in volume as she spoke. Her sword hand clutched about the hilt of her battle blade, as if she felt the need of its comfort. “What do you say gunmage? Hedge wizard? Have you and Jonneran been competing for the chance to bargain with the cephalyx once more? That’s the plan isn’t it – offer

us up in return for more magical power? You arrived here a monk and left an arcane practitioner! Surely that is the kind of strange transformation that a mind raper might wreak! Or has Jonneran left even now to bring them to us? Are the two of you in collusion, performing your petty conflict like mummers on a stage while plotting our demise?"

The others recoiled aghast, from Honour's words. Garreck and Dokor shook their heads, apparently unconvinced by the accusation. Viridian was more passionate in her response.

"Honour, no!" she declared, grabbing her friend by the arms and shaking her. Honour shrugged out of the half-elf's grip. Desperate, Viridian turned to Matthias, who still stood at the end of the dock, his back to the island.

"Tell her it isn't true!" Viridian almost pleaded. "Tell her, Matthias!" Every eye turned to Matthias, watching to see how he would respond, either to Viridian's plea, or Honour's accusation. In the elongated silence, they began to hear Matthias' voice, speaking very quietly, almost whispering. As they strained forward, all of them realized at the same moment, that he was intoning magic and casting spells. With a roar, Dokor hefted his warcleaver from the deck, but he was too late.

26 Haste

Matthias uttered the final words of his hasting spell and felt time loosen its grip upon him. Dokor's battle cry rippled slowly through the air towards him while the ogrun's hefted warcleaver rose to strike with the gentle upwards waft of an errant feather upon a lazy, summer breeze. It seemed as though the whole world were being restrained while Matthias himself felt free to run, with the pace of a thoroughbred. A smile lit his lips as he swayed easily back a step from Dokor's lethal downstroke. Then he surged forward, placing one foot onto the back-spike of the cleaver's head, using it like a step to leap into the air. As he flew over Dokor's shoulder, he twisted until he was almost horizontal. His left arm lanced out with a knife hand strike that drove straight into Dokor's throat, while his leg swung in an arcing kick that crashed across the side of Garreck's head and knocked the rhul to the jetty's decking, momentarily insensible. Matthias' blow stunned Dokor, keeping him from breathing. The ogrun warrior dropped his cleaver and clutched at his windpipe, desperate for breath.

Before Dokor even released his hold upon his weapon, Matthias had already dropped on his feet and was racing towards Viridian and Honour. Surprised as she was, Viridian still reflexively put her hands to her pistols and was in the process of drawing them from their holsters when Matthias reached her. With the deftness granted him by his enchanted speed, he snatched the two sidearms from Viridian's hands and spinning, hooked his heel into her back, tripping her face first. Viridian's pistoleer reflexes saved her from a crashing fall, as she tucked and tumbled over the ancient planks. With the stolen pistols in hand, Matthias crossed the final step to confront Honour, who was drawing her sword. Kicking upward, he drove the weapon from her hand and then brought his foot back down in a sweeping trip that laid Honour on her back on the deck. He dropped over top of her, crouching, with his feet trapping her arms and Viridian's stolen pistols pointed at her face. He released a long breath and willed the haste dweomer from his body. The magic fell away like a discarded cloak and the world began to run about him at normal speed; time gripped him closely once more.

"Now," said the gunmage, sucking in a long breath, like a runner after a race. "If I can have your undivided attention. I fled this island with only one of the several dozen comrades that accompanied me here – many I counted as friends and some as dear as brothers. I fled with my oaths to Morrow and my duty to the Order intact. Since that day I have suffered curses, injuries and indignities that you have yet to imagine. I know that you have deep wounds in your heart and that faith in Morrow and Katrena is the bandage with which you have bound them!" Matthias paused as he saw horror and shame blossom in Honour's eyes. Talk of the wounds in her heart, spoken of so openly and directly, was almost as confronting as being trapped under the gunmage. From behind him, Matthias heard Dokor finally clear his throat and reclaim his warcleaver. Without turning his eyes from Honour's, Matthias swung one Viridian's pistols around to point directly at Dokor's face.

"Stay there, ogrun," said Matthias in a tone that was not threatening, but brooked no opposition. "This will only take a moment longer." Matthias then addressed Honour once more.

"Since the moment I found you and Viridian in my rooms, you have abused and insulted me. You have despised my skills; derided my knowledge and opinions; and cursed me for the peculiarities of my relationship with the Faith. I am sorry, but I have had enough! By your designs and for *your* reasons, I find myself wrecked once more upon this accursed island. I swear to you my life is the only thing I possess that I wouldn't give to be anywhere else in the world than here! Wishing and wanting will not change the fact however, and it is the facts of which I wish to make

you, unmistakably aware!”

Matthias paused once more. He could hear Garreck groaning as the dwarf struggled back to consciousness. In the corner of one eye, he could see Viridian, standing again and plainly caught in indecision. Perhaps even more than Honour, who had no other choice, Viridian hung upon Matthias’ every word. With a weary shake of his head, Matthias made his final points.

“We are all shipwrecked here now and in short order we can expect the cephalyx to be aware us, if they are not already,” said the gunmage. “I assure you that they will no more welcome myself, or Jonneran, than any of you. In fact, as a successful escapee, I imagine I might well be singled out for especially unpleasant investigation. We have come here to rescue your friend; keep that ever in the front of your mind, for it is the first of only two goals that matter. It is almost certain that she has been captured by the island’s masters, but you say the clerics of the Church believe she is still alive. Though it is to me a vain hope, your dream tells you that you will rescue her and I urge you to hold to that. I will give you every aid I am able to, because I left too many others behind the first time and I will not willingly leave another living soul to the mercy of the soulless!” Matthias gently eased himself into a standing position, but kept the pistols still trained on Dokor and Honour.

“So, Honour Pendragon,” he finished. “I suggest you find an unction to heal your heart-wounds swiftly or else you find a better armour than a haughty air and sharp tongue with which to guard them. Your friend needs you, as do we all. No one will be left behind and that will be easier if we have your aid.” In the silence as Matthias awaited Honour’s answer, he allowed the two pistols to lower slowly and point at the deck. Almost immediately, Dokor hefted his warcleaver and a rumble in his chest threatened to burst into a bellowing warcry. Before he could attack however, Honour raised her hand.

“Dokor, no!” she commanded and then levered herself to her feet. “I...he...Mat...Matthias is correct. I was wrong to accuse him of treachery. I...I think I have come to see deceit and betrayal in every man.”

“You’ve had some great examples to go on!” muttered Viridian in a sour voice and all knew that she was referring to Jonneran.

“So?” asked Matthias.

“You shall lead,” Honour conceded, nodding her head. Matthias shook his.

“No, you lead; I will guide!”

Honour raised her head and a surprised smile dawned on her lips. Matthias returned it and the tension that had hung about the group passed momentarily. Honour looked to the sky, enjoying the light upon her face. After a short while, she addressed the group.

“We are shipwrecked and injured,” she began. “We have but few supplies and as yet, no way to leave this island. Nonetheless, we have our purpose and...” She paused to cast a glance to Matthias. “And we have each other. Moreover, we have the advantage of foreknowledge. Let us about our task and, as the Warlock says, let us ensure that no one is left behind!”

Everyone nodded, though Garreck was not too vehement in his agreement, clutching his head where Matthias’ kick had landed.

“Dokor, see to the salvage,” Honour ordered, her military training giving her practical directions to move forward. “Whatever we cannot carry, we’ll try to find a hiding place for. Make a close count of any ammunition and rations. Viridian, we’ve lost Jonneran’s magic support, but I still have my amulet. As long as we have it, we can still find Tarleen. Let’s go into the trees and see if we can find her location.” Viridian looked awkwardly from Honour to Matthias.

“We need to speak privately, Warlock,” Honour said, misunderstanding Viridian’s awkwardness. “We shan’t travel far.” Matthias nodded, but Viridian stepped up to him and cleared her throat loudly.

“Yes?” asked Matthias.

“You have some things that belong to me,” answered Viridian, looking down with a cocked eyebrow at the pistols still in Matthias’ hands. He ducked his head in mild embarrassment.

“Sorry,” he said, handing the pistols back to her. Viridian could not tell if he was apologizing for not returning them, or for taking them in the first place. “Oh, and I think the powder has leached in the left one; the charge isn’t sound.”

Viridian looked at the pistol he was talking about. Experimentally, she pointed it out over the water and squeezed the trigger. The hammer fell, but the shot did not fire. Viridian stared at Matthias in amazement.

“I am a gunmage,” he said with a smirk, explaining how he had known the shot would hangfire.

“You were pointing a useless pistol at me?” Honour asked. Matthias shook his head.

“At Dokor,” he said. The three of them turned to look at the ogrun who had busied himself with the salvaged supplies. If he had heard that he had been faced down by a harmless pistol, he gave no indication. Honour shared Viridian’s amazement for a moment, then the two of them began to walk towards the mangroves. They had only gone a step however, when Honour turned back to ask the gunmage one last question.

“Why?”

“Dokor was not the one I was afraid of,” answered Matthias and then he looked to Garreck, who was sitting on the edge of the jetty, still rubbing his skull. Honour turned and walked away with Viridian, the two talking in hushed tones. Matthias sank to the deck next to Garreck who scowled at him.

“Sorry about that Three Fingers Short,” Matthias apologized. “I was just making a point.”

“Ye sure ‘it ‘ard enough fer makin’ a point!” said Garreck. “Dropped me like a sack!”

“I needed to make sure no one intervened between myself and the lady knight before I had finished speaking.”

“I wouldn’ a’ gotten involved,” Garreck protested. He picked a splinter from his plaited hair. “No wonder you done fer me boys!” The two men were silent for a moment, before Garreck’s words triggered a shock in Matthias.

“Those were Red Serpents in Catskinner’s Alley, not Gosling Street Runners?” he asked the former gang Thane, remembering the two men who had attacked him on his second last night in Five Fingers. Garreck Three Fingers Short nodded. “Why?”

“Oily Hermes leased ‘em out from me,” the rhul explained with a shrug. “ ‘E said somethin’ ‘bout havin’ spent a load on some secret assassin from out’a town, ‘e just wanted some bodies ta clean up after! ‘Parently they got o’er eager and you done ‘em in a’fore the assassin even showed up. When Hermes told me they was dead, I sent ‘im after you for blood feud. I figured I’d win any way it played out. I didn’t know ‘bout Greyfingers, ‘course.”

Matthias shook his head in wonder at the intricacies of underworld politics. More in disbelief than anger, he said, “I saved your life!”

“Yeah, well,” said Garreck, looking with wary eyes at the rocky island in front of them. “A lot o’ things have ‘appened since then!”

27 Clearer Understandings

The edge of the mangroves approached like a curtain woven of contorted branches and skeins of inch thick vines; in spite of their vibrant life, Viridian felt the trees spoke of cloying death, like the heat of the deep jungle. As she and Honour neared the end of the jetty, the half-elven pistoleer wondered how her full-blooded cousins could ever enjoy their close relationship with forests. As far as Viridian was concerned, anything more than four trees in a single group was too much of a forest for her. What this place needed was a couple of steamjacks with axes; big axes.

“Ios are weird,” she muttered under her breath, only partly aware of the irony of cursing her own heritage. Like so many half-elves, she had never known her elven ancestors and viewed their culture with the same mistrust that most humans did.

“What was that?” asked Honour, not looking up from the amulet in her hand. The medallion was made of a set of concentric iron and gold circles, forged together, with a single, flat piece of quartz in the center. As she held it, Honour could sense the presence of her friend and comrade Tarleen of Morridane; to the south-west, near the center of the island. It filled Honour with hope to be so close at last.

“What did you say?” she asked again, looking up at last.

“Nevermind,” Viridian replied with a shrug. “So can we find her?”

“I believe so,” Honour said with a smile.

“Well that’s something.” Viridian looked back over her shoulder, where she could see their companions working at the end of the dock. Heavy-leaved mangrove branches waved down across her vision, giving her a momentary shiver. “I suppose we should fetch the others and go do what we came for.”

“Yes,” Honour agreed. She turned back and caught sight of the three men sorting through their meager supplies. Pausing, she watched them for a space, the amulet in her hand forgotten for a moment. Viridian thought she heard Honour catch her breath.

“Farthing for your thoughts?” she asked. Honour blinked and turned to look at her friend.

“It was an impressive display, was it not?” she asked, referring to Matthias’ recent actions.

“Like Caine,” Viridian agreed, thinking of the Cygnar military’s preeminent gunmage.

“Caine is a warcaster,” Honour protested reflexively.

“And what’s he?” asked Viridian, nodding to where Matthias was leaning over the jetty’s edge, helping Dokor with something in the water. Honour shrugged.

“I just thought...a warcaster...well they are soldiers, not freebooters, as you know.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Viridian mused. She slapped her thigh and chuckled. “Damn, he went through us like a dose of salts. I can’t remember being so easily beaten, not since I was a little sod.”

“He surprised us,” Honour said. Viridian thought she might be about to say more, but Honour’s voice merely trailed off.

“Now what are you thinking?”

Honour drew in a deep breath. “I was remembering,” she explained. “When I was sitting there, his weight pressing upon me and the pistol pointed straight at my eyes. The whole time he was talking, I kept seeing that sea-witch, the satyxis, in my mind. The way she knelt there in front of him. I wondered if she had felt the way I felt.”

“How did you feel?” Viridian asked her friend, studying Honour’s face in surprise. Honour swallowed.

“Funny...strange,” said the paladin hesitating between the words. “Do you think he would have done it? Would he really have shot me?”

“No,” said Viridian reflexively. Then she shrugged and shook her head. “Maybe...I don’t know.”

“He shot her,” said Honour. “Do you think he loved her?”

“How the bloody hell should I know?” Viridian responded, incredulous. Then she realized the true direction her friend’s thoughts were tending. A wry smile twisted her lips. “He’s not Jonneran, is he?”

“No, he is not,” Honour answered honestly, before she realized the direction that Viridian was drawing her. She waved angrily at her friend. “Oh don’t be ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous? Oh I don’t think so!”

Honour said no more, but tried to dismiss the subject with a derisive snort. Viridian chuckled again, knowingly. Honour’s imperious façade slowly melted to a soft mix of insecurity and guilty pleasure. The two women stood together in silence for a moment, sharing their thoughts without speaking in the way that old friends sometimes can.

“It was so much simpler with Jonneran,” Honour said at last.

“You’d rather be with him?” asked Viridian in disbelief.

“No, not at all, but...at least he wasn’t so...complicated.” Honour paused, thinking about the changes in the directions of her heart. A sudden thought gripped her with panic. “Do you think he knows?”

“The Warlock? About you? I don’t know,” said Viridian. “He’s pretty canny, that’s for sure, but even so...probably not.”

“Why not?”

“Well, he’s only a man, isn’t he?”

The two women chuckled and headed back to the others.

Matthias wedged the last of their meager stores up under the jetty, above the high tide line. He pulled hard upon the knotted cord that would hold the makeshift oilskin bags in place and threaded the end back through a gap in the jetty planks, where Garreck's thick fingers took it and tied it off tightly. With a push against a pylon, Matthias swung himself back up to the jetty's edge. As he struggled to get purchase against the slick, wet wood on the jetty's side, Dokor thrust out a massive hand to help. The Warlock took the offered aid and found himself easily levered up onto the edge. Dokor did not let go however; instead, he held the gunmage at the jetty's edge by his grip and drew his face down close to Matthias'. The two stood there for many moments, eye-to-eye and stony-faced. Finally, Garreck broke the silence.

"Some'it on yer mind, big fella?" asked the dwarf warily. "Or is you boys jus' makin' friends?" Dokor did not look down to the rhul standing at his side. All of his attention and powerful presence were focused on Matthias.

"You saved my life today, Matthias Warlock," Dokor said in his clipped, measured voice, his vast shoulders thrust forward so that his upper body all but overshadowed the gunmage. "That fact notwithstanding, I will not let you threaten her again."

"Fair enough," Matthias replied flatly, not shirking from Dokor's angry gaze.

"Mark me, gunmage," Dokor said, emphasizing his words with a shake on Matthias' entrapped hand. "I will give you no further warning."

"I doubt you'll find a need."

"There ya go," Garreck intervened, like a man trying to keep two drunken mates from coming to blows over ill-chosen words. "You warned 'im good an' proper Dokor an' he's marked it an' thinks it won't be no problem. So how's about we jus' finish shakin' on it and put on some smiles, eh? It looks as if th' ladies is comin' back."

Dokor looked to see Honour and Viridian walking back down the jetty. With a helpful pull onto the jetty proper, he released his grip upon Matthias and headed in the women's direction. On the way he bent down to pick up the two sacks that he had sorted with supplies, one for each woman. Dokor handed the first sack to Honour, the second to Viridian.

"'E means it, ye know?" Garreck said quietly, bending down to claim his own small sack and tie it under his belt.

"Of course he means it," said Matthias. The gunmage crouched in front of his own kit bag. On the deck in front of it was the elegant wooden case that held the brace of magelocks the party had claimed from the satyxis ship. He hesitated, his hand hovering over the case's polished brass latch. Then he took it and placed it, unopened, in the top of his kitbag.

"Tha's jus' deadweight if ye ain't gonna use 'em," Garreck observed, referring to the pistols inside.

"I know that," said Matthias testily as he slung his kitbag over his shoulder, gripping the sling rope with one hand. "You're just full of statements of the bleedingly obvious today, aren't you."

Matthias headed up the jetty to join Dokor and the women. Garreck also followed, scowling.

28 Into the Green

It was still an hour from sundown when Honour led the companions off the jetty and into the green gloom under the tree canopy, following a narrow muddy track. The interwoven foliage was as thick as a thatched roof, admitting only dim light, but trapping the heat. The path turned, switchback upon itself several times as it rapidly climbed to a ridge that commanded full views of the entire bay through a single break in the canopy, which ran like a gallery window alongside the path. The break was so tailored to the path that the companions were certain that the island's inhabitants had deliberately created it. In the dying light the half-submerged wreck of the *Puffing Bey* seemed like nothing more than a roughly shaped rock or piece of coral, but on the water around it there floated a strangely multicoloured film.

"Engine oil," Garreck observed to Viridian as the two looked down at the water through the gap. "Like the blood of a machine."

"A poetic observation, old dwarf," answered Viridian. She drew a kerchief from her belt and used it to mop sweat from her face and the back of her neck. "Damn, I'd have expected to get cooler in the shadows, not hotter."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout trees," said Garreck with a shrug.

"Me neither," Viridian agreed and the two of them moved on to keep up with the others.

The group paused at a point on the path at the end of the ridge, while Honour consulted Matthias. In her hand she held the locating amulet.

"I sense her down there," Honour insisted, pointing downwards, where the trail followed the curve of the mountain into a deep-sided gully. "You are sure we shouldn't follow the path?"

"Absolutely," Matthias Warlock said without looking to where Honour pointed. Instead, his eyes were searching above them, looking for something much further up the slope. "I think we need to leave the path here."

"And go upward?" Honour was struggling to keep to her recent resolution to trust Matthias' advice.

"Yes," said the gunmage; he reached out and used a tree trunk to lever himself off the path onto the slope above the ridge. Slipping on the muddy hillside, he proceeded to half walk, half climb up the mountainside. More than once, he went down onto his knees, or caught his foot on the edge of his mage robe. Using branches or trunks or even the fronds of long growing palms, he as much pulled himself upwards and climbed. After watching his progress for a moment, the others followed one at a time. Honour and Viridian did their best to keep their balance, picking their way upward carefully, while behind them Garreck used his lesser height to his advantage by bending forward to almost on all fours, crawling as much as walking. Though he made no better time, he slipped much less. Dokor came last of all, taking advantage of his own unusual height; using a tree trunk as a launching point, he thrust himself one massive step upward and then reached out for another tree trunk to pull himself up by. He made his way in a staggering, stop-start fashion, his path weaving back and forth as he sought suitable trunks within reach.

The companions were scattered up the slope when a low growl issued from Dokor below them.

All turned to see the ogrun crouched behind a tree trunk and watching the path below. In the final rays of daylight, it was difficult to even make out the ogrun's form against the bark and dark earth. The path itself was almost invisible. After a moment the sound of heavy footfalls began to filter up through the rainforest and the companions all hid themselves as best they could behind palms or trees.

Upon the path beneath them, they were able to barely make out three figures. The first two seemed to lumber in heavy armour, their brass-helmeted heads swaying in time with the thumping sound of their footsteps. The third figure moved so smoothly that it seemed to float along, rather than making steps. The trio moved in an unhurried fashion, taking their time and there was something about them that was vaguely unsettling. After a moment's study Honour realized that it was the nature of each figure's motion. The first two moved with a kind of unmotivated gait, as if they could walk without any sense of purpose; they reminded her of oxen yoked to a cart. Even steamjacks and warjacks showed more notion of intention in their motion. It was as if the two figures possessed the power of motion but lacked the strength of will to move on their own. The third figure was the opposite. It moved forward without showing any signs of bodily motion, as though all that it required was the will to move. The darkness settling under the trees made it all but impossible to make out any of the final figure's features, but the three together gave Honour the impression of some perverse shepherd, herding two equally perverse 'sheep' along the mountain path. None of the three looked up the hill, continuing along the path to the shoreline.

"That was they?" Honour asked Matthias as she clambered carefully to his spot beside a tree. The gunmage nodded.

"A cephalyx and two drudges."

"The drudges are men?"

"Aye, or they were once at least," Matthias answered with a nod. "Now they are mere servitors, as un-human as any thrall or mechanism." The pair of them waited in the twilight for the others to clamber to their height. By the time Dokor reached them the sun was gone and the darkness beneath the canopy was as deep as any cave or tunnel. In whispers, Matthias outlined his plan for the night.

"Just above us is a rock outcrop," the gunmage explained. "We should be able to make it there without getting lost. It will give us something to hide behind so we can camp without being seen from the path or slipping down the mountain in the night. Cold camp, of course."

"Of course," agreed Honour readily.

With deliberate care the companions scrambled, single-file, up the final few paces to the rocky outcrop. Each made sure that the one following was never more than a pace behind, reaching out to touch each other in the darkness, so as not to get lost. Eventually they levered themselves over the granite lip and slithered across the table-like surface of the outcrop. Last of all, Dokor pushed up onto the stone, not standing, but sitting cross-legged, with his back leaning against the earth of the steep slope. In the warm darkness they lay flat, listening to the island's myriad small sounds; insects chirruped and lizards skittered across the ground beneath the canopy. From the north spur of the bay there came the distant sound of surf, beating on the shore. Crawling to the edge of the rock, Viridian and Garreck peered into the darkness beneath them.

“Lanterns!” Viridian said, pointing to faint, luminous dots, some way down the mountain to the south.

“I guess,” whispered Garreck. “But from th’ way they’re movin’ I’d swear th’ hands holdin’ ‘em is drunk or stupid.” Viridian understood Garreck’s observation, for the small lights seemed to dance and whirl about in wild and erratic patterns.

“Surely they aren’t fireflies,” Viridian mused. “The lights are too large.”

“Moonwings,” whispered Matthias from further back on the rock. Viridian nodded, unseen in the darkness, but Garreck was still confused.

“What the damn’s a moonwing?” he asked hoarsely.

“A kind of moth or butterfly,” Viridian explained. “With a wingspan about the width of a man’s shoulders.”

“Tha’s a bloody big moth!”

“Aye,” agreed Viridian. “They’re drawn to fires and lanterns; that’s what causes their bodies to light up like that.”

“So they ain’t search lanterns but they could be showing us where the searchers are?” Garreck ventured.

“Unlikely! Drudges do not need light to see by,” Matthias disagreed. “More likely they are a natural phenomenon, a break in the canopy that lets the moonlight in.” Garreck and Viridian went back to watching the dancing luminescence, gradually falling into surprisingly relaxed sleep. Matthias and Honour remained awake much longer.

“They are pleasant to watch,” the paladin whispered, so quietly that only Matthias could hear. “A small blessing of Morrow to ease the tension of our journey.”

“You will count them a curse soon enough,” the gunmage countered. “Their wings drop a fine powder that brings deep slumber. Not dangerous in itself, but on this island a sleep you cannot wake from will be your last, I promise.” Honour said nothing for a moment and there was a deep rustling sound as Dokor adjusted his weight. He was asleep, but it was the alert sleep of an experienced scout.

“Why do you hate my faith so?” Honour asked at last. “Is it really so wrong, what I believe? Or is that what it means to be a heretic; that you hate belief in others?”

“I do not hate your faith,” Matthias said quietly. “Remember that until today my heresy was your cause for cursing me.”

“True, but I cannot understand how anyone can turn their back upon their faith.”

“I have not,” Matthias said. “My faith has turned its back upon me.”

“But why,” Honour asked. “What did you do?” Matthias’ mouth twisted in his familiar wry smile that she could feel in his words, in spite of the darkness.

“It is truly not that simple,” he answered. “And it is not something to be explained in the shadows of a cold camp. The faith you have is something that I once enjoyed, but it has been battered by the beliefs of others. It has become a twisted, cynical grotesque of itself. Nonetheless, it is founded in truth and I will not relinquish it! I do not curse you for your faith, I envy you.” Matthias let his words hang in the warm air.

“But you can be restored,” Honour said eventually, her voice filled with more compassion than Matthias had ever seen her demonstrate before. It was a sweet thing; he shook his head.

“It is not that simple,” he repeated. “Sleep now, and pray that Morrow will gird that simple faith of yours; tomorrow will bring it some heavy shocks.” Matthias lowered his head to the rock, arranging his arms underneath as an uncomfortable pillow.

“Where do we go tomorrow?” asked Honour.

“To meet a maggot.”

29 Maggot

The dawn awakened the rainforest to a chorus of chirruping and birdcalls. By the time the sun was fully above the horizon, the group had made their way upward from their night camp, climbing the slope to just below the shoulder of the mountain. There Matthias directed them to a shadowy cleft between two faces of rock. Being a dwarf, Garreck poked his head through the opening first, then ducked back to deliver his 'professional' opinion.

"This openin's nat'ral, but there's a tunnel jus' inside 'as been purposely built," he declared. Matthias nodded.

"This is the exit to a secret access-way to the cephalyx settlement."

"Settlement?" asked Viridian. The gunmage nodded.

"What else should I call it?" he asked with a shrug.

"I don't know. It just seems like such a benign term."

"So we just follow this tunnel?" asked Honour. Matthias shook his head.

"There's more to it, isn't there?" Garreck observed sourly.

"Of course," Matthias replied, his familiar sardonic smile playing again on his lips.

"After all this time, did you expect it to be otherwise? Now for this next bit, it would be best if you all kept behind me."

"Why?" asked Honour.

"Because the owner of this tunnel can be an unpleasant fellow," the gunmage answered, reaching into his duffle bag. He pulled out an amulet of graven silver, hung from a simple leather cord. Passing the cord over his head, he flashed them all one more smile. "He knows me."

Matthias Warlock slipped between the rocks and down the lip to the tunnel proper. The rock was dark, volcanic granite, riddled through with slivers of basalt that twinkled damply in the moist air. After very few steps though, the light from the opening faded and deep shadow awaited. Matthias paused for a moment and uttered a few arcane phrases, effecting a magical transformation to allow himself to see without light. From behind him there came a sarcastic cough. Turning, he saw Viridian standing in the tunnel entrance with her hands on her hips, frowning.

"I'm sure your magic works wonderfully for you, but what are the rest of us supposed to do?" she asked archly.

“I’m fine,” said Garreck, pushing past the half-elf and into the tunnel. Viridian glared at the back of his head. “I thought elves had good eyes.”

“There’s a difference between good eyes and seeing in pitch darkness,” she snapped. “And all the Ios eyesight in the world isn’t going to help Honour, is it?”

“She ‘as a point, Warlock,” Garreck conceded. The three stood in silence for a moment and from the entrance to the caves there came the sound of grunting and a despairing sigh. Honour then stood beside them, a bull’s-eye lantern in hand, its shutter’s pulled open.

“Seems like the problem’s solved,” observed the dwarf.

Honour cast him a momentary, quizzical look, but did not wait to see if he would explain further. Instead she pressed past him to Matthias’ side.

“There is no way that Dokor is going to be able to fit through this tunnel, not unless it widens very soon,” she informed the gunmage. “Even on all fours, he will barely fit.” Matthias winced and sucked his breath over his teeth.

“I half-hoped it wouldn’t be a problem,” he admitted. “But the tunnel is like this almost the whole way. I guess he will have to wait for us here.”

Honour studied Matthias’ face for a long moment, looking for a crack in the gunmage’s certainty. At last she sighed in acceptance. Eyes downcast, she pushed back up the tunnel. As she passed Viridian, the two exchanged knowing glances and nods of resignation.

The three in the tunnel waited in silence as Honour gave Dokor the bad news. There was no cry of refusal, no heated denial, only quiet. Everyone knew that Dokor would accept the situation with the same stoicism he brought to every aspect of his life.

“Can’t be easy on ‘im,” Garreck whispered just before Honour reappeared.

“You have no idea,” Viridian replied in a whisper that was almost swallowed by the sound of Honour’s armour as the woman knight reentered the tunnel. She held the lantern up so that its light fell over all four of them. Her face showed clearly the pain leaving her battle-brother behind. The unpleasant silence continued for several moments until at last, Honour spoke.

“It cannot be avoided,” she acknowledged, accepting the situation. “He understands that. It is no treachery to ask him to guard our escape.” They all nodded their agreement, but Honour’s tone conveyed none of the certainty of her words.

Matthias led the way deeper into the tunnel.

For some time the four made their way into the darkness, the light of Honour's lantern lancing into the blackness ahead. The air cooled rapidly and the tunnel soon became quite steep. Viridian and Honour both lost their footing at different points, their boots missing uneven rocks amidst the shadows. Even Matthias, who led with confidence, cursed at one point, slipping on an unseen patch of moss. Only Garreck's mood seemed to lighten as the dark journey continued, his rhuilic heritage coming to the fore. He smiled broadly and even sighed happily on occasions. Viridian was about to suggest that he shut up before she shoved her fist down his throat, when Matthias brought them to a halt with a hiss of warning. He signaled for them to follow him slowly.

Matthias crept forward, the amulet now held in his left hand. Rounding a slight bend, he came upon a fork in the tunnel. To the right, the tunnel continued on a gentle, downward path. To the left, a parallel path dropped six feet in only a few paces, before continuing onward for many more paces. The two paths remained effectively parallel, so that the right hand path seemed like a raised gallery to the left hand path. From down in the darkness at the end of the length of the two paths there came a scratching sound, similar to rats in the corners of houses, but louder and somehow more disturbing. As the others rounded the corner, the light of the lantern revealed the figure of a bone thin man, his skin so white that it was virtually translucent. Whatever clothes he had once possessed were long gone, with only a threadbare loincloth covering his nakedness. The hair on his head was long and ragged, so thin that it almost looked like cobwebs. He crouched at the end of the left hand tunnel, apparently digging through the rock with his own bony fingers. As the light played across his body, he ceased his digging and whistled quietly. With a shriek, he turned and charged wildly towards the companions.

Matthias thrust the medallion in his hands forward and shouted at the charging figure to halt. In spite of the fury of the creature's assault, it recoiled from the presented silver amulet as though the object were a burning brand. Alternately whimpering and hissing, the figure retreated to the end of the lower tunnel, glaring at Matthias with eyes black like long dried blood. The others crowded behind Matthias as he addressed the pallid monstrosity.

"We meet again, Maggot," Matthias said. In spite of the insulting nature of the epithet, it seemed to the others an appropriate term. The figure so plainly resembled a maggot. "You have made some good distance since last time."

"What is that thing?" Viridian asked, as Maggot hissed again at Matthias.

"A shaft wight," answered Garreck with a tremor in his voice.

"What's it doing here?"

"Digging," said Matthias flatly. Viridian and Honour both snorted in disgust, but Matthias dared a look over his shoulder to show his earnest face. "I am serious. This is what they do."

“He ain’t lyin’,” Garreck concurred. “These things is the bane o’ all miners.”

“Why?” asked Honour. “I can see that it’s disgusting, but hardly all that fearsome...” Her words were cut short as the shaft wight suddenly sprayed a wet mixture of gravel and dust from its mouth, as if vomiting the rocky matter from a recent, geological meal. The brackish particles sprayed across the lower tunnel floor in a foul smelling puddle.

“That’s why,” Garreck answered. “Woe betide ye git that in yer mouth or eyes.” The two women waited for the dwarf to finish his explanation, their eyes never leaving the maggot.

“Why?” they both asked in frustration.

“It is how they make more of their own kind,” Matthias answered. “The amulet will keep him at a safe distance though.”

“So why waste time with the magic?” asked Viridian, her face contorting in disgust. “Why not just kill the thing?”

“It serves a purpose.”

“What purpose could this abomination possibly serve?” Honour asked in revolted disbelief.

“A lesser evil to stopper a more vile container,” Matthias answered enigmatically.

“If ye reckon,” Garreck muttered. “So what do we do now?”

“We leave Maggot to his digging,” said Matthias, ushering the others down the right passage with his free hand. The group made their way cautiously along the ledge-like path, making sure to stay as far from Maggot as possible. Matthias acted as a shield man, keeping the medallion at arm's length, its power forcing Maggot further back into the cleft of its own mining. At last the others were all past the branching tunnel and Matthias crept along the ledge. Just as he was passing the end of the lower tunnel, Maggot again spewed forth a spray of wet, black gravel. The gout of muck splattered against the wall of the lower passage, with only the smallest amount reaching the toes of Matthias’ boots.

“Uh-uh,” Matthias chided. “Do not be rude; we were just leaving! Be nice and next time I’ll bring you a shovel...or a pick.” Maggot only screeched as the power of Matthias’ amulet pressed closely upon the undead’s being. At last, Matthias stepped through the opening at the other end of the upper passage and left Maggot behind.

“Won’t it follow us?” asked Viridian as Matthias joined the others further along the tunnel. The gunmage shook his head.

“Maggot would not hesitate to rip us apart and pour that filth down into us to make more of his kind, but he does not care about us and now that we have gone, he will return to his digging and not give us another thought.”

“You talk about it like an old friend,” Honour observed. Matthias shook his head with a wry smile.

“Not quite,” he said. “But there was a time when I was all but certain Maggot’s would be the last face I would ever see. It has left me with a certain affection for the ugly brute.”

“Where was it digging to?” Viridian asked as Matthias made his way to the front of the line once more.

“I do not know,” the gunmage answered.

“No one knows,” added Garreck. “Damn things just dig; dig an’ kill miners!”

30 The Aviary Temple

After a long time in darkness the tunnel finally emerged onto a ledge that ran to the left along the sheer rock face of a deep ravine. Looking upward the company could see the sunlight, perhaps a hundred feet above them. Over the edge, the dark coloured rock plunged downward beyond the deepest reach of the light. The other side of the chasm was as featureless as the side with the ledge, twenty or thirty paces distant across the yawning space. After the pressing confines of the tunnel, the sudden openness seemed to almost suck at their bodies, threatening to draw them into a fatal fall.

“Well this was unexpected,” said Viridian. Even at normal volume her voice echoed off the rock walls. “Where to now?”

“Does it look like we got alot ‘o choices?” quipped Garreck with a mocking smile. Viridian cuffed him on the shoulder.

“The path follows a curve around to the left out of sight,” explained Matthias.

“Then what?”

“You will see!”

The ledge was broad enough for the party to walk single file. Honour took the lead at the head of the line. From somewhere above the sound of birdsong trilled through the air, answered by another avian voice. As the corner drew nearer, so the numbers of birdcalls grew. Cautiously Honour reached out with a hand to grasp the corner of the wall and stepped around.

“Mercy of Morrow!” she swore, her face rising in astonishment. Out of concern for her comrade, Viridian stepped past Garreck, dangerously risking a fall. As she rounded the corner she too breathed a disbelieving oath.

In the midst of the ravine rose a pagoda, a ten-sided tower, three levels in height. It was built from some ancient wood as pale as cream and its beams and gables were as ornate as any temple any of them had seen. Carved dragons festooned the walls, their scales painted in brilliant reds, blues and greens. Murals on every wall depicted dragons and birds in flight. The bottom floor had no windows, but on the second floor were openings barred with intricately woven patterns of wood. The top floor, the smallest of the three, had neither windows nor walls, only ten wooden pillars that supported the pointed, tile roof. Through the spaces of the third level flew birds of innumerable species. Predator and prey, they flew into and out of the temple and roosted under the tower-top roof. Their cries echoed from the ravine walls and mingled with a blowing breeze that descended from above. Most amazingly though, the pagoda seemed to float in the space of the ravine, free of the ground and connected to the rock wall by only a flimsy wooden footbridge that looked as if it would break under the weight of a single mortal foot, let alone the massive weight of the tower. As they approached, the four could see a similar bridge crossing from the pagoda to the other side of the ravine.

“Did you know this was here?” asked Honour looking in wonder from the tower to Matthias at the back of the line. The gunmage smiled and nodded.

“This is the Aviary Temple of the Order of the Nine Dragons.”

“The Order o’ what?” asked Garreck.

“The Nine Dragons.”

“Toruk worshippers?” Honour demanded, suspicious of the title.

“Not in the least,” said Matthias with a chuckle.

Honour came level with the footbridge and found the remains of what might once have been statues, broken down to the very foundations. Standing at the ravine end of the bridge, the others joined her and together they watched the birds swoop and fly around the temple. Their flight was a pleasure to watch and all found themselves smiling for a moment, the meditative sight temporarily lifting the heavy burdens of their long journey.

“So we cross here, right?” asked Viridian.

“I hope so,” said Matthias, a note of uncertainty in his voice. He led the way out onto the footbridge. The ancient wood was deeply crusted with the droppings of a hundred generations of birds. Though the gunmage seemed to almost float over the noisome surface, the boots of the other three cut into the ancient guano, kicking up grey-white puffs of dust. The bridge had neither rails nor handholds and as they walked, the dark ravine seemed to leer at them. They fixed their eyes on the temple entry ahead, trying to forget the pagoda’s impossible position in space.

Matthias stopped just inside the doorway of the temple and the other three gathered up behind him. The entire first floor of the pagoda was a single open space and across the opposite side they could see the entryway for the other bridge. A further short walk would take them to the other side of the ravine and the only thing that blocked their way was a thin, bald man sitting in the middle of the floor. Wearing a simple robe of tan cotton and a white belt, he sat on his feet with his eyes closed and his hands in his lap.

After a moment the group noticed eight others, all seated in the same fashion as the monastic, around the walls. Three of the figures seemed to be women, but all were shaven-headed and still. On their shoulders, each of the eight around the walls had small birds, twittering and trilling in their ears. Some would alight, sing for a time and then fly away, only to be replaced by other birds. It was as if the sparrows and gulls, crows and swallows, all stopped to gossip with each other while the monks sat quietly and listened. Only the monk in the middle was unattended by any avians.

“What’s with the birds?” asked Viridian, ducking as a magpie swept past her face.

“They come from across the kingdoms,” whispered Matthias. “They tell the monks the news of the world. These nine monks are more informed than chroniclers and better studied than the greatest sages.”

“Informed? By birds?” scoffed Garreck. “What’s a bird know?”

“They know better than some to not let underlings plot against them, Master Three-Fingers-Short,” said the monk in the middle of the floor without opening his eyes. Matthias and Viridian smirked but Garreck scowled to be reminded of his betrayal by Greyfingers the gobbler.

“So you knows me name, so what?”

If the monk heard Garreck's reply, he gave no indication. Matthias lowered himself to his knees and bowed to the floor, making obeisance. The others watched, unsure if they were expected to do the same. As Matthias lifted himself to sit back on his knees, one of the other monks spoke, causing the swallow on her shoulder to pause in its song and stand by, twitching its wings.

"You still wear our sash," she said. Her face was not deeply lined, so that she seemed no more than forty years of age, and her voice was strong, but there was the weight of ages in her words. "Have you thought to return it?"

Matthias unwound the sash from around his waist and folded it, placing it neatly on the floor in front of him.

"It has served me well, No Sa," he said with a quiet humility that surprised his companions. They had never seen him so humble. "You said I would have a chance to return the gift. I did not believe you, but I have been proved wrong."

"Even so," said the nun No Sa. None of the other monks spoke, but the birdsong quieted completely so that silence filled the pagoda. In the quiet the sound of the breeze outside could be heard and the wood of the impossible temple groaned softly in the moving air. As the quiet continued the companions shifted back and forth, unclear what was expected of them. Honour leaned forward to ask Matthias what to do next when another monk spoke, sending the bird on his shoulder fluttering away out the entry on the opposite side.

"You wish to ask for something more." It was not a question.

"We need to pass through the temple, No Den."

"The temple is not a passage, but a journey," answered the monk No Den. "You know this."

Matthias nodded, but it was Viridian who spoke.

"So can we make the journey?" she asked. There was an impatience to her voice. None of the monks replied directly, but it seemed to the pistoleer that the one in the middle cocked his head to listen to her, as if she was another bird singing in his ear. She felt suddenly like a little girl in a room full of adults.

"Ah, sod this!" said Garreck harshly and with one hand on the hilt of his short sword, as if he expected trouble, he shouldered past Matthias. It was clear that he meant to force the issue. He had set his boot down on the floor of the pagoda proper when the monk in the middle of the floor moved. Like the blur of a hummingbird's wings, the monk surged forward with a motion almost too fast to be seen and his palm landed flat on the dwarf's chest. The force of the push lifted Garreck bodily into the air and flung him out of the temple. He landed on the footings of the bridge and skidded onto the ledge, ending up lying stunned against the ravine wall. The monk stood peacefully with his hands clasped in front of his chest. Viridian and Honour looked at his now open eyes and were astonished to see they were nearly white with rheumy blindness.

"Ill manners are ill desired," he said with a quiet voice.

31 *The Nine Dragons*

Viridian's hands went to her pistols, but Matthias stood and put a hand on her arm before she could throw down. Honour's own hand went to her sword and she pulled the blade forth an inch before addressing the monks of the Nine Dragons. Although she kept her eyes on the blind monk in front of her, it was clear from her tone that she spoke to all nine.

"We desire no violence, but our need is great," she said in a loud voice. Birds took flight at the sound so that soon there was nothing for the monks to listen to but the paladin's words. "Beyond your temple is a great evil and it imprisons a dear comrade. We mean to rescue her and your temple is the only passage we know of. We must pass through; we cannot accept any denials."

"She cannot accept," said one of the monks.

"Impatient on the journey," said another.

"She is just like the god she worships," said Na So, the nun. "As he leads, so she follows."

"Morrow is impatient?" asked Honour, so confused by the claim that she did not think to be offended by the criticism of her deity. She looked at Matthias for clarification. He nodded slowly.

"Before he ascended to divinity Morrow studied here with the Nine Dragons," he explained.

"What? No!" Honour could not believe what was being said.

"Argument cannot dissuade the truth," said No Den. "What is, is."

"But it's heresy," she began but stopped as she remembered Matthias was standing beside her.

"You did not think they excommunicated me for my dress sense, did you?" he asked with a wry smile. She stared at him.

"You believe them?"

"We know that Morrow and his sister traveled many places in their life," said the Warlock with a shrug. "They both studied many things from many sources in their quest to rise. There is no reason why they could not both have studied here."

"But that would mean this temple has stood for centuries, for over a millennia!"

“At least.”

“Then it is dedicated to Menoth?” Honour’s grip on her sword tightened as she asked about the god of the ancient faith. Behind her Garreck groaned as he returned to the temple entry, rubbing his head and straightening his leather jack. With suspicious eyes, Viridian and Honour scanned the nine mystics. When her eyes finally returned to Matthias, the gunmage shook his head gently.

“It was dissatisfaction with the worship of Menoth that led Morrow to consult these monks,” he explained. “Or so they say.” Honour lowered her eyes, thinking.

“Wha’s goin’ on?” asked Garreck, his voice softer and lower than before.

“Apparently these monks trained Morrow and his sister when they were still mortals,” Viridian whispered.

“These monks? Them some old buggers?”

“We have waited here since before the Orgoth crossed the seas,” said one of the monks.

“Perfecting what we know,” said another.

“Never teaching without learning as well,” said No Sa.

“Guarding a path which we will only walk twice.”

“What path?” asked Viridian. Her hands had long since fallen from her pistol butts and she watched the monks in fascination. Her mind struggled to fathom the notion of people who were over a thousand years old.

“Our path,” said Matthias. “Down into the belly of the beast.” The conversation stopped for a moment and the sound of birds could be heard from the aviary above. The pagoda creaked in the wind.

“How can the Church not know these things?” asked Viridian.

“Prob’ly do,” said Garreck. Honour scowled at him, looking up as if awakening from a daydream. The dwarf only shrugged his shoulders. “Jus’ coz they don’t teach it, don’t mean they don’t know it!”

Honour looked at Matthias who met her eyes for a moment and then looked away gently, as if he did not want to hurt her by confirming the difficult story with his glance. She looked down to the floor again and shook her head, trying to make what she was learning fit with her faith.

“What then?” asked Honour. “If you are so ancient and mighty that you could teach Morrow, how can we satisfy you? What must we do to cross your temple? I will pay any price, I promise you!”

“As Morrow promised, so does she,” said a monk.

“He fulfilled his promise,” said another.

“She cannot,” said a third.

“No, she cannot pay,” said No Den in his soft voice.

“Do you doubt me?” Honour demanded. There was an edge of desperation in her voice. “You cannot deny me! I have traveled too far! I will not be left out in the night! I will pay whatever you ask, only open the door...” Tears began to flow down her cheeks and her hand twisted on the hilt of her sword, as if she fought to keep herself from drawing it. “I have seen your skill and do not doubt you would defeat me in combat, but if you force me, I will fight to win through to the other side! I will die before I turn back!”

“As will I!” declared Viridian.

Honour looked back at her comrade and the two shared a smile of loyalty and commitment. Next to Viridian, Garreck did not share the smile, but shrugged and looked away. She had not expected his support. Turning back to Matthias she looked to see if he would stand by her. He did not say anything but looked at her with a piercing gaze that seemed for a moment to block out the rest of her vision. She shivered as he looked into her and in his eyes she read something she did not understand at first. With a rush of surprise she realized it was admiration, honest and unabashed. He smiled and in spite of the difficult circumstances, she smiled back.

“You cannot pay us in any currency we would accept,” No Den said. Honour was thinking about his words when Matthias surprised her a second time.

“I can, can’t I?” he said. No Den nodded.

“What currency?” asked Honour.

“One may walk a path one thousand times and learn nothing more than was learnt the first time the path was walked,” said a monk.

“Then on the thousand and first time, discover something that had remained unseen all the previous times,” said No Sa.

“We guard the path we will only walk twice,” said another monk.

“We must learn all we can before we walk the path again!” said No Den.

“What does that mean?” Honour demanded. She looked down and saw that next to her Matthias hand unslung his duffle bag from his shoulder and was removing the box with the matched pair of pistols inside. She looked back to No Den. “That is all you want? Pistols?”

The monks ignored her, but Viridian thought she understood.

“Not pistols,” said the pistoleer. “Magelocks.”

“Will you give them the guns, Matthias?” Honour asked.

The gunmage paused and looked at her.

“You called me Matthias,” he said, as if using his name had some special significance. Then he shook his head. “They do not want me to give them the weapons.”

“Well what do they damn well want?” Garreck demanded, losing grip on his patience once more. As his angry voice echoed around the temple floor he glanced at No Den who met his gaze with calm. In spite of the monk’s apparent blindness, something in his expression unnerved Garreck and the dwarf lowered his head. He muttered something unheard under his breath and rubbed at his chest where the monk’s push had landed.

“I will teach you of the art of the gunmage and the magelock if you will open the way to my companions,” Matthias offered out loud, holding the inlaid box under one arm

“Thank you, Matthias,” said Honour and Viridian clasped his shoulder, to show her own gratitude. There was a long moment, as the monks seemed to consider the Warlock’s offer, though they did not speak a single word to each other.

“We will accept this offer,” No Den declared finally. “The way is opened to you and to the companion you hope to return with. Walk the path ahead and return.” He stood to one side and the line to the doorway on the other side of the temple was open and clear.

“Thank you! Thank you!” said Honour. She looked to Matthias. “How long will it take you to show them?” The gunmage shook his head and smiled. Honour had a sense that she had missed a vital point.

“The way is opened to you, not to me.”

“What? Why not?”

“He will not ever leave,” declared No Sa.

“Why?” demanded Viridian and Honour at the same time.

“It has been decided.”

“Decided by whom?” asked Viridian. The monks did not answer. No Den stood as impassive as a statue.

“I cheated,” said Matthias finally. The others all turned to look at him. “I dragged Marsendat up that damn path and when I got to this temple I thought for sure I was delivered. The Nine Dragons would not let me pass. I begged and pleaded with them, all the time terrified that the cephalyx would come and drag me back to their laboratories, turn me into a drudge. Marsendat raved and drooled and I debated with the masters here. When at last I understood what they wanted, to learn of new methods of combat, new weapons or new techniques, I nearly despaired. I was a novice, I knew nothing new or original. At last I proposed a deal, if they let me pass with Marsendat I promised to learn a new art and return with the knowledge. I meant it when I struck the deal; I even began my study of arcane guncraft so that I could fulfill my commitment. Then the Church cut me off and I stopped caring. I never thought to come back here.”

“You have known this all along,” said Honour. “You’ve known they would not let you leave once you returned?”

“I knew my own treachery; I did not imagine they would trust me twice.”

“But you still led us here. You didn’t look for another way.”

“There is no other way.”

“I never...never thought...” Honour’s voice trailed off. Matthias smiled gently.

“I left thirty friends and comrades here,” he said. “I try to forget them, but I cannot. I did not want to help you, did not want to have to, but the truth is...I would not leave a rat to those monsters. Go, save her and get back here.”

Honour stared at Matthias for a long time, until Viridian began to shift quietly towards the opposite side of the temple. Garreck also headed across the wooden floor, his heavy footsteps causing the boards to creak. Viridian took hold of Honour’s hand, but the paladin would not move.

“Honour,” said her friend. “We have to go.”

Honour turned to follow for a moment and then stopped. With sudden speed, she strode to Matthias and grabbed the front of his robe. Twisting it in her grip she pulled his face towards hers and kissed him passionately. When she was finished, she drew back but did not let go of him.

“I think I would have liked more,” she said. “But I’ll be damned if I’m going to leave you without at least having that!”

The three of them crossed the temple and just before he walked across the other bridge Garreck asked one last question.

“I don’t suppose you have a plan for getting us off this little rock, should we actually manage to get this little filly out of her prison?”

“Do I have to think of everything?” quipped Matthias. “One thing at a time. You just get her back here.”

32 *In Uncertain Darkness without a Guide*

Somehow the wind was even stronger on the other side of the Nine Dragons temple and as Honour led her last two companions down the path following the ravine wall, she thought she could feel the breeze blow past her in pulsing rushes, like the air from a smith's forge or the puff of a vast steam engine. She sniffed the air for any scent of steam or smoke, but could not find any. Looking over her shoulder at the two behind, she noticed Garreck walked with his head down, ignoring his companions, his hand always on the hilt of his fighting blade. Viridian caught Honour's gaze and the two of them looked back one last time. Behind them the impossible pagoda rocked and vibrated in the wind while birds circled and swooped. There was a sound that might have been the retort of a gun, but the wind snatched it away before it could be recognized.

Soon enough the path began to turn inward to the wall and the temple passed from sight. The trio was confronted by an iron gate, with bars so ancient it had turned completely red and scabrous with rust. Near where the gate met the rock floor of the path, three of the bars had been bent out of the way, to create a small gap, enough for a man to squeeze through. This was where Matthias had escaped five years before and the exit had never been repaired. Honour thought that it boded well; it was possible the cephalyx knew nothing of this weakness in their defenses. She face the other two once more.

"Well this is it," she said. "We have made it this far and beyond this gate is the comrade we came to save."

The other two nodded grimly.

"Who's gonna save us though, eh?" asked Garreck.

"Put your faith in Morrow," urged the paladin. The dwarf was not impressed. Viridian was likewise uninspired by her old friend's urging.

"This isn't the time to be making converts," she said.

"I am not proselytizing," said Honour. "But I tell you truly, Morrow led Matthias out of here five years ago and we were led to find him so that we could rescue Tarleen. I am certain of this fact! I am surer now of the truth of my vision than ever before! We are here to rescue a priest of the faith."

"But we aren't priests of the faith!" Viridian protested. "We aren't faithful or holy! Matthias is a heretic; Garreck's a street thief! I am...I was a whore!"

"And I am the castoff bitch doxy of a noble family," said Honour, naming her shame openly. "I was abandoned to the night and the wolves, but I have found such allies and comrades as few have ever enjoyed. If this is not Morrow's blessing, then what is? And if such as we do not need Morrow's mercy, then who does? Trust in his care and the true vision he sends!"

“This true vision?” asked Garreck. “Does it ‘appen to show you anythin’ ‘bout a mature and wordly but nonetheless ruggedly ‘andsome dwarf survivin’ to escape this bloody rock?” Viridian and Honour both smirked in spite of the circumstances. Honour put her hand on Garreck’s shoulder.

“I will make a pact with you, Three Fingers Short,” she said and then she looked past him to Viridian. “We will all make a pact. Before Morrow and Katrena we swear that none of us leaves unless we all do. So if Morrow’s going to get me off this island, he will have to take you too! How does that sound?”

“So at least I won’t die alone, is tha’ it?”

Honour smiled, shaking her head.

“It is all I have to offer,” she said. Viridian smiled as well. Garreck shrugged and bent down to look at the gap in the bars.

“Tain’t a big ‘ole! Looks as the gunmage ‘as gained some weight since ‘e went through ‘ere.”

“Can you make it?”

“I can,” said the dwarf. “I don’t fancy yer chances though, not wi’ that armour.”

“Easy enough,” said Honour and she began unbuckling the straps of her pauldrons and other armour pieces. Garreck and Viridian pushed themselves into the gap, one after the other. By the time they were through Honour had removed all of the bulky parts of her protection, leaving her breastplate, the greaves on her lower legs and her gauntlets. Her only other garment was a pair of moleskin leggings. Laying herself flat against the ground, she squeezed through the gap under the bars, pushing her sheathed war sword ahead of her. In spite of her efforts to fit the gap, the back of her breastplate still dragged against one of the bent bars and the metal squealed loudly in the close darkness of the tunnel beyond. Viridian and Garreck watched the dark path ahead with weapons at the ready. With every screaming inch of Honour’s passage they waited for the silently floating figure of a cephalyx or the thudding footfalls of a drudge, coming to catch them at the gate, but no monsters emerged from the shadows.

“Who leaves a hole in their defenses after a prisoner has escaped through it?” asked Viridian in disbelief as Honour finally pushed herself to her feet and hooked her sword to her belt once more.

“Why question our good fortune?” asked Honour with a shrug. Their dwarven companion had a different thought.

“Ye don’t waste time searching for every little ‘ole a rat can climb through,” Garreck answered Viridian’s question. “Ye send a ratter out ta kill ‘em.”

“Maybe so, but once you know it’s there, it serves you well to block the hole if you can.”

Three Fingers Short said nothing further. He looked past Honour to the pieces of armour she had left on the other side of the gate.

“Ye want ta pull them bits through?”

She shook her head. “On the way back there’s a good chance we will want to move with haste,” she explained. “I may not have time to disrobe again. Better to leave it for now.”

Garreck moved forward into the darkness, his Rhul-born senses requiring no light to see by. In only a few short paces the two women lost sight of him in the inky shadows while they stood by the gate. He returned and reported.

“The passage turns to the right about twenty paces down,” he told them. “Around the bend it goes straight some ways. There’s some sort o’ light comin’ from the other end o’ tha’ tunnel! It ain’t much ta see by exactly, but if ya keep yer hands to the wall ye should make yer way sound enough, least ‘til the light gets stronger.”

“Well, this is what we came for,” said Viridian. “We’re here now.”

“Short both of the two mages who would have been more than a little help,” Honour said wryly, her face recognizably sour, even in the shadows. “Without Dokor; without the extra weapons and equipment we brought with us on the *Bey*.”

“I thought you had faith in your vision?”

“I do,” she affirmed. “But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like this to be a bit easier!” She gave them both one last shadowed look. “No one gets left behind!”

“No one gets left behind,” they agreed. Garreck led them down into the uncertain darkness.

33 The Shaft

Groping for the dry rock wall of the tunnel, Honour crept forward by inches. In spite of Garreck's claim that there would be some light to see by, the paladin found only pressing blackness. The tunnel seemed a physical manifestation of the recent passage of her life, a hesitant and inexorable crawl into unending darkness, pressing on in the hope of finding the light.

There'd better be a light at the end of this tunnel, Morrow! she prayed silently.

Even only a month ago she would have chastised herself for taking such a tone with her god, but too much had changed. Somehow she knew that the god she had believed Morrow to be was a false image. She was learning something new of him, something more intimate and true. Morrow was not like Menoth, the hard and unyielding taskmaster. She had treated him that way, lived in fear of him, as though he waited for the least excuse to fall upon her with brutal judgment. Now Honour saw that she was wrong and that her god had drawn her out into this quest to reveal more of himself.

That was why the gunmage had been along too. Matthias Warlock was everything that Honour thought Morrow despised, but under his rakish charm and angry heresy, he was as devout as any she had known, believing the truth of Morrow's teaching even as he was shut out from the church that did the teaching. As she stepped ever forward, grasping for the coming light, Honour realized that there was more to holiness than miters and chaunsels, than robes and rituals.

The tunnel wall curved away to the right and the paladin traced the wall with her hand. Rounding the turn she finally began to see the light Garreck had reported. It began as a gentle radiance, so soft that it was little more than an undertone to the black darkness. By slow steps, the radiance grew to a discernible purple glow, so that soon the tunnel's opposite wall became visible. Looking over her shoulder, the paladin nearly started as the reflected radiance made Viridian's normally green eyes momentarily glow a deep violet colour.

"Eyes like a wolf," she whispered. When Viridian cocked her head with curiosity Honour explained, "Your eyes are reflecting the light, like a wolf's."

"Elvish eyes," said the pistoleer with a shrug. "They all do it."

"I never noticed."

"If you ladies could finish this little chat ano'ver time," hissed Garreck from behind Viridian. Honour nodded and crept forward once more.

Ahead, the tunnel turned tightly to the left and the purple light came from around the corner. Sneaking up to the turn as quietly as she was able in her armour, Honour could hear mechanical sounds that seemed to echo loudly, as if in a large chamber. She

crouched down, her back leaned against the tunnel wall, and the other two joined her. For a time the three of them merely listened to the noise. They said nothing but communicated their fears and uncertainties with silent glances. At last Viridian signaled that she would take the risk and she stepped softly around the corner.

“Saint’s tits!” she swore openly and both Garreck and Honour rolled their eyes in exasperation. Viridian stepped back around the corner and waved to her companions. “You have to see this!”

With a shrug, the two followed her around the corner and both realized immediately why she had not bothered to attempt stealth. The tunnel opened out onto a circular shaft that dropped into the earth and out of sight. The shaft was easily fifty paces across and it was sealed by a roof of rock no more than a dozen feet above them. The tunnel opened onto a ledge that ran both ways around the circumference of the shaft. Almost out of sight around to their left an iron ladder mounted to the wall let down to another shelf-like ledge ten feet below. That ledge was followed by another and by still more, evenly spaced down the wall of the shaft until the detail was lost in darkness.

Looking downward though, all their eyes were drawn to the source of the light. Suspended, apparently in the air, fifty to sixty feet below them, was a vast sphere of glass, easily thirty paces across. The sphere was bound inside a network of curved ironwork, as if caught in a net. Inside the sphere a cloud of glowing purple mist swirled in an ever-shifting maelstrom, like a storm trapped in a bottle, unable to blow itself out and raging eternally. The light from the cloud bathed the entire shaft in purple, defying the eyes to find bright colours. Though it lit the darkness, the radiance seemed to crush the soul and standing in its presences felt vaguely sickening, like the nausea of a boat rocking on a choppy sea.

Looking past the strange device, the companions could see further ironworks and glass conduits that siphoned away zephyrs of purple to machines and devices further down the shaft. Looking at first like swarming flies, dark leather-clad shapes of cephalyx floated around the machinery, tending to their arcane functions. At a distance the cephalyx seemed genuinely insectoid, often possessing too many limbs. It took Honour some time to realize that the humanoids had mechanisms attached to their backs, which furnished them with further limbs. These mechanical appendages reminded the paladin of arms of steamjacks, moving by means of pistons and gears, but they were of finer manufacture than Honour had ever seen.

As they watched, the companions began to pick out other figures lumbering around the sides of the shaft and along iron bridges that ran between the alien devices that hung in the shaft beneath the globe.

“What keeps it up?” whispered Viridian.

“Magic,” said Garreck. Viridian rolled her eyes. Beside them, Honour was holding onto the seeker amulet that she used to know the location of their comrade. Her eyes glazed

over and she stared down into the shaft. At last she returned her focus to her companions and she nodded.

“She is here,” said Honour and she grimaced. “Somehow, we have to get down there without being seen. It will not be easy.”

“Of course it won’t be easy,” said an unexpected voice behind them and they turned with a start. Standing beside them in the tunnel was Jonneran, a look of cold self-importance in his eyes. Honour could not suppress a shiver as she met his eyes. She had not expected this.

34 *Old Uncertainties in the Heart of Darkness*

The three companions stared in disbelief as the eldritch purple glow lit Jonneran's mocking gaze, his Fraternal Order robe seeming to enfold him in dark shadows. Honour felt her chest constrict, as if the pit of her stomach was an endless fall and hanging over it, her heart shrank back in fear. She watched him with fixed gaze, fearful of his previous hold over her. For his part, Jonneran did not appear to register her presence. He was equally disdainfully of them all.

"How'd you git 'ere?" Garreck demanded.

"Honestly, did you think the hedgewizard would be the only one capable of finding a way in?" Jonneran asked in reply. "It is no great challenge." He paused and looked about, as if suddenly noticing that something was missing. "Where is the heretic? Did the fool got himself killed?"

Honour looked away, reminded of Matthias' sacrifice, the complex emotions still fresh in her mind. Viridian and Garreck glared at Jonneran and reading their expressions, he came to false approximation of the truth.

"Don't tell me he abandoned you?" he said with a low chuckle. "Oh the coward! How delicious!"

"He did not abandon us!" Honour declared reflexively, then looked away again. Jonneran gave her a scathing glance.

"No? So what happened then?"

"He made a necessary sacrifice," said Viridian. "He gave a lot to get us here! More than you."

"And yet I am here and he is not," mused the mage. "One has to wonder how necessary his sacrifice really was."

"Arrogant shite!" declared Garreck.

"Shut up dwarf!" Jonneran spat back.

"Shut up the pair of you!" Honour ordered. She fixed each of the others with a hard glare. It was possible that a tear rolled down her cheek, but the uncertain light made it difficult to tell. "I am here for Tarleen, not to discuss our shared past. If you can help us Jonneran, then by all means rejoin us. If not, then stop wasting my time. We need to make our way down and I will not risk giving us away just to bandy useless words with you!"

Jonneran nodded with an oily smile.

“I know a way,” he offered. “With a simple mix of minor magic and genuine cunning, I’ll bring you to where you need to be.” He pointed along the ledge to the iron ladder and led the way. Honour followed next, with Viridian and Garreck bringing up the rear. The dwarf held his loaded pistol ready and glowered.

“I don’ trust ‘im!”

“Silence, fool!” Jonneran hissed back from the top of the iron ladder. “No one cares whether you trust me and your fool whispering will give us away!” Before anyone could say any more, Jonneran swung out onto the rungs of the ladder and clambered downward. With no other choice, the others followed.

On the next ledge, Jonneran led them further around the circumference of the shaft to another ladder. He paused at the top, watching down to the third ledge where a drudge was making its slow way around to a spot where an iron strut anchored itself to the wall. The surgically modified slave stopped and appeared to perform some kind of maintenance on the footings. While it was focused on its task, Jonneran quickly made his way down and led them at a dash to the next ladder.

Through several more levels they moved like mice, alternately hiding and scurrying. Soon they were on the level of the globe of glass with its entrapped magical storm. Here they passed their first cephalyx, the shadowy, leather-clad figure floating in the air between the conduits that siphoned away wisps of the arcane tempest for incomprehensible purposes. Jonneran pressed everyone back into the shadows near one ladder as the cephalyx drifted past. The creature’s face was entirely masked in leather, with two glass lenses for its eyes. There were no openings for mouth or nose and watching, Honour wondered how the thing might eat or even breathe. Gradually it floated away to the other side of the huge, glass orb and Jonneran led them once more on their scurrying course to the next downward ladder.

With each further level down the numbers of cephalyx and drudges constantly increased. Dodging the seemingly mindless slaves, the comrades witnessed such scars and vile modifications to the flesh that it beggared the imagination. No violation of the body was beneath the minds of the alien surgeons; flesh and metal were interchangeable. Bolts held helmets in place. Screws, stitches and rivets crisscrossed flesh as naturally as hair, nails or bone.

In spite of the increased numbers, Jonneran led the party unerringly, picking just the right moments to wait and to go. He found a clear path without a single misstep until they were deep in the shaft, with the globe glowing far above them. Honour forced them to pause in an alcove so she could check her amulet. By its magic she felt that her comrade Tarleen was still far beneath them. Jonneran waited impatiently for her to finish and when she nodded he turned in a rush from the alcove to lead off, stepping straight into the path of a marching drudge. Although the figure’s pale skin suggested that it had once been human, its limbs were swollen in size and musculature so that they were like an ogrun’s. Jonneran stared up at the slave’s faceless glass and bronze helmet, as it stood unmoving

in front of him. After a pause the creature simply turned in its path and walked away. The unfortunate monster turned a corner into a tunnel and out of sight.

“That was lucky,” Jonneran said to his companions and moved off again. Behind her Honour heard Viridian release a tense breath. The elf pressed against her battle-sister’s back in her eagerness to follow on, but Honour would not be moved. She stared out into the shaft at the floating cephalyx and the marching drudges, apparently all busy about their arcane tasks. She did not believe it. Sheathing her sword, Honour drew her dirk and rushed after Jonneran. Seizing him by the collar of his robe, she threw him back against the rock wall and pressed the dagger’s edge to his throat.

“When’s the ambush?” she hissed.

“What are you talking...?” Jonneran began to argue, but she shook him to silence. They stared at each other for a moment and Honour felt herself wondering how she could have ever loved this man. His lips twisted upward in a contemptuous smile of pure evil. “You always were a fool.”

Sensing the danger, Honour looked over her shoulder into the shaft. Floating in the air all the cephalyx now turned from their tasks to look at the party. Lidless eyes of glass stared through the purple shadows and as surely as rain knows it must fall, the companions knew they were trapped.

Jonneran chuckled and Honour turned back in rage. She thrust her hand forward to slash open his treacherous throat, but her arm refused her mind’s command. Her head was suddenly crowded with the touch of noisome thoughts. She tried to remember herself and regain her will, to recall the healthsome touch of the sun or the sweetness of fresh air, but all of that was pressed out of her. Her mind was bathed in a cloud of dark and fetid shadows, as if she had been immersed bodily in a cesspool. Her skin crawled and nausea clawed up her throat. Worst of all, in the midst of the violation, she knew that she was being examined, studied. The cephalyx were reaching into her mind like dispassionate thieves, heartlessly searching for any valuable they might take for their own ends. This was the mind rape about which Matthias had warned. Honour felt dirtied to the depth of her being, as if filth were pouring over her in a cascade and she wondered if she might ever feel clean again. If she had known it could be like this, she wondered if she would have had the courage to face this enemy, even to rescue her friend. It had taken no small amount of bravery for Matthias to risk this evil once more.

The telepathic voices of the cephalyx echoed through her mind as they discussed her in the same way goodwives would discuss fish and meat in the market, comparing quality and usefulness. Though she could not turn her head to see them, Honour knew that her companions were being likewise violated. Forced to face Jonneran, unable to move, she could see by his eyes that he too was not immune. The look of disdain had been replaced by one of unfocussed terror. She wondered if he could even see her, or if the mind rapists had robbed him of any sense of his surroundings.

Though it pleased her to think of him trapped in his own treachery, a sense of the wrongness of it also grew inside her. Justice must be clean and pure. He deserved no better than to be abandoned to evil, but somehow she must not let that happen. Justice must not ever benefit the plans of evil. The light should banish the darkness, not merely abandon the fallen to the shadows. Another thought rose up with this sense of justice, a warm, healthy certainty. It was her commitment to her deity and his commitment to her. The shadows entrapped her, surrounded her and washed through her like deep sickness, still the truth of her place in Morrow remained. She was his and he was hers. Katrenna, patron of paladins and women warriors, was as a sister to her. In the depths of darkness, Honour realized that she was not now alone and would never be again.

Like a dawning sun pressing back the night, the presence of Morrow pushed back the minds of the cephalyx. Honour knew she could not fight them, not beat them in their own fortress at the height of their power. Instead she resolved to resist them, to deny them to the fullness of her meager strength. Better to die on her feet than to bend the knee to vileness. Digging her fingers like claws into the folds of Jonneran's robe, she pushed backwards into the void. The blackness of the shaft rushed upward as she and her erstwhile fiancé fell. Telekinetic fingers pulled at her armour, but slid off, unable to grip. Falling to her death, Honour wanted to weep for her two comrades still on ledge, left to the mercy of monsters.

I am sorry I cannot save you, she thought. Then she looked into Jonneran's terrified eyes. And this is a better end than you deserve, bastard!

Then the darkness enfolded them and nothing more could be known.

35 *Awakening in Darkness*

The dark night was starless, but Honour could see the approaching dawn in the purple shift in the sky's blackness. She lay on her back and waited for the sky to lighten and the day to come, then she would rise from her bed. For a long time the dark did not lift and she began to wonder why. Then it occurred to her that she could not remember where she was camped or what she planned to do with the day. From the cold discomfort of the ground beneath she guessed that she must be out on the march somewhere, but her company's orders eluded her. What was their mission?

She tried to rise, but a hand pressed her down. A woman's voice told her to rest and Honour smiled when she realized it was her comrade Tarleen speaking. She let her head relax against the ground. It felt good to hear Tarleen's voice again, after such a long time. The promised dawn still refused to banish the night and Honour slipped back into unconsciousness before she remembered why it had been such a long time since she had heard Tarleen's voice.

Honour woke to the sound of prayers and it felt pleasant to hear. Slowly she realized that she was lying underneath some kind of makeshift shelter made from twisted iron and other scrap metal. She turned her head to look about and retched violently. Bile washed through her mouth and drooled out smashed lips onto her face. Pain staked a claim on her limbs and shut out clear vision. The noise of someone clambering across the ground heralded the arrival of gentle hands and she felt herself pushed onto her back once again.

"Careful sister," said Tarleen's voice, though Honour's vision did not yet clear enough to see her face. "You're safe here, but not ready to move yet."

"Tarleen," Honour whispered. "We found you."

"Indeed, you did, but I can't believe you came looking."

Honour tried to reply, but found it difficult to express her reasons for searching for her lost comrade. Finally, Matthias' words rose from her memories and they seemed the most appropriate; "No one gets left behind."

Tarleen said something in reply that Honour could not understand. The paladin's vision refused to clear as Tarleen began to pray. Soon droplets of fresh, sweet water dripped over Honour's lips and she opened her mouth to receive them.

"Drink as deeply as you can," said Tarleen. "It will refresh your flesh and draw you into deeper healing. You must rest. Your wounds are dire, but the mage's are worse. He requires more of my attention."

Honour realized to whom Tarleen was referring and nearly laughed in disgust, but the water's healing properties washed away her agonies and sleep enfolded her once again.

When she awoke the third time Honour rolled over on her side and looked around to get a sense of where she was. The scrap metal shelter was open all along one side and barely high enough for her to lie on her side without her upper shoulder scraping the metal roof. The space was only just long enough for her body laid flat and for a moment she felt as if she had been laid out on a burial shelf in some junkyard catacomb. Looking away from her metal shelter, she could see another similar shelf-like space facing hers not a dozen paces away. The shelf was hidden under the mound of a pile of junk metal that was higher than she could see from where she lay. Jonneran's body was laid out in the other shelf, asleep or insensible. A woman with straggling, ash-blond hair sat with her hand on his chest, her back to Honour's shelter.

"Tarleen?" Honour asked and the woman turned her head between hunched shoulders. The sight of the woman's face shocked Honour and she nearly recoiled. The Tarleen that Honour knew was a vibrant woman of faith, full of the life and passion of her god. The woman before her was so drawn and desperate that Honour would not have recognized her if they had passed in the street in good light. Looking at her through dim shadows with only the eldritch glow of the cephalyx machines far above, Tarleen might easily have been a shaft wight, like the pitiable monster Maggot. Her cheeks were sunken with near starvation; her skin was sickly and pallid. Looking into her hazel eyes, Honour wondered if she saw fear, weariness or madness. Whatever else, they told of a life haunted and lived continually in the shadow of death.

"You're looking much better now," said the long lost priestess and her voice was still the sweet sound that Honour remembered.

"Thanks to your ministrations," she said. The two watched each other for a long moment, each aware of the immense weight of their now shared circumstance, but neither able to find ready words to talk about it. At last, Honour opted to follow her curiosity. "Where are we?"

"At the very bottom of the shaft," said Tarleen. "In amongst the convene's detritus and discards."

"The convene? You mean the cephalyx?"

"You know their name?"

"Yes," said Honour, nodding slowly. "A...friend...told me."

"Convene is what they call themselves in such numbers," Tarleen explained. "It means something similar to clan or family, but those words carry all the wrong connotations."

They have no knowledge of the deep bonds we would understand in such words.” Honour nodded again; having seen the cephalyx at close hand, she had no doubt Tarleen’s words were true. She chewed her lower lip in thought for a moment and realized that it was now healed, no doubt by her comrade’s priestly ministrations.

“Have you been hiding down here all this time?” she asked at last. Tarleen cast her gaze over the small space that Honour now realized was a cleft dug in a deep mass of discarded junk.

“It’s a strange place to call home, but it has preserved my life for such a long time that I feel a kind of affection for the place.”

“And they do not know you are here?”

“The convene?” asked Tarleen and she looked up as if she could see them from where she hunched beneath their garbage. “They come here rarely, even less lately. They tend to their perverse machines and vile trade and leave the garbage to itself.”

“What is it all for?” asked Honour. Tarleen cocked her head to one side and smiled a wry smile.

“Many of their devices service the convene or its slaves,” she said.

“The drudges?”

“Yes. Others of their machines are so old that they themselves probably don’t remember the functions or purposes. They have been here a very long time.” Tarleen stopped in her explanation and became soberly thoughtful, as if she could remember for herself all of the years of the cephalyx convene and their underground colony. At last she smiled again. “But the main machine, that great glass orb? It exists for the sole purpose of gathering the blighted energies of these islands for themselves.”

“Blighted energies?” asked Honour, troubled by the term.

“The power of the dragon,” said Tarleen. Her eyes glittered with a dark knowledge that made her friend shiver involuntarily. “The blight of Lord Toruk himself. It spreads from his throne across these islands, blighting flesh and land with equal vehemence. And the convene collects what it can of that power, using the umbral magic for their own fell purposes. They gather it in vast amounts, but I cannot discern the purpose they store it for.”

“You have garnered so much regardless,” Honour said and the two became silent once again. Honour lay back once more with a strained sigh. Though most of her wounds were healed, her body had not yet regained its strength. “All this time, Morrow has preserved you down here, in the darkest of holes.”

“Not quite, dear sister,” said Tarleen. There was a strained quality in her voice. Honour gave her friend a worried look.

“What do you mean?”

“I have left Morrow’s service, dear Honour,” Tarleen said. “I no longer follow the god of our fathers.” Her words chilled Honour to the marrow.

36 *A New God*

Honour's head swam as she struggled to grasp the full meaning of her friend's words. This was Tarleen, the most devout woman Honour had ever met; scholar, theologian, healer. How could she have relinquished her faith? What was it about this umbral pit that drained all the certainties from one's life? Since she had begun her quest to this island Honour had lost her fiancé and fallen in love with a heretic, an outcast from the church. She believed that her god walked with her but now she was in a hole deeper and darker than any she had imagined. Even if she were granted the strength to climb from the pit, the shaft's monstrous denizens would only capture and enslave her. Every time she felt her balance regained, an axe was laid against another pillar at the foundations of her faith and her identity. She wondered if this latest blow would take the keystone, collapsing the house of her mind to ruins.

"How could you leave Morrow, Tarleen?" she whispered. Her eyes pleaded for a wholesome answer.

"Do you remember the campaign against that Protectorate butcher Garoloth?" Tarleen asked, absently picking at the ground with a piece of rusted wire. It seemed to Honour as if she was writing something in the dust but the word was never finished.

"I remember," said the paladin. Her voice trembled slightly. "He was marauding through frontier settlements, butchering villagers and calling it 'purification'. We said he was the Mad Mennite!" Honour swallowed at the memory. The sight of whole families tortured to death by the scrutators had unmanned even the most hard-bitten veterans on the campaign.

"Remember how you gave me your shield?"

"Yes, of course," Honour answered, surprised at the memory. "It was your first true campaign march and your shield came loose fording that fast flowing river." Tarleen nodded with a gentle smile.

"You gave me yours, because my need was greater," she said.

"My armour was better quality than yours and I fought with a pistol in my off hand anyway."

"The gods do the same, you know."

"What?"

"They're all on campaign," Tarleen said, returning her eyes to her writings in the sparse dirt. "There is war in the heavens and we are some of the weapons they bring to bear."

“What are you saying?” Honour’s concern was overtaken by confusion. “Do you think Morrow has given you up? Lost you in the river, like a shield?” Tarleen shook her head.

“Not given up, dear sister, given over, to one who needs me more than he.”

“Given to who?”

“Cyriss,” said the priestess, the corners of her mouth turning up in an impish smile.

“The clockwork wench? Oh you must be joking!” declared a male voice from the shadows behind Tarleen. The two women looked to see Jonneran lying in his niche, listening to their conversation. He barked a derisive laugh. “You have some taste in friends, Honour! Whores, heretics and monsters!”

“Traitors too, it seems,” Honour retorted and Jonneran glared at her. “It was too much to hope that you would die if I did not!”

Honour’s words surprised Tarleen who raised an eyebrow.

“Isn’t he your fiancé?” she asked. Jonneran hissed angrily, but Honour made no answer. “Perhaps I made a mistake saving his life.”

“All life is precious,” Honour said without enthusiasm. “But I would not have cared if you had not.”

“No, of course you wouldn’t you murderous slut! You tried to kill me.” Jonneran’s voice echoed angrily in the confined space.

“You dare?” demanded Honour, raising herself up on her elbow once more. “You planned to surrender us to the cephalyx! To trade us for your own life! Or did you trade us for some magic knowledge? It is your greatest love, after all!”

“What would you know?!”

“That’s it? That’s all that you can think to say to defend yourself?”

Tarleen raised her hands one to each of them and hissed to quiet them. Honour fixed her ebony eyes on Jonneran, continuing her argument wordlessly. The mage shrugged his shoulders and turned his back on both women. Honour looked to Tarleen but the priestess kept her hand up for quiet while she listened to sounds from above the trio’s hiding place. In the quiet the sound of metal scraping against metal crept along the edge of hearing. A shower of iron filings fell from the roof of Honour’s cleft shelter. She froze as the ferrous cascade was followed by a set of long, steel fangs mounted in a jaw of cast iron. As if a chain of gears had grown into a living creature, the iron coils and ratchets of a gear wyrm slithered, snakelike into the space between the two women. Coiling like a serpent and scraping like fingernails on a slate, two yards of metal body dropped into sight.

Eyes made of coils of copper wire looked first at Honour and then at Tarleen. Honour looked to her friend but the priestess did not spare a glance from the monster. She met the monster's strange gaze and slowly reached out her hand towards its head. The mechanicka creature swayed slightly, snapping its jaws at the approaching fingers. It had no true throat and so could not hiss nor make any other sound, but the grinding of its gears somehow gave it a voice of sorts and Honour wondered how she would fight the thing if it suddenly attacked her friend. For a moment she was sure the creature would bite Tarleen, the iron fangs tearing her flesh and crushing the fragile bones of the hand. With a sudden flick of her wrist Tarleen slapped the creature's metal head and it sank gently to the ground like a chastened puppy. For a time it lay flat before slithering up out of the hole and away over the pit floor.

"What was that thing?" asked Honour.

"A gear wyrm," explained Tarleen. "An animaton created from the confluence of magic energies and mechanicka scrap. They are known all over, isn't that right master mage."

Looking to Jonneran, Honour noticed that his skin was pale and sweat soaked the collar of his robe.

"You look terrified."

"Well he should," said Tarleen when Jonneran remained silent. "Animatons are immune to conventional magic. There isn't a single spell known to the entire Fraternal Order that could even scratch that serpent."

"But you can control it?" asked Honour. Tarleen shook her head.

"Influence," she said. "Not control."

"A conjurer's trick," said Jonneran. His lips twisted in a sneer. "No more than any market square snake charmer."

"Yet you could never do it," Tarleen replied, with a smile of gentle amusement, like a mother with a cross toddler.

"Why would I care?" Jonneran snapped churlishly. He rolled over once more, turning his back to the women. The pair shared a smile at his willful anger, but Honour was careful not to laugh out loud, in case the gear wyrm might return. A happy moment with Tarleen brought back many hopeful memories for Honour and she sighed gently. Tarleen clambered to Honour and checked on her wounds.

"We must escape, Tarleen," Honour said quietly. "There is a path out through tunnels in the mountain. We left a guard at the other end. We can do it!"

“Hush sister,” said the priestess. “We’ll leave soon, I promise, but now is not the time. There are other things we must wait for first.”

“What things?”

“I have seen a vision of the path out, but we will only escape when the cephalyx are destroyed.”

“How?” asked Honour. Tarleen’s touch was soothing to her still healing body and she felt sleep coming on her like a warm blanket.

“In my vision the cephalyx are thrown up out of their deep pit,” Tarleen explained. “And their bodies are cast out to feed the wolves.”

“Wolves?” Honour whispered and she fell asleep.

37 Until the Time has Come

They waited in the dour shadows at the bottom of the pit, with only hunger and thirst to mark the passing of time. Periodically Tarleen fed them with food and water provided by prayerful magic. The three ate and drank and waited in darkness. Honour felt the strength return to her limbs and soon began to chafe at the inactivity their hiding forced upon her. She asked Tarleen if they could find her sword, but the priestess already knew its fate. The long fall had bent the blade at the tang; it could not be repaired without reforging. Honour sat measureless hours with the ruined weapon in her hands, praying and contemplating. At first her frustrations goaded her to take action, but soon she found her prayers brought her a kind of calm that made the murky light and endless waiting more bearable.

From time to time Tarleen left their cleft in the mounds of detritus to conduct the unknown business of her new divine patron. She left quietly and returned with nothing, no piece of evidence that might point to what she did when she was gone. For all Honour knew the woman moved no more than a few paces out of sight and sat there for an hour before returning. Even so, even if that was all that happened, the paladin found she was envious of her friend.

Jonneran was harder to bear. Watching him in his little niche across from her, Honour could not bring herself to hate him. He lay mostly with his back to her and sometimes she could hear him whispering to himself. Occasionally he would speak to either of the two women and his words would pick at them cruelly. It was as if he was continuing the one long conversation with them, falling silent for hours, so that Honour would wonder if he had finally given up. Then he would begin again, chastising her and sometimes Tarleen. He lashed them with long discourses of venomous contempt and self-pity, heaping blame and anger together. While her anger rose periodically listening to his diatribes, Honour eventually came to marvel at how vile it must be to be Jonneran, so full of poison was his mind and heart. She would never again love him, but she found she pitied him, in spite of herself.

They were eating a meal of prayer-conjured bread, which for all its nourishment tasted like wet paper, Tarleen suddenly turned her head and raised her ear to listen. Reaching out, she took up a short handled flail with two mace-headed chains. As the other two stopped eating they began to hear a scraping sound coming from nearby. The sound began to take on a regular form and soon it resolved itself into the clear repetitions of footsteps. Honour tensed, her hand twisting around the hilt of her useless weapon. Their eyes scoured the junkyard edge of their hiding place, searching to see the source of the sound before it was upon them. The footsteps ceased just as they seemed as near as they could possibly get. Honour swallowed and readied herself to flee if forced. She would have prepared to confront any enemy, even in the face of certain death, but with no weapon and only the battered remnants of her armour, she found the fear in her chest hard to control. The silence stretched out in the darkness. Just when they began to doubt their ears and to hear phantom sounds farther away, a dark-clad figure dropped into the cramped space of their hiding place. The three scrambled away in surprise, pushing their

backs into the jagged surfaces. Tarleen raised her weapon to strike the new arrival when he spoke in a friendly voice.

“Well look at that!” said the figure. “You are here!”

Tarleen hesitated and Honour nearly burst out laughing.

“Matthias!” she whispered, a smile broadening on her face in defiance of tears that welled in her eyes. The gunmage smiled at her and she pushed herself onto her knees to throw her arms around him as he crouched in their midst. For a long moment she pressed him to her, not speaking, with her eyes screwed shut. She breathed in his smell and luxuriated in his embrace, which he gave to her with equal vigor. At last she pulled back to look into his eyes. In the ethereal half-light his steel blue eyes were nearly shadowed beyond sight, but nonetheless and searching the soul behind them, Honour found herself in the first unguarded moment she had ever felt completely safe with a man. A moment’s doubt lashed her with the stinging fear that he might not feel for her what she was feeling for him but as she searched for withdrawal or hesitancy in his expression, he smiled and she knew she was safe.

“I have missed you!” he said with deep warmth. Then he looked at Tarleen and finally at Jonneran. “You, not so much!” The Fraternal Order mage sneered.

“Oh, of course,” he hissed. “Now the peasant hero can rescue the strumpet and this village farce will be complete.”

“I can rescue you too, if you like,” said Matthias in his mocking tone. “Or you can stay; do not feel obliged on my account.” Jonneran’s eyes grew wide with rage but before he could say or do anything more, Tarleen interrupted.

“Who is this, Honour?”

“Tarleen, dear sister, this is the man who guided us here; the survivor of Marsendat’s expedition to this forsaken island,” Honour explained.

“The heretic monk, Matthias?” asked the priestess.

“Matthias Warlock now,” answered Matthias.

“But a heretic, nonetheless,” spat Jonneran. Matthias nodded.

“Quite so.”

Tarleen smiled, not as openly as Honour, but in welcome. “You’ll find heresy doesn’t set you quite so far apart in this company,” she said and Matthias’ brow wrinkled in confusion. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Indeed?” Matthias was plainly surprised, as were the other two.

“Yes,” said Tarleen, straightening up and standing so that her head was over the lip of the cleft. “Now, we must hurry. There is much yet to do.”

“If you say so,” said the gunmage. He stood as well, looking to Honour for an explanation. She rose beside him and shrugged.

“Of course,” said the priestess. Honour was astonished to see her friend infused with a new energy, like the embers of a fire suddenly stirred to a conflagration by oil or fresh fuel. “You have only a short time before the attack, do you not?”

“An hour or two to find you,” Matthias agreed.

“What attack?” demanded Jonneran in a too loud voice, any caution swallowed in his uncertainty. “Who is attacking? Are we being rescued? Is it the Order?”

“Your brotherhood doesn’t know where you are and couldn’t rescue you even if it wanted to,” Tarleen told him in motherly condescension. Jonneran’s fists balled in rage. The priestess ignored him.

“Follow me,” she said and slipped out of the cleft into the shadows. Matthais and Honour glanced at one another for a moment and then the Warlock followed Tarleen. As he crested the lip of scrap, Honour realized he was no longer wearing his mage robe. Instead he wore a tunic coat of gunmetal grey tied with a new sash of a dark colour she could not make out in the half-light. He wore a pair of fine leather gloves, but shockingly, no guns or gunbelt.

“Where are your pistols?” she whispered as he reached down and helped her from the hole.

“Close to hand,” he said with an enigmatic smile. While she was puzzling over his words, he looked past her at Jonneran still down in the hole. “Come with us. No pride, no fight, nothing is worth staying in this place over.”

For a long moment the mage stared out from the hole with his arms folded and his face set like flint. Finally, he too reached up and Matthias helped him out as well.

“Besides,” said Matthias as Jonneran icily followed after Tarleen ahead of the gunmage. “There will be no point seeing me get my comeuppance if you do not live to gloat about it with your brethren.”

38 Out of the Pit

Like roaches cringing from the sight of a homeowner, the four of them crossed the bottom of the pit with swift stealth. From moment to moment they cast their eyes upward, fearful and hopeful. Only Tarleen seemed disinterested in the activities of the cephalyx convene and the insane workings of their machines. After her long imprisonment there was little left she wished to see. Rather the priestess led the other three on a confident path to the pit wall, where metal rubbish was heaped in great, random drifts against the native rock. Tarleen was clearly in haste and she began to ignore any noises made by the ruined landscape that she crossed. She clambered over bent iron girders and between steel plates twisted and crumpled like screwed up pieces of paper. Then one by one they followed her scrabbling across the surface of a metallic sphere larger than a horse drawn carriage, their feet slipping on the alloyed surface. Finally they arrived at a set of rusted rungs, hand holds embedded in the wall and leading into the shadows above.

“Here,” said Tarleen. “This is where we must go.”

“Where does it lead?” asked Matthias.

“Up, into places we must go.”

Matthias frowned doubtfully and Honour shook her head. Seeing their displeasure, Tarleen sighed.

“I have been here so long with only my mistress for company,” she explained. “I forget that not everyone knows what I know! This great shaft is only the middle of the cephalyx home; the axle down the centre of the machine. There are tunnels and rooms that lead out from this into the rock like pistons, or the spokes of a wheel. Many of the lower chambers are storerooms, where only the drudges go.”

“What is in these storerooms?” asked Honour. Tarleen smiled.

“Toys.”

“Toys?” repeated Jonneran breathlessly. He had fallen behind on the climb and only reached the others in time to hear Tarleen’s last word. Seeing the rungs in the wall he looked up and then down again at their priestess guide. “This is it? How can we be sure it’s safe?”

“The rungs will hold!”

“How do you know?” he demanded, his tart voice full of mistrust. “And how long have you known about this?”

“Some time.”

“Well if you knew how to get out, why didn’t you escape before now? Why just squat all this time at the bottom of a hole?”

“The timing wasn’t right,” said Tarleen, her mystical demeanor finally beginning to show ruptures of frustration. “Now the time is right and we must hurry!”

“How do we know you aren’t leading us into a trap?” asked Jonneran.

“Like the one you tried to put us in?” snapped Honour. Jonneran hissed at her angrily.

“It would have been much less effort to simply let you die from your fall,” Tarleen explained. “However, I saved you and waited for the right moment, as I was bid. To do otherwise would have resulted in failure. If the timing is wrong then things misfire, the engine seizes. Smooth running requires the right timing.”

“Bollocks!”

“Shut up Jonneran!” said Honour. The two turned on each other for a moment but before a full argument could bloom between them Matthias placed his gloved hand on the first rung pulled himself up. Perhaps to escape the confrontation or simply to be not shown up by the gunmage, Jonneran pushed forward and was second on the ladder. The two women followed.

The simple ladder clung to the living rock, the dark metal of the rungs all but invisible against the black stone. They counted sixty three rungs hand over hand until the ladder stopped at a narrow ledge. Clambering onto the ledge they found themselves besides the shadowed entrance to a tunnel that ran deep and straight into the rock. One after the other they moved into the entry and waited for the others behind; last of all came Tarleen. When she gained the ledge she pressed past the other three and wordlessly made to lead them into the dark tunnel. Before she could, Matthias caught her by the arm and held her fast.

“Just a moment,” he said. “I realize that we all feel a certain sense of urgency, but there are some things that need to be discussed before we go any further.”

Tarleen gave him a confused look, as if his interference was more perplexing than offensive. There was a moment's silence where she seemed be trying to think of something to say. Before she could speak, Matthias looked to Honour for support.

“I am not trying to be difficult,” he explained. “But we have a number of goals now and we need to decide the process and order in which we will attempt them.”

“What 'number of goals'?” Jonneran demanded. “Escape is our goal! What other possible goals could we have!” Matthias and Honour both silenced him with cold glances that pierced even the shadows of the pit.

“Viridian and Garreck,” said Matthias and Honour nodded.

“You must be joking!” scoffed the mage. “They’re dead, surely! They were lost the moment she abandoned them to get her petty revenge on me!” Honour scowled but did not respond to the insulting accusation.

“They are not dead,” said Tarleen, her voice having a faraway quality, as if she were distracted by sights long distant. “But they are lost to us. We can find them again, but other things must first be accomplished.”

“What other things?” Matthias asked.

“We do not have the time for long explanations. If we are to do all that must be done before your comrades assault the convene, then we must hurry. I assure you all will be lost if we are late, the machine will stall! You must trust me!”

Now Tarleen looked to Honour for support. The paladin nodded; inside her she found her new confidence was strong, born not of the exhausting walls of self protection she had built around her inner wounds, but anchored in the certain trust that comrades share, truer even than many lovers know. She smiled and turned to Matthias.

“Tarleen is my battle-sister,” she said. “She saved my life in that pit and waited a long while in the darkness for the chance to do it. I do not understand her new faith, but I trust her. Can you? Can you trust to someone else’s faith?”

“My own faith has not always been the best guide,” Matthias replied with a shrug. “Someone else’s could scarcely steer me worse.” Honour smiled and there was a wicked glint in her eye.

“If you can trust yourself to my faith, perhaps it will lead you back to Morrow.”

Matthias rolled his eyes. “Saints forfend!”

“Oh spare me,” said Jonneran.

Dokor wondered if he should try to struggle again but did not bother. The three drudges carrying his body would no more release him now than when they first caught him. Their strength was extraordinary. As an ogrun, Dokor had little experience of being physically outmatched. After years of military service among humans and dwarves, elves and gobbers, the ranger had come to rely on his superior strength so much that he took it for granted. Faced with foes he could not overpower, the uncommon experience rankled. It was true that after several days of exhausting cat and mouse over the forested slopes of the island’s mountain, lacking food and sleep, Dokor was not in peak condition, but he

allowed himself no excuse. He was a ranger, living off the land should not be a privation. He was captured because he had been beaten, there was no other explanation.

At first he had enjoyed being hunted, dodging drudge patrols was an enjoyable way to relieve the boredom of his vigil at the tunnel mouth. Gradually though the stupid monsters had begun to come more frequently and with increased awareness. Dokor suspected that the cephalyx masters could sense his presence and were coordinating their servitors' activities. As days wore on the number of drudges in the forests increased so that it was not possible to run from them and the ogrun's size made it too hard to hide. After a few skirmishes with the gauntleted monsters Dokor finally fell into a trap he could not escape. Any hopes of a death and glory stand were dashed when he found himself caught in the mental grip of a black-garbed cephalyx. The ranger had stood still on the leaf strewn ground, his eyes fixed on the alien creature, as three drudges simply walked up and seized his disobedient body. Once the three had a solid grip, the cephalyx returned control of his body to him; it had felt like icy needles being withdrawn from his brain. The sensation had made him retch at first, but then he fought his captors and discovered the limit of his might. They carried him, in spite of his struggles, to an iron door hidden in a grotto somewhere on the mountain's south side. As the long journey into darkness continued, Dokor had finally despaired of wrenching free of his captors and now let them carry his inert form to whatever imprisonment they thought to bestow him. The memory of the cephalyx grip in his mind and the despairing sense of having failed his companions in his sentry duty so enshrouded the ranger's mind that by the time he realized the drudges had released him, he was already chained to a table in a cell cut from natural rock, with no door and lit by a flickering purple light coming from the passage beyond the entryway. The drudges that brought him left the cell, but a sentry remained, standing away from the stone table where Dokor was laid.

A metal collar had been placed about his neck, but twisting his head from one side to the other as much as he could, he made out the spindly black arms of strange devices which seemed to sprout from the nearby floor like trees of wrought iron. At the ends of the branches of these 'trees' were tools such as those that he had seen on the end of the spider-like arms the cephalyx fitted to their own bodies. Viewing the tools up close, the hooked and bladed implements reminded Dokor of the instruments used by battlefield surgeons to extract musket balls from the body and to sew wounds closed.

The manacles about his wrists and ankles felt every bit as unyielding as his captors' grips had been; after a number of attempts to break them or pull them from their housing, Dokor stopped wasting his energy. For want of anything else to do he twisted his head so that he could see as much as he could of his attendant, the sentry drudge that stood near the entrance, neither moving nor speaking. Even pushing his head around so far that the collar about his neck threatened to choke him unconscious, the ogrun could make out no more than the sentry's head and one shoulder, covered as they were by the ubiquitous brass helmet that characterized all drudges. In the dim light, he could make out a little of the shoulder beneath the burnished collar and was astonished at the thin limb underneath. The top of the sentry's arm was distinctly less muscular than that of other drudges Dokor had seen. Thinking about it, he decided that it must mean the sentry was some other

specialist form of drudge, used for duties related to the surgical purpose of the room. He lay his head back in a more comfortable position and, thinking to conserve his strength, wondered if he could risk sleeping for a time.

The sentry drudge was slender, not for reasons of specialization, but because it was relatively new and the final processes of its conversion had not yet swelled its body with the excessive musculature which it would eventually acquire. Had Dokor been able to twist a little further he would have seen that the newly made drudge still wore the garb it had possessed in life, studded armour of red dyed leather, fashionably cut to suit a woman's form.