

Trouble On Big South

C. Edward Stewart And Friends

Published by C. Edward Stewart
<http://home.golden.net/~giark/>

The *Magic!* MultiSkill Role-Playing System

Also written by C. Edward Stewart
Published by C. Edward Stewart

The Alt-Earth/Terra Series

Mission: Mars
The Weather Outside Is Frightful...
The Headless Horseman Rides Again
Love Is In The Air
Falling

The Urban Myth Series

Urban Myth

Erotica

Erotica Volume I
Erotica Volume II
Erotica Volume III
Erotica Volume IV
A Workplace Romance
Be Rough With Me: The Harder Side Of Erotica

Books can be published by C. Edward Stewart for reasonable rates. For details, visit the website at:
<http://home.golden.net/~giark/>
and follow the FBN link to the publishing section.

Preface

Trouble On Big South is the result of several months of game time by myself and several others. The initial idea for the story and the overall plotline is mine, but much of the character interaction is the result of the actions of the players.

I was gamemaster, overlord, dungeon master, pick your own term. The players were:

Ryan Gibb - Jace Viriux

Blaine Lichty - Bain

Fode Tsambas - Gunivere

Steve Miles - Durin

Chris Grey - Taerus

Each one added a different twist to the storyline. As you read the story, the most outrageous things that the characters do is probably the result of what actually happened. I enjoyed running the game, and everyone involved enjoyed reading each new chapter.

Each chapter represents what happened during a week of game play. The activity that involves the players is what they were aware of; the other sections are back plot and additions I made that they were not aware of, but that affected the plot of the campaign.

Chapter 16 is the last session of game play. I asked for input from all the guys in order to help me finish off the story. I hope they enjoy the result of our sessions and their input. It may not be the best way to write a story, but it was a lot of fun.

Published independently by C. Edward Stewart

First Printing, December, 2000

Text copyright ©C. Edward Stewart, 2000

Images copyright ©C. Edward Stewart, 2000

All rights reserved.

Printed in Canada

Set in Kitchener

Designed by C. Edward Stewart

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

Table Of Contents

Prologue..... 7
Chapter 1 - An Unexpected Arrival..... 11
Chapter 2 - Shipwrecked..... 19
Chapter 3 - A Visitor In The Night..... 23
Chapter 4 - A Chase On The Beach..... 27
Chapter 5 - A Morning Stroll..... 31
Chapter 6 - A Lesson In Healing..... 37
Chapter 7 - A New Companion..... 41
Chapter 8 - We Must Go North..... 45
Chapter 9 - Punishment..... 61
Chapter 10 - Not So Tough After All..... 67
Chapter 11 - Nothing Stays The Same..... 73
Chapter 12 - Humility..... 81
Chapter 13 - Rewards..... 89
Chapter 14 - Contact..... 95
Chapter 15 - Camp¹..... 109
Chapter 16 - Damsels And Desperadoes..... 115
Chapter 17 - Come Together..... 149
Epilogue..... 171

¹ Written by Ryan Gibb

To Ryan, Blaine, Steve and Fode. After all, this is *your* story.

Prologue

The rising sun briefly silhouetted the three figures that crested the hill overlooking the plain that led to the beach. Kel, broadsword gripped in his fist, looked back, squinting into the light. Termion put a hand on Kel's shoulder, briefly; the two of them had become good friends in the last few days - during their flight to the sea. Karen didn't look back, but strode down the incline toward the distant shore.

When they started, there had been seven of them. A lucky shot had taken Porol, the hunting arrow piercing his throat as he leaped over the castle wall. Morok and Blan, the Dwarf twins, died together fighting off a pack of dogs in the forest to the south of town. Cobb died just yesterday, caught in a pit trap; he'd been the best cutpurse any of them had ever seen. To go like that - it seemed so senseless.

As she headed for the beach, Karen looked for any sign of driftwood. She'd need something to help keep her afloat; it was at least a 30 kilometre swim to the mainland and she'd have no support until she got there.

Kel walked past her, the morning sun turning his white skin copper. She smiled, knowing that they'd not have made it this far without his strength. Even with the handicap of temperatures far

higher than his native land, Kel's Barbarian code had kept him true to the mission and his broadsword had cleaved them a path through more than one patrol. The wound on his thigh had started to bleed again. Part of Karen's dress was tied about it. She wondered how he'd fare, crossing the channel. Better the chance of death there than what awaited them if they turned back.

Termion put his hand on her shoulder as he walked closer to her, his darkly tanned skin and light brown hair again sending a shiver down her spine. Even knowing that he didn't do it on purpose, she was still frustrated. She knew that elves tended to be more attractive to humans, but her body picked the worst times to notice it. She felt a wave of cooling strength flow from Termion's hand; he was casting a healing spell on her, relieving the fatigue of the day.

"Do you hear it?" Kel called. "The pounding of the surf!"

"I think we're going to make it," Karen shouted back, a smile forming on her lips.

"No," Termion countered, "it's not the surf. It's hoofbeats." Karen turned to see armoured horsemen cresting the rise. "*Run, Karen!*" Termion shouted. She didn't waste any time, but started running. Termion kept pace with her, but Kel stopped.

"Go on," he shouted. "Get the word out."

"Kel!" Karen cried. Termion grabbed her arm and pulled her with him.

"Don't waste his sacrifice," Termion gasped between breaths.

Karen looked over her shoulder to see Kel waiting, sword at the ready. The horsemen slowed, then stopped, facing Kel. One dismounted and drew a sickle sword.

"Oh, no," Karen sobbed, running even faster. "Black Pete's come after us." Termion didn't waste any more breath on talking, just ran as if there was no tomorrow. If Black Pete caught up with them, there wouldn't be.

As Karen staggered from the grass of the plain to the first dune of sand that marked the beach, she could hear the pounding of hooves again. An errant breeze wafted the scent of saltwater to her.

She kept going, breath coming in ragged gasps.

“It’s all up to you,” Termion said. Karen didn’t stop to look back. She didn’t want to see Termion’s frail body between her and Black Pete. Tears coursed down her cheeks. She wouldn’t stop. Not now. She could see the surf rolling in across the sand.

Termion waited for the horsemen to arrive, knowing that he was about to die. He had no illusions about his fighting skills. He promised himself that he’d sell his life dearly. As with Kel, the horsemen reined to a halt a few paces from their victim. Before anyone could move, Termion began stripping off his equipment. All his remaining gear fell to the ground, followed by his shirt. Termion knew that he had no magical energy left and that he was less than skilled with the knife that now lay at his feet. The leader dismounted.

“Lord Peter Domingo,” Termion said, bowing slightly.

“Sorcerer Termion,” Domingo answered, shedding his armour.

“You’ll never beat us, Black Pete,” Termion scoffed, speaking plainly now that the formalities were over.

“You rebel scum are too sure of yourselves. We’ll crush you all without even thinking twice.”

“We’ll defeat you, you *and* your psychotic master,” Termion shouted, trying to bait Domingo into a rash act.

“Put an arrow into that bitch,” Domingo said, nodding toward Karen’s distant figure. One of the horsemen drew his horsebow from its case, nocked an arrow and let it fly. Karen stumbled and fell.

“We’ll still win,” Termion hissed through clenched teeth.

“I don’t think so,” Domingo replied. “*You’re* the last one.” Termion assumed a fighter’s crouch, his fists raised. Domingo slipped into a similar stance, smoothly. Termion moved about, waiting for an opening. From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Karen’s body move.

He lashed out, determined to keep the attention off her. His fist struck Domingo’s forearm. Domingo countered with a roundhouse

blow that Termion ducked - barely. Termion swung wildly, trying only to distract Domingo. His fist connected, bursting Domingo's lip and cracking a tooth.

"Traacherous dog," Domingo swore, spitting out the remains of his tooth. "For that, you will die." Termion tried to dance about, to keep Domingo from him. Domingo stood, his eyes slitted. His hand shook. Too late, Termion realized what was happening. Domingo plunged his hand forward, bursting through Termion's ribcage to clutch his heart. He pulled it out and Termion saw that it was still beating.

His knees buckled, then he folded at the waist. His body hit the sand. Before death glazed his eyes, he saw Karen struggle to her feet and run into the surf, a gnarled log clutched tightly to her chest.

"Lord Domingo!" a rider called, pointing. Domingo reached into the pile of equipment and pulled out Termion's knife. With a practiced flick of his wrist, he sent it spinning toward Karen. It hit her shoulder and she fell into the water, creating a splash tinged with red.

"*That* was the last one," Domingo stated.

Chapter 1 - An Unexpected Arrival

Durin walked carefully across the deck; to him, it seemed to pitch and roll alarmingly. He was more at home with solid rock under his feet - and over his head, too, for that matter. Not for the first time, he regretted leaving the expedition to set out on his own, but there was little chance for a crusader to shine with a trade delegation, even a crusader that spoke Royal Dwarf. The prank he'd pulled with his Dragon Door illusion hadn't helped matters either.

At the time, striking out on his own seemed like a good idea. He'd just turned 50 and his beard was finally growing like a true Dwarf's beard should. The conference was going to take at least another month and he was just one more guard, a guard who followed the Order of Battle. Talk and trade were not his specialties. The elders had not argued about his leaving to travel home on his own and see a bit of the world at the same time.

He'd walked through a good portion of Alarus, always heading north and west, his home in The Masters mountain range on his mind. He'd underestimated the size of the world. But his command of the Western language got a lot better, and his skill with his battle axe did, too. Bandits abounded, trying to separate a Dwarf from his gold - always a bad idea. He'd even managed to improve his

knowledge of Hunter's Chant, though few animals that could understand the language passed his way.

Durin squinted across the water, the midday sun bright even through his Dwarven surface goggles. He thought they made him look cool. Had he taken them off, his hazel eyes would have shown his discomfort. Black pants, travel-worn, were tucked into the tops of his boots that rose past his knees. His red tunic flashed colour briefly as he swept his black cloak back. His tan features, topped with an unruly mop of blonde hair, bearing the round cragginess associated with the Dwarven race, were a bit rounder than most. He insisted, to anyone who'd listen, that he was going on a diet, going to lose weight. At 83 kilograms, he was slipping past plump rapidly. Add to that his average 1.3 metre height and you had someone that not many people would look twice at.

He frowned and clutched the rail as another wave threatened, to his eyes, to swamp the ship. The *Bouncy Linda*, a trading ship out of the tiny country of Swalo, was in port when Durin reached the coast. He reluctantly parted with some of his hard earned gold to book passage across the Eastern ocean. He was proud to have struck such a good bargain; he got a reduction in the fare because he signed on as a guard. He glanced toward the hatch leading below as one of his fellow travellers came on deck.

Gunivere nodded to Durin as he stepped carefully across the deck to stand at the rail. Even without the distinctive grey skin, something in the way he moved let everyone know he was a High Elf. He tossed his head, getting his long, black hair out of his eyes. They were startlingly green, contrasting to his dark skin.

As he moved, his leather armour creaked slightly. In all the time he'd been at sea, no one had seen him without that armour. It was a strange thing, for a Sorcerer to be wearing armour, but Gunivere was young, only 81 years old, a mere youth in elven terms, and he could be expected to have a few affectations that would fall away with age.

His cloak blew in the wind, making it seem like he was phasing

in and out of existence. At 1.6 metres in height, Gunivere was slightly above average height for an elf. He weighed in at 56 kilograms, a solidly built young elf, out to see the world. Gunivere had spent the morning in solitude, taking time to follow the tenets of the Order of Magic. He tried to speak the words in Western, in order to better speak the language of this new land, but he found himself slipping into High Elf again and again. He was glad that Durin spoke the Hunter's Chant, a language of sounds and gestures that woodsmen had developed to speak to animals. Having the ability to shapeshift into a falcon, it was more handy for Gunivere than for most.

Like Durin, Gunivere's home was across the sea, in Mythos. That was not his destination, however. He was headed for the Isle Of Knowledge to study with the scholars there at what was said to be the finest school of magic in the world. The Elven elders disputed this fact, so did the dragons.

"I see you left your staff below this time," Durin commented. His hands gripped the rail with white knuckled intensity.

"I still have this," Gunivere replied, tapping the hilt of his bone stiletto, protruding from his belt. "I see you still carry that great whopping axe of yours."

"He'd not be who he is if he didn't carry it," Jace Viriux said. Both of the others started, surprised by Jace's appearance.

"I wish you wouldn't *do* that," Durin said as Jace stepped up to the rail on Durin's other side.

"At least he's not a skeleton this time," Gunivere noted dryly. Jace's shapeshifting ability allowed him to appear as a skeleton, a fact that amused him greatly, and one that he used for pranks as often as he could.

He was a somewhat forbidding figure, his Dark Elf heritage giving him black skin. His silver hair, longer than Gunivere's, but tied back in an intricate web of black lace, enhanced the unholy gleam of his ice blue eyes. While Gunivere was a robust figure, Jace was thin to the point of gauntness at 51 kilograms. Durin

secretly believed that Jace liked it, figuring the narrow elven features and thin limbs gave him a skeletal look, even when not transformed.

He wore an elven cloak, similar to Gunivere's, but where Gunivere's seemed to shimmer like a heat haze, Jace's seemed to wrap him in shadows. He wore elven boots and an elven hat of similar material, both aids to his chosen profession - assassin monk. His pants and tunic, of simple black, seemed somehow lacklustre beside the fantastic appearance of his other clothing.

At 78 years old, Jace was surprisingly mature. At an age when most elves were only starting to explore the world, Jace seemed to have already seen far too much. He was of a height with Gunivere, and the habit the three had of standing at the rail and talking had earned them the nickname of Cannonball and the Bookends.

Jace had left his elven bow in his cabin today; rarely did he let it out of his sight, a fact that made the others wonder. It may have had something to do with his life in the Dark Domain, before he stepped into the violent world of the assassin monk. The others knew he followed the Order of Desire; they knew, and secretly, they were just a bit afraid. From time to time, Jace would creep up on them and whisper something in Mushmouth, the language of the undead. It was decidedly unnerving.

"Looks like another boring day," Jace noted, speaking in Western. His accent, rooted in his original Delvish, was harsh.

"The weather is picking up," Gunivere noted. "In this latitude, we just might be in for a storm."

"Shut up about the weather," Durin muttered, staring at the waves.

"Man overboard!" Seaman Wiley shouted from his perch atop the main mast.

"Where away?" Captain Biggles shouted from midship.

"Off the port bow, Cap'n," Wiley responded, pointing. The three peered at the water, or at least the elves did. Durin just gripped the rail and swallowed. The sea *was* getting rougher.

“You two,” Biggles shouted, “fetch him in, ye scurvy sea dogs!” Seaman Gruber and Seaman O’Malley threw out a lifeline and hauled the semi-conscious figure aboard.

“It’s a woman!” Gruber shouted, taking a step away from the unconscious figure.

“Toss her over! Women are bad luck,” O’Malley added.

“What is it?” Wiley queried from his post atop the mast. He climbed down from the lookout perch to stand with the other two.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Durin said, moving away from the rail.

“Man or woman, no one gets tossed off the *Bouncy Linda* without my say so. She’s wounded, man. Are you so heartless?” Captain Biggles said, pushing Gruber and O’Malley back. Durin knelt beside the woman.

She wore a once fine dress, now torn. She was young and pretty. Some kind of arrow, broken off near the tip, was embedded in the back of her right thigh. Wiley carefully drew the arrow out. The woman started when he did. The arrow clattered to the deck. No one had seen its like before.

There was also a knife embedded in her left shoulderblade. Wiley removed it as well, gently, then applied a dressing to both wounds. Gunivere picked up the knife and examined it. It seemed to be a regular knife, though the name “*Termion*” was engraved on the hilt of the blade.

The woman was delirious. Wiley performed some first aid on her. As he worked, her eyes fluttered open.

“Can you talk? Do you feel strong enough?” Biggles asked.

“I have to tell you. Please. I’m confused. Ask me your questions,” she replied, a look of horror in her eyes.

“What is your name?” Jace asked.

“Karen,” she replied.

“How did you get here?” Gunivere queried.

“I swam from the island four days ago, or maybe five. I’ve lost track.”

“What Island?” Durin asked.

“Big South Island,” Karen responded weakly. Wiley gave her a drink of water; she smiled at him.

“Where is Big South Island?” Durin continued his questioning.

“It’s at the southern end of the Great Marsh of Midlands,” Karen told him, trying to be cooperative.

“Why did you leave?” Durin asked, trying to draw the tale from her.

“Lord Zev, the overseer of the island, has gone mad. He’s set himself up as King and is keeping everyone on the island under his control. If the rulers knew, they’d stop him, but no one escapes from the island,” Karen told him. The others looked on in shock. Such a thing was against the natural order; Lords were supposed to protect the people, not oppress them.

“How does he control the island?” Jace asked.

“There are many hidden pit traps and other fiendish devices on the trails leading to the sea. Magical devices guard the shores, alerting his patrols. The patrols are lawless men, criminals that take what they want from the people. Packs of dogs roam the forests, ready to tear apart any travellers they find.”

“How did you escape?” Gunivere put in.

“There were seven of us. We fought our way out of the Glass Dungeon and through the countryside. Only I made it off the island. If Black Pete had thought me alive, he’d have sent men into the water after me,” Karen said, her voice growing quieter as she spoke.

“Who is Black Pete?” Durin asked her.

“Lord Peter Domingo, Lord Zev’s enforcer. He keeps the people in line and deals with any malcontents. Some say he built the Glass Dungeon,” Karen replied. Wiley looked up at them and shook his head. Karen clutched his arm. “No! I have to tell you. They’re counting on me!”

“What is the Glass Dungeon?” Durin asked.

“It is a huge catacomb, fraught with peril. Lord Zev uses part of it for his jail. There is a way out of the jail, but it leads to the

deeper dungeon. We were lucky to get out alive. Well, most of us did.”

“Can we help you?” Gunivere asked, voicing the thought for all of them.

“Go to the island and talk to Big Willy. He’s a barman.” Karen’s eyes closed. Moments later, her breathing stopped.

“Now she’s *dead!* If that isn’t bad luck, I don’t know what is,” O’Malley shouted.

“Wiley, you blasted fool. Keep your eyes on the horizon!” Biggles shouted, as unnerved by the young woman’s death as the rest of them. Wiley scrambled back up the mast. The wind was blowing strongly.

“Rocks! Dead ahead,” Wiley shouted.

“Turn her, Mr. Lars,” Biggles shouted to the helmsman. “Passengers, get below. O’Malley, trim that sail!” Gruber handed life preservers to the passengers.

“She’s not turning, Captain, Helmsman Lars shouted.

“Not that way, you fool!” Wiley screamed.

A wave caused the ship to list to port just as she struck the rocks. The wave and the ship’s momentum combined to shatter the ship on impact.

Chapter 2 - Shipwrecked

Jace awoke slowly, feeling the pain of battered ribs. He remembered the ship striking the rocks, then everything became a blur. He staggered to his feet and gazed blearily about. He was on a beach, fine white sand extending back to distant hills. He had nothing but the clothes on his back, but wreckage was strewn over the beach in all directions. Durin walked up beside him; moments later, Gunivere joined them.

“Looks like we’re the only ones that made it,” Durin commented.

“Hey!” Jace shouted, “There’s my bow!” The three set about searching the beach, collecting everything of use that they could find and piling it well past the high water line.

Jace pulled a thick sheaf of papers from the sand. He examined it and found that it was charts of the surrounding area. He tucked the maps into his belt.

Durin pulled a piece of paper free from a broken frame. It was the *Bouncy Linda*’s trading license.

This may come in handy, he thought.

By the time it was dark, the travellers had collected everything they could find that was of any use. Gunivere surveyed the pile, noting the few boxes of trade goods that they’d manage to salvage.

A box of trinkets, cheap jewelry and the like; a box of spices; a box of fine clothing, expensive silks and other fabrics; a bundle of 20 knives, unsharpened.

Jace pulled his cloak tighter about himself; the wind was rising and the temperature dropping. He realized that, on this open beach, they might all die of exposure. He pointed that out to the others.

“With this sailcloth, poles and rope, we should be able to make some kind of shelter,” Durin said, then put word to deed. Gunivere collected the driftwood they’d found and soon had a roaring fire burning. Jace arranged the items that they’d found around the fire to dry them out. They all shared a meal of trailaid and trailmunch, then huddled under the makeshift shelter.

Bain studied the land before him from the cover of the trees before stepping onto the grasslands. His leather armour creaked slightly as he moved forward. His ice blue eyes squinted, trying to make out distant shapes. If a patrol spotted him, he was finished.

It was his own fault, he knew. No one declared war on the “King” without paying the penalty. His father would not have approved, but his father was dead, along with the rest of his family, killed by the same patrols he was trying to avoid.

At 1.7 metres tall, Bain was about average for a human. His tan skin was a marked contrast to his close cropped white hair. Though he fretted about it from time to time, being only 21 years old, it did attract attention from the women - Bain enjoyed that.

“Where you goin’, Bain?” A familiar voice came from behind him.

“None of your business, Sarge,” Bain replied without turning.

“We’re makin’ it our business,” another voice added.

“Kiss my ass, Corporal,” Bain growled.

“You oughtta show more respect,” Sarge said. “Get him.” The patrolmen quickly subdued Bain; even his great strength couldn't hold off the attack of six men. Sarge moved to stand in front of Bain.

“Nobody leaves the patrols, Bain,” Sarge said. “Once you join, you help us keep the peace.”

“You don’t keep the peace,” Bain said, struggling to break free. “You’re nothing but a bunch of murderers and thieves.”

“Didn’t bother you much before,” Corporal sneered from behind him.

“I’m *not* gonna join up with you scum,” Bain stated.

“Then you’re a traitor, and we know how to deal with traitors,” Sarge said. He nodded and Corporal brought his clenched fist down on Bain’s unprotected neck.

Chapter 3 - A Visitor In The Night

Gunivere was awakened by someone prodding his shoulder. He sat up quickly and grabbed his bone stiletto.

“Whoa, there! Old Skeeze didn’t mean to frighten ye. I saw yer camp and thought I’d welcome ye to your new home,” Skeeze said, holding up his hands. He was an old man, thin, with straggly white hair in a fringe around his bald head. His clothes were threadbare and, when he spoke, Gunivere could see the remains of teeth in his mouth. Gunivere kicked the other two awake and all three sat up and spoke with their visitor.

“Who are you?” Durin asked, mind still foggy with sleep.

“I’m Skeeze, like I said. I live on the beach, looking for stuff as washes up,” Skeeze replied amiably.

“Can you tell us where we are?” Gunivere asked. “We were shipwrecked.”

“You’re on Big South Island,” Skeeze cackled. “This used to be a nice place to be. Now, it’s just a pit of despair. No one gets away.”

“Is it really that bad?” Durin asked.

“You’d think the *real* King would do something about this. I guess he doesn’t know. After all, if the taxes are paid, what reason would he have to come here?” Skeeze looked pointedly at the three

travellers.

“How do you avoid the beach patrols?” Durin asked.

“They don’t bother me none, ‘cuz they know I don’t wanna leave. Asides, I got my papers. How do you know about the beach patrols, anyway?”

“Aren’t there dog packs as well?” Jace put in, steering the conversation away from their knowledge of the island.

“I hate them dog packs. They’ll tear you apart as soon as look at you,” Skeeze said, holding out his arm. In the fitful glow of the dying fire, they could see scars, remnants of at least one run in with the dog packs.

“What did you mean by ‘papers’?” Durin asked.

“You got to have a reason to be on the Big South Island beach. Me, I live here, and I got my papers to prove it. How about you?”

“We’re traders,” Durin piped up. Jace frowned at him.

“Sure you are,” Skeeze laughed, “and I’m Black Pete.”

“Who’s Black Pete?” Gunivere put in.

“Oooh, don’t say that,” Skeeze warned. “He’s got long ears, and nobody what wants to stay alive calls ‘im that.”

“But doesn’t Lord Zev control Big South?” Jace interjected.

“Lord Zev?” Skeeze whooped. “He’s a total nut job. But you didn’t hear it from me. They say, so they do, that he has a broom for one of his advisors and that he chops off people’s heads and uses them for puppets.” Jace thought of the possibilities of raising the heads, but without bodies, they would make a pitiful army of darkness.

“We heard there were traps and such on the beach,” Durin started.

“You sure know a lot for someone who didn’t know where he was,” Skeeze said. “Traps? You got to keep a sharp eye out, especially close to the beach. People are supposed to stay clear of the beach.”

“What about Lord Zev’s magic devices?” Jace asked.

“That’s a good one, that is. The sorcerers, they sell Lord Zev the

devices to spot anyone on the beach, but there's a rumour that they also sell a device to keep those things from seein' ya," Skeeze giggled. The travellers glanced at each other. It appeared that Skeeze was a bit odd, to say the least.

"Tell me what you know about the Glass Dungeon," Durin said, determined to wring all the information from Skeeze that he could.

"Hee hee hee," Skeeze laughed raspily. "Ol' Peter Domingo thinks he's so smart. He didn't build the Glass Dungeon, and he don't know what it's for. There's a sage, name of Ziggle Bob, who knows more than I do about that."

"Do you know anyone else on the island? Do you know Big Willy?" Durin asked.

"He's a barman, in one of the inland towns," Skeeze said, standing. "That's all I know. I'll see you fellas around." The three sat and watched as Skeeze shuffled off over the sand.

Gunivere was the first to notice a distant sound. He motioned the others to silence. Then, they all heard it - dogs in the distance.

The three barely had time to grasp their weapons before three huge dogs leaped at them out of the darkness. Jace tried to frighten them by transforming to a skeleton, but one of the dogs pounced on him and bore him to the ground, chewing on his arm.

Gunivere flailed about with his staff, trying to keep the dogs back. Durin swung his Dwarven axe, shouting battle cries, but hitting nothing. Moments later, a dog darted in, tearing part of Durin's armour away. He tried to grab it and another dog darted in, pulling his leather pants off. Durin struggled to stay upright, but the dogs converged, tearing at his leather armour like it was a chew toy. Unfortunately, the dogs scored on Durin as well as his armour. Soon, he lay, unconscious, beside Jace.

Gunivere swung more and more wildly as he tired. His hands were sweating, making his grip slippery. Another swing, and another, still unable to hit the dogs, but keeping them back. Then his hand slipped and his staff flew away. The dogs turned from him to chase after the staff. One grabbed it and the others tried to take it

away. Gunivere watched in dismay as his weapon was carried away by the three dogs. He turned back to minister to his fallen comrades.

Chapter 4 - A Chase On The Beach

Jace awoke abruptly. For a moment, he wondered where he was, then the events of the night before came back to him. He looked around to see Durin sprawled on the ground, snoring. Gunivere was nowhere to be seen. Jace woke Durin and both of them went out to the beach to see if Gunivere was about.

“Maybe he’s flying around,” Durin suggested. “He might be scouting for a town.”

“Could be,” Jace mused, “but I don’t like this at all.” The two were startled by a sudden barking. A pack of dogs was charging down the beach toward them. After the events of the previous evening, neither was ready to take on more dogs.

And there *were* more. Six dogs, tongues hanging out, ran toward them, barking. Durin broke first, grabbing his axe and running off down the beach. Jace weighed the odds of his being able to beat all six dogs, armed with only his fists, and chose to follow Durin.

For a moment, the two held their lead but, inexorably, the dogs closed in. Jace kicked at the dogs as he ran; Durin swung his axe. All too soon, both were felled by the dogs who savaged their bodies before running off.

Durin and Jace recovered slowly, eating from their provisions

and binding their wounds. They stood, preparing to return to their camp, when the dogs crested a rise. With a cry, Durin ran forward to meet the pack, his axe singing a song of destruction as it whistled through the air and clove the leader in two.

Jace stepped in and kicked a dog. It fell on its side. Before they could take advantage of the situation, they were overwhelmed again.

“Why don’t they just kill us?” Jace asked when they awakened again.

“I hate dogs,” Durin said around a mouthful of trailmunch.

Six hours, four kilometres and five battles later, the last dog lay dying in the sand. Durin and Jace walked slowly back to their camp, torn and bloodied. Durin had barely enough strength to carry his axe. His arms ached from the prolonged effort of battle, without rest, over and over again. Jace limped, a ragged gash running up his left thigh.

“Thanks for the spell,” Jace said wearily. Durin had cast a spell, increasing Jace’s fighting ability for a few moments.

“I’ve got to store more power,” Durin replied. “If we run into more of those dogs, one spell isn’t going to help us, and that one spell pushes me to my limit.”

“What I want to know,” Jace growled, “is where was Gunivere?”

Domingo closed the door quietly and walked slowly across the tiled marble floor. The walls of the chamber were panelled in black pine; red curtains hung in front of the doorway, effectively blocking all light from entering the chamber. Across the ceiling, sculpted demons, nymphs and other supernatural beings cavorted; the room was lit by the glow of the demons’ eyes.

“Sorana,” Domingo intoned, “Queen of the gods, grant your humble servant guidance.” Domingo waited, hoping that, this time, she *would* respond. As always, only silence answered his call.

After a time, Domingo knelt, then leaned forward, pressing his forehead to the floor.

“I beg you, my Queen, grant your servant some small token. My actions, even my very life, is yours. Command me, I beg you.”

Chapter 5 - A Morning Stroll

Gunivere awoke before the others. Rather than disturb his companions, he crept out of the makeshift tent and walked along the beach, taking time to contemplate the world.

How strange, he thought, to be shipwrecked on the very island that Karen came from. He fingered the hilt of the knife with “*Termion*” on the hilt. There was something strange about that knife.

“Hey, you,” a voice yelled. Gunivere looked up to see three disheveled humans standing in front of him. “Let’s see your papers,” the one in the centre said, hand on the hilt of his rapier.

“Papers?” Gunivere asked. The human nodded. There was a sharp pain at the back of Gunivere’s head, then everything went black.

Gunivere awoke, feeling a throbbing at the back of his skull. He took in the pile of equipment, the ramshackle tent and the firepit.

“He’s awake, Sarge,” a voice said. Gunivere noticed that his equipment was on the pile as well.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you, spy,” Sarge said, kicking Gunivere in the ribs.

“I’m no spy,” Gunivere replied, blinking at the pain in his ribs.

“We’re traders. Our ship crashed into the rocks.”

“I told you this camp was too big for one guy, Sarge,” Another human said.

“Shut up, Corporal,” Sarge growled. “So, where’s your crew, *Mister Trader?*”

“Dead, I guess. I’m the only one here,” Gunivere lied.

“You said ‘we’ a minute ago. You didn’t drag all this stuff here by yourself, elf boy.” Sarge shoved his rapier into the coals. “Next lie, I burn you. Now, where’s-”

“Sarge!” a human called from the pile of equipment. “There’s lots of trade goods here. Necklaces, gems, clothes, lots of stuff.”

“Keep looking, Ernie,” Sarge said. “Okay, maybe you *are* a trader. You still didn’t do all this alone. Where are your buddies? Maybe hiding in the bushes, waiting to jump us?”

“I went for a walk before they woke up,” Gunivere said. “Then you jumped me.”

“We *arrested* you,” Sarge said, kicking Gunivere in the ribs again. “We’re the law. You show some respect.”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” Gunivere said through gritted teeth. His ribs were in agony.

“Look, Sarge,” Ernie said, dropping a knife in front of Gunivere. “This was in his backpack.” Sarge picked up the knife. In the firelight, the word “*Termion*” seemed to flare from the hilt.

“You lying rebel scum!” Sarge exclaimed. His fist came down, seeming to fill all of Gunivere’s vision.

“Get up, traitor,” a human said, roughly pulling Gunivere to his feet. “We’re moving out.”

“Why do you keep calling me traitor? I’m a *trader*.”

“Shut up, rebel,” Sarge said. “You’re lucky we don’t just hang you right here.” Gunivere noted the lack of trees on the beach, but decided not to mention it to his captors.

“Hey, Sarge, lookit that,” a human said.

“What is it, Bob?” Corporal asked.

“If it wasn’t moving, I’d say it was a stick and a beachball,” Bob said, squinting into the evening sun.

“My brother has been drinking,” Jace said as he approached and put his arm around Gunivere’s shoulders. “I’ve told you to keep out of the wine.”

“Brothers, huh?” Sarge sneered.

“We’re traders,” Durin put in.

“Where’d you get this knife?” Sarge shouted. “Tell me that, fat boy!”

“We bought it from a sailor,” Durin said. Sarge looked unconvinced. “He found it floating in a piece of wood.” Even to his own ears, the lie sounded weak.

“He’s been drinking, too,” Jace said. Durin staggered a few steps and crossed his eyes. No one was convinced.

“That doesn’t explain the knife,” Corporal piped up.

“I told you, we found it floating on a piece of wood,” Durin said. “Um, after we bought it from a sailor. Oh, damn. My axe will drink your soul!” Durin cried, swinging at the nearest of Gunivere’s captors, Ernie. The axe clove through Ernie’s armour, and through his chest. Everyone leaped into action, drawing weapons and squaring off.

“Get ‘em, boys!” Sarge shouted. Sarge and Corporal stepped back. Durin followed, swinging his axe toward Sarge. Jace punched Bob, dropping him to the ground. He followed it with a kick. Bob’s head twisted around, accompanied by a distinct snapping sound. Gunivere punched another human, knocking him over.

“You dirty rebels,” Sarge said, deftly dodging Durin’s axe. “I’ll see you hang for this!”

“You won’t see anything,” Durin howled, bloodlust driving him forward. His axe swung in a flat arc, crashing right into Sarge’s nose. It passed on, cleaving his head in twain. The top of Sarge’s skull flew across the beach to land near a small crab.

Durin didn’t stop, but charged toward Corporal, yelling Dwarven battle cries. Gunivere and Jace fought on, both landing

blow after blow on the humans. Soon, the beach was littered with corpses. Jace began methodically searching them. The only thing of interest that he found was a piece of paper with something written on it. The three put their heads together and, with the knowledge they had of Western, puzzled out the message. ‘Thee dunjun is to thee ~~east~~ weste’.

“How are we going to get rid of the bodies?” Jace asked.

“We should bury them,” Durin said.

“Got a shovel?” Jace asked.

“We could burn them,” Durin continued.

“And another patrol will see the smoke,” Jace countered.

“Well, what do *you* suggest?” Gunivere asked, rubbing his sore ribs.

“We could chop them into bits and throw them into the sea,” Jace said.

“Ew, gross,” Durin exclaimed. “Why not just throw them in the water?”

“They’ll float back to land,” Jace snapped.

“We could weight them down with rocks,” Durin tried. Gunivere and Jace looked at the fine sand of the beach.

“Rocks?” Jace asked.

“We could cut them open and fill them with sand,” Durin tried again.

“Why not just cover them with the sailcloth and throw sand over it?” Gunivere suggested sensibly. The others agreed and set to the task with a will, dragging the bodies into a pile.

“Where’s the top of this guy’s head?” Gunivere asked. They looked around. Durin spotted it, covered with small crabs.

“Oh, that’s *sick*,” Durin gagged.

“Go get it,” Jace ordered.

“Why should *I* go get it?”

“Your psychotic axe swinging hacked it off, you go get it,” Jace retorted. Durin pulled out his staff and used it to prod the crabs away from the skull. One started climbing the pole. Durin swung it

to flick the crab away. It flew through the air, toward Gunivere, who ducked.

“Hey! Watch it,” Gunivere shouted. Durin eventually managed to get the skull and attached bits over to the pile of bodies. They spread the sailcloth over the pile and started tossing sand on it.

“Dungeon, huh?” Gunivere asked.

“It’s shelter,” Durin pointed out, “since we just used ours to bury these guys.”

And it’s probably a cave. Good old underground Durin thought.

“Well, we’ve got nothing better to do,” Gunivere sighed.

“I would rather find a town,” Jace said. “I could use some real food. This trailaid and trailmunch is starting to make me gag.”

They gathered up what was left of the trade goods and parceled it out among themselves. All three were carrying almost as much as they could.

“Dungeon, here we come,” Durin chortled.

Chapter 6 - A Lesson In Healing

The travellers approached the cave cautiously. Two low hills slanted down to a valley that opened out into a cavemouth. Durin smiled.

“Underground. Rock under my feet, no more light blazing in my eyes,” Durin sighed.

“Underground. Traps all over the place, monsters attacking at every turn,” Jace added.

“Don’t say that,” Durin said, looking back at Jace. His foot caught on a wire. It snapped. There was a bright flash.

“Ow!” Durin yelled.

“Damnation!” Gunivere exclaimed.

“Told you so,” Jace said. Each had felt the effects of the magical trap, set off by Durin’s foot.

They proceeded into the dungeon, Durin leading the way. Jace held a lantern, pointed away from their path so Durin could use his Dwarvish senses.

“Look out,” Durin yelled and swung his axe. The creature danced nimbly out of the way, then dodged Jace’s foot, only to succumb to Gunivere’s staff.

“What was that?” Durin asked.

“Whatever it is, it’s dead now,” Jace pointed out. Then, he

checked the area for any more traps. “It’s clear,” he called. They proceeded to the north, entering a passageway. The tunnel led for a ways, then the three were balked by a pit, stretching three metres down the corridor, from wall to wall. Durin looked down.

“It looks to be about four metres deep,” he reported.

“I’ve got this one,” Gunivere said. He transformed into a falcon and flew across the pit. He transformed back and attached a rope to an outcropping. The others swung across.

The tunnel terminated in a large cavern. The floor was strewn with dry leaves, wood and bones. The three tried to identify the bones but, without skulls, the bones all looked quite similar.

“At least we didn’t find any skeletons in suits of armour,” Durin quipped.

“Not yet, anyway,” Jace said. Another tunnel exited the cavern to the east. They entered it and followed it as it turned south. This tunnel came out into an oddly shaped cavern with several other tunnels branching off it. Durin led them to the west, then turned north.

The tunnel appeared carved, with much more regular lines than the previous sections. In the centre of the room was a statue of a monk, holding out his hands. In his hands was a box with a lock on the front and a slit in the top. Gunivere examined the statue and box magically.

“I see no magic trap,” he pronounced. Jace examined the box, checking for regular traps. He, also, found nothing.

“Gimme that,” Jace said, snatching the box from the statue. It rattled.

“Hey, the box rattles,” Durin noted.

The three exited the chamber and headed west again. Gunivere traced their route with quill, ink and parchment. He told them that the corridor should be joining up with the entryway, if he was mapping correctly. They turned to the north to examine another chamber.

“Ew,” Durin exclaimed.

“What is it?” Jace asked, shining the light forward. The beam illuminated three large, slimy worms, coiling about on the floor. Before the travellers could react, the worms attacked, lashing out at the three with their tails.

Durin plied his axe with precision, dispatching a worm handily. Jace struggled to land a blow, swinging repeatedly at the flailing tail. Gunivere managed to stave off the worm’s attack, but was unable to score a hit of his own.

Suddenly, Jace went down, felled by a blow to the head. Durin swung his axe, dispatching the worm, then knelt to aid Jace.

“I think he’s dying,” Durin called.

“Well, *do* something,” Gunivere insisted, dodging the worm’s attack. Durin examined his pack for any healing herbs - nothing. He resorted to trying to bind Jace’s wounds.

“Hey!” Gunivere yelled. “I don’t remember him being that *spread out* before.”

“My knife slipped,” Durin snapped. “I can do this.”

“Well, don’t kill him,” Gunivere shouted, swinging his staff at the worm.

“Oops,” Durin muttered,

“What do you mean ‘oops’?” Gunivere asked.

“He’ll be fine,” Durin shouted, trying to convince himself. He continued working over Jace’s prone body.

“Take that,” Gunivere cried, finally killing the attacking worm. Jace stirred, shouting something in his native tongue.

“I did it!” Durin yelled.

“Get your hands off me, you crazy dwarf,” Jace gasped. “What kind of healer are you?”

“I’m just learning,” Durin stated.

“Well, learn on someone else next time,” Jace muttered.

Domingo stood to the left of the throne, listening to the petitioners who’d come to speak to the king. It was the usual mix of peasants and nobles, some whining about the taxes, others trying to

curry favour with the mad king of Big South Island.

“Off with his head!” King Zev shouted.

“It’s a woman,” Dalus Arachnos pointed out.

“Really?” Zev asked.

“Yes, my king,” Arachnos replied.

“Then, off with her clothes!” Guards quickly complied, roughly tearing the clothing from the hapless woman. She screamed and crouched, trying to hide her nakedness. “Wash her and bring her to me,” Zev said. guards led the weeping, terrified woman away.

“The next petitioner is-” the chamberlain began.

“Enough!” Zev cried. He held out a broom, shaking it at the crowd. “Bobby broom says that the audiences are over for today.” The crowd dispersed, aided by the guards’ halberds.

Domingo knew that Zev was hurrying to the royal bedchamber, there to sample yet another woman. He glanced at Arachnos, who nodded. Zev would be unable to enjoy the woman, a fact made certain by the potion Arachnos had created.

“How much longer must we suffer this fool?” Arachnos whispered.

“Softly,” Domingo warned. “While there are still loyal supporters of this ‘king’, and while the border patrols are still unable to turn back a determined attack, we must bide our time.”

“I bow to your wisdom,” Arachnos said, then withdrew.

Yes, Domingo thought, *my wisdom. Fool! I’ve even turned you from your god. You follow Sorana, even as I do.* Even as he thought her name, he felt a summons.

“Finally!” Domingo shouted, startling a servant who bowed low and stayed that way until after Domingo left.

Chapter 7 - A New Companion

After ascertaining that Gunivere was indeed mapping accurately, the threesome headed back to explore the tunnel that led to the east. Gunivere discovered a pressure plate in the floor and jammed it with a small piece of wood so the adventurers could cross it. The tunnel opened out into a large, kidney shaped cave. Durin noticed some marks on the floor.

“They’re hoofprints,” Jace noted. “Big ones.”

“Oh, boy,” Durin muttered.

The group followed the curve of the cavern and exited to the west. At that point, the tunnel widened, then branched into two sections. They stood, pondering which way to go.

Bain woke slowly, feeling the multiple pains received in a stiff beating by his former patrol buddies. If he hadn’t known they were evil before, he surely knew it now. A voice chattered something unintelligible at him as he opened his eyes. Three goblins cavorted in front of him, brandishing their knives and waving their shields. Bain was surprised at their boldness until he came fully awake. He was chained to the wall, suspended by his arms. He growled at the goblins, but they ignored him. He strained to break the chains, but to no avail.

Jace examined the table on which sat five vials, the kind found in an alchemist's or healer's shop. Gunivere couldn't find any magical traps. Jace saw no other signs of danger. The three took turns, trying to discern the nature of the potions.

"This one's healing," Jace said, after a taste.

"This one, too," Gunivere noted. After some time, the adventurers managed to identify three of the five potions. They took all five, knowing that they'd be useful later on.

Gunivere knelt, staring at the floor carefully. He could barely make out the trigger for another trap. Small holes in either wall made him exceptionally wary as he attempted to disable the trap. With a soft hissing sound, several small darts came out of the walls, sticking into Gunivere.

"Youch!" he yelled.

"Let me try," Jace said, kneeling by the holes. Moments later, he sat back in disgust. "I don't see *anything*," he said.

"We've got to get by," Gunivere stated. "I'll have to try again."

"I'm bored," Durin said. This slow checking for traps wasn't his style. He walked off, humming a dwarven battle hymn and swinging his axe jauntily. As he walked, he heard a squeak. Too late, he tried to throw himself backward. He felt the floor swing out from under him, then he fell. He hoped he wouldn't fall on his axe. His head struck rock.

"How many of those darts can there be?" Jace asked, plucking yet more of the tiny missiles out of his arm.

"At least they aren't poisoned," Gunivere pointed out. "Wait. I think - yes, I've got it."

"About time," Jace muttered.

"Hey," Gunivere exclaimed. "Where's Durin?"

"Huh?" Jace grunted, making notes in the old book he'd found a few rooms back. "I just thought of a new spell."

"Durin's missing," Gunivere said.

“Trust that anti-healer to go wandering off,” Jace grumbled. “Let’s go find him.”

They found the trapped floor easily. Gunivere opened it and Jace shone the light down. Durin lay at the bottom of the pit.

“One of us has to go down there and tie a rope to him,” Gunivere noted.

“You’re pretty light as a bird,” Jace pointed out. “Easier for me to haul you up. And we will both need to be up here to haul Durin out.” Gunivere nodded in agreement and started to climb down. He slipped and fell to the bottom of the pit, landing on Durin.

“Are you okay?” Jace called.

“Yeah,” Gunivere replied. “I missed the axe.” Jace tossed one end of the rope down and Gunivere tied what he thought was a good knot. Then he transformed to falcon form and Jace pulled him out of the pit.

They wedged the trap door open and began hauling on the rope. Gunivere’s knot, inexpertly tied, slithered loose. Both of them fell over backwards as the rope came free and Durin crashed back down.

“You know,” Jace said as he got up, “He’s safe down there.”

“Nothing can harm him,” Gunivere agreed. “We can get him out later, when he’s awake to help from his end.”

“Do you hear that?” Jace asked.

“Sounds like voices,” Gunivere noted. They crept down the hall and looked into the cleanly constructed room from concealment. Three green skinned creatures were cavorting about a human chained to a wall. Jace drew his elven bow and nocked an arrow. He sighted along it and let fly. The shaft struck one of the goblins’ shields, shattering it. The goblins turned with a cry as Jace and Gunivere charged into the room.

Bain saw the two charge in. He redoubled his efforts to break free of the chains. Jace swung and dodged, engaging the goblin whose shield he had destroyed. Gunivere attacked another. The third chose not to attack, but continued taunting Bain. The goblin

dropped his pants and wiggled his scrawny buttocks at Bain.

Jace landed a mighty blow, knocking the goblin off its feet. He followed with a wicked kick, dispatching the foul creature.

“My goddess Cassandra will claim your soul,” Jace uttered. Gunivere cried out, felled by the combined attack of two goblins.

With a snap, one of Bain’s chains parted. Moments later, the other broke. He charged in, swinging fists and chains together. With a single blow, he bashed open a goblin’s head, splattering brains and bone in a bloody spray. The other goblin turned to flee. Jace tripped him and Bain finished him off.

“Too bad Durin isn’t here,” Jace muttered as he bent to heal Gunivere. “I’d show him how you are supposed to heal someone.”

Gunivere responded to Jace’s ministrations as Bain went to collect his gear, thrown haphazardly in a corner.

“I’m Bain,” he said, extending a hand.

“Jace,” Jace replied, clasping his hand. “Good to know you.”

Domingo halted before the door to his private chamber and uttered the password. Without it, anyone passing through the door would be killed. He noted that the glowing eyes in the ceiling sculpture were making the chamber as bright as day, albeit a redlit one.

“Sorana, Queen of the-” Domingo started.

“On your knees, dog,” a voice thundered. Domingo dropped, fearful and thrilled at the same time. Finally, his goddess was speaking to him again.

“The means of your destruction is again on the island,” Sorana intoned, her voice thundering through the chamber.

“I saw it go into the ocean,” Domingo protested.

“Do you doubt my word?”

“No, my goddess,” Domingo shouted.

“You need a reminder,” Sorana stated. Domingo’s body was wreathed in red flames. He fell, writhing, to the floor. What followed seemed to go on for a long time.

Chapter 8 - We Must Go North

Gunivere found himself looking down the hole at Durin's sleeping form. Jace stood, running the rope through his fingers. Bain leaned against the wall, arms crossed, wishing he had a drink.

"Wake up," Gunivere yelled.

"You want I should drop a rock on him to wake him?" Bain offered.

"Hey, *Fatboy!*" Jace yelled. Durin stirred.

"I'm on a diet," he muttered. "Oh, I'm in pain. Hey, where am I?"

"You fell down a hole, you stupid dwarf," Jace pointed out sarcastically. "Mister night vision, Mister sensing underground passages, Mister -"

"Are you going to get me out or not?" Durin interrupted. Jace tossed an end of the rope down. Durin tied a knot about his waist and prepared to be pulled up. Jace and Gunivere pulled. Durin's knot unravelled and the rope slipped through his hands. Jace and Gunivere staggered, but didn't fall.

"You're as bad as Gunny," Jace muttered. "Try again, and *hold on* this time." He threw the rope down again and Durin tied a knot, then tied another. He gripped the rope tightly. Jace and Gunivere prepared to pull, then Bain stepped forward.

“Step aside, guys,” Bain said, grabbing the rope. Leather creaked as his muscles tightened inside his armour. Durin rose out of the hole. Bain held Durin out.

“Is this your yo-yo?” he asked them.

The party was balked by yet another dart trap. They did not know if there was a way around it, for Gunivere had spilled ink all over his map. Durin and Jace tried to disarm the trap. Bain watched, growing more and more impatient. After Durin took a cloud of darts in the face for the third time, Bain had had enough. He grabbed Durin and threw him past the trap. Just then, Jace yelled out that he’d succeeded in disarming it.

After a period of rest, the party, joined by Bain, had continued to explore the dungeon. Bain told them that the place was regularly used by patrols to store items they wanted to keep for themselves.

“I know it’s around here somewhere,” Bain said, running his hands along the wall. “Ah, here it is,” he chortled as his hand seemed to pass through the rock wall.

“Illusion wall,” Gunivere said. “I’ve got to study this.”

“Get away from there!” a bestial voice bellowed. The group turned to see a huge form down the corridor. Durin charged, followed by Jace and Bain. Gunivere was engrossed in the workings of the illusion wall.

Jace paused for a moment and cast a spell to enhance their fighting prowess momentarily. Bain reached the minotaur first and shoved, pushing the creature over. It fell, stunned, to the ground. They tried to dispatch it but only succeeded in getting in each other’s way. It regained its feet and bellowed. Durin swung his axe and missed. It swung back, slamming a mighty fist to Durin’s head, knocking the stocky dwarf senseless.

Jace danced in, trying out a Chal move. The minotaur lowered its head and scooped Jace up, tossing him across the room to smash into the wall. He slumped to the ground in a boneless heap.

“Hold on, there,” Bain stalled, holding up his hands. “Patrolman, remember?” The minotaur looked at him for a moment, as if considering, then stalked away. Bain quickly grabbed his new friends and dragged them back to a safe location. Gunivere, enthralled by the idea of an illusion for a door, didn’t notice a thing.

“Here’s my plan,” Jace said, sketching on a page torn from one of the old books lying in a nearby room. “You two wait back here,” Jace instructed, drawing two stick figures.

“How come my stick man is a circle?” Durin whined.

“I’ll go here,” Jace continued, ignoring Durin. “I’ll shoot at it and when it comes charging back, you guys whack it with your weapons.” Durin and Bain nodded. Gunivere was still studying the illusion wall.

Jace crept forward, moving silently. He reached for an arrow and his belt purse came open, spilling coins across the floor with a jingle and a clatter. He retreated quickly, nearly getting decapitated by Durin’s axe.

“It’s me, it’s me,” Jace hissed, ducking the blow.

“Sorry,” Durin grinned.

Call me fat boy, he thought.

After a few moments, Jace crept forward again, avoiding the coins strewn on the floor. He drew an arrow, sliding its length over his lips before nocking it.

“Cassandra, guide my arrow,” Jace whispered, calling on his goddess for aid. He was surprised to feel warm hands slide down his arms, to grip the bow and arrow with him. He couldn’t see anything, but he could feel it. He felt breasts pressing into his back; he just *knew* they were bare. A wave of emotion flowed through his normally austere countenance. He let the arrow fly.

You’re mine, a female voice said in his head.

The arrow sped straight and true, sinking deep into the minotaur’s chest. It bellowed, then collapsed. Jace crept to the

corner and called to the others, visions of axes and fists passing through his mind. They went to the minotaur and quickly dispatched the wounded creature. They searched it, finding only a ring.

“You put it on,” Jace said.

“I’m not putting it on,” Durin countered.

Now that the guardian was gone, they were free to examine the chamber beyond the illusion wall. Gunivere sat at the entrance, repeatedly putting his hand through the illusion and back out again, giggling the whole time.

“Gunny?” Durin started.

“Leave him,” Jace said, pushing past him and into the room. He went cautiously, checking for traps. Inside were sacks of coin and some items.

One box held a suit of glittering chain mail. Jace slipped the mail into his backpack. Durin opened a small box to see a single large gem resting inside, perched on a bed of black velvet. The stone was black, with white swirls that moved slowly. The gem glowed, faintly, in soft pulses of light. He stowed it as Bain picked up a statuette of a troll. He squinted at it, noting some marks on the bottom. Durin found a ring in the box that had contained the gem. He put the ring on. Jace and Durin gathered up the sacks of money and the three headed out, collecting Gunivere along the way.

The four adventurers made haste to get away from the dungeon, not wanting to tangle with any more patrols.

“We are heading for that town that Gunny saw a few days back,” Jace stated. “I want some *real* food, dammit!”

“And I want a beer,” Bain agreed.

“Which way was it?” Durin asked.

“Um, north, or east,” Jace said.

“We must go north,” Bain intoned.

After heading north for most of the day, the party admitted that they were off course. Jace pulled out the sheaf of charts he had

found on the beach and consulted them.

“I think we’re too far north,” Jace said.

“We must go south,” Bain uttered.

“Ya, no kidding, you musclebound ox,” Jace snapped.

“You’re the one with the maps. Why’d you listen to me?” Bain countered.

“Let’s go,” Durin broke in. “And someone else lead Gunny for a while.” They had tied a rope loosely about Gunivere’s neck. Durin was leading him about like a dog.

“I wonder what addled his mind,” Jace wondered.

“Maybe he got bopped on the bean,” Bain suggested, taking the lead rope.

The party followed a rough wagon trail that led south and east. Soon, some cultivated fields came into view. The four walked past a farmhouse and were hailed by the farmer.

“Howdy, strangers,” the farmer said. “I’m Farmer Ed.” He was a human, tanned, with brown hair and brown eyes. His skin was creased and wrinkled, hands calloused and rough.

“What do you know about the Glass Dungeon?” Durin asked. Jace slapped a hand to his forehead in disgust.

“Never heard of it,” Farmer Ed said. “Never heard of the teleport gate disguised as a whirlpool neither.” All the adventurers stared at Farmer Ed in surprise.

“Okay, do you know Karen?” Durin continued.

“Nice name,” Farmer Ed said. “Never heard of her. Or do you mean Karen Del Sienta?”

“Who?” Durin asked.

“She’s the leader of the rebellion against Lord Zev. She came through here once. A very pretty girl, she was.”

“Thanks for the info,” Durin called as the others led him away, still leading Gunivere by a rope.

Jace took out writing implements and started drawing a crude

map of the town, sketching in the buildings and identifying them. Bain headed straight for a tavern, coins in his hand. Jace headed for the general store to buy some provisions. Things were priced higher than he had expected, forcing him to buy more trailaid and trailmunch. Durin headed for the inn and got rooms for them all, paying out of the sack he had found. He led Gunivere to a room and made sure he was locked safely inside.

Once the group had made all the purchases they wanted, they went looking for Bain. They found him, roaring drunk, keeping the bartender company. Broken chairs and smashed mugs spoke of the reason the tavern was empty of patrons.

“Have a drink!” Bain yelled, waving to his friends and almost falling off the barstool.

“Hey, Bain,” Durin said slyly, “why not try on this ring?” He held out the ring they’d found on the minotaur’s body.

“Don’t do that,” the bartender said, putting out a white hand. He was a barbarian, of the northern tribes. His skin was white, his hair red. Green eyes, slightly unfocused, stared at the group.

“’s Hank,” Bain said, waving at the bartender.

“What do you know about Lord Zev?” Durin asked.

“Who said that?” Hank said, looking around.

“Down here,” Durin growled.

“Oh,” Hank said, looking down at Durin. “He’s a nut job, but I’m just a bartender. Who’m I to say a thing about a broom for an advisor? *I’d* worry if the broom talked back.” He slapped Bain on the shoulder and both of them laughed. Bain grabbed another flagon of ale and started guzzling it, leaning back, then fell off the barstool. He lay, snoring, on the floor.

“What about Black Pete?” Durin continued. If no one else was going to help Bain, neither was he.

“He never comes to Bob’s Flats. My axe would like the chance to chop him to bits.”

“The Glass Dungeon?” Durin prompted.

“I made it out alive. I still have nightmares about it,” Hank said,

shuddering.

“Patrols,” Durin said, feeding Hank another cue.

“They’re a good way to work out. There’s usually six of them. I sometimes go out and look for them,” Hank smiled. “Chop, chop, chop,” he made chopping motions with his hands.

“Do you know Big Willy?” Jace put in.

“He’s a barman in a town near the capital.”

“Ziggle Bob?” Durin asked.

“If you got the money, ZB will sell you what you need, even if you don’t know you need it,” Hank slurred.

“You must know Termion,” Jace said, fishing for more information.

“I remember,” Hank said, pointing at Jace. His finger wavered back and forth. “I remember when he and I killed 20 men at one fight. What a spellslinger! And that knife. Wow!” Hank took another drink.

“Skeeze?” Durin asked, surprised at how much Hank knew.

“Even if he did defy that nutjob King Zev, they shouldn’t have killed his family and stripped him of his title and lands. I hear it drove him a bit whacko.”

“What about the rebels?” Jace asked.

“Until someone can get the *real* king to come here, no rebels are going to win.”

“Did you know Karen Del Sienta?” Durin asked.

“A beautiful girl. I bet she’s somewhere safe.”

“No one’s going to bother her now,” Jace muttered.

“Whaddaya mean?” Hank challenged.

“She’s dead,” Jace stated.

“Get out, alla youse. The place is closed.” Hank pushed the group, helped them to haul Bain to his feet and shoved them out the door, then slammed it behind them.

The group headed for the inn, where they spent their first night in real beds since they’d hit the beach, days ago. Sometimes it seemed like it had been weeks.

The next day, the group was preparing to set off for the capital. They'd decided that they needed to see the 'king' for themselves. Jace donned his new mail shirt, having ascertained that it was magical and would not interfere with his casting.

As they walked out of town, they saw a man sitting on the front porch of what Jace had identified as the seat of government in the village.

Lord Bob, the ruler of the village, was in his thirties, with blonde hair and blue eyes. His skin was pale, though he looked to be in good shape. He wore silver field plate, tarnished in places. Beside him, a light broadsword rested against the wall, within easy reach.

"Hello," Durin said, once more taking the lead. "Can you tell us about the Glass Dungeon?" Jace shook his head, amazed that no one had locked the crazy dwarf up yet.

"The wisdom of Lord Peter Domingo made that place to send prisoners of the state. And why do you have an elf on a rope?"

"Er," Durin said cleverly.

"He's had too much wine," Jace claimed. No one was sure exactly which one of them he was talking about.

"What do you know about the patrols?" Durin questioned.

"They keep the peace on Big South Island," Lord Bob stated.

"Do you know Skeeze?" Durin asked.

"Such a shame, what happened to him," Lord Bob said.

"How about Karen Del Sienta or Big Willy?" Durin quizzed.

"She was a delightful girl," Lord Bob sighed. "Terribly misguided, though. Big Willy is a suspected rebel. No one can prove it, however."

"How do you feel about the taxes?" Jace put in.

"I must do what my king tells me. I have no militia here," Lord Bob said.

"King?" Durin asked.

"Zev, our rightful lord and king," Lord Bob said, looking at them warily. "Don't I know you?"

"I'm Bain, of the patrols," Bain said.

"It's around back," Lord Bob grunted. "I don't appreciate your trying to trick me."

"Just keeping you on your toes," Bain said, casually strolling toward the back of the building.

What the hell can this be? he wondered. Bain looked around, but didn't see anything unusual. Gunivere wandered back, staring dreamily at the surroundings. He sat on a chest that was pushed up against the wall. Bain joined him. Jace and Durin came around.

"What are you sitting on?" Durin asked.

"Huh?" Bain said intelligently.

"The chest," Jace snapped.

"Oh," Bain said, standing. Durin opened the chest to reveal mounds and mounds of coin.

"Oh, baby," Durin said, almost drooling at the sight of so much money. The four struggled to lift the chest and crabbed off down the street, heading north.

"We'll take this to, uh, to the place," Durin called. Jace rolled his eyes. Lord Bob waved, uncertainly, as he watched them leave.

"Damned strange patrol," he muttered.

"So, now what do we do?" Bain asked.

"We could all keep carrying this chest like a bunch of gibbering idiots," Jace suggested.

"You aren't helping," Durin pointed out. Jace transformed to skeleton and said something in Mushroom. Durin shuddered.

"Jace, you're really creepy sometimes," Durin said.

The four traded some money for a broken down manure cart and a tired old ox, both from Farmer Ed. They put Gunivere in the back, with their equipment, and started off up the trail.

Gunivere fell off the cart and landed on his head. Bain heaved him back onto the rickety contraption. Durin walked ahead of the cart, axe at ready. Jace led the ox, keeping it to a steady, albeit

slow, pace. Bain followed, watching for any trouble from the rear.

“Halt!” a voice called from the front of the cart. A group of six disheveled men stood, blocking the path.

“Make way for the king’s patrol,” Bain yelled from the rear.

“You aren’t a patrol,” the leader said.

“We are, too,” Durin said. Bain walked forward. Jace stayed with the ox. Gunivere fell off the back of the cart again.

“What’s the deal, Bain?” the leader asked.

“We’re a patrol,” Bain said.

“Not likely,” the leader snapped. “Where’s your Sergeant?”

“I’m the sergeant,” Durin piped up.

“You’re a fat, ugly, little dwarf,” the leader replied. “Now, give me some answers.”

“I’m the sergeant,” Durin insisted. Bain was making urgent hand gestures of negation, but Durin was getting angry.

“No way, you little runt. You and me, right now,” the leader said, drawing his rapier. Durin stepped in, his axe coming up.

The leader stabbed with his rapier, aiming for Durin’s neck. Durin ducked the blow and returned it with a vicious swing of his axe, taking the leader in mid thigh and hewing off both his legs. The leader fell, his severed legs falling against each other, then falling over. The stumps pumped his lifeblood onto the ground as he screamed weakly. Durin glanced at the rest of the men blocking the way.

“So, what are your orders, Sarge?” one of the men asked.

“Continue your patrol,” Durin said. “Now, get out of the way.” Jace tugged on the ox’s bridle to get it moving. Bain tossed Gunivere back onto the cart.

“You’ve got some blood on your face,” Jace whispered to Durin as he led the ox past.

“Hey! Where are we?” Gunivere shouted. “And why does everything smell like manure?”

“We are on the way to Thin Fjord,” Jace stated. “You smell like

manure because you have been rolling in it all day.”

“How did we get here?” Gunivere asked.

“*We*,” Jace said, stressing the word, “got here by effort. *You* got here by wandering around like an addle-brained idiot.”

“Lighten up, Jace,” Durin said. “Glad to see you’ve regained your senses, Gunny.” Durin looked at the others, slyly. “We saved this magic ring, just for you,” Durin spake, holding out the ring that they’d found in the minotaur’s belt pouch.

“Oh, thanks,” Gunivere said, slipping the ring on. He screamed, clutching his head in agony. The ring shimmered on his finger and disappeared. “My head! Oh!”

“Guess it wasn’t such a good ring after all,” Durin said mildly.

Jace halted the ox. He pointed to a moving form out on the plain. Durin looked carefully and could barely make out something moving. Gunivere transformed to falcon and flapped into the air to see what it was.

“It’s a bear,” Jace said.

“Use an arrow,” Bain suggested.

“That will just make it mad,” Durin said. “Maybe it will leave us alone.”

“We’re on a plain. It is no doubt hungry and we look a lot like food,” Jace drawled.

“Should I try my ring?” Durin asked.

“Get set, boys,” Bain shouted. “It’s coming!”

“How about my ring?” Durin queried.

Jace struck a fighting stance, vowing again to learn how to use a weapon. Gunivere dove down, heading for the group. Then he saw the bear and flew up again.

“Get down here, you stupid featherbrain!” Jace yelled. The bear charged, growling, at the party. Jace held the ox’s head, trying to keep it from running off.

“How about my ring?” Durin whined.

“Use it,” Bain shouted.

“Okay!” Durin shouted. “Um, go? Activate? Smite?” The bear reared up on its hind legs. Durin thrust his fist forward, pointing the ring at the bear.

Out of a clear blue sky, lightning arced down, striking the ground around the bear repeatedly. The others shielded their eyes against the glare. When the lightning ceased, there was only a charred black spot where the bear had been. Durin stared at the charred spot in amazement.

“Let’s get to Thin Fjord before anything else happens,” Bain suggested. Gunivere landed and transformed to elf.

“What kind of scout are you?” Jace demanded.

“A living one,” Gunivere replied.

“Thin Fjord,” Domingo said.

“It’s a hive of rebel activity,” Arachnos added.

“It must be taught a lesson,” Domingo said smoothly.

“Yes,” Zev muttered, “a lesson. Strack!”

“You called, my king?” Lord Strack said, saluting.

“Take a force and pacify the town of Thin Fjord,” Zev ordered. Strack saluted and left. Domingo stroked his moustache thoughtfully. Light flashed from his gold tooth as he smiled.

Durin stared in amazement at the torches and other lights flashing out front of the casino. He walked inside and was handed a free drink. He watched people winning money, based on the spinning of a wheel. He took out a quartz coin and bet on even. It came up odd. He was sure that it would be even. He bet again. And again.

After again making a rough map of the town, Jace found his temple, part of a multi-denomination building; being a port, Thin Fjord had to cater to a very wide variety of religions. Jace knelt before the altar and sent a prayer of thanks to his Goddess for her aid.

“*You’re* an assassin monk,” a low, sexy voice said. Jace looked

up to see the temple priestess standing with her arms crossed. They were all that covered her upper body as she was wearing the full panoply of a priestess of Cassandra, which is to say, very little.

“Yes,” Jace said, kneeling and lowering his head.

“Behave,” the priestess admonished, then left.

“I *am* behaving,” Jace whispered.

Gunivere wandered through the port, looking for equipment and supplies. He could not fathom how he’d become addled, nor why it left him so quickly. And the ring they’d foisted on him had left a terrible ringing in his ears and a pounding ache in his temples. He was worried that he’d never be able to do magic again.

Bain strode into the tavern and headed straight for the bar. He asked the barkeep about a bath and some soap. A serving girl led him to a barrel of water outside where he could wash and clean his clothing.

After his washup, Bain headed back into the tavern. His white hair and muscular build soon collected a bevy of bouncy young women. Bain sat back and started drinking. He smiled. A man approached him, tall, distinguished and wearing expensive clothing. A sickle sword hung at his hip. He smiled and Bain noted a gold tooth.

“How much?” the man asked. Bain stood quickly, jumping to the wrong conclusion. “For your services as a guard,” the man continued, grinning.

“What’s the job?” Bain queried, shooing the maidens away.

“You guard my caravan. Half now, half when the job’s done. Two serpentine. We leave at first light.”

“Done,” Bain said, shaking the man’s hand. The man handed him a single serpentine coin and left. Bain decided not to drink as much as he’d planned.

Durin stared at his dwindling supply of coins and then frowned

at the spinning wheel. He'd won, that was true, but he'd lost far more.

"Maybe I need bigger stakes," he muttered, pushing away from the table. He resolved to dip into his emergency gold - tomorrow.

Jace crept around the corner of one of Thin Fjord's dockside warehouses, looking for a way in. Gunivere was doing the same, circling around the other way. They met at the small door to the right of the main loading doors.

"Did you see anything?" Jace whispered.

"No," Gunivere whispered back, "The windows are too high up and there's nothing for me to perch on."

"Damn," Jace said. "I guess we go in blind." Jace raised his hand to the door. Suddenly, a sharp, stabbing pain ran up his arm. He tried to cry out, but couldn't make a sound. A voice thundered in his ears. He could see Gunivere speaking, but couldn't hear him.

"I didn't take an interest in you to see you become a common thief," the voice asserted. It was so loud; Jace was afraid, for he recognized the voice of his goddess. "If this happens again, I won't be so lenient."

"-ing statue! Do something," Gunivere's words broke back into Jace's awareness.

"Let's get some sleep," Jace said, walking away from the warehouse, clutching his arm.

"But you said-" Gunivere started.

"What do you take me for, a common thief?" Jace snapped.

"Fine," Gunivere snorted. "I'll see you in the morning."

After Gunivere left, Jace slowly peeled back his sleeve. On his forearm were four parallel wounds, positioned just right for a woman's hand to have scratched them in. Jace watched for a moment as the blood slowly oozed out of the lacerations and ran around his arm to drip to the ground. He glanced down the street and saw a group of sailors clustered around a barrel that contained a small fire. Jace crept up, aided by his elven clothing. He carefully

slid his knife between two barrel slats, into the heart of the fire. He waited, hugging the shadows, as the blade of his knife heated up.

Jace pulled the knife out and, taking a deep breath, drew the hot blade along each of the scratches; He wasn't sure if they'd scar and he wanted the touch of his goddess to be with him forever. He gritted his teeth, tears of pain coursing down his face. Finally, as the fourth track was seared, he let loose a cry of agony. The sailors scattered, yelling about banshees and other creatures of the night.

As the sun peeked over the horizon, Bain ran from room to room, pounding on the doors. He soon collected his traveling companions and hustled them out to the brand new covered wagon and horse team they'd purchased yesterday. He filled them in on his assignment.

"Who're they?" the man who'd hired Bain asked as he strode up to the human and his companions.

"Friends of mine," Bain said.

"They ride at the back," the man replied. "You keep guard properly," he added, poking a finger into Bain's chest.

There were fifteen wagons, stretched out in a long line. Jace drove the wagon, steering the team carefully. His exertion caused fluid to well up through his sleeve. He did his best to ignore it. The wagon train rode slowly across the plain, following the trail that led inland. Gunivere transformed to falcon and flew up, scanning for anything unusual. Even as a falcon, the pain in his head didn't fade.

"Dust cloud," Durin said, walking up to Bain. Bain went to tell the leader, but they seemed to already know. The wagons lurched forward, urged by the drivers. Jace tried to get his team to speed up, but his inexpert handling of the team made them slower than normal.

A man stood up on the lead wagon and waved a staff. A black square, bounded by shimmering lightnings, opened before them. The lead wagon rode through the blackness, disappearing from

view. Bain watched as the whole wagon train passed into the black portal. Moments after the last wagon passed through, the portal closed. Jace reined the team in as he drew alongside Bain. Gunivere landed and transformed.

“There’s a large party of armed men coming,” he said.

“The ones making that dust cloud?” Jace asked.

“Dust cloud?” Gunivere asked.

“We’re screwed,” Durin said, looking around the open plain for a place to hide. The mercenaries hired to guard the caravan were muttering about payment. It would be difficult to collect when their employer had disappeared. First one, then two, then the whole group started walking back toward Thin Fjord. Durin and Bain both tried to convince them to stay, but to no avail.

The group clustered together, waiting for the horsemen to arrive. The column advanced, then came to a halt a few metres from the wagon. All the men were human and all wore tabards. Durin squinted to make out the coat of arms displayed; it was a broom on a field of green.

“Who are you?” the leader questioned.

“We’re traders,” Durin said.

“Search the wagon,” the commander ordered. Two horsemen dismounted and efficiently searched the wagon. Durin got out the *Bouncy Linda*’s trading license and showed anyone who would look. The two soldiers nodded.

“Keep out of trouble,” the leader said, reining his horse around. The column moved off, heading for Thin Fjord.

Chapter 9 - Punishment

Strack dispersed his men efficiently. The one path out of Thin Fjord was easily blocked; there were no boats in the harbour. Strack drew his bow and fired off a whistling arrow to signal the beginning of the action.

Throughout the town, men were selecting random people and arresting them. Strack, an old campaigner, was no innocent. He knew that murder and rape were taking place in the town. He turned a blind eye.

Nothing I can do about it anyway, he thought. He saw a flash of green skin and spurred his horse forward. On closer examination, it was only a goblin. For a moment, he'd thought it was a lizard man.

"If I ever catch up with Sslim," Strack muttered. Inside, he knew the truth; if he ever caught up with Sslim, the lizard man who'd killed General Ether and taken his head, the lizard man who broke the power of the military, he'd probably beg on his knees for his pitiful life. He drew his sword and heeled his horse forward. Some slaughter just might wipe that memory from his mind - for a while.

The adventurers looked at the map that Durin held. Jace had argued successfully that going to the capital was suicide for the

inexperienced band. The four were wondering where to go instead.

“We’ve got three choices,” Durin said, tracing the words on the map. “Thiston, Thatton, and Otherton.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Jace asked. “Our choices are *this, that or the other?*”

“That’s what it says,” Durin grunted.

“We must go east,” Bain said, holding up a finger.

“You know,” Gunivere stated, “the Midlands, the country we are in, has the Order Of Magic as its religion. The Great Marsh, which Big South Island is part of, is not really a marsh, but an area of islands, many of which are not much above sea level.” The others all looked at him. “I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t contributing,” he grinned.

“East?” Jace asked. The others nodded.

It was midafternoon when the wagon rolled into the farming village of Otherton. Jace guided the team of horses toward the stockyard he could make out farther down the road. Bain jumped off the back of the wagon and headed for the nearest tavern. Durin hopped out of the wagon and wandered through the streets, looking for a game of dice or something else to bet on. Gunivere climbed out of the wagon and fell, his foot slipping on some horse droppings. He muttered something about unfair tactics and walked north, up the main street.

Gunivere saw what he thought was a temple to the Order Of Magic at the end of the street. A crowd of people was standing in front of it. He pushed through to see that it was destroyed. The painted torch symbol was hanging by one rope. The doors were splintered, the hinges bent. Not one window was left intact.

“Hey, you’re a sorcerer, aren’t you?” a voice said.

“Why, yes, I am,” Gunivere stated.

“Where were you when they destroyed the temple?” another voice asked.

“I’m not from around here,” Gunivere started.

“You should have protected your temple,” a third voice shouted. The crowd started muttering angrily.

“Hey, wait! I’m not even *from* here,” Gunivere tried.

“Get him,” someone else shouted. The crowd surged forward, hands reaching to clutch Gunivere.

“Guys! Hey, hold it,” Gunivere yelled. The crowd bore Gunivere, kicking and yelling, away.

Bain sat in the tavern, eyeing the single serving girl with disdain. She was not too bad to look at, but was obviously the tavernkeeper’s daughter and *he* was watching Bain and fingering the bungstarter that sat on top of a barrel.

“Hey, stranger, you want something to do?” a farmer asked, walking up to Bain’s table.

“Like what?” Bain asked.

“There’s this bunch of bullies, five of them,” the farmer said. “They’re terrorizing the town. How about you take ‘em on?”

“Sounds good to me,” Bain said. He hurried out of the tavern and rounded up Durin and Jace. “Where’s Gunivere?” Bain asked them.

“I don’t know,” Durin said.

“Me, either,” Jace added. “And I’m not taking care of him anymore.”

“Whatever,” Bain said, dismissing the issue. “There’s these guys terrorizing the town, we’re gonna get ‘em,” Bain asserted.

“What guys?” Jace asked.

“There’s five of them,” Bain said.

“Well, who are they?” Durin asked.

“Bullies,” Bain replied.

“How will we know them?” Durin quizzed.

“We’ll know them when we see them,” Bain said.

“Are they them?” Jace asked, pointing up the street. Five riders were heading for a small shop at the north end of the street. All wore chain mail. One, a human shorter than Durin, rode a

surfboard, gliding silently through the air, about a metre off the ground. A morningstar swung from his hip. Two rode grey mules and were identical humans, right down to the tulwar each wore at his hip. One, with an air of sophistication and a haughty mien, rode a wolfhorse, a bastard sword strapped to his back for easy over-hand drawing. The fifth was a huge man, bigger than Bain, riding a bull. One hand gripped a pike, its flashing blade pointing to the sky. As if on unspoken command, all five dismounted and stood to block the street.

“This is *our* town, see?” the short one said.

“That is right,” the big one added. “This town ain’t big enough for the-” He started counting on his fingers. “Seven of us,” he finished.

“There’s eight of us, you fool,” one of the twins said.

“There is Shorty, and Slim, and Sam, and Snooty and them three guys. That are seven. I can count,” the big man said.

“You forgot to count yourself, Ox,” Shorty said.

“There are three of them,” Ox started.

“Never mind,” Shorty said. They all entered the shop.

“I want that surfboard,” Bain said, starting up the street toward the shop.

The three entered the shop to find that it was a lot larger than it appeared on the outside. A cool fountain splashed and tinkled in a corner. Marble columns held up the high, arched ceiling. Alabaster containers held rare and exotic plants. A chest-high counter ran the length of the room.

The Five Desperadoes stood at the counter, talking heatedly with the shopkeeper, a nondescript individual.

“How much for one of them flying boards?” Bain asked, stepping up to the counter.

“They’re not for sale,” Shorty said. “I’ve got the only one and that’s how it’s gonna stay, see?”

“They’re more than q10,000, stranger,” the shopkeeper said. “You’ve only got about q1,500 on you.”

“You ain’t buyin’ one,” Shorty said. Bain looked at the little man in annoyance.

“Yeah,” Ox said. “You ain’t buyin’ one. Heh. Heh heh.”

“You ain’t heard the last of this,” Shorty said, shaking his fist at the shopkeeper. “C’mon, boys, let’s go.” They walked toward the door. “Next time,” Shorty said, glaring at Bain.

“Yeah, next time I’ll have one of them flying boards, even better than yours,” Bain taunted.

“So, what do you sell here?” Jace asked.

“You want it, we got it. We don’t got it, you don’t need it. You still want it, come back in a week,” the shopkeeper said, then stood, waiting expectantly.

“You’re Crazy Harry,” Jace said.

“At your service,” Crazy Harry replied.

“I’ll take a grab bag,” Jace said, putting some coins on the counter.

“Me, too,” Bain said, fishing in his belt purse for money.

“Why don’t I have any money for a grab bag?” Durin wondered aloud.

“Because you spend all your money on doughnoughts,” Jace sneered.

“And gambling,” Bain added. “Don’t forget gambling.” The three left the shop. As they came out, they noticed that it was almost night. They had been in the shop for what seemed like moments, but hours had passed.

The farmer who’d talked to Bain was walking down the street. He waved at the group. Out of the darkness, Shorty came sailing up, whirling his morningstar. He swung and connected, crushing in the back of the farmer’s skull in a bloody spray of bone and brain. Before the adventurers could react, Shorty banked around and sailed into the night. Bain examined the farmer; he was beyond help.

“We gotta get those guys,” Bain said.

“They’ve got a hideout to the north,” a passing person said. “I

could, no, nevermind,” he finished, hurrying away.

“We must go north,” Bain said. The others nodded.

As they passed the outskirts of town, they saw a broken down building. Outside, a monk was sitting on the steps, his head bowed in prayer. Durin walked up and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Tell me about the Glass Dungeon,” he said. The monk looked at him. “Big Willy?” Durin asked. The monk didn’t reply. “Skeeze? Black Pete? Um, Karen Del Sienta?”

“What happened here?” Jace asked, gently pushing Durin aside.

“The Five Desperadoes wrecked the temple,” the monk said.

“Why?” Bain asked.

“As the king fares, so fare his people. The king is the symbol of the land. When one is out of balance, the other must surely follow,” the monk said.

“Where do the Five Dippyscumballs hide out?” Bain asked.

“There,” the monk said, pointing. “You can just make out the hideout across the fields.” Bain started walking toward the hideout. “Wait, friends,” the monk said. “Rest in my temple tonight. Journey on in the morning.”

Chapter 10 - Not So Tough After All

Slim and Sam stared out the window toward town. Ox, sprawled on the old couch, snored. Snooty polished his chain mail, one link at a time. Shorty sat in the bedroom, his private room, wondering if things would go as planned. He'd received orders the night before by courier. Lord Domingo told him to eliminate the four adventurers that were coming into Otherton.

The townsfolk, angry at the destruction of the temple to Zalthon, took out their wrath on the sorcerer of the party. Now that same sorcerer was on his way to the capital, bound, gagged and blindfolded. There was a knock at the door.

"They're comin', Shorty," Slim said.

"Thanks, Sam," Shorty replied.

"I'm Slim," Slim corrected.

"Here's the plan," Shorty said, walking into the main room.

"Ox, wake up." Shorty kicked Ox.

"Huh?"

"Since we wrapped that sorcerer in our rug, the trap door should be real easy to find," Shorty continued. "The allies that Lord Domingo sent us should give our do-gooder pals something to do."

"We don't got no do-gooder pals," Ox said.

"We're riding south, for Green Field. Snooty," Shorty barked.

“Fix up that map for our guests to find.”

“Yeah,” Snooty chuckled. “Heh heh, guests.”

“Now, let’s mount up. We ride.”

As the day dawned, Durin stood, bared to the waist, axe beside him. Sweat filmed his body as he went through his morning exercises. His axe whirred, flashing in the sun as he spun it around, through form after form. An overhand chop flowed smoothly to a sweeping side cut, which blurred into a sharp jab with the spiked top. Air whistled as the axe swung through another pass, only to stop for a quick reversal and outthrust of the butt.

“Wow,” a voice said. Durin spun, his axe halting a hair’s breadth from the youth’s neck.

“I’m here to help,” the newcomer yelped, backing away quickly.

“Who are you?” Durin questioned, getting out a notebook and a stick of charcoal.

“I’m the guy who told you where the hideout is. You know, last night on the street?”

“That’s a long name,” Durin frowned. “Got a shorter version?”

“Taurus,” the youth said. He was 1.65 metres tall, with white skin and flaming red hair, both marks of his Northron barbarian heritage. He wore a white robe and black boots. His weapons and equipment were strapped to his back, as if he planned on taking a long journey.

“I want to join you,” Taurus said.

“What do we need with a monk?” Jace said, seeming to appear out of thin air behind the nervous youth.

“I-I-I,” the lad stammered.

“Are you a monk or a sailor?” Bain queried, walking over to the group.

“Huh?”

“Do you follow Cassandra?” Jace snapped.

“I, no, um,” Taurus said, confused.

“Then you should die,” Jace said, crossing his arms.

“Don’t mind them,” Durin said, pulling Taerus away from the two. “Welcome to the party.”

“Exactly what *is* your plan?” Arachnos asked. He walked beside Domingo through the castle passageways.

“The band I’ve set on the fools are fools as well. They may be only a minor hindrance at best, but I want to play with these *champions of good* for a while,” Domingo smiled.

“Is that wise?” Arachnos asked.

“Yes,” Domingo answered with a terse nod. He had no intention of telling his underling exactly how much of this plan was his and how much was Divine order.

They descended a staircase, ending in the dungeon level. Domingo drew forth an elaborately carved gold key and fitted it into the lock. The door, instead of swinging open, shimmered and disappeared. Domingo put the key back in his pocket and the two crossed into the outer chamber of the Glass Dungeon.

“How is your spellcasting study proceeding?” Domingo asked as they walked down a smooth, glassy hallway.

“I’ve come up with some interesting applications for inverted healing spells,” Arachnos said. “Deliciously painful, I believe.”

“You haven’t tested them?”

“Not yet, my lord,” Arachnos said with a note of regret. Domingo opened a cell door. Inside, a struggling figure was wrapped in a dirty rug. Domingo undid the ropes and pulled, rolling the figure out onto the floor. Gunivere sprawled on the floor, hands and feet bound. A rough blindfold was tied across his eyes.

“A sorcerer,” Domingo said, “so leave the blindfold.”

“Yes, lord,” Arachnos said, a gleam of lust in his eyes.

“Don’t *kill* him,” Domingo said as he closed the door. The first scream echoed down the hallway before he’d taken ten paces.

Jace peered in the dingy window, then walked around to do the same to every window the building had. After a moment, he

straightened and signalled the others to come close.

“There’s nobody here,” Jace said.

“Do you see that flying board anywhere?” Bain asked.

“Is there any food lying around?” Durin wondered.

“No, and no,” Jace said, opening the door. The group quickly searched the cabin, finding nothing of importance. Durin pulled open a trap door. Jace eyed the ladder, then clambered down it quickly. As Durin’s form blocked out the light from above, he stood back. Moments later, with a cry, Durin fell down from above to land on the ground.

“Dwarves are tunnellers, not climbers,” Durin said at Jace’s look. Taerus climbed down, followed by Bain.

“Shouldn’t someone close the trap door?” Taerus wondered. Everyone looked at Durin.

“Why me?” Durin asked as he carefully climbed up the ladder. He made it to the top and pulled the trap door down. “I’ve got it,” he said. The door closed on his fingers. “Yeeeowch!” Durin yelled as he plummeted to the ground below yet again. The others hid smiles as Durin struggled to his feet.

The party stood in an octagonal room. There were torches, lit, along the walls. Taerus took one as Durin led the way. The first door they came to opened on a weapon storage room. Weapons of every type and description, from the average to the exceptional, lined the walls, on racks and stands. The group noted the room on a map that Jace was making and walked out the door and across the hall.

“I hear voices,” Durin said. Just then, the door burst open and three rat men charged out, waving swords and flexing their claws. The adventurers retreated to the weapon room, where there was more space to fight. The rat men followed, babbling in their incomprehensible language.

“I push you in the name of the lord!” Bain shouted, pushing one of the rat men over.

Durin swung his axe, missing his target and crashing into a rack

of delicate crossbows, from wrist size up to the light ballista favoured by the barbarian heroes. Splinters of treated wood and intricately crafted metal flew through the air.

“Huhwhaaaa!” Jace yelled, aiming a vicious kick at a rat man.

“I punch you in the name of the lord!” Bain yelled, punching the fallen rat man in the face. Taerus swung his weapons, managing to look menacing but unable to land a blow. Bain staggered back, hit by a rat man’s sword, and fell into a rack of pole arms. Though he kept his balance, the weapons fell to the ground with a clatter, making the footing in the room even more unsure.

Durin’s wild swings, nothing like the controlled action he’d shown in practice that morning, destroyed rack after rack of weapons, and occasionally landed on the hapless rat men. Soon, the foes were slain and the party moved on, exploring the underground dungeon.

“Izzat Green Field?” Ox asked, for the hundredth time that day.

“No, that’s a forest,” Snooty sniffed.

“Well, when do we get to Green Field?” Ox asked.

“Why do you care?” Shorty asked, irritated.

“I gotta go,” Ox explained.

“Well, just go in the forest,” Slim said.

“That would be unsanitary,” Ox replied.

“What is the point of this place?” Jace muttered, sketching in another hallway. “It’s just a bunch of hallways.”

“Probably meant to confuse people who shouldn’t be in here,” Taerus stated.

“I hear voices,” Durin said, leading the way to the east. Taerus followed, then turned north as the others went east.

“Aaaaauugh!” Taerus yelled. As the others charged up the passageway, the waiting rat men drew their weapons and charged.

Chapter 11 - Nothing Stays The Same

“Sorana, aid me!” Jace cried. Bain and Durin stopped and looked at Jace, surprised. Jace had an expression of shock on his face. He tried to shake it off and concentrate on the battle.

Taerus gripped his weapon, staring fearfully at the rat men. Bain and Durin stepped in, taking the first blows from the skillful rat men. Jace followed, doing his part, but also getting hit repeatedly. Taerus tried to advance, but memories of the bloody battle only minutes before and the sight of fresh wounds on the adventurers broke his resolve. With a cry, Taerus turned and ran. The others, all suffering from wounds delivered by the rat men, quickly backed out of the room. They fled to another room and barricaded the door - just in case. Taerus, his urge to adventure quelled, ran all the way out of the dungeon and he didn't stop until he was safely huddled under his bed at home.

“This is *good* armour,” Jace said, marveling at its ability to soak up the damage.

“This,” Durin said, holding up the tattered remains of his shield, “is *not*.”

“We got our butts kicked,” Bain said, chewing on some trail-munch. “And that flying board is not down here.”

“I think we should use plan A,” Jace suggested.

“Huh?” Bain asked.

“I sneak up, shoot one with an arrow, you guys hide around the corner and get ready to whack them.”

“Yeah,” Bain said, “We wait and whack them.”

“Gonna pray to your bitch first?” Durin asked, making motions in the air as if he were grabbing breasts. Jace narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

They unbarricaded the door and Jace crept slowly down the hallway. He could see the rat men. As he reached for an arrow, his belt purse slipped open again, spilling coins across the hall in a jingling clatter. He stared at the rat men in horror, but they seemed not to notice. Jace knelt and drew an arrow. He silently asked his goddess for aid, but felt nothing. He pressed his forearm to the wall, leaning harder until the welts started to throb painfully. He’d failed her; he’d have to do something to regain her favour.

“I send this spirit to you, my Goddess,” he whispered, nocking the arrow. He pulled it back and let it fly.

“What you do?” a rat man shouted, noticing Jace. The arrow sped into his mouth, piercing the roof and lodging the tip deep in his brain. The rat man crumpled to the ground. Jace stared at his handiwork in amazement, then turned and ran as the remaining rat men charged toward him. He dove around the corner, ducking the fists and axe that may be a little overanxious.

Durin swung, as did Bain, but the rat man suspected a trap and dodged the blows. His sword swung in a vicious arc, striking Durin across the shoulder. The doughty dwarf fell, bleeding, to the floor. Jace stepped up, standing over his fallen comrade. Bain pushed a rat man over, following him down to the ground.

“I punch you in the name of the Lord,” Bain shouted, driving his fist downward. The mighty blow landed right between the rat man’s eyes, crushing the skull and splattering brains and blood across the floor.

“Haaaazsaaaw!” Jace yelled, sweeping the feet out from under the last rat man. He followed with a death drop, driving his elbow

to the stunned rat man's throat. Cartilage crunched and blood spurted. Jace stood slowly. Bain nodded. Both grinned and wiped the blood on Durin's ragged armour.

"Wake up, Lard," Jace said, shoving Durin with his toe.

"Huh?" Durin moaned.

"We're leaving," Jace said.

The three made their way back to the trap door. As they clambered out, Bain took some oil out of his backpack and started splashing it around.

"What are you doing?" Durin asked.

"I'm burning this shack down," Bain said. "Put *that* in your little notebook."

"What the hell is *that*?" Shorty said, looking toward the distant light.

"It's our cabin," Slim said, gazing at the light.

"What do you mean?" Shorty snapped.

"Somebody burned down our cabin," Slim explained.

"We gotta get 'em," Ox said.

"You got it in one, Ox," Shorty agreed.

"One what?" Ox asked.

The party arrived in Thatton. The wagon rumbled through the dusty streets, heading for the stockyards. Jace steered the team slowly, guiding them towards the smell of animals. All three were tired, having traveled all day long.

"I can't believe we're here," Durin said.

"I'm going to my guild hall," Bain said, stretching his arms over his head. "I could use a decent meal, and a place to sleep that isn't going to cost me a bunch of money."

"You've been spending money, that's for sure," Jace said. "But you keep finding us jobs, so just keep it up."

"You see that?" Durin asked.

"I don't know what you see," Jace said, "but *I* see my temple."

“I was going to say that I see my temple,” Durin said.

“I don’t care about temples,” Bain said. “All I care about is getting a decent meal and a place to sleep and getting my butt off this creaking wagon.”

“What’s wrong with this wagon?” Durin asked. “Do you know how much this wagon cost?”

“It doesn’t ride nearly so well as a flying board would,” Bain said.

“You and that flying board,” Jace said. “I’m getting sick and tired of hearing about that stupid flying board.”

“Do not make fun of the board,” Bain intoned. “I intend to have that board and that’s all there is to it. If you don’t like it, too damned bad.”

“I’m tired of you, I’m tired of your board,” Jace said. “I think we need to spend a bit of time apart before we kill each other.”

“I second that,” Durin said.

“Finally, something we can agree on,” Bain said.

For the next 35 days, the three would see each other only briefly.

Durin sat in the temple, lost in thought. His axe weighed heavily on his mind. He had it when he started to adventure out in the world, and it was almost a part of him. The problem was, he wasn’t getting any better at using it. In fact, it was slowing the party down. Though it was a good offensive weapon, Durin found it was not good enough. He found himself falling in battles far too often. He nodded, coming to an internal decision. He stood, picked up his axe, and headed for the altar. A priest of Restorus Destroyer waited, expectantly.

“You’ve come to a decision, my son?” the priest asked.

“Yes,” Durin sighed. “It pains me to do it, but I want you to have my axe. I need a weapon that fits more with my fighting style.”

“I understand,” the priest said. “Perhaps we have something that is more suitable.”

“And maybe some new gauntlets,” Durin said. “I could use them and that’s no lie.”

Bain studied every day, learning new techniques of combat and improving his ability. He enjoyed spending time with other warriors, people who understood what he was talking about. Jace and Durin were fine companions, but sometimes they just didn’t understand what he was trying to do. They didn’t understand the true warrior’s way; they were good companions all same.

For the entire month, the priestesses and acolytes at the temple of Cassandra spoke quietly and walked even quieter still. When not studying, Jace spent his time in the temple prowling about, muttering to himself. He knew he was out of favour with his goddess, but he had no idea how to change it. He wished, not for the first time, that there was a temple to Sorana somewhere in the town. His goddess, Cassandra, and Sorana were always at odds, and destroying a temple to Sorana would be a definite plus. Since there wasn’t one, Jace was a foul mood.

Every morning, upon awakening, Durin took the time to transfer magical energy from himself into the gems he had acquired for that purpose. He knew that he would require more magical energy as time went on. Every bit he stored today would let him cast larger spells tomorrow. In those quiet times, he wondered what had happened to Gunivere. Durin had managed to piece together part of the story. Townspeople, angry at the destruction of their temple, had swarmed over Gunivere, rendering him unconscious. After that, the trail grew cold. No one Durin spoke to could tell him what had happened to Gunivere.

Durin was struggling with the added difficulty of his diet. In order to lose weight, he had restricted himself to one meal a day, and that small. As the days wore on, he noticed changes. He moved differently, his balance was better, and his new weapon seem to be

a part of him. The priest told him that the weapon was magical, that he could draw energy from it to cast spells. Durin was growing confident, but it was a false confidence, one that would land him, and his companions, in trouble in the near future.

Jace, too, used the time to store magical energy. He also used it to explore the town, searching for items and equipment that could help them on their journey. Every time something bad happened while they were adventuring, Jace made a mental note to pick something up that would help next time. His only difficulty was remembering what he was supposed to remember.

Unlike Durin, Gunivere's fate didn't bother Jace at all. He wondered what had happened to the elf, and expected him to turn up at any moment, flying in to land amongst them, acting as if nothing had happened.

Bain stood by the message post, looking left and right, waiting for someone to show up. While he was a good warrior, Bain was still unable to read. He was hoping someone would come by who could read. One notice in particular had caught his eye. There was a drawing of a melted-looking person, and a bit of green residue. For some reason, Bain was interested. Since no one was coming, he pulled the notice off the post and tucked it into his belt.

As he had done every day for the last month, Bain headed for a tavern. Unlike every other day, today Jace and Durin were waiting for him. He yelled and ran forward, glad to see his companions again. Durin explained that he decided it was time to get back together again. He went to Jace's temple, where they were only too glad see Jace finally leave.

"So, how did you find me?" Bain asked.

"Are you kidding?" Jace retorted. "All we did was wait outside this tavern. We knew you'd show up sooner or later."

"Come on in," Bain grinned. "I'll buy you guys a drink."

“Do we even know where Far Grinpen is?” Jace asked, as he hooked the team up to the wagon once again.

“I got a guy in the tavern to add a little bit to our map,” Durin said, waving the map in the air. “I just asked him for it.”

“I still don’t know why that works,” Jace said, shaking his head. “We’re ready to go, boys. Mount up.”

“We must go north,” Bain said. The others laughed.

Chapter 12 - Humility

“No, really,” Durin said, “isn’t that like calling out another woman’s name in bed?”

“What would you know about that, dwarf boy?” Jace growled.

“You messed up,” Bain said. “No matter what you do, she’s not going to forget that.”

“Shut up, the both of you,” Jace said.

The wagon rumbled into the town of Far Grinpen, early in the morning. Bain instructed them to head for the tavern, where he expected to meet his contact. Durin took over driving the wagon, heading for the stockyards. After they’d stowed the wagon and seen to the horses, Bain led the way to the tavern, as usual, unerringly finding it.

“I am here,” Bain intoned, “to fight the evil beast.”

“You’re looking for Fred,” the bartender said, pointing towards a table in the back. Bain nodded and made his way through the tavern to the table at the back. As he approached, the man sitting there gestured him to a seat.

“I am here -”

“To fight the evil beast, yes, I know,” Fred said. “Here’s the deal, pal. There is more than one evil beast. I’m not sure exactly how many there are, but you’ll have to take them all out.”

“And what do we get in return?” Jace asked, coming up behind Bain.

“One treasure, and only one, for each of you. You can pick them yourselves,” Fred stated.

“That sounds like a good deal,” Durin said. “Let’s go bash some monsters.”

The three arrived at the entrance to the valley at about midday. Bain noticed something strange on the ground. He bent down and touched it.

“It appears to be some sort of mucilaginous compound,” Bain murmured.

“It must be from the monster!” Durin cried, pulling out his sword. Bain cautioned them to take it slowly, but Jace and Durin, fired up, perhaps because of the promise of treasure, forged ahead, with Bain trailing behind them, muttering about a lack of planning. The valley walls were steep, sheer rock offering little in the way of handholds. The hill rose before them, a rough trail marked out, heading for the summit. To the east and west, bracken, undergrowth and other foliage blocked passage. Jace and Durin headed up the trail, Bain arguing the whole time that they should first find something out about these monsters.

As they crested the hill, a monster came into view. It was roughly human in shape, a translucent green, with old rusted weapons stuck to it in various places. It raised its arms and flung them forward, launching a glob of green goo toward the hapless adventurers. It struck Durin, coating him with slime and knocking him to the ground. Jace pointed his arms forward, attempting a spell. Bain bent down to help Durin stand. A wisp of smoke was all the effect Jace could produce.

“This is gross,” Durin said, rubbing slime from his clothes. As he stood, he saw one of the monster’s fists heading for his head. He ducked, letting the blow pass just over the top of his skull. The monster’s other fist, coming from the other direction, landed

solidly on Durin's chest. Durin heard the dry snapping sound of ribs splintering, then he heard no more.

Jace stared as another glob of slime flew through the air, coating Bain. Before Jace could do any more than stare, the monster launched a mighty fist toward his head. It struck, accompanied by the distinct and horrifying snapping sound of Jace's neck breaking. He fell in a lifeless pile to the ground.

Bain lay, eyes open, staring at the monster. He still didn't know what it was; he only knew that if he didn't play his cards right, he was going to die. He took a gamble and laid there, playing dead. The monster stared at him for a moment, launched another glob of slime at him, and left.

Bain waited until he was sure the monster was gone, then got up slowly. He cleaned the slime from himself and looked at his fallen companions. They were both quite obviously dead. He grabbed each of them by the leg, then started dragging them down the hill toward town. He hoped he could find a temple, and he hoped he'd have enough money to get them resurrected.

"You're *sure* they're both magicians?" the priest of the temple to Zalthon asked.

"They both do magic," Bain assured him.

"Didn't *this* one announce to everyone that he was an Assassin Monk?" the priest asked, pointing to Jace's still form.

"He shoots lightning from his hands and stuff," Bain replied.

"And this is a dwarf. Who ever heard of a *dwarf* sorcerer?"

"Look," Bain said, reaching into his belt purse, "here's twenty sapphire coins; that's 20,000 gold. I'm telling you *they do magic*."

"You bet they do," the priest agreed, quickly taking the coins from Bain's hand. He started setting up the equipment and ingredients he'd need for the resurrection rite. Bain nodded and left the temple.

"I'm worried, Lord Domingo," Arachnos said, pacing about the

small but lavishly appointed chamber. “The three seem to be overcoming every obstacle you put in their way.”

“You worry too much,” Domingo replied offhandedly. “And I didn’t call you here to listen to you whine. I’d like you to meet someone.” Domingo gestured and a figure stepped from the shadows. Arachnos sneered at the small figure.

“A lizard man? How repulsive,” Arachnos stated bluntly.

“You find me repulsive?” the lizard man hissed.

“Don’t squabble, children,” Domingo admonished. “Morloth here is our ally. We’ve prepared a demonstration for you, Arachnos.” Arachnos watched warily, waiting for the demonstration to begin.

As Bain walked from the temple toward the town proper, he noticed a poster nailed to a post. On closer examination, he saw that it was a drawing of three people with some letters across the top. The three people were a human with white hair, a fat dwarf and a skinny elf. Bain glanced around to see if anyone was looking, then tore the poster down. He folded it and tucked it into his map case.

“Bain!” Durin shouted, walking unsteadily out the temple door. Jace followed, looking even more gaunt than normal.

“I remember a big, gooey monster,” Jace said in a quiet voice.

“How did we get here?” Durin asked.

“Heh. Heh, heh. He don’t know how he got here,” a familiar voice taunted.

“Shut up, Ox,” Shorty snarled.

“Still holding on to that board for me?” Bain asked nonchalantly.

“It ain’t *your* board,” Shorty snarled. “You and me got a score to settle.”

“Shaddap, dumb-ass,” Bain said, turning toward the distant valley.

“Is he ignoring me?” Shorty yelped.

“Jace,” Bain beckoned, “come here and read this.” Bain took the poster out, making sure the Five Desperadoes couldn’t see it.

“It says ‘wanted’,” Jace said.

“That’s it?” Bain asked.

“Ya, just ‘wanted’. Where’d you get it?”

“It was on that post over there,” Bain said, pointing.

“He *is* ignoring me,” Shorty spluttered. “Let’s get to it, boys.”

“I’m not *that* fat,” Durin pointed out. “And I don’t have an axe anymore. Is there an axe in the drawing somewhere? ‘Cuz I’ve got a sword. See?”

“Put your crappy sword away,” Jace said. “We have monsters to kill.”

“Then shouldn’t he keep it out?” Bain asked.

“Guys? Do you smell smoke?” Durin interrupted. They turned to see the temple to Zalthon beginning to burn.

“Sorana rules, Zalthon drools!” Shorty yelled as the Desperadoes rode out of town.

“Hey! Don’t *you* follow Sorana, Jace?” Durin needed.

“I *don’t* follow Sorana!” Jace shouted. “*Cassandra* is my goddess; she’s the *only* goddess!”

“Too little, too late,” Durin chortled. “Should we do something about the fire?”

“It’s not *my* temple,” Jace said. Bain refolded the poster and put it away again.

“Ya, but you *can* rescue the innocent, right?” Durin asked. “You know, save the people, leave the temple to burn?” They were all startled by the crash as the temple doors flew open. The priest, robes, hair and skin burning, staggered into the street, his arms flailing ineffectually at the flames. A thin wailing scream wavered on the air, then the priest collapsed, oily smoke roiling the air.

“Too bad you didn’t follow Cassandra,” Jace said. “To the valley.”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: You’re creepy, Jace,” Durin muttered. Bain looked at the temple and wondered if he’d be

able to find his coins in there.

“Hey, you guys owe me money,” Bain called.

Two slaves carried a long, dirty wooden box into the room. It took Arachnos a moment to identify it.

“That’s a coffin!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” Domingo said, pointing at the slaves and then at a wall. They obediently walked over and stood by the wall.

“What is this all about?” Arachnos asked, fearing that he knew the answer all too well. Morloth smashed the lid off the coffin with a swing of his tail. Dirt clods splashed across the floor as the rickety box spilled its gruesome contents on the floor. A stench of putrefaction rose into the air. Arachnos covered his mouth with his hand. Domingo turned his head slightly. Morloth, however, strode forward, chanting. After a moment, he stepped back.

“Not much of a display,” Arachnos sneered. Then his eyes widened as the corpse stirred, slowly rising to all fours, then standing.

“But is it truly under your control?” Domingo asked.

“Kill,” Morloth said, pointing at Arachnos. Arachnos, panicked, raised his hands to cast a spell. “Them,” Morloth said, shifting to point at the slaves. Arachnos watched in horror as the shambling semblance of a human staggered toward the cowering slaves. What followed could only be described as messy.

“*Completely* under my control,” Morloth hissed.

“I don’t remember *that* being here before,” Durin said, pointing at a brightly coloured, striped tent.

“Me, either,” Jace said. “I think it’s okay, though.”

“Ya, let’s go in,” Bain said. The three entered the tent to find themselves in a marble portico. Silk hangings lined the outer perimeter, behind the smooth columns that held up the arched roof. Intricately woven carpets covered much of the floor. Where it could be seen, the marble tile of the floor was polished and

reflected the richly appointed room.

“Welcome, my friends, welcome,” boomed a big man at the end of the hallway. He wore a long robe of costly silk. His face was round, atop it perched a red fez. Thick handlebar moustaches added to his look of a desert prince. “I am Gunda, perhaps you have heard of me. Would you like a refreshing fruit drink?” All three accepted the offered beverages. At the first sip, they all felt refreshed. “You go to fight the booger men,” Gunda stated. “You will need a plan.”

“Booger men?” Jace asked.

“Yes, there are three. Normally, you could just set them on fire, but there is a fire-damping field over that valley. You’ll have to come up with something else,” Gunda said, shaking a finger at Jace.

“Tell me about King Zev,” Durin said, whipping out his notebook.

“He is as much a king as I am a toad,” Gunda said. “Peter Domingo is the real power in this land, aided by his twisted Sorcerer Dalus Arachnos.” Durin scribbled notes furiously. “You,” he said, pointing at Durin, “give me a hundred quartz.” Durin wasted no time, but fished the coins out of his belt purse. In return, Gunda handed him a sack. “You’ll know when to use it,” he said. The three thanked Gunda and left.

Durin sat, concentrating, while the others waited. Jace had given Durin one of his gems to help in the casting of the largest spell Durin had ever attempted. He gestured and a shimmering glow seemed to envelope all three of them for a moment.

“We’re protected from the Booger Man’s fists, for a few blows, anyway,” Durin said.

“And we’ve got more surprises for it,” Jace stated. They headed up the hill, to find the Booger Man waiting for them. Durin inhaled and blew out a breath. A cloud of fog spread out from his mouth, momentarily freezing the Booger Man solid. Jace thrust his hands

forward, fingers outstretched. As before, a little wisp of smoke came from a finger.

“Noooooo!” Jace yelled. The Booger Man thawed and launched a glob of slime at the party. It missed. Durin breathed cold on the monster again, freezing it once more. This time, Jace’s spell worked and lightning shot from his fingers, blowing chunks from the frozen creature. Bain drew the bastard sword he’d purchased while training and swung it. It connected, smashing the frozen Booger Man into little bits.

“Yeah, baby,” Durin chortled. Bain opened his backpack and took out a box. Inside, protected by padding, were ten vials. He filled each one with slime from the deceased Booger Man.

Chapter 13 - Rewards

The adventurers took five days to recuperate. Bain spent most of his time in the tavern, telling everyone how he shattered the booger man with one blow. Jace and Durin both spent their time storing energy for the upcoming battle. All three were amazed at how easily they had defeated the first booger man, after their initial small setback.

After their rest, they headed back to the valley. This time, there was no colourful, striped tent waiting for them. They were a little disappointed, but still confident. They were certain that their new method would yield the same results as it had last time.

They proceeded south into the valley, warily checking the area as they went. They had to proceed farther this time, clambering over the first peak and on to the second. Durin stared at the sky, muttering about his weapon. He was unhappy with its performance, even though it was a repository of magical energy for him. As he stared, his gaze settled on something at the top of the peak. It took him a moment to realize what it was.

“Hey!” Durin yelled. “It’s a booger man!”

“Smash him in the name of the Lord!” Bain yelled.

“Eat blazing electric death!” Jace howled. The three charged up the peak, confident in their new abilities. Lightning sprayed from

Jace's fingertips, dancing across the booger man's surface, causing it to twitch. Durin thrust his head forward, breathing ice at the hapless booger man. Bain charged forward, swinging his bastard sword.

"I smite you in the name of the Lord!" Bain cried, bringing his sword down in a vicious arc. As before, the booger man, frozen by Durin's breath, shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. "Did you see that?" Bain grinned. "I smote him. I smote him in the name of the Lord!"

"This is getting too easy," Jace said. "How'm I supposed to get in good graces with my goddess if we keep doing stuff like this?"

For the rest of the day, the adventurers wandered through the valley, searching for last booger man. Thanks to Gunda, they knew that there were three.

As night approached, the adventurers stopped looking for the booger man, and started looking for safe place to camp. Bain found the best place, due to his warrior training. Jace elected to take the first watch, saying he wasn't tired. Soon, however, Jace's mind began to wander. He was distracted, his mind on matters religious.

How, he wondered, am I ever going to get back into Cassandra's good graces?

"My goddess," Jace whispered, "give me a sign. Show me what you want me to do."

Jace stared into night, lost in thought. Bain woke, ready to take his watch. He looked at Jace, sitting dejectedly, and saw the booger man behind him, poised to strike. Bain leaped to his feet and the booger man turned and fled. Jace looked up, a morose expression on his face.

"Did you see that?" Bain asked.

"See what?" Jace asked. Bain settled down to watch as Jace curled up to get some sleep. As he sat, his eyes scanned the darkness around them. He saw nothing for his whole shift.

Bain woke Durin for his turn at watch. Durin sat up, blinking sleepily, as Bain lay down again. Durin yawned, stretching. His

eyelids seemed incredibly heavy. His head nodded. Moments later, Durin was asleep.

Morloth stood, gold eyes studying the trail ahead. What he did was a calculated risk. He wasn't sure that the adventurers would come this way. If they did, however, his minions would be ready. He bowed his head, casting a spell of summoning. A short while later, six shimmering, amorphous shapes appeared before him.

"A human, an elf and a dwarf will pass this way. You will kill them."

Durin woke, stiff. His neck was sore, his back was sore, and he still didn't like his holy weapon. He opened his eyes to see Jace and Bain standing there, arms crossed, staring at him.

"You fell asleep on watch," Bain said.

"We could have all been *killed*, you fat dwarf," Jace snarled.

"Any word from your goddess?" Durin asked sweetly. Jace glared, but didn't say anything.

As they searched, Jace traced out a map of the valley. He marked in the peaks, the areas of impenetrable bracken, and the steep walls that made up the little valley. He made a note of where they had found the first booger man. He also noted where they had found the second one.

"Don't forget to mark in where you guys died," Bain laughed.

"I don't remember that," Durin said. "And if I don't remember it, it didn't happen."

"Is that called dwarf logic?" Bain asked. "I don't care what you believe, or what you remember, you owe me a thousand quartz, dwarf boy."

"Take it out of the party fund," Durin said.

"You mean your gambling reserve?" Jace asked.

"*You* owe me, too," Bain said.

"I know, I know," Jace said. "When I get it, you'll get it."

"Are you guys ready with your magic?" Bain asked.

“I see it, too,” Durin said.

“Time to fry, booger boy,” Jace said, thrusting his hands forward. A glob of slime flew out of the bracken, heading straight for Bain. Before he could react, it struck him, knocking him to the ground. Again, a little wisp of smoke was all that Jace’s magic produced. As Bain struggle to free himself from the slime, Jace tried again. This time, his magic worked, and lightning lanced from his fingertips to strike the booger man. As the booger man twisted in the throes of electricity, Durin stepped forward and breathed ice. Bain, finally freed of the slime, leaped forward and smote the booger man, shattering it into myriad tiny pieces.

“You meant to ‘smite it in the name of the Lord’, didn’t you?” Jace asked.

“Doh!” Bain exclaimed.

Jace noticed a scroll, clutched in the slowly thawing fist of the defeated booger man. He pulled it free and shook the slime off it. He unrolled it and read it aloud for the others.

“It says ‘you morons just wasted time. You will fail. P. D.’. That’s it,” Jace said.

“P. D.?” Durin asked.

“Peter Domingo,” Jace replied.

“Who cares?” Bain shouted. “It’s time to get our treasure.”

Once back in the town of Far Grinpen, the adventurers searched out Fred. They found him at his usual table in the tavern. When he saw them, bits of slime still clinging to their clothing, he stood and motioned for them to follow him into the back room.

“Congratulations, boys,” Fred said. “Now, here’s the deal. You can each reach into this box in front of me, and take out one thing.”

Durin stepped up first, slowly reaching into the box. He felt around for a few moments, then grabbed something. He withdrew his hand to see he was holding four horseshoes. Durin frowned; he rarely had anything to do with horses, other than riding on a wagon pulled by them.

Bain reached into the box, muttering something about smiting. Almost immediately, his hand seemed to find the hilt of a sword. He pulled it out, to find himself clutching a black sickle sword with red runes on its surface.

Jace stepped up, ready for his turn. As he reached into the box, his eyes widened. He felt hands slide along his forearms, guiding them towards something. He felt something small pressed into his palm, and a feeling of warmth and confidence spread throughout his body.

“She’s back,” Jace whispered. He held up a necklace, an onyx heart on a gold chain. Slowly, reverently, he drew the chain over his head and let it rest on his neck.

“Aren’t you a pretty boy?” Durin teased.

Chapter 14 - Contact

Morloth sat in a chair, thick tail wrapped about one of the chair's legs. In his hands was a glittering knife. The word "*Termion*" was etched into the hilt of the blade. Morloth closed his eyes, willing the power of his god to aid him. "Father Time, open the gates to me once more.

"From the sorcerer Termion, now dead, to the hands of a sailor. From there, to the deck, then to the hands of another sorcerer, one who did *not* appreciate its power. Next, to a human with a surfboard, then to Domingo. Now, to me," Morloth finished. "And I *do* know its power." As Morloth held the dagger, it seemed to glow for a second, spreading the glow down his arm and over his body. "Assiskaloth," Morloth spoke in Lizardine. With a shimmer, he disappeared.

"Ya, you and your bitch goddess," Durin said. "Or should I say goddesses? You go through them like I-

"Go through doughnoughts?" Jace interrupted.

"And money," Bain added.

"Don't forget gauntlets," a passerby said.

"Hey!" Durin objected.

"We've spent too much time here," Jace noted.

Domingo lay back in the warm water, allowing the slavegirls to tend to his needs. With each passing day, the island was more firmly under his thumb. The atrocities committed, in the name of King Zev, of course, brought the people closer and closer to utter despair. When the time was right, he'd kill Zev and take his place, showing the people that he was their saviour. His eyes roved over the lush curves of one of his slavegirls. He felt a familiar response growing.

"How long can you hold your breath, my dear?" Domingo asked, pulling her toward him. She glanced down into the water then back up and licked her lips.

"So, what do we do now?" Bain asked, putting one foot on the tailgate of their wagon.

"Why don't we head for Thatton?" Durin asked.

"Bob's Flats?" Jace asked.

"And deal with the Five Desperadoes," Bain agreed. "I mean, the Five *homeless* Desperadoes."

"You're funny," Durin said, laughing.

Gunivere existed in a world of pain and darkness. He was tied, spreadeagled, on a wooden surface. Every day, someone came and fed him; in the beginning, he'd refused, but hunger soon won out over willpower. Even so, the food was barely enough. Gunivere, normally a robust figure of an elf, was quickly becoming a gaunt, skeletal figure.

"And how are we doing today?" a familiar voice said. Gunivere didn't answer. "Quiet today? Well, not for long," the voice continued cheerily. "All you need to do is tell me who your friends are," the voice insisted. "I might even be persuaded to take off the blindfold." Gunivere pressed his lips together. "No? I'd like to tell you I was disappointed, but we both know better." Gunivere tensed, waiting for the first magical wound. He gasped when a lash struck across his thigh.

“Oh, yes,” a new voice breathed. “How delicious. May I do it again?” The whip hissed through the air and cracked across Gunivere’s chest. He tried to hold it in, but a scream welled up and tore from his throat, an agonized sound.

“You mustn’t kill him,” the male voice said. The whip struck again, a hot line of pain across Gunivere’s stomach. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“Oh, yes,” the female cried, lashing Gunivere’s naked form again.

“You know,” Durin said as they rolled the team out of town, “if I never come back to Far Grinpen, I won’t care at all.”

“Unless there are more beasts,” Bain said. “Smite, smite smite!”

“Even then,” Durin insisted. “I *still* haven’t got all the slime out of my beard.”

“Don’t worry,” Jace said, patting Durin’s shoulder. “It blends with all the cookie crumbs and soup stains and doughnought bits and-”

“All right, all right,” Durin grumbled.

“Next time,” Captain Biggles growled, “you *stay* in the crow’s nest, Wiley.”

“I was helping that woman,” Wiley answered. “And if *he* was a better helmsman-”

“Don’t start with me,” Lars said, shaking a dirty fist at Wiley. “I didn’t lose the trading license.”

“Get offa me,” Captain Biggles threatened.

“I told you women were bad luck,” O’Malley said, for the hundredth time that day.

“Quiet, you slaves!” the overseer shouted. “Dig! Dig or I’ll flay your hides and leave you for the buzzards.” They all dug, none of them so much as glancing at the gathering of carrion birds that blocked the view of Gruber’s corpse.

“I *told* you women were bad luck,” O’Malley whispered.

“Do you see that?” Jace asked, pointing ahead. Six figures were arrayed across the road, blocking their path.

“Are those the Five homeless Desperadoes?” Durin asked, squinting through his dwarven surface goggles.

“We can’t take them,” Bain said, shaking his head.

“It’s Karen!” Jace exclaimed. He tried to rein in the horses, but something was spooking them. The people on the road seemed to float forward as they quickly mounted the slowly moving wagon. As they did, the horses bolted, turning off the road and heading over rough terrain. The adventurers struggled to repel the boarders as the wagon careened over hill and dale, jouncing around and slamming them into the boxes and crates stored in the back.

“I repel you in the name of the Lord,” Bain said, swinging his bastard sword. It seemed to pass right through his opponent. “Guys? We’re in deep slime now.”

“Shouldn’t that be ‘deep mucilaginous compound’?” Jace asked.

Skeeze looked warily around before trotting out to the beach. He’d followed the dogs for days, wondering what they were up to. Normally, the dog packs were ferocious, often fighting each other if no other opponent was around. This pack, however, was intent on something that they carried.

Skeeze approached slowly, the sleeping dogs foremost in his mind. As he drew closer, he could see that the item the dogs had possession of was a staff. He reached out, slowly, and grabbed it. He picked it up and backed away, watching for the dogs to move. One of the dogs snorted in its sleep and kicked, awakening another dog. That dog, seeing Skeeze, barked. It roused the others and the pack circled, preparing to attack. With the first touch of the staff, however, memory returned. Skeeze stood straighter and held the staff expertly. The first dog that attacked was met with the end of the staff. It made a satisfying crunch as it stove in the dog’s head.

“I am Lord Aaron Del Sienta,” the no longer addled Skeeze

shouted. Two dogs leaped at once. Del Sienta's staff swung, one end rapping each dog smartly. Both fell to the ground, dead, to join their companion.

"You will pay, Domingo! You will pay," Del Sienta yelled to the sky. Effortlessly, he dispatched the remaining dogs. After all that activity, he wasn't even breathing heavily. More memory flooded in, memory of a group of people running down the beach - a barbarian, an elf and - his daughter. Memory crushed Del Sienta, dropping him to his knees.

"You will be avenged, my daughter," Del Sienta promised. Then he gave in to emotion and wept.

Jace swung his staff, silver wrapped weapon of his church, at the translucent Sam. Though his weapon passed through the ghostly form, it did seem to cause damage. Wherever the silver tracings touched, sparkling flames danced on Sam's skin. Jace struggled to stay upright as the wagon bounced through the rough terrain.

Durin jabbed his weapon half-heartedly at Slim. When he noticed the glittering gash it carved on the apparition, he grinned and swung again. Then the wagon jounced, tossing him headfirst into a box. Durin's legs flailed wildly as Slim moved in.

Bain swung his sword, creating a wind and barely missing tearing a hole in the canvas roof of the wagon. Snooty seemed to hardly feel the attack.

All three were suddenly beset by more opponents as the other forms moved to attack.

"Karen!" Jace cried. "We tried to *help* you!" Her hand swung around and, even though she appeared insubstantial, the slap left a ringing in Jace's ears. Almost reflexively, he tried to grab her wrist, but his hand passed through her.

"Get me out of here!" Durin cried, attempting to push himself up and out of the box.

Big Willy polished the bar, pretending to ignore the slim woman who sat on a stool, nursing a drink. Upon closer examination, an observer would see that it was not just any drink, but dwarven ale, one of the strongest spirits known. That observer would also note the calluses on her palms and the well worn handle on her weapon. Then that observer would realize he was wanted elsewhere - right away.

“What news, Carli?” Big Willy asked, all the while staring at the surface of the bar.

“There’s a new prisoner in the castle dungeon,” Carli replied, her blue eyes glittering. “Blindfolded, and *not* scheduled for the GD any time soon.”

“Nothing changes,” Big Willy said.

“How long do we wait?”

“Until they make a mistake,” Big Willy muttered.

Bain and Jace dispatched their foes, not without a struggle. Durin, finally freed from the box, attacked with a will. Jace tried to stop the fleeing horses before they either tipped the wagon or killed themselves. Just as Durin finished off his opponents, Jace leaped forward and landed on the thin shaft between the horses. He nimbly walked out and gripped the bridles of the lead horses. He pulled back slowly, forcing the horses to slow to a walking pace. They finally stopped. Jace examined the lathered horses for damage and found that one was lame. Until they could get to a town, they’d have to take things very slowly.

Ziggle Bob stared moodily out his window. In the distance, he could hear the cheering crowds at the arena. He was surprised that the visitors he was expecting hadn’t showed up yet.

Perhaps, he thought, Black Pete is not as ineffective as I thought.

“Now, what?” Durin asked as Jace climbed back into the

driver's seat. "And how come you get to drive all the time?"

"Check the map," Bain suggested.

"We must go north," Durin said, looking at the map. "Most of the commerce lies up this river," he added, indicating the river directly ahead of them."

"North it is," Jace said. He turned the team northeast, heading for a nearby bridge. As soon as the team started forward, Jace began to feel unwell. With each step they took, he felt worse until he fell off the bench and back into the wagon.

"Stop us!" Jace shrieked. Durin scrambled for the reins and stopped the team. As soon as the motion stopped, Jace's pain stopped as well.

"What was that?" Bain asked.

"I don't know," Jace said shakily, "but it's gone now."

"North?" Durin asked, still gripping the reins.

"North," Jace nodded. As soon as the team started forward, Jace was again gripped in agonizing pain. Durin again reined the team in, halting their progress. Again, as soon as the motion stopped, Jace's pain stopped.

"We must go south," Jace said weakly. Durin and Bain, shocked at the sight of Jace doubled up in agony, agreed.

"South it is," Durin said, turning the team.

"Looks like Goose Bend is the nearest town," Bain informed them.

"You're the only one who understands me," Zev said, staring at the broom. "You *do* understand, don't you?" The broom didn't reply. "I *knew* you did," Zev smiled, settling down for a nap.

Durin guided the wagon to the Coach Line/Stockyards on the outskirts of Goose Bend. It seemed to take almost no discussion to get the farrier on duty to trade a fresh horse for their lame one. Bain headed for the tavern, as usual. Jace headed there as well and checked into a private room. Durin, following, stopped outside a

brightly lit building. The sign bore a golden coin surrounded by dice. Durin walked into the building as if in a trance.

Dalus Arachnos stared at the town of Far Grinpen. He was disgusted with this latest ‘brilliant idea’. He threw the clothes he’d worn as ‘Fred’ in the gutter. He knew for a fact that the necklace *hadn’t* been in the box. The horseshoes were perfect for a person who was afraid of horses, even if he didn’t admit it. And the sword? In that group, it was *perfect*. The necklace, however, that made him wonder. He thought about telling Domingo about it.

“Fuck him,” Arachnos decided.

Durin placed a single black sapphire coin on the ‘even’ marker. The wheel spun and the ball landed in an even slot. Durin tucked his winnings away and left the original coin there. Again, the ball landed in an even slot. Durin grinned.

Wait’ll I tell Jace and Bain about this, he thought. He switched the bet to odd. Again, the shiny ball landed in the spot Durin hoped. Emboldened, he placed a bet of two black sapphire, or 20 quartz. He won again. The thrill went to Durin’s head and he started betting more and more. All too soon, his lucky streak ended. As fast as he’d won, he lost. Only an iron resolve allowed him to leave the casino a mere 50 quartz lighter than when he went in.

“Maybe I *won’t* tell them after all,” Durin muttered.

Strack slid the whetstone along his blade, slowly. He’d seen the newest addition to Black Pete’s little cavalcade of horrors - Morloth. Truth be told, King Zev wasn’t a real king and that meant Strack wasn’t a real lord. He could live with that, but a lizard man? No, that would never do. Strack continued to sharpen his blade, getting it ready to shear through tendon, ligament, bone and flesh. Soon, the world would have one less lizard man in it.

“When’s the next boat due in?” Bain asked the bartender.

“No boats,” the bartender answered nervously.

“Well, where are the ones that use the docks?” Bain pressed.

“No docks, nope, none at all,” the bartender gibbered. Bain frowned and started to stand when he noticed Durin enter the tavern. He waved the dwarf over.

“I think it’s time we contacted the rebels,” Durin said to Bain quietly. “Tell me about the rebels,” Durin said loudly to the bartender. Almost immediately, guards stepped forward and grabbed Durin.

“You’re under arrest, shorty,” a guard said.

“For what?” Durin spluttered.

“You’re a rebel,” the guard said, dimwittedly.

“I said *‘tell me about the rebels’*, you dingus!” Durin shouted.

“Why don’t you just let him go?” Bain asked, standing up. Another guard appeared out of the crowd, this one carrying a piece of paper.

“These guys look like the ones on the poster,” the second guard said. “Does youse guys know an elf?”

“We don’t know any elf,” Durin shouted.

“These aren’t the dudes you’re looking for,” a quiet voice said.

“Y’know, I don’t think these are the guys we’re looking for,” the first guard said.

“You just watch it,” the second guard said, waving a finger at Bain and Durin.

“That was close,” Bain said.

“Did you hear that voice?” Durin asked.

“What voice?” Bain queried. Durin felt something being shoved into his palm. When he turned around, there was no one to be seen. He looked down to see that a wadded up piece of paper had been pressed into his hand. He glanced at it carefully and saw a crude map of the town with an X on the docks. Beside it was a drawing of a skull. Durin correctly surmised that it referred to a meeting on the docks at midnight, the skull representing the skull moon.

“I thought we was going to Green Field,” Ox said from the back of his bull.

“Well, now we’re going to Goose Bend,” Shorty grumbled, gliding silently on his surfboard.

“Why is we going to Goose Bend?” Ox asked.

“Because Lord Domingo told us to,” Shorty snapped.

“Goose Bend sounds like some kind of sex move,” Slim joked.

“You want a morningstar in the mush?” Shorty yelled. Slim put up his hands in surrender. When Shorty turned away, Slim made circling motions near his temple, crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

“Why does we do what Lord Dingo tells us?” Ox questioned.

“That’s Domingo, and because he pays us,” Shorty explained.

“He didn’t never pay *me*,” Ox said.

“No, he pays *me*, and *I* pay you guys,” Shorty said.

“So, how come you ain’t paid me?” Ox asked.

“There’s no money left,” Shorty said. Ox looked at Shorty’s surfboard, but said nothing.

Jace sat on the floor in the centre of his room. He was stripped, wearing only a breechcloth. The necklace of Cassandra hung about his neck, the onyx heart even blacker than his skin. Across his lap lay the holy weapon he’d been given by his temple. It was a staff, made of black pine. At each end, a silver cap, carved in delicate filigree, glittered in the light of the single candle on a nearby nighttable. Silver trceries, looking like veins, ran the length of the staff, inlaid cunningly into the wood. At the balance point was a bas relief of Cassandra, in her elven form. Jace had been surprised and thrilled when the priestess had presented the staff to him.

Jace ran his fingers over the carving, touching the tiny breasts, caressing the miniature thighs. He knew in his heart that he was absolutely devoted to Cassandra, Duchess Of Desire, The Temptress. He understood her, or so he believed. Most people thought of her as a whore, giving herself to all comers. Jace knew

that wasn't true. Cassandra expected women to use the gifts they'd been given to further their own ends, and hers. Sexuality, cunning, intrigue, all of these were the weapons every woman was born with.

"And some use them better than others," a voice said. Jace turned to see his goddess, in elven form, clad in her traditional garb. He looked away, blinded by the brilliance and radiance of her. He heard the silky whisper as she moved forward and knelt behind him. She leaned forward, pressing her naked flesh to his. Jace leaned back, wrapped in arms of molten steel. His heart pounded, feeling every bit of his skin as her loving touch enveloped him. Her hands grabbed his staff, then pulled it up tight against his throat. Jace tried to speak, but she pulled the staff tighter, cutting off his air.

"You aren't strong enough yet, my pet," Cassandra purred. "Stay away from the capital. I brought you here for a reason, so don't act - prematurely." At her words, Jace felt a stirring in his loins. She laughed, a throaty, sultry laugh that excited him further.

"No, no, my pet," she whispered. "You haven't earned that - yet. Build your strength, build your power. When you're ready, you'll know." The room started to grow dim. Jace was suffocating, and completely oblivious. If his goddess was going to take his life, he would give it gladly.

"Don't fail me, Jace," she whispered, her lips brushing his ear. His lungs were on fire, begging for breath. "Don't fail me." Those words were in his mind when everything went dark.

Durin knocked at Jace's door. After a moment, he knocked again. He could hear a muffled groan from inside.

"Jace?" Durin asked.

"I'll be down in a minute," Jace replied.

"There was some trouble with the guards," Durin said. He waited a moment longer, then went back downstairs.

Inside the room, Jace slowly dressed, massaging his throat from

time to time. He remembered the things he'd seen, living with humans, and decided that Cassandra was everything a woman was, only more so.

After dressing, he made his way down to the common room. He bumped into Durin, who slipped him the note. He pushed Durin away roughly, attempting to throw off any watchers. He walked to the bar and ordered ale in a raspy voice.

"By the way," Jace said, looking down at his drink, "I'm an assassin monk." As he hoped, the statement caused the people nearest him to edge away, giving him a bit more space at the crowded bar.

Durin and Bain sat by a window, watching the sky slowly darken. Durin spotted the skull moon, close to full, through a break in the light cloud cover. He nodded to Bain and the two left. Jace, noting their departure, waited a moment, then followed.

As soon as he exited the tavern, Jace pulled his elven clothing out and put it on. He seemed to blend into the shadows.

"Cloak of darkness," Jace whispered. He was surrounded by dark mist, eddying and swirling, but moving with him. He moved off, trailing the other two.

Durin stood on the dock, facing the river, Bain beside him. He tapped the hilt of his sword, growing impatient.

"How long do we stand here?" Bain asked. At that very moment, he felt a dagger press into his back. Durin was accosted in the same fashion.

"Who sent you, spy?" a voice hissed.

"We aren't spies," Durin said, taking the initiative. Bain shook his head; he expected to be killed - he'd seen how well Durin handled confrontation.

"You were talking with the guards," the voice continued.

"I used to be a guard," Bain said. "But they are evil, and I decided to fight against them. They locked me up, but I escaped."

"They were trying to *arrest* us!" Durin yelled. The knife in his

back pressed deeper.

“Softly, spy, or we see how well you can swim,” the voice threatened.

“We are opposed to Black Pete,” Durin said. “Only a rebel would say that.”

“Or a spy *pretending* to be a rebel,” the voice shot back.

Jace crept forward, planning to surprise his friends’ assailants. He stepped on a stone, which turned his foot. He tottered, trying to keep his balance, and fell heavily against a wall. He froze, but no one seemed to have heard.

“We know of Termion,” Durin said. An arm came around his throat, clutching his neck.

“How do you know of Termion?” the voice hissed.

“Karen Del Sienta told us,” Durin started.

“Karen?” came a query from the person behind Bain. It was a female voice.

“We pulled her onto our boat. Termion’s knife was in her back. We tried to save her, but she died. Then we were shipwrecked here,” Durin said. He went on to describe the dream they’d had, about Black Pete catching Karen and her friends. Jace crept forward again, trying to see what was going on. He stepped on a cat that was trying to be friendly. The cat yowled. Jace grabbed it and clutched its mouth, trying to keep it quiet. Again, no one seemed to notice.

“That’s the craziest story I’ve ever heard,” the voice behind Durin said. “I believe you. Go to north Point. Wait there.” The knife withdrew from Durin’s back. Bain was released as well. Both turned, trying to see who had been behind them, but no one was there. They looked out toward the water, trying to see if anyone was in that direction.

Jace crept onto the dock, stood behind Durin and transformed to skeleton. Durin turned, saw the skeletal form behind him, and yelled. Jace said something in Mushmouth, then transformed back.

“*Quit* being so *creepy!*” Durin yelled.

“What did you find out?” Jace asked. Bain chuckled.

“North Point,” Durin said. “We go to North Point.”

“Okay,” Jace said, “but we avoid the capital at all costs.”

“That was a good one,” Bain said, grinning.

Chapter 15 - Camp

Durin grumbled loudly as the wagon rattled along the broken trail. Their encounter with the six apparitions had left them with no answers and even more questions.

“-Wish the King would get his butt over here and do something about Lord Zev!” Jace noticed Bain was muttering to himself as he approached the wagon again. Bain had been scouting ahead, and Jace reined the horses so the wagon could stop, stomping hard on the braking pedal. There was a loud crash in the back and Jace smiled as he heard Durin angrily curse in Dwarven.

“There’s a marsh up ahead,” Bain told Jace as Durin jumped down from the wagon. “We’ll have to go around it, or through it. Either way, we ain’t going much further tonight.”

Durin looked at the setting sun with annoyance, rubbing the bridge of his nose where his Dwarven surface goggles rested.

“He’s right,” Jace admitted. “It would be the middle of the night before we made any progress and I don’t especially like the idea of traversing a swamp in the dead of night.” Durin made a face.

“What’s the matter, mister undead-wannabe? Swamp gives you the creeps?” he said in a mocking tone.

“We could always use your belly to float the wagon across, fatboy.” Jace countered nonchalantly. Bain laughed aloud. Durin

made a face.

“I’ve lost weight!” Durin insisted, stamping his foot to emphasize the point.

Unfortunately, the little fat dwarf has lost a bit of his chunkiness, Jace thought with dismay. He cheered up when he remembered Durin’s obsessive gambling habit, and the endless string of jokes he could make at Durin’s expense in the future. Jace smiled and jumped down from the wagon. He slapped Durin hard on the back.

“Come on, Chubby. You can make camp while I unhitch these horses,” Jace said. Durin grumbled as he went off to a nearby grove of trees to make camp; Bain and Jace watched him as he stamped off. “Wanna look for some firewood or something?” he suggested. Bain nodded.

“We must make camp!” Bain said and went about his work. Jace shook his head.

With the horses hobbled and hidden from sight in a small grove, the three adventurers made a cozy fire and were sitting around it, munching on a meal that Jace had somehow produced. It was not particularly tasty, but the three agreed it was better than the trail-munch they had been eating for much of the previous two months.

“It tastes like bark, not rabbit!” Durin insisted as he munched on the blackened piece of meat.

“What makes you think that that’s rabbit you’re eating?” Jace asked quietly, turning toward Durin. Durin paused for a moment, but then took a large bite out of his ‘rabbit’.

“Oh, no, Jace!” Durin said, food falling into his beard. “You’re not going to creep me out *again*.” Jace shrugged and went back to poking the fire. Bain looked at his food, evidently not entirely convinced.

“You know,” Durin said as he chomped away, “the next major town we get to, I’m going to train for my next level!” Durin glanced at the other two proudly.

“Me too!” Bain chipped in. Jace turned up his lip in disgust. Although he knew his calling in life was to be an assassin monk, he disliked the amount of training he had to go through in order to achieve next-level standing. He knew that Cassandra had made it that way for a reason, but at that point he felt like he was holding the other two back. Still, if he were to attain the rank of third level, he would be a powerful being to be reckoned with.

The scars on Jace’s arm suddenly began to throb. Jace tried to massage away the pain, but to no avail.

Do not assume yourself to be more than you are, a silent voice ran through his mind. *You will need much more power, and greater allies, for the final victory* Jace shifted uncomfortably as the ethereal voice whispered into his mind. Bain and Durin were talking about combat techniques, and failed to notice Jace gnaw on his lower lip. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

We are making allies. We continue to grow. I will not fail you my mistress! He forced the words through his mind. There was a nothing for a moment, just the silent campsite and the two yappy warriors. Then, a cool breeze blew into the camp, and Jace heard in his head: *A step in the right direction - perhaps.* And then nothing.

“-What do *you* think, Jace? My old axe or Bain’s fancy new sword?” Durin asked, tugging on Jace’s cloak. Jace rubbed his arm and poked at the fire.

“*I* think we need to find Gunivere,” he said quietly. Durin blinked.

“I thought *you* didn’t care,” Durin snapped. Jace rubbed his chin and turned to Durin.

“I don’t. The fact of the matter remains, however, that I can’t storm the capital by myself, while fighting off King Zev and Peter Domingo.” Jace motioned in Bain’s direction. “Bain can only ‘smite so many people in-the-name-of-the-lord at one time’ and you, fatboy,” Jace poked Durin in his shrunken belly, “you can only use that gut of yours as a shield for so long!” Jace finished. Bain smiled, and Durin pushed Jace’s finger away with annoyance.

“At least we agree on getting Gunivere back. But where do we begin?” he asked. Bain threw the rest of his food in the fire.

“He may be dead,” Bain stated bluntly. Bain seemed to think about that for a moment. “Yes,” he said. “He’s probably dead.” Durin winced. Jace pulled himself onto a log and warmed his hands by the fire.

“He’s not dead,” Jace told them.

“How can you be sure?” Durin asked, looking concerned. Jace turned to face the dwarf.

“Peter Domingo doesn’t strike me as the type who would kill one of our companions and *not* rub it in our faces. Remember the dream we all had?” Durin nodded slowly. Jace continued. “He is, if nothing else, a showman.” Bain seemed to agree as well.

“But if he’s not dead, then where is he?” Bain asked. Durin shrugged.

“The capital, probably,” Durin said with disgust. “Maybe even in the Glass Dungeon,” he said with a shiver. Jace scratched his nose.

“I don’t think Lord Zev and Peter Domingo are too concerned with us, or Gunivere for that matter. Let’s face it, Black Pete could have killed us at any time, and those wanted posters aren’t much of an attempt at actually capturing us,” Jace said grimly. Bain looked up.

“What about the booger men! Peter Domingo set them up as a trap for us. The scroll-”

“Yes, I know,” Jace interrupted. “I’m still not entirely convinced that the booger men were just a diversion for our benefit, even though Black Pete claimed we were wasting our time. I think there are other forces at work on this island, and Peter Domingo and Lord Zev are too caught up in their own machinations to notice other things going on around here,” Jace said. Durin coughed.

“But even if we *do* go after Gunivere and head for the capital, it’s suicide for us at this point,” Durin said, sounding frustrated.

You don’t know the half of it! Jace thought to himself.

“Maybe the rebellion will know something. We’ll be meeting them soon enough anyway,” Bain piped up. Light danced over Durin’s face.

“I hope Gunny’s all right,” Durin said quietly. Jace frowned.

“I hope so too,” he whispered.

Chapter 16 - Damsels And Desperadoes

The wagon rumbled across the dusty road at close to midday. Jace reined the horses in, bringing the wagon to a halt.

“That’s different,” Bain said, squinting toward the town ahead. A wall, about six metres high, encircled the entire city, right to the shoreline. Guard towers could be seen, manned by vigilant guardsmen.

“No problem,” Durin said, taking the battered trading license out of his backpack. “We’re traders.” Bain shook his head, already envisioning the battle that would ensue after Durin tried to be in charge. Jace shook the reins, getting the horses moving again.

“Halt,” a guard yelled as the wagon rolled up to the gates. Durin started waving the trading license around. Bain pulled his cloak up and drew the hood down, trying to conceal his features. The guards noticed, and then noticed the group - dwarf, elf, human. One of them looked at a poster, stuck to the guardhouse door.

“They’re the criminals!” a guard yelled.

“For Restorus Destroyer!” Durin howled, jumping off the wagon and swinging his sword. The guards, better trained than the ones Durin had faced before, closed as a group, swinging their truncheons with skill. When they parted, the stocky dwarf was stretched out on the ground, bruises already beginning to purple his

features.

“You’re under arrest,” a guard said.

“Yeah, we get it,” Bain said.

“Get off that wagon,” another guard ordered.

“We’re in for a beatdown, right?” Jace asked. Bain nodded. The guards closed in.

Carli was idly scratching her name in the bar when Sorn burst in. Big Willy looked up as Sorn scurried across the room, avoiding the midday lunch crowd. Big Willy moved close to Carli, grabbing her knife.

“I asked you not to do that,” he said. Carli looked at Big Willy’s hand on her wrist. He looked at it, too, then let go - slowly, making no sudden moves.

“They moved him,” Sorn said. Big Willy reached out and grabbed Sorn by the throat, lifting him off the ground.

“No palace scum in my place,” Big Willy growled. He pushed Sorn back. “Get rid of him, Carli,” Big Willy said, turning his back on the two. As Carli stood, Sorn’s eyes filled with fear. He moved back, then turned to walk out as Carli stepped up beside him. Several patrons grimaced, knowing how rough Carli was. More than one bore scars of her *friendly* reminders.

Once outside, Carli grabbed Sorn’s tabard and hauled him around behind the tavern. She slammed him against the wall, bouncing his head off the wood. Her fist drew back. Sorn closed his eyes.

“You *are* just faking, *right*, Carli?” Big Willy asked, stepping out of the back door. Carli’s fist shot forward. There was a crunching sound. Sorn opened his eyes and whimpered, staring at the fist that met the wall right beside his head.

“You’re paying for the repairs, you crazy bitch,” Big Willy growled.

“Who?” Carli said, staring at Sorn. He blinked, playing back the last few minutes in his mind.

“Oh!” Sorn exclaimed. “That elf. The one the DA has been spelling the hell out of. The one Lady Tiana has been whipping every day.”

“Where?” Carli asked. Sorn licked his lips. Carli pulled him forward, then pushed, bouncing his head off the wall again. “Where?” she repeated.

“North Point!” Sorn yelled.

“They won’t take him off the island,” Big Willy muttered. “So why North Point?” Carli glanced over her shoulder at Big Willy. Her eyes met his. It couldn’t be coincidence.

“Get back to work, Sorn,” Big Willy rumbled. “Let him go, Carli.”

“I’m not going back there,” Sorn said, half statement, half pleading. Carli grabbed his jaw and wrenched his face around, pulling him close to her.

“Are you trying to make me angry?” she said quietly.

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Sorn babbled. Big Willy winced. More than most, Carli knew exactly what it was like in the palace. Big Willy had seen the scars on her back.

“You go back to the palace,” Carli said, “or I kill your fucking ass right now.” Sorn hesitated. With a metallic whisper, Carli’s sword slid out of its scabbard.

“I’ll go, I’ll go!” Sorn shrieked. Carli let him go. He scrambled away, running as if his life depended on it. Carli watched him for a moment, then raised her arm, shaking back the sleeve. She drew her sword across her forearm, just enough to draw blood. She rubbed the blade against the bloody gash, then wiped it off and sheathed it.

“You never put your sword away unblooded,” Carli said at Big Willy’s look. “This is it,” she continued. “They’ve made their mistake.”

“It’s not a mistake - it’s a trap,” Big Willy countered.

“Dammit!” Carli yelled. “We set up a meeting with the others in North Point. A fucking day later, they move the other one to North

Point. It's coming together!

"Lord Del Sienta is raising an army in the south. The DA is getting restless. Strack's developing a conscience. It's time!"

"No, Carli," Big Willy said. "Not yet." Carli spun and walked away, her stride raising dust at every footstep. Big Willy went back inside.

Moments later, the tavern door burst open. Patrons started, some reaching for weapons, some diving under tables. Carli stood in the doorway, fists clenching and unclenching. She stepped into the tavern.

"It's over, Big Willy," she said. In a flurry of scraping, the patrons dragged all the tables and chairs to the sides of the tavern. She walked slowly, looking at no-one, and grabbed her pack from beside the bar. Without a word, she turned and walked toward the door.

"Carli, wait," Big Willy said, stretching out one huge hand. She didn't slow, just walked out the door. Big Willy's hand clenched into a fist. "Everybody out!" he yelled. There was a mad scramble for the door. A few patrons dove out windows in their hurry to get clear. Moments later, the sound of destruction could be heard. No-one was curious enough to risk looking in a window.

Durin woke last, to find the others sitting dejectedly in a dark room. He took in the rough stone walls, the thick wooden door, metal strap hinges and barred grille.

"Are we in gaol?" Durin asked.

"Yep," Bain said, not looking up.

"So, when do we escape?" Durin asked. "And where is our equipment?"

"We don't and who knows," Jace said thickly. Durin took a closer look at the other two.

Bain sat, wincing at every breath. A large purple bruise decorated his left side. A long gash marred his right cheek, from just below his eye to his jawline. A rough splint bound his left shin

and ankle.

Jace clutched his arm, the one Durin knew bore the scars of his Goddess. Even in the dim light from the torch outside, Durin could see the blood, red on Jace's dark skin. Jace's nose, once straight and proud, was pushed to the side. Dried blood caked his lip and cheek.

Durin stood and started to examine the cell, slowly. He used his dwarven senses to their utmost, straining to find a weakness that could be exploited. After a few minutes, he sat back down, defeated. There was no way out.

"Hey, guard!" Durin yelled. No one answered. "Let's pull out the bars," Durin suggested.

"Says the short guy who can't even reach them," Jace grumbled, slowly standing. Bain rose as well, limping over to the door. He gripped the bars. Jace put his hands to them as well, then screamed. He fell down, his hands quivering. Red welts were already rising on his palms and fingers.

"Iron," Jace gasped.

"Okay," Durin said, hand on his chin, "what if we start a fight?"

"Are you nuts?" Bain asked.

"You guys pretend to beat on me. When the guards come running, we'll get 'em."

"That is a stupid plan," Jace said. "Besides, the guards don't seem to come, no matter what we do."

"They've got to come sometime, to feed us," Durin said.

"You do realize that we're prisoners, right?" Jace snarled. "We aren't guests at a freakin' inn." There was a sudden banging at the bars.

"Shut up in there!" a guard yelled, peering in through the grille. Jace turned and stretched out his hands. Lightning shot out, wreathing the guard in flickering blue light. He opened his mouth in a silent scream and fell to the ground. Bain leaped to the grille and looked out. The guard's smoking corpse lay sprawled in the hallway.

“I laugh at you in the name of the Lord!” Bain shouted.

“Way too late,” Durin said.

“Keys?” Jace asked.

“I don’t see any,” Bain said. “All I see is char-broiled guard and his baton.”

“Get the baton,” Durin shouted. Jace stepped up to the bars and looked at the dead guard. He concentrated and the baton slowly rose and floated into the room. It floated over to Durin, then rapped him on the head. He grabbed it.

“You’re getting good at that,” Bain chuckled.

“Why do you keep doing things like that?” Durin asked, rubbing his head.

“Because I can,” Jace answered.

“Well, now we got this,” Durin said, waving the baton.

“And how will that help us?” Jace asked.

“Er,” Durin said.

“Got any big plans?” Jace queried.

“Well, I-” Durin said.

“Did you hear that?” Bain asked.

“What?” Durin wondered.

“The guard’s gone,” Bain said, looking out the grille.

“Dammit, I wanna see!” Durin exclaimed. As he touched the door, it slowly swung open. “Um, guys?”

“That’s unusual,” Jace commented drily. Bain wasted no time on comments, but exited the cell into a long hallway. The three explored the hallway, looking for signs of people. All the other cells were empty. Jace used another spell to peer through the door at the end of the hall.

“I see six guards,” he whispered. “And our stuff, in a corner,” he added. The spell ended. Jace motioned for the others to move down the hall. “It’s an octagonal room,” Jace continued. “There’s a door in each wall.”

“We have to get our equipment before we can beat six,” Bain said.

“Ya, my sword,” Durin added.

“There’s no way to surprise them,” Jace said. “And these aren’t the patrol idiots; they can fight.” Jace felt a throbbing on his chest.

I gave it to you for a reason, a voice said in his head. Jace smiled, basking in the glow of his Goddess’ favour. *Move!* came the command.

“Shroud of mystery,” Jace said. Durin and Bain looked at him.

“I don’t see any difference,” Bain said.

“Was something supposed to happen?” Durin asked. Jace stepped up and grabbed the doorknob. With a quick move, he flung it open. The guards looked up, but didn’t charge. It seemed like they were expecting him.

“Lust!” Jace commanded, pointing at one of the guards. He did the same to another, then slammed the door shut again.

“What did you do?” Durin demanded.

“Go ahead and look,” Jace said, smiling sinisterly. Durin opened the door slowly. The sight that met his eyes shocked him to the core. One guard was dead, stabbed through the chest, the sword still protruding. The other was on his knees in front of another guard. He seemed to be... Durin slammed the door and leaned against a wall. He breathed heavily for a few moments.

“That was-” Durin began.

“What’s going on?” Bain asked, opening the door. The sight that greeted him made him long for a drink. “You gotta come with me to the tavern, Jace,” Bain said. “I know this girl-”

Three people burst through one of the other doors: Two humans, a man and a woman, and between them, slumped, was Gunivere. Bain charged into the room and swung at one of the guards. He missed. The man pushed Gunivere into Bain’s arms, then he and the woman drew weapons. In a blur of motion, the remaining guards were dispatched. They sheathed their swords almost as one, then took Gunivere from an unresisting Bain.

The two moved away, opening yet another door. The three quickly grabbed their equipment and followed, wondering who the

two strangers were. They went out the same door and down a long hallway. At the end, another door stood ajar. The three rushed out; there was no sign of Gunivere or the people who'd been with him.

Domingo knelt on the floor, head bowed. The eyes on the roof glowed brightly, casting a crimson glow over the room. He'd received another message from his Goddess; the Five Desperadoes were going to fight the adventurers - finally. It was a brief message, lacking in detail, but Domingo was pleased.

He still had to deal with Morloth. It would never do for him to have it in his possession. A sound at the door behind him startled him.

"You took my plaything away," Tiana said, pushing through the red curtain.

"I needed him elsewhere," Domingo said calmly, inwardly shocked that anyone was able to penetrate to his inner sanctum.

"My appetites need to be satisfied," Tiana said, undoing the clasp on her robe. The silky fabric slithered over her dusky skin, collecting in a pool of ebon at her feet. She stood, naked, her breasts heaving as she breathed heavily. Her hands were behind her back. Domingo stretched out on the floor, on his back, making it easy to see he was excited by her.

"The palace slaves aren't enough for you?" Domingo asked.

"The High Priestess of Sorana does not consort with *slaves*. Proud, strong souls are what I need."

"My soul belongs to Sorana," Domingo said, beckoning to Tiana, "but it's not for you to take it."

"I don't want your soul," Tiana spoke, walking sinuously to Domingo. She knelt and straddled him. Domingo reached out and grabbed her hips, pulling himself into her. Tiana gasped, then started undulating her hips, eliciting a groan from Domingo.

Under the lurid red glow of the carvings, Tiana's brown skin assumed a deeper shade, almost ochre. Domingo's skin seemed pale beside hers. She tossed her head, her raven tresses spilling

over her shoulders and breasts. Domingo's head rolled back and he closed his eyes.

Tiana's hand rose, a glittering knife gripped in her fist. The word "*Termion*" flashed in the glow from the ceiling. Domingo's eyes snapped open and he grabbed her wrist, stopping the blade a hair's breadth from his heart.

"Bitch," Domingo growled.

"Sorana calls for blood," Tiana hissed. Her arms tensed, trying to force the knife down. Domingo easily stopped her, twisting the knife from her hand.

"And she will have it," Domingo said, bringing the blade up in a vicious arc. It slashed across Tiana's throat. Blood welled from the wound, cascading over her chest and stomach. Domingo gripped her hips, intent on finishing what she started. Tiana kept moving, thrusting against him even as her lifeblood poured out to cover Domingo's chest. Domingo cried out in ecstasy.

Moments later, Domingo rolled Tiana's lifeless body off of his. He glanced at the knife. He'd lock it up. When next his Goddess spoke to him, he'd have questions for her.

As night fell, the three arrived within sight of North Point again. The gate was brightly lit. Smaller points of light marked each guard tower.

"We're all agreed?" Bain asked. "No more trying to ride through the front gate?"

"We can't ride, they've got our wagon," Durin grumbled.

"Give me some rope," Jace said, taking a grappling hook out of his backpack.

"Over the wall?" Bain queried. Jace nodded. Bain took some rope out of his backpack. Jace tied a knot and flung the hook up. It caught the wall and Jace scrambled up, then sat on top of the wall, waiting for the others. Durin clambered up the rope, muttering about dwarves being diggers, not climbers. Bain came last, perching atop the wall as Jace hauled the rope up and let it down on the

inside.

Durin climbed down first, for once not having any difficulty. Jace followed, agilely descending to the ground. Bain freed the grappling hook and tossed it to Jace. Then he looked at the six metre drop to the ground. He attempted to hang off the wall, to lessen the drop, but his hand slipped. He fell heavily to the ground.

“Ow, my ankle,” Bain yelled. Durin chuckled.

“Not so funny when *you’re* the one falling, eh, Bain?” Durin smiled.

“I’m going to my guild,” Bain said. Luckily, it was the building closest to the wall where they’d climbed over. “Hey!” Bain exclaimed. The others looked where he was pointing. “From this side, that wall looks really sturdy and thick.”

“So, it’s designed to keep people in?” Durin asked. “In any case, I’m going to find an inn and sleep some of these bruises away.”

“Ya, whatever,” Jace said distractedly. He could see the symbol of his temple to the south. He headed for it.

Gunivere woke to the feeling of a warm cloth stroking his back. The pain that had seemed to fill his existence was fading. A single candle burned on a table beside the bed on which he lay.

“How is he?” a woman’s voice asked.

“He’ll live,” a man replied. “The scars’ll be there forever, but he shouldn’t lose any mobility. Just getting regular meals is doing him a world of good.”

“Okay. I’m going into town tomorrow,” the woman replied. Gunivere tried to ask where he was, but his ordeal had left him very weak. He drifted off into unconsciousness again.

Jace walked into the temple to Cassandra, located in the temple quarter, at the southeast end of town, close to the wall. By the door, he dropped ten black sapphire coins into the bowl left there for donations. He grabbed an acolyte by the shoulder.

“I need to see the priestess,” Jace said. The acolyte nodded and

hurried away. Jace took a moment to study the temple. Red curtains hung from every wall, giving the place a warm, close feeling. The cords and trim were black, in keeping with the colour scheme of the Order Of Desire.

Every curtain could hide an assassin, Jace thought. It's a perfect place for a bit of intrigue.

"You needed to see me?" a voice said, breaking into Jace's reverie.

"Yes," Jace said. "I've things to tell you." The priestess nodded and indicated one of the low couches in a corner. Jace sat; she reclined beside him and pulled his head onto her stomach. Jace relaxed as he felt her hands caressing him, sending the cooling energy of healing through him.

"It started in a dungeon," Jace began. "I felt her hands on me." Jace talked through the night, telling the priestess of his adventures and of the signs from their Goddess.

Durin walked down the stairs slowly, taking in the room. He'd spent a night in a good bed, after quaffing healing potions. He felt almost as good as new. When he reached the inn's common room, the scent of food assailed his nostrils. He quickly grabbed a plate and got in line for the buffet, piling the plate high with bacon, sausages, pancakes, muffins, eggs, toasted bread and anything else within sight. As he turned to find a seat, a pair of humans caught his eye; they were the same ones he'd seen with Gunivere the day before. He walked over and sat, looking at the two with a bit of hostility.

"I'm Carli," the woman said. "This is Ellis."

"Durin," Durin replied gruffly.

"Your friend is okay," Ellis said quietly. "He's in rough shape, but he'll survive."

Bain wandered through the town, a silly grin on his face. Everywhere he went, someone was calling his name. People knew

about his exploits and wanted to know him. He'd already had three women proposition him since he left the guild barracks this morning. Bain headed toward the docks, keeping his eye open for Durin or Jace.

And who was that redhead? Bain wondered. *What did she have to do with anything? Why did she have Gunivere?* Bain shrugged and grinned again. A perky blonde was smiling at him. He walked over and crossed his arms.

"Oh, *so* strong," the blonde said.

"I'll show you strong," Bain chuckled, grabbing the woman and slinging her over his shoulder.

"Yeah! In the name of the Lord!" someone shouted. Bain waved and laughed out loud. The blonde wriggled, settling herself more comfortably on Bain's shoulder. Thoughts of rebels and companions fled, chased away by more urgent concerns.

Jace stood, rested and relaxed. It was good to finally tell someone about his concerns. He'd refused the offer of a temple acolyte to take him to a private room. He didn't tell her that he was repulsed by human women. He didn't tell her that he was in love with his Goddess. The priestess stood before him. Suddenly, her eyes rolled back in her head.

"It's time, my pet," Cassandra spoke through her priestess. "Kill the five. Send them all to me." Jace stared, shocked. He wondered what had changed.

"I hate it when that happens," the priestess said. "What did I say?"

"Don't you know?" Jace queried. "I'm supposed to kill the Five Desperadoes. They follow Sorana."

"Fine, whatever," the priestess said, turning away. "Go."

"Okay," Jace said hesitantly. Then he realized whose name he'd just spoken in Cassandra's temple. He left quickly, rapping his staff against his forearm.

Carli spoke quietly, telling Durin about the rebels and what they were doing. Durin listened intently, occasionally scribbling notes. She confirmed that it was her and Ellis who'd met them on the docks. Durin noticed Jace coming in the door of the inn. Jace looked agitated. Durin waved, motioning for Jace to join them.

"Jace, this is Carli and Ellis," Durin said. Jace nodded.

"Domingo's the real power in the land," Carli said. "He is officially an advisor to Zev, but the power is in his hands.

"Dalus Arachnos is Domingo's pet sorcerer. The rumour is that the DA no longer follows either the Sorcerer's Guild or the Order Of Magic. Domingo has converted him to the Order Of Hellspawns. You can imagine the havoc he'll create when Domingo turns him loose on the rebels.

"Morloth, a lizard man, has shown up recently, bringing with him a High Priestess of the Order Of Hellspawns, one Lady Tiana. Morloth is a specialist, a monk who deals exclusively with one branch of magic."

"You can't," Jace interrupted. "You have to learn all the spell formulae."

"Yeah?" Carli grunted. "Anyway, almost all he does deals with undead."

"The apparitions!" Durin exclaimed. Carli looked confused. Jace explained about their encounter with the spirit forms a short time ago.

"That would be Morloth's doing," Carli agreed. "Now, for the good news.

"Lord Aaron Del Sienta, the one you knew as Skeeze," Carli explained, "has regained his senses. He's raising an army in the south. The word is, keep it on the island. Del Sienta wants to put this false king down without outside help." She was interrupted by Bain sitting down at the table.

"Bain!" several people in the room called. Bain waved. Jace and Durin looked at him. He shrugged.

"It's been happening all day," Bain grinned. "Hey, baby," Bain

said, leering at Carli. She smacked him on the back of the head - hard. Bain's forehead bounced off the table.

"That's Carli," Durin said. "This is Ellis." Carli filled Bain in on what they'd been discussing. He told them about his newfound popularity.

"I killed a lot of bad guys, too!" Durin whined.

"Yeah, but Bain is the one who brags about it to anyone who stands still for five seconds," Jace teased.

"Hey!" Bain interjected.

"Oh, by the way, we're going to kill the five," Jace said. "My Goddess commands it."

"Who?" Ellis asked.

"The Five Desperadoes," Durin said.

"The Five *Homeless* Desperadoes," Bain corrected. "I burned down their hideout."

"That was you?" Ellis exclaimed. Bain just smiled. Jace stared at the table, muttering something about his temple. Durin, watching Jace with concern, noticed a group of dwarves at another table.

"Excuse me," Durin said, standing up. Durin walked to the table of dwarves, they motioned him to sit; he complied as they plied him with questions about Big South Island. After exchanging news, Durin grew serious.

"Are you fellows staying on the island?" Durin asked.

"Nae," the eldest, Golan, replied. "We ship out this afternoon."

"I need you to take a message for me," Durin said quietly. He leaned in closer and spoke in a low voice to the others.

"What do you think he's doing?" Ellis wondered, looking across the room at Durin.

"He's probably got an idea in his head," Bain said, edging closer to Carli.

"He's not the only one," Carli retorted, elbowing Bain in the ribs. "I'm getting out of here."

"You want some company?" Bain asked, rubbing his side.

"Sure," Carli said. She stood and Bain followed.

“What about you?” Ellis asked.

“I’m going to the gates. I’ve got to check something out,” Jace responded.

“Your dwarf friend?”

“He’ll be fine,” Jace said.

“Then I’ll go check on your elf buddy,” Ellis stated.

“Gunivere,” Jace replied. “His name is Gunivere.”

“You are not the King,” Strack said. The audience chamber grew silent. Zev’s eyes grew large. “You’re under a spell. I can no longer serve you in good conscience.” Strack waited for the command to kill him, but none came. He turned and walked out, slowly. As soon as he was out of sight of the door guards, he ran. He had equipment and provisions hidden in the stables. With luck, he could get away before Domingo caught up with him.

“In a hurry, *Lord Strack*?” a sibilant voice hissed.

“Just getting some exercise,” Strack lied. A glance into the stall showed him that his horse had been killed.

“You’ve nothing to fear from me,” Morloth continued, stepping into view. “You’re a complication.” Strack’s heart began to beat faster.

He’s not Sslim, Strack told himself.

“Leave!” Morloth commanded. “Your name will quickly be forgotten.” Strack entered the stall and grabbed his pack. As he stood, the horse’s corpse stirred. “A little parting gift,” Morloth hissed as the horse lurched to its feet. Its eyes, filmed over white, slowly grew red as the horse looked at Strack. He backed out of the stall slowly, then turned and ran. The horse clattered out of the stall after him, moving jerkily, bloody foam dripping from its mouth.

Jace stepped into an alley. He looked behind him to make sure no one had noticed his exit from the street. He rubbed the talisman through his tunic, then took a deep breath.

“Shroud of mystery,” Jace said, then stepped back out into the

street. He moved to the centre of the street, walking as if he owned the town. As he approached the gates, the soldiers straightened.

“Good morning, Sir,” the sergeant said, saluting. “Are you going out today, Sir?”

“No,” Jace replied, waving a hand idly in return of the salute. “Just taking a tour of our defenses. Carry on.” Jace strode away.

I knew it, he thought. They see who they are expecting to see.

“Everybody knows about magic weapons,” Arachnos muttered, concentrating on the cabinet in front of him. “Use it or lose it.” The cabinet door swung open. As he had expected, the knife was gone.

“Where is it?” Domingo growled.

“Gone,” Arachnos replied.

“I can see that. Gone where?”

“Somewhere where it will be used,” Arachnos stated. “You should have tuned it to yourself and carried it. How can it kill you if you have it in a sheath at your hip?”

“Hold your tongue, slave,” Domingo grated. Arachnos stiffened, then turned and left.

Once in the hallway, Arachnos let out a long breath. It didn’t mean anything to him anymore - nothing did. He noticed a guard leaning against the wall.

“You, there,” Arachnos called. The guard lurched away from the wall and walked unsteadily to Arachnos. “I need you to-” Arachnos noticed the guard’s condition. “You’re drunk!” The guard, instead of denying it, looked at Arachnos with pity.

“My poor, poor child,” the guard said, shaking his head. “Come back to the fold.”

“What are you talking about?” Arachnos said emotionlessly. The guard held out a hand. On his palm rested a ring.

“Take it,” the guard said. “Go on, take it.” Arachnos reached out to take the ring. As his finger touched it, it disappeared, then reappeared on the ring finger of his right hand. The guard staggered off.

Arachnos looked at the ring, made of silver, fashioned to resemble a skull, twin to the one on his left hand. Memories of lessons, long forgotten, bubbled through his mind.

“Our God appears as a drunken soldier.”

Arachnos heard the soldier’s voice again. *Come back to the fold.*

“The Guild is always there for you.”

“True wisdom comes only with acceptance.”

“Only one in a hundred attains fifth level.”

The voices grew louder, thundering through Arachnos’ head.

“Do not meddle in politics.”

Arachnos saw himself, standing by Domingo, aiding in the plot to control Big South Island.

“Aid any Guild member.”

Arachnos watched as Gunivere was tortured and whipped.

“It’s not my concern.”

Arachnos remembered. Plotting. Betrayal. Treason. Despair.

“Zalthon, forgive me,” Arachnos whispered. He started to run, pounding through the corridors of the palace. He burst into the street, slipped, righted himself, then looked across the city. Hanging in the sky, shining, was the Eternal Torch, symbol of the Sorcerer’s Guild. Arachnos ran, breath coming in ragged gasps, until he was before the Guild. He stopped, looking about. It seemed as if everyone was watching him.

Why not? he thought. *I’ve been Black Pete’s lap dog. I’ve done things to make a normal man insane.*

Arachnos mounted the marble stairs slowly, evenly. He walked past the guards and into the foyer. He waited. With a shimmering, three figures appeared.

“I am Instructor Tom Arenson,” the man on the left said. Arachnos nodded, inwardly surprised. It was his first instructor.

“I am High Priest Torin Shea,” the man on the right said. He wore the colours of the Order of Magic.

“I am Guildmaster Irene,” the woman in the centre said. Arachnos dropped to one knee. He felt powerful spells wrapping

about him, but not affecting him.

“I am Dalus Arachnos,” Arachnos said. “Zalthon has granted me fifth level,” he added, holding out his right hand. “I am unworthy. I ask that it be revoked.”

“Who are you to question our god?” Shea asked.

“Acceptance is the way,” Arenson intoned.

“Why are you really here?” Irene asked pointedly. Arachnos nodded.

“I-” Arachnos began. He looked around to see the room filled with people, all Guild members. Not one showed hostility. “I have broken the Guild law. I submit myself for punishment.” Tears began running, unheeded, down Arachnos’ cheeks. “Help me.”

“What is the first responsibility?” Arenson asked.

“To the Guild,” Arachnos responded.

“And the second?”

“To myself,” Arachnos whispered.

“You have broken both laws. Why should you be allowed back?” Arenson demanded.

“Please,” Arachnos whispered.

“Why?” Arenson thundered.

“The Guild will aid all members,” Arachnos cried.

“And?”

“The Guild will hunt down renegades - and destroy them,” Arachnos said, bowing his head. Arenson stepped back.

“Have you been true to the Guild?” Shea asked. Arachnos shook his head no. “Have you been true to yourself?” Again, he shook his head no. “Do you deserve forgiveness?”

“No,” Arachnos said quietly. Around the room, several members were weeping openly. Most of the others wore looks of sadness.

“Do you repent?” Shea asked.

“Yes,” Arachnos whispered.

“What say you?” Irene asked.

“He broke the law,” Arenson said. “He was guided by outside

forces. This is not an excuse, but only an explanation.”

“What say you?” Irene asked.

“Guilty,” Arenson intoned.

“What say you?” Irene asked.

“Our god Zalthon favoured him. This is not a thing done lightly. He repents, but has transgressed,.” Shea said.

“What say you?” Irene asked.

“Innocent,” Shea intoned.

“You are weak,” Irene said, looking directly at Arachnos. “You have went astray. By Guild law, you are renegade and must be destroyed. By holy writ, you are innocent and must be forgiven.” Irene looked around at the assembled sorcerers. “Who here can destroy this sad creature?” One by one, the sorcerers left, none looking at Arachnos, until only he and the three remained.

“Choose,” Irene intoned. “Destruction or punishment. If you choose destruction, High Priest Shea will carry out your sentence. If you choose punishment, Instructor Arenson will decree it. Choose!” Arachnos bowed his head. “Choose!”

“Please,” he begged.

“Choose!” Irene thundered. Arachnos straightened, then slowly stood.

“It’s not my concern,” he said. Irene smiled.

“He is not so far gone as you think, Tom,” Irene said. “What say you?”

“Exile,” Arenson said.

“Exile,” Shea said.

“Exile,” Irene said. “You will be sent to the Isle of Knowledge, there to spend your days in solitude until you are given leave to go.” The air around Arachnos shimmered, then he was gone.

As night wrapped its dusky cloak about the town, the adventurers found themselves near the south gate. Durin eyed the wagon, parked to one side, horses hitched to it. There were twenty men, in various positions, about the gate.

“What are they planning to do with *our* wagon?” he asked.

“The garrison commander ordered it,” Jace said. “Or at least, they thought it was the garrison commander.”

“There are a lot of them,” Durin noted. “We need a plan.”

“Get out your bow, Jace,” Bain suggested. “And try your ring,” he said to Durin. Carli pushed past them and strode toward the guards.

“Here we go again,” Ellis said quietly. Before the guards had time to do more than register Carli’s presence, she drew her sword and swung it in one fluid motion. The nearest guard’s head flew up, droplets of blood from the base creating a carmine spray.

Bain, not to be outdone, drew his bastard sword and charged, continuing the over shoulder draw into a whistling overhand arc. His sword clove a guard in two, shearing through bone, armour and gut. The rest of the party charged forward, determined to do their part.

The guards, seemingly beset by a horde of slayers, wavered. Their resolve broke and the guards fled into the night. Carli walked out into the night, straight down the centre of the road. Bain hurried to catch up. Jace hopped aboard the wagon and headed it out into the night. Durin, the last one left, looked about for any guards remaining.

“I wanted to kill some, too,” he whined, then trotted off after the others.

Jace drove the wagon slowly, following the dimly seen figures of Carli and Ellis. Bain was in the back, cleaning his sword and muttering. Durin sat on the tailgate, scowling into the night.

Jace reined the horses in at a sign from Ellis. Carli walked toward a copse of trees and disappeared into it. Jace detected the faint traces of magic.

“Guide them this way,” Ellis called to Jace. He complied, turning the team directly toward another stand of trees. Bain and Durin exited the wagon to stand on the plain. They watched as the

wagon seemed to ride right into the trees and disappear.

“Ah,” Durin said, pretending to be wise in the ways of magic. Moments later, Ellis and Jace reappeared. Ellis walked to the other stand of trees and disappeared inside.

“So, what now?” Durin asked.

“We might as well follow,” Bain suggested.

“Gunny’s in there,” Jace said, then walked into the trees.

Morloth put the needle and thread away in a pouch on his belt. Domingo stood to one side, watching. Morloth used a damp rag to clean the body, taking care that all the blood and filth was wiped away.

“You’re sure this will work?” Domingo snarled.

“Of course,” Morloth hissed. He raised his hands and uttered arcane words in his native tongue. The incantation went on for a long time. Domingo frowned; it hadn’t taken so long before. After a few more minutes, Morloth lowered his hands.

“Well?” Domingo demanded. Then the body stirred. Slowly, it sat up. Eyes, filmed over with death, slowly cleared. It lurched to its feet, walking unsteadily. With every step, the movements became more fluid, more graceful. Finally, the figure halted, naked, before Domingo.

“Welcome back, High Priestess Tiana,” Domingo said.

Jace knelt at Gunivere’s side, laying out bottles of herbs and other medicinal supplies. Durin watched carefully, ready to mock Jace if he slipped up. Jace had never let him forget the ordeal of healing and re-healing that Durin put Jace through.

“So, you’re pretty hot,” Bain said to Carli as he sat at the table.

“Are you always this subtle?” Carli asked, pouring a mug of wine for each of them.

“You want subtle, call a poet. Me, I want you,” Bain said, grinning.

“Gods,” Carli groaned, rolling her eyes. “Shut yer piehole,

Bain.”

“Whoa!” Durin exclaimed as Jace started work. Gunivere seemed to improve before his eyes. Gunivere stirred, then his eyes opened.

“Am I dreaming?” Gunivere asked.

“No, Gunny,” Durin said quietly. “You’re rescued.”

Lord Bob reached for his sword as the large party of armed men rode into town. They looked healthy and well fed, as did their mounts. Behind them, a large group of men marched, in formation. It took a moment for it to register; it was an army.

“Your eyes aren’t deceiving you,” the leader said, then removed his helm.

“Aaron!” Bob shouted. “How?”

“It’s a long story,” Del Sienta replied. “I’ll tell you on the way to the capital.”

“I’ll get my men,” Bob said, not hesitating for a moment.

“Men?”

“You think I was just going to sit here and let the nutjobs in the capital take over?” Bob asked. “I’ve been biding my time, waiting for the right moment. There was a group that came through here a while ago, I thought they might be a sign, so I started reforming the local militia.”

All told, it took over an hour to assemble the men. Bob put on his silver plate armour and mounted his horse. Men from Del Sienta’s force distributed tabards to the newcomers.

“Move out,” Del Sienta commanded. Men shouted up and down the line and the army started moving, heading for the inexorable clash in the capital.

Ellis returned to the hideout. He walked slowly to the table and grabbed the winebottle. Carli and Bain were in a corner, she curled up on his chest. Durin sat by Gunivere, reading aloud from his notebook. Jace sat by the fireplace, running a silk cloth over his

staff, polishing the already gleaming shaft.

“Did anyone tell some dwarfs about the situation on the island?” Ellis asked.

“Yeah,” Durin said, standing. “Did they get out?”

“They, and their ship,” Ellis said, “blew up. Apparently, it was carrying naphtha and other flammable items in the hold. That’s the official story, anyway.”

“It’s my fault,” Durin said. “If I hadn’t told them, they’d be alive.” Durin frowned. “Let’s get moving. We have to get Jace’s job done so we can go to the capital and end this. I declare crusade on Peter Domingo and false king Zev.”

“I’ll smite in the name of the lord,” Bain shouted from the corner.

“We’ve got other things to take care of,” Carli said. “We’ll meet here in one week. Agreed?” The others nodded.

As the wagon rumbled along the dusty road toward Otherton, Gunivere found the strength to sit up. He was growing stronger in leaps and bounds. Better yet, the ringing in his ears and pain in his head that was limiting him magically had finally faded.

“Where are we going again?” Gunivere asked.

“Otherton,” Durin said from somewhere in the back of the wagon. “To finish the Five Desperadoes.”

“The Five *Homeless* Desperadoes,” Bain added.

“Why?” Gunivere asked. “I know they’re annoying-”

“My goddess commands it,” Jace intoned. “And we have arrived.” Bain jumped out of the wagon.

“Bain!” someone yelled.

“Hey! It’s Bain,” another voice chimed in. Soon the wagon was surrounded by cheering people.

“What’s this about?” Gunivere wondered aloud.

“Bain’s been bragging about what we do to anyone who’ll stand still for five seconds,” Jace drawled.

“And it paid off?” Gunivere asked.

“That’s one way to look at it,” Durin growled. “I see someone I recognize,” Durin said. He hopped off the wagon and pushed through the crowd of Bain’s wellwishers. “Ho, there, monk,” Durin called. The monk, the same one they’d spoken to about the Five so long ago, looked down at Durin, then smiled.

“Ah, my friend, you’re still alive,” the monk said. He guided Durin away from the wagon toward a bench out front of the tavern. As they sat, Jace came over to join them, followed by Gunivere. Bain walked by the group and into the tavern, followed by a crowd.

“What did you mean ‘still alive’?” Durin asked. “And what is your name?”

“Get out your little notebook,” Jace quipped.

“I am Osrice,” the monk said. “The Five come here rarely. After all, with the temple destroyed, there’s little reason. Our village is peaceful now. We owe you our thanks.”

“We didn’t do much,” Durin said.

“Bain burned down their home,” A passerby said.

“You shut up!” Durin yelled, popping to his feet.

“Is Bain’s popularity going into your notebook?” Jace asked innocently.

“So, how do we find the Five?” Durin snapped.

“I’ve got an idea about that,” Bain said, coming back out of the tavern.

“Rebuild the temple?” Jace asked.

“That’s my thought,” Bain agreed.

“I’ll go find the housebuilder,” Gunivere volunteered.

The housebuilder was obstinate and argumentative. All Gunivere’s efforts seemed to be wasted until he mentioned Bain.

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” the housebuilder cried. “I’d love to get in on one of Bain’s plans.”

“It’s really Jace’s plan,” Gunivere explained. “Bain is not the leader.”

“I’ll have to get the men together,” the housebuilder continued,

ignoring Gunivere. "Imagine that - me working with Bain."

Gunivere gave up trying to explain reality to the man and vowed to take a closer look at Durin's notebook.

"They'll burn it down," Osric stated to the group, sitting in the back of the wagon that Jace had parked near the site of the destroyed temple. "It's what they do."

"Where do they get the oil?" Bain asked.

"They get all their supplies in Thatton," Osric replied. "And you're right, they do usually soak the building with oil before lighting it on fire."

"Maybe we can go to Thatton and convince them not to sell the Five any oil," Durin mused.

"Let's roll," Bain shouted.

"Bain," Jace drawled, "if you don't stop with the 'hero act', I'm going to kill you."

"I'm just giving the people what they want," Bain grinned.

"Well, right now, we're the only people here," Durin snarled, "and we want you to shut up."

"Fine," Bain grumbled.

By the time the group arrived in Thatton, everyone was quite disgusted with Bain's newfound popularity. It seemed that every peasant by the roadside had not only heard of their exploits, attributing them all to Bain, but knew him on sight. Bain, for his part, sat in plain view, waving to the people who called his name.

"You're not *alord*, Bain," Jace noted.

"I didn't say I was," Bain retorted.

"Maybe you should tell *them* that," Durin grumbled. Jace guided the wagon to the general store, knowing that was where the oil was sold. They all climbed off the wagon and went into the store.

"Well, well," the shopkeeper exclaimed. "It's Bain and his band of heroes! To what do I owe the honour of-"

“I’m *not* any ‘band of heroes’ dude,” Durin snapped. The shopkeeper ignored him.

“Within the next few days,” Jace began explaining, “some men will come to buy oil. Lots of oil. They must be stopped.”

“You’re Jace, right?” the shopkeeper asked. Jace nodded, feeling a bit better.

“You’re even creepier in person than in the stories,” the shopkeeper said.

“Are you listening to me?” Jace growled, grabbing the shopkeeper by the throat. “Five guys, no oil, get it?”

“I’m no fighter,” the shopkeeper gasped, clutching at Jace’s wrist.

“He’s right,” Gunivere put in.

“Fill the barrels with water,” Durin suggested.

“Even the Five aren’t stupid enough to confuse oil with water,” Bain said. “Well, maybe Ox.”

“What if I fill them *almost* full of water, then put oil on top. After all, oil floats on water, right?” the shopkeeper whispered. Jace let him go.

“Okay, how much?” Jace asked.

“For Bain? Nothing,” the shopkeeper smiled. “Or for a friend of Bain’s,” he hastily amended at Durin’s glare.

Strack hid around the corner, a shovel in his hands. Soon, the clattering sound of hooves could be heard. At the last possible moment, he leaped out of concealment, swinging the shovel. It struck the head of the undead horse with a loud ‘klong’.

“When I say ‘whoa’, I mean ‘*whoa*!’” Strack shouted. “Stupid horse!” He was relieved to see that, this time, the undead horse that Morloth had set to chase him was finally dead.

“Dead,” Strack laughed. “That’s a laugh. how do you make an undead horse dead?” He looked around to see if anyone was looking. “You hit the damned thing with a shovel!” Strack started laughing as he poured oil over the hopefully lifeless corpse. He

knew that burning was one sure way to make sure a dead thing stayed dead.

As work commenced on the Otherton temple, Bain, Durin, Jace and Gunivere planned out the strategy for the coming battle. Bain insisted that the planning was useless, since no battle plan ever survived the first arrow. The others, enthused by the thought of dealing with their enemies after so long, paid him little attention.

Three days later, however, they paid him more attention as he explained how most traps were a matter of waiting. Tempers grew short and nerves frayed as time passed and still no word came to them of the Five.

Finally, on the eve of the fourth day, the shopkeeper rode into town on a tired horse. As he leaped off it, the overworked beast collapsed.

“They’re coming!” he shouted, in rather rough shape himself. “They bought ten barrels of oil.”

“Okay, places, people,” Durin said. They’d arranged for the townspeople to go about their normal business to make the Five easier to defeat. Dawn found them all at the construction site, performing simple carpentry tasks. Bain worked some planks, planing them flat. Gunivere transformed to falcon and flew up to scout the area. Durin donned Osric’s spare robe and played the part of a monk. No one was fooled; the robe was far too big for him, dragging behind him like a wedding dress. His sword made a very obvious shape under a fold of cloth. Jace climbed up on top of a nearby house and took out his elven bow. Then they waited.

Tiana lowered her arms and walked off the altar, shaking drops of blood from her fingertips. The sacrifice, even of a proud, unsullied virgin, brought little to enliven her day. Domingo controlled her, something she hated with as much passion as she could muster.

“What news?” Domingo asked as she stepped to the main floor.

“The confrontation is coming. Who will win? I can not ascertain,” Tiana sighed.

“Where is the knife?”

“Nearby,” she replied wearily.

“Search the palace!” Domingo roared.

Shorty sailed into the square in front of the building site. Slim and Sam followed, both of their mounts laden with barrels of oil. Snooty came next, a sardonic grin on his haughty features. Ox brought up the rear, flexing his muscles and humming.

“You people don’t get it, do you?” Shorty shouted. “Zalthon and the Order Of Magic are gone. You build it, we burn it. Try to follow along.”

“Don’t do this,” Osric shouted, waving his hands in the air. “There’s no need for violence.”

“You must not pass,” Durin said, doing his best to look like a monk. The five ignored him and began stacking the barrels in front of the half constructed temple. Ox grabbed the barrels, one by one, and threw them toward the wooden framework. Each one smashed, showering its contents on the wooden beams and planks.

“Blaze of glory!” Durin shouted, finally freeing himself from the ridiculous robe. His sword flared brightly, but all the enemy were behind him, facing the temple, so it did no good. It did alert the others, who began the battle, as they had planned.

Bain pulled his mighty bastard sword from concealment. He pointed it at Shorty, then leaned on one arm, waiting for the diminutive leader to approach. Shorty, face red with rage, leaped off his surfboard and charged forward, his morningstar whirling over his head.

“Theme of desire,” Jace said, nocking an arrow. Urgent music with a driving drumbeat filled the air. It made Jace think of combat and riding horses across the plains, slaying foes.

Jace stood and fired an arrow. At the last moment, it felt as though someone had jostled his arm and the arrow flew past his

target to strike the plank right beside Bain's hand. The sudden appearance of the arrow caused Bain to flinch, sending his swing at Shorty off the mark.

Snooty whirled at Durin's yell and prepared to meet the dwarf's charge. Durin, angered at being ignored by the five, swung with a ferocity that Snooty was not prepared for. He paid for his lack with his life.

"Restorus Destroyer claims your soul!" Durin shouted.

On the rooftop, Jace felt hands on his shoulder as he neared the edge of the roof. He tumbled off, landing hard on the ground.

They were supposed to be mine! his goddess' voice thundered in his head. *Get in there!*

Ox stepped in to aid Shorty, swinging his weapon at Bain, who dodged nimbly. Suddenly, several villagers jumped out of concealment and started playing instruments, joining the theme that was magically filling the air. Shorty stared wildly about, unused to resistance. It was the last thing he did.

Bain's sword crashed down upon Shorty, cleaving through armour, bone and sinew. Shorty fell, dead, to the ground.

Jace engaged Sam and the two fought back and forth across the open space, Sam swinging his weapon, Jace dodging and weaving, striking with deadly chopping motions of his hands.

Ox landed a blow on Bain, but Bain was fully charged and ready to kill. He saw Ox as one more person standing between him and the surfboard he'd been wanting ever since he first saw it. On the next swing, Bain grabbed the haft of Ox's weapon and pulled, getting Ox off balance. As he fell forward, Bain brought his sword down, decapitating the big man.

Durin charged across the open space to strike at Slim. Slim, ready for the ferocious dwarf, got his shield up in time. The two began what would turn into a lengthy battle, each one blocking and parrying the other's attacks.

Jace slipped by Sam's guard, delivering a decisive chop to Sam's unprotected neck. The blow was followed by the dry snap-

ping sound of Sam's clavicle and neck breaking.

"Cassandra, one more soul is freed from this world to serve you in the next," Jace pronounced.

"Hey, Durin," Bain called, while examining the surfboard, "you need a hand?"

"I got him," Durin replied, gasping for breath.

"You sure?" Jace asked. Durin didn't reply, but concentrated on blocking Slim's attacks. As the moments wore on, Durin became slower. Slim grew tired as well, and it looked like luck would play a factor in the outcome of the last battle. Durin swung, a powerful blow that would end the fight, but Slim blocked it, destroying his shield in the process.

Jace extended his arms and shot lightning across the square, striking Slim. He convulsed and fell, his body twitching in the grip of electricity.

"Thanks," Durin wheezed. "I was just about done in." All around them, the villagers were cheering. As the battle ended, so had the music from Jace's staff. Now the villagers were playing a new song. Jace ignored it as he walked over the bloody ground, cutting off the heads of the Five who still wore them. Once he had all five, he stuffed them in a sack. Durin raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Even if he had spoken, no one would have heard him over the singing.

It slowly dawned on the adventurers that the song was about them or, more to the point, about *Bain*.

Trouble On Big South

The Ballad Of Bain

Well, I'll tell you a story,
About blood and glory,
About a fighter who came to fame;
How he fought two or three,
In a battle to make us free,
I bet you all can guess his name.

He's Bain,
I'll say it again,
Even though he might be thick as a board;
It's Bain,
Mighty Bain,
Shout it out 'Smite you in the name of the lord'.

He used to be a guard,
And it was mighty hard,
And his pleas the creeps ignored;
When they killed his family,
It set him free,
To smite them in the name of the lord.

He's Bain,
It caused him pain,
The killing of his family left him floored;
It's Bain,
Lonely Bain,
Getting even with guards, smiting in the name of the lord.

They caught up with him,
And it got real grim,
When they locked him in the dungeon of hoard;
but Jace, Durin and Gunny,
Came quick like a bunny,
And freed him in the name of the lord.

He's Bain,
On the loose again,
Running to the tavern as often as he could afford;
He's Bain,
The girls know his name,
Drinking and wenching and smiting in the name of the lord.

The town was in danger,
When along came a stranger,
To give hope where there was none before;
With a mighty plan,
And his merry band,
All smiting in the name of the lord.

He's Bain,
No need to explain,
Doing all the talking at the end of his sword;
Oh, Bain,
Splatter them brains,
Chopping and bopping and smiting in the name of the lord.

The townspeople cheered,
When the smoke had cleared,
Not only cheered, they roared;
Because mighty Bain,
Was the victor again,
Smiting in the name of the lord.

He's Bain,
Repeat the refrain,
He's the white haired fella all the girls adored;
He's Bain,
Big bad Bain,
Rambling and gambling, chewing and spewing, chopping in the name of the lord.

“Quick like a bunny?” Durin exclaimed. Jace just shook his head. The celebrating townspeople kept the adventurers up late, singing the ballad of Bain more than once. Bain, feeling like quite the hero, led the singing from a table in the tavern, swinging his beer mug and sloshing beer on patrons until he finally passed out.

The next day, the group returned to Thatton. As soon as they arrived, late in the evening, Jace hopped out of the wagon and headed to his temple, carrying a large sack. When he came out, he was smiling.

“I know that smile,” Durin moaned. “You just did something creepy.”

Domingo sat in his chamber, watching Tiana brush her long,

dark hair, when a servant came in carrying a box. The stench was overpowering.

“Get that out of here!” Domingo yelled.

“It is addressed to you, my lord,” the slave squeaked, cowering. Tiana seemed oblivious to the entire situation. Domingo rose and stalked over to the box. It stank of decay and there was a scroll attached to the box. Domingo unrolled the scroll, noticing green goo on parts of it.

At the top was written: “You morons just wasted time. You will fail. P.D.” Domingo recognized it as the scroll he’d left in the booger man trap. The P.D. was crossed out and, beneath it, in a rough scrawl, was written: “Returning a favour to his lordship - The Rebellion.”

Domingo opened the box, his hands already shaking with anger. The box fell apart and five rotting heads, still recognizable as the Five Desperadoes, rolled onto the floor. Domingo screamed in rage. Tiana continued brushing her hair.

Chapter 17 - Come Together

Big Willy urged his tired mount to the fastest pace it could take. Rain poured down, somehow making its way through his raincloak to soak his hair. He regretted his harsh words with Carli, but even more, he regretted the cowardice that made him hold back when she left. He knew that the time had come - knew it and was afraid.

A flash of lightning lit the area, showing Big Willy a line of men strung across the road. Thunder rumbled across the sky as he reined in his mount and dismounted. He reached to his side and unlimbered his weapon; the chain rattled as he let it pay out. Normally used by cavalry, designed to break the legs of a running horse, the felarm was a devastating weapon - in the right hands.

“Lord Domingo sends his regards,” one of the men called. Big Willy tightened his grip on the felarm’s handle and trotted forward. “You shall not pass,” the guard stated.

Big Willy raised his arm, swinging the barbed lengths of steel across in front of him. The vicious weapon tore into the flesh of three of the men; two dropped instantly, their mangled throats spewing their lifeblood onto the rainsoaked ground. The third, his armour and chest torn asunder, screamed, a high-pitched scream of agony. What followed was not a battle, but a slaughter. Big Willy, taller than most humans, almost of Barbarian stature, proved more

than the motley crew of bravos could handle. After the carnage ended, Big Willy stood, looking down at the lifeless bodies.

“If the rulers weren’t out of alignment, you’d be at home, on your farms,” Big Willy said quietly. No one could have said if it was only rain running down his cheeks.

Carli woke suddenly. She lay still, her eyes darting about, ensuring that she wasn’t strapped to the table. Her body trembled; she grew angry, angry at her own supposed weakness.

“What’s wrong?” Bain asked, rolling over to face her.

“Just a dream,” Carli answered.

“Tell me?” Bain asked. Carli shook her head. “Does it have to do with the scars on your back?”

“You don’t want to know,” Carli stated, hoping to end the conversation.

“Tell me,” Bain insisted.

“Back when Black Pete first came to power,” Carli began, “I was in the Royal Guard. We formed the core of Lord Zev’s bodyguard. I was the best, still am, but I made the mistake of proving that to Black Pete.

“Him, a Lord, and I still planted my point at his throat. At the time, he acted like it was a good thing but, that night, I was taken from my room. I fought, you can believe that.” Carli stated. Bain put his hand on her shoulder, gently. Her skin was cold to the touch.

“I struggled, but I was tied, spread eagled, across a table. My wrists were bound to the table legs, my ankles to posts beyond the table. It supported my body, but my legs were free. I heard Black Pete tell his men that I was there for their amusement.”

“You mean...?” Bain asked, feeling anger grow.

“For three days, I was beaten, whipped and raped. I don’t know how many men fucked me, I was hooded the whole time. I only know that, on the third night, my bonds were cut. I was carried for a while, passing in and out of consciousness. Then I felt myself

falling.

“When I awoke, I was in the Glass Dungeon. I found myself surrounded by men, looking at me with *that* look. Then they were falling back, pushed away by a woman, smaller than me. You should have *seen* her, Bain. She was a leader; you could tell by how she stood, how she spoke, everything. She and a group of others took me in and protected me.

“Me, a member of the Royal Guard, protected like a schoolgirl. I was ashamed. I ate what they gave me and built up my strength as fast as I could. They had an Elven sorcerer - he healed as much of my wounds as he could. A few days later, I left them. I found a way out of the Glass Dungeon. It was a lot easier than I had expected.

“I only found out recently, from what Jace said, that I’d been with Karen Del Sienta,” Carli said, then lapsed into silence. Beside her, she could hear Bain breathing heavily. She touched his arm.

“Domingo will die, screaming,” Bain said.

“Get that out of your mind, Bain,” Carli exclaimed. “I’ve seen you fight - you can’t beat him.” Bain stood and drew his sword.

“I will kill Peter Domingo. I swear it in the name of the Lord!”

Strack knelt to study the muddy trail. The rain was doing him no good, but he was still reasonably certain that the rebels were somewhere close by. He glanced around, wary as always. Once he’d renounced Lord Zev, he was sure that he’d be killed. More than once, his wariness had been the only thing that saved him.

Strack stared at the ground as an arrow seemed to appear magically between his fingers. He moved slowly, standing and spreading his arms wide.

“How long were you planning to follow us?” a voice asked with a thick accent.

“Until I can join up with you,” Strack replied, not moving. His eyes searched the darkness, striving to see the unknown attacker. Suddenly, a figure seemed to appear out of the shadows.

“Why?” the figure asked, storing his elven bow in a waterproof

case.

“You’re fighting against Black Pete,” Strack explained. “I’m fighting against Morloth.”

“Morloth?” the figure asked.

“Domingo’s undead controlling lizard man lackey,” Strack snapped.

“Nice to put a name to the face,” the figure drawled. “You might as well get up.”

“Am I in?” Strack queried.

“Do you follow Cassandra?” the figure retorted.

“I do now,” Strack said.

“Yeah, you’re in,” Jace nodded.

Lord Aaron Del Sienta surveyed the ground ahead. Orderly rows of tents, interspersed with clear areas, stretched for as far as the eye could see. The sounds of labour came faintly to his ears. Soon, the army would reach the river, then on to the capital.

Each tent marked the location of a lord of the island. Not one had hesitated to join the march to defeat Zev and Domingo. Lord Bob, second in command, rode up, his silver plate armour glittering in the sun.

“We can beat the army that Domingo commands,” Bob said. “Our men are as prepared as we can make them. But we don’t have the might to storm the castle and bring Zev out.”

“My daughter had a cause,” Del Sienta replied. “Others have taken it up. Ziggle Bob says that a band of rebels, no more than ten, will deal with Domingo and open the castle gates.”

“And you believe it?”

“I met them, it seems like ages ago now. And I’ve heard tales of their exploits.

“Jace Viriux, assassin monk, astounding archer and practitioner of dread magics. Gunivere, sorcerer and former carrier of the blade that Domingo fears. Durin, crusader, strong fighter and healer. Bain, warrior, reknowned throughout the land,” Del Sienta listed.

“Four?” Bob asked.

“I wasn’t finished,” Del Sienta chided. “Big Willy, berserker, out of the field for a while, but still a doughty fighter. Carli, former captain of the royal guard. Ellis, a retired Newport Ranger.”

“By the gods!” Bob swore. “A Newport Ranger?” Del Sienta nodded.

“Lord Strack, out of the far west, a veteran campaigner with a score to settle,” Del Sienta concluded.

“How do you know so much?” Bob asked.

“Ziggle Bob is quite interested in the result of the coming battle. You know how Sages can be. He has vouchsafed me quite a bit of information. We need only march to the capital and defeat Zev’s army. The band of adventurers will do the rest.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t share your optimism,” Bob drawled. Del Sienta chuckled.

Bain held Carli back with both hands as Strack sat up, wiping a trickle of blood from his mouth. Carli strove to shake Bain off.

“He’s responsible for the massacre at Thin Fjord,” Carli yelled.

“And how many people did Bain kill?” Jace asked quietly. “He was a patrolman for Zev, remember?”

“It’s *not* the same,” Carli said. She shook free of Bain and strode toward Strack. He stood, hands at his sides.

“Go ahead, if it makes you feel better,” Strack said. “Nothing matters to me but Morloth.” Carli drew back her fist. Jace stepped in front of her. He stared at her, eyes glittering in the fitful light of a flickering torch.

“You want what he wants - revenge. We can’t do it alone. *You* can’t do it alone,” Jace said, words stabbing like knives. “You get as angry as you like. You just keep your hands off my followers.”

“Chill out, Carli,” Bain said, pulling on her arm.

“Isn’t our enemy Black Pete?” Gunivere put in.

“Is there any food left?” Durin queried. Everyone turned to stare at him. Carli tried not to laugh, but it burst out of her. Bain joined

in, roaring out in mirth. Jace, too, started to grin. Gunivere fell down, holding his stomach as he chortled. Strack grinned, then laughed as well.

As day broke, Big Willy arrived in the capital. He headed for a tavern, looking for a cheap place to stay. As he rode up the street, a sign swinging in the breeze caught his eye. It showed a group of people silhouetted by the sun. The name across the bottom read “Travellers’ Rest”. Big Willy nodded and headed for the tavern. As he drew closer, the doors flew open and a barbarian flew out, backwards, to land in the street. Big Willy gaped.

“Hank!” Big Willy cried as the barbarian sat up.

“Big Willy, you ugly son of a bitch, how are you?” Hank yelled, running toward the dismounting Big Willy.

“I’m a fool is how I am,” Big Willy said ruefully. “I let Carli take off on her own.”

“No problem,” Hank grinned. “Come on in. Stableboy!” Hank yelled, “come get this horse.” Hank steered Big Willy into the tavern.

“Zalthon’s drunken breath, look at that!” Carli exclaimed, jumping up. “Big Willy!” He could barely hear her over the singing. The entire tavern was singing the Ballad Of Bain. Standing on a table in the centre, leading them on, was Bain himself.

“One more time,” Bain yelled as the song ended. Carli strode over and punched him in the thigh.

“Get down off there, you great oaf. I want you to meet someone,” Carli shouted.

“I get down in the name of the lord,” Bain shouted. The tavern patrons cheered.

“Bain,” Carli said, grabbing his arm possessively, “this is Big Willy. I knew you’d come,” she said to Big Willy. Hank thrust four full flagons into the centre of the group.

“Enough talk. Drink!” Hank commanded.

Zev stared over the battlements as his army prepared to march out. It was just a minor annoyance. Nothing to worry about, or so his advisor said. He picked up his broom and turned back inside.

“Did you hear?” Gunivere asked as the group settled down to breakfast. “There’s an army coming up from the south.”

“Del Sienta,” Hank nodded. “This is it.”

“So, how do we get in?” Durin asked.

“Why not just walk in the front gates?” Jace queried.

“You have a plan,” Bain said. Jace nodded.

As the sun sank slowly in the west, the band huddled behind a convenient building. Jace had explained his idea to them. They’d spent the rest of the day arguing it out and refining it. It was time to put it into action. Most of the defenders were out in the field, marching toward Del Sienta’s army.

Durin reached into his pack and pulled out the grab bag he’d bought from Gunda so long ago. He reached in and pulled out a small oval, about ten centimetres long. It had small fins at one end and was orange with black stripes. In fine letters along the side were written the words ‘tiger bomb’. Durin looked at it askance. Jace nodded, making throwing motions. Durin stepped out and threw the item toward the main gates.

It streaked away from his hand with a loud descending whistling sound. It struck the ground with a mighty crash and bright flash. Guardsmen flew through the air, knocked off their feet by the blast. Out of the blast leaped several huge catlike creatures, all orange with black stripes and white bellies.

The tigers attacked the guards, rending them with sharp claws and biting them with razor sharp teeth. The guards, demoralized, fled, leaving the gate unguarded.

“Step one - complete,” Jace said.

“I need more of those,” Durin said greedily. Carli stepped out of concealment and strode toward the gate. The others followed, Bain

leading the pack. At the gates was their next obstacle - the portcullis was down.

“Bain! Big Willy! Let’s give this the old heave ho,” Hank said. The three bent down and gripped the bars firmly.

“One,” Hank grunted.

“Two,” Big Willy gasped.

“Three, in the name of the lord!” Bain shouted. The three heaved and the portcullis rumbled up. The others hurried under. Gunivere found the lever to lock it up and pulled it. After the three had joined the party, the portcullis fell down with a crash. They all whirled about to see Jace by the lever.

“This is it,” Jace said. “No one gets in, no one gets out. Durin nodded, then set about cutting the ropes to the portcullis’ counterweights. “It ends tonight. Everyone is in here.”

“Morloth,” Strack growled.

“Tiana,” Gunivere snarled.

“Zev,” Big Willy hissed.

“Black Pete!” Bain shouted.

“He’s mine,” Jace said.

“As long as he dies screaming,” Bain stated. “He has to die screaming.”

“One of us gets him,” Gunivere said. “No matter what, he dies. Whatever it takes.” He held out his hand. One by one, the others added their hands to the stack.

“One of us gets him,” Jace said. The others nodded.

“It’ll take more than you’ve got!” someone shouted. Hank flew backward and hit the wall. He hung there, pinned by a ballista bolt. “Stick around, Hank,” the voice yelled, then laughed.

“Where is he?” Jace shouted.

“I know that voice,” Gunivere yelled.

“I call you out in the mmmph,” Bain started. Carli covered his mouth with her hand.

“That’s what he *wants*, fool,” she whispered. “You aren’t alone; what makes you think *he* is?”

“Guards coming,” Gunivere said. He transformed to falcon and flew into the night.

“Cloak of darkness,” Jace said, then stepped back into a billowing cloud of shadow. Strack felt an arm around his throat as Jace pulled him backward. As the guards closed in, Durin stepped forward.

“Blaze of glory,” he shouted. His sword flared, as bright as the sun. The guards, taken by surprise, were momentarily blinded. Durin ran through the guards and up a staircase. Bain drew his bastard sword and waded into the blinded guards, smiting left and right. Big Willy swung his felarm, wreaking destruction with every swipe of the chain. Carli and Ellis darted about, stabbing with precision, but, all too soon, the four were overpowered.

Domingo walked down the stairs slowly, his dark eyes glittering malevolently. Behind him, head held high, wearing a high necked gown, came Tiana. Morloth followed both, moving in his curious, shuffling gait, tail swishing back and forth.

“You’re all trapped,” Domingo stated. “And your friends have deserted you. We’ll hunt them down - or better yet...” With a gesture to the guards, Domingo turned away toward an archway. The guards bore their struggling prisoners along.

“Playtime,” Tiana giggled.

Bob scanned the fields below the rise, the site of the coming battle. Zev’s forces’ fires were scattered, disorder reigning in their camps. Each fire was surrounded by a knot of men, or at least bipedal forms. Bob expected that Zev’s army would contain other races, suborned by Domingo’s evil. In contrast, looking at Del Sienta’s encampment, the fires were orderly. The men were bedded down, not carousing until late into the evening. Each one held a secret score in his heart, ready to carve it out of the enemy’s hide on the morrow.

“Quite the contrast,” Del Sienta said, walking up behind Bob.

“How do they expect to win?” Bob mused.

“They’re used to fear doing their job for them. After all, they’ve been controlling the peasants that way for months.”

“They’re in for a shock,” Bob noted.

“True. They’re not used to anyone resisting. But I don’t expect it to be an easy battle, nor should you,” Del Sienta admonished.

“If these rebels of yours fail, it will all be pointless anyway,” Bob retorted. Del Sienta nodded gravely.

Jace peered over the railing of the second floor walkway carefully. Below, in the main dining hall, Domingo was overseeing the tying of his captives. A ring of guards lined the wall, standing about two metres apart. Each one held a loaded and cocked crossbow.

Jace looked at the prisoners intently. Big Willy and Ellis had struggled the most and both had been knocked unconscious. Bain was bleeding from a shallow cut on his forehead. Carli seemed almost in a trance, a look of horror frozen on her features.

“I have an advantage,” Domingo said, speaking to Bain and Carli. “Your friends are sure to attempt a rescue. And when they do,” Domingo made a slicing motion across his throat.

“You’re gonna die - screaming,” Bain said.

“Brave words from one tied and beaten,” Morloth hissed. Above, on the balcony, Strack stiffened. He peered through a hole in the ornate lattice girding the upper deck. Almost directly below, Morloth stood, intent on the prisoners.

“I can take him,” Strack whispered, attempting to rise. Jace pulled him back and away from the balcony, into a vacant sitting room.

“You *can’t* take him,” Jace growled. “Not fast enough, anyway. And Domingo would get away.”

“But I’m after Morloth,” Strack insisted.

“We all swore to get Domingo, whatever it takes, remember?” Jace prodded. “There’s nowhere to run; the gate is closed. Put your thirst for vengeance aside - until Domingo is dead.” Jace stared at

Strack, who looked defiant for a moment, then nodded.

“Whatever it takes,” Strack agreed. “Now, what?”

“We wait,” Jace said.

Durin strode through the castle, stomping his boots in an effort to attract attention. All that came to him was echoes.

“Bain!” Durin snorted. “What about the ballad of *Durin*?”

“You mean ‘rambling and gambling, chewing and spewing, chopping in the name of the lord’?” a guard asked, stepping out to block Durin’s path.

“Argh! I hate that song!” Durin cried, drawing his sword and charging. The guard parried Durin’s swing, answering it with a quick thrust, meant to end the battle. Durin blocked the stab with his buckler and answered it with a vicious riposte. The guard leaped back, Durin’s sword barely missing him. The two circled, both now wary of the other’s skill.

“The townspeople cheered, when the smoke had cleared, not only cheered, they roared; Because mighty Bain was the victor again, Smiting in the name of the lord,” the guard taunted.

“Stop singing that!” Durin shouted, his face turning red.

“He’s Bain, I’ll say it again, With a little fat buddy that we all ignored; Yeah, Bain, Repeat the refrain, Smiting in the name of the lord!” The guard shouted.

“That isn’t a verse!” Durin shouted. “I’ll kill you!” He cried, charging into the guard. The guard, unprepared for the speed that Durin possessed, was caught off guard. Both fell to the ground, Durin on top, beating the guard about the head and shoulders with the pommel of his sword. After a moment, Durin stood and sheathed his sword. He bent and wiped his bloody hands on the motionless guard’s tunic.

“Who’s singing now?” Durin snarled, kicking the corpse.

Gunivere perched on the rafters above the dining hall, falcon’s eyes taking in the scene below. Almost all the party members were

in position. Only Durin was missing. Then Gunivere caught sight of the diminutive dwarf creeping up to an open doorway. He spread his wings and glided silently across the room to where Jace and Strack were hiding, hoping that the enemy below didn't see him. He hopped across the floor, then transformed.

"Durin's here," Gunivere said.

"So, what now?" Strack asked.

"Now," Jace grinned, "we create a diversion. I think freeing Bain ought to be a good start."

"He'll detect magic," Gunivere pointed out.

"No magic required," Jace replied, taking out his elven bow. He nocked an arrow and prepared to stand and fire. "From concealment, wreaking havoc, I call upon you for aid, Cassandra," Jace whispered. He stood and let the arrow fly.

As the first light of dawn stretched shadow fingers across the fields, the two armies formed up for the first charge. To his surprise, Bob saw only humans in the opposing force. He'd expected at least a few lizard men and goblins. Del Sienta rode up and down the line, speaking to soldiers as he rode. The rising sun, coming up on his right, fully lit the field below. With a cry, the northern force charged, men running out across the open plain, drawing weapons.

The southerners formed neat ranks and began moving forward, starting at a walk and slowly accelerating. Not one spoke or made any more noise than necessary. Officers marched behind the troops, muttering terse commands to keep the army in formation. Del Sienta and Bob rode at the rear, with the rest of the horsemen.

"Out, weapons," Del Sienta called. Up and down the line, officers relayed the command. Almost as one, the southerners drew their weapons. The sunlight flashed off the bright steel.

"Charge!" Del Sienta yelled. All the southern soldiers commenced running and yelling. The northerners were shocked by the sudden noise. Moments later, the two forces met in a clash of steel

and a crush of bodies.

Jace's arrow thudded into the post where Bain's hands were tied. The rope parted and Bain sat up, grabbing the closest guard and reaching for the guard's dagger. Strack leaped over the railing, aiming for Morloth. Gunivere raced around the balcony to descend the far stairs, blocking Tiana's attempted escape. Durin thudded down the near stairs, launching himself toward the nearest guard. Jace calmly put his bow away and moved to follow Durin. His foot brushed something. He looked down to see what it was.

"Hold!" Domingo yelled. His shout caused a momentary halt. He stood, dagger in hand, poised over Carli's throat.

"Drop your weapons," Domingo commanded. Bain dropped the dagger he'd used to free himself as he slowly stood. Durin sheathed his sword, as close to relinquishing the weapon as he'd get. Gunivere leaned his staff against the stairs' railing, then crossed his arms. Strack's sword clattered to the floor. Morloth hissed at him.

"Drop it," Domingo said, looking at Jace at the top of the stairs. Jace started to descend, his staff held ready. Domingo pushed the dagger down, causing Carli to wince.

"You can't win," Domingo sneered. "Drop it, or she dies."

"Come on, Jace," Bain said, his eyes on the dagger at Carli's throat.

"No," Jace said, coming to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

"He's gonna *kill* her," Durin insisted.

"Whatever it takes, Jace!" Carli yelled.

"Carli!" Bain exclaimed.

"This is your last chance," Domingo said calmly. Jace tightened his grip. "You're outnumbered. No one has to die."

"You do," Bain growled. Jace lashed out with his staff, felling a guard. Domingo frowned. Bain looked into Carli's eyes and time seemed to stand still. "Whatever it takes," Bain whispered.

"You should have listened," Domingo said. He drove the dagger

down, through Carli's throat. Blood welled up and over his hand.
"No!" Bain yelled.

After the initial clash, the battle swiftly turned in Del Sienta's favour. As he had predicted, the northerners were unprepared for resistance and lacked the skill to deal with a trained fighting force. They were forced back and Bob smiled, already anticipating the surrender.

Suddenly, several of the southerners were flung aside. Bob saw a figure, twice the size of a man, charging into the thick of the battle. Out from the hills poured the northerners' reserves, goblins and ogres, drawn to the evil and ready to fight.

"Form up!" Del Sienta ordered. The assembled lords dropped visors and couched lances, preparing for their first charge. The southerners fell back before the onslaught of fresh troops. "Charge!" Del Sienta shouted. The mounted warriors rode forward into the fray.

Strack dove for his sword, ducking the swing of Morloth's tail. Gunivere caught up his staff and stood ready for Tiana's first move. Durin eyed each guard in turn, daring them to make a move on him. Big Willy stared at the dagger's hilt standing out from Carli's throat. Bain slumped, seemingly defeated. Jace put a finger to his lips and tapped them, shaking his head.

"That wasn't nice," Jace said.

"I mean what I say," Domingo said, wiping his bloody hand on his cloak. "Look around; you're surrounded by armed guards with loaded crossbows. What part of this don't you understand? You've *lost!*"

"I'm sure it looks that way," Jace said, "but, I ask you, what do you-"

"What is the meaning of this?" a voice cried. Everyone looked up to see Zev standing on the balcony, shaking his broom at the assemblage.

“Damn!” Jace swore quietly. Zev had disturbed the beginnings of a carefully set up tableau. Jace would have to fix it - quickly.

“I’ve captured the rebel leaders,” Domingo said.

“You sure have,” Jace shouted. Everyone looked at him. “And the worst of them all is that short, fat dwarf over there.” Jace pointed with his staff. As he hoped, everyone’s eyes turned toward Durin. Durin drew his sword quickly. As he did, the rebels closed their eyes.

“Blaze of glory!” Durin shouted. His sword flared, light bursting forth in a brilliant white glare. The guards, all looking at the supposed ‘rebel leader’, were temporarily blinded.

Big Willy strove mightily and snapped his bonds. He heaved his bulk off the table and charged for the stairs, one thought on his mind: kill Zev. Gunivere turned and ran up the stairs, followed by Tiana, insane laughter cackling from her throat. Durin, tempted to attack the guards, reluctantly retreated to the balcony with the others. Strack fled, in seeming terror, from a hissing and spitting Morloth. Jace grabbed Bain’s arm and pulled him up the stairs. Domingo, blinking, shouted and followed, Ellis hot on his heels. Bain reached into his pocket and pulled out the troll statuette he’d been carrying for so long. He read the word written on the bottom and tossed it toward the milling guards, just recovering from the bright flash. Two trolls appeared, summoned by the magic of the item. They set upon the guards, pummeling and crushing man and armour alike. One picked up one of the tables and started using it to bash at the panicked guards. Zev ran for the throne room, pursued by Big Willy. The others followed, attacker and defender alike fleeing the destruction below.

Once there, Big Willy caught up with Zev. The big man eyed the so-called king with disdain. Zev lashed out with his broom, striking Big Willy on the head. Big Willy grabbed the broom and snapped it in half. He threw away the bristles and held the shaft, the jagged, broken end pointing toward Zev.

“It’s time to clean house,” Big Willy yelled, driving the shaft

into Zev's chest. Zev grabbed the shaft and sank to his knees. He stared at the shaft accusingly.

"Bobbie, how could you?" he asked, then fell over dead.

The southern army fell back before the fresh goblin and ogre troops. It was not a rout, but an orderly retreat. The lords, mounted on horseback, burst through the retreating southern line to clash with the northern foes.

The initial charge against the northern shock troops took its toll on both sides. The lords had aimed for ogres, determined to take the large foes out quickly. Unfortunately, an ogre was almost an even match for a mounted warrior in full plate armour. Almost half the lords who charged were either dead or, at the least, unhorsed. To their credit, almost all of the ogres were down.

The southern foot charged forward, striving to take advantage of the cavalry strike. The northern army, expecting victory with the reinforcements' arrival, were unprepared for the renewed southern charge. The line held, then wavered. Bob stood up in his stirrups and shouted across the battlefield.

"To me, for Del Sienta!" Bob cried. Troops rallied to his call, forming a wedge in the northern line.

Ellis put a hand on Big Willy's shoulder. Big Willy stepped back and looked around the throne room at the combatants remaining.

"I've done what I came to do," he said quietly. "You're finished, Black Pete. There's no puppet for you to use to gain your evil desires."

"We're not done yet," Domingo replied as more guards appeared in the doorway. Ellis and Big Willy moved to block the entrance, drawing their weapons.

"I owe you pain," Gunivere snarled, hefting his staff and staring at Tiana. "You whipped me for no reason other than your own sick pleasure."

“Oh, it was *so* good,” Tiana grinned. Gunivere lashed out with his staff. It struck Tiana’s head with a resounding crack. She smiled and stepped forward, drawing a dagger from within her robes. “Oh, hit me again,” she breathed, advancing.

“You sick bitch!” Gunivere yelled. The two traded blows, each dodging the other. Tiana’s scarf came loose, exposing the large, crude stitches fastening her head to her neck. “Undead!” Gunivere cried.

The northern forces, bolstered by the fresh troops, strove to break the wedge that Bob had driven into their midst. The goblins, weak creatures, more suited to sneak attacks, though dangerous in large numbers, sought to overwhelm the southerners through sheer mass. Five, six, sometimes even ten goblins would attack a single soldier from the southern army, piling onto the hapless fighter and bearing him down in a squirming mass of flailing limbs.

Del Sienta wheeled his horse around, lining up for a third charge. He waited for the other lords and horsemen to gather, then spurred his mount forward. Their hooves pounding the ground like thunder, the warhorses charged into the northern troops, widening the breach in the front.

An ogre struggled to its feet, shaking its head dazedly. It turned and found itself almost directly behind a lone horseman. It reached out and grabbed him, yanking him backwards off his horse and throwing him to the ground. goblins swarmed in, tackling the struggling armoured figure. The southern army pushed forward, not noticing the fall of one man in so large a battle.

Durin ran forward, already swinging his magic sword. He aided Gunivere, hacking at the gruesome parody of a woman that Tiana had become. Gunivere’s staff seemed to have little effect on the undead creature. He aimed a blow at her legs, hoping to knock her over. It succeeded. He used his staff to keep her from rising as he fumbled for a flask of oil. He pulled the cork with his teeth and

splashed the viscous liquid over Tiana's thrashing form.

"Jace!" Gunivere called. Jace responded as Gunivere knew he would, with a bolt of lightning from his fingertips. The energy ignited the oil and Tiana's body began to burn. Thick, greasy clouds of smoke billowed up as Durin chanted a spell to lay the soulless creature to rest at last.

"Augh!" Big Willy cried out, a swordblade protruding from his back. Durin leaped to fill the gap. Gunivere Moved to stand near the entrance, ready to lend a hand if one of the others should falter. Win or lose, the end was in sight and no one was going to interrupt.

All along the northern line, holes were appearing. Soon after, men started turning from battle. One minute, there was a huge battle raging, the next, a rout. The southern leaders struggled to keep their troops from pursuing the fleeing northerners; after the battle, the power of evil over the land would be broken and most of them would return to quiet peasant lives.

Del Sienta rode back to his tent; the soldiers returned, in groups and singly, to their billets. In a day, perhaps two, they'd disband and go home, knowing they'd done their part to free the island.

A commotion on the battlefield caused Del Sienta to wheel his horse about and return to the scene of the action; he recognized the silver plate. As he reined in his horse, a monk stood, shaking his head.

"It's too late," the monk said quietly. "The wounds were too great; I know of no healer who could have saved this one." Del Sienta dismounted and knelt by the body. It was almost unrecognizable.

"He was a good man," Del Sienta said. "He fought to rid the land of evil and now he's dead. He protected the people to the last. He will be missed." In other locations on the battlefield, similar scenes were being carried out as friends found other friends who would never walk away from the battle.

For every man who walked off the battlefield, nothing would

ever be the same. Whether they'd fought in many wars or had never fought before, a little part of each one died as they looked at the broken bodies strewn across the plain. Later on, minstrels would write songs about the battle, glorifying the southerners' victory, but no man that was present would ever join in the singing; most would quietly get up and leave when the songs began. Glory was the stuff of legends; sadness and emptiness were the trappings of reality.

Strack closed with Morloth, swinging his sword with a skill not expected by the lizard man. Morloth blocked each blow with his shield, striking back with a mace and with his tail.

"You fight well," Morloth hissed.

"Well enough," Strack grunted, trying a daring underhand swing. It connected, slicing a line across Morloth's midsection. The lizard man countered with a blow to the head. Strack ducked but the spiked club grazed the top of his head, opening shallow cuts across his hairline.

Morloth's swing, delivered with much force, put him off balance with his right side exposed. Strack swung in an overhand blow, cutting deeply into Morloth's side. The lizard man hissed but did not fall. Strack tossed his head, trying to get the blood out of his eyes. Though his head wounds were not serious, they were bleeding copiously.

Morloth sent a low blow Strack's way; it connected, tearing through armour and flesh to shatter Strack's knee. Strack staggered, struggling to stay upright. The stagger may have saved his life. As he lurched to the side, Morloth's overhand blow missed him. The mace struck the floor, spikes gouging grooves in the marble.

"I send you to Cassandra," Strack said, swinging a backhand attack toward the bent over lizard man. His sword bit deeply into Morloth's back, severing his spinal cord. The lizard man dropped, lifeless, to the floor.

“It hurts,” Strack said, falling to the floor beside the recumbent lizard man. “Wherever you are, Sslim, I hope you’re afraid.” Strack closed his eyes. It felt almost peaceful, lying there on the floor.

His blood began to pool under him, mixing with that of his fallen enemy. He saw a woman, almost naked, surrounded by others, almost as lovely, beckoning him. It seemed effortless to stand; he walked toward her. She held out her arms to him.

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” Strack asked.

Jace felt the presence of his goddess. He felt envious, for a moment, of Strack; he’d gone to be with her. Ellis’ cry brought him out of his reverie. The tough human had fallen, a guard’s sword through his groin. Jace winced.

What a horrible way to go, he thought. Gunivere stepped forward, filling the spot Ellis left open. He and Durin fought, side by side, defending the throne room. The guards’ attack slackened, then stopped. Gunivere and Durin remained wary, ready for any tricks. The guards’ attention, however, was on the three people left in the room. Durin and Gunivere turned to watch as well.

Jace stood, hands behind his back, holding something under his cloak.

Bain began stripping off his equipment. All his remaining gear fell to the floor, followed by his shirt.

“Lord Peter Domingo,” Bain said, bowing slightly.

“Warrior Bain,” Domingo answered, raising his fists.

“You’ll never beat us, Black Pete,” Bain scoffed, speaking plainly now that the formalities were over. He raised his arms and flexed his muscles. “I’m gonna pound you flat.”

“You rebel scum are too sure of yourselves. I’ll crush you all without even thinking twice.”

“Look around, Petey,” Bain taunted. “All your allies are dead and you’re real ugly,” Bain shouted, trying to bait Domingo into a rash act.

“I don’t think so,” Domingo replied. “*You’re* the last one.” Bain

assumed a fighter's crouch, his fists raised. Domingo slipped into a similar stance, smoothly.

Bain moved about, waiting for an opening. From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Jace gesturing. He lashed out, hoping to score the first hit. His fist struck Domingo's forearm. Domingo countered with a roundhouse blow that Bain ducked, replying with an uppercut that snapped Domingo's head back. Domingo appeared dazed and Bain swung again, a right cross this time. His fist connected, bursting Domingo's lip and knocking his gold tooth out.

"Tracherous dog," Domingo swore, spitting out blood, "but it does you no good, Ape. It was prophesied that I can only be killed by a dagger, a special dagger, and you don't have it."

Domingo swung, a straight shot from the shoulder. It hit Bain on his right cheek, rocking the big man. Domingo bored in, raining a flurry of blows on Bain, who blocked as best he could. The punishment took its toll and Bain fell to his knees, dazed. Domingo stepped back and looked at Jace.

"You're next," Domingo grinned. Bain, head bowed, looked up at Domingo, struggling to get the strength to stand. He remembered Carli, lying on the table. *Whatever it takes*, she had said.

"Nuh uh," Jace retorted. "I found something on the stairs that you might be interested in." Bain looked around. Jace's hand came out of his cloak. He tossed something toward Bain. It glittered in the light as it flew. Domingo's eyes grew big.

"No!" he shouted as Bain caught Termion's dagger. Bain thrust, ramming the dagger into Domingo's stomach.

"No," Domingo gasped in pain. Bain stood, pulling the dagger upward, slicing through Domingo's stomach and ribs.

"No," Domingo mouthed, blood drooling out of his mouth. Bain looked into his eyes.

"I gut you in the name of the lord," Bain said, pushing Domingo. By the time his body hit the floor, he was dead.

News seemed to travel faster than thought. No one bothered the four as they wearily walked out of the castle. Thankfully, someone had managed to raise the portcullis. They left, their task accomplished; though at a great cost.

Epilogue

Jace sat in a corner of the tavern in North Point, staring moodily into his elven wine. Gunivere sat across from him, staring into space. Bain dropped into a seat, a mug of ale clutched in each fist. A moment later, Durin joined the party, a heaping platter of food in his hands.

“So, now what?” Gunivere asked, breaking the silence.

“Pass the ketchup,” Durin grunted. Jace smiled sardonically.

“Are you guys leaving?” Bain asked. Durin nodded.

“I’m on my way home. I’ll have to book passage on another boat,” Durin grimaced, repressing a shudder. “It’s been too long. You guys are great, but I miss the company of other dwarves.”

“You’re actually going to get on another boat?” Gunivere exclaimed.

“I don’t think even Bain could throw him all the way across the ocean,” Jace drawled.

“I’m willing to try,” Bain stated. They all laughed. “What about you, Gunny?”

“I’ve been shipwrecked, captured, beaten, rescued, captured again, beaten, jailed, whipped, tortured and rescued again. I feel like the world’s bitch. I’m going to check into the guild and not come out again until I can kick some serious ass,” Gunivere stated.

“Let me know when you do,” Bain said. “By then I’ll probably be bored to death.”

“Jace?” Durin asked.

“Got your notebook ready?” Jace asked. Durin smiled, then patted his pockets, as if looking for something. “I’m heading off the island, too,” Jace said. “Cassandra commands that I found a branch of the church, so I’m going to find Sorana’s main temple and build on that site - after I destroy it.” The others stared at Jace.

“I said it before, and I’ll say it again - creepy,” Durin stated. “What about you, Bain?”

“Now that the island is back on track, I’ll go take over the land my father had. I want to start an academy for fighters to train. I’ve already squared it away with the local guild master,” Bain said. They all stood. Each shook hands with all the others. Gunivere, Durin and Jace started for the door.

“That’s it?” Bain asked.

“What did you expect?” Jace countered. “Some kind of song and dance, musical finale?”

“As a matter of fact,” Bain shouted. “One more time!” Minstrels started playing their instruments. Bain jumped up on a chair and started waving his hands. Everyone in the tavern began to sing The Ballad Of Bain. Durin rolled his eyes. Gunivere shook his head and grinned. Jace stepped back into the shadows and disappeared.

Durin and Gunivere left the tavern, expecting to find Jace on the street; he wasn’t there. They shook hands again, then went their separate ways.

As he walked, Durin kept expecting Jace to appear behind him and gobble something in Mushroom, but it never happened again.