



# Against the Cult of the Reptile God



Based on Dungeon Module N1:

*Against the Cult of the Reptile God* by Douglas Niles

Adapted for narrative from the role-playing game by

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**N1**  
**FOR ADVANCED**  
**D&D® GAME**

## Dungeon Module N1

### Against the Cult of the Reptile God

by Douglas Niles

AN ADVENTURE FOR CHARACTER LEVELS 1-3



*Terror by night! The village of Orlane is dying. Once a small and thriving community, Orlane has become a maze of locked doors and frightened faces. Strangers are shunned, trade has withered. Rumors flourish, growing wilder with each retelling. Terrified peasants flee their homes, abandoning their farms with no explanation. Others simply disappear . . .*

*No one seems to know the cause of the decay—why are there no clues? Who skulks through the twisted shadows of the night? Who or what is behind the doom that has overtaken the village? It will take a brave and skillful band of adventurers to solve the dark riddle of Orlane!*

*This module is designed for 4-7 characters of first through third levels. It includes a map of the village and a description of its buildings and occupants, an overland journey to a challenging underground adventure for especially brave (or foolhardy . . .) characters, and a list of pre-rolled first level characters.*



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### The Third Year of Our Lady's Freedom

Father Tabor, a servant of Merikka, to the holy fathers of our order and the ecclesiastical order of Hochoch.

In that many have already circulated reports of the things that have been accomplished among us in Orlane and the Gran March, it seemed right and proper, that having successfully brought these affairs to a satisfactory conclusion, to write an orderly account for you, most holy fathers, that you may be set at ease and see how I have faithfully discharged the commission you laid upon me and how the reputation of our Lady of the Changing Seasons has been restored.

#### **Myron and Bruin**

On the first of Harvester I searched our good city Hochoch and made all the usual inquiries to find those noble men which your grace had recommended to me, but I did not find them. Since time pressed, I made further inquiries in that area of our good city which is called "The Shingles," and through these efforts, I found men such as might suffice for the mission: One investigator and solver of crimes called Myron the Glamorer and his colleague Bruin. They came to me recommended by a certain lady of our parish who had once hired them to settle some matter regarding her previous husband.

Moreover, I sought a man who knew the Dim Forest and could provide us a safe escort all the way to Hookhill. The men at the Shingles recommended to me the young elvish tracker and hunter Felligan, a native of those dismal woods, a bowman and one who

knows those rangers that patrol the way between Hochoch and Hookhill. I retained him for the journey and explained my mission.

On the very day on which we were to set out I had the dubious pleasure of meeting the two investigators who were to accompany me and assist me in my task at Orlane. They arrived at the chapel an hour earlier than I expected. I offered them both tea while young Felligan finished purchasing a few last items in the Shingles and packed our supplies on our sturdy mule.

We small folk are fond of making light over the clumsy habits and comic dress of big folk, but I refrain from joining in those conversations, for the gods do not favor mockers. Therefore I shall content myself to relate only a description sufficient for you to gather some indication of the character of my companions. One fellow wore the pompous garments popular among the academics of Gran March and Keoland, men who consider themselves scholars and teachers. Unlike any professor or scholar I have ever known, this man completely concealed his face beneath black scarves which he kept tightly wrapped about his misshapen head. Only his squinting eyes peered through the wrappings. The strange mummy-like mask unnerved me. His voice grated unpleasantly, and he sniffed contemptuously as he spoke. He carried himself with an artificial, self-important air of the type that offends the sensibilities.

The other fellow, a great bear of a man, had a handsome, friendly face. His features betrayed no blood of the river people to whom he claimed kinship, and unlike the *Attloi* raftmen, he was tall of height, broad at the shoulders, and thick-limbed. He wore fine scale armor, carried a heavy shield secured to his back, and he bore an enormous two-handed sword strapped overtop it. He was full of smiles and laughter and set me at ease despite the presence of his strange companion.

They made an odd couple: The sniffing, mummy-wrapped wizard and the gentle giant.

The veiled wizard gestured toward me and said to his companion, "So this is our priest. I did not expect a half-size!"

"Father Tabor," I said stiffly as I poured them each a cup of tea. "And I'm not sure either of you are what I was expecting either. Which one of you is Myron the Glamorer, and which one of you is called Bruin?"

The big man swallowed the tea in a single go and answered, "I am Bruin, a son of the raftmen. My friend here would like to be called Myron the Glamorer, but everyone calls him Myron the Hideous." Bruin laughed at his own joke.

The masked man nodded awkwardly, somehow sipping at his tea despite the wrap of scarves concealing his face. "It's true," he admitted in a congested, muffled hiss, "I'm hideous." He hung his wrapped head rather pathetically.

"Tut-tut. Not so, but just as the gods made you," I consoled.

"Then the gods are sadistic," he snarled in retort.

Bruin slapped him on the back and said, "Beauty is only skin deep, but in the case of my friend here, ugly goes all the way to the bone."

### **Mission to Orlane**

These odd characters I hired to assist me on the mission to Orlane. I explained our objectives.

"Our priesthood has received disturbing rumors from the village of Orlane which lies on the new road to Gran March and Hookhill. Now as summer slips toward harvest and the festival season draws close, pilgrims will soon converge on the temple of Merikka which stands in that place. The church has elected to send an acolyte of her ladyship to investigate the situation and settle things before the festival begins.

"I am to travel to Orlane and, from there, on to Hookhill, to carry out a clerical mission. I bring the calculations for the new calendar cycle of sacrifices and fast days, plowing, planting, and harvesting before Celene waxes full and the festival is upon us. I am further instructed to look into matters at the temple of Merikka in Orlane and set them aright before the festival begins, and from there, on to Hookhill to discharge the same obligations in that place."

"What things are amiss that need be set right?" my hired men inquired of me.

I shrugged. "No one knows. That's our job to ascertain," I explained. "Some say that the waters of Orlane have been poisoned with a powerful numbing drug which leaves all who drink of it enchanted and under some witchery. Some say a sorcerer from the Vale of the Mage has moved to the Dim Forest

and now works his foul enchantments, casting spells from within those dark woods. Some say the people of Orlane have fallen under his enchantment. Whatever the case may be, we will find it out and set it aright with Merikka's help."

Only a few years ago, a group of knights and heroes from Gran March opened a small caravan track through the previously untraversed eastern edge of the Dim Forest. This road now connects the town of Hochoch with Gran March's thriving capital of Hookhill. The track cuts through a narrow finger of the forest that extends south toward the marshes. Merchants, traders, and travelers that brave the new road take precautions against the marauding creatures that haunt the dim world beneath the boughs. Ogres and goblins roam the forest, often in large and bloodthirsty bands. Only lucky or well-armed caravans can expect to make the journey in safety, so I did not much relish the thought of the journey.

"The truth is," I admitted, "I am afraid to travel alone through the Dim Forest, and the church has agreed to hire both of you as an escort for me. In addition, we have retained the services of a ranger, one of the young lads from the elves of the forest, to serve as our guide and to offer us his added protection. He is called Felligan, and even now, I have sent him to the Shingles to purchase a few last-minute things and load our mule for the journey."

"After the river docks," Bruin admitted, "Myron and I are grateful to find a paying customer with deep pockets!"

Myron agreed, "I have no hesitation about taking your money, but I do not care for clerics, nor do I believe in your gods. I believe in magic and the power of illusion. Real power is in the ability to manipulate perception. The gods are nothing more. The one who controls perceptions controls the gods."

I poured a second cup of tea for my philosophical guests and scolded, "I will ask you not to blaspheme."

Myron stiffened and sniffed a few times from beneath his scarves before offering in a conciliatory tone, "The job suits us well. As I understand it, we are to protect one stubby little priest from danger and assist him in his investigations. My companion, Big Bruin, will do the protecting. He is a warrior in whose veins flows the genuine blood of the Rhenn-folk, a fearsome fighter and loyal

friend, too simple for much guile or malice. I will do the investigating. I specialize in solving riddles, piecing together clues, and finding patterns. I dabble in the illusory arts, but my real talent involves revealing the obvious to the oblivious.”

### **Felligan and the Road to Orlane**

On the third day of the Harvester month, in the Common Year 573, the four of us and one sturdy-footed mule set out on the road for Orlane and the Gran March. I felt giddy with the joy of making pilgrimage to the shrine of my lady, for her temple in Orlane is widely regarded as one of the finest, and it draws devotees from afar. For all that, I had not yet had occasion to make the pilgrimage to Orlane where stands one of the few temples dedicated solely to the adoration of my lady. I wondered what shadow could have possibly settled over such a sacred house.

From Hochoch, we quickly crossed the Realstream at a shallow ford and followed the caravan track that winds along the south side of a narrow creek. This is a farmer’s road that passes through the Midwood Vale, into Gran March and the barony of Farvale. A few days beyond Orlane, it enters the Dim Forest. Felligan admitted that he has never travelled east of the Realstream before, but he did not anticipate any trouble before reaching the forest. Nor did I.



Several miles beyond Hochoch, we left cultivated lands behind. The plains stretched out before the eye, flat and grassy.

Occasionally, large cottonwoods grew along the stream, but in general, those plains are bare of trees.

Felligan remarked, "I have never acclimated to wide open spaces. I prefer bough and branch and the concealment of the forest." Except for his young, boyish face, the elf looked every bit the woodland ranger. His tattered, weather-stained, hooded cloak wrapped around a shirt of battered chain mail. A long sword swung at his side and a finely crafted elven long bow and full quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder. His fine features indicated a youngster by olven years, perhaps a century. More than twice my age, but by elvish years, a lad in the first strength of his teens.

A day from Hochoch we traversed fertile vineyards and orchards surrounding a small village of farmhouses, barns, and fenced pastures: Leilam's Orchard. I offered the farmsteaders the blessings of my lady. We stayed the night. I asked our host what news came from Orlane. He shook his head, "Strange things afoot there. People whisper about some evil in the town. Farms have been abandoned; crops left standing in the field, grapes left on the vine."

We passed unmolested through sparsely inhabited regions, encountering no one except the occasional shepherd. When we found wood to burn, we spent the warm summer nights around a small camp fire, telling tales and swapping anecdotes.

I would tolerate none of the belligerence of these *Attloi* raftmen concerning the gods. I quickly made it clear to my travelling companions that I am a serious priest, a real believer. I expect to be undisturbed during my prayers and devotions, and I tolerate no blasphemy. Despite my diminutive stature, I commanded their respect and quickly established myself as the authority over our small party of travelers. I reminded them, more than once, that they are my employees for the duration of the mission.

Big Rehnnee Bruin showed himself a kind man, quick to laugh and quick to take a jab. His affable and easy manner contradicts his alleged Rehnnee blood, as does his towering height and solid build. He enjoys telling jokes about the Rhenn-folk, which are all the funnier since he claims to be a son of the Rehnnee. He also enjoys telling jokes about priests and elves, and he has quite a lot of them. He says he has fought ogres before, and I believe him. Were I an ogre, I should not want to meet Bruin.



Myron puzzled me. I sensed that genuine goodness lies buried behind his wrappings and his awkward and repulsive manner. He is intelligent beyond reckoning and speaks with authority on every possible subject, but he speaks in such a way that one wishes he would not.

Presently we left the grassy plains and entered cultivated land. Here were prosperous farms surrounded by fields of grain. Here were pastures for cows and goats. Then, early on the fourth afternoon of the trip, a cluster of buildings and trees came into view. On a rise above the little village we saw the sacred grove which surrounds the stone walls of the temple. This was Orlane, a village of pioneers perched on the edge of civilized lands, a place of no great significance in the wide Flanaess but to me, a devotee of Merikka, a holy place indeed.

### **Nowell Graven the Dairyman**

We came upon a fine farm house and barn under the blessing of my lady. Several cows were to pasture and three girls played in the yard. They stopped their game to gawk at the group of strangers, and they seemed especially delighted to see me. Halflings are an uncommon sight in this part of Flanaess. I approached the children to speak a greeting, but an older sister rushed out from the house and hustled the girls inside before they could answer me. I called after her, saying, "Hello daughter. We are four travelers who have been four days from Hochoch, come here to offer blessings in the name of the Lady Merikka."



She closed the door behind her.

I shrugged to dismiss the rude reception, and we were about to turn away when her father, a man who introduced himself as Nowell Graven the dairyman, emerged from the barn. We spoke briefly, and I told him that I have come to deliver the calends and to offer blessings in the name of my lady. He reluctantly invited us in for water, tea, cheese, and a spot of brandy. He eyed Myron fearfully as we tied off our mule and shuffled into his home.

I found Nowell Graven a kindly Oeridian who lives well in a small comfortable if crowded home. The gods blessed Nowell with five daughters, a wife, and a mother-in-law, all under the same roof. Perhaps he would be glad for the company of men, but the wrapped and concealed face of Myron the mummy clearly disconcerted him. I made an attempt at diplomacy to assure our hosts that Myron is harmless but without any help from Myron's cold demeanor. Nowell Graven was and remains convinced, I think, that Myron is an evil magic user, perhaps the one from Vale of the Mage which has been rumored to be about.

I asked about poisoned waters at Orlane, but he knew nothing of any problems in the water supply.

"Strange things in Orlane. Some evil is afoot," he admitted. "People disappearing. Some disappear for a few days. They come back, but they don't never say a word about where they been. Others don't come back. Not at all. People is scared. Real scared. And you all shouldn't expect much welcome. Wouldn't have welcomed you myself if I didn't see for myself you're a true priest of Merikka. We are Merikka's folk here in Orlane. The whole lot of us here. People like yourself come from far away to visit her house here in Orlane."

It seemed that people had been vanishing in the night, leaving without warning, and then returning days later without explanation. Some did not return. The strange behavior created a climate of fear and suspicion. Everyone suspected everyone else of being involved in the conspiracy.

Myron suggested the farmers might be slipping away to engage in some shameful ceremony.

One of Nowell's daughters added a few words to the mystery. She said, "Mama says there is a witch about. Sometimes the milk is curdled before it leaves the cow's teats."

We thanked Master Graven for the information, and I offered a prayer and blessing on his farm, and I advised him about the upcoming calends. I asked for directions to the temple though the way was clear enough.

Back in the street, Myron sniffed contemptuously and said, "The idiot dairyman can scarcely distinguish between his heifers and the five women crowded into his house."

### **Constable Ruskadal**

Across the way from Nowell's place another farm house stood beside the road. A teenage girl churning butter saw us and ran into her house at our approach. We observed people inside the house watching us through the windows. I decided to offer their farm my lady's blessing too, but this time I suggested that my companions go on ahead into the village and find an inn and some place to stable our beast. I hoped that, without Myron's ghastly presence, I might find warmer receptions.

Myron sniffed, "Bruin and I will begin our investigation."

"At the closest ale and mead hall," Bruin added with a feigned tone of serious resolve. As my travelling companions made their way into the village proper, I knocked at the door of the farmhouse at hand. A man came to the door. He politely, quietly declined my offer of blessing. Clearly apprehensive, he told me not a word, carefully sidestepping all my inquiries.

A short bit further into the village brought me to the constable's office. This seemed like the first logical place to begin my investigation. I looked in and found three men hovering about. Nervously clasping his forehead, the leader introduced himself as Constable Grover Ruskadal. His companions looked like serious warriors. One Donovan Allard stood fully dressed in plate mail. The other two men, called Hulbar and Jarvis, were also well armed with scale mail, shields, longswords, and crossbows. They seemed prepared for trouble.

The constable acted in a manner unduly suspicious of my presence, and he asked many questions about our visit to Orlane. He would know how many had come with me and where we would be staying. He would know all about my mission. As village constable, I granted him the right to be nosey, but at the same time, until I learned more, I did not want to disclose my true objectives.

After the interrogation, I posed a few questions of my own. He dismissed my queries about a wizard from the Vale of the Mage and poisoned waters. He assured me that everything was in order and all business was as usual in Orlane. I asked him about the disappearances the dairyman Nowell Gravel had mentioned, and he explained that some people have moved on to other things.

“Not everyone is cut out for the frontier,” he said. Then he leaned down to my height and warned me in an ominous tone, “Don’t get involved in things that t’aint your business. You are a stranger and outsider. Be best for you to do your business and move on to Hookhill quick as you can.”

### **The Village Store**

I made my way to the village general store to replenish some supplies and see what I could learn. By consent of universal custom, the village store-keep is well-versed in all the latest gossip, news, and happenings, and always willing to share it with a paying customer. I found a fairly well-kept establishment with an assortment of farm implements and cooking utensils on the wide porch. The door stood open, and a well-painted sign depicted a pot, a plow, a sack, and a lantern hanging over all. The proprietors greeted me as I entered a room cluttered with everything one might need to stock the Orlane farmhouse. Mundane items such as cooking pots and sacks of meal were readily available but no weapons or armor.

“Welcome friend,” the storeowner said, pressing his right palm to his forehead—the same odd gesture with which the constable greeted me. “Sit down and have a drink before business,” he said slowly—a common ploy to loose the inhibitions of your potential customer. Methodically pouring a glass of wine for me, he indicated a place at a table in the center of the room. I thanked him and accepted his hospitality. His wife, a fair woman beclouded by a sour expression, watched suspiciously from beside the fireplace where she sat on a bench and mechanically brushed at her hair. The proprietor introduced himself, “I am Finla, and this is Mrs. Finla. This is our store and all our goods, the best assortment between Hochoch and Hookhill.”

“Well met,” I said, and introduced myself. Making conversation, I asked, “And have you any children?”

Mrs. Finla scowled, but Mr. Finla nodded, “Indeed we do. Two boys and daughter.”

“Two boys,” Mrs. Finla corrected. “Just two boys.”

“Yes,” Mr. Finla agreed, “Just two boys now.”

It seemed impolite to inquire further. Obviously, they had recently buried a daughter.

The wine surprised me. Taking the opportunity to quickly change the subject and dispel an awkward moment, I exclaimed, “This is a fine tasting vintage, among the best I have ever had.”

The storekeeper explained, “It’s a local vintage from the blessed grapes of Orlane. The proprietor of the Slumbering Serpent is our vintner.”

“And a fine one at that is he,” I exclaimed.

Before I could begin my line of questioning, the storeowner began his own interrogation. Not unlike the constable, he wanted to know my business, who travelled with me, how long we would stay in Orlane, and so forth. I kept my answers vague and elusive. Likewise, he in turn deflected my questions about affairs in Orlane. It soon became clear that I would receive no help from Mr. Finla, and unless I was going to buy something, I had worn out my welcome. I finished my glass of wine, purchased the few odd items I needed, and left the Finla’s to their shop-keeping.

### **The Golden Grain Inn**

While I dallied, Bruin followed his beer-finding instincts and led Myron and Felligan directly to a lodging-establishment called the Golden Grain Inn, the same lodging recommended to me by the town constable. I arrived an hour later. Carvings of sheaves of wheat decorated the eaves of the roof. The wood of the large lodging house was once nicely whitewashed but more recently the paint has been left to peel. A sign picturing a cluster of wheat and a pitcher of beer hung over the door.

I joined Bruin and Myron in the common room. Bruin had already gone soggy with beer. Myron explained Felligan’s absence, “I sent him out to scout the town and gather information. He’s a ranger after all.”

“That’s not his job,” I said somewhat crossly.

Bruin interrupted, explaining to me that the bar had both light and dark beer on tap. That sounded encouraging. Bertram Beswill,

the hefty proprietor, greeted me cheerfully and offered beer, wine, or brandy. I ordered a dark beer and joined my friends who had already taken a table. Beswill seemed friendly enough, asking us why we are in Orlane, and I was pleased to tell him about my mission to bring the calends to the chapel of Merikka. He listened with interest, and I got the impression that others in the room listened too.

The common room might have been a pleasant place except for the unfriendly clients, a dozen or so locals sitting in small clusters of twos and threes here and there. A dour atmosphere hung over the establishment. The patrons cast dark glances at us and looked away. Every attempt to make conversation with them failed

Before leaving our table, the innkeeper offered us the meal and rooms for the night, but no one else in the room said a word to us. The other patrons stared dully ahead but quickly looked away when any of us tried to speak with them. They sat alone in their little groups. No one spoke. The silence in the room created an awkward, eerie atmosphere not conducive to enjoying dinner.

Bruin remarked, "You would think they would offer a welcome or a greeting. It's weird."

Myron shrugged dismissively, took out a pipe, and packed it with tobacco while Bruin continued with his observations. The beer was not very good, and the prices were high. I wondered if there might be better accommodations elsewhere in town. Had Felligan been there, we might have left together to find a better option. Several hours later, when the ranger had not yet returned, we began to wonder if we might have to go out looking for him.

I made a few more attempts at conversation with the locals gathered in the common room. Bertram the innkeeper repeatedly asked if he could prepare rooms for us for the night, but I could not get so much as a kind word from any of his patrons. Myron remarked that they suffered under a mind-numbing enchantment. I agreed. Either that or some great fear hovered over them. I decided that I would rather sleep in the streets than stay in the Golden Grain. I wondered if perhaps we could find lodging among the servants of Merikka at the temple, but I preferred to make my debut there in the morning. I knew that the temple would be closing its gates soon.

### **The Ugly Child**

Myron smoked and played cards with me to pass the time while we waited for Felligan to return. His clay pipe protruded awkwardly from between his scarves and narrow lips. As the afternoon faded toward evening, I grew increasingly concerned for the elf lad. My eyes kept returning to the door, hoping to see him enter. Myron repeatedly prevailed at the cards. Bruin kept drinking and brooding in increasingly bad humor, glaring at the vacuous locals. Just to make conversation, I asked Myron, "How did you and Bruin become partners?"

Bruin replied for his colleague, "We aren't partners. I just can't get rid of him."

Myron offered his version of the relationship, "Bruin has all the natural intelligence of a shovel. I look after him."

Bruin finished his mug and declared with some slur to his words, "I will tell you the story."

Myron sniffed and wheezed an objection, but Bruin, who had been drinking quite a lot, spilled out the tale. He said, "Myron's mama was a woman from Ulek, or so we believe. The truth is that when she saw the misshapen and homely whelp that dropped from between her legs, with this warped skull and ugly goblin's face, she assumed he must be the son of a curse or an ogre's spawn."

Myron sniffed and added, "Perhaps a devil."

Bruin laughed, "He likes to think so, but he's no devil boy. Just butt-ugly. Who knows why? When his mama sees this ugly baby, she thinks she will leave him by the Lort. That's what they do. They leave them by the river. Let the river take them away. Well, that's when my grandpapa's raft comes down the river and my grandpapa hears the baby crying, and you have to know, my grandpapa is Rhennee, and we Rhenn-folk can never resist something free. If it's not nailed down, we'll take it. It's like a sacred duty."

"So you are brothers then?" I asked.

"No. He is my uncle!" the big man said with his great smile. He gave Myron a squeeze in his massive arms. The masked wizard grunted and wheezed as if Bruin's affectionate embrace would collapse his rib cage.

"But Myron is not a Rhennee name," I observed.

Myron explained, "When I was seven, Bruin's grandpapa sold me to a swineherd in exchange for a fat sow. The swineherd named me Myron. I do not know why. I followed pigs for a few years, and I worked in the kitchens of the Lord Engle's manor at Tringlee until I taught myself to read. That made me king of the imbeciles and they promoted me to manager of the estate. I saved money and purchased my freedom at the age of seventeen. Then I tried to return to the Rhennee."

Bruin picked up the story, "But we are a river people and we migrate. How will the homely child find his way home? He speaks Rhopan, and after many long journeys, up the rivers and down the rivers, he finally finds my family, but we don't want him back."

Myron snorted, "They didn't want you either, did they?"

Bruin nodded, "By then I was long gone. Left the rafts behind and was making a name for myself."

"Making a fonkin of yourself playing turoos," Myron put in. "By the time I found him, he was in a Sterich dungeon, and I had to pay his ransom."

Bruin shrugged, "That part's true. The Rhennee don't want me because I'm not Rhennee enough, and the other folk of the world don't want me cause I'm too Rhennee."

### **The Slumbering Serpent**

Felligan's sudden return cut the story short. By then, the sun had nearly set. The ranger said to us confidentially, "I feel we are not safe here. I have found another establishment, only a few doors down, where we will be more comfortable." We gladly consented to a change of venue. I paid the proprietor for the meals and the drinks; he protested our decision to leave. When I insisted, he regarded us coldly and suspiciously.

We took our mule from the stable and crossed a small bridge that passed over a stream which empties into a small lake. To the left stood a tall grove of elms that cast mysterious and enchanted shadows in the fading light of day. To the right side of the road we found an inn called the Slumbering Serpent, just across the way from the tall elms. A large, colorful sign pictured a red dragon with its head resting contentedly on its paws. A plume of smoke rose lazily from the serpent's nose and its eyes were closed in sleep. It was smaller and older than the Golden Grain. Several



beds of flowers brightened the front yard. A large, middle-aged woman lighting the lamps that flanked the front door looked up and saw us approaching. She bustled out to meet us, "Welcome, welcome!" Calling over her shoulder, she summoned her husband, "Ollwin! Guests are here!" I recognized the name as that of the esteemed vintner of Orlane.

Turning back to us, she said, "I'm Balba. Welcome to the Slumbering Serpent. Let me call my husband to stable your mule."

Balba and her husband Ollwin took us in and set us at ease. They attended to our needs, took care of our mule, and set out a meal. Not elegant in any sense, but the Slumbering Serpent offered a homey atmosphere which felt pleasant, unlike the cheerless Golden Grain Inn. The prices were better and the food reasonably good. Ollwin stoked up the three fireplaces in the common room. Eight customers drank at the main table. We took a smaller table while our hosts prepared rooms and served the meal.

Ollwin offered us a sample from his vat; the first glass was on the house. I recognized the vintage. My second glass of the day. "Isn't this the best wine you have ever tasted? These grapes grow in the shadow of the blessing of my lady's house!" I exclaimed to my companions. Myron sniffed and claimed he has tasted had better. Felligan praised it above the vintages of Celene, which was high praise indeed. While we sipped at our glasses, young Felligan told the tale of his scouting mission around the village and all that he had learned.

### **Felligan's Encounter with the Hermit**

"Across the way from this good house," the young elf said, "stands a stately grove of elms, and in its midst one finds a meandering path which winds its way to a little hermitage. I circled it about a few times before knocking at the door. A gray-bearded old man leaning on a gnarled wooden staff opened the door. 'An elf in Orlane!' he exclaimed, 'Knocking at my door! What business with me has the olven folk?'"

"The old hermit introduced himself as Ramne. He invited me into his home, a sparse and well-lived shack, stocked with numerous scrolls and tomes. He puttered about to scrape together some hospitality to offer to me, fussing over a tea kettle. I noted a magical ring on his finger, and a white weasel emerged from the folds of his robe to climb over his shoulders as he poured a cup of tea. He introduced the creature as his good friend 'Whiskers.'"

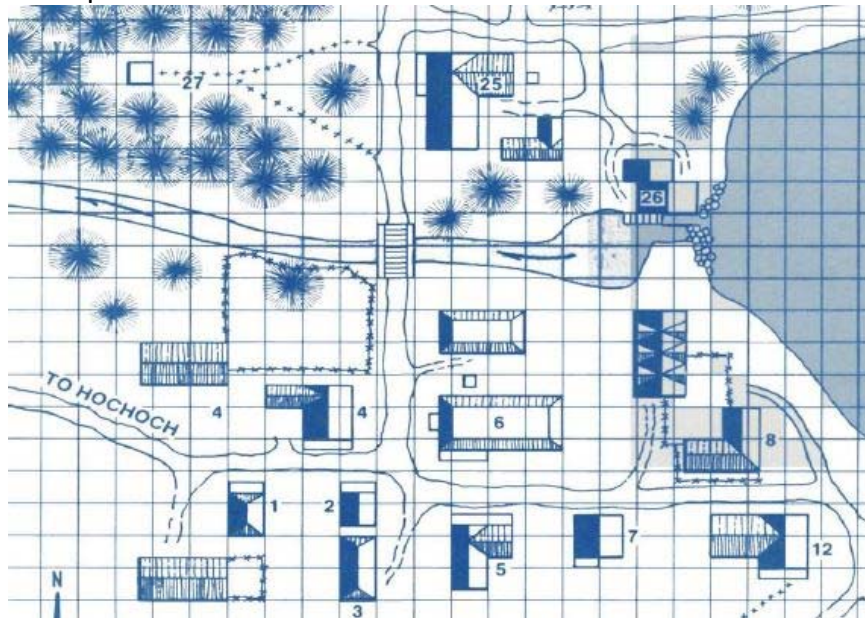
“A spellcaster!” Myron remarked confidently. “A spellcaster and his familiar. I once tried to keep a toad.”

“Perhaps he is the wizard who has come down from the Vale of the Mage!” I added.

Felligan shook his head. "I think not," he said. "Or if he is, he has not come recently, for this Ramne has lived a decade or more in his hermitage. He rarely goes out; his old legs tire quickly. The clutter of his hermitage looks to be ten years deep."

I nodded and asked, "What else did you learn from him?"

Felligan said, "I told him we had come from Hochoch in the employ of the church of Merikka, to which he replied, 'Then you have come to the right place. The people of Orlane are Merikka's folk.' He asked me where we intended to lodge, and I told him that we intended to take a room at the Golden Grain Inn. To that, he said emphatically, 'Not a good place for an elf. Not a good place for decent folk. Not a good place for a priest. You'll find it most inhospitable for outsiders.' He recommended that we relocate to this place, The Slumbering Serpent, and it seemed to me that he implied we stood in some danger if we stayed at the other place.



“The hermit shared a cup of some concoction resembling tea and spoke of matters of local interest, but he guarded his words carefully, unwilling to reveal too much. I asked him if he had heard any rumors of poisoned waters or a spellcaster from the Vale of the Mage at work, but he dismissed that speculation with

a wave of his hand. He said, 'Look to your own affairs and your own business. You'll find you have enough to keep you occupied in the temple of Merikka.'"

"Well that sounds ominous enough," I mused.

### **The Clayborne Family**

Felligan's tour of the town took him next across a fallow field to investigate an abandoned farm house and barn. He found the farmhouse recently boarded up, but the barn doors swung freely.

"One of the homes of the disappeared," I speculated. Felligan nodded and said, "One of several farms which ought to be prosperous, now left abandoned. But let me tell you of our neighbors, just across the way from here. I wrapped my cloak about me and stole up to the edge of the farmyard where two small children were at play. They did not see me approach. At this place all was in order and well maintained. The house was whitewashed. The barn looked clean. Goats were in a corral. One pen contains an immense pig.

"As I came around the corner of a shed, I took sight of a beautiful woman feeding chickens. This looked to me like no simple farmwife. She carried herself like a daughter of standing, like an olven maid, and I saw she wore a blade at her side. I watched her go into the house. As she closed the door behind her, I took note of a sign over the door of the home, a secret glyph recognized by all rangers of the Dim Forest. Pleased at my good fortune, I revealed my presence to the children and asked to meet their mother or father. My sudden approach frightened the children. They ran into the home, leaving me standing in the yard. A moment later the owner emerged.

"I offered him the clandestine greeting that the local rangers use, and he returned the greeting. He presented himself as Allen Clayborn; his lovely wife is called Marleke. He asked some questions to determine the validity of my claim, but he quickly recognized me as one of the folk and invited me into his home. He set out some soup and beverage, and I ate with the family.

"Allen and his wife are among the new farmers in Orlane. She is the daughter of a Keoish family; he a son of the Flanmen of Geoff and Gran March. They have retired from a life on the road. They have travelled broadly—as far as the Lortmils and the Ureks. They tell of adventures in the Lortmils and the eastern woods of the

Dim Forest. They possess a wealth of tales. I would enjoy the time to hear their stories in full. We discovered that we know several of the same people—elves and rangers of the Dim Forest, and Watchers from Hookhill.

“I asked about them about the hermit. Allen knows him only as the bedraggled man of the grove. I asked about strange things afoot in Orlane. He told of a family up the road that disappeared for ten days and then reappeared with no explanation. People thought they were dead. His wife believes something evil is at work in Orlane. People are frightened, but they know little of what is happening to their neighbors. Allen is resolved to defend his home, no matter what the case may be, and should we need to call upon him, he is at the ready.”

“You did well on your little stroll, scoring a cup of tea, a homecooked meal and a potential ally,” I remarked. I was impressed with how much the elf’s progress.

Bruin asked for more wine, Myron occupied himself with unwrapping and rewrapping his scarves, and Felligan told on.

### **Enchanted Neighbors**

“Taking my leave of the Clayborne home,” the elf continued, “I made my way along the north side of the lake toward the temple. I had to pass through the farmyards of Clayborne’s neighbors. A shabby farmhouse and barn indicated a lack of upkeep. The residence gave the impression that it has seen much use but, as of late, has not been attended. A small infant played next to the house. Chickens and roosters strut about in the yard. A family lives there. I slipped into the barn unseen. They have large stores of barley, wheat, and corn in the barn and a small vineyard west of the house, lush with ripe grapes, spoiling on the vine, unharvested.

“A man and his son emerged from the house, and I introduced myself and tried to ask them about their affairs, but the conversation quickly faltered. They seemed to be slow-witted or entranced. I had to repeat questions. They did not seem to hear me. I bid them goodnight.

### **The Pig Farmer’s Welcome**

“I travelled down the hill and back toward the village, under the shadow of Merikka’s temple. I came upon a foul-smelling farm of

hog and poultry, and I thought it strange to have such a foul-smelling farm so close to a temple. A teenage boy watched from the porch of the house. As I approached, he hurried inside and sent out his father. I approached to greet the farmer. The man took up a crossbow and leveled it at me. The son appeared again, this time in a window of the house with a second crossbow trained on me. I thought that perhaps they do not like olvenkind."

Myron sniffed, "Or perhaps they have something to hide."

### **The Suel Widow**

Felligan smiled and sipped at his wine. "Almost everyone in this town seems to have something to hide," he observed, "And they don't see many Olvenkind in these parts, of that I am certain.

"I left that unwelcoming reception and passed by what might have been a prosperous farm, but the garden looked untended, choked with weeds. A sturdy cart stood in the yard. A pale skinned boy split wood beside the house. I stopped to speak briefly with the young man. I asked him, 'Is your father here?' I noted that the curtains moved, and someone watched me from the window.

"The boy put down his axe and briefly pressed his palm to his forehead in a deliberate manner, like this, as if the gesture should mean something to me. Then he replied dully, 'My father has been dead these many years. My two brothers and I live here with my mother.' I looked back toward the farmhouse window through which I could now see the Suel widow peering coldly. The boy had the same glazed look as the other family, as if lost under the enchantment of a spell."

"I have twice observed the same gesture," I interjected. "Perhaps it's some sort of local custom or gesture of greeting."

Myron snorted derisively and rolled his eyes.

Bruin suggested thoughtfully to his brother, "Do you know any spells that dispel a spell? Because that would be useful, don't you think? I mean, if everyone is under a spell, why not cast another spell that dispels the spell? Mission accomplished, just like that!"

Myron replied, "I should first like to find a Dispel Stupid spell and cast it on all of you."

### **The Boarded-Up Ale House**

Felligan ignored the banter and continued his tale.

“Now comes the intriguing business. I came upon a boarded-up alehouse. Shingles and thatch were missing from the roof. I decided to try the front door. I found a sign lying face down in the weeds before the porch which, on turning it over, I found the name of the establishment: ‘The Foaming Mug Inn.’

“I circled about the boarded-up inn, checking the ground for tracks, and I found clear prints of some heavy bipedal creatures—not men—coming and going about the back wall. The prints indicate some sort of claw-footed creature, such as a troglodyte one might find in a dank cave or wallowing among the mud and reeds of the Rushmoor swamps. The heavy tracks led to and from the back wall of the Foaming Mug. I want to return there tonight, after dark, and set a watch on the place. Perhaps I can entice Bruin and Myron to come with me and we will force our way inside to see what we may see.”

Myron nodded and added, “Bruin has some previous experience with breaking and entering drinking establishments.”

Bruin nodded thoughtfully, “That’s true. I’m a professional.”

I laughed and said, “You’ve earned your day’s coin Felligan.” Gesturing toward Bruin and the mummy-man, I added, “Better than these professionals who spent the afternoon numbing their senses!”

Myron sniffed. Bruin congratulated the ranger with a slap on the back that nearly sent his slight frame sprawling across the table, spilling half the contents of his goblet.

### **The Carpenter and the Smith**

Felligan recovered himself and said, “There’s more to the tale. I saw a carpenter at work in his shop. He does good work. I saw well-crafted tables and chairs and desks, but the table he was assembling as I watched seemed like a child’s attempt, as was the case with the pair of chairs that went with it. I thought it strange. Perhaps this was not the same carpenter that made the other works, or perhaps this is yet another sign of the benumbing that seems to lie upon the people of this village, dulling their senses and dulling their minds.

“I also passed a blacksmith’s shop where two brawny lads operated a bellows while a giant of a man thundered with a

hammer on a piece of metal amidst soot and smoke. When the smith saw me, he glared at me and cursed at me.

“I tried to ask them about the boarded-up alehouse, but as I approached the angry smith, he rushed at me with his hammer, though I had in no way provoked such a reaction. As I retreated, the two younger men restrained him. I hurried along my way. Again, it might be possible that the people of Orlane nurture a hatred for olven folk, or perhaps something even more sinister than bigotry is at work in the place. I am concerned with the amount of neglect I see in so many homes and farms. It indicates some uncharacteristic detachment from responsibility.”

### **The Livery**

I nodded my assent and said, “It’s all the more puzzling in a village dedicated to the veneration of My Lady. Our goddess teaches strict disciplines in routines, seasons, set times, daily chores, and each man attending to his duties. That is our way of life, but these farmers and villagers seem to have wandered far from her teachings.”

Felligan said, “I made one last acquaintance. Across the street, a child at play on the porch of the livery greeted me. I made to speak with the child when the woman of the house came out and collected her son, mumbling an apology about mealtime. She hurried inside. Her husband, the livery man, heard my voice and came out from the stables with pitchfork in hand, looking as if he was ready to face down any fiend.

“I was already on the retreat when he called to me and offered me a proper greeting. He apologized for his wife’s hastiness, and he invited me back, mistaking me for a potential customer.

“I ask him about the boarded-up place. It seems that some fight took place at The Foaming Mug, more than a year earlier. Someone was killed. They closed the establishment and boarded it up after the owner disappeared. I ask him about the hostile smith. He explained that the blacksmith has been out of his head ever since he and his sons returned to Orlane after an unexplained absence.

“As if he had suddenly become my best friend and confidant, the livery man went on to relate his theory about the strange goings-on in Orlane. His suspicions rested on two strangers who recently moved into the cottage across the way a few weeks ago. He said,

‘They don’t seem to be interested in mixing with anybody. Keep to themselves, but they go nosing about.’

“He also mentioned his neighbors in the general store who ‘up and disappeared a couple of months ago, gone fer nearly a fortnight, then the whole family came back. Didn’t even leave one of the boys to mind the store!’ What is more, they returned without their daughter, and when he inquired about her whereabouts, they put him off. He said, ‘Whate’er became o’ that girl they’s not sayin.’”

“Is that all then?” I asked. “Because that’s quite a lot for one walk about town.”

“Only this one last thing. As the old hermit had done, the livery man warned me not to take lodging in The Gold Grain Inn. He explained, ‘Queer things afoot in that place,’ but that was all that he would say on that matter.”

### **Putting Together the Clues**

To Felligan’s report, I added my own story about the paranoid constable and his prickly disposition and the inquisitive shopkeeper. I observed, “The constable was all too eager to see us lodged at The Golden Grain Inn. These other fellows, who seem to be outside the conspiracy, whatever it may be, warn us not to stay at that establishment. We have seen for ourselves that the hospitality is poor, the beer tastes watered-down, and the food was overpriced, so we should have reason enough even without the dire warnings to prefer our current place of lodging over that miserable crowd.”

Myron and I turned these clues over and considered their implications. At length, we called our host, the proprietor, to join our conversation. I asked him, “What do you know about a boarded-up alehouse on the other end of town that was called The Foaming Mug?”

Ollwin described a serious fight that had taken place some time ago. There had been some killings. The owners disappeared. The place had been boarded up the next day.

I turned to the other guests in the common room for information; some were reticent, but some spoke of two suspicious strangers in town living in a cottage near the mayor’s house; some spoke of the mysterious disappearances of neighbors; some told of



villagers who had taken flight and others who seemed not quite right.

Myron drew some conclusions. He said, "It seems obvious enough that some sinister conspiracy is at work. Certain villagers have fallen under some magical befuddlement. Others remain unaffected. I surmise that the disappearances are actually kidnappings. Those who return do so under the power of the enchantment. Those who do not return are perhaps those too strong-willed to fall under the spell. The Golden Grain Inn may be at the center of the conspiracy, or if not the center, it stands near the center."

"Tomorrow," I said, "I will visit the temple and learn what I can from my fellows of the cloth. Then we will visit the mayor and see what insights he might add. Perhaps he can tell us more about the proprietors of The Golden Grain. The mayor was the first to alert my order about the strange goings on, and I should like to hear what he has to tell."

Felligan added, "I believe we will find more answers in The Foaming Mug. I intend to return there tonight, under cover of darkness, and see what I might see." Then turning to Bruin, he said, "No more wine for you. I want you in your right wits tonight when we go out."

"Where are we going?" Bruin asked groggily.

"To another alehouse," Myron sneered, poking at his inebriated colleague.

"Perfect!" Bruin was happy to hear it.

My own head spun with wine and exhaustion, and the idea of searching through an abandoned and boarded-up building in the middle of the night held no appeal for me. I excused myself, bedded down for the night in the comfort of a soft bed, and in a short time, fell deeply asleep.

### **Felligan's Wound**

Several hours later, the sound of Bruin bellowing and pounding on my door woke me abruptly. "Priest! Priest!" he shouted. I stumbled out into the hallway in not but my nightshirt, and he fairly scooped me up and carried me down to the common room where Felligan lay bleeding on the tabletop of the main dining table. I blinked in the light, sleepy and still disoriented.

Underneath a pile of hastily applied bandages I found a nasty gash splitting his chest. He smelled awful, and so did Bruin and Myron. A reeking urine smell of musk and swamp filled the whole room.

The three remaining patrons in the common room hovered nearby, frightened and appalled. Ollwin the proprietor was shouting to his wife while she gathered hot water and clean bandages.

To my eyes, the elf looked completely dead, but the wheezing gurgle of shallow breaths indicated he still fought for life. I prayed over him, laid my hands on him, invoked Merikka and the gods of good and healing, even naming a few of the olven deities for good measure, such as the Lady Ehlonna whom the rangers of the Dim Forest venerate. Miraculously, before our eyes, the wound closed and the flesh healed. I heard Myron gasp and say, "By all the gods!"

"Not all the gods," I replied, "Just the ones who care."

Myron mumbled, "I have seen spell craft before and powerful illusions, but I have never seen any like this."

"This is not spell craft, and I will not countenance any blasphemy," I snapped back.

The elf's breathing returned to normal.

Myron warned to the proprietors, "Lock the doors tonight. There are fell beasts in the village."

We gently transferred Felligan to his bed. Balba agreed to watch over the unconscious elf for a few hours while Bruin and Myron bathed to remove the stench. Ollwin heated three tubs of water. In one, tub we dumped all their clothing along with the elf's. In the second tub, big muscle-bound Bruin scrubbed and washed to try to get the stench out of his skin and hair. In the third tub, Myron did the same. I realized I had never seen the man unmasked before, much less naked. Ollwin and I tried not to stare at his scrawny, misshapen body, peculiarly angled head, and comically grotesque facial features. Keenly aware of our discomfort, he sniffed, "So what do you think? Is there a woman in all the Flanaess that will have me?"

Bruin chuckled, "Now you see why Myron studies magic. He wants spells to make him handsome like me."

Ignoring the banter of the naked men, Ollwin the proprietor said, "Tell us what befell you this night. How came our olven friend by such a dreadful mortal wound, and what is this wretched stench you have brought into my inn?"

Myron told us the tale of all that had befallen them.

### **Ambush at the Foaming Mug**

"Our unlucky ranger friend wanted us to see this boarded up alehouse he had found and see if we might find a clue to the mystery that hangs over this accursed town. He showed us the back wall of the building where some suspicious tracks converge. I'm no tracker, but one does not need to be a ranger to know that the tracks must go somewhere. I felt about the wall, and in only a moment or two, I found a secret door, cleverly concealed in the wall. It yielded, unlocked, and swung open into the pitch darkness inside.

"The elf could see well enough in the half-light, but Bruin and I were blind in the darkness. With a pinch of firefly and a few magic words, I cast a spell of illumination on my quarter staff. Using it like a torch to light our way we entered the abandoned alehouse.

"The entire place smelled badly. A powerfully foul swampy smell hung in the air. The room was in disarray. I recognized long dried blood splatter markings, perhaps the left over from the fight that took place in the common room. We poked around a bit and found a cellar door, hanging on one hinge. A creaky staircase led down into the darkness. The cellar smelled musty and rotten with a sick swamp smell."

Bruin interjected, "Smelled like swamp gas. Strong enough to make me sick."

Myron continued his tale, "We searched the cellar by the light of my staff. Felligan examined the dirt floor for tracks and found plenty of evidence of clawed feet coming and going. We found several crates of spoiled food stores. Three kegs of wine remained, still sealed. The cellar had two doors. Felligan opened the first. It led to a small fruit cellar, now empty. He opened the second and in an instant three lizard-like men sprang out wielding stone axes. The stench of the monsters filled the room. Felligan struck the first one a blow with his blade, but the great beast returned the blow. His stone axe clove the ranger's chest. He fell to the floor. I thought him dead from the blow.

At that point in the story, Bruin interrupted, "So I cut the fiend in half, just like he was made of butter."



Irritated by the interruption, Myron sniffed with contempt and continued his narration. "Right. My fonkin brother swung his mighty sword and bisected the first lizardman just like he was made of butter—if there is a type of buttery lizard gore that reeks like vomit. He spilled it to the ground and filled the air with its stench. I released a powerful spell, sending a spray of colors from my hands. The remaining two creatures fell to the ground unconscious. My merciful Rhenee brother quickly hacked them apart, splattering us with the stench you now smell.

"We staunched the elf's wound as best we could, but I had little hope of saving him from such an ugly gash."

Bruin splashed a bit in his washtub and interjected, "I could see he was still alive, so I hoisted him over my shoulder and carried him out."

Myron continued, "I hastened after him. I knew what this big oaf was thinking. He believes in the gods, and he hoped the priest could heal the wound."

“And so he did. This time you saw it with your own eyes Myron,” Bruin said triumphantly. “The priests are not the charlatans you say they are.”

As the story came to its conclusion, Ollwin the proprietor shook his head, “May Mother Merikka have mercy on us all!”

“Indeed, she will, and already has,” I assured him. “She has shown us this night her healing hand.”

Myron dried himself and slipped into a clean robe which Ollwin had brought as he shared his thoughts, “The lizardmen are swamp dwellers. In the bestiaries, they are called troglodytes. They must have come to Orlane from the Rushmoors. Fell things prowl those forsaken bogs where cruel Vecna once dwelt.”

I shuddered at the mention of the legendary lich. Ollwin moaned, “Has some nasty devil from those fearsome minions slithered up to our little village of Orlane?”

Myron wrapped a robe around his body, “The answer to that, and the solution to this riddle must be sought in the temple of Merikka.”

### **In the Cottage of Vilma Merridie**

The sun shone brightly, making the trauma and terror of the previous night seem like a nightmare, half-forgotten in the morning light. Felligan still slept, but to me he seemed strong and well. My lady Merikka had closed his wound and healed him completely with her touch. He only needed to rest.

While he still slept, Felligan’s ranger-friend Allen Clayborne came seeking him. Ollwin showed the ranger to our room. I explained what happened the previous night; the ranger expressed his remorse for not accompanying Felligan. “He asked me to come with last night, but I would not leave my farm,” he said gravely. Turning to Myron and Bruin, he said, “Please show me the place where you were attacked.”

Bruin agreed to take Allen back to the scene of the attack at the Foaming Mug. I needed to pay my visit to the temple that morning, so we left together, and I walked with them some distance as the temple lays on the way to that side of the village. The illusionist preferred to stay behind, clearing his throat, smoking his pipe, and studying his spells, so we left him to watch over Felligan.

As we drew near the temple, Allen said, "There dwells here a devotee in the shadow of the holy house that you should meet."

Allen brought us to the neatly kept cottage of Vilma Merridie, an elderly Oeridian widow and devout worshipper of Merikka who has lived in the village half a century. She invited us in for morning tea. "A priest of Merikka in my house! What a blessed day this is. We are Merikka's folk here in Orlane!" she exclaimed.

We stepped into her tiny, single-room home, and I offered the lady's blessing. I approved of the tidy, clean, and tastefully decorated cottage. I recognized the sigils of Merikka, and among the widow's books, I saw a worn and well-read copy of the *Almanac*. While we sipped tea together, I asked her to tell me what she knew of the troubles. She rambled through an animated discussion of the old days, sometimes offering a piece of pertinent information and gossip.

"When my husband was alive," she began, "this was a different place. We were among the first farms, the first settlers from Geoff, and we made our life from the soil. In those days, there were no roads. Just endless horizons. We had no smith or store. We made our own tools, and we kept our own provisions.

"Not long after we arrived, we banded together and raised a sanctuary to Merikka so that she might hear our prayers and bless our farms, though she herself remained in chains. Bless us she did. They said she could not hear our prayers, but she heard them and answered them too. The land here proved rich. We grew crops half again as large as those in Geoff. Our little community grew quickly to three hundred souls or more, mostly men from Keoland and Gran March, but not a few Geoffites either. Some years ago, the church in Hochoch took charge of our sanctuary and made a proper temple of it."

This, I knew, had occurred just two and half years ago when Our Lady of Changing Seasons had been released from the chains in which she had languished for so long. In that same year, she appeared to me in a vision while I sacrificed to her at the edge of my fields, and she summoned me to her service. In that same year our clerics took charge over her veneration, as is well known to everyone.

"Now and again we had troubles. Some years had the goblin raids from the Dim Forest. Then there was the troll. And now and then

some scaly creature crawls up from the swamp and curdles all the milk.

“We are hardy folk here, and we were not about to let a few raids drive us back. Our menfolk put together a militia to meet the raiders, and meet them they did with cold steel. Those goblinfolk learned soon enough that Orlane was best left alone.

“Things are different now. Over the past year, folks have been packing up and leaving and our little village has dwindled away, like a field struck with the blight. Some families have up and disappeared, some so quickly that they left the food still set out on the table. Some left crops unharvested in the field. Sometimes they return in a week or two, and some folk have never been seen again. Now everyone is frightened, and no one knows who to trust. I have seen from my own window those lizardmen from the swamps prowling about our streets.”

Allen leapt up from the table, startled by those words and asked for specific details about the creatures she had seen. She described scaly humanoids with fin-like crests on their heads crossing north of her cottage and climbing the walls of the temple. Yes. Bruin was certain. They were the same creatures he had met in the cellar of The Foaming Mug.

Admitting that she had no certain basis for her suspicions, she stated that the family across the road from her “used to be real nice, but now they act suspicious toward everyone; even me!” She had never liked the family at another farm and reported seeing the lads go out at all hours. The blacksmith, she said, had always been an ill-tempered lout, but lately “there’s just no talking to the man!” She had a very high opinion of the mayor and hoped that the two strangers now living in the cottage next to his house did not bring him to any harm.

Although she prays to Merikka faithfully and thanks her for all the bounty of her hand, she admitted that she no longer allowed the clerics from her temple to visit her, nor did she go to the temple herself. She remarked that the priests themselves had changed, like everyone else, and she no longer trusted them. For that reason she felt especially delighted that Merikka had heard her prayers and sent a true and faithful priest directly to her.

This information deeply alarmed me, and the talk of lizardmen frightened me. I shuddered to imagine the temple of my lady defiled. I said, “I had best take a look at the temple myself.” We

bid Vilma goodbye, but before we left, I offered her blessings for protection and sustenance from the goddess. Grateful tears filled her eyes, and as she wiped them away, she said affectionately, "Sweet little Hobniz!"

### **The Temple of Merikka**

Allen and Bruin offered to accompany me to the temple, but I told them that they need not do so. "Merikka will surely protect me in her own house," I assured them. I set off in the direction of the temple, and they went their way toward the boarded-up tavern.

The temple of Merikka in Orlane is one of a kind, and a pilgrimage destination for all of her folk. I had often desired to visit this holy place, ever since I first heard of it after my arrival in Hochoch, but had not found occasion for the journey until now. The house in Orlane is the only sanctuary known to have been raised to her worship during the years of her imprisonment. When others had forsaken her and turned to other gods and powers, the people of Orlane remained steadfast in their devotion. They proved their faith by building this magnificent house even during those dark years when our Lady's presence had faded. In those days, her priests received no oracles; her seers saw no visions; her prophet's dreamed no dreams. Only the calends continued to be counted and that without her confirmation or any sign. But the faithful continued her veneration, especially here in Orlane, where they raised this holy house. For that reason, her special affection rests on the temple in Orlane and upon her faithful priests who minister there. I myself had sent letters some nine months earlier requesting a chance to serve in Orlane, but I had received no reply from Father Abramo.

Not far from Vilma Merridie's home I found the main road leading to the temple. The holy house stands on the highest piece of ground in the village, on top of a little ridge overlooking the stream and the pond. A grove of stately elms surrounds an encompassing twenty-foot wall built of granite blocks imported from Gilmorack in the Lortmil Mountains. This is the only stone structure in Orlane. The heavy wooden gates are strong and sturdy. Carved into them with precise craftsmanship is an ornate carving of the goddess, depicted as a beautiful young woman.

A broad path led through the gate and across a courtyard, up to the doors of the temple. I found the courtyard itself to be empty except for a gardener, and for all his efforts, I observed, the



grounds were not well maintained as befits our lady's reputation. Weeds grew wild and the lawn had been left untended. I attempted to greet the gardener, but he put me off, pointing the way to the temple's doors, and then turned his back toward me to indicate the conversation was at an end.

The temple building itself is made of solid granite blocks, and is completely windowless. I took it all in for a moment or two, relishing the moment in adoration of my lady. Then I entered the large sanctuary hall. The tile floor was decorated with an abstract mosaic pattern in orange, tan, brown, and blue. Tapestries decorated the walls, all depicting scenes of lush farmland and crops in various stages of maturity. Five huge elm trunks, polished to a shine, serve as columns in the room, and the image of Merikka, magically carved from a solid piece of jade, is mounted on a low dais at the north end of the room.

A slender and attractive young Oeridian priestess came out to greet me. She wore a snake's head amulet of gold around her neck—a strange and unnatural choice of jewelry for a priestess of my lady. She introduced herself as “Misha,” and she bowed politely in the manner of our order.

After I had finished my devotions before the image of my lady, the priestess asked about my business, and I discharged my duties, delivering the scroll with the calends for the annual fasts, sacrifices, plowing, and planting. She said that I had been expected and that the other priests had prepared a welcome meal for me.

We stepped out of the sanctuary area so that we could converse freely without profaning the holy. We strolled through a hallway with a gleaming white tile floor and a series of alcoves along the wall. Each alcove was lined with black velvet to highlight the beautiful golden items kept on display. Each one represents plants and produce that my lady's potent blessing nurtures: wheat, potato, oats, cornstalk, carrot, turnips, grapes, barley, beans, all intricately molded of pure gold. Together the collection constitutes a small fortune, guarded by the loyal temple monks.

After admiring the gold and exchanging a few more pleasantries, I turned to the issue at hand and asked Misha about strange things that have been afoot in the village. She suggested that I speak to Father Abramo, the chief priest. Something sounded cold and sickly in the way she said his name. I sensed deception behind her

motives, and I suspected something amiss with her. I wondered if she might be under the same enchantment as the others, and then, suddenly, as if it dropped from heaven, I realized with absolute certainty that the priestess was indeed under the spell and that she intended to trap me.

Without indicating that I had discerned the enchantment, I told her that I would like very much to return later in the day for the meal the temple had prepared to welcome me, but until then, I had some matters of business to conclude in town. I promised that I would return later in the day. Misha attempted to dissuade me and reached to take hold of me, as if to force me, but I stepped back and withdrew from her touch.

Somehow, by my lady's grace, I saw that something foul was afoot in the temple and that this lovely Merikkan priestess had fallen prey to its powerful spell. Apologizing, I abruptly left the temple and hurried back to the Slumbering Serpent Inn.

### **The Constable's Threats**

Myron and Felligan awaited me in the common room where they lingered over breakfast and discussed the implications of the previous day's discoveries. For an elf that seemed dead and gone less than twelve hours earlier, Felligan looked more than hale and healthy. I greeted him with thanksgiving and blessings to my lady and all the gods of healing, and he thanked me kindly for my prayers of healing. He showed me the place of the wound, closed and hole as if it had never been. Myron shook his head thoughtfully.

I sat down with them and reported, "It's as we feared! The sinister spell is on the temple too. The priestess of Merikka has fallen under the enchantment, perhaps everyone in the temple, and what is more, the lizardmen have also been spotted around the temple by night."

Myron sniffed thoughtfully, "Until last night, I thought all priests were charlatans. But after what I have seen I must consider the possibility that the power of the gods and the priests is something more than chicanery and spellcraft. At the very least, I have a new-found respect for you my Halfling cleric."

"Thankyou, Myron," I said. "I know that was not an easy concession."

Balba the proprietress interrupted our conversation, "Begging your pardon, but some gentlemen here to see you."

Three unpleasant characters followed her into the hall. I recognized them all. Grover Ruskadal, the constable of Orlane, and two of his henchmen. Grover came armed for trouble. A shield hung off his arm. A long sword hung at his side. A loaded crossbow hung over his shoulder. The other two men carried similar gear and weapons. They regarded Myron, wrapped up in his scarves as he was, with extreme suspicion. He pressed his right palm to his forehead, just briefly, and then gave all of us a searching look. We had seen that very gesture, some type of clandestine sign, often enough the previous day.

Constable Ruskadal had some questions for Felligan. They came slowly, methodically, growling, and not waiting for replies: "What's this trouble you bring to our village? How did you get that wound we heard about? Where were you poking around last night? Who are you and what are you trying to do here?"

I refused to be intimidated and replied with my own questions, "What kind of hospitality is this? My friends were assaulted in your streets last night and our olven friend here was grievously wounded. Why isn't the local constable keeping the streets safe?"

The constable replied, "It will be best for you and your friends to leave our town before the sun sets today, but if you insist on staying, we will show you hospitality. For your safety, I will personally put your whole party up in the Golden Grain Inn."

I thanked the constable and told him we were comfortable in our current lodge. We exchanged a few more unpleasantries. Before leaving, he remarked, "If I were you, I would take my offer. Either that or find your way out of town as quick as you can. Otherwise none can say what might befall strangers by night in a place like this."

After the constable's departure, we discussed the situation. It did not take a genius of Myron's caliber to realize that the constable was part of the sinister conspiracy gripping Orlane. Likewise, it had become obvious to me that the temple of Merikka had been subverted and that the troglodytes had some connection with the enchanted priestess who ministers there. The Golden Grain must also be somehow involved. The constable's thinly veiled threats implied that we were free to stay in town only if we accepted his

gracious hospitality at the Golden Grain Inn where he was willing to pay for our room and board.

Myron assessed the situation, assembling the clues as they stood. "Obviously, the constable intends to ambush us in the night if we stay there, but we should ask, why not ambush us while we stay here at the Slumbering Serpent? He has co-conspirators at the Golden Grain who will assist in the ambush and whatever deviltry is afoot. That clears the old hermit who warned us not to stay at the Golden Grain, or so it would appear. He is the last an unknown factor. I need to meet him myself."

### **The Missing Carcasses**

Sometime after the constable and his men had left, Allen and Bruin returned. They found us still discussing the strange goings-on of Orlane and the constable's threats. They inquired after Felligan's wellbeing, and the elf reported his miraculous recover. Indeed, the divine touch left neither scar nor bruise, and even I wondered at that. Truly Merikka's blessing rests upon Orlane, and her power here is strong.

Allen and Bruin also had news to report from the Foaming Mug. Myron anticipated their discovery, "I suppose you found the bodies of the lizardmen have been removed?" Yes, the bodies had been removed, dragged out by someone before dawn, but the signs of the battle and the stench of the troglodytes remained all over the alehouse.

"How did you know?" I asked Myron. He sniffed contemptuously in reply.

Allen found fresh wheel tracks made by a heavily loaded cart. The tracks, he said, belonged to a cart owned by the Suel widow and her three sons. "Whatever the conspiracy is, that widow and her sons are part of it, I am certain," Allen said. "They denied everything, but their cart stinks of lizardmen."

Allen wanted us to take the matter before the constable immediately. When we objected on the grounds that we feared he might be complicit in the conspiracy, he suggested we see the lord mayor, "The lord mayor should know what type of creatures lurk about his village." We agreed to accompany him as soon as we might secure an appointment with his lordship. Allen returned to his home and to his daily chores.

## Conversation with Ramne

The proprietor of the Slumbering Serpent popped in with loaves of hard bread and a round of cheese in one arm and a skin of wine tucked under the other. As Ollwin set the table, Myron asked him, "What do you know about the old hermit in the wood across the way?"

Ollwin replied, "I know him as well as any I suppose and better than most. He goes by the name Ramne. Occasionally he comes to the inn to purchase a few necessities, otherwise he keeps to himself. He seems to be a harmless old man, but I believe that he is more than meets the eye, that is to say, more than just a hermit. I do not think you will find any treachery lodging with him, nor will you find him to be a friend to the treacherous or in league with those wretched creatures which smote our master elf such a wicked blow last night."

"No, I do not believe he is treacherous," Felligan concurred. "I sensed no malice or treachery with him."

Myron mused, "I would like to ask him what he knows about the Golden Grain. Why did he warn you not to stay there?"

We agreed to lunch with the hermit. We took the bread, the cheese, and the wine, and left the inn. Felligan led us to the path beneath the elms to pay a visit to the recluse. The door stood open, and Ramne was out in front, sweeping the stone pavement in front of his door. He saw us, set aside the broom and welcomed us into his hovel. He did not seem surprised to have visitors. Felligan made the introductions and offered Ramne a share in our food and drink.

Before stepping into the hermitage, I asked Merikka and all the gods to open my eyes to distinguish between evil and good. Likewise, Myron quietly recited a spell of magical detection. He later told that he sensed the strong presence of magical auras. Ramne is a powerful wizard and an evoker, far more powerful than Myron. His rat is also magical, what is called a "familiar" I am told by Myron. Ramne keeps several magic items and active spells within his cottage.

After making introductions all around and taking a place on the floor (for Ramne had only one chair and a stump for a stool), Felligan recounted all that had befallen us since our arrival in Orlane, just twenty-four hours ago. The hermit seemed keen to

learn—interested in every detail. I watched his face as Felligan told the old hermit about the encounter with the lizardmen. I gauged his reactions, all the while praying for divine insight. Whatever else he might be, I could see that Ramne the hermit was not evil—of that much I was certain.

When Felligan's tale was complete, I told the old man, in greater detail, about my own encounter at the temple of Merikka earlier in the morning. He nodded thoughtfully as I described the enchanted priestess. He said, "It was a mercy of your goddess that this was revealed to you or I fear you too would now be among their number."

Myron spoke, "Sire. Yesterday you warned our friend the elf that he should not stay in the Golden Grain. What evil lurks there?"

Ramne fed a few crumbs of bread to his rodent "Whiskers" before offering an answer. His face looked thoughtful. Then he said, "I know not what evil lurks there, but I know where evil lurks, and it lurks there. Many who have stayed there of late have vanished, and others who have checked in have never checked out."

Myron pressed further, "Sire. The constable has bid us stay the night in the Golden Grain. He has offered to pay for our lodging. I want to accept his offer in order to learn what may be learned from his treachery. What counsel would you give us?"

"I have already given you my counsel," Ramne said softly, "But if you choose to ignore my advice, then hear this. Always let your priest make his blessing before you taste the food they serve you. Let him bless before you drink. Do not even drink the water without a blessing. When you take your room, let no sleep befall your eyes. Do not sheathe your sword. Keep watch through the night."

Despite what powerful magic he may have possessed, Ramne seemed frail and delicate to me. I could not mistake him for an evil spellbinder from the Vale of the Mage. I could scarcely imagine that he had any connection to the sinister kabal of Orlane.

### **Dorian and Llywillan**

Allen secured an appointment for us with the lord mayor of Orlane. On our way to the mayor's residence, we passed near the

little cottage where the two mysterious strangers had recently taken up residence and become the subject of so much speculation. Myron suggested dropping in on them and introducing ourselves. Their cottage was a small, square building, freshly whitewashed. Heavy curtains over the window suggested the desire for privacy. We decided not to honor that desire, and Bruin knocked on the door. Allen stood at the ready, hand on the hilt of his weapon.

A fair-skinned, dark-haired man opened the door cautiously and sized up mighty Bruin. As he turned to assess the rest of us, I recognized distinctive olven features. His eyes rested on Felligan, and he offered him a stiff greeting in the elven tongue. Felligan returned the salutation, and they exchanged a few brief words before switching back to the common tongue for our benefit. The man identified himself to us as Llywillan and he introduced his companion, another half-elf who had stepped outside by then, as Dorian. Dorian's heavy beard was the only feature to betray his human blood. Otherwise, one might have assumed him to be one of Felligan's own kin. Felligan handled the introductions for all of us, and the half-elves invited us into their little cottage.

We were uncertain of whether or not we could trust them, and they seemed equally uncertain about us. In any case, they did not appear to be under any enchantment, nor did they seem to hide dark secrets. Allen inquired about their business in Orlane, but they remained evasive, turning back the inquiry with questions about our own mission and objectives. It became evident to us by the manner of questions that they posed that they wanted to ascertain whether or not we might belong to the local conspiracy. Allen and Felligan, speaking confidentially to them in the elven tongue, managed to win their confidence. Finally satisfied that we were on the side of the good, they explained, "We have a special commission from Mayor Ormond himself. We are here on his private business."

Allen pressed directly to the concern. Addressing all of us, he said, "In this room, I alone am a man of this village. You are all strangers to Orlane. For that reason you are all equally distrusted in this village, but during these strange days, perhaps I find it easier to trust outsiders than my own townsmen. The halfling priest and his band have been here less than a day and have already uncovered a lair of Rushmoor lizardfolk, here in town beneath our noses. What can you strangers tell us about that business?"

Dorian and Llywillan admitted that they too had seen indications of such things afoot in the area, but they denied specific knowledge. When they learned that we had come, even now, to report to the mayor the tale of our encounter with the lizardmen at the boarded-up ale house, they offered to accompany us. I saw no reason not to allow it. They assured me, "We are in the mayor's employ, and we know he will be interested to hear your tale."

### **Mayor Ormond**

The mayor's house, by far the most imposing residence in the village, sits on a lake, well back from the road. A pair of great elms partially screens it from view. It's whitewashed walls shone in the sun, and the roof gleamed with new wooden shingles. A wide porch crossed the entire front of the house, and columns of wood supported the overhanging roof. Each of the columns had been carved into leafy patterns by a skilled craftsman. I later learned that the mayor himself is that craftsman, and he has proudly shown me several pieces of his work, including a remarkably lifelike bust of his wife, the Lady Verrel, carved from the wood.

Mayor Ormond, his cheerful wife, and his four children all live there, along with servants and the mayor's own personal man at arms. He has two sons and two younger daughters. The mayor is polite to everyone, and he received us kindly. He is a veteran fighter, a one-time warrior, but also a man of many skills and talents. He keeps his own vineyards, manages a considerable number of livestock which he quarters on a farmstead outside the village, and is a devoted patron of the Temple of Merikka. His gray hair betrays his years, but he possesses the boundless energy and eager enthusiasm of a younger man.

The ranger Allen and his wife are well-known to Mayor Ormond and already trusted friends, so we had no trouble winning the mayor's confidence, but the same could not be said for the mayor's man at arms who seemed convinced that we meant some mischief. The mayor brought us into his comfortable home and bade us welcome, but his man at arms insisted we leave our weapons on the porch. All the while, he spied on us, and he eyed Myron most suspiciously.

The mayor questioned us thoroughly about our affairs. I saw no reason to withhold the truth, and I sensed the mayor could be trusted. I divulged the true purpose behind my mission to Orlane,



telling him how I had come on behalf of the church of Hochoch and the holy order of our lady. I told him, "We received your lordship's own letter of concern over affairs in the temple, and the church sent me to set matters right before the festival."

Felligan, Myron, and Bruin described their encounter with the lizardmen. Allen told about the disappearance of the bodies and his suspicions regarding the Suel widow and her three sons. I related my suspicions about the priestess in the temple of Merikka. Myron told the mayor about the constable's threats.

To each of us, the mayor listened attentively, and he frequently asked for more information and clarification. His questions, however, circled back frequently to the old hermit in the woods and to the encounter with the lizardmen. All the while the two half elves listened quietly and exchanged knowing glances with the mayor.

When he had heard enough to satisfy him, the mayor said, "Truth is, and I can see there is no hiding it from the likes of you, that some sinister force is at work here, and it is made all the more frightening by the fact that its true nature is concealed in a web of fear and suspicions. The midnight disappearances have something to do with the change that comes over people. When they come back, they walk like men in a dream, like they are half asleep or listening to a voice in their heads that comes from some other world. I am convinced that the shopkeep, the carpenter, the smith, and even the priests at the temple are all members of some secret order, and I'll wager the whole thing goes back to that miserable old hermit who lives in the elms."

Dorian shook his head, indicating that this was a conversation and line of suspicion he had heard before. Dorian and Lywillian took Allen and Felligan aside and they conversed with one another in the elven tongue. I interrupted and asked them directly, "You say you are in the employ of the mayor, yet you are newcomers to this town. What exactly has the mayor hired you to do?"

They did not reply, but their silence spoke a great deal. After a moment's hesitation, Mayor Ormond spoke up on their behalf, "They are what you might call mercenaries but also friends of mine. I summoned them to Orlane because I trust them and because I stood in need of some able men upon which I could rely." The mayor's man at arms looked visibly hurt by this remark.

I asked the two mercenaries if they were willing to assist us if we should call upon them. I reminded them that Felligan had nearly been slain the night before, only a few doors down from their own cottage and the mayor's home.

Myron suggested that the first order of business might be a raid on the Golden Grain Inn. The mayor objected, "On what pretense and for what reason? We have laws here in Orlane! I cannot tell the constable to go raid a private establishment for no reason other than a stranger's suspicions."

Myron replied curtly, "Do not involve that comic! That buffoon is complicit in the conspiracy, we may be certain of that much if nothing else."

"I'll have it known that the Constable Ruskadal is a respected personage of our village," the man at arms retorted, but ignoring him, Myron continued.

"We must all agree to keep these matters quiet. Let us form our own conspiracy. In any event, do not speak about our affairs with the constable."

"You sir, I have never before met, not have you revealed your face, whereas Constable Ruskadal has been ..."

Myron again cut off the man at arms, saying to the mayor, "Give me one day and I will bring you reason enough and evidence to justify some action against the Golden Grain if any justification there be. If it comes to that, we may need both your mercenaries and any other men that can be trusted."

"What is your plan then?" Dorian demanded, but Myron would divulge no more. We left the mayor to confer with his half-elf mercenaries. As the sun began to set on Orlane, Allen returned to his farm, and we set Myron's plan in motion.

### **Ambush in The Golden Grain**

Myron's plan seemed foolhardy: accept the constable's offer, take up lodging in the Golden Grain, and wait for the conspiracy to unmask itself.

Bertram Beswill the proprietor regarded us suspiciously. He asked without enthusiasm, "So you have returned?"

I bowed apologetically and explained, "The good constable recommended your hospitality."

"Yes," the proprietor said. "Our loyal constable has already made the arrangements. Your rooms are ready and waiting. Supper will be served in an hour."

Myron demurred, "We shall dine in the common hall tonight. Please bring a pitcher of beer and a few draughts of brandy along with our food."

Beswill brought the food and drinks, as requested. Heeding Ramne's warning, we left the food and drink untouched until I had offered a blessing for the purification of food and drink, lest there be some poison or drug, as Myron fully suspected. "Let them observe us eating and drinking," he said.

After the meal, Beswill showed us to our designated room on the second floor of the establishment. The chamber contained four beds with some room to spare. Myron quickly observed something amiss with the size of the room. The depth of the room seemed too shallow for the size of the building, and there should have been a window or two on the southern wall. He softly rapped his knuckle along that wall. I helped him search until we found a cleverly concealed door, but it could not be opened from this side. Myron gathered us and whispered confidentially, as if afraid of eavesdroppers, "They will expect to find us all drugged and in a stupor after that meal. They will most probably come in through the secret door in the night. Others will be waiting to assist. We must be silent and ready, and we must appear to be asleep."

We searched the room for peep holes and took note of any potential places where spying eyes might be peering in on us. Then, employing his craft, Myron cast an illusionist's spell which would make it appear, to anyone spying into the room that we slept soundly in the beds. So we waited.

The hours passed slowly. A single, short-wicked candle burned. Myron used the time to memorize a spell. Bruin paced impatiently, but his footfalls made the floorboards creek, so we bade him stand still, at the ready by the door with his great sword unsheathed.

Near the middle of the night came a soft tap at the door. We looked up, but Myron shook his wrapped head and gestured to

maintain silence. “That will be the innkeeper at the door, checking to ensure that the drugged drinks have taken effect and that everyone is safely asleep,” I thought. A moment later, we heard the fellow shuffle off down the hallway.

Then came a faintly audible movement at the concealed door. The four of us exchanged glances clutched weapons. Myron put out the light of the candle and spoke a quick word of magic. The room became completely dark.

Minutes passed during which my eyes flashed in the dark and the sound of my beating heart filled my ears. At last we heard the concealed door in the wall open a crack and a faint light shone through. Just as Myron had predicted, someone peered through it into our room. Slowly and quietly, the door opened wider; dim light spread into the room. A hooded figure carrying a small oil lamp in one hand and a short sword in the other stepped through the opening. He did not see us positioned along the wall. A second character—the cook from the kitchen—followed with a dagger in one hand and burlap bags in the other. Over his shoulder hung a coil of rope.

As the two men stealthily crept into the room, Rehnnee Bruin stepped into the light swinging his great sword. It was over in a moment. The sword crashed down on the first man, sending him spilling to the floor with a crash, blood gushing from an open wound. His lamp fell and extinguished itself. Before the cook could even react to the assault, Rehnnee Bruin’s sword lopped his head from his shoulders. Head and body fell noisily to the floor. Blood washed across the floor.

I whispered, “Light! Give us some light!” At that moment a heavy blow landed on the front door to the room. A second vicious blow broke the timber, and the door fell in on itself.

Five armed men, one of them carrying a torch, burst in through the broken door brandishing short swords and shields. They attacked savagely and clumsily, tripping over themselves, slipping on the blood-slicked floor.

For a moment I panicked. I thought, “Perhaps we will die here in this room.” May Merikka forgive me, I wielded the sickle of her harvest against those poor souls. Bruin brought his great sword to strike yet another immediately dead. I swung the sickle of Merikka to topple one of the attackers, and he fell as easily as if I harvested a standing sheaf of grain. A man on Felligan slashed at

the elf drawing blood. Feligan answered with a thrust of his own long sword, running the man through. My sickle cut a second man's legs out from under him. The last of the assailants fell under a final blow from Bruin's great sword. The whole battle had lasted only a few brief seconds. Seven bodies lay heaped across the floor and strewn over the beds. I snatched up the fallen torch and waved it around so that we could take it all in. The splatter covered the walls, and blood soaked into all the bedding. The floor ran with blood. It seeped into the floor boards, draining into the common room below us.

"We might have spared these men for questions," I hissed angrily, shamed at myself. I thought, "Surely these men were not but unwary and innocent villagers caught up in some evil enchantment and acting under a compulsion not their own."

The dead cook still clutched his dagger. Myron pried it from fingers. "A souvenir," he explained, "A memento of the exceptional hospitality."

"It's not necessary to fight like berserkers," I scolded. "Now follow me so we can see where this secret passage leads us."

### **Iggy Olivero**

A narrow hallway provided access through similar concealed doors into three other guest rooms, all of which we found empty. At the eastern end of the hallway Myron discovered yet another concealed doorway which opened into a large master suite. A quick search of the room revealed a locked iron strongbox beneath the bed. Myron said, "It's locked. We can take it with us and open it later." Bruin snatch it up and used his great strength to pop the box open. The lock broke. The chest contained gems and coins and three glass bottles wrapped in a lush velvet cloth, each containing a clear liquid. Bruin emptied the chest into his bag. "We are not thieves," I scolded.

"I am not a priest," Bruin laughed.

Standing at the ready with swords drawn, Bruin and Feligan flanked the door out of the room, flung it open and leapt into the hallway. They surprised the innkeeper Bertram Beswill who was just rounding the stairs with a lamp in hand, having come up from the common room below. Bruin grabbed the man by the hair and shook him. Myron said, "Tie him up and put one of the sacks over his head." Using the cook's sacks and rope, Myron and I tied up

Bertram while Rehnnee Bruin and Felligan continued to search the other rooms on the second floor.

Before putting a sack over the innkeeper's head, Myron and I conducted a quick interrogation of our host. Charm spell or no, the man was terrified. His evasive answers offered no help. Bruin and Felligan returned with another of the guests.

"Here's one for your collection," Bruin jested.

Felligan said, "Stay here with the prisoners. Bruin and I will clear the lower level." The two warriors rushed down the wooden stairs.

The new prisoner dropped to his knees before Myron and I, held up his arms, as if to ward off blows, and pleaded, "Please do not strike me, I am a simple merchant from Hookhill, held prisoner here against my will. Please release me so that I may return to my own city."

"Who is holding you prisoner," Myron hissed venomously. He added, "How did they hold you against your will when these rooms all lock from the inside?"

The man seemed confused by Myron's questions. He stammered, "I am Iggy Olivero, a merchant of some means, a dealer in cloth, from Hookhill in the Gran March. Release me and I can pay you a ransom."

I asked him, "Who took you prisoner? Can you tell us who captured you and why?"

The man motioned to Bertram Beswill the innkeeper and replied, "This proprietor of this very establishment has held me here against my will and collected ransom for my release from my family and friends in Hookhill." Bertram neither affirmed nor denied the accusation. He only stared vacuously into space.

I turned to Igglesworth and asked, "Who is behind all these kidnappings? Who has poisoned the waters of Orlane? We know that a powerful wizard is at work here. Where is he?"

The man shook his head, "Please sire, let me flee this horrid place."

Myron told him, "You will stay with us and speak to the lord mayor for us. Tell him your tale and all you know about the goings on in this foul place, then you may go your way."

### **Searching the Rooms**

Felligan and Bruin found the lower level empty, but they had yet to search the cellar. "We need torches," the young elf said.

We lit torches and joined Bruin on the first floor. The fire in the common room hearth had burned low and no guests remained. Blood oozed through the ceiling, dripping from the slaughterhouse we left above. The kitchen was also empty.

A locked door in the northeast corner of the building gave way to Rehnnee Bruin's strength. The room contained a large soft bed, a desk strewn with papers, and a hard, wooden chair sitting next to the bed. Several plain woolen rugs covered the floor, and large brass-bound chest rested against the north wall. I realized this was the innkeeper's room.

Myron perused the documents, scanning them quickly. They appeared to be poorly kept bookkeeping records for the inn and nothing more.

Bruin used his great sword to cleave open the chest, but as he did, some vial within was broken. A noxious gas released into the room and sent us all coughing and diving for the floor. For the next minute or so, Bruin moved slowly, like a man half-asleep.

Myron cursed, "By Boccob's staff! You great fool! Quit smashing everything."

Before the effect faded, the great bear of a man moved comically slow, like a stage actor in a pantomime. His hands lethargically scooped the coins from the chest into his great purse.

"We must search the cellar," Myron insisted, slapping at Bruin's face to bring him back to speed.

I told them, "This poor wretched man Igglesworth and I will stay here in the common room and watch the door and keep an eye on Bertram while you search the cellar." This seemed prudent to me, and I felt that I could fend for myself if need be.

Felligan agreed and said, "We will make this quick. If you need us, shout out and we will hurry back."

I never had the opportunity to shout out. They had scarcely disappeared through the cellar door in the kitchen than Olivero Igglesworth clubbed me from behind. For a brief moment, I felt a rushing darkness, and then I remembered nothing.

### **Cellars of The Golden Grain**

I later learned the tale of all that transpired in the cellars beneath The Golden Grain that night. Felligan, Bruin, and Myron found a stairway from the kitchen and descended into a dark, windowless cellar where broken tables and chairs stacked against the wall. Cobwebs covered much of the ceiling, filling the spaces between the rafters. Torch sockets were arranged along the walls at intervals. Myron placed his torch in one and, by the gods' intervention, discovered that if he used the torch to lever down, the socket activated a mechanism which unlocked a concealed door in the wall.

A narrow door opened into a clandestine meeting room which contained a table, several benches, and a ladder rising to a trapdoor in the ceiling. Bruin popped his head up through the trapdoor and realized that it opened in the floor of Bertram Beswill's room above.

Felligan found a door in the south wall, strangely barred from the inside. It made him wonder what the proprietors wanted to keep out of the cellar. Prisoners? The missing people of Orlane? Felligan lifted the bar from the door and opened it, discovering a roughly cut low-ceilinged tunnel, excavated in the soft soil, shored at five-foot intervals with heavy timbers on the walls and ceiling. Felligan described a dirt floor packed smooth by many feet. A foul odor of decay hung in the chill air.

They took torches in hand and entered the tunnel. Felligan led, Bruin followed, and Myron brought up the rear. By the light of those torches, they explored a small maze of earthen tunnels and chambers. Here and there rats fled before them. In one chamber, a great constrictor snake coiled about a rotting rafter.

As they explored a side chamber with a narrow entrance, Felligan shouted a warning, "Look out! Ambush!" Three hunkering grave creatures—corpse-eaters—sprang upon them. Just when a priest would have been most useful I had stayed behind again.

Felligan tried to swing his sword, but in the cramped, close quarters and low ceiling he lost his weapon and fell back, forcing



Bruin and Myron to also step back. The ghouls pressed into the narrow entrance of the chamber, clawing and swiping. Without his sword in hand, Felligan tried to flee the attackers, but as he did, one leapt on him, biting and clawing at his back as he withdrew. He fell to the ground beneath the weight of the creature.

The other two ghouls leapt onto Bruin, biting and clawing. Myron called upon his spellcraft. A blinding shot from his hand dazzled one of the ghastly horrors. In those close quarters, Bruin could not swing his great sword. Dropping his weapon, he attempted to ward off the attackers with his bare hands.

The ghoul that had taken down Felligan leapt onto Bruin from behind. Bruin fell to the ground beneath a pile of three ghouls. Myron unleashed a spray of colors, and, under that powerful spell, the monsters fell unconscious. Employing the magical dagger he had obtained from our midnight intruders less than an hour earlier, the illusionist quickly finished each ghoul.

Felligan rose to his feet by merit of his elven blood, neither dead nor frozen by the bite. Bruin, on the other hand, lay completely still, either paralyzed by the ghoulish touch or rendered unconscious from the grave nature of his wounds.

“Quickly,” Myron said, “Fetch the priest and let him lay his healing hands upon Rehnnee Bruin, before life slips from his body.”

### **Potion of Healing**

Felligan bore wounds as well, but not so deadly as the gash of the previous night, nor so serious as Bruin’s. He retrieved his sword and, seeing that Bruin had been badly hurt, he hastened back up the tunnel, into the cellar, up the stairs, through the kitchen, and into the common room where he had left me in the company of the merchant from Hookhill and our prisoner the innkeeper. To his surprise, he saw no one. Neither I nor Bertram Beswill the innkeeper nor Igglesworth Olivero the merchant. He called out. He shouted. He ran through the all the rooms, frantically searching. He searched upstairs where the corpses of our attackers still lay. The priest, the innkeeper, and the merchant were gone.

While Felligan searched for us, Bruin quickly bled toward death. Myron feared that the ghoul’s poison would take possession of

the big man's life. His breath sounded shallow, and his wound was open, ugly, and deep. The great man shuddered convulsively.

Now it happened that Myron remembered the three potions we had discovered. He drew them out from the Rhen warrior's bag, unwrapped the velvet, and, by the light of the torch, studied them carefully for some clue. The three bottles had different shapes but, unfortunately, no indication whatsoever as to their contents. All three contained a clear liquid, one of which, he discerned by the taste, to be healing tincture.

Taking Bruin's big head in his arms, he slowly, carefully, dribbled the potion into his mouth, down his throat. He was immediately gratified to see that he had not mistaken the potion. Bruin's breathing resumed as normal. He choked. Coughed. Spluttered. And suddenly leapt to his feet, glancing about, casting about for his sword, looking for his assailants. He saw Myron sitting in the torchlight among the bodies of the three ghouls. The man's great gaping wound diminished, the blood staunched, and the open flesh seemed to scab over, almost as neatly as if he had received the healing touch of a priest.

Myron quickly tried to explain to the big man what has happened, but even as he spoke Felligan arrived, saying, "They're gone! They are all gone!"

### **Idol of the Lizard Goddess**

The three of them staggered off to return to the common room and pick up the hunt for their missing priest, innkeeper, and merchant, but on the way back they took a wrong turn and stumbled into yet another chamber in the tunnel. The light of their torches illuminated a great coiled serpent with a woman's head. The serpent stood full-sized, large as a man, longer by far, rearing up, facing the intruders, and perched on a pedestal. It took them only a moment to realize that they were staring into the eyes of a carved, ivory idol and not an actual serpent-woman. The convincing sculpture had been skillfully carved from several tusks of ivory, skillfully blended by a master craftsman and raised on a stone dias.

Bruin took a mighty swing with this great blade and cleanly cut the ivory snake's body in the middle.

"Put the head in your back and bring it with. We will need it for evidence with the mayor," Myron told him. Bruin dropped the

head and torso (so to speak) into his bag and they continued their retreat from the tunnels and back to the common room of the Golden Grain.

Back in the common room, the hearth fires had burned down to mere coals. They found no sign of me, no sign of the innkeeper, no sign of the merchant.



### **Help from the Half Elves**

They spent the next hours of the night scouring the village streets, searching for me or the men from the inn. They found no trace of any of us, but soon they heard the constable and his men shouting to one another in the night. "They will be looking for us," Felligan warned.

"And they will have us for murder," Myron agreed. They fled from the sound of the constable's men and into the dark village streets.

From the shadows, a voice called to them in the olven tongue, "Come with me if you want to survive the night." Dorian the half-elf stepped from the predawn darkness and led them back to the cottage he shared with his brother Llywillan. He locked the door and drew the curtains. As Felligan related the tale their adventuresome night at The Golden Grain, a soft knock at the door announced Llywillan's arrival. Llywillan had just returned from the inn where he observed the bodies of the dead laid out and the constable and his men in the company of Bertram Beswill the innkeeper.

Bruin wanted to go at once and lay hold of the innkeeper. "He alone can tell us what became of our priest!" Bruin said.

Dorian and Llywillan deterred them, "They are hunting for you in the streets. You must present your evidence to the mayor. He will have the innkeeper and the constable both arrested, and we will find your priest, if he yet lives."

"Then let us wake the mayor at once," Myron said.

"Too dangerous even for that," Dorian objected. "The constable is at the mayor's house even now, making his report. Let me take your tale and the head of the idol to present before the mayor after the constable has gone. I will tell him all that you have told me, and then I will bring word back to you, but for now, I think it foolish for any of us to leave the safety of this door."

They agreed to that. Felligan and the half-elves stayed awake through the remainder of night, speaking together quietly in elvish. Bruin slept. Myron studied his spells and drifted to sleep as the sun rose.

A few hours later, Dorian returned from his meeting with the mayor. He reported, "His lord the mayor still believes that suspicion should rest on that hermit Ramne and that he alone is the mastermind behind all that has befallen the people of Orlane."

Myron objected, "The mayor is a fool and an idiot. We must go straightway to the Temple of Merikka. That is where we will find Father Tabor and whatever menace hides behind the conspiracy of Orlane."

"Do you think you will simply march into the temple?" Dorian asked. "They are still searching the streets for you, and the mayor can do nothing to help. You will be discovered by the constable and his men before you even arrive at the temple."

Llywillan suggested, "There is another way. The mayor has a boat which could bear you across the lake. With a little stealth, you will be able to stay off the roads."

The half-elves escorted the three investigators to the mayor's boat house and ferried them across the lake. They landed them in the woods near the cottage of Vilma Merridie. Felligan said to the half-elven brothers, "If you will not come with us into the temple, at least go up the way and speak with Allen Clayborne. Tell him all that has befallen us and how we intend to visit the temple to find

our priest. If we do not return, perhaps he will be able to assist us, or perhaps he will at least find our priest and rescue him.”

### **In the Temple of Merikka**

They crossed through the woods and, glancing this way and that, they scurried across the village road. They scrambled their way up the ridge and through the girdle of trees to the granite block wall that surrounded the temple. They followed the line of the wall to the front gates. The gates stood open. A broad path led into the courtyard and to the doors of the temple. They strode up the monumental steps and entered the sanctuary

Misha the priestess met them, scolding them, “This is a holy place. How dare you enter here with your weapons? Have you come to offer obeisance to Merikka?”

“What is your name, priestess?” Myron asked menacingly.

“I am Misha Devi, a servant of Merikka.”

Myron replied for the party, “We have come on another errand, an errand for the goddess herself, and you will do well to assist us. We seek a priest of her divinity, a halfling by the name of Tabor. We are his escort, and we are concerned because he did not return to our lodging place last night. Is he here? Have you seen him?”

“He is not here,” Misha answered.

“You will not object if we just take a look around, will you?” Myron suggested.

“I do object,” Misha stated dully. “It is impossible. Non-members are not allowed beyond this area.”

“Then we will wait here for our companion,” Myron countered.

“You cannot wait here in the presence of the goddess,” Misha objected. Several monks emerged from the shadows to enforce her word.

The three retreated from the temple and regrouped in the courtyard. A lone monk hastened away through the gates and toward the village. Felligan warned his companions, “That one goes to fetch the constable and let him know that we are here. Of that we can be certain.”

“We must get into the temple and retrieve our priest before they bring the whole village down on us,” Myron said. Felligan and Myron searched the temple’s walls for alternative entrances. In a short time, Myron found a small servant’s door near the northwest corner which granted access to the kitchen and dining hall. Using a spell to magically alter his appearance and disguise himself as Misha the priestess, he slipped through the door.

Myron-Misha moved quickly through the kitchen and the dining hall. He encountered no one until he came to a hallway lined with a series of small doors that opened into meditation cells. Deciding that a halfling priest might easily be concealed in any one of those cells, he opened each, disturbing a few meditating monks as he did. They recognized their priestess, Misha Devi, and scarcely paid him any attention.

### **Misha vs. Misha**

So it went until at last he passed from the last cell into the hall of statues, lined with niches containing the golden replicas of agricultural produce under Merikka’s blessing. A door on the south wall stood slightly ajar. He gently pressed it open to peer inside and found himself face to face with Misha. He expected her to recognize the ruse as an illusion spell and a cheap one at that, but to his surprise, she seemed completely stunned and stared in complete bewilderment. Myron used the opportunity to cast a daze her with another spell which had the desired effect, and he used a blinding ray to further dazzle her.

As Myron later told me the story, he offered blow-by-blow details. Moving quickly, bursting in to her room, he stripped the sheeting from her bed, pulled it over her head and tied it tight. The dazzlement cleared, but now she was occupied clawing at the sheet to get it off her head. Myron tried to knock her unconscious with his quarterstaff, but being clumsy and inept with weapons, he swung it wildly at the air. A second swipe with the quarter staff connected, but not with the desired effect. Misha tore the sheet from her wounded head and took the initiative, casting a spell at Myron, but her magic fell flat on him, and he struck at her again with the quarterstaff.

The entire scene would have been puzzling to behold, and perhaps comical, if anyone had been there to behold it. Here is this slender, attractive priestess clubbing and striking at her exact

double, or so it would have looked to the observer. Myron retold the story with dramatic flair and no sense of shame:

She grabbed at me with her icy touch and inflicted instantaneous, wrenching pain to my body. I returned the caress with the magical dagger I acquired the previous evening. Bleeding from the gash, she tried to rush me, but, still twisted in the bed sheet, she went sprawling to the floor. I clubbed her again, but she was back to her feet, shouting for help and diving for a trunk from which she pulled a heavy mace. I followed right behind her and smacked her yet again with the quarterstaff, now feeling sick from the entire escapade. She swung about, clumsily wielding the mace, still shouting. I struck her with the quarterstaff one last time, the blow connecting with a crack on her head, rendering our priestess unconscious at last.

Myron tied the unconscious priestess tightly, gagged her, and laid her in her own bed. He took her snakehead amulet from around her neck and the magical ring from her finger.

He returned to the courtyard and summoned his companions, beckoning them to join him. He said, "I have searched the first floor, encountered monks, battled my double, tied up and gagged the priestess, found a trap door to a lower level, and the stairway to the upper floor. My spell is at its end. Now what do you prefer?"

### **Battle with the Undead Sentries**

They ascended to the second floor of the temple and stepped out into a bare room containing only some wooden benches and the bones of eight skeletons standing against the walls between them. We later learned that the skeletal guards had been provided by the Garath, the necromancer and high priest of the lizard goddess. The skeletal remains leapt up like startled animals. They moved demonically fast. Their bony fingers clutched short swords. If I had been there, I might have invoked the lady's blessing and the power of good to turn those undead fiends away. A fierce combat ensued. From my prison cell, a few doors down, I could hear the distant clash of steel and the shouts of Bruin and Felligan.

A hail of sword thrusts and blows struck at them. They cut Myron down almost immediately. Bruin and Felligan swung their swords, trying to shatter the magically animated assailants, but the clattering attackers surrounded them, flanking them on all sides.

Each time the blades of Felligan and Bruin shattered a skeleton, the blow dispelled the evil force that animated the bones, and they fell into a pile at their feet, but the two warriors could not avoid injury from the flashing swords of the undead. Both of them suffered wounds. One by one the skeletons dropped until Bruin brought his heavy fist down on the last one's skull, shattering the empty skull and collapsing the rest of the bones.

Bruin was bleeding and wounded. He swayed unsteadily and said, "We can fight no further, and Myron is hurt badly. We need the priest."

Felligan replied, "There is a priest here somewhere." They briefly tried to bandage Myron's wounds, but the wounds were grave. He was dying. They said, "His only chance now is the hands of the priest. We must find Father Tabor."

### **Goblin Trap**

Felligan and Bruin hurried through the chambers of the temple, heedless of danger. Bruin bellowed, "Give us Father Tabor and we will give you your priest girl. We have your priestess."

They passed into another room—the torture chamber of the mad priest Abramo. What had formerly been a storage room for the ample supplies of grain and vegetables that the faithful provided for their clerics' disposal had been outrageously defiled. In that room, I had already suffered, only hours before my companions arrived. They saw the torture rack and the table at the center of the room. They saw the table's heavy restraining straps. They saw the iron maiden that stood in the corner of the room. Several empty pine boxes, intended to serve as caskets, were stacked against the west wall.

From inside my cage I clearly heard Bruin calling out. I called back to him, but my hoarse voice did not carry to his ears. He did not hear me.

Instead, I heard the unmistakable war-scream of goblin voices and the clamor of more combat. Abramo had sprung his trap. Two concealed doors in the torture chamber swung open and a small



host of goblins sprang to attack the intruders. Felligan cried out, "In the name of Sehanine! Soldiers of the Goblin Trees!"

Surprised by the sudden onslaught, Bruin spun about and caught one of the squealers with his sword and flung it across the room. Felligan already had an arrow on the bow and pierced another in midair, passing the shaft through its chest as it leapt through at them. The rest of the goblins fell on their quarry, striking them with furious blows, dropping both warriors down to the floor.

### **The Chapel of Father Abramo**

For a long while I heard no sound except the occasional chatter and whine of goblin voices. Then the door opened. Father Abramo entered ahead of two burly lizardmen, dragging Bruin by his feet. Bruin's body left a long smear of blood marking the path as they dragged him. The reek of the lizardmen filled the air. Behind the lizardmen, another pair came, dragging a second body—the body of Felligan the elf. I felt complete despair at the sight of these things, and I turned my face away.

This Father Abramo was once the head priest of the temple here in Orlane. A devotee of Merikka all his life, he was well-known in our circles as the author of several prayers and psalms which are widely employed through the Flanaess. Before coming to Orlane, I had looked forward to meeting the man, but the man I met was no longer Father Abramo. The spell of the lizard goddess had twisted and perverted his mind so much that he scarcely resembled a man any longer.

Father Abramo took his role as mad priest seriously. He painted his tormented face with heavy cosmetics, circling his eyes with dark charcoal paste to make him look all the more frightening. He covered his head in a leather skullcap with a long central strap which bisected his forehead and covered his nose. He wore dark clerical robes such as those a son of the Slumbering One might wear, and over top of these, a hooded cape over his shoulders. Of course, he kept the hood up to make him seem even more shadowy and menacing.

Abramo instructed the lizardmen, "Tie them both tightly."

Now my ears perked up. Why tie up a corpse?

The lizardmen tightly bound both men with ropes, hand and foot. Abramo knelt over Bruin, laid hands upon him, and uttered an

invocation of healing. Bruin jerked and gasped, and began to struggle at the ropes. His eyes took in the large, dirty room to which he had been dragged. He saw the lizardmen, slithering about, and Father Abramo in his dreadful dark clerical robes. He saw the blood smear that marked the path to where he lay. He saw me, swollen and beaten, caged behind iron bars, sharing my cage with a once-beautiful young girl, now sullied, begrimed, and clothed in tattered rags.

Bruin strained at the ropes.

"He's strong, tie him with extra ropes," Abramo instructed. The lizardmen set to the work while Abramo knelt over Felligan and offered the same mercies.

"Why are you doing this," I asked him, but he paid no attention to the halfling in the cage.

Felligan awoke from wherever his soul had been wandering.

The room in which the warriors found themselves was once a private chapel to my lady Merikka. Now shards of rock lay scattered around four crude granite statues standing about the room in haphazard locations. In the southeast corner stood a polished jade figure of a snake with a female human head made of violet, brown, and green jade stones blended together. The superior craftsmanship of the serpent-lady idol set it apart from the other statues in the room. Felligan and Bruin recognized the image as the same type they had found in the dungeons beneath The Golden Grain a few hours earlier. The light of burning torches reflected off the idol, causing the colors to swirl and shimmer in an almost hypnotic pattern. The other statues in the room were crudely chipped from granite: ugly and unrecognizable figurines.

Near the idol, a small cage with iron bars held me and the listless figure of the young woman in tattered rags. I sat cross-legged beside her.

Abramo and the lizardmen left the room and, for a moment or so, we were all alone together.

"I thought we were dead," Felligan said to Bruin.

"Better off dead perhaps," I replied from within my cage. "Or at least as good as dead. But they don't want us dead. They want us alive. So the priest healed you both. He's been keeping this poor girl alive for months. They tortured me nearly to death ..."

Just then we heard the sound of the door opening again.

I craned my head around and saw two lizardmen carrying Myron's unconscious body into the room. He looked like even more corpse-like than the others. His ridiculous scarf no longer covered his misshapen face. Misha and Abramo follow after them. Misha knelt over him and removed her snakeshead amulet and magical ring from him. She said, "Father Abramo, it would please me to let this ugly trickster die. He disgusts me."

Abramo, who was both her elder and her superior, replied with insane gibbering, "A crocodile has many teeth, and snake mother desires them. But you may repay him the indignities you suffered however you please during the interrogation."

The lizardmen bound Myron's limp limbs tightly with ropes and gagged him with a rag lest he speak any spells. Misha reluctantly laid her hands on Myron to invoke divine healing. His body jerked, his wounds closed, and his eyes opened with a start. He fearfully took it all in, locking eyes with Misha, and then looking from Felligan, to me, to Bruin.

Bruin warned him, "The priests of Merikka have healed us. They mean to keep us alive. Father Tabor is here too."

Misha spat at Myron. "We are no longer priests of the farmer goddess. We serve another, and soon you will serve her too." She genuflected before the jade snake idol. "But first, the wizard and I have a score to settle. Bring him to the rack." The lizardmen stood Myron to his feet and dragged him out of the room. Misha and Abramo followed.

When the door closed, I explained to Felligan and Bruin, "They tortured me through the night, but I did not answer them a word. Just when I thought I could not resist for another moment, Merikka appeared to me. She sees the blasphemies and sacrilege committed in her house in the name of this fell reptile goddess, and Merikka promises to rescue us ... all of us. Help is on the way."

A few minutes later, we heard Myron's screams of agony, muffled behind closed doors. Misha took her revenge.

### **Father Tabor's Story**

How did I end up caged together with a teenage girl in the upper rooms of the house of my lady? You may remember that my

companions left me with Igglesworth and Bertram Beswill the innkeeper at The Golden Grain Inn while they searched the cellars below. Igglesworth, the merchant from Hookhill, betrayed my kindness and struck me a heavy blow from behind. I woke up minutes later in the custody of Constable Grover Ruskadal. I had been tossed into a corner of the constable's office where I lay crumpled like a sack and my hair wet with my own blood. Bertram and Igglesworth argued in low tones with the constable.

My hands were tied and blood still flowed freely from the blow to my head. I recovered myself and asked Merikka to stretch out her healing hand. Rather than try to speak and beg for mercy, I listened in on the conversation which went as follows:

Constable Ruskadal: How could Derek have been so foolish as to attack them in the night before the priests and I had arrived? And why did you let them stay together in the same room?

Bertram Beswill the Innkeeper: They would not be separated, and they insisted on staying together. Snigrot drugged their drinks. We looked in on them and saw that they all slept soundly under the sleep of the poison, or so it seemed to our eyes. We wanted to take them before the effects of the poison abated, but we were deceived.

Igglesworth the Merchant: It does not matter now. Even now, the corpse-eaters will be feasting on their flesh in the cellars. The important thing is that we have the priest; we must take him to the temple at once.

They brought me to the temple of Merikka. The gates to the temple were closed and barred from the inside. Ruskadal knocked until two servants opened. Each temple servant kept a ferocious, snapping wolf straining at a leash. They brought me into the sanctuary of my lady and handed me over to those apostates, Misha and Abramo. Goblins danced about the holy place, cackling and cursing. Foul smelling lizardmen hovered along the sides of the sanctuary, snarling and reeking. The goblins dragged me through the temple and up to the torture room. For several hours Father Abramo applied torments to me, bringing me to the point of death more than once, then healing me to bring me back to strength to begin his torments again. All the time he demanded to know who had sent me and how much they knew. He demanded information about everyone we had talked to in town. He wanted

to know about the proprietor of The Slumbering Serpent. He asked about Allen Calyborne and his wife. He asked about the old hermit in the wood. He wanted to know all about our conversations with the mayor, and he was especially interested in the half-elves in the cottage. He also demanded to know what had happened to the lizardmen in the old ale house, and he demanded to know how we had known to find them there. To all these inquiries I refused to answer as long as I could, but then I felt my will beginning to break as my mind slipped in and out of consciousness.

Suddenly, I felt complete peace wash through me. I no longer felt any pain at all. The room filled with sublime light, but Abramo did not see the light. He continued to work his craft and inflict greater pains upon my body, but I felt them not. Before me stood my lady appearing as a grey-haired noblewoman of great faded beauty, and she spoke to me: "Be strong Tabor and fear not, for I have many allies, and I will rescue you from the hands of these creatures. Do not hate your brother Abramo or your sister Misha; you must forgive them. They are not themselves, for they have fallen under the powerful enchantment of a blaspheming serpent."

Then the vision faded, and I found myself carried into the chapel where Misha knelt before the idol of the snake goddess. Abramo opened the cage and tossed me in with the girl, Cirilli by name. The girl told me all about her journey to and from the Rushmoors, and she told me about the snake goddess that dwells there. The snake goddess enchants her victims under a powerful spell. Even Cirilli's own father and mother had betrayed her and turned against her under the power of the snake's spell.

### **Cirilli's Story**

This is a brief telling of the tale that Cirilli related to me:

I am the daughter of Finla, the village shopkeeper, the firstborn of the family, an older sister of three brothers. We have lived in Orlane since I was a girl. My father and mother were good people, respected in the village, and everyone for miles around knows us well, for ours is the only store between Hochoch and Foredge.

Five months ago, my family and I were kidnapped in the middle of the night by our own village constable, whom we trusted. He came under the cover of darkness with

other men of the village, and they entered our home and seized us. My father and my brothers struggled and fought, but the intruders were stronger and armed to fight. I screamed and screamed, but no sound came out of my throat, for Misha casts a spell of silence to keep the nighttime work quiet. I saw her in my home with our kidnappers. I tried to call out to her, but no sound came from my lips. I saw no mercy on her face. This woman to whom I had entrusted my secret prayers!

They tied us and tossed us into the cart. The sons of the Suel widow delivered us to the temple. Abramo gave us to the lizardmen, and they imprisoned us in the dungeons below the temple. There we found other missing people from the village and the local farms.

After several days, weeks perhaps, Abramo and the reeking lizardmen took all of us by night, tied by ropes in a prisoner's train. We travelled for days, always by night. I had no shoes, and my feet bled. They led us into the Dim Forest, and then into marshes, and into the forgotten cellars of some sunken ruin.

We saw horrors. In that place an evil priest called Garath practices necromancy, raising the dead to serve him. He commands them, and the undead heed him. Garath worships the snake goddess. Father Abramo and Mother Misha bow and cower before him. They obey him like children heeding their father.

When our time came, we faced the snake goddess in her very lair. My father, my mother, and all my brothers fell under her spell at once, but I resisted the power of her eyes, and I would not be broken. I saw her wrap and coil herself about my brothers. She could not command me, and when she realized that I had not fallen beneath her spell, she imprisoned me.

I shared a cell with others who had been there already for months. They told me that those who do not fall under the snake goddess' gaze become food for the lizardmen. Garath raises up their bones, and they serve him as undead. So it goes in that place. Those who do not submit to the magic in life submit to it in death.

But Abramo would not leave me there. He fancied me, and he brought me back here. Now he keeps me in this cage as his own pet. For three months he has kept me here, wretched and half-starved. Often he has beaten and mistreated me.

I have omitted many of the details of her story. When she had told all these things, I said to her, "Do not fear daughter, help is coming." The help I hoped for did come, but by the time they reached Cirilli and I, they themselves needed rescuing.

### **The Madness of Abramo**

I told Bruin and Felligan all that had befallen me since we parted company the previous evening and how I had seen a vision of my lady. They told me of their own adventures beneath The Golden Grain Inn. All the while, we could hear the screams of torments our friend the illusionist endured only a few doors away as Abramo combed him for information and Misha avenged herself on him.

I told my companions Cirilli's story and how we came to share a cage in Abramo's chapel. Felligan spoke softly to Cirilli, "Tell us lass what you know of this idol of jade that stands before us. Is this the snake goddess you speak of? For we found a similar idol in a hidden shrine beneath The Golden Grain Inn not but a few hours past."

My cellmate replied, "The jade idol is a likeness of the snake goddess. She is called Explicitca Defilus."

Felligan asked her, "And what are these other images about the room?"

The girl replied, "In his madness, the high priest Abramo created these from the broken stones of a great granite image of Merikka which once stood in this chapel. He smashed the image and has chiseled the rubble into these fell things. This one is a crocodile, and those over there are great lizards, and that one is a coiled cobra."

I said, "I would scarce have been able to discern any of that from these crude stone blocks."

Cirilli agreed cynically, "Nor I if not for Abramo's gleeful pride. He has explained each of them to me more than once, and indeed, he never ceases to torment me with his raving. He is quite mad."

"He was once a good priest," I explained. "The madness that grips is a sign that his own true and hidden will struggles against the enchantment. In his heart of hearts he is good, but the enchantment forces him to do evil. Hence the madness."

Cirilli objected, "He may have been a good priest once. Once-a-time he helped my mother survive through a perilous pregnancy. When I came of age, he conducted the rites. But that good priest of Merikka is long dead. Abramo is a demon."

"Say not so!" I objected. "Father Abramo is not himself; he has merely fallen under the powerful enchantment of that blaspheming snake, not unlike your own good father and mother."

"Verily," the lass replied, "But when the time comes, I shall slay him nonetheless."

### **Abramo and Misha at Worship**

For most of the day the priests tortured my companions, one at a time. Misha took a special interest in causing Myron pain. Enchantment possessed her mind, but not so much as to cause her to forget her personal hatred or vindictive revenge. Despite the torments, none of my companions answered a word. This was, in my opinion, a miracle of Merikka's blessing. I believe she strengthened each of them, even as she had also strengthened me. When Abramo and Misha realized they could learn nothing from any of us, the lizardmen took my companions away to imprison them in the dungeons below the temple.

Abramo returned to the chapel where I remained caged up with the girl. In his arms he carried a huge and heavy book, ornately bound in leather and silver. He softly chanted to himself, and I realized he was in prayer. He passed close by our cage, close enough that I could recognize the text as our scripture, *A Most Worshipful Guide to the Benign Merikka*. This was a fine volume, fully illuminated in beautiful bright colors, but each of the illuminations had been crudely defaced. As Abramo turned the pages, I saw dried blood stains on the pages.



I called out to Abramo, "Brother. Read to me some of the holy words from the book you hold."

He nodded serenely and placed the book on a small altar in front of the snake goddess' idol and prostrated himself. He rose, returned to the book, and began to make as if he was reading aloud, but as he did, he blasphemed: "Snake mother coils about the legs. Snake mother slithers through the grass."

"Tut-tut," I scolded, "That's not what it says. I can see the page from here, and I know the very text you have lit upon:

Livestock will not thrive unless their master shows them  
care,  
Nor will seed sown in springtime sprout 'less fields be  
prepared."

A concerned look passed over the priest as if uncertainty gripped him. He squinted and puzzled over the text in front of him, as if trying to decipher a difficult language. The moment passed. He shook it off and slammed the book shut. Encouraged by that brief display of uncertainty on his part, I wondered if I might somehow break the trance.

I tried singing a few lines that I remembered from one of Abramo's own hymns:

The seasons bring thy bounty sown,  
Planting, Flocktime, Wealsun grown.  
Let idle hands take up their work;  
Let bounteous fields fill up Oerth.

Abramo moaned softly as if the memory of the hymn caused him physical pain.

"You will soon be singing a different song," Misha said. I had not noticed the priestess enter the chapel. She prostrated herself before the idol, rose, turned to face Cirlli and I, and said dully, "You will soon be singing the praises of Explitica Defilus."

"Snake mother is waiting for you," Abramo agreed with glee. "She is waiting for you!"

"Let her wait then. We have responsibilities and duties to attend to here," I preached. "You have let things fall into a terrible state in this parish. You have both been derelict in your duties. I see the

signs of neglect, lethargy, and idleness everywhere. Fields are left untended. Weeds choke the gardens. Vineyards are left to rot and spoil. That *Most Worshipful Guide* instructs us, 'The way of the lazy leads to famine, but the man of discipline stores away for winter.' Your allegiance to that reptile goddess has brought this whole parish to the brink of ruin."

I saw tears in Abramo's eyes as I spoke. For a moment, I thought I had pierced the trance, but then he laughed and exclaimed, "The crocodile sheds many tears!"

Misha waved me off, saying, "We no longer serve your farmer's wife."

Now I demanded, "Shame on you both! Look at this child you have caged up here like a bird! How can a priest do such shameful things?" Ignoring Misha, I shouted at Father Abramo, "As if it was not sacrilege enough to defile the temple of our lady Merikka and replace her image with this detestable idol, today you have tortured one of her priests. And what fell things have you done to this girl?"

Misha rose to Abramo's defense, interposing herself between me and her superior. She stood directly in front of the cage, staring down into my eyes, and she shook the bars as she said, "You know nothing Hobniz! You have no proof of anything except the word of this filthy child. The respectable citizens of Orlane know that you and your companions robbed and murdered the other guests at the The Golden Grain Inn last night, and then you came here to rob this place too. You are bandits! You are brigands! You assaulted us. We defended this holy place. That is all anyone will ever know, and our constable will testify against you. No one will believe you, and no one will believe the testimony of this filthy child."

Abramo chuckled, "Decent folk do not see indecency."

### **In the Reeking Dungeons**

My companions found themselves brought to the reeking chambers beneath the temple. The stinking lizardmen lead them blindfolded through a series of twists and turns through the sacred temple maze. As they stumbled along, the angry howls and growls and pleading moans filled their ears. Even blindfolded, Myron counted his steps and memorized the turns he made so that, if possible, he might find his way out again. At the end of the

maze they left the temple's construction and descended into a subterranean passage which twisted and descended until they found themselves slogging through deep mud, nearly up to their knees at points. They heard the cries and pleas of other prisoners now. One of their captors turned a heavy door on a hinge and pushed them inside a small chamber in which, thankfully, they found a dry floor. The door slammed shut behind them, and they heard the sound of a bar dropped into place. By means of a great deal of contorting, they were able to scrape the blindfolds from their eyes. It did not help. They were in the complete darkness of a sealed cave, ten feet deep and perhaps twenty feet wide at its broadest point. A solid heavy door sat in a heavy frame. Bruin threw himself against the door a few times, but Felligan and Myron stopped him. "Even if you break the bar and we escape the room, we will be struck down in the mud. We cannot fight them with our bare hands," Felligan scolded.

After some effort they managed to free their hands. With his hands finally free, Myron invoked his magics and created light by means of his spell craft so that they could have a look about their lodging place—a crudely cut cave room with a low ceiling. They were the only prisoners in the chamber, but they could hear moans and cries from an adjacent cell. Myron complained, "They took my spell book and my bag of components, so I cannot hope to study or relearn my spells. I have only a few cantrips."

The magical light faded, leaving them in the darkness. They slept on the dry floor. Time passed slowly in the dark. Their captors brought them neither food nor drink, and Bruin and Myron felt themselves growing weaker.

Felligan said, "I cannot see the sun nor the light of Luna or Celene, but my senses have not abandoned me. I have lived a century under the boughs of the Dim Forest where light of sun and moons seldom penetrate. We have been in the Temple of Merikka now for more than twenty-four hours, and even now the sun touches the western horizon."

### **Escape!**

They heard the sound of the lizardmen's feet slogging in the mud of the tunnel outside. The bar of the door lifted and the door began to open. Bruin launched himself at the door, flinging it open with such utter violence that it cracked against one of the lizardmen, striking him dead. As the troglodyte writhed in the

throes of death, he released an overpowering blast of his reeking stench and made them all buckle.

Bruin grabbed a second troglodyte by the head and twisted it in his great hands until he heard the sickening sound of bones snapping. A third struck at Bruin, but fighter's big arms grabbed the wiry creature. Felligan joined the attack, grappling the creature to the ground, and they all thrashed about in the darkness. The creature clawed at them, but Felligan had him pinned in the mud and would not let him go. Bruin's big hands found the creature's throat and crushed. The troglodyte released its great stench, stinging at their eyes.

Feeling around in the dark, they found the stone axes the lizardmen carried. Felligan's elvish eyes could see better in the darkness. He made out another cell door adjacent to theirs. He lifted the bar and opened the door, speaking into the darkness, "Be silent. We are here to rescue you. Come quickly and follow us silently."

Nowell Graven the dairyman, his wife, his mother-in-law, and his five daughters huddled in the darkness within. Felligan spoke briefly with them and quickly explained the situation to them. "We must move quickly and silently," he insisted. "There are fell beasts down here in the darkness. They can see us, and we cannot see them."

Nowell's women held hands. The little girls whimpered in the darkness. Slowly my companions made their way through the mud. Bruin and Felligan lead the way until they entered the maze. Myron whispered, "I can navigate us through the maze. I counted our steps and all of our turns."

Myron took the lead and brought them through the darkness. They found the door that entered the maze from above unlocked, and they open it quietly. Light poured in from the chamber outside, dazzling their unaccustomed eyes.

The Graven women all broke into a cacophony of shrieks. Bruin and Felligan spun about on time to see a hulking shadow of a great beast (an ogre Felligan says) lifting one of the screaming little girls by the hair. Felligan leapt onto the ogre, swinging a lizardman's blunt stone axe against the armored monster. The ogre replied by dropping the girl and hefting a heavy mace. Felligan dodged the poorly aimed swing. As soon as the ogre released his hold on Nowell Graven's daughter, the women

scrambled to flee through the door. Bruin shoved them aside in his rush to reach the ogre. Felligan's second axe blow found its mark and the ogre howled in pain. He struck a glancing blow to the elf. Bruin made his way to flank the ogre and, with a mighty crack, sunk his stone axe into the ogre's forehead, cleaving its skull. The ogre fell with a thud.

### **The Recapture of Misha**

Bruin took up the ogre's mace and led the flight up the stairs to emerge through a trap door in the floor of Misha's bedroom. She was not in the room. Myron rummaged through her things and retrieved his spell book and other personal items. "Get the dairyman and his heifers out of here; and then we try again to retrieve our priest," Myron said.

They left Misha's room, making their way through the darkened hall of statues and into the main sanctuary. Expecting to face more lizardmen, goblins, or evil priests, they were surprised and relieved to find themselves face to face with Dorian, Llywillan, and Allen Clayborne.

One more character stepped out of the shadows. The old hermit Ramne leaned on his staff.

"How have you come to be here?" Felligan asked as he searched from face to face.

"We are here to rescue you," Dorian explained.

"The mayor sent us," Llywillan added. "He is concerned for your wellbeing, but I see that you have taken care of yourself."

"Where is little Father Tabor," Ramne inquired after my welfare.

The conversation cut short as Misha strode into the room and announced coldly, "You cannot be here with weapons, and the temple is closed for the evening. You will have to leave now." Then she saw Bruin and Myron and Felligan, covered with mud and blood, reeking of troglodyte, and she saw the Graven family, cowering back in the shadows. She took it all in, turned, and retreated from the room.

"Catch her!" Felligan shouted, and he was already sprinting after her. She had a head start, but the elf was faster. He pursued her through the hall of statues, overtook her, tackled her to the

ground, and tried to keep her from shouting. No use. A panel door in the wall opened and three monks sprang out into the hall of statues. Llywillan, Dorian, and Allen collided with the monks, and furious combat ensued. Misha wriggled out of Felligan's arms. Dorian's long sword killed one monk. Allen dropped another. Dorian killed the last.

Felligan was back on the chase, pursuing Misha as she fled toward the stairs to the second floor. He overtook her on the stairway and dragged her down again, grappling her to the floor. This time Allen was there to assist with a length of rope. They quickly tied her up, gagged her, and delivered her to Dorian.

Felligan instructed Dorian, "Stay here with the hermit and the farmer's family. Bind up your wounds and do not let the priestess escape!"

### **Battle with the Guardians**

The rest of them hastened up the stairs to confront the skeleton guards. Reanimated and reassembled by whatever evil magic quickened the bones, the skeletons leapt to the attack again. A quick battle took place. Myron hung back, letting the fighting men smash their way through the undead guards. He used that short time to sort through his bag of tricks. Felligan smashed at the boney visages of death with the stone axe he still wielded. Bruin swung the ogre's great blunt mace. With the help of Llywillan and Allen, the skeletons quickly shattered. As the last skeleton fell to pieces, Felligan picked up two abandoned swords. He cast aside the bony fingers that still gripped the hilts and tossed one of the swords to Bruin.

Exchanging one quick glance, the fighters broke into the torture room. Once again, the secret doors in the wall sprang open and the goblins rushed out to attack. This time the fighting men were prepared, and this time they had more manpower for the fight. Felligan struck with the undead sword, and he sliced the first goblin down as it came. Myron fumbled with a spell. The goblin scimitars cut into all of them. Allen and Felligan stood back to back, striking down any goblins that approached them. The attacking blades seemed to come from every direction. When Felligan and Allen dropped the last of the goblins, the floor of the torture chamber ran with blackish goblin blood.

Felligan and Myron turned to check the condition of their wounded companions. Allen produced a healing potion, held it up, and said, "A gift from Ramne the hermit."

Myron examined the vial. "It has two draughts," he observed. They administered the healing magic to their wounded companions, Bruin and Llywillan. The potion quickly did its work. The heroes rose.

### **Abramo's Chamber**

They came to the quarters of Father Abramo. The walls were scratched, stained, and covered with strange markings. Loose chips of stone lay scattered on the floor. As the warriors looked about, a coin was tossed around the corner and sudden silence fell. Myron realized at once that a magical silence had fallen, intended to silence spellcasters. He tried to warn the others, but no sound came from his mouth. At that moment, Abramo came hurtling around the corner and into the silence, bearing a shield and mace.

The priest came on ferocious and terrifying. Father Abramo knocked Myron a blow to the head with his mace and dropped him like a stone. The ensuing fight felt unreal and dreamlike in the magically imposed total silence. Blows were exchanged, and the fighters beat the lone priest back. He fled, and they pursued, leaving Myron's inert form sprawled on the floor.

The fighters pursued the priest into his private room. Abramo decorated his room in a bizarre fashion. They took in a dirty straw pallet on the floor, two soft and expensive armchairs at a low table, a beautiful robe hanging on the wall above a battered, locked chest. The floor was strewn with muddy rags. An exquisitely crafted wooden desk had been placed near the northeast corner of the room. At various points around the walls, small iron hooks for hanging tapestries had been set into the stone. The rags on the floor were barely recognizable as tapestries. At one time, these showed pastoral harvest scenes in honor of my lady. The desktop was covered with insane scribbles in the draconic tongue: "Snake mother..." and, "A crocodile has many teeth."

Abramo waited for them on the opposite side of the chamber, outside the area of the silence spell. He cast a spell, and a great mace appeared in the air, tumbling toward the warriors. The

spiritual weapon struck Allen a full blow. Llywillan launched an arrow across the room and stuck his target directly in the chest. Father Abramo fell backward through the open door which he hurled shut against the intruders and barred from the inside.

Bruin threw himself against the door. He and Felligan supposed that the priest could heal his injuries even as he had healed theirs in the torture chamber. They wanted to reach him before he had the opportunity. With two or three blows of his heavy ogre-mace, the great bear broke the door open and tumbled in. Felligan followed behind him.

### **Battle with Father Abramo**

While these battles raged, Cirilli and I listened from within our cage. I fancied I could hear Bruin's shouts. I realized that my companions were, once again, trying to fight their way through to rescue me. I squeezed the girl's hand and said, "You see there. I told you help would come."

The abrupt silence occasioned by Father Abramo's spell disquieted us, and I prayed fervently for the safety of my companions.

The door of the chapel opened abruptly. Father Abramo darted in with arrow protruding from his chest and slammed it behind him, dropping the bar. He sank to his knees before the idol, laid his hands on himself, closed his eyes, and spoke words of healing. All the while, heavy crashing blows smote at the door.

The door burst open. Bruin came through first. Father Abramo was back on his feet. The spiritual mace came sailing through the air struck Bruin up the side of the head. Behind the mighty Bruin came Felligan, and after him, Llywillan with another arrow already knocked on the string. Allen came last.

Father Abramo spoke a brief word which I recognized as a prayer to induce fear. It seemed to have no effect on Bruin or the half-elf, but Allen dropped his weapons, threw himself into the corner, and huddled under his cloak.

The spiritual mace struck Bruin another heavy blow.

Llywaine composed his shot and launched another arrow across the room. The arrow struck the priest dead on, lodging in his chest right next to the first.



Father Abramo turned to flee, and as he did, he passed by the cage in which Cirilli and I were still locked. Cirilli reached through the bars and bravely took hold of the cleric's robe, grabbing him by the sleeve and pulling him back with both hands. Knocked off balance, Father Abramo stumbled back against the bars of the cage, allowing Cirilli to grasp him all the more tightly. Felligan and Llywaine both delivered blows to the priest while Cirilli held him fast. The cleric collapsed to the floor, trying to ward off any further blows with his hands. Cirilli extended her leg through the bars, placed her bare foot on the cleric's throat, and stomped down with all her weight. Father Abramo thrashed about briefly and died.



### **Council in the Dining Hall**

Abramo's spells died with him. The magical mace vanished, and the enchanting fear which had so paralyzed Allen lifted. In only a few moments my companions had the cage unlocked.

Ramne and I attended to the wounded with prayers and spellbinding. I found Myron, pale and corpse-like but not yet dead. I prayed the breath of life back into his body with the healing of Merikka.

Meanwhile Bruin, Allen, and Felligan hunted down the rest of the lizardmen slithering about in the dungeon did away with them. We also captured the remaining temple servants and placed them in custody in the dungeon along with Misha. We slaughtered the wolves they had used to patrol the grounds, and we sealed the outer gates.

That very night, I rededicated the temple to its deity. We began the process of clearing the corpses and purifying the rooms. We removed the idol of the snake goddess and shattered it at the feet of Merikka. I broke down all the altars which had been used for the worship of the snake; I smashed them there and threw their rubble out of the holy house and raised a heap. I broke Abramo's cultic stones in pieces and threw them onto the heap, along with the shards of the snake idol, and we burned the bodies of the lizardmen atop it all.

We kept Nowell Graven and his family with us for their own protection. I showed his daughters the well-stocked temple kitchen, and they set to work to prepare an evening meal for all of us. Although it was now the middle of the night, Dorian summoned the mayor to attend a covert meeting in the now-secure temple of Merikka. Dorian returned with both the mayor and the mayor's personal guard, Mr. Stoutheart.

We met in the temple's dining hall where we ate together around a great table. Those present included myself and my companions, Rehnnee Bruin, Myron, and Felligan, and those folk of Orlane: the ranger Allen Clayborne, the reclusive hermit Ramne, Cirilli Finla the storekeeper's daughter, and Mayor Zakarias Ormond and his man, Traver Stoutheart, and also the half-elven brothers Dorian and Llywillan of Furyondy.

Myron and I laid out the situation, explained all our findings, and related the details. The mayor listened to our tale, but when he had occasion to speak, he voiced his suspicions about the old hermit.

Myron dismissed the mayor's concerns about Ramne with a wave of his hand and said, "We have a decision to make. We have in our custody a priestess still locked in the lizard goddess' trance. The lord mayor has a town of citizens still locked in the same trance. No one knows how many men and women between here and the Hookhill have also under the trance. The only cure, so far as I know, is to break the enchantment at its source. If you want to kill the snake, cut off its head! We must find our way to this creature's lair."

"With what weapons shall we fight a goddess?" Allen asked.

"She is no goddess," Ramne interjected, "She will die if you strike her down. Then, and only then, will her victims be released from the trance."

“Cirilli, can you lead us to the lair of the snake goddess?” I asked the shopkeeper’s daughter.

“I do not know the way, and even if I did, I would never return there. Not for anything,” the girl said with a visible shudder.

“Cirilli, be strong and tell us what you do know. How can we find our way to the lair of this creature, and what will we find there if we go?” I asked.

“I will tell you what I do know,” she said bravely. “You will find the place four days travel from Orlane. One day crossing the farms. Two days passing beneath the boughs of the Dim Forest. One day wading through the Rush Moors. Then you will come to a place on which the foundations of a forgotten tower have crumbled away, and below that place you will find tunnels dug into the earth, reeking of lizardmen, for the lizardmen dwell there in that place. Those passages are guarded by men under the snake’s enchantment, and therein are many foul creatures of the Rushmoors. Moreover, you will find the foul high priest of the lizard goddess. He has obtained the power to animate the dead; he fancies that he builds an army of undead for his goddess to command. In those lower halls of mud and dank filth you will find a certain flooded chamber like a wide cave which must be crossed on a great wooden raft. At the far end you will find the snake woman. Those who meet her gaze fall under her enchantment and ever after perform her bidding.”

I said, “I must find my way and do what I can to avenge the honor of my lady and to avenge those whose blood has been spilled.” Motioning to Cirilli, I added, “I must also avenge the wrongs committed against this daughter and, if I can, set her family free from the cursed enchantment.”

I turned to Ramne and asked him, “How will we find our way to the snake’s layer?”

Ramne produced his white weasel from inside his robes and said, “Whiskers knows the way.”

The mayor frowned and began to express his reservations about Ramne once again, but Myron silenced him and said, “You’re only job now is to outfit us for a mission to the snake’s layer.”

Ramne said, "I am just an old man, but this old man still knows a trick or two. I will accompany the priest and his men and do my best protect them and ensure the success of their mission."

Assuming a role of authority which did not belong to him, Myron told the mayor, "A day after we leave, begin the arrests. Use only your most trusted men. Round up everyone you suspect of collusion with the cult and any who are under the foul influence. Apprehend them swiftly before they have time to warn one another. Incarcerate them here, in the dungeons beneath the temple, and keep them under careful guard. If we succeed, they will be released from the spell. Even if we fail, they will be unable to work further mischief."

The mayor's mouth fell open. He was not accustomed to being told what he must do and how he must do it. Before he could object, Dorian said, "My lord mayor, hear the wisdom in these words. Llywaine and I will travel with them on your behalf to be your eyes and ears and see the matter through."

### **The Party Sets Out**

We gathered at The Slumbering Serpent the next evening to discuss who should go and who would remain behind. My companions were all willing to see the matter concluded. Besides, I still had the three of them on retainer. Allen Clayborne remained in Orlane to assist the mayor in the arrests and to protect his wife and children from the cult. He and his wife agreed to take Cirilli into their home where his wife could nurse her back to health. Moreover, he took responsibility for watching over the temple and caring for the prisoners. We agreed that the temple should remain closed until I returned and could reinstate the sacred rites.

Dorian and Llywaine agreed to travel with us as the mayor's men and trusted friends. The old hermit Ramne was to serve as our guide, relying on the instincts and tracking skills of his animal familiar, the weasel he called Whiskers. Admittedly, this seemed like the most dubious part of the plan. At least we knew that we needed to reach the Dim Forest. From there we hoped to find the path to the marshes that Cirilli described. Felligan remarked, "It's not that I distrust the weasel, but I prefer to rely on my own skills to follow the trail signs."

Ramne was too old to walk the distance so the mayor lent us a pony on which the old hermit could ride. We packed and repacked our supplies, checked and double-checked all that we

could carry on the road. Before first light, we gathered again in the common room of The Slumbering Serpent, preparing to set out. Balba, the innkeeper's wife, prepared an early breakfast, and Allen Clayborne and his wife came to see us off. Allen offered a warning: "The constable and his officers have fled the town ahead of you. They were seen fleeing toward the Dim Forest. They may be on their way to warn the snake goddess about all that has transpired."

Alarmed at this, I exclaimed, "Then there is no time to waste at all. We need to set off at once."

We left the village by the road to the east as the sun began to brighten the horizon. We knew well that many eyes watched as we made our way out of town, even at that early hour. The smith was already up and stoking the fire at his forge. He cursed at us as we passed by the smithy.

### **Across the Plains of Farvale**

We spent the first day of travel from Orlane crossing the grassy plains of the Barony of Farvale. Felligan led the way with Dorian and Llywaine. Though Felligan was older than the brothers, his pure elven blood made him appear to be yet a youth. The two half-elven brothers treated the young elf like a younger brother, and Felligan took it in good humor.

Ramne followed them on his pony, and I trotted along beside him, chatting with the hermit about all manner of things. Myron followed behind us, interjecting his own obnoxious opinions and and unbidden observations into our conversation. Rehnnee Bruin brought up the rear, leading the pack mule. I knew that the road we followed led through the Dim Forest and on to Hookhill, a destination I still needed to pursue after settling matters in Orlane.

The further from Orlane we travelled, the fewer signs of civilization we saw. Felligan constantly watched the road for recent prints, and he quickly discerned that four or five booted men walked the road ahead of us less than a full day earlier: Constable Ruskadal and his men.

We saw abandoned farms and other fields which had gone fallow and unkempt, homesteads where haunted-eyed farmers stared at us as emptily we passed by. A few hours before nightfall, we came

to a small village, a cluster of houses, called Tamlin. We found no inn or lodging in Tamlin, and we thought it best not to stay in the village in any case. The entire village gave every indication of the presence of the cult. We continued on toward the forest.

An hour out of Tamlin we left behind any traces of habitation, and the great brooding trees of the Dim Forest appeared on the horizon. We found a place of partial cover some distance off the road and beside a wholesome stream. We prepared to camp down for the night. Ramne's pony and our pack mule set to grazing. We raised our shelters and collected some brush wood for fire.

While I recited my prayers, Myron studied his magic and smoked his pipe. Ramne fussed over a cooking fire.

The Godsdays night shone brightly, the eleventh of the moon of Harvester; Luna rose full while Celene waxed. The air felt warm and filled with the summer sounds of crickets and frogs. When we had gathered around the fire, we asked Ramne to reveal to us the truth of his identity.

Myron drew at his pipe and said in his annoying know-it-all tone of voice, "You are not merely a hermit, but a wizard of no small power. That much I readily perceive. But we would know more of your story."

Ramne replied evasively, "Merely a meddler in magic, hardly a wizard of any great power. When I was young, I learned a few spells and a few tricks from a great wizard, but that was long ago."

Myron replied, "Keep your secrets if you like, but I should like to learn a few spells and a few tricks from you I think."

Attention turned to Dorian and Llywaine. I asked them, "How did you come to know the lord mayor?" The brothers exchanged glances and laughed. Dorian replied, "We fought with Zakarias Ormond in the Troll Wars decades ago. When trouble came to Orlane, he summoned us by means of an urgent letter." Dorian fished the letter from his pack and read it aloud:

Dorian and Llywillan,

Much has transpired since we fought side by side in the Troll War. I hope, sometime, to have an opportunity to relate some of those happier matters. My purpose now, sadly, is to ask, nay, beg, my courageous comrades to aid

my people in a time of dire need. I cannot explain the danger that threatens Orlane, for I know not its true nature, but I do know that, unless it can somehow be stopped, this evil will consume my little village and its families. We will vanish without leaving any footprint in the dust of history. Some sinister force works here, and it seems all the more frightening by the fact that its true nature remains concealed in a web of fear and suspicion. I plead with you, come to Orlane, lend your skills to uncovering this menace, that it may finally be destroyed. Your comrade at arms, Zakarias Ormond, Mayor of Orlane.

“That does sound ominous and cryptic,” Myron remarked.

Llywaine explained, “We did not know that Zak had become a lord mayor until we received the letter. We came at once, driven I think as much by curiosity as by old loyalties.”

We took turns at watches through the night. Luna sank in the west. Celene still cast her ghostly light until rosy dawn began to warm the sky above the dark line of the Dim Forest.

We were back on the trail going east before the sun had fully risen. The ground was harder, and Felligan could no longer make out the tracks of the constable and his men. He asked Ramne, “What does Whiskers say? Still on the right path?”

“Still on the right path,” Ramne answered absently.

By the time the sun began to dip toward afternoon, we came to the outskirts of the Dim Forest. The road led beneath the heavy canopy of the trees. My companions looked apprehensively into the noonday darkness ahead.

### **The Dim Forest**

Although I had lived in Hochoch for many years, I had never walked beneath the shadow of the Dim Forest and its heavy canopy before. The trees of the Dim Forest are ancient, gnarled old trunks of immense height. They crowd one another closely, and their dark boughs and leafy crowns form such a tight ceiling that the sunlight scarcely penetrates.

Dim, greenish light draped the path, and the spaces between the trees in every direction looked dark as if the sun had already set. The lack of sunlight allowed for only sparse underbrush between the trunks. Moss dangled from the limbs above our heads, like

great beards hanging from the ancient trees. The forest is a hushed wood; the common sounds of squirrels and birds are absent.

Felligan was at home in those woods and in his natural element, but the rest of us felt a sense of claustrophobia as the trees pressed in around us. The darkness felt foreboding, and the mind summoned up stories about the dark things that creep in the dark wood.

Felligan observed wryly, "This wood is but a finger of the great forest at its narrowest. To the north the forest stretches beyond reckoning, east and west, and far to the north, as far as the Barrier Peaks. There are places where no light of sun penetrates to the forest floor at all, and the forest lies in perpetual darkness, even in the winter."

"This perpetual twilight is dim enough for me," I said.

Several hours passed. We knew that the sun must have been dipping low on the horizon. The forest began to darken even more. Felligan returned from where he had been scouting ahead, and he motioned for the party to stop. He said, "An ogre comes this way." He called to Dorian and Llywane, "String up your bows." The elf and the two half elves headed off into the woods, leaving the rest of us standing in the middle of the road. A few moments later we heard a muffled bellow in the woods. A short time later, Felligan and the half-elves returned. Dorian reported, "We planted two arrows in him and he fled."

Felligan said, "He will not return this way too soon."

### **Wolves and Undead**

We made a camp not far from the road and lit a merry fire. As the night went on, the sound of wolves calling to one another in the trees drifted closer and closer. The pony and the pack mule snorted and stamped nervously. We kept the fire burning bright.

An hour or so later, Felligan shook us all awake. He said, "The wolves have circled us about." Wolves had drawn up close around our camp. We could see the light of the fire glinting off red eyes in the darkness.

We were all awake except for Ramne who rolled over and went back to sleep despite Felligan's efforts to rouse him. He slept peacefully oblivious to the danger, while some five wolves took up



positions in the darkness. With the keen sight of the elves, Felligan and the half-elves could make out their forms despite the darkness. Felligan put an arrow to the string, but the shot went wide. The staring eyes never blinked. A second arrow found its mark and we heard a yelp in the woods. Dorian and Llywane launched arrows too, and the wolves withdrew for a while, but soon they returned to take up their positions, this time closer than before.

The pony and the mule rolled their eyes anxiously. Felligan spoke to them and calmed them. One great wolf drew close enough to be visible in the firelight. Rehnnee Bruin took up his great sword and strode out toward the beast. The wolf eyed him and abruptly leapt through the air for his throat. Bruin swung his mighty sword in a great rush and decapitated the wolf in midair. He turned to flash us a happy grin, and as he did, another wolf leapt at him from behind.

Felligan let an arrow fly, sending it yelping into the night. Llywane's arrow also found a wolf in the dark. It squealed in sudden shocked pain and went off yelping into the silent woods.

For the rest of the night, the wolves no longer bothered us, but other visits found their way to our camp fire. In the last watch, Felligan alone remained still awake. He heard the sound of movement and then the approach of creatures from the road. He quickly woke us, and we sprang to our feet and grabbed our weapons—except for Ramne who rolled over and fell back asleep. There was no time to try to wake the old man. The undead were upon us.

A small troop of skeletons, animated by some foul magic, stepped into the light of our fire, drawn toward it like moths to the flame. They rose up out of the darkness. Horrid grinning faces of death drew up all about. My companions had already faced creatures like this in the temple of Merikka, but I felt as if I still slept in some horrid nightmare.

Bruin stepped forward to meet the host, once again wielding his great sword, and he began to cut them down like a man harvesting sheaves of grain.

I lifted the sickle of my lady and declared, "We are servants of Merikka." The creatures turned their attacks against us. I received a wound across the shoulder when boney fingers from a clawing hand swiped across me. Bruin smashed through another heap of

bones. I raised my sickle again and commanded, "Return to the earth!" To my own surprise, the invocation availed. By the power of benevolent Merikka, the skeletons fell to the ground as heaps of lifeless bones.

"From where did these come?" Rehnnee Bruin asked, "We fought skeletons in the temple too!"

Felligan shook his head and said, "Fell things wander these woods at night. Perhaps they came like the wolves, drawn to the light, or perhaps ..." His words trailed off, but Myron finished the thought: "Or perhaps they were sent as a welcoming party from the snake goddess."

Myron and I examined the bones. Myron said, "The rags still clinging to these unhappy bones suggest that these were simple peasants, such as we have met among the farmers around Orlane. The state of these bones indicate that they have not been dead more than a year."

We dug a shallow pit beneath an oak tree, collected the bones, and tossed them into the pit. I sprinkled holy water on the bones and then we threw earth over them.

The darkness began to soften, indicating that the sun had cleared the horizon. Ramne woke up, rested and refreshed. The rest of the party had hardly slept at all. We fixed a breakfast from our supplies and prepared to break camp.

### **The Old Road**

A few hours further down the road, Whiskers leapt from Ramne's shoulder and scooted off the road, scurrying onto a narrow path that veered off sharply to the south. Felligan examined the path and immediately identified the tracks of the constable and his men. Not only that, bony footprints indicated that the skeletons we faced the previous night came up that very path. Searching further, he discerned the telltale sign of troglodyte prints. Felligan said, "The weasel is not mistaken. This is our path. Here we leave the road."

He went to scout ahead.

Our path split off from the main road to Hookhill and veered to the south. The trail was easy to follow. Many feet had trodden it of late. The trees grew thick and close along the path, but due to the lack of underbrush, we could walk two or three abreast. At

points we found the remains of pavers, indicating that once, long ago, that backwoods path was a road bed, now reclaimed by the forest. At some points, the trail climbed over rough ground or passed along a narrow edge, but never so tight or steep as to obstruct the way for the mule or the pony. Although I could not see the sky through the canopy of moss and leaves, I felt a summer thunderstorm brewing above us.

The trees pressed in on either side of us. Felligan scouted the way ahead, occasionally returning to check on our progress. The heat of the day made the air heavy and choking. Perspiration poured off Bruin. All of us were sweating and chafing beneath the armor. We stopped for lunch in a small clearing, unloaded the animals and fed them from the grain we had brought. They had nothing for grazing except moss. I had an uneasy sense that we were being watched. After a short rest, we press on.

### **A Great Storm**

The faint sound of thunder rumbled above the trees. The heat of the day continued to make the air thick and heavy, but now the land dropped in elevation quickly. The trees had begun to thin out ever so slightly, and here and there we spied a patch of darkening sky and occasional flash of lightning. Muddy little streams frequently cut across the path. As the afternoon wore on, Felligan warned, "This storm is about to break upon us. We should set up our camp and take some shelter beneath the overhang of this rocky scarp."

So we did, and not a moment too soon. The thunder began to boom and roar and the light flashed in the boughs above. We heard the sound of rain pounding hard against the forest's canopy. Soon the water ran off the leaves and down the moss, soaking everything around. The storm thundered on more loudly and we heard the rushing of the wind and the beating of the rain in the canopy high above. The boughs of the ancient trees swayed and creaked. Between the flashes of light, the forest remained in thick darkness.

We did our best to remain dry and enjoy a soggy meal from the rations, but the storm showed no sign of abating. The animals were frightened by the thunder and needed some coaxing. Bruin and the half-elves helped Felligan gather branches enough to throw together a crude shelter, but it did not keep the rain out. The wind and rain washed away the heat of the day, and soon we were wet, cold, and shivering. No fire seemed possible in those conditions, but Ramne used his spell craft to dry some wood and

start a blaze. The storm lasted longer than the dry wood. For a while, we kept an oil lamp lit. Seven hours later, only a few hours shy of midnight, the rain stopped, but continued to drip incessantly from the leaves. The wind still beat against the forest canopy. The thunder and lightning was distant. I encouraged everyone to try to get some sleep.

An hour later the storm had moved on toward Geoff lands, but the woods still rained with the constant sound of water dripping from uncountable leaves.

### **Encounter with the Serpent**

Felligan, the sleepless wood elf, took up a perch on the rocky scarp above our camp, watching and listening in the darkness while the rest of us slept. At some point in the night, a faintly audible slithering through the bed of wet leaves caught his ear. He listened more closely, crept quietly toward the sound, drawing his long sword. A hiss. He was certain. Some enormous serpent-like creature had slithered up to the camp. He could make out its dark shape, rearing up like the snake goddess idol, and he realized that it saw him too. With a shout he leapt on it with his long sword drawn, and so he smote the serpent. The blow of his blade hardly scratched its scaly hide. Lightning fast, the serpent was on him and he felt a venomous bite close on the back of his neck. His sword fell from his hand. The serpent coiled around him.

Whether I slept or not I do not know, but when I heard Felligan's voice I leapt to my feet, shouting to the others, "Light! Light! Give us some light!" The pony whinnied wildly, pulling at its tethers. Myron spoke a word of magic and suddenly his quarterstaff beamed with light, blinding us at first with its brilliance. As our eyes recovered from the shock, we beheld the horrid serpent creature coiled about Felligan.

I saw the creature, not twenty feet from our sorry shelter. Like the idol Abramo served in the temple of Merikka, the beast had the body of a great black-scaled serpent but the head of a horrid woman. She had wrapped herself around Felligan and sunk her teeth into his neck.

Her witch's head bit at the back of the ranger's neck. While we scrambled for weapons, Ramne stood, lifted his hands, and sent out invisible arrows of magic flying from his fingers. They tore into the flesh of the serpent. She screamed a horrible screeching sound and released Felligan's limp body. At once she was

slithering away into the darkness. Bruin went to pursue her but Ramne shouted, "No Bruin. We must stay together."

I knelt over Felligan. The wound was deep and cruel and ran with venom. Invoking Merikka and all the gods of goodness and light, I prayed for miraculous healing. The wound seemed to close, but the poison racked through the elf's body, making him shake and tremble. His skin turned ghastly pale.

Bruin helped Felligan back to our small shelter. With everyone inside, Ramne spoke a spell of protection over us. I added my own prayers for protection and specifically a ward of protection from evil. We lit the lamps.

Myron asked Ramne, "What is that creature. Tell us what you know of it."

Ramne replied, "This kind is called a naga witch. In a time now forgotten, an evil sorcerer of immense and cruel power held sway over these lands. He commanded great armies, and all men feared him, for he walked among the living dead. He created fell beasts and summoned abominations to serve him. The wicked things that haunt the Dim Forest, the Rushmoors, and the Lortmil Mountains are the last remnants of his minions."

Myron observed, "You speak of Vecna."

Ramne scolded him, "Do not speak that name. Not here. Not in these parts of the world."

We fell silent for a while, listening to the drip, drip, drip from the trees.

I broke the silence, "Tell us about the naga. What kind of creature is it?"

Ramne explained, "The naga witch is a powerful spell caster. Those upon whom she gazes fall under her enchantment and must ever after do her bidding. She possesses dangerous, powerful spell craft and, it appears, a vile, poisonous bite. We have been very lucky tonight. I hope that luck does not run out."

Not all of us were so lucky. Felligan shuddered and shook in his sleep. His skin burned with fever.

Rehnnée Bruin asked, "Is this naga witch the one who holds the people of Orlane under an enchantment? Is she the one we have come to slay, or is there more than one?"

Ramne answered, "There is no doubt my Ren friend. No doubt at all. She is the witch we have come to slay."

### **Another Summer Storm**

The night wore on toward morning. We dozed now and again. Felligan's fever broke. His elven constitution sustained him. He felt weak and sickly. We were all exhausted from the storm and the lack of sleep, but as soon as the faint light of morning in the Dim Forest appeared, Ramne insisted we must break camp at once, "We cannot stay here! The naga witch will certainly return for us."

We broke camp and loaded Ramne onto the pony. Felligan was up on his feet, but he looked pale as death. He examined the ground and easily found the track left behind by the naga witch. Now we were in pursuit, and her path led us on the same trail south.

The air hung hot and heavy, full of steaming mists. In the distance, we heard the thunder of another approaching storm. Within an hour, the storm was upon us with thunder, lightning, and rain pouring down. Our path, which had been descending sharply for the last few miles, turned to a cascading stream. After an hour in the rain, we were cold and miserable. A nearby lightning strike and thunder clap spooked the pony and Ramne was thrown to the ground. The pony bolted off into the trees. Felligan staggered after it. The rest of us picked up Ramne from the ground. The old man was shaken but unhurt. Felligan returned with the pony.

We decided to wait out the storm under a nearby thicket which seemed to offer a dryer patch of ground. We did our best to make a soggy breakfast. The thunder abated but the rain continued relentlessly. We decided to press on.

Myron said, "Ramne has told me that a naga witch possesses the powers of a mighty mage. It might at any time launch a magic missile, cast a lightning bolt, or torch us all with a fireball. We should spread out as we advance so that, at least, we should not make an easy target for a single spell."

We established a marching order. Felligan scouted ahead. Dorian and Llywaine followed him. Then I came leading the mule. Ramne,

came next, mounted on the pony; Myron followed behind Ramne, and Bruin brought up the rear. We endured a miserable trudge through the rain and mud. Near the end of the day the rain finally stopped and the clouds started to break. The trees had thinned out to the point where we could see welcome patches of clear sky here and there. At the end of the day, the trail finally descended from the trees and opened up onto the Rushmoors.

As the daylight began to take on the colors and hues of sunset, I emerged from the wood where the elven folk waited. The others arrived shortly, except for Bruin who still trailed behind us. We stood on the edge of broad and fetid marsh—the northern edge of the Rushmoors.

Felligan said, “The trail continues.”

“One need not be a ranger to find this trail,” Myron observed. The reeds had been crushed out of the way to open a passage. But it looked as if we would be wading through mud, muck, and water. Thick rushes, reeds, and cattails, interspersed with patches of scummy water and muskeg stretched as far as the eye could see. In the warm colors of the setting sun, the pools of the Rushmoors reflected oranges, reds, and purples which made the marsh appear enchanted and beautiful. As the darkness fell, an innumerable host of fireflies lit the marshes, transforming them into something resembling a blinking, swirling, sky of stars.

“Where is Bruin?” Myron asked.

I looked back up into the wood, but I did not see him coming.

Ramne asked gravely, “When was the last time you saw him?”

“An hour ago,” Myron replied, “Not long after the rain stopped.”

An anxious moment or two passed in which we imagined all the evil fates that might have befallen our friend. Then Bruin’s big silhouette appeared in the woods. He came meandering down the path as if he had not a care to concern him.

### **Ramne’s Pyre**

We made our camp beneath the trees as the sun set and Luna rose in the east. All of our things were wet. The temperature was dropping sharply, and we shivered in our wet cloaks. We decided to risk a fire to dry out. The wood was wet and we needed to use spells to ignite it.

Llywaine took up a post in the trees above to keep a sharp watch while the rest of us tried to sleep for a few hours. An uneasy sleep settled over me. She was near. I felt her watching our camp. My skin crawled with the certainty of it. I could feel her slithering near to us, slithering through the reeds, circling about, slithering among the trees, watching our fire, studying us. I wondered, "Why does she not strike?"

The morning came cold, bitter, and with sorrow. Ramne was dead. Bruin sat morosely outside the camp, with his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck, secured to a tree like a dog on a leash.

Myron explained, "Bruin killed Ramne in the night. Yesterday, when the big stupid ox lagged behind us in the woods, he encountered her and she enchanted him and told him to kill the wizard. I woke to the sound of him wringing the life out of Ramne in the night. I realized at once what must have happened, and I dispelled the magic of the enchantment."

Bruin protested, "I didn't ..."

Turning to Bruin, Myron snapped, "You big stupid ox. You fell under an enchantment. She got to you while you were dawdling back there in the woods, didn't she?"

Still trying to make sense out of the chaos around me, I demanded, "What did she tell you to do Bruin? Did she tell you to kill Ramne?"

Bruin puzzled over the question, confused like a man just woken from a dream. "Yes," he said. "I saw her in the woods. She cast her gaze on me. I only wanted to please her." He shuddered.

I asked again, "What did she tell you to do Bruin?"

Bruin stammered, "Kill the old wizard. She said I should kill the old wizard. She said I should bring her the priest alive."

Aghast, I cried out aloud, sank to the wet ground, and clutched at my head. When I had recovered myself, I went to uncover Ramne and commend his spirit to the gods, but Myron refused to let me see his body. He snapped, "I have already shrouded the old wizard for the fire in the manner of his school. Now we must gather wood for a pyre."



The elven folk and I objected, but Myron insisted that this was the only way. He said, "We cannot bury his body out here. Some fell thing will dig him up, or worse, we shall encounter him again, revived and undead. This is the way it must be. This is the way of wizards. Do not meddle in our affairs."

We built a great pile of fallen limbs and branches from the woods, and we laid Ramne's body up on top of the pile. Myron spoke the words of a spell to ignite the pile. The flames sprang to life and blanketed the wizard's shrouded body, eagerly consuming him. Ramne almost seemed to evaporate in the flames, his mortal form ascending in the smoke and vapor of the blaze. I stroked Whiskers the weasel as we bid his master farewell, and I offered prayers for the passage of Ramne's soul.

As the pyre burned, I prayed over Bruin, asking the gods to forgive him and asking Merikka to offer him special protection from any further enchantment.

In truth, we did not know if Bruin remained under the naga's spell or not. He seemed sincere and sorrowful, but Myron insisted that we should keep him tied up lest the magic still held on to his mind.

Llywaine and Dorian wanted to turn back. "We needed the wizard, and now we do not know what to do with your big friend," Llywaine said. "If he remains under the enchantment, he might slay us all."

I was ready to agree, but Myron objected, "If we turn back now, the snake will slither away through the reeds, and we will never be able to break the spell, not for Bruin nor all the people of Farvale. We must continue on and see the matter completed."

"Can you control the enchantment?" I asked.

"I can," Myron insisted. "The bindings are only precautionary, and for a ruse. Should she espy our progress, I would have her believe Bruin still beneath her sway."

### **Into the Marshes**

All this while Bruin remained tied tightly, hand and foot, and with a rope noose around his neck. He looked penitent. I invoked the gods and felt for evil in him, but I found none. Something seemed amiss with the story of Ramne's death, and I eyed Myron suspiciously. Was he complicit? What if both of them were under

the sway of the naga witch? I noted that Myron did not burn Ramne's possessions with the old wizard's body. Instead, he packed away the old man's belongings, and even the weasel.

The half-elves looked grim, and they took counsel together in the elven tongue. Felligan translated for my benefit, "They are saying that we would be wiser to slay Bruin and turn back for Orlane."

Myron overheard this and interjected, "Bruin is not responsible for what happened! Let's take the fight to the one who is."

The half-elves counseled against it, but Myron wanted to continue. We looked to Felligan, and he looked toward the marshes. "If we entrust ourselves to the gods, they will surely protect us."

"Well spoken," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

Myron took charge and said, "Whatever we do, we cannot stay here. We have sent up a smoke signal visible to every creature for many miles. But neither can we take the animals into this flooded marsh. We must abandon them, or leave at least one of us behind to guard over them at a basecamp. If the brothers will not come with us, then let them stay here and guard the animals and await our return."

In the end, we drew lots to choose one man to stay behind with the animals, and the lots chose Llywaine. He agreed to stay behind with the pony and the mule as we set off into the Rushmoors. I told him, "Take the animals back up into the woods and find a safe place to camp. If we are not back in three days, take the animals and return to Orlane and tell them what has befallen us."

"Or come and rescue us if you like," Dorian added.

We said our farewells to Llywaine, charging him to the protection of the gods. We left him standing beside Ramne's still smoldering pyre. The rest of us began the trek through the marsh. Even when we had gone some distance, we could still see the smoke of that wet wood rising on the horizon.

The thick reeds of the Rushmoors grow tall and sturdy, as strong as bamboo. The marsh road that we followed cut a winding way through them. In some places the path required wading through a foot or two of water and slimy mud. The heavy rains of the previous days had turned the whole trail to muck. The mud

impeded our progress. The reeds stood taller than our heads, certainly taller than mine, but even taller than Bruin. The path created a channel through the reeds and rushes, and at times tall reeds bent over the top so that we walked through dim tunnels of matted reed.

We took Bruin with us as if we led a prisoner. Dorian and Felligan took turns carrying Bruin's great sword. Felligan never let go of the ropes with which we had bound the great warrior. Bruin kept a good spirit about it.

Despite the rains, the well trampled path showed the evidence of many feet passing that way. At one point, Felligan discerned the slithering, snaking signs of the naga's coming and going. We wondered, "Where is she now? Is she watching us, or is she back at her lair, awaiting our arrival?"

Felligan said, "The thought of her makes me feel weak, as if I can still feel her poison coursing through my blood."

The mud and muck wore us down, leaving us soggy and sodden with mud. Mosquitoes and biting flies harassed us every step of the way. After a wearisome day-long trek through an endless sea of rushes, we were all exhausted and seeking some dry place where we might camp.

### **Front Porch of the Lizard God**

As the sun set in the west, we espied a low barrier in front of us. Another quarter of a mile and we reached this barrier—a circular dike made from mud and wood, resembling the work beavers. The dike held the swamp water back from a small island of dry land at the center of the circle, barely fifty feet across. Half-sunken stones of some ruined fort lay scattered about the island. We clambered over the top to explore the small area within the circular dike.

Dorian discovered a poorly concealed pit at the center, like the broad mouth of a well. A muddy set of wooden stairs descended into the earth. Felligan observed numerous tracks around the pit, indicating heavy and regular traffic. The hole smelled damp and nasty, tinged with the faint smell of wood smoke from below. We knew that we had found the naga's lair. I felt certain that she was

watching us even then. I asked, "Do we dare to camp at the witch's front door?"

"I have not the strength of body to do else," Felligan admitted. "I am tired from the journey, more tired than any elf should feel. I have not slept for several nights now except for the fevered dreams brought on by the naga witch's bite. Her poison has left my body weak."

The difficult slog through the mud had sapped all of us. Darkness settled over the marshes and a chill wind blew across reeds. We welcomed the wind because it drove the mosquitoes away. The walls of the dike offered us some little shelter. We agreed to pitch a camp and wait, at least until morning light. Dorian and Felligan agreed to take turns at the watch. "Keep your eye on that cursed hole in the ground," I warned them. "Let us know if anything crawls up."

"Yes," said Myron, "She is near. We can be sure of that."

We left Dorian to watch and the rest of us tried to sleep some and rest before facing the morrow's unpleasant task. I woke in the morning, startled, confused, and ill-rested. The eastern horizon already glowed. Myron hissed into my ear, "The time has come."

For a few moments, I listened to the sound of morning over the Rushmoors: birds and frogs competing in song, morning breezes rustling through the reeds, the rippling sound of a nearby stream, the splash of a toad leaping into the water.

Dorian reported a quiet night. No sign of the witch. Nothing crawled up from the hole. Nothing came or went.

"She knows we are here. She waits our arrival," Myron sniffed unpleasantly. We shared a few victuals and passed around a canteen of fresh water. I offered my prayers and invoked Merikka's blessing over us and the blessing of all the gods of good and right. Myron reviewed his spell book. We strapped up armor and arms and prepared for our descent into the lair of the naga witch.

"Do we have a plan?" I asked.

Myron said in a low voice, "So far as the serpent knows, Bruin remains yet under her enchantment, but I know for certain and have verified that he is in his right mind and no longer subject to her will. We must use this to our advantage. She will command

him against us. She will not expect the blow to come from him. Remember our objective. We must kill the naga. When we have done this, her magic will fail and all her servants will be set free."

Dorian looked askance at the illusionist, and I asked myself, "How do we know that Myron has not also fallen in league, and the two of them together will now surrender us to the witch?"

Felligan had no such misgivings. He cut Bruin's hands loose and returned his sword to him. Bruin smiled sheepishly as he rubbed at the places the rope had chafed. We took up our gear. As Bruin prepared to descend into the pit, Myron spoke to him softly in the language of the Rhennee. Bruin nodded and briefly pressed his right palm to his forehead. My blood ran cold.

"It's our best chance," Myron explained. "Let Bruin and I go first."

### **Into the Pit**

Bruin descended into the pit, carrying Myron's lantern. Myron followed after him. The rest of us waited above, anxiously staring down after them. The muddy wooden stairs descended deep into the darkness, much further than we anticipated. We watched Myron and Bruin disappear into the darkness as they descended the wooden steps into the dungeon below.

Dorian and I exchanged worried looks, and he spoke my thoughts aloud, "How do we know we can trust them?"

After a long breathless silence, we heard Myron call to us, assuring us of their safety. Felligan went next. I followed. Dorian followed me. After a long descent, we arrived at the bottom of the stairs in a broad chamber. Four men with spears pointed awaited us. In a flash, I realized the situation. Dorian and Felligan moved to strike, but I warned them, "Hold! We are betrayed!"

Myron said stiffly, like an inexperienced actor in a drama, "Here they are now. Take them away to our queen."

Smirking like a man who cannot contain a good joke, Bruin collected the weapons from Felligan and Dorian. With his back turned to the spearmen, he winked at me knowingly.

The guards marched us off into the dungeon. One walked ahead of us, leading Bruin and Myron. The elves and I followed. The remaining three spearmen walked behind us, prodding us on with their spears.

By the light of torches and the magical light of Myron's staff, I observed that the walls of the dungeon dug from the soggy earth. We heard the trickling and dripping sound of water from every direction. Decaying and sagging timbers supported the walls and ceiling. An inescapable dampness in the air smelled of rot, mold, and swamp gas. The floor beneath our feet was wet and slippery.

Some distance and the tunnel opened into a wide entrance hall. Six stout columns of unadorned trunks of trees supported a high ceiling. Mud had pooled at the center of the room. Torches lit the chamber.

The lead guard took a fresh torch in hand, and they marched us through a door on the opposite side of the room and into a perpendicular tunnel. The sound of dripping water seemed to come from every direction. They took us to the right, and then to the right again, down a long dark chamber until we all came to a stop before a wooden door. The leader knocked on the door. After a moment or two, the door opened a crack and someone within exchanged a few words with the guards. The four guards turned to go as a man in scale armor and drawn long sword in hand opened the door to admit us.

### **Constable Ruskadal and his Men**

We entered the room and the door was closed behind us. The room contained soft chairs and several small tables. A few wine glasses were set out, and five armed men sat at the tables, enjoying early morning wine. I immediately recognized Igglesworth, the merchant from Hookhill, Constable Ruskadal, and two of his officers. They rose to meet us. One man was half girded in plate mail. They were all heavily armed with swords and spears. Crossbows lay at the ready on table tops. A fire burned in the large fireplace, dispelling the dank chill of the tunnels, and large stack of wood was next to it. A tapped keg stood in the corner.

I said, "Constable Ruskadal and Master Olivero, how unexpected to see you both here."

Pressing palm to forehead, Myron and Bruin exchanged the signal with the constable and the merchant and the other men in the room. Myron said, "We have brought the priest and the elves as we were instructed."

“By all the gods,” I thought, “Myron is a fool. He is playing them, and means to play us all, but he has no talent for the game.” His stiff performance could not have persuaded even a mesmerized man. Myron may be brilliant, but he is not an actor, and his shocking lack of social skills makes it impossible for him to carry out a ruse.

Constable Ruskadal stood and appraised us all with a sour look. He said to his companions, “Bind them all. Take their weapons. Search them for hidden weapons and magics. Confiscate everything.”

The men rose from behind their tables, but at that moment Myron threw a spray of magical colors. The spell took effect, if somewhat less so than one might have hoped. Constable Ruskadal seemed completely immune to Myron’s magical attack. Two officers fell unconscious at once. A third, the officer with the plate mail, staggered back, blinded and stunned. The constable returned fire, pulling the trigger on his crossbow. The bolt struck Myron in the ribs, lodging in his leather jerkin. The force of the blow knocked him to the floor.

Dorian stood behind me, launching a volley of unseen magical arrows from his hands. His invisible arrows passed over my head as I charged forward swinging the sickle of Merikka. The table tipped over and the wine glasses crashed to the floor, spilling their contents on the packed earth. Bruin handed the elves their weapons and took up his sword. One of the men struck Dorian a deadly blow, and only fortune saved him.

The constable brought out his long sword and swiped down on the halfling that assailed him, cutting me badly on my left hand. Felligan’s blade ruthlessly lopped off the head of one of the attacking men. Bruin struck down another man without remorse. Back on his feet, Myron leapt across the room to rescue me from the constable, bringing his magical dagger down on him in rapid and blood thirsty stabs. Constable Ruskadal fell at my feet and died on the floor, free at last from the curse of the enchantment. The packed earth floor drank up his blood. I felt a heavy sorrow in my spirit, for I knew of a certainty that this was not an evil man but only a hapless and helpless pawn in the hands of evil. So too with his men, and I felt that we committed a great sin in spilling their blood.

We turned our attention to the survivors, strewn about the floor, still stunned or unconscious from Myron's spell. "Spare them!" I shouted. Bruin soundly knocked each one, in turn, unconscious, with a single thump to the head. I remembered the blow that Iggy Olivero had delivered to me, and with some satisfaction, I saw him receive it back, measure for measure.

"Are you with us or with the witch?" I demanded of Myron and Bruin.

"Don't be a damned fonkin!" Myron snarled. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think," I retorted. I had no further time for the discussion. I was bleeding badly. I invoked my lady and all the gods of good and light to attend to my own wound and those of my companions, administering my healing touch.

### **Among the Spoils**

Felligan searched out the adjoining side rooms: three bedrooms which branched off of the gallery. He found nothing but bare furnishings and a few cloaks. Bruin put his shoulder to a locked door and burst it open. We found a soft bed, a desk, and a chair; a small, jade image of the reptile god sat on the desk. Under the bed was a wooden chest. The chest was locked. Bruin split it open with his sword but unleashed some powerful magic as he did. A magical ward paralyzed the big man. He crumpled to the floor.

"He did not learn his lesson last time?" I remarked.

Myron examined him and announced, "It's a temporary paralysis from breaking a glyph of warding. It might last a while." There was no waking him. Nothing could be done.

Inside the chest we found a mace, several scrolls, and clerical robes: one of ochre and one of black and crimson. "This must be the cleric's room," I said.

Dorian held up the ochre robe and said, "These are the vestments of the priesthood of Elemental Evil. Llywaine and I fought alongside Prince Thrommel at Emridy Meadows. We saw many in robes like this."

"A priest of that fell temple?" I asked with a shudder. I carefully unrolled the scrolls. They were holy scrolls with charms of healing for light wounds. Moreover, they contained maps of Farvale, Gran



March, and the Dim Forest. Felligan studied the Dim Forest map briefly and announced, "My people would make good use of this map in our battles with the goblins."

I took the maps for evidence and further investigation.

While Bruin remained paralyzed, we dealt with our prisoners. We stripped them of their armor and weapons, some of which was valuable and perhaps even magical. We tied them tightly with the constable's own ropes and manacles, and we gagged them securely. Then we concealed them in one of the bedrooms. We laid the other bodies in the beds and tucked them in. By the time we completed all this shuffling about and dragging of bodies, Bruin had recovered himself. For a few minutes he slapped himself, stretched his limbs, and tested his muscles, chuckling the entire time, "I could hear everything you said, but I felt like a stone."

We divided up the weapons and armor we had acquired from the men. Bruin took a fancy to the plate mail armor. He claimed to have worn similar armor before while serving with a mercenary guard. As he made clumsy attempts at strapping it onto his body, he said, "With this fine suit of armor everyone will think me a knight of Furyondy."

Myron sniffed at that. He took up one of the crossbows and a quiver of bolts. Felligan and I both found banded mail which would offer us better protection than the leather armor we wore, but mine was large enough for two of me.

Myron, that master of disguise, instructed us, "Put on the raiment of these men. We have a better chance of passing through the dungeons disguised as them." None of us felt at all confident about Myron's plan, but we did our best to disguise ourselves in the men's clothing and armor. As we finished strapping Bruin into his new suit of mail, he said, "Next time, Myron, you don't talk. Next time, let me do the talking."

"So it was a ruse?" I asked. "You did not betray us?"

Myron sniffed contemptuously and rolled his eyes.

### **Exploring the Upper Halls**

After all these things, we headed out to find the naga witch. With torches in hand, we went out the door we came in, back into the dripping dank dungeon. Felligan led the way. Bruin followed,

clanking along clumsily in his new armor. I walked behind Bruin. Myron followed me. Dorian brought up the rear.

The dank tunnels smelled of mud, swamp, and lizardmen. That incessant sound of dripping and trickling water seemed to come from every direction. Our tunnel intersected another tunnel running north and south. To the south the tunnel had partially collapsed. To the north, the tunnel also ended in a plug. Like rodents lost in a maze, we returned the way we came, back past the main room, and as far as the passage took us to where we found a locked door.

Bruin put his shoulder to the door, popping it open, but the blow dislodged the ceiling, causing a collapse. A significant amount of the ceiling caved in. Dirt rained down on Bruin and Felligan, partially burying both of them. They dug themselves out and shook off the soil. The now broken door opened into a small store room containing casks of wine; most of them bore the name of Orlane.

Up the passage to the north, we waded through heavy mud where part of the wall had eroded and collapsed, revealing a shallow pool of clear, still water in which hundreds of small, blind fish darted through the water.

As we hesitated in the darkness, Felligan whispered, "I hear the sound of footsteps squishing in the mud in the tunnel behind us, but I see nothing." Listening closely, I fancied that I too could hear the sound of footsteps in the muddy hall behind us.

Another storage room contained crates, barrels, cases, and racks stocked with the dungeon's supplies. Here also we found an armory: ten spears, four daggers, and a short sword, protected from dampness by a rack on the wall. The crates contained dried beans, wheat, flour, cornmeal, potatoes, turnips, oil, lard, and salt. Boxes of large spikes, several hammers, a pile of stout timbers, and four shovels were the building materials present. Several dozen fresh torches were stored in a barrel, and we helped ourselves to these and the daggers.

### **Winged Menace**

Following the way further into the tunnels, we passed by several doors in a growing haste to find the way the naga's lair. We came to a door on which someone had scorched a large black X. The room beyond the door opened into a high, arched chamber with a

ceiling that rose some twenty-five feet above. A double-wide corridor led from the opposite side of the room. The sound of a woman's voice, singing a song of alluring beauty, emerged from the opposite side of the room. I recognized it for evil magic at once and shouted a warning to the others, but it was already too late for Felligan who hurried toward the sound of the singing before any of us could stop him. He hurried into a corridor where he quickly sank to his knees in swallowing mud. Still he struggled on and was soon waist deep in the mud, despite our shouts and warnings. We stood on the edge of the swallowing mud, calling to him, but he seemed heedless of our calls.

Out of the darkness ahead a great bird came swooping down. I saw her in the light of Felligan's torch, a horrible eagle-like creature with a woman's torso and head but enormous talons for hands and feet and a bird's lower body. Screaming she rushed straight toward Felligan.



Bruin reacted first, hurtling a spear for the creature. He missed and lost the spear in the mud. Dorian managed to get an arrow to the string and punctured the creature just as she lit upon Felligan. The arrow sank deeply in the bird's chest and put an immediate stop to the song. She wheeled up and dove at us, attacking Dorian and swiping him with a talon. Bruin swung his great sword over the top of my head, but in his reach to hit the flying creature, he lost control of the heavy sword, and it flung through the air. I loaded a stone in my sling staff and swung it around, scoring a hit

on the fell creature. The harpy wheeled about to attack Bruin, gashing him across the back of the neck as she few back toward her lair. I hit her with another sling stone; Bruin hurtled his dagger like a Rhennee knife-thrower at the Greyhawk fairs and struck her in midair, sinking the dagger into the back of her head. She dropped into the mud.

Then it was just a matter of getting Felligan out of the mud, something we managed without rope by having Bruin wade in knee-deep and reach out to Felligan with a spear. So we managed to drag him out. We did not try to cross the mud to explore the harpy's lair.

### **Crocodiles!**

We returned the way we came, this time continuing to the east where the chamber opened into a large underground pool. The water seemed relatively clear and, by the light of our torches, we could see small fish swimming back and forth. The far end of the flooded chamber disappeared in the gloom. Using our spears to determine the depth of the water, we found that the perimeter of the pool was quite shallow, and so long as we kept to the wall, we could wade through the pool. We began to make our way along the southern wall, but we had not gone far when Dorian cried out in alarm. He had spotted something moving across the water, swimming in the water, coming toward us: crocodiles!

Felligan and Dorian both dropped their torches into the water so that they could have hands free to nock arrows on their bows. The room became suddenly darker as the torches hissed and extinguished in the water. Myron and I still held our torches aloft. The eyes of the elves can pierce the darkness. Their bows sang simultaneously and the lead crocodile turned back with two arrows lodged in its head, but two more were still coming. I prayed to Merikka for help and placed a touch of good on Felligan. Then the crocodiles were upon us, rising up out of the water with a mighty splashing roar, pouncing like cats on mice. Myron plunged his magical dagger into a crocodile's neck as it took a bite of him. Felligan hit the other with another shaft. Bruin brought his big sword down on one and bisected it. The remaining crocodile closed his jaws on Bruin but his bite did not pierce the plate mail. Bruin slammed his sword down on it and killed it.

Shaken and shocked, we continued our way, wading along the edge of the room, wary of more beasts in the water. We lit more

torches so that everyone carried a light. We waved them about, watching the water more carefully as we skirted the edge of the pool.

We emerged soggy-footed into a tunnel on the south side of the flooded chamber. Again I called upon the lady Merikka and all the gods to offer us healing from our wounds. As we left the pool area, I fancied I heard something moving through the water after us. I whispered to the others, "Something follows us." I positioned myself to ambush it, but Myron growled, "Leave it."

Bruin laid a big hand on me as well and said, "Pay no heed to your shadow."

Confused, I peered back into the dark chamber of the pool from which we had just come. I imagined I could see the shape of a cloaked and hooded figure crouching in the darkness.

"Please," Myron hissed. "Leave it. It's no threat to us."

Felligan's elven ears overheard all of this and demanded of Myron, "What is it that follows us?"

Myron replied evasively, "Not now! No time to explain now. We must hurry before we are discovered, and we have wasted too much time already."

Felligan, Dorian, and I exchanged concerned glances and then hurried down the tunnel.

### **Sentry Post**

The way to the west was bogged with mud, and so was the way to the south, so we turned back to the east down a long corridor until it ended at a closed door. We listened at the door, heard nothing, but the smell of troglodyte was strong. The door was locked.

I cautioned, "You know, rather than forcing it open and creating another collapse, we might just try knocking."

Bruin stood at the ready with his two-handed sword. The elves nocked arrows to their bows. Myron and I held torches behind them. Bruin knocked three times with three heavy knocks at the door. He was about to knock again when we heard some shuffling behind the door, the sound of a heavy bolt lifting, and the door swung upon. Two lizardmen stood ready with stone axes. Bruin

launched himself with his big sword over his head, dropping to a crouch as he entered. He led with a beautiful, artful swing, and he missed badly, sinking his weapon into the wood of the door. The elves released their arrows, one struck.

I rushed in with my sickle. Bruin was busy pulling his sword from the door. A troglodyte with an arrow in its shoulder turned to run. I fumbled after it, swinging my sickle through the air. The second troglodyte swung a stone axe at me but it passed with a whoosh just above my head. The fleeing troglodyte rushed to the far door, beating on it with his axe and calling for help in his croaking, screeching voice. Dorian launched an arrow over my head, striking the troglodyte and passing the arrow through its throat. It fell dead at once. The shaft of Felligan's arrow lodged in the door.

I turned on the other lizardman, but I could not move fast enough to bring my sickle down on it. Bruin had his sword free from the door, but the close quarters did not give him room to swing a proper blow. The troglodyte turned and swung his axe at me, but once again the axe blow passed over my head. The troglodyte released its revulsion stench. Bruin and I were immediately choking. I could scarcely catch a breath. Dorian's bow sang again, and the lizardman dropped dead before us.

Three wooden benches furnished the guardroom. We tried the door, but it was barred. Bruin took a kick at it and burst it off its hinges. Four more lizardmen leapt out yielding stone axes and releasing their noxious gases. I received a sturdy blow which sent me reeling. Bruin attacked and killed the first one to come through the door. Dorian's bow twanged and his arrow planted itself deeply in the second. Felligan also hit one with a feathered shaft. The troglodytes swung madly and wildly, screaming with terror. Bruin dropped one with a single blow. Myron hurtled his charmed dagger and, to our surprise, landed the blade in one of the lizards. Another troglodyte took a headshot from Felligan's bow and dropped dead. A stone axe caught me, and I thanked Merikka for the new armor, even if it was twice my size. It saved me from what would have been a nasty wound. Bruin's sword clove through the last troglodyte standing and dropped it dead.

The room from which the troglodytes had poured were sleeping quarters. Fishbones were scattered around the floor, and a low table stood at the center of the room. The smell stung at my eyes.

**Centipedes!**

A set of stairs descended into a mud cavern where two large columns supported the roof of a great room. We stepped onto a floor coated with mud. The walls of the dungeon's lower level were irregular and winding. Timbers stood as supports here and there, but not at the neat intervals of the first level. The incessant trickling noise of water was more pronounced, and the dank stench choked us.

Thick mud slowed our movement by half, but stepping stones allowed us to cross the room in single file. We passed out the north side into a tunnel in single file. In only a few yards we found no more stepping stones and became mired in the mud. As we tried to extricate our boots without losing them from our feet, Felligan gave a shout, gesturing toward the walls. Indeed, it seemed the walls themselves undulated. In a blur of legs and shadows, giant centipedes came clambering down from the walls.

Dorian discharged his crossbow, and I had a sling stone at the ready, but then they were upon us, swarming over us. We beat at them with our torches. As I swung madly with my torch, I felt uncountable legs on my body and horrid mandibles biting at my neck. My blood turned hot and tingly, and my limbs grew heavy.

There seemed to be no practical way to fight the creatures. In the sudden panic of shouts and madness, Bruin managed to cut one in two. The severed pieces flipped about and the legs continued to thrash. Myron jammed his quarterstaff through one and ground it into the mud, but another bit at him from behind as he did. The numbness continued to wash over me, and I felt suddenly clumsy and slow.

Dorian had his long sword out, swatting at the writhing attackers. Felligan used the flame end of his torch to smite at them. Bruin swung his sword so frantically that he nearly took off Felligan's head. Myron threw the one from his back and jammed it with his quarterstaff. Slowly we prevailed against the swarm. Dorian killed the last of them. By now I could scarcely move or talk. I sat down in the mud. All around me the twitching kicking legs of the giant centipedes continued on heedless of death. I fumbled through my pack until I found the dark priest's scrolls of healing. A minute or two later, the poison began to wear off, at least enough so that I could read the spell and deliver the healing words.

### **Denizens of the Troglodyte Cave**

We pulled ourselves out of the deep mud, moving slowly until we found somewhat more solid ground. The corridor branched in two directions. We followed the one into an empty cave. The walls of the cave dripped and glistened with moisture, but the area was apparently empty.

We slogged through the mud until coming upon the foul stench of troglodyte smell again, this time so strong we could taste the scent. A male guarded the entrance to a large lair. Bruin offered him the sign of the cult, saying, "We have brought the halfling priest to our lady as she ordered."

He pressed his palm to his forehead and gestured, as if asking for passage. The troglodyte called out over his shoulder in the draconic tongue, then stepped aside to let our party enter the chamber. Now we had truly come into the midst of the lizard halls. The troglodyte guard sniffed at us suspiciously, growling and sniffing as we passed by. He could smell the reek of battle on us, I am certain.

We walked in single file and entered a huge underground chamber, between twenty and thirty feet wide and three times that in length: the lizardman lair with all the comforts of troglodytery. They line the walls, blended like chameleons to match the stonework. The very walls seemed to be alive, seething with hissing, snarling, and reeking lizardmen. Their eyes glinted in the light of our torches. They bared their white fangs. The overpowering stench of lizardmen seemed to seep through our skin. We followed the main chamber as it turned to the right. We passed by many narrow entrances from which small lizard-children peered and females hunkered in the gloom. A guard at the far wall offered us the cult salute and pointed toward a narrow passage in the north wall. Bruin returned the gesture. So it was that we passed through the troglodyte lair without a fight.

### **The Bonesnapper**

The way from the troglodyte lair took us through a narrow tunnel which opened into a small cave where we were greeted by a growling, snapping, savage-looking reptile chained to the wall like a vicious guard dog. Human bones lay scattered about. The ferocious creature growled and snarled, straining at the length of its chain, but it could not reach us. It made such a racket that it was sure to alert anyone near at hand to our presence. Bruin made to silence the creature and took a swing at it with his sword.



It leapt back with a yelping hiss. The second blow silenced the foul thing for good.

### **The Ruse Revealed**

The far end of the cave led into a great, half-flooded cavern, lit by a ghostly green glow emanating from eight columns which supported a dark vaulted ceiling. A large flat-bottomed barge waited at the shore of the pool. I recognized the barge and the pool from Cirilli's descriptions of the lair of the reptile goddess. We had arrived at last. We boarded the barge and prepared to push off, using a long pole. As we settled into the boat, our invisible pursuer revealed himself.

Ramne appeared with us in the barge, saying, "I am here. Back from the dead."

Myron cackled, "Our friend and benefactor the wizard lives."

"How is this possible?" Felligan demanded. A blade in his hand revealed his misgivings.

I saw the whole thing clearly, and I explained to Felligan and Dorian, "It was a ruse. Ramne lives."

Myron nodded. Bruin grinned. Myron explained in a quiet, low voice, "She does not fear us. She only fears Ramne. I gambled that if she supposed Ramne dead, and if she believed that Bruin remained under her spell, she would let us enter her holds, fearless of what we might do, confident in her own strength. But if she knew Ramne lived, she would have struck us down in the Rushmoors. So we feigned the wizard's death."

Dorian objected, "But we saw you burn his body."

"Did you?" Myron replied, "I'm an illusionist."

"Yes," Ramne admitted, "An illusory fire and a potion of gaseous form. It needed to look convincing, and we did not dare to tell you lest you too should fall under her spell. It was more convincing this way."

"So Bruin was never under the enchantment?" I asked.

"He was, but I recognized it at once, and when the time came, I dispelled the enchantment with a spell," Ramne explained.

Later I was able to put the whole story together. On the day when Bruin had met the serpent near the edge of the Dim Forest, she had laid her eyes upon him and taken him under the sway of her enchantment. Then she commanded him, "Slay the old wizard. Bring the rest to my home. Bring me the priest."

That night, Bruin waited until he supposed Ramne slept, then he crept up to kill him in his sleep, but in so doing he clambered over the top of Myron, startling him awake. Myron called out a warning. Ramne sat up, just as Bruin was about to throttle him, and spoke a powerful word to dispel the enchantment. Bruin returned to his right mind at once. He warned the spellcasters, "Even now she watches from the reeds to see that her word will be carried out."

"Then we must make it appear to her that you have done her bidding" Ramne said, "We must not let her suspect that you are free from the enchantment." While the rest of us slept, they quickly conspired to make it appear as if Bruin had carried out his mission.

All of this I came to learn later. At that moment in the dungeons of the naga witch, I could scarcely comprehend how it was that Ramne had returned from the dead.

Ramne said, "Now we have come to our goal and we are all still alive and well. I followed you through the dungeons, and we have now arrived at our objective, the lair of the snake. On the opposite shore I am sure we will find our serpent. We must try to get near enough to strike her. So far as she knows, Bruin remains still secretly in her power and brings the party to her, as she commanded him."

Myron pulled Whiskers from a pouch he carried at his side and handed him back to the old wizard. Ramne stroked the pet weasel affectionately as he explained the plan. We exchanged quick whispers to prepare for our attack. Ramne said, "Stay close beside me in the barge lest she strike us with lightning or fire." Then he spoke the words of magic to create an invisible globe of invulnerability around us which could turn back the spells of the witch. Myron used his own illusion spell to disguise himself as Constable Ruskadal. Bruin used the long pole with the boat to propel the craft across the water.

### **Facing the Reptile Goddess**

As Bruin propelled us through the water, Ramne huddled at the bottom of the barge.

“She does not know I am alive, and she has reason to believe that Bruin has brought you here as she ordered him,” Ramne said. He reached into his cloak and withdrew a magical wand which he handed to Myron.

“What does the wand do?” Myron asked as he turned it over his hands and examined its workmanship.

“One never knows, so you should only use it as a last resort,” Ramne chuckled. “One never knows what the wand will do, but it may serve you when your own spells are exhausted.”

As our boat came around the corner, I used my own priestly prayers and called up an obscuring mist from the water. Drawing near the shore, by the light of the strange green glow which filled the chamber, we could see a raised alcove on the opposite shore, and there we saw the reptile goddess, coiled atop a collection of her treasures, like a dragon perched on its hoard of gold. Her treasure pile included the skulls of her hated enemies. She raised herself from the pile of coin and bone and gazed on our approaching craft like a serpent staring at its prey before it strikes.

Bruin called out to her from the distance, “My Lady Defilus, I have brought the priest. I have brought them all to you.”

Leaping forwards, she slithered toward the water’s edge with surprising speed. As our barge touched the shore, Bruin leapt out, dragging me under his arm, while Constable Ruskadal kept his crossbow aimed at Dorian and Felligan. Ramne remained concealed low in the boat beneath his elven cloak.

I placed a touch of protection from evil on Bruin as he carried me up to the naga witch. The naga slithered up to us and regarded us suspiciously. Her cold piercing eyes scrutinized Bruin as if looking for evidence that he remained beneath her spell. I tried not to meet her gaze, and I prayed that Bruin might not fall again under her enchantment. To make the whole scene more convincing, I struggled against Bruin and attempted to get away from him.



A cruel smile spread across the hag's face. Explitica Defilus said to Bruin in a honey-sick voice, "You have done well." She slithered up around him, coiling about his legs, sliding up his body, her serpentine tongue licking at and tasting the air all around him. Bruin grimaced despite himself as she coiled about, caressing him with her serpentine embrace. She arched her head down to place her hag's face in front of me, and she locked her gaze with mine, eye-to-eye.

I felt the powerful pull of her magic, like desire and yearning, it spread through me warm and sweet. I suddenly realized that I wanted nothing more than to be loved by the beautiful and noble being that was Explitica Defilus. I felt myself as if sinking into a warm pool of longing, and I only wanted to please her. At the last moment, before I sank completely beneath the spell, a vision of my lady Merikka appeared in my mind, bold and clear like a ray of light, and I shook free from the enchantment.

Just then her priest stepped down from the alcove where he had been hanging back in the shadows, waiting and watching. Dressed in the black and gold of a dark cleric, he strode forward confidently.

"I am Garath Primo," he said. He had the heavy accent of eastern men. He added with an air of self-importance, "High priest of her worship Explitica Defilus." He bowed toward the witch.

Explitica uncoiled herself from Bruin and commanded him, "Bring me the others." Bruin turned as if to heed her. The naga coiled about me, her new servant, and hissed, "Garath, here is another priest for your order."

At that moment Bruin spun about with his two-handed sword in hand for swift attack of surprise, but the witch was faster. She ducked beneath the blow. Bruin swung again, but she dodged away.

She still had her coils about me, so summoning power of my lady Merikka, I touched her with a wounding touch, but it was a weak effort. She jerked away from me, dropping me from her coils. Felligan and Dorian launched their arrows from aboard the boat, but their shafts missed the target. Myron released a magical blinding ray, but even his spell went astray. It seemed that the gods had no favor for our mission. All of our attacks failed. Our entire plan had depended upon successful blows and wounds with those first few attacks. Instead, our every effort failed.

Old Ramne sat up in the boat and loosed a volley of unseen magical arrows from his hands. They tore into the flesh of the naga, splashing a spray of blood into the air. She struck like a cobra to bite at Bruin. Her fangs flattened on his heavy armor.

Garath the cleric spoke a spell of holding against the great warrior, but the protection from evil which I had preemptively cast neutralized his powers.

More arrows hissed through the air from the elves on board the barge. Myron hit the naga with a second blinding ray which dazzled her momentarily. Bruin swung his sword through the air again as she sprang back. I took my sickle in hand against her, but she coiled away from my attack as well, slithering toward the barge with astonishing speed.

A sudden whooshing roar and blaze of torching flame filled the air as a fireball sped from the witch toward the barge. The enormous blast of fire should have blown the barge to cinders and charred everyone on board to the bones, but Ramne's magical globe of invulnerability deflected the spell. The flames licked harmlessly around the invisible globe.

Myron leveled Ramne's magical wand at the naga as she closed the distance between her and the barge. A bolt of lightning cracked forth from the wand and struck the serpent woman, lighting her up in flashes of brilliant light. The blow of the charge knocked me to the ground, and the clap of thunder that filled the cavern deafened us all. Unfazed by the magical strike, Bruin leapt after her and, moments after the lightning blast, his sword struck her hard from behind, opening a huge gash. Blood spurted out from her convulsing serpentine body.

I saw a look of panic pass over her high priests' face. He cast a quick spell, and a cold magical darkness emanated out from Garath Primo as he retreated back toward the alcove under the cover of his trailing shadows.

Young Felligan's next arrow found its mark, planting itself deep in the serpent's chest. Explitica Defilus realized her end was at hand. She spoke a spell and slipped invisibly from the sight of our eyes.

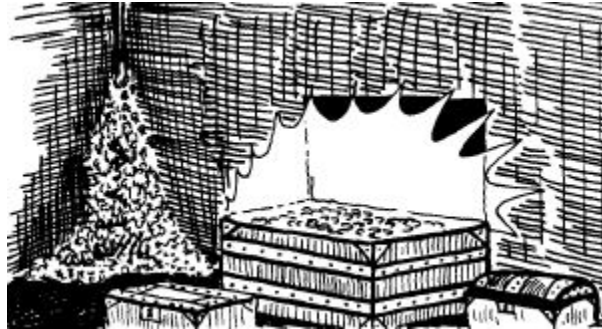
No use. Ramne shouted out the words of a powerful dispellation, cancelling her cloak of invisibility. We saw her slithering for the water. As she passed by the barge, she turned her charming gaze on our ugly illusionist and the two elven archers, but they were not swayed. Perhaps their own fortitude of will saved them, perhaps her weakened state reduced the power of her charm, or perhaps Ramne's magical shield protected them.

Trailing blood from her wounds, she dove toward the water. The bowstrings twanged and arrows slapped harmlessly against the water. Bruin crashed after her, swinging madly, but his blows fell short. She coiled and sprang, leaping through the air in a graceful arc before diving into the pool and disappearing beneath the surface. Just as fast, Dorian leapt over the side of the barge, wading into the water, firing arrows at the retreating form of the serpent as it swam beneath the surface. An arrow found home. The snake thrashed in the water, rose to the surface, flipping and twisting in agonized death throes, and then she was still. Dorian stood over the enormous corpse in the water and planted another arrow deep into its flesh for certainty.

### **The Hoard of Explitica Defilus**

Bruin waded out into the water where Dorian stood. He planted his sword through the serpentine body. Then turning to me, he asked, "Where has the priest gone to?" "He fled under the cover of magical darkness, back to that raised area in the alcove," I told

them. We hurried to the alcove, but we found no sign of the priest and no exit where he could have escaped. It seemed as if he had melted away or teleported into the air.



We took some time to examine the precious possessions that Explictica had collected: a pile of gold and silvery coins, with some bottles and leather items partly buried in the pile. Later, when we had time to examine it closer, we counted a vast stash of coins and jewelry and several magical items. Here we found a bag of holding, a pair of elven boots, a magical horn, more than one magical ring, six potions in separate bottles, and ivory scroll tubes with clever locking mechanisms in which we later found spell scrolls, items of correspondence, and maps of Gran March, Farvale, and the Dim Forest.

Ramne and Dorian loaded all this hoard into the magical bag of holding while the rest of us searched the alcove for any sign of how Garath had escaped us.

### **In The Temple of Explitica Defilus**

A concealed door at the back of the alcove cleared up the mysterious disappearance of the dark priest. Bruin pushed the door open, snapping the mechanisms and latches which operated the door from the other side. We burst through the doorway onto a wooden dias on which stood an altar supporting a statue of the naga with her back to us. We stood in a long, paneled room, lit by torches. Garath Primo stood at the far end of the room, fastening a shirt of chain mail over his vestments. He now carried a shield and a wicked hammer with a head like that of a snake. He did not seem surprised to see us.

The shadowy human form of what I first assumed might be his assistant skulked about the altar. Worse yet, an undead, zombie-like creature hulked forward from behind Garath. I cried out, "Undead!" I gave Bruin my touch of good so that he might strike the creatures a blow. Dorian unleashed an arrow at Garath who

was already in the midst of casting a spell. The arrow clattered to the floor. I was shouting, "Magic and magic items to strike the undead!"

The room suddenly burst in peels of flame as Ramne cast a fireball at Garath and the undead thing. The flames engulf them both. The undead monster wailed and flailed about in flames. The panels on the walls burst into consuming flames of fire, but Garath stood completely unaffected while the flames licked about him. The far end of the room suddenly disappeared in darkness as he completed his spell. Then the darkness began to advance on us.

"He's coming!" Felligan shouted in warning.

The skulking assistant leapt out from behind the altar and grabbed for Dorian. Dorian stepped back quickly. Bruin struck the creature a mighty blow, but his sword left no mark on the undead creature. I lifted the sickle of Merikka and commanded the creature, "Back!" I invoked her power and the creature cried out, taking a step back.

Confusion, heat, smoke, magical darkness, and terror blurred my senses, and in the fierce fight all around me, I scarcely knew what was happening.

Ramne dispelled the magical darkness just on time to reveal Garath leaping onto him with his wicked hammer raised to strike. The hammer cracked down on the old man, casting him up onto the altar of the naga. Bruin took a great two-handed swing at the priest and paid him a mighty blow he would not soon forget. That gave Ramne time to speak a spell and disappear from view. Garath took a wild swing at the spot where Ramne had been a moment before. His hammer recoiled from the altar and flew from his hand.

At the same time, Myron and Felligan faced off with the evil wight. Myron struck at it with his magical dagger, but the wight ignored the wizard, preferring to ruthlessly slash at the young elf with its bared claws. I saw the young elf of the Dim Forest fall to the floor. Next it struck at Dorian, clawing him and sucking life-energy from his body. As his strength ebbed, Dorian shouted a warning, "Stay away from the touch of the undead!"



Fire spread quickly, climbing up tapestries, igniting the fine paneling. The hot flames raged around us. The wight pushed Dorian aside and leapt after Myron. Myron threw his dagger at creature, expertly striking it like a knife-thrower at the Hochoch Fair. We were all fleeing from it's dreaded touch, but the wight was pursing Myron. The illusionist's dagger remained lodged in the dead thing's boney chest. I knew that if the ghoulish creature touched him, Myron would surely die. It swiped at him but, thanks be to the gods, it did not touch him.

Still in the fight, Garath reached out and laid his hands on Bruin, inflicting divine wounds. This is an old cleric's trick, one favored by the priests of the wicked gods. Instead of healing wounds, as a priest should do, the power can be reversed to open wounds and hemorrhaging. Bruin dropped to the floor dead, or so I thought.

I continued my futile attacks against the powerful priest. Just then, Dorian, still alive after the wight's ghastly touch, knocked an arrow to the string and took a clear shot from across the room. He put the arrow into the priest's head. Garath dropped dead in front of me. At the same moment, I heard a terrible crack of thunder as a flash of bright light seared across my eyes. Ramne had created a magical bolt of lightning that struck the wight dead. We reeled in the concussion of the lightning bolt. The whole room was in flames from the fireball and choked with black smoke. Ramne quickly searched the dead priest and relieved the corpse of his keys. Myron pulled Bruin to his feet and helped him stagger out of the room. Dorian and I knelt over Felligan. The young elf was cold and lifeless, all the life had been drained from his body by the wight's ghastly touch.

I warned Dorian, "We cannot take him with us. He will rise as a wight himself. It is better to leave his remains here to burn." My stomach sickened at the thought of what we needed to do. We desecrated Felligan's corpse so that he should never rise to serve the undead, and we soaked him with oil. By the time we fled the burning room, the flames had already begun to take him.

### **Rescue**

Blind with grief and shock, we passed through the dungeon and into the workshop of Garath Primo, the dank chamber where the evil cleric carried out his experiments in animating the dead. The room was bare except for five wooden benches. Each stood about three feet off the floor. We did not linger to explore.

We passed through a door leading to five locked cells. Three cells were unoccupied. The other two contained prisoners from Orlane and Hookhill who had not succumbed to the naga's charms. They had been penned up there waiting for whatever unthinkable fate Garath Primo had in store in for them.

The first cell contained the son and daughter of Orlane's carpenter. The second held a prosperous merchant from Hookhill, taken with his ill-fated caravan in the Dim Forest, and a poor wife from one of the farms east of Orlane who saw her husband charmed into a life devoted to the reptile god. The prisoners were nearly hysterical, and we had trouble communicating with them and explaining that we meant to rescue them. Later, they expressed their gratitude and they told us all they knew of the naga's chambers.

We spent the rest of the afternoon searching for other prisoners and members of the cult. We returned to the upper level where we had tied and gagged the fighting men. We found them still there, conscious, and now in their right minds. The naga's spell had broken the moment we ended her life. None of them could remember how they had come to be there. Several of them were members of the Orlane militia. We found the guardsmen that we had first encountered. We found other cult members in the barracks: four more men and four women. All of them had been under the naga's enchantment, and all of them were now free from her spell, utterly baffled to find themselves in that marshy pit beneath the Rushmoors.

By the time we emerged from the muddy hole and returned to comparatively fresh air of the marshes, most of the day had gone and the sun was low in the sky. We needed to rest, but Ramne warned us, "It will not be long until the lizardmen emerge from their dens and discover our handiwork. Then they will pursue us across the swamps in a mad rage and strike us down. We must strike them first."

### **A Final Purge**

We agreed to rest for a short while to recover our energy. Ramne and Myron refreshed their spells. Bruin quaffed a potion of healing and asked for more. Then he and Dorian led the fighting men we had liberated back into the dungeon. Ramne and Myron went with them. I stayed up top with the others we had rescued and prayed for the safety of my friends and the success of their

raid. In the halls below, Ramne employed his spell craft. The fighters attacked the lizard folk suddenly and viciously, and they left none alive. They burned the hatchery and destroyed the eggs. They returned with many wounds, reeking of lizardmen, but all were alive.

Moreover, as they searched the depths below, they discovered the secret of how Exptica kept her lair from flooding. Water seeps and trickles through the labyrinth to finally collect in a muddy pool at the lowest point in the dungeon. In that room, five of Garath's zombies operated a system of buckets connected to a stout rope and pulley. As the pulley turned, the buckets dipped into the pool and filled, then lifted through a hole in the ceiling. Another pulley was concealed in a hummock in the marsh. At the top of the cycle, the buckets tipped by a cleverly placed block of wood, emptying the water into the marsh and returning for another load.

Ramne ordered the zombies struck down. He said, "Without their labors, let these cursed halls flood with water, lest foul things make use of them again." I hope he is right about this. I like to think that the lair of the naga witch has flooded and collapsed—never to be inhabited again.

## Epilogue

We received a hero's welcome when we returned to Orlane, as it should be, for we were heroes after all. We arrived on the twenty-second day of Harvester. The lord mayor prepared a great feast for us.

The spell of the naga witch had broken the moment she died. Even before we arrived home, Allen Clayborn and the lord mayor knew that our mission had succeeded. They released the cult members they had arrested after our departure.

The return to normal life in Orlane began at the moment of the naga's death. Of course, there will be a period of readjustment, and many of the former cult members struggle with a great load of guilt as they realize some of the things they participated in while under the spell. Human nature is resilient, however, and after a month or so, the little village has already returned to its atmosphere of friendly optimism.

I returned to find Sister Misha also in her right mind and tending to the restoration of the temple of our lady, moreover, making the final preparations for the happy days of Brewfest. I officially reinstated her into our order, and together we are conducting the daily affairs of the temple here in Orlane. Pilgrims arrived for Brewfest, and we conducted a successful festival.

Cirilli, the merchant's daughter, has surprised us all by asking to be admitted into our order. I have taken her as my own apprentice, and she and Misha have become friends. I can only shake my head over this turn of events and observe that the gods have a strange sense of measure and justice.

We gave proper funerals according to our order to those slain members of the temple who had fallen under the spell. So Father Abramo and the monks sleep at peace in the temple's cemetery. We have commissioned a proper monument for Father Abramo with an appropriate inscription from his hymnary.

We returned the wealth that we found in the naga's hoard to the people of Orlane and Farvale. I retained a tenth of the money for the honor of the temple of Merikka to compensate for the sacrileges and many losses the sacred house incurred. I also paid Myron and Bruin for their services from the proceeds and gave them each a bonus for their heroism and loyalty. We sent Felligan's portion back to Hochoch with this letter in the hand of

Allen Clayborn who will deliver it along with a copy of this entire tale to Felligan's kin. The lord mayor, working in conjunction with the temple, where I now preside as chief priest, has created a system of fair distribution for the rest of the recovered spoils, using it to compensate people for loss of property, crops, livestock, and other damages incurred through the abuses of the cult.

As for the magical items recovered from the hoard, we gave them to Ramne as his share in the adventure, and he in turn bestowed a few upon Myron and Bruin and me. Myron has devoted himself to studying magic under Ramne. Allen Clayborn has replaced Ruskadal in the job of constable, and with Bruin's help, he is reorganizing the once-formidable militia of Orlane. The blacksmith, his sons, and the Suel widow, and her sons, have all fled Orlane. I cannot guess where they have gone, but I should like to know. The innkeeper Bertram Beswill has placed the Golden Grain Inn up for sale.

Finally, there remains the matter of the maps and correspondence we recovered from the naga's lair. I have labored hard to decipher the correspondence and create accurate translations. Myron has assisted me in the interpretation of the many clues and hints contained therein. He has deduced from the correspondence that Garath Primo indeed once served the Elemental Evil as a master of necromancy. He came to the Dim Forest after the battle of Emridy Meadows and discovered the troglodyte cult. He exploited the cult, using the naga and her powers to ensnare the people of Orlane and the surrounding villages. He negotiated a cooperative treaty with a goblin lord of the Dim Forest, and he sent many children of his victims to the Goblin Trees. Some of the missing children of Orlane may have been taken there. I have meticulously copied all the correspondence along with my own translations, and I have copied the maps as well. I have included those leaves with this final report on the investigation at Orlane.

As soon as this letter has been dispatched, my companions and I will undertake the perilous journey to Hookhill. Llywaine and Dorian are on their way back to Furyondy, and they will travel with us. In Hookhill, I will discharge my obligation and deliver the calends to the faithful. Moreover, I will ensure that the cult has been thoroughly rooted out from that place. In addition, I hope to find an audience with His Most Resolute Magnitude Commandant Petros of the Gran March and persuade him to offer better

protection and attention for Farvale, for our farms, and for our villages, and for the roads that connect us. I will recommend that he consider appointing our own Lord Mayor Ormand as baron of these neglected lands, and I will seek his blessing for my own post as chief priest in Orlane in the place of the late Father Abramo. Finally, I will beseech him to send a force of his knights to deal with the goblins of the Dim Forest that we might stamp out the last vestige of this entire blight.

Before winter snows fall, I intend on returning to Orlane where I will execute my office in the temple of my lady unless I hear otherwise from you, most holy fathers, and from our most honored and blessed ecclesiastical office in Hochoch of Geoff.

I need not remind you that Orlane falls within the territory of the Gran March. Therefore I think it best if I abide by the wishes of the commandant of Gran March in this matter, whatever those wishes may be.

Now may the blessing of our Lady of Changing Seasons and all the gods rest upon you.

Peace to all those who pursue peace.

Father Tabor  
Patchwall 28, 573 CY