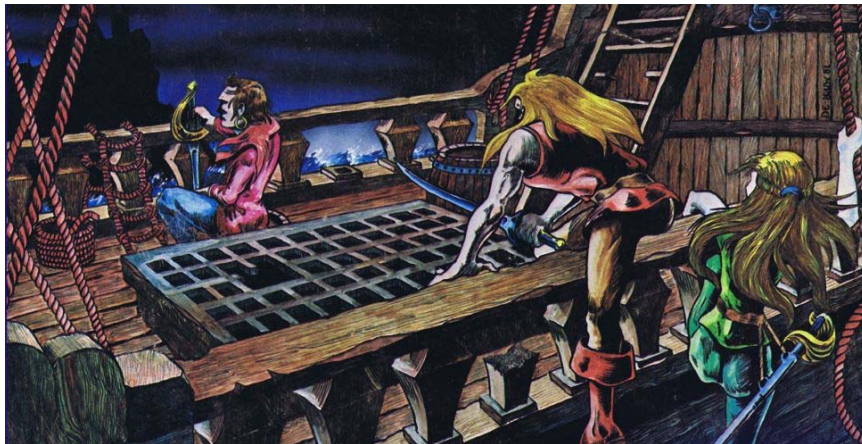


Greyhawk Stories

It Started in Saltmarsh



Kirt Wackford

Edited by Thomas Kelly
Greyhawkstories.com

A Dungeons & Dragons campaign adaptation of
U1 The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh
Dave J. Browne with Don Turnbull
© 1981 TSR

Chapter One

Dirty Dwarf, Disgraced Paladin, Half-orc Fugitive

At three years old the child was developing like any dwarven infant—he could crawl and babble but not yet walk or talk. He had come into the world in gilded halls deep beneath the Cyrstalmist Mountains, born to a wealthy, prosperous clan of mountain dwarves. But the happy parents did not have long to dote over the Dumathoin's gift. They were among those chosen to pioneer a new colony, for their clan looked to expand its holdings by starting daughter colonies and exploring new mines. They set out overland with the child still in his mother's arms.

What should have been a short journey to an already-secured fortification instead turned into a nightmare and tragic end to all their aspirations. A raiding party of ogres, bugbears, and goblins boldly ambushed the caravan. A long, bloody, and desperate battle ensued. The child's mother was the last dwarf to die, which she did bravely, but not until she had hidden her son beneath some bundles in a mule cart.

The goblins began leading the live mules away while the ogres feasted on the dead ones. The child would certainly have been discovered had not, by chance, a huge bear came upon the scene. It must have been a cave bear, for it towered over even the ogres. As it scooped up goblins and crushed them under its mighty paws, the terrified raiders fled. Then, the bear was gone. An elderly man probed at the cart with his staff, seeking the source of a baby's cry which he had somehow heard through the din of the battle. The man took the dwarven babe and retreated to his cave before the goblinkind could regroup.

These things happened late in the fall of the year. All through that winter the old man cared for the babe. He gave the child the name Larrenthal—not a proper dwarfish name at all. By the spring, "Little Larry" was walking and talking—but his first spoken words were in Flan, not the tongue of the dwarves.

The old man knew little of dwarves. His was the world of sky and streams, sun and meadows, herbcraft and druidlore. He thought to return the babe to the first group of dwarves he found in the spring. Little did he know that the caravan massacre had

prompted the dwarves of the area into a series of local wars and genocidal campaigns against the humanoids that lasted for years. Dwarves aboveground had been rare before the war, but now they were simply not to be found except in military hosts, none of which passed near the alpine valley that was the druid's home.

The first dwarven explorers to arrive after the war came seeking pastureland for their goats. An old man, hobbling along on a staff and with a dwarven child in tow hailed them from a distance. The child was not more than ten winters; he spoke not one word of their language. Of course they knew the story of the massacre; of course they knew to which clan Larrenthal belonged; of course they offered to return the child to his people. But when Little Larry came back to the cold stone halls of his father's clan, he found all of his near kinsmen had been killed in the wars. True, he had distant cousins who did their duty and took him into their care. But what were they to make of the boy who cried at the dark, who begged in Flan to see the sun and feel the wind, and who could speak not even one word of Dwarven? The boy preferred mud to woolens and trees to forges. After two weeks, "Dirty Larry" pleaded to be returned to the old man—and his kinsmen required little persuasion; they did not even consider Larrenthal a "real dwarf," but a strange and wild "bear boy."

The old bear-man took the child back. In the ensuing decades, he tutored Larrenthal in the ways of the Old Faith, the Great Circle of the Flan, the names of all the gods and spirits of the woods and hills and mountains. Larrenthal grew and learned. When whiskers first began to darken his chin, his foster father initiated him into the First Mystery and told him that, to learn more, he would have to apprentice to another druid. No, he could not apprentice under the old man—they were too close and the code of the druids prohibited apprenticeships within family. "Besides," the old druid explained, "I am far too old to school you further. You must go to the Great Druidess, the head of my order, and see if she accepts you. She holds moot in the Dreadwood, far to the south. It is a longer journey than I care to make, and the way passes through lands far too civilized for me. But I know of a remote temple to the Old Faith in the country of Sterich. I can take you that far. We need not cross many farms or fields—just a few valleys away from us."

The short journey took them weeks, scaling the mountainsides up, down, and across. The old man approached the temple warily, for

in truth he seldom spoke to men, but the head priest knew the Old Ways well and welcomed them in the temple garden. He agreed to take Larrenthal in, and find a guide to take him to the Great Druidess. Larrenthal wept for the first time in many years, and he would have had the old man stay if he could have moved his heart. The old man said, "Let your sadness be your final lesson from me. Is not sorrow and loss also a part of the cycle of life?"

Larrenthal had not been at the temple a se'nnight when the head priest introduced him to a young man called Tyrius, a bright young paladin of Pelor, of sixteen years, not more, shining like a newly-minted coin. The pair were a perfect contrast—the tall, handsome, worldly, noble-born youth and the short, stout, grubby dwarf who went everywhere barefoot, had atrocious table manners, and could barely speak the Common Tongue. The dwarf introduced himself, "Larrenthal, but some call me Dirty Larry." Tyrius realized at once that Pelor was putting his faith to the test.

The head priest explained the mission, "The dwarf is to be escorted to the moot of the Great Druidess, deep in the Dreadwood. You will provide the escort and protect him from harm. This will be your first official duty as a crusader of the Shining One."

The shrine brothers gave Tyrius and Larry just enough food for their journey overland to the headwaters of the Davish River and just enough coin to book passage for them both in a merchant ship bound for Gradsul. In that great city the brothers of the great Temple of Pelor would provide aid for the last leg of the journey.

Tyrius escorted "Dirty Larry" down the valley into the lands of men in Sterich proper. Every hamlet they passed seemed a city to Larry, but the hamlets grew into thorps, the thorps to villages. In a bustling river-village, Tyrius looked for passage on a boat headed downriver. They found a riverboat carrying refined ores from the mountain mines. The dense cargo left plenty of deck space for passengers, and Tyrius booked passage. The captain was a foul and grasping sort whom Tyrius took to be another great test of his faith.

The bargemen navigated by day and pulled up at night, for the swift mountain river had many rapids that could only be safely run in the light. They had been on the water just a few days when came a misty morning. The captain advanced the boat slowly, but

then ordered his men to make camp when they spied the first set of rapids. He said he would pilot her later in the day, only after the sun had burned off the mists. As bad luck would have it, that very bank of the river was a favored place of ambush for a band of hobgoblins who preyed upon the river traffic. The raiders fell upon the camp in the mist and a half-dozen guards were slain in the space of a few minutes. The remaining guards, crewmen and passengers too, with Tyrius among them, rallied and carried the day. The surviving hobgoblins fell back to lick their wounds.

As the crew attended to the dead and wounded, the mists cleared, revealing a curious sight—a towering, misshapen man stood among the slain. He seemed just as surprised to see the rivermen as they him, and he produced a huge axe and began some type of incantation or chant. The bargemen surrounded him and prepared for another fight.

Something about the misshapen man stirred Tyrius' sympathies. Through the grace of Pelor, he looked upon the half-orc and understood that he was not one of the attackers. His mind returned to the lessons he had learned about Saint Jalnir the Gentle, a half-orc Peloran priest of legend. Tyrius knew that the divine will of Pelor was in this meeting. He stepped forward. He saw fear in the man's eyes, and his heart was moved. Approaching slowly, with hands open, unarmed and clad in his white Pelorian robe, he was obviously not one of the guards, and he hoped the axe-bearing half-blood would understand that he meant him no mischief. Their eyes locked. The half-blood could see genuine concern and compassion in this man's eyes—unlike the fear and loathing he saw in the eyes of the guards. He slowly lowered the axe and ceased his death chant.

Tyrius beckoned him and led the stranger to the river's edge where he showed him the corpse of a hobgoblin so recently slain. "These raiders attacked us and shed the blood of our people," Tyrius explained. "These men think you came against us along with them."

"I am no friend of hobgoblins. I did not lift my axe against your people. I did not know of the raiders or the raid. I only came to the sound of voices, hoping to find a meal."

"We can offer more than a meal. Take passage with us down the river. The next time raiders come, we could use your axe."

The captain objected, "Not on my boat! By the gods!"

Tyrius argued, "We need more guards to replace our losses if we hope to survive the rest of the journey downstream."

The captain hissed, "He will just as likely slit our throats at the first opportunity."

Tyrius pressed the captain to accept the misshapen man into his service and offered his own guarantee for him. "How much would it cost you to replace these slain guardsmen, simple sellswords who had never been in a battle before today, when we could have this seasoned warrior for free?"

The captain did not trust the stranger further than he could spit, but he saw the sense in Tyrius' words, and his greed compelled him. He gave the man a berth in the ship and meals, and he let him act as a guardsman without pay. The other guards grumbled and cursed the stranger all the way downriver, past the confluence with the Javan and then the Hool, until the ship entered the trackless Hool Marshes. Larrenthal learned from the mutterings of the rivermen that the man was not misshapen. In fact, he was a half-orc barbarian, a wild raider from the mountains who was fleeing his home. The stranger proved himself and the metal of his axe soon enough. In fights with lizardfolk, marsh orcs, and bullywugs, Thokk and his great axe slew more than any of the others. The grumblings ceased.

The rivermen and guards were all the more amazed when, on a certain evening, Thokk produced a flute from among his bundles and entertained the guards and the boatmen with a melody. They all gathered around and demanded another song, and after that, another. Most of the melodies sounded familiar to their ears, not unlike the tunes played by bards and musicians in the remotest villages of Sterich and Geoff, which were home to some of them.

"From whence did a half-orc learn the art of the flute?" Tyrius asked.

"My mother was a human captive in the harem of my father, the orc chieftain of my tribe," Thokk explained to Larrenthal and Tyrius. "From her I learned to play the flute. She taught me all the melodies she knew; she used to play for my father and entertain him and all the valiant warriors who reclined at his table. She died

before my seventh winter ended, but I remained a favorite at my father's side, entertaining him and his personal guard with melodies from mother's flute as they lounged about after feasts and ruts."

"Did you also learn the Common Tongue from your mother?" Tyrius asked. "You speak eloquently despite your orcish accent."

"Only did my mother speak to me in the tongue of men. Being in my father's court, I also learned the tongues of visitors, for our tribe was important, indeed. Dignitaries of goblins, hobgoblins, bugbears, even human priests and bandits, all passed through my father's halls, and I found I had talent with languages. I served many years beside my father as his interpreter, and he sent me at times as his messenger to the holds of men and even the court of Threshell the Bugbear King. But my father is dead now, slain at the hands of my own half-brother, and that one would have slain me too if I had not fled. I will find my mother's people, and make a new home among them."

Larrenthal thought this tale most remarkable and not unlike to his own. "So we are the misfits, you and I! Dirty Larry and Thokk the half-blood!"

"Call me a misfit too," Tyrius said, and found himself telling his tale. In his youth he had often complained of his fate, but this was different. This was the first time he had spoken of himself since he took his Vow of Humility, and his perspective was very different than in the past. "I am noble-born to an old and prestigious Sterich family, kinsmen to the Earl of Sterich. I was raised to be at home among the cultured, sophisticated, wealthy, and elite, but my father's lands were smaller than his title was due. My eldest brother stood to inherit those lands, barely enough to maintain the family's privilege. My eldest brother was the heir, my older brother was the spare, and I, as a third son, was just an inconvenience.

"I was barely twelve when they sent me away to take holy orders. I went to a large and respected temple in Istivin. I didn't appreciate how much the family had paid for this; I only knew that I was not willing to trade my life of privilege for scrubbing floors as a novice. I complained constantly, got into fights with the other novices, and I found no patrons among the clergy-teachers, none who were willing to advance my position.

“After several miserable months the priests in exasperation sent me to a temple of Hieroneous. At least the drudgery was supplemented with martial training, which I enjoyed and excelled at. But the clergy there demanded strict obedience and deference, and I never missed an opportunity to remind the low-born war priests that regardless of their rank within the church, I was still their social better. After I had insulted my trainers one too many times, they punished me by sending me to a remote shrine to Pelor. I thought to myself, ‘Am I to serve a Flan deity for godssake – a god with no noble patrons and no presence at court, a lingering, embarrassing reminder of the conquered aboriginal people and their backward Old Faith?’ When my mother learned of this latest humiliation, she sent me a final letter. My family had enough of my foolishness, they ended my allowance, and they did not want to hear any more from me until I had been made a priest of some faith—any faith.

“I was the only novice among a handful of priests at the small shrine. My life was cutting wood, milking goats, and dipping candles, but the brother-priests worked alongside me rather than lording it over me. As much as I railed at them and cursed my misfortune, they only smiled back. All the other, previous, priests had risen to my challenges, been insulted by my abuse—but these priests of Pelor were so selfless, so self-effacing. They honestly cared about me and ignored my tirades. Through their kindness, Pelor won my heart. This journey is my first quest as a paladin in his name, the first of my trials.”

“I know nothing of the gods of men. I worship Gruumsh, as do all my kin,” Thokk said thoughtfully.

Tyrius shuddered at that, but continued sincerely, “From my brethren in Pelor, I learned an honest desire for goodness in the world. Helping people seemed a more fulfilling path than the anxious social scrambling of my own noble family. I’m not perfect. I still have a temper and a sharp tongue, but I try.”

Thokk shook his head, unable to make sense of a god that desired honesty and goodness, humility and patience, in his followers.

“So we are all three of us misfits in the world,” Larrenthal declared. “We had best stick together.”

Those words proved prophetic. When the ship emerged from the dangerous swamplands and docked in the port of Saltmarsh, the captain insisted that Thokk go ashore. "I've just been made to pay for the King's Protection from here to Gradsul," he said, "And I'll be damned if I am taking a free-loading orc bastard all the way to Gradsul now that we've left the combats behind."

This change of plan pleased Tyrius not at all. He argued with the captain past his patience, pleading sympathy for the half-orc and reminding the captain of how the man had bravely fought beside them to deliver them safely thus far. The argument ended only when the captain put the crusader off the boat too, along with his young dwarf friend. "If you are so concerned for the half-blood, go see to himself yourself. You will not be riding my vessel any further."

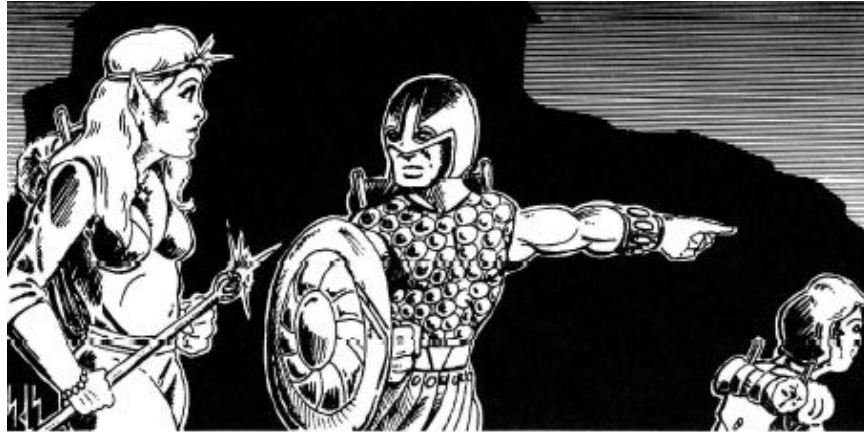
Tyrius had some coin left in his purse, but he doubted it was enough to book passage for himself on another ship to Gradsul, let alone the three of them. And what was he supposed to do with the half-orc now? He had naively assumed that the captain would have been so pleased with Thokk's performance in the marshes that he would have taken him on as a paid guard upon reaching Gradsul. But now, he could hardly leave the savage warrior with no means of employment in a peaceful port town—that was surely asking for trouble.

In truth, it all seemed no great loss to Larrenthal, for the town was a scant few leagues overland from the Dreadwood—the place for which he travelled—but Tyrius seemed put out. "True, we are now only a few leagues from the Dreadwood, but we stand on the wrong side of that vast forest. I paid for passage to Gradsul, from where we could take the King's Road to the northern side of the forest, and once there find an elven guide to the moot of the Great Druidess within. Entering here, on the south side, would mean crossing leagues of dangerous forest infested by goblinkind, with no idea of where we are going or how to get there."

The stevedores unloaded their gear, and Tyrius slipped them a copper each. Surrounded by a clutter of their bundles and their weapons, the ragged half-orc, the polished paladin, and the bare-footed hairy dwarf stood together on the docks of Saltmarsh, watching their boat cast off without them.

Chapter Two

Naïve Scholar, Moody Elf, and Scallywag Halfling



Aurora never knew her father, but his elven blood left his mark upon her unmistakably. Her mother spoke fondly of him often, but only when her own father was not about. Grandfather was a wealthy human merchant of Tringlee, the capital of the Duchy of Ulek, and Aurora was born and raised in his household. As the girl had grown from babbling child to discreet young maiden, her mother had explained that her father was a soldier, a guard to an Uleckian elven nobleman sent in a delegation to the Duke, on a diplomatic mission that lasted all of one glorious summer. They met; they fell in love; he returned home before either knew she was with child, and they never saw each other again.

“When you are older,” her mother would say, “When you are a young woman, you will understand such affairs of the heart.”

“Why didn’t you go after him? Why not write to him or try to find him?” Aurora would ask. Her mother never answered directly, but always with a tale or lesson about how some parts of the Duchy were forbidden to humans, about how her grandfather was a good man but was still subject to all the prejudices of men, about how she had known more than one person undone by the deaths of their children, and it was a sad truth that Aurora would surely die before her father did. Always the lesson was different, until Aurora did not know whether the true reason was one of these or some or all or none.

Aurora matured into a highly intelligent child, and quickly surpassed any tutor that her grandfather could provide. A month shy of her twelfth birthday, she saw a mendicant illusionist doing cheap street theatrics in the market square. She had dragged her maid home early from shopping, politely slipped into a business meeting with her grandfather, and announced her intention to be a wizard. His pale Suel skin grew beet red with embarrassment and anger, but his temper subsided quickly, and he sighed with resignation, "Ah, well. Blood will out."

With her grandfather's permission, Aurora obtained an apprenticeship with a local Master of History and Magic, an ancient human sage with a lifetime appointment to the Duke's Court, though one without much power or prestige (which was, he later told Aurora, just how he preferred it). Like all his other apprentices, it seemed she studied just as much history as she did magic, and did more text-copying, book-searching, and scroll-filing than anything else. Yet, over the years, she mastered one spell after another, and delighted in practicing them.

Like all students of history, she knew about the Twin Cataclysms (the Invoked Devastation and the Rain of Colorless Fire), which had, a millennium ago, destroyed the two greatest nations the world had ever known: the Suel Imperium and the Baklunish Empire. She could recite several different authoritative texts (and note their contradictions and discrepancies) explaining how the Suel refugees passed over (or under!) the Hellfurnace Mountains and brought human civilization to the east, eventually founding the Kingdom of Keoland. She could add, and in the presence of her master she would always add, how the people's reaction to the destruction of their homeland by mages of power had led to a great distrust of magic among the populace, and that for the first five or six hundred years of its existence, the practice of magic was in fact forbidden in the Kingdom. And she would add, again at the insistence of her master, how lucky they were to live in an age and in a nation (for the Duchy was once part of the Kingdom, but was now independent) that were both more tolerant of the craft than the Keoland of old.

On one occasion, her master dismissed the other apprentices and asked Aurora to remain behind. First checking the doors and windows to insure they were tightly closed, he employed a few simple charms and wards to make absolutely sure they were alone. Given the ominous and seemingly clandestine preface to

their conversation, Aurora felt some disappointment when he merely asked her to recite the texts concerning the migrations of the Suel houses and the founding of Keoland. Her disappointment grew when he asked her to recite the names of the principle Suel Houses, but she did as he bade.

“And what became of House Neheli?” he asked.

She answered by rote. “They founded Niole Dra and are today the most important noble house in the north of the kingdom.”

“And House Rhola?”

“They founded Gradsul and are today the most important noble house in the south of the kingdom.” She respected her master too much to let her tone of voice betray her boredom and disappointment, *But seriously! Why conduct a private lesson to review subject matter well-known to apprentices before their first week of tutelage was completed?*

“And House Malhel?” And there she paused. She had read this, of course, but never before had she been asked about the Malhelites.

“Master, those of House Malhel were wicked and fought against the good houses. After many battles they were banished from the kingdom.”

“Correct. And where did they go after that?”

There was a long pause while Aurora searched her memory. “I imagine they dispersed or died out ... I have not read any record of them.”

“Indeed. A house powerful enough to war upon the Neheli, and they just faded away?”

“That does not seem likely, but...”

“But that is what the texts would have us believe. Most of them.”

Aurora felt a creeping sensation moving under her skin. She began to think the wards had perhaps been a good idea.

“Suppose,” continued her master, “they did not die out. Not at first anyway. Conjecture,” he demanded.

“Well, they had the hubris to war upon the Neheli, thus they must have been both proud and powerful. Such people are unlikely to give up their aspirations after merely suffering a setback. While they might have fled, migrated out of the Sheldomar, it seems unlikely. More likely they would have withdrawn, regrouped, and planned revenge.”

“Precisely,” her master said, pleased. “Logic is one of your most potent tools as a scholar and wizard, don’t forget that. So why do you suppose you have not seen any records of this?”

“Because they didn’t regroup? Something else ended them before they could?”

“Perhaps, or perhaps they did persist ... and any record of their defiance has been destroyed, eliminated, or altered.”

Aurora did not know what to say. Her master had instilled in her a reverence for history so profound that she suddenly felt aghast at the crime against truth. Then, slowly, it dawned on her. *Who would have the power to make sure that this history was not known, and what else could someone with that kind of power do?* She thought of her master’s wards and shivered.

The old sage lowered his voice to a whisper. “I believe I have uncovered an unedited text, describing how House Malhel retreated to the Dreadwood Forest, and from there planned their revenge. I have another text, very rare but likely authentic, claiming that the Malhel were powerful spellcasters, even while the Neheli and Rhola sought to ban magic. I will not tell you the names of the books or their locations—for your protection, my protection, and theirs. If I were a younger man, I would investigate this myself. But you are my prodigy, the best and brightest student I now possess. I charge you with the task of taking up the hunt for truth.”

Aurora looked at the old man, shocked. “Master, you want me to ...”

“Travel to the Dreadwood, and see what clues you can find. Ruins, stories, texts, tales—anything. Perhaps, likely even, you will find

nothing. But if I am correct, I believe that someone will find *you*. Someone will appear and, in the most delicate way, attempt to ascertain what you are seeking and steer you away from any discoveries. And that is precisely what we are after. I don't expect you to prove that the Malhel were in the Dreadwood. But if you can find proof that someone does not *want us to know*, then we will be sure that I am on the right track."

"Master, you honor me with your trust, but this sounds dangerous, and I am yet an apprentice."

"No, Aurora, you are no longer an apprentice. Yes, I name you journeywoman, as of today. You have earned it. As to the danger, well, certainly there is plenty of danger in the Dreadwood. I suggest you recruit some loyal sellswords, preferably the type who fancy themselves heroes—what is it they call themselves? Ah yes; 'adventurers.' With your wit and charm I am sure you can convince them to join you on a quest for treasure in the forest. But the greater danger lies not in mindless monsters, but in whomever is protecting this information—if there is any truth to it at all. And in that you will be safer than I would be, or so I suspect, else I would never send you. Should I, a Master of History, go poking about the forest and asking the wrong questions, it could hardly be done discretely. But you are a young, inexperienced wizard, seeing the world, seeking adventure ... what could you possibly know of the quest for ancient, forbidden magic referenced only in the most esoteric texts accessible to a handful of academics?"

"But Master, you have warned me many times against appearing as a wizard in Keoland."

"True enough, the common folk still harbor many superstitions about our craft. To the commoners you should appear to be nothing more than a young scholar—the daughter of a wealthy merchant pursuing academic interests. But to the more astute and discerning, present yourself as a simple freemage looking for fortune, not a threat to their secret histories. Only you and I can know your real mission."

"So you ask me to be a historian pretending to be a wizard pretending to be a scholar?"

The old man smiled warmly. "As I said, Aurora, you are my best student. Complete this last task, and you will be a wizard, with the diploma and credentials you so richly deserve."

Over the next several days they made their plans. Aurora's master counseled her on purchases to prepare for the trip, supplies to pack for the journey, and prices to pay for goods and services. He warned against trusting herself to adventurers without testing them first. "They must be strong enough, but they must also be simple enough to be easily swayed into doing your will, all the while thinking it their own will. Avoid travelling with another arcane caster, or anyone else with too sharp a mind. When you have found swords you can trust, steer them to the forest, but make it seem as if you merely agree with their own objectives and plans to enter the wood."

"Anything else?" she asked, as if all that had been suggested so far was not far-fetched enough.

"Yes. Beware the northern Dreadwood. Those woods fall under elven control, and the elves are surely in the pocket of the Lion Throne. You will fare better, I believe, in the dangerous and unexplored south. In those wilder lands, you have a better chance of a real find or, if not that, of at least drawing out those who will not wish you to find anything."

On the day before her departure, as she cleaned out her desk area in the master's tower, he burst upon her excitedly with a letter in his hand. "It is done!" he exclaimed, and then proceeded to explain that he had petitioned a friend of a friend within the nobility to provide her a dedicated guard, someone she could trust beyond a mere adventuring oath. He was an elf of the Silverwood, and he would join her when her ship made port in Kewlbanks.

The next day she bid goodbye to her mother, her grandfather, and his household, and boarded the ship on the Kewl. The boat was a passenger vessel, and while it did not provide her with a private cabin, she shared a bunking room with other young ladies, mostly those going to court in Gradsul. It took a bit more than a day to get to Kewlbanks, and as promised, her Silverwood escort awaited her there.

He was not at all as she expected. The elves Aurora knew in Tringlee were all bright, curious, open hearts, free-spirited and polite in speech, forward with questions, and firm in friendship. This one, Babshapka by name, seemed just the opposite. After confirming that she was indeed his charge, he practically ignored her as he boarded the boat and stowed his gear. He asked her no questions and responded to hers with the bare minimum of answers. Nonetheless, he did look capable enough with his massive unstrung longbow always in hand and twin shortsword sheaths crossed across his back. His traveling cloak hung heavily over his frame, and his boots looked well-worn. She had every confidence that the elf would be skilled in woodcraft and capable of guarding her person, but he acted as if conversation posed the more serious threat to safety. Even when she addressed him in her best Elven, he seemed offended by the effort.

Babshapka was a wood elf from deep in the Silverwood, from the part where humans were still not allowed, and that suited him fine. Even at the young age of two and a half centuries, he had seen more than enough of compromises with humans. He was among those who resented the kingdom of Keoland for separating Silverwood from Celene. When the Fey Queen Astaranthe took power in Celene, the King of Keoland was forced to recognize her nation and the right of the Elven Queen to rule. Fearing her power, Keoland created the Ulek States; the Duchy, County, and Principality on its eastern border. When Babshapka was born, the Silverwood was recognized as part of Keoland. Today, the land was considered part of the Duchy of Ulek, and was ruled by elven nobles who were independent of the Lion Throne, but still favored Keoland. Rather than fight for Celene, the elves of Silverwood accepted their new state and status. Rather than push the humans out, they collaborated with them. Not all of their subjects agreed.

Babshapka preferred to avoid humans and human lands, and he had little use for half-elves either. He was accustomed to his idyllic and isolated sylvan life in the Silverwood, as chief huntsman for his village, respected by his peers, staunch warrior against goblinkind when necessary, but mostly free to live, sing, feast, dance, and hunt. But his village was beholden to an elven noble, and that noble called for a ranger: someone to serve as a guide, guard, and protector to a half-elven child of the Duchy. Babshapka did not volunteer. And yet he was selected. It was an unwanted honor. He gathered all his possessions and bade farewell to his

kin. He traveled to the town of Kewlbanks and there met the riverboat with the half-elf on it. She was fair of face, but naïve and obviously raised by humans. She talked incessantly at him. *I must serve her by my oaths, and protect her as required by honor, but I do not have to like her.*

All the next day they sailed downriver. The green-grey Silverwood passed by on their right and the farms and fields of the County of Ulek on their left. Babshapka leaned against the rail, watching the forest roll past as if in trance. They reached Junre early the next day and spent the remainder of the day in port. He remained sullen and distant. The day after they set sail again, soon reaching the confluence of the Kewl with the mighty Sheldomar. Aurora continued her attempts at conversation, and three days into the journey now, the elf seemed to relent some and become more personable, even willing to exchange a few words with her. She never did realize that, so long as the line of Silverwood had remained in sight, he had been silently singing his farewells to the only home he had ever known.

On arriving in Gradsul, Aurora took charge of the expedition, intending to begin ordering affairs. All the arrangements until then had been made by her master. Unlike the Kewl River, passenger ships did not sail on the dangerous and pirate-ridden Azure Sea. She needed a merchant vessel that would take them on for fares. She had thought the matter simply one of coin, but soon found two impediments. First, ships sailed with only a limited number of berths, and these were always filled. Out on the seas, after the death of a sailor or two, there would be free spaces—but ships left Gradsul fully manned. Second, most of the captains with whom she spoke shook their heads and mumbled, in solemn tones, about the bad luck incurred from having a woman aboard ship. “Best not to offend the Lady of the Waves,” they would say, or, “Osprem is a jealous goddess, love.” After a full day at the docks she had not managed to find them passage anywhere, and she was forced to use more of the meager allowance her master had given her on a second night at the inn.

Before the sun rose, she thought she would rouse her escort for an early start, but she found him already waiting for her in the common room downstairs. Determined to find passage, she arrived at the docks before any of the ships had left. With gloomy and dangerous-looking Babshapka skulking behind her, no man gave her any trouble, but neither did they grant her the passage

she sought. She harassed captains from one end of the quay to the other, obtaining no better results than the previous day. Having been turned down yet again, this time by the captain of a cargo ship named *The Merchild*, she thought her patience surely at an end, when a voice said, “Hold now, Cap’n, surely we can make things right for such a charming lass?”

That remark initiated a spirited discussion between the human captain of the vessel and a most curious hobniz sailor. They exchanged quick remarks so peppered with sea slang that she could scarcely follow of the gist of the debate, but at the end of the argument, the captain of *The Merchild* acceded to taking both her and her escort on board—albeit for nearly the entire sum she had remaining to her name.

The Merchild was bound for Torvin with a cargo of agricultural implements; spades, plows, sickles, machinery, spirits, medicine, cloth, clothes, boots, and various and sundry other goods in demand on the plantations of the Sea Princes. In the week at sea that followed, Aurora learned about the ship, its crew, and the hobniz Barnabus in particular, as he claimed to be enraptured by her beauty. To her surprise he was not a sailor after all, but an entertainer—or, he preferred to say, “a good luck token.” He did no real work on the ship, but sang often, played the hornpipe, and if the weather was fair, his lute. All sailors are superstitious, but those aboard the *The Merchild* seemed more so than average. They believed, almost to a man, that Barnabus brought them luck. Certainly he seemed lucky enough, for he won coin nearly every night in the games of dice or cards that took place below decks. Aurora was not permitted to mingle among the men or watch the games, but Babshapka (who slept in a hammock among the reeking sailors) tersely reported to her on the affairs of the crew. Aurora herself had the privilege of staying in a cabin, small and cramped, but private. It turned out that Barnabus had won a week’s stay in the cabin from a foolish first mate and had been waiting for just such an opportunity to cash in his debt. Most of his songs were simple sea shanties to set the pace for the sailors’ work, but for Aurora he played love ballads. Whenever the captain came with earshot, he changed his tune and sang to the sea itself, or as he claimed, to the goddess Osprem, placating her jealousy over having Aurora on board.

Barnabus was born to a solid farming family of halflings on a pipeweed plantation in the Hold of the Sea Princes. As a child, he

did not question their labors, but not far into adolescence he decided that plantation life was not for him. The freeborn halfling community as a whole had a fair and reasonable agreement with the noble human landowner—protection in return for a share of the crop sold at market. And they were not treated poorly—certainly not as poorly as the human slaves on other plantations nearby. It was not even that the work was long and hard (although it was). Really, it was that it was boring. Monotonous, even. Barnabus' family, like all good halflings, valued security and comfort over most anything else, but he felt that excitement and freedom were worth a little discomfort and danger.

He decided to run away to “the city,” so he called it in his youthful naïvety, Mantan being the only city he knew. It did not take him long to run out of coin, and he soon found himself hiding on a ship to escape an angry innkeeper. When the ship sailed with him on it, he became a cabin boy. Humans always seemed unsure of the age of a halfling, due to their small size, and a halfling with any cleverness could quickly convince a human that he was yet a child, or a man grown, as need dictated.

Barnabus enjoyed the seafaring life. He liked the colorful language, the interesting men, their stories and songs, the fascinating destinations, each different than the last. He did not like the buggery. All the other duties of a cabin boy were easy, but he drew the line when he learned about that and immediately explained that he was a man grown after all. That put him in a difficult position, halfway through his first voyage. If he were a man, why then he was expected to do a man's work on the ship—and though he was as strong as any of the human men, he did not have the size to go into the rigging, the weight to haul lines, and so forth. And if he could not do a sailing man's work by day, and he would not do the night work of a cabin boy, then what good was he? *Well, I can play*, he thought, for he had always been considered a good player, both for work songs and in worship on the plantation. With borrowed hornpipes he performed the pieces he knew and set about learning those of the sailors. His efforts mollified the sailors themselves, but the officers told him he would have to pay for his passage. He had always been a bit of a card sharp, and he found the sailors such easy marks that by the end of the voyage he had enough coin to pay his passage and had a number of sailors praising his luck.

Over the next few years he perfected this craft and saved enough to buy a quality lute. He performed at port towns all over the Azure Sea and found it easy to earn coin enough for meals and lodging wherever he went. Sometimes on a bad night or with a sullen crowd he did not get much, but a quick dip in the pockets of the drunkenmost patrons usually did the trick. When he had “played out” a port (or received a visit from the local Thieves’ Guild demanding a membership fee and a cut of his take), he found passage on a ship to somewhere new. Fresh on board *The Merchild*, he persuaded the sailors that his songs to Osprey, the Lady of the Waves, brought good luck and good weather, and in exchange for that service, he received his berth for free and meals as well more often than not. Those aboard who doubted his luck were soon convinced otherwise after a few games of cards or dice.

When it came to seducing Aurora, however, the halfling’s luck seemed to falter. Though he labored over her the entire next week, employing all his best ballads, she refused to yield so much as a kiss or even a sigh! *Perhaps it’s the close quarters and watchful eyes of the crew. I might find better fortune on land—if I could just get her away from that damnable wood elf!* After several days, some of the sailors were even starting to doubt him. “Lucky at cards, unlucky in love...” they said helpfully, but he was unnerved by the jibe, and once they almost caught him cheating. *Me! I never get caught!* he scolded himself.

Few ships sailed west, for it went against current and often against wind, so Aurora had been fortunate in that regard to find passage aboard the *Merchild*. She told the captain that they would disembark when the ship took on fresh water in Seaton. When she had made plans with her master, they had considered the two ports south of the Dreadwood: Anglar and Seaton, deciding upon Seaton as the place from which she should begin her investigation. Though farther from the forest, Seaton was the larger of the two options and would give her more chance to assemble the team she needed without drawing any immediate suspicion. But when, a week into their voyage, *The Merchild* rounded Cape Salinmoor, the captain told them that the wind blew amiss and that he would be making port in Saltmarsh instead, a small fishing village rather than the county seat. Aurora did not have near enough coin to persuade him to fight the wind, and by this point, Barnabus, weary of her rebuffs to his advances, did not seem interested in interceding on her behalf either.

Instead, the halfling bade farewell to his shipmates, telling them that he too would be going ashore for a short spell at Saltmarsh to spend their wages.

As evening fell, Aurora, Babshapka, and Barnabus disembarked at Saltmarsh. In the gathering dusk, the setting sun reflected off the Azure Sea and a cool salt breeze blew over the docks. The town of Saltmarsh seemed quaint and picturesque to Aurora, and she resolved not to let the unanticipated change in plans perturb her. *My master sent me, rather than another student, because he trusted me to resolve just such unforeseen difficulties, after all.*

By the time the three of them had gathered their gear and walked the gangplank to the dock, the captain and mate of the *Merchild* were engaged in conversation with a local customs officer.

“We’ll not be unloading any goods. We’ll only be taking on water, as soon in the morning as you can arrange, and we’ll be paying with crowns of the realm,” the captain told the dockman. The appearance of the trio briefly distracted the officer, but the captain assured them, “They are passengers only, harmless folks.” The officer waved them on distractedly and resumed his conversation.

Most of the ship’s crew lined up along the sheer strake, waiting to see whether they would be granted shore leave. While Aurora’s back was turned to them and Babshapka was looking warily up the quay, Barnabus caught the crew’s attention and made a lewd gesture, suggesting that he would indeed have the woman soon enough now that they were on land – he had even recently hinted that it had been her idea, that she had begged him to go ashore with her. A laughing cheer rose from the crew in response. Aurora turned back to the *Merchild*, utterly oblivious to the source of the jest, and waved a farewell, which drew a second cheer for Barnabus.

Chapter Three

Arrival in Saltmarsh

4 Goodmonth, 570

Standing among their gear on the docks of Saltmarsh as they watched their former ship set sail, Tyrius, Larry, and Thokk contemplated their options. Or, rather, Tyrius contemplated while Larry and Thokk returned the open stares of the passers-by. The dockworkers seemed rough-and-tumble men, and if they were taken aback by the newcomers in town, they did not let on. The inner harbor, however, was lined with a dirt road that ran all along the shore. Judging by the number of commonfolk stopping and gawking, the town did not see much in the way of huge half-orcs, grubby dwarves, or noble paladins. Tyrius could not have guessed which of them made the bigger spectacle. Keoish manners seemed to prevail, however, and the bystanders did nothing more provocative than staring and whispering to one another, occasionally cuffing the bolder children who would have spoken to the strangers had they been permitted.

With the decision-making left to Tyrius, it seemed meet that they should first thank the gods for their safe arrival. Enough of the commoners sported the dusky hue of the Flan that Tyrius dared ask about a temple to Pelor, but the look he received spoke louder than the answer itself. Overhearing the exchanges, an old man who sat mending nets nearby remarked that anyone who had any sense would thank Osprem for a safe arrival after a voyage at sea. He motioned a hand toward the back of the harbor, where what was obviously a temple stood overlooking the water.

The temple was of limestone without, decorated here and there with bits of coral. Inside were simple wooden benches without backs for pews, and a stone altar in front of what looked like a marble-lined wading pool that smelled of saltwater. No clergy were present, not even novices, so Tyrius offered what he hoped was an appropriate prayer. He looked up just in time to stop Thokk from entering the pool. The half-orc argued that they should collect the coins and pearls from the pool and use them for drinking money; Tyrius tried to explain to him several times that the valuables there were offerings, not for taking. He only

succeeded in convincing the barbarian not to take anything when he suggested that the treasures belonged to a sea goddess who would be angry when she found them missing, a line of argument Thokk found reasonable.

By the time they emerged from the temple, a gaggle of town watchmen waited for them, word of their arrival having apparently spread to the authorities. They were escorted to the Customs House, which seemed to Tyrius' surprise to be a center for civil governance in the town. A junior customs officer questioned Tyrius at length, establishing that they were not merchants, had nothing of value that they needed to declare (or pay taxes on), and were not mercenaries. Having determined that they were not there on business, the functionary made it plain to them that Saltmarsh had laws against vagrancy—they would need to establish a residence by sundown, and gainful employment within a week. Tyrius replied that he doubted they would be staying that long, and the officer helpfully gave him the names of the three inns in town, as well as that of a tavern that had a common room. Finally, the officer clarified that as Larry and Thokk were neither humans nor crown subjects, they were legally considered to be Tyrius' chattel—meaning that he would be responsible for all their actions within the town, and any consequences thereof. Furthermore, the man said that while there was no law against freemen carrying weapons, he had already received several complaints about Thokk and his axes. He advised Tyrius to make sure that the half-orc never drew or brandished his weapons, or they would all face charges of disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace, at the very least. Tyrius agreed to these terms, but he thought to himself, *I can see that this is not going to be a leisurely sail through the Hool Marshes.*

With so many ways to run afoul of the local law, after they left the customs house Tyrius decided the best thing to do would be to find a room at an inn and placate Thokk with food and drink while he thought about their next move. *The Inn of the Merry Mermaid* was close at hand, the owner Madam Ruth friendly even after seeing Thokk, the room adequate, the common bed cramped for the three of them but acceptable. Tyrius washed before preparing for supper (his companions saw no reason to do so) and then counted the coins remaining in his purse. Not enough for a week's food and lodging, to be sure.

As the trio of misfits prepared to take their board at *The Merry Mermaid*, a ship called *The Merchild* took harbor and three passengers disembarked: an attractive young woman with fey features, a brooding and hooded elven warrior, and a halfling minstrel with lute in hand. The streets were by then deserted; apparently the good folk of Saltmarsh had gone to their homes to take their evening meals. Only stray dogs and cats prowled the docks, sniffing out the offal from the day's gutted fish. In the town, lights filled the windows, one by one, as candles and lanterns were lit. Sea air mixed with the smoky scents from dozens of hearths and cooking fires. At the end of the dock a single human figure, a man dressed in brown robes, stood, as if awaiting them.

"Welcome to Saltmarsh," the man said warmly. "I am Flern, priest of Fharlanghn."

"A priest, excellent!" Aurora responded enthusiastically. She launched a barrage of questions, "Do you have a temple in town? Can we stay there? Can we use it as a base of operations? Can you sell us healing potions ..."

The priest held up his hand as if to ward off the inquiries and laughed good-naturedly, more amused at the pretty maid's impertinence than offended. "No, no," he said, "I have no kirk in town, neither temple nor chapel nor shrine, and nothing to sell you. My order exists to help travelers."

Barnabus suspiciously eyed the simple wooden bowl the man carried on his hip. "It looks like your order exists to beg."

The man smiled again, though this time the smile looked a little more forced. "I am a mendicant priest, yes, as there is not a local endowment for my order. Nevertheless, I help travelers such as yourselves. What do you wish to know about Saltmarsh? Where do you wish to go?"

"Know?" pondered Aurora. She quickly remembered her instructions and considered how best to locate the sellsword adventurers she would need. "What great deeds need to be done? What wrongs need to be righted? Who is in danger here that we can ..."

The man laughed again. "At sundown in sleepy Saltmarsh? The only ones in danger here are you, in danger of being arrested for vagrancy if you do not find a place to stay for the night. Let me right *that* wrong and I will take you to an inn."

Flern led the trio along the shore of the inner harbor. He did not have to work hard to avoid Aurora's questions, since she kept asking another before he could answer the first. They turned right at a crossroads and came to a solid, two-story building with a hanging sign depicting a mermaid. "*The Merry Mermaid*," said Flern. "Best inn in Saltmarsh."

"I like the sound of that," Aurora said cheerfully. "From out of the *The Merchild* and into *The Merry Mermaid*! It must be providential; don't you think Father Flern?"

Inside they found a cramped common room, most of the first floor space apparently occupied by the kitchen, and a steep stairway to the guest rooms above. At a rough wooden table, a strange trio sat supping; a golden-haired man whose fine robes bespoke noble birth, a dirty dwarf in course traveling clothes, and a huge half-orc who might have been naked, for he was bare from head to table (below the table he was unseen). As Babshapka entered the room, the half-orc stood and his hand went at once to a huge axe strapped to his bare back. Now that he was standing, they could see that he was indeed clothed – but in a dirty loincloth that covered little more than his privates. The nobleman spoke to him and laid a hand on the brute's shoulder. The half-orc released his hold on the axe, sat, and resumed his meal.

A door to the kitchen burst open, and a matron entered with a platter and three mugs of ale. She smiled broadly at the trio of potential customers and nodded at Flern.

Barnabus looked at those at the table, then at the ample-figured, middle-aged hostess. "Yes, well, I'm for the tavern," he said, and turned for the door, pushing past Flern. He paused, turned back, and stared at Aurora. "You really should come with and hear my full repertoire," he said suggestively as he left, "It is much more refined than anything I play on ship."

Aurora spoke with the matron, a woman named Ruth, and arranged the let of a room with a single bed for herself and a

separate chair for Babshapka. She ordered dinner for herself and the wood elf, thanked Flern, and sat down at the table with the other guests. The odd trio looked as much as anything like candidates for an adventuring group. When Aurora learned of their quest to enter the Dreadwood, she remarked, "I myself have no interest in Dreadwood, but I might be persuaded to join your expedition if it promised some incentive." Babshapka shook his head wearily.

"We are short of coin and in need of supplies," Tyrius complained.

"Perhaps we can scare up some adventure," Aurora suggested. "Like treasure hunters who fight monsters in some dank dungeon and steal away with a horde of gold, or like heroes who save the town from some terrible danger and receive a goodly reward."

The unkempt dwarf nodded, "I like the sound of that."

Tyrius agreed, "A heroic quest!"

Thokk ground the bones of the fish he was eating between his teeth, and Babshapka silently shook his head again.

In the meantime, Barnabus had no trouble finding the tavern. The noise of a boisterous crowd was easy enough to follow through the quiet streets of the town. The tavernkeep looked dubiously at the halfling when he offered to sing in return for supper, drinks, and tips. "I'm Barnabus the minstrel," he said reassuringly, "known in every port of the Azure Sea, and this is my standard deal."

"Well, I don' ken ye," responded the tavernkeep sourly, and he might have turned him out if not, by a stroke of luck, some of the crewmen from *The Merchild* arrived and, recognizing him, enthusiastically greeted him by name and asked for a song. The locals soon joined the seamen in calling for the halfling to sing, and the tavernkeep relented. By evening's end, as the last drunken sailor staggered from the tavern, supported by an equally-drunk shipmate, Barnabus was working on a plate of cold mutton. The singing was a success, of course, for such a small town rarely heard an entertainer of his quality, and he had a pouchful of copper sparrows—more than he came in with. But the vexing half-elf woman never came, though he kept watching for her through the evening. *Damned if I am going back to the* "Merry

Mermaid" *without an invitation from her, and fie on her!* Besides, he saw the knowing look exchanged between the "priest" Flern and Matron Ruth when he arrived. Obviously the "priest" was hustling customers for the woman. *Finest inn in Saltmarsh, my hairy halfling-hind!* He had seen some highlands as they passed at the harbor entrance with merchant warehouses and fine craftsmen's shops. *I would wager more than this bag of coppers that there is a better inn there.* He bade goodnight to the tavernkeep and gave a salacious look at his daughter, a serving wench. *Why did I waste the night waiting for Aurora, when I could have been working my charms on her?* He stepped out into the cool night air. His head felt heavy with ale, but he managed to find an inn called *The Full Moon*. He had to knock hard to rouse the innkeep, but his bag of coppers earned him a private room with a bath. *Better than anything those fools at The Mermaid will have tonight.*

Chapter Four

In Search of Adventure

5 Goodmonth, 570

Tyrius, Thokk, Larry, and Aurora awoke to the smell of fresh bread and batter-fried fish rising from *The Mermaid's* kitchen. Babshapka had been awake for hours already—elves do not sleep like other races. He spent the early morning seated near the open window of the bedroom he shared with the half-elf girl, staring out over the town and to the water.

At breakfast, Aurora continued the discussion she had initiated the night before, exchanging stories and manipulating the conversation toward a resolution to form an adventuring company. Tyrius was reluctant to commit to anything long-term. His goal was to get Larry to the Moot of the Great Druid, and he recognized that he would need coin to accomplish even that. *Why should I doubt the light of Pelor? If these two elvish folks want to help me get coin by doing some noble deeds, so much the better.* They were still talking when visitors arrived—Lieutenant Dan of the town watch, and several of the watchmen that Tyrius encountered the previous day. He cast a curious eye over Babshapka and Aurora, letting his eyes linger perhaps a few moments too long on the pretty half-elf. Then he turned to Tyrius and addressed him with a stern and non-nonsense tone, “I’ve come to meet you all and see that you found yourselves some honest lodgings. I want to see that you have paid Ruth here with good coin, and that you understand you now have six days left to find either employment or a patron.”

Tyrius sighed and nodded. Thokk picked at his teeth and sniffed at the air.

The watch officer levelled a finger at the half-orc and continued with the warning, “Understand that violence of any kind, including drawing weapons or threatening the townsfolk, will not be tolerated.”

“My good sir,” Tyrius said solemnly and with his best air of noble honor, “I assure you that my companions and I will cause no stir or trouble, that we have paid in full, and will pay for our future

lodgings and all that we eat and drink in this good city, and that we will be on our way and gone from your fair town before Godsdays next. In fact, we have taken up this good scholar and her warder, and we intend to accompany them on an adventure."

"Pray tell, what is the nature of this 'venture?'"

The pretty half-elf stood and introduced herself with a flirtatious smile. "I am Aurora, a scholar from Ulek and a student of history and lore. Perhaps you can tell me something of the local history of Saltmarsh and then I will be able to tell you of the adventure we intend to undertake. I would be curious to know what dangers threaten the safety of these citizens and how the men of the local watch, brave men like yourself, deal with such dangers."

The unanticipated attention from the beautiful and exotic-looking stranger discomfited the watch officer. He stammered, "There...there really are no current dangers to the town itself, and the watch...under my leadership of course...keeps things safe, quite safe enough." He thought for a moment before adding, "In times past, Salters have seen marsh orcs come raiding, and there's some that speak of curses from the occasional bog witch, and there have been goblin raids from the Dreadwood."

"Those sound like formidable threats to me," Aurora replied.

Lieutenant Dan drew himself up a little straighter and puffed out his chest, "Well, we Salters take care of ourselves well enough, though there be dangers aplenty. Pirates on the Azure Sea are always a concern, but they do not menace the town itself."

Thokk leaned forward, taking in every word keenly.

"As a scholar of lore," the watch officer continued, "You have no doubt heard of the Long Summer, some fifteen years ago, when the flickers came out of the marshes in the north and burnt and pillaged all up and down the Javan."

"Of course, of course," replied Aurora, "but that was long ago. Are there no dangers today that press upon the concern of the brave men of the watch?"

"Not at all. Under my watchful eye, Saltmarsh is peaceful and prosperous. And," he added with just a bit too much emphasis

and a menacing glance at Tyrius and his companions, "I intend to keep it that way, so if you and these would-be-heroes are seeking to sell your swords or find some adventure, you'll find nothing to interest yourselves hereabouts, and really should clear off sooner rather than later."

The watch officer left, and Aurora put the same questions to Ruth, wondering if perhaps the Lieutenant might be concealing some matter which could prove useful to her investigation, but the matron's answers were nearly identical to those of the watchman excepting that she made no remarks about clearing off. Ruth was apparently more than happy to accept their coin, and she assured them, "You are all welcome to stay at *The Merry Mermaid* as long as you would like."

"I need to put together a few supplies and nose about a bit, and by now the merchants will be at their stalls. I should like to find some magical items or potions," Aurora said to Babshapka. Turning to Tyrius, she invited, "If you and your friends have no better occupation this morning, you might come with us to explore the great city of Saltmarsh and find our first adventure!"

"I have purchases to make as well if we are to embark upon a holy quest," Tyrius agreed. "We would be pleased to accompany you."

As the five newcomers stepped through the door of *The Mermaid* and out into the city streets, they drew curious stares and gawking expressions from everyone they met. Elves and dwarves made an uncommon enough sight in their own right, but they were never seen in company together and as a strict rule, never in company with a half-orc. The odd party of strangers soon found the Lord's Marketplace, an open-air collection of stalls with people of all sorts buying and bartering for the dozens of different supplies and luxuries available in a town of that size. Aurora seized upon the opportunity to talk to more than a score of stallkeepers and customers, asking each of them in turn the subtle questions about the history of the area and looming threats to the town while she pretended to be interested in the wares on display. Babshapka trailed her silently. His sharp eyes watched the people around her and how they reacted rather than bothering with the conversants themselves. The conversations all repeated the sentiments of the watch officer, though some sellers emphasized the threat of orcs more (especially when Thokk lumbered by), and others the bog witches, and others the goblins,

the flickers, or the pirates; the litany of villains was the same, but none, it seemed, posed any consistent or immediate threat.

Aurora tried casting her nets for adventuring leads at a few more stalls, but she pulled them back empty. In addition to fishing for clues about conspiracies, she had asked about those who sold magical supplies, such as potions of healing, as well as quality incense (that she might use in her find familiar spell, although she did not mention that last part). Most of the townsfolk stiffened at the mention of magic, and a few even made signs to ward off evil. Some of the more trusting sorts took her request for “potions of healing” to mean herbal remedies, and they pointed her in the direction of the town’s herbalist, across the commons from the marketplace.

For his part, Tyrius organized the purchase of various supplies the group would need if they were to leave town together and enter the Dreadwood or some other adventure. “Does everyone have a waterskin? A bedroll? Is there enough cheese and hardtack for everyone for a week at least?” He made careful purchases, stretching the few coins that remained as far as possible, but he had difficulty concentrating on the task at hand. He had to spend as much effort keeping Thokk and Larry out of trouble as negotiating trades.

While Tyrius made purchases and Aurora made inquiries, Babshapka caught sight of the halfling scallywag from their ship wandering the stalls.

“So we meet again, and I see that you have taken up with characters more savory than sailors,” the halfling said sarcastically with a perfunctory nod toward Thokk and Larry.

“Not all that seems base is low, nor is every high thing lofty,” Tyrius said with some edge to his voice.

“Well priest, or whatever you are, if you want to know about things base and low, you need only ask,” the halfling said with a laugh and a bow.

“This is Barnabus,” Aurora explained by way of introductions, “A minstrel who sailed with us.”

“Would you care to see my instrument?” the halfling quipped while cupping himself obscenely. Thokk snarled and bared his teeth, and the smarmy smile quickly fled from the halfling’s face. Turning to address Aurora directly, Barnabus said with an exaggerated tone of sensual enticement, “I hope you found your accommodations satisfactory, if lonely. For my part, I took my repose in a fine inn with a bath and a feather pillow ...”

Ignoring his solicitation, Aurora cut in, “We have agreed to adventure together with this noble paladin of Pelor and his charges. You should join us. Why sing for a few coppers when there is the promise of gold ... and more?”

“Team with you?” he began loudly. “I wouldn’t...” he paused, his intended rhetorical performance, which he had practiced all morning and in which he planned on denouncing her for all the marketplace to hear as a shrill and fickle harpy, stalled on his tongue. “Everyone knows about adventuring groups, of course,” he said thoughtfully. “They merely set foot outside town and fissures in the earth open for them, leading to caves filled with monsters and treasures. If you fools want to tackle the monsters, I don’t mind a share of the treasures. I’ve heard it is said that adventurers even have magic items thrown at them by the denizens of the darkness. For a few useful magic items, I could swallow my pride and suffer even you, you annoying temptress!” Barnabus’ pride was strong, but his greed was stronger. “I wouldn’t want to refuse such a potentially lucrative venture. At least not until the next ship comes to town.”

Tyrius conferred with Barnabus and the two of them ticked through a mental inventory of supplies they might need for an extended journey before declaring their party fully equipped for travel. For all her efforts, Aurora had not acquired a single clue about a secretive Suel conspiracy, not any leads for a potential adventure of any type, nor even a single magic component. They left the marketplace and headed across the commons. The grass was a lush green, close-cropped by the grazing knots of sheep and goats that wandered here and there.

As they passed among the livestock, Aurora noticed a throng of children left the marketplace and followed them at a discrete distance. “It appears that we have acquired a small flock of our own,” Aurora said to Babshapka.

The elf sighed and spoke for the first time that day, “They have been following us ever since we entered the market. We have attracted every guttersnipe in town.”

An herbalist’s shop stood on the other side of the road from a much larger building of strange construction. It was all of wood, with a lower story and a roofless upper level. Both levels were without walls, with large timber support columns and beams that left the whole structure open to the elements except that the floor of the upper level formed the ceiling of the lower. An open spiral stair constructed of narrow planks set into a vertical post in the center of the lower level ascended precariously to a trapdoor without even a railing. Behind the building and perpendicular to it were a series of bound straw bales covered in lime—apparently archery targets for the town watch or whomever else practiced with a bow thereabouts. There was a single crude, scarecrow-like manikin as well, dented and pock-marked. A small shed behind the building was roofed with three walls, but one open side revealed several cut yew boughs curing.

As they drew still closer, they could spy wooden frames set with cressets on both the lower and upper stories of the open building. Tyrius was the first to take them for altars and the whole building a temple of some kind. Since all the walls were open, there did not appear to be an “entrance” per se, but he led them around to the side nearest the road for formality’s sake. Just then a man emerged from a small dwelling next to the temple, a house they later learned was the temple’s rectory. The man was dressed oddly, in loose breeches but without a shirt. He did, however, wear a light linen cape. The man’s pale skin was covered in freckles, particularly his broad shoulders and face. Undoubtedly his odd style was comfortable in the heat of the midsummer’s sun, but it seemed awfully immodest for local standards. Aside from Thokk, they had seen no-one bare-chested in town but infants.

In reply to Tyrius’ inquiry, the bare-chested man replied, “I am Aeravis, priest of Phaulkon. Yes, this building is the Aerie of Phaulkon, a temple to my god.”

“We are seeking potions of healing,” Aurora explained.

“I am a priest and can heal, but I do not mix potions. When someone comes to me with a wound or affliction, I pray over the

person and offer what cure I am able in exchange for an appropriate donation to the Aerie.”

“Perhaps you have incense you might spare to sell us,” she persisted.

“The small store I possess I use for sacred services; I have none to spare. Such refined goods are hard to come by in this small town. But the next time a merchant ship makes port with incense and spices on board, if you are still in town, I will let you know.”

“You are the second priest we have met since coming to Saltmarsh. A priest named Flern met us at the docks.”

The priest of Phaulkon chuckled. “That ne'er-do-well? Let's just say that some of us worship the wind, and some of us are blown by the wind from town to town. I wouldn't get accustomed to seeing him around, if I were you.”

Aurora asked him about threats to the town, and he replied with the same litany as the others, but added one more. “The greatest threat here is complacency, of course. It has been peaceful so long that it is hard to get these staid townsfolk to prepare for danger. Look at yon gaggle of followers you have attracted,” he said and pointed to the children, most of them sitting in the shade of the bow shack or the practice targets, but still watching the party. “Why, there's at least two of those strapping lads strong enough to string a bow, but do they come to practice of a week? No, the lazy urchins. Why don't you ask them what threats they face? Most like their father's belt is the only thing they ever were afeared of.”

Aurora laughed dismissively, but Tyrius looked suddenly inspired. He took out his brightest copper coin, then began tossing and catching it so that it glinted in the sun. Once he had attracted the attention of the youths he ambled slowly over to them. “We need to find real threats, not chasing boggarts,” Aurora called after him, but Tyrius ignored her.

Aurora crossed the street to try the herbalist's shop but she found the door closed.

“Out gathering herbs,” called Aeravis and shrugged.

Tyrius greeted the children with a toss of his long golden hair, and one of them, apparently a girl beneath the street dust and scabbed knees, blushed. "So, I have a game for you," he said in perfect Keoish, but his northern accent sounded exotic to their ears.

"A game?" they respond in chorus, some eagerly and some with suspicion.

"The game is this—I ask you a question, and if you answer truthfully, you get a copper sparrow."

The youngest of the children began jumping, begging to be chosen, but the largest boy turned on them, brandishing his fist, and they sat down sullenly. He turned back around to Tyrius.

"Ain't nothin' fer free," he says. "Wat's ther catch?"

"The catch is this," smiled Tyrius. "I am a servant of the Sun God," and he pointed up at the disk of the sun, now almost directly overhead. "If you take my coin and lie to me, you'll have him to reckon with." The boy snorted—but he didn't offer to play. Sensing the restlessness of his band, though, he waved another boy forward, smaller than him, but still one of the largest present.

"I'll play," said the youth.

"Alright," said Tyrius holding forth his fist without releasing the coin, "Here is my question—What is it you fear the most in this village?"

"Me Pa, wen he's been in ther cups!" the boy said without hesitation. A roar of laughter went up from the children. Tyrius smiled and handed the boy the coin. He was instantly mobbed by children all trying to see if it was real. He bit the metal and grinned.

Tyrius fixed his gaze upon the oldest girl and drew forth another copper from his pouch. "And you, young miss, what is it you fear?"

"I ain't afeared o' nothin'," she said definitely, and then, when a nearby boy sniggered, she shoved him so hard he fell to the ground.

Tyrius closed his hand about the coin and frowned. "The coin is only for those who tell the truth," he said, "those are my rules, and the rules of Holy Pelor."

The girl stared at her feet. "Malenxa, the bog witch," she whispered, and a few of the children shuddered. Tyrius tossed the copper at the spot where her gaze was fixed on the ground. She snatched the coin up, then took off at a run across the commons.

"I bet she be goin' ter buy sweets!" said one of the smaller boys jealously.

"Nah," said another. "She be buyin' milk fer her baby sister. Her ma's done gone dry, an' don't her sister holler all night!" That got much laughter as well.

Tyrius pointed at another youth, one of the smaller lads. He pulled a third coin from his purse. The boy started to answer, then stopped, then started again, and stopped. "Petey's afeared o' so much, 'e don't even ken what 'e be afeared o' ther most!" cracked the largest boy, and everyone laughed while the boy flushed.

"The alky-mist ghost!" the small boy blurted out, and the unruly crowd went coldly silent. Tyrius noted that a few of them made the ward against evil.

"Aurora..." he called over his shoulder. "You might want to hear this."

The full tale took thrice as long to tell as necessary, with half of the children interrupting each other and trying to tell it at the same time. Just outside of town, along the coast road, on a lonely cliff overlooking the sea, was the abandoned house of a long-dead alchemist-magician. Even while alive he was an evil sort, but death made him worse, as his ghost haunted the house and killed, in quite terrible ways that seemed to vary with each child doing the telling, any who entered. That would not be so bad, were his spirit confined to the house. But there was one way (no, two! NO, three!) that he could actually leave the house. For anyone who walked the coast road (for business, travel, or even a spot of poaching in the wood) and passed the house, if they were incautious and allowed the shadow of the house to fall on any part of their body, then the ghost could leave the house, come to them at night, and strangle them in their bed. Furthermore, if one

was so foolish as to travel the coast road by night, it was more than likely that one would see eerie lights, or hear screams, coming from the house. In that case, the ghost could also come to you. The only escape in any of these cases was to spend the next night in a temple, and any of the five temples in town would do. The ghost could not chase you on holy ground, and so would give up, return to his house, and you were safe.

When the tale was largely done, and the urchins were just arguing over details, and who really knew someone who was killed by the ghost, “no, really,” the party members looked at one another. Tyrius and Aurora found this as likely an adventuring idea as any they had heard so far. Larry grumbled that the undead are abominations and need to be destroyed. Babshapka rolled his eyes and said his duty was in protecting Aurora. Barnabus asked a few clarifying questions of the children—yes, the alchemist could turn lead into gold, and yes, there was a mysterious treasure still hidden in the house that was never recovered after he died—and then declared that he was “in.” Only Thokk objected. “Fah—a ghost is made of wind! Thokk’s mighty axe will cleave a ghost in one stroke, and the fight will be over too quickly to enjoy.” He reached for his axe to pull it out and demonstrate, and Tyrius had to physically restrain him.

“Yes,” said Tyrius as he struggled with Thokk, “an adventure outside of the town limits would be perfect.”

The party agreed to return to *The Mermaid* and collect their gear (including Tyrius’ chain hauberk, which he had not donned for town). They retraced their steps across the commons with the gaggle of urchins surrounding them, though several of the children were pulled away by angry parents upon their return to the market. Those that remained were chased off by Ruth and her broom when they arrived at *The Mermaid*. Unnoticed by the party, one of the youths was neither taken away by parents nor chased off by Ruth. Rather, he darted behind a stall as soon as they reached the marketplace, and then dashed off by himself down a side street. Ultimately, he arrived breathless at the shop of Master Merchant Murphy.

Chapter Five

Haunted House of Saltmarsh



5 Goodmonth, 570 (afternoon and evening)

“That one’s got to pay! He didn’t want to be a guest here last night, and he’s not eating for nothing today,” Ruth warned severely, nodding toward Barnabas as she set a luncheon out for the paying customers.

“Not to worry, Oh Fairest Flower of the Azure Sea,” Barnabus said with obviously feigned obsequiousness. “Bring me an ale with this luncheon and I shall pay for what I eat and drink with a song worth twice the amount.”

“We’ll pay with coin for what he eats,” Tyrius hastened to add.

Aurora hoped that Ruth might offer a more sober telling of the tale of the alchemist’s house than the version offered up by the children of Saltmarsh. Ignoring the whole exchange about whether or not Barnabus would pay for his food, she inquired, “Ruth, what can you tell us of the alchemist’s house? The children you chased off told us that it’s haunted?”

“Like as not it is haunted,” she admitted as she ladled up the broth into their bowls.

“Would it be meet to say the spirits haunting it are a threat to the town?” Aurora pursued eagerly.

“Hardly!” she said with a dismissive laugh. “It’s four miles east of the town which is a long way for a geist to go a-creeping. It’s not even likely any of the ragamuffins ye spoke with has ever actually laid eyes on the place. It is indeed a lonesome house, just off the old coast road and looking out to the sea.”

“We intend to exorcise the spirits that haunt it as a service to the people of Saltmarsh,” Tyrius explained as he counted out coin to pay for Barnabus’ food. “What can you tell us about it?”

Madam Ruth put down the ladle, a grave expression settling over her plump features. “Oh, I shouldn’t be poking my nose into things like that if I was ye. I can tell ye this. Until some twenty years ago, when I was yet in the flower of youth, an aged alchemist and magician did reside there, and he did indeed have a sinister reputation—as anyone who practices magic deserves, really. The townsfolk mostly shunned the house because of the occupation of the owner. He disappeared under unexplained circumstances—his body was never found. He simply stopped receiving the weekly lot of food he purchased from the sundries store here in Saltmarsh. After several missed pick-ups and missed payments, the Town Council ordered the house searched. Nothing was found—” she paused dramatically, fixing the diners a solemn look before continuing in a hushed tone, “though over the next

few years, everyone in the search party, to a man, suffered ill luck and untimely ends...”

Larenthal shuddered and even Thokk seemed taken aback, but Barnabas laughed it off. “Oh my!” he exclaimed sarcastically with a roll of his eyes. “I’ve never had a stroke of ill luck in my life.”

“I don’t like ye, hobniz,” Ruth said matter-of-factly, “And I don’t mind telling ye that, neither.”

“Never mind him,” placated Aurora. “Madam Ruth, please tell us what else you know of the house.”

“Well, the place is now long-abandoned and in much disrepair. In recent years what passersby have spoken of it to me indeed do tell tale of ghastly shrieks and eerie lights from within it. Not even the bravest of the townsfolk would dare enter it now, and frankly, neither should ye all,” she said firmly. After a moment of thought, she added, “If it *were* restored, the house would make a fine country estate for some wealthy merchant or noble from Seaton, but that hasn’t happened. The town council would sell it if there was a buyer, for the town assumed title to the land and house after no heirs came a-calling. That they be unable to sell it for even a paltry fee speaks to its unsavory reputation.”

After lunch, the party organized and packed all of their gear and settled accounts with Ruth, who was sorry to see them go. She even offered to store for them whatever gear “would only get in their way” in their exploration of the cursed house. As they passed through the streets to the *Full Moon*, the urchins gathered again, begging to play more games for coin, and soon they had an even larger crowd of ragamuffins than before. By the time they left Saltmarsh proper, a full score of youths were in tow. However, the youngest of the lot did not last long for the journey once the town was no longer in sight. By the time the four miles had gone by, and the vague outline of the house appeared in the distance, only the oldest and boldest remained.

The house stood on the cliff top some seventy feet above the sea and eighty feet from the edge. The sound of waves relentlessly beating against the stones below gave the house a lonely, noble feeling. *This was a fine house once*, Aurora thought to herself. *I can see why a spellcaster, such as myself, would choose to live here.*

A six-foot-high stone wall, topped with rusty ironwork, surrounded the property, looking a bit out of place since there were no neighboring buildings. An ornate iron gate pierced the wall, and a weed-choked stone-and-earth drive led to the well-traveled coastal road.

The handful of youths remaining took one step forward for every two steps of the party of companions once the gate was in view. They watched the adventurers pass through the open gate, at which point two of them bolted and ran; three remained, hesitating, reluctant to miss the adventure.

Beyond the gate, the party saw an overgrown garden and the back of the house. The drive curved around the side and disappeared from view, for the front of the house, and presumably the main entrance, faced the sea. Moving cautiously through the garden, they came upon a stone well. No bucket was in sight but there did appear to be water at the bottom. From the garden, the party of adventurers could see a dozen windows and two doors on the back of the house, on the ground floor. A second bank of windows indicated a first floor above, and the steep roof hinted at a large but unlit attic. The windows had glass panes, a sure sign of the wealth of the original builder. The panes remained largely intact but so caked with dust, inside and out, that little could be seen through them. Each door had a window next to it, but only one of them opened on to the same room as the door did, and that one off of a back patio.

“Wait here,” Babshapka said to Aurora and the rest. His tone and manner invited no argument. The elf watched at the window a good while, then found the door to the patio unlocked, and slipped silently into what appeared to be a ground floor living room. The room was bare save for a pile of refuse in the corner, but had a stone hearth and an interior door to the main house. Cobwebs and rat droppings were everywhere. After allowing a second for his eyes to adjust, Babshapka continued deeper into the room, at which point a booming voice called out, “*Welcome fools—welcome to your deaths!*” Babshapka’s blood ran cold and he froze, but no further sound was forthcoming. The voice had come from the ceiling, and the force of it shook loose some plaster that fell to the floor. Even now a fine white powder drifted down from the ceiling. *A magical ward. Nothing more*, he told himself. He checked the hearth to see if it had been recently used, but he found it cold, with rat tracks in the ashes. With the end of

his short sword he prodded at the refuse pile. Convinced that no immediate danger lurked in the room, he called for the others to enter. They carefully and methodically searched through all the rooms on the ground floor. The wood was rotten and there were several loose floorboards. Mold and water damage was abundant, but they found no indication of the alleged undead, or of life at all save for vermin. Aurora collected a few books from the library. A large spider in the drawing room inspired some excitement, and while the party was occupied with it, Barnabus made search of all the spots where he would hide valuables had it been *his* home. His efforts garnered him a precious ring which had been hidden up a chimney. As he secreted it on his person without mentioning it to the others, he shook his head. *The tales are true*, he said to himself. *Magic items throw themselves at adventurers*. Enormous centipedes made themselves a nuisance in the kitchen, but the would-be heroes were eager to employ their weapons and cantrips and left the creatures dismembered, smoking, and twitching. In the scullery, a narrow stair presumably descended to a basement, but the walls were so covered in mold that the party avoided it.

Having thoroughly searched the ground floor, the party ascended to the first floor. The grand staircase in the main entrance hall seemed untrustworthy, so they used the steeper but sounder kitchen stairs. At the top of the stairs was a landing that provided access to the rest of the house and a collapsed stairway to the attic. They explored the first floor; empty bedrooms and storage rooms in the northern wing (though Tyrius did find a scroll on which a spell was scribed), and empty bedrooms in the west wing. In one of these stood a wardrobe. Thokk snarled and popped it open, brandishing his axe, but as he did so, he was showered in mold spores.

Laughter turned serious as Larry warned them, "That's a yellow mold! It can be deadly!"

Thokk's eyes widened, and he began to try to brush the yellow spores from his flesh. "You just need to stay dry. It needs moisture to grow," the dwarf said urgently. Larenthal ripped plaster off the walls, quickly ground it up into a coarse powder, and covered Thokk head-to-foot so that the half-orc appeared to be a ghost himself. Barnabas laughed openly at the hilarity of the powdered mostly-naked half-blood, and even Babshapka's stoic face seemed almost on the edge of a smile.

The passage between the west and east wings posed a problem. A section of dangerous flooring made it inadvisable to traverse. "I would not want to leave half the house unexplored!" Aurora protested.

"We can jump across," Tyrius said, taking the leap and landing safely beyond the sagged timbers. Thokk followed, clearing the distance easily. All the rest did as well, except for Larry, who remained hesitating on the other side.

"I don't think I can make the leap," he said glumly.

"We can't leave you there," Tyrius objected.

"No need," Larry said as he pulled rope from his sack. He quickly devised a safety rope and pitons and made his way across with many groans from the floor but without incident.

The three bedrooms of the east wing proved more interesting. In the first room they explored, two more of the large spiders inspired some heroism. In the second, Babshapka pointed out some odd scratches, obviously recent, marking a window sill that looked out over the sea. The door to the third room was locked, but Barnabas found the key nearby on a sill.

"We'll just see what's in here!" he said excitedly as he turned the lock.

"Wait," Tyrius warned, supposing there might be some lurking danger, but the warning came too late. Barnabus pushed the door open. Inside the room, gagged and bound and with a lump on her head, was a woman in her smallclothes!

Of course Tyrius was the first into the room and worked quickly to free the woman. He gave her his own cloak to cover her modesty. The floor in the room looked unsafe, so he ushered her back to the bedroom where the legs of the slain spiders still twitched. After they had given her water from a skin and granted her time to recover her bearings, Aurora asked, "Who are you, and who has so mistreated you?"

"I am Nadine Shakeshaft," the woman said, putting a hand delicately to the bruise on her head. "And I am grateful to you."

"From whence have you come, ma'am?" Tyrius asked.

"I hale from Seaton," she said. "I am a mercenary, taking jobs to guard warehouses, ships, and caravans." Her state of undress easily revealed that she had both the build and the hands for such work. "I was traveling from Seaton to Saltmarsh last evening, looking for work, but due to delays on the road could not reach Saltmarsh by dusk. As the sun was setting, I came upon this house and thought to take refuge, but I had only entered through the door to the scullery and gone into the kitchen when I was attacked from behind and knocked unconscious. I awoke, bound and gagged, sometime this morning. I heard you making your way through the house and imagined you to be my assailants, not my rescuers!"

"Who do you suppose..." Aurora asked.

"Thieves, like as not," Barnabas remarked. "highwaymen or some such. Where are her things?"

"Yes, I had good leather armor, a metal helm, and a sword. They are missing along with my clothes."

Babshapka drew a dagger and, with a silent nod, handed it to her hilt-first.

"We will be happy to safely escort you to Saltmarsh, but not until we are done searching the house," Tyrius said. "Perhaps we will yet recover your belongings."

"We are adventurers," Larenthal said proudly. "And we are on an adventure."

"I see," she said in such a manner to make it clear that she did not in fact see what that meant. "I can perhaps stand watch, or perform some other duty, until your task is finished. For without my arms and armor, and with brigands about, I feel it prudent to have your company until I get to Saltmarsh."

With the first floor clear, but now even more suspicious of a malign presence in the house, the party decided to head for the attic. The way up posed another obstacle in the form of a gap in a collapsed stairway. Nadine proved her worth quickly, for she was strong of body, and she helped the party members to navigate the

gap, even boosting them up. But in the process of all that, Tyrius in his heavy armor slipped and fell, tumbling not only to the floor of the landing, but all the way down the stairs into the kitchen below, suffering a number of bruises along the way.

Eventually everyone was able to ascend into the attic, which was not but one open space underneath the sloping roof of the entire house. Their explorations stirred up a stirge nest and so began a desperate battle in cramped quarters. They had just managed to slay the last of fully a dozen of the bloodsuckers, with several of them wounded in the process, when a swarm of giant ants began flooding up the stairs from below.

Shouts of alarm filled the attic again. Larenthal found himself surrounded, and he panicked. He reached into the druidic arts taught to him by the old bear-man. He called upon his spellcraft and summoned up a wave of thunder which shook and rocked the whole house. It succeeded in killing the ants, but it also collapsed much of the floor of the attic under him. He was left dangling by his hands from some sagging crossbeams while the rest of the party stared helplessly. Tyrius attempted to rescue him, but the weight of the northern paladin in his armor finished the collapse of the floor, plummeting both of them to the first floor in a shower of splintered wood and a cloud of dust and plaster. No sooner had they hit the first floor landing when that, too, gave way, and they fell to the stone floor of the entryway below. Their limp bodies were half covered in debris. Sensing the urgency of the situation, Babshapka leapt through the open hole in the attic floor, tucked and rolled and landed safely on the first floor, then did the same thing to attain the ground floor. He cleared the debris from their bodies and checked his companions for breath and found they had survived the fall but barely. Binding up a wound or two, he checked for broken bones. They were not in immediate danger but were quite unconscious.

The Saltmarsh youths had, in the meantime, crept to the stone wall, and listened eagerly at the faint sounds of combat emerging occasionally from the house. At the peal of thunder and crash of timbers, however, all three of them turned and ran back to town.

The party of companions assembled in the entry hall. With both of their healers unconscious, they were in no state to continue with their adventure. Larry and Tyrius were, coincidentally, also the two heaviest members of the party. There was no way they

would be able to transport them both all the way to Saltmarsh, even with the help of stout Nadine.

“We will not spend the night in this house!” Aurora said, angrily wiping away bitter tears. She was frightened for her injured companions and all of her bravado had vanished, but she would not let the others see it. She began to think that adventuring might not be so great after all. Spiders, centipedes, stirges, ants, and collapsing floors hardly delivered the glory she had imagined attaining on their first adventure, but those rather mundane hazards had proven deadly enough. The only consolation was the ring she found. Just before the incident with the stirges, she had discovered a ring in the attic. *Certainly magical*, she had told herself as she slipped it on her finger.

They left the house, withdrawing across the road and a hundred yards or so into the forest, and that being taxing enough carrying their fallen friends and all their gear besides. There they broke open the supplies they had carried to take their evening meal and set watch while they nursed their companions, waiting for them to regain consciousness.

The night was warm; the sky clear. They heard no sound but the distant wash of the waves and the hum of insects. Thokk and Nadine shared the first watch, and then Barnabus and Aurora, and finally Babshapka on his own—Aurora having carefully selected someone with darkvision to be on each shift. Barnabus flattered himself into believing that she had intentionally manipulated the watch to grant them time alone together. *I guess my luck hasn't run out after all!* he congratulated himself. While he was distracted with more useless bids for her affection, neither of them noticed the supposedly sleeping Nadine slip off into the forest. She left behind Tyrius' bundled cloak in her place on the ground, and her absence went undetected. Much like the urchin before, she too paid a visit to Master Merchant Murphey in Saltmarsh before returning by the light of the moons and taking her place back in camp tired but with no one the wiser.

Chapter Six

Sanballet's Refrain



6 Goodmonth, 570

Sometime during Babshapka's watch, first Tyrius and then Larenthal regained consciousness. Both remained in considerable discomfort, but the elf was relieved to find them lucid. Babshapka spoke to them softly, gave them water, and attended to their needs before encouraging them to rest longer. By morning Larry felt strong enough to summon up enough of the Oerth's power to work spells of healing for his own wounds and also for those of his companion. Tyrius, in his turn, invoked the name of Pelor to lay healing hands upon himself and the dwarf. Through rest and the power of spells and prayers, they recovered their strength, but the effort cost them all their magical potency, and the party was not keen to return to the house with their spellcaster at "empty." They decided to let Larenthal continue to rest for the morning and then set out in the afternoon. For his part, the dwarf was content to spend the morning communing with sky and land, earth and sea, and the living soul of Oerth rather than returning immediately to the house of giant vermin and blood-sucking stirges.

The rest of the party spent a leisurely morning in the fresh sea air, enjoying a generous lunch. Nadine did not have food to contribute (her supplies having been taken along with her clothes), but she did provide assistance with gathering wood, cooking, and washing up, so the party did not begrudge her the

two meals. Thanks to Tyrius' careful planning, they had purchased a week's worth of supplies, and they were in no danger of running short soon even with one extra mouth.

In mid-afternoon, the party broke camp and returned through the woods to the house. Arriving there, however, they found it surrounded by townsfolk! Mostly the young and spry, but people of all ages had gathered—many having brought a picnic lunch with them. They were spread out along the road and camped on high spots so as to see over the wall—a few youths were even perched in trees, studying the house. None had dared cross the wall or enter the garden, however, and Aurora noted that they stayed well away from the shadow of the wall.

When the party emerged from the woods, a cheer went up. As they walked toward the road, the smaller children surrounded them. "Why have all these people come?" Aurora asked Tyrius.

"Perhaps the boys from yesterday heard the thunderclap Larry created, and now they have come back for more entertainment," Tyrius suggested.

The cheers of the crowd disconcerted the adventurers. Aurora scowled. Thokk hefted his axe nervously. Larenthal actually blushed. Babshapka pulled his hood up over head. Barnabas offered an awkward bow as if he had completed a performance. Nadine barely concealed a smirk that had started to creep across her face. Only Tyrius seemed to take it in stride. He smiled and waved and tossed his golden hair. "So nice of the small folk to turn out for us," he murmured contentedly.

The cheers faded into silence as the party approached the gate, and when Babshapka stepped through first, there was an audible gasp from the spectators. Ignoring the stares as best they could, the rest of the party followed the drive around the house to the sea-side and up to the front entrance.

The entry hall was as they had left it the afternoon before—in a shower of shattered timber, fallen plaster, and the bodies of dead giant ants. They picked their way carefully across the room, then down the hall to the kitchen and opened the door to the scullery. There the abundance of mold once again gave them pause, as did a putrid smell of decay rising from below. Larenthal suggested they tie rags over their faces before proceeding forward, "To

protect from spores.” Most followed his advice, but Thokk scoffed at the idea.

As Babshapka set his booted foot lightly on the top step of the stairs down, hideous screams emerged from the basement, as of a soul in terrible torment. The sound gave them all a fright, and even Thokk took a few steps back.

“By the gods!” Barnabas exclaimed, his voice muffled by the rag he had tightly bound around his nose and mouth. “What in the nine hells was that?”

Babashapka shrugged unconcernedly, and Aurora said, “It sounds like a tormented spirit—or at least the way I imagine a tormented spirit would sound.”

“That sounds like a job for a holy knight,” Barnabas said, pushing Tyrius to the front of the party. Tyrius agreed, and he took the lead, descending first.

The steps led into a single open room, obviously a former wine cellar, though now a mess of collapsed shelving and broken bottles. The light carried by Tyrius revealed a human corpse, still in plate mail, lying on the floor, his flesh well-rotted away.

Thokk sniffed at the corpse and declared, “Been dead a long time, several weeks.”

“Not likely the source of the screams we heard,” Larenthal said cautiously.

“Unless it was his soul,” Barnabas added as if in jest, but his voice did not sound as brave as he had hoped.

“I must say,” Tyrius remarked as he stooped over the corpse. “I’m not for stripping the dead, but this man’s plate armor is of excellent quality, and its protective value surpasses that of my own chain shirt!”

“Looks to be about your size, too,” Barnabas added. “I’d take it myself, but it would be big on me.”

“We are adventurers,” Aurora said, trying resolutely to keep her lunch down. “Treasure hunters and all that, and this is the first

thing of value we have found.” She didn’t think it worth mentioning the magic ring she had taken for herself with the party’s assent, and Barnabus certainly didn’t volunteer information on his, which was still unknown to the party.

When Tyrius examined the corpse and its armor, however, a number of large, maggot-like creatures emerged from the body and sprang on to his gauntleted hands. As the grubs rooted around seeking some way to his flesh, Tyrius panicked. Aurora summoned a ready spell and produced a bolt of fire to burn the creatures away.

“You have spellcraft?” Tyrius exclaimed, stripping the rag away from his face.

Aurora realized that everyone was staring at her. She dismissed their looks of shock and concern, as if she had not done anything special, and said, “I’m a scholar. I know a few tricks.”

“I always took you for a witch,” Barnabas grumbled under his breath, but not so softly that Aurora did not hear the remark.

They exercised considerably more care as they further examined the rest of the body and its possessions, and Aurora burned a half-dozen more of the maggots before the armor had been stripped from the corpse and laid aside, along with the sword and shield. They poured out a flask of oil over the remaining possessions and the body itself, dragged it over to the open hearth, and then set it afire.

“I may smell like a dead man,” Tyrius said as he examined his new set of armor. “But I would rather smell like one than be one.”

Aurora wrinkled her nose in disgust.

The party searched the wine cellar, but found nothing more (completely missing a concealed door). Tyrius commented, “As large as this cellar is, it underlies only the north wing of the house, and there may be some other access to a separate cellar we have not yet found.”

“I don’t believe we have yet gotten to the bottom of the mysteries of this house,” Aurora said.

“Be that as it may,” Nadine objected, “I should hope we will be returning to Saltmarsh sooner rather than later. I am eager to find myself honest work, not grave-robbing.”

Meanwhile, behind the secret door, a single guard listened attentively to the noise of the adventurers, trying to estimate their total number. These intruders were nothing if not persistent. The frightening shrieks of Sanballet’s dweomer had failed to dissuade them, and rather than being warded off by the macabre presence of the dead knight, from the sound of it, they were looting the body. Convinced that they were about to find the secret door, he hurried off to warn his companions.

“So, they returnt then,” Sanballet said as he dressed himself. “A pox upon ‘em!” He quickly organized an ambush in the cave complex such that, if the party should discover the concealed entrance, they would be suddenly set upon from two sides at once, trapped by his full force of smugglers and gnolls.

The adventurers had no suspicion of the trap being readied for them, but they remained wary. As they left the cellar, something caught Babshapka’s eye. He signaled for a halt, knelt down in the hall, and examined the dust. None of them had been down the east hallway since their return to the house that day, and yet there was a set of footprints in the new layer of plaster and dust from the collapsed attic. The prints led down the center of the hallway to the door at the end.

Unbeknownst to the elven ranger and his companions, the prints had been left by a careless smuggler the night before, assigned by Sanballet to check on the damage to the house from the party after hearing the explosion and collapse. Sanballet was principally concerned with whether it was still possible to get to the bedroom from which he signaled the ship.

“We did not leave these tracks,” Babshapka said, more to himself than to the others. He followed the tracks into the living room, but once past the closed door the trail was lost—the new layer of dust and plaster that made the tracks obvious did not pass the door.

“I say this room merits a more thorough search than we gave it yesterday,” Aurora declared. Babshapka agreed with a quick nod,

but Aurora noticed a spark of enthusiasm. “You are enjoying this adventure, aren’t you? Just a bit?”

The ranger ignored her as he set to searching the room. About halfway between the hearth and the door to the patio, approximately under the spot from which the spooky voice emerged the previous day, he found a disguised trap door in the floor. Opening the door revealed a wooden staircase descending into the earth. The whole party gathered around to peer down the staircase, but the space below was no dark basement - it was actually well-lit!

“Now we are getting someplace!” Aurora said quietly. They arranged themselves carefully, and then started down the stairs with trepidation. They did not find the eerie crypt of an undead warden that they might have expected, but what they did find unnerved them nonetheless. The lit and reasonably clean quarters below were obviously maintained, well-tended and lived in—there was no mold, no water damage, no cobwebs. There were cots for ten men, personal trunks, a long wooden trestle table, and various kitchen supplies. For some reason, after the disorder and decay of the abandoned house itself, the party felt spooked by the thought of a large number of men living beneath them the whole time. The sausages hanging from hooks along the wall seemed especially creepy in the flickering light. What’s more, although the space itself was obviously recently in use, there was no one currently about—heightening their sense of dread. They all wondered when these men would be returning.

They searched the foot lockers and the wooden bins, but found only personal effects and food supplies. Their sense of anxiety over when, and how, the occupants would return, only grew. At the east end of the room were two doors—one normal and wooden, the other similar but barred with a stout wooden bar set into metal brackets on the wall. The door had the word “DANGER” scrawled across it in chalk, in the Common Tongue. Barnabas put his ear to the first door, and then to the other, but he shook his head to indicate he had heard nothing.

“Well, let’s try the first door,” Aurora said. The unbarred door opened into a large bedroom. The furnishings were comfortable and obviously of better quality than the common room. The party crowded into the room and closed the door behind them and set to searching for clues about the occupant. They found a lantern,

oil, a scroll with curious marks, a naval almanac with the times of the tides for the surrounding coastline, and a number of other mundane items.

“Ten beds out there and one in here makes eleven beds!” Larenthal pointed out, his voice hushed and anxious. “Eleven beds makes eleven men. If they all return at once, we will be more than outnumbered.”

“We don’t even know who we are dealing with,” Aurora whispered.

“But we’ll have the jump on them,” Thokk said too loudly and with bared teeth. “We just hold up in here until they return, then take them unprepared.”

“Shshshsh!” Barnabas scolded him. “We won’t surprise anyone if they hear you first.”

After perhaps an hour or so of waiting in the caverns, it became apparent to Sanballet that the intruders had not found their secret entrance. He sent a scout ahead, who reported that there was no one to be seen in the cellar, either. Returning to the quarters in which his men slept, he found obvious signs that the room had been searched, though.

“Hush!” one of the smugglers said, pointing toward the door to Sanballet’s room. Sure enough, he could hear a muffled conversation coming from his personal quarters. *Well, if yon intruders be not comin’ to me ambush, I’ll be bringing me ambush ta them!* As quietly as possible, he motioned his men to clear all the stools out of the way and pile them in front of the secret door to the wine cellar to block that exit. The heavy table was turned on its side, rotated, and used to barricade off the western end of the cellar. He put his men behind the table to shield them from missiles or spells. He stationed the gnolls next to him to guard against anyone who made it over the table. When all was prepared, he called out across the room, “Ye can come out ter talk—we ken yer in there!”

Startled by the strange voice, the party held a quick discussion, arguing about whether they should burst out the door ready for a fight, or send someone out to “talk” but really to scout.

"Let me take a look," Barnabas said. "I'm always lucky."

Remaining hidden in the gloom of the eastern end of the cellar, he crept out and peered around the corner. The men were ready for a fight. They had piled up some type of defensive fortification of overturned tables, barrels, and chairs. Barnabas counted not only eleven men (and one of those in robes), but two great hairy humanoid monsters as well. Luck or no luck, he did not like those odds, and said as much when he returned to the party.

"Perhaps they will listen to reason, or at least negotiate," Tyrius said hopefully. "I will speak with them and explain that we thought the house abandoned."

"I will go with you," Babshapka said.

"As will I," Thokk said with a snarl and fierce look in his eye.

"Probably best if we let them handle the negotiations," Aurora said, holding Thokk back.

"It's only going to be talking," Tyrius agreed. "No fighting."

As the ranger and the paladin went out to face the danger, Barnabas used them as cover to slip out and disappear into the shadows along the south wall without being seen.

"Parlay!" called Tyrius, as he strode across the room, "let us parlay."

When Tyrius and Babshapka were about halfway across the room, Sanballet called out, "T'at's far enou'. Here be the conditions o' yer surrender: lay down yer weapons and ye can walk outta 'ere an' nae be returnin.'" Of course, Sanballet had no intention of keeping his word, but if he could get the party to lay down their arms the coming fight would be that much the shorter and go far better for his side.

Tyrius had lost track of Barnabus. He hoped that the halfling "minstrel" was moving into a strategic position for the fight and not abandoning them. Tyrius was prepared to negotiate in good faith, but when he saw the sour and hard-bitten faces of the men, noted that their leader was unarmored and likely some sort of spell-caster, and saw that, above all, he commanded those monstrous humanoids, his optimism vanished. The righteousness

of Pelor flooded his soul, and he knew what he must do. Tyrius responded to the leader of the smugglers, "Actually, those were the conditions I was about to offer you. Lay down your arms, and your men are free to go. Only you and the two brutes will face the King's Justice."

Those words incited a raucous outburst of incredulous laughter from the smugglers. The gnolls joined in with strange, barking calls, though they probably did not understand a single word of the exchange. As the sound of laughter faded away, Tyrius waited for Sanballet to reply. As soon as the mage began to speak, Tyrius interrupted him and shouted, "Charge!"

Brandishing his warhammer, "Molly," Tyrius charged the table, swinging overhead at the men behind it. Babshapka fell back to the corner and, in a single smooth motion, nocked arrows to his bow and began loosing them. Thokk barreled out from the room, delighted at the turn of events, swinging his axe as he ran at the table. Larry, Aurora, and finally Nadine emerged from the room as well, though the latter, unarmored and armed with only a dagger, hung back from the fray.

Sanballet was still in the middle of shouting orders to his men when he suddenly screamed out in pain. A shortsword stuck in his side, the other end attached to a halfling with an elegant moustache. He cursed, pointed at the halfling, and said a word in gnoll. One of the humanoid brutes forced the halfling back with wild swings of its axe. Sanballet sent the other gnoll halfway up the cellar stairs to guard his escape route just in case he had misjudged the strength of the party.

Aurora completed her sleep spell, and several of the smugglers fell inert to the floor. Thokk ran up to a now-unguarded section of the table and vaulted over it. He landed on the other side and started toward Sanballet, but the gnoll guard left the halfling and intervened. Barnabus took the opportunity to disappear into the shadows again. Tyrius moved to the table and tried to either haul himself over, or pull the heavy table down in the attempt.

For a moment, it appeared as if the party would make short work of the smugglers. Then Sanballet completed a spell of his own. A spray of colored lights leapt from his hands, and several of the party were blinded by the flash, Tyrius among them. The gnoll was having the better end of the fight with Thokk, and the half-orc

was seriously wounded. The heavy table proved to be very effective cover, and the smugglers took little damage from the arrows of Babshapka or the cantrips of Aurora and Larry. By the time the smugglers had roused their slumbering comrades, several were wounded, but only two had fallen. Even after his vision returned, Tyrius was still unable to clear the table or pull it down. Worse yet, Sanballet had vanished into thin air, though he still shouted orders in a disembodied voice.

“Fall back!” cried Tyrius, “back to the room!”

He stayed at the table only long enough to cover Thokk as the barbarian climbed back over, then retreated himself, walking backwards with his shield held high in front of him as the smugglers jeered and hurled insults. Everyone in the party fell back to Sanballet’s room except the missing Barnabus. Even with two of the smugglers slain, the party was still outnumbered, and Tyrius hoped they could at least even the odds by defending the doorway.

With the cellar clear, the smugglers fell to squabbling over the coins and jewelry of the two dead men. Sanballet let them bicker for a while, then ordered them to inch the table forward, closing half the distance to his own quarters. He had each man take up a stool to use as an improvised first volley missile weapon should the party charge again. When no response came from the party, he ordered the table moved, halving the distance again and abutting the end against the nearer east wall to completely block off the narrower portion of the cellar.

Inside the bedroom, the party dissolved into panic. Thokk clutched at his wound and muttered darkly. Tyrius tried to take command to organize a to-the-last-man defense of the doorway, but the others, even Babshapka, urged flight. Barnabus was nowhere to be seen—presumably dead, but for all they knew he might have already slipped past the gnom on the stairs and even now be making his escape.

“Even if we fled, and even if we were fortunate enough to make it to the stairs, we would have to fight our way past that dog-faced menace!” Tyrius reminded them.

“There’s another way,” Aurora said. “The second door. We can flee through the barred door.” Turning to Babshapka, she said,

“Slip out and see if you can raise the bar.” Babshapka nodded, and slipped out the door as stealthily as a burglar. The wooden bar was heavy and swollen, and Babshapka struggled trying to lift it without being heard by the smugglers. “I’ve got you, mate,” whispered Barnabus, his hands already on the other end of the bar. Together they lifted it, then set it down silently on the floor and opened the door a crack without the smugglers even being aware.

Pulling the door outward halfway, they peered in. Light from the cellar behind them spilled through, but the room beyond was dark. “What do you see?” Barnabus asked in a whisper, for while Babshapka had elvish darkvision, he did not.

“No exits,” says Babshapka bitterly, “just some dead bodies. Skeletons, really. Uh...”

“What?”

“I think they are moving...”

Just so, the three skeletons in sight were slowly swiveling their skulls and staring at Babshapka with eyeless sockets. Another three out of view of the door staggered to their feet from where they had been slumped against the wall.

“Ther fools be openin’ ther door!” the smugglers shouted in alarm. More than one called to Sanballet.

“Attack ‘em! An’ close it, fast!” he yelled back, but the warning came too late. By the time the smugglers got the table down so they could move forward, Babshapka and Barnabus were back in the bedroom with the door closed. The first skeleton was already through the door and the others were close behind.

“T’ey be comin’!” Sanballet announced, his voice betraying fear and panic.

Inside the bedroom, the elf took charge of the situation. “Brace the door,” Babshapka ordered. “Use the furniture.” He did not need to say it twice. Larry and Tyrius pushed the bed up against the door.

A second later the party heard shouts outside and the ringing of steel, then cries of pain and a howl from one of the gnolls.

“They’re fighting!” Larry exclaimed. “Three cheers for the skeletons!”

The battle was brief. The smugglers had the advantage in numbers, but their table was down by their own hands, many of them were already wounded, and their broadswords had little effect on the fleshless undead. As the cries of the living grew fewer, the party removed the furniture from the door and formed up for a charge. They spilled from the room just in time to see the last smuggler fall from a blow of the last skeleton standing. Tyrius did not hesitate. He charged and shattered the skeleton’s skull with his hammer. It dis-animated and dropped to the floor in a pile of disarticulated bones.

Tyrius shouted orders to secure the room as he and Larry checked the fallen men. They found two still alive, though unconscious. Tyrius mercifully bound the survivors’ wounds while Thokk bound their hands and feet. In the case of the fallen gnoll, Thokk slit its throat without checking whether it was alive or dead. All told, they counted one gnoll, ten men, and six skeletons among the fallen. The other gnoll, and the leader of the men who they assumed was some sort of mage, were nowhere to be seen. Nadine looked around the cellar, dumbfounded.

“Hey, you alright down there?” called out a deep voice from the top of the stairs. Three faces peered through the trapdoor. The local youths sported bare wisps of beard, but they had the muscles of stevedores or plowmen. The party had quite forgotten that the house above was surrounded by townsfolk. Tyrius laid healing hands on each of the two prisoners to restore them to consciousness, then left his companions to tidy up while he ascended the stairs. He assured the three youths, “Everything is fine, we are all alive. We have just now overcome a band of brigands or outlaws of some kind.”

Leaving the house through the back patio, he addressed those still gathered outside. He called out “The show is over, and you can return to your homes. There will be more news on the morrow, after we have had the chance to consult with the local authorities.”

While Tyrius was out, Nadine busied herself picking through the fallen men's weapons until she found a broadsword sized for her, and then stripped one of the smaller men's leather armor and began to don it. She took a dead man's dagger and returned the one the party loaned her.

By the time Tyrius returned, he found the two prisoners conscious but sullen. Thokk suggested various methods of torture while Aurora listened and nodded sagely.

"We'll have no such thing," Tyrius said in a voice that brooked no argument, then turned to address the prisoners. "We need answers," he said in a friendly tone, "who are you, what illicit activities were you pursuing in this place; tell us all, admit your guilt, and we shall show you the mercy of Pelor."

"I ain't tellin' ye nothin, godsman," said one of the prisoners.

Tyrius fixed him a stern look. "Your silence only condemns yourself," he said. "If you will not speak to us, you force me to declare you outlaw, and execute the King's Justice upon you."

"Do yer worse," said the man, and spat at Tyrius' face, though the spittle fell short. "Kill me in cold blood an' answer ter yer jus' an' good god fer it."

Tyrius bowed his head in prayer, then retrieved one of the trestles from the table. He maneuvered the man into laying his neck over the wooden crossbeam, and held him from behind. He called for Thokk to bring his axe.

"We can make him talk!" Aurora objected urgently. "We need this information."

Tyrius shook his head solemnly. "We do not torture," he said firmly. "He has chosen his fate." He nodded to Thokk, and the half-orc cheerfully severed the man's head from his neck. Blood washed the floor. Aurora nearly swooned, and Larenthal emptied the contents of his stomach. Tyrius used some rags to wipe away the spattered blood from his face and chest, then turned to the remaining prisoner. "Please accept the mercy of Pelor," he said, "and tell us all you know."

The man eyed Tyrius suspiciously. “What mercy be this? A quick death, like ye gave yon Paxton?”

Tyrius shook his head. “No; tell us all, and tell us true, and you leave from here a free man—free to mend your life, gods be willing. Although I would suggest you wait until the townsfolk outside have dispersed.”

Only Babshapka observed the relief on Nadine’s face when Thokk killed the prisoner, and he also observed her expression of concern when Tyrius seemed on the point of convincing the remaining man to talk. The sole remaining prisoner stared defiantly into Tyrius’ pale blue eyes for a moment without flinching, but his eyes strayed to the gory mess that was his companion. He sighed and began his tale. “Aye, we be outlaws, right enough—though smugglers not brigands and I ain’t never ‘armed a soul, honest. True, some of me companions killed the knight what found ‘is way into the basement some three weeks ago, but I weren’t here for that. Most of me time ‘as been spent unloading ships and loading wagons and nothing worse than that. The boss’ name be Sanballet and he a wizard and all, with some magic way to control those two ‘ulking gnolls he got godsknowwhere. Sanballet ‘as a deal with some merchant guy in town name o’ Murph o’ somesuch—I ain’t never seen ‘im in person. A ship with another lot of smugglers brings in goods—mostly silk and brandy—from other ports in the Azure Sea, and lands them ‘ere. We pass the goods off to the merchant at night, and ‘e uses fancy book-keeping so it looks like he paid the crown tax to the customs house to import luxuries when ‘e ain’t neither—at least that be what the other smugglers say, but I don’t claim to know the truth of that. This Murph fellow then sells the goods in larger markets like Seaton and further afield.”

“Why here? Why use this place?” Aurora asked.

“The ‘ouse be lookin’ right out to sea, ma’am. Sanballet signals with the ship somehow at night—there be a lantern and signal codes involved, but I don’t know about that.”

“When is the next shipment due to arrive?” she pressed.

“I don’t know when the ship be coming—every few weeks they come. Sanballet goes upstairs in the house above each night, and then one night or another tells us it is time. We take the boat out

of the sea cave below, row out to the ship, and bring in the smuggled goods. Usually it takes several trips, and we work most the night. Sanballet then sends a message to town. I don't know 'ow that works. Next night a wagon shows up for us to load. That merchant fellow be fat enough, but I ain't never seen the good gentleman's face in the light."

Tyrius asked him to repeat parts of the story he found unclear, and kept him talking until he was satisfied about everything except the "sea cave below." With Thokk hoisting the bound man, they walked over to a section of the south wall until the man indicated where to find a secret door. Sure enough, the concealed entrance opened into a series of chambers, several filled with bolts of silk and casks of brandy, sloping down to a cave that mets the sea and had a small jollyboat drawn up inside besides.

"You've been honest and kept your end of the arrangement," Tyrius told the prisoner. "We will release you at dusk."

With the prisoner safely tied, the party feasted on the best of the smuggler's fare throughout the afternoon. As evening approached, they made sure there were no townsfolk about the house. True to his word, Tyrius then released the man and told him to "go forth and do evil no more." The man started off down the coast road to Seaton with the clothes on his back and a dagger Tyrius returned to him only once they were outside the house.

Taking one bolt of silk, the head of the gnoll, and the painted shield of the fallen knight as their proofs and trophies, the party, including Nadine, set off back to Saltmarsh, arriving just after dark. They resumed their lodging in the *Merry Mermaid*, and asked Lieutenant Dan to set up an emergency meeting of the Town Council at their earliest convenience. Nadine thanked the party for their rescue and begged their leave. "I will find less expensive lodging in the common room of the tavern," she said. Then she disappeared into the night. As soon as she was sure she was not being followed, she returned to the townhouse of Master Merchant Murphey.

For his part, when the tide of battle had turned against his men, Sanballet retreated with the unwounded gnoll to the stairs. He had lingered just long enough to see Tyrius smash the last skeleton, and then fled upstairs. Invisible, he left through the front of the house and then worked his way along the cliff face

until well away from the house and townsfolk. He crossed the road and returned through the woods to wait nearby. He let his gnoll sniff out the party's campsite from the night before, and he waited there in case a chance for revenge presented itself. He and the gnoll watched from the cover of the trees as the entire party left the house in the evening, and then they crept back inside the house to see what had become of the men and all their goods. The party had not found his spellbook nor his treasure chest, so he recovered both of these, gathered some food, cast a final magic mouth spell in his room, and left, walking the coast road to Seaton through the night.

Chapter Seven

The Escape of Master Murphy



7 Goodmonth, 570

Tyrius, Aurora, and Barnabus held a hushed strategy session over breakfast. They sat by themselves at a different table from the other three party members, and they stopped talking whenever Ruth appeared from the kitchen. Tyrius reiterated, “We simply need to appear before the town council and tell them what transpired in the haunted house.”

Aurora shook her head emphatically, “You are being naïve!”

Barnabus agreed, leaned forward, and hissed, “No one needs know *anything* until we have determined the disposition of the

recovered smuggled goods! We are in possession of bolts and bolts of silk, casks and casks of fine brandy. This is a fortune, and it belongs as much to us as to anyone. As soon as the council learns of this windfall, they will seize the goods without a second thought!"

Tyrius objected, "There is what is right and what is wrong, and I choose to be on the side of what is right. I will not be a party to theft, even if it be from thieves and smugglers. Surely the council members will appropriately reward us with a portion of the recovered goods, which is more than we had yesterday and as much as we deserve."

Barnabus smiled impatiently, "Listen, noble knight. We can report everything we found in the cellar, down to the last gold earring if you want, but we are better off keeping what was found in the sea caves a secret until we find a way to move the goods to Seaton and sell them there, for the benefit of the whole party—equal shares all around. After all, we are the ones who risked our necks, not the council."

Tyrius' face darkened. His voice took on a note of firm resolve. "I will not lie, or hide goods for simple monetary gain."

Aurora tried a more subtle approach. "Whomever was receiving these smuggled goods," she explained, "is likely to be both wealthy and powerful. If they are not on the city council themselves, they are likely to have allies, eyes and ears, on the council. For all we know, the council itself could already be aware of the smuggling ring and be using it to enrich the town at the expense of the king!"

Barnabus nodded emphatically. Aurora continued, "I'm just saying that we have to tread carefully here. The smuggler could have given us the name of this Master Merchant Murphey as a ruse or decoy. If the council, or at least some members of it, are complicit, we will put ourselves in significant danger by exposing their secrets to the public. As strangers in town, we are more than likely to be set up as fall guys and find ourselves charged with the very crimes we are reporting. The less we reveal to the council, the better, especially about the sea caves. We are safer pretending we don't even know about the caves, so that we don't make anyone tip their hand."

Tyrius considered that argument more seriously. “If you agree to report the matter, I will let you speak for us. Reveal as much or as little as seems to prudent to you, only do not ensnare us in a web of deceit. I will not lie. If I am asked a direct question, I will answer truthfully, if not fully. Nor will I allow you to blatantly mislead the councilmen.”

Aurora and Barnabus exchanged glances. The latter sighed and rolled his eyes before mumbling, “That’s the best we can expect from a paladin.”

Lieutenant Dan summoned the adventurers to the council meeting at mid-morning. Larry and Babshapka remained at the Merry Mermaid with the party’s gear. Thokk was left outside the council chambers with orders to guard their escape route (just in case one was needed) but otherwise not to interact with anyone. Tyrius, Aurora, and Barnabus were ushered in before the council.

Ten of the fourteen Saltmarsh council members awaited them in the room. Not all of the members could make it on such short notice. *The worse for us*, thought Aurora as introductions were made, for Murphey could well be one of those missing. All of those present were men, except for a priestess of Osprey, and all were dressed in fine, if not noble, clothes. There were other priests, a number of merchants and tradesmen, and various civil officials. It soon became clear that the meeting was being run by a man named Secun, who was the chief customs officer of Saltmarsh and an agent of the king himself. The others spoke only when he invited them to do so or, occasionally, when he did not object to their interruptions.

Aurora introduced herself as a traveling scholar of little account, here simply to document the exploits of an odd band of would-be adventurers. She told the council members of the party’s arrival in town just three days ago, of their lodging at the Merry Mermaid, of the warm reception they had received from the townsfolk. Recognizing Aeravis on the council, although in much finer robes than when they last saw him, Aurora even said that their decision to explore the haunted house had been upon his suggestion. The priest looked puzzled at this, but he did not contradict her.

Aurora described how they found nothing of interest in the upper part of the house (and she specifically did not mention Nadine) but how, upon finding a hidden basement, they were immediately

set upon by a large band of ruffians. With a glance at Tyrius and Barnabas, she told of the silk and brandy found in the basement and how the sole survivor claimed to be a smuggler, their goods destined for “a merchant in town.” This last bit caused a stir of fevered whispering which Secun had to silence. Secun pressed Aurora for more information on this merchant. She scanned the faces of those present, looking for any betraying an expression of anger, fear, or guilt. “I do not suggest any accusation or raise any allegation,” she said carefully, “I merely repeat the words of the self-confessed smuggler, for whatever they are worth.”

Secun noted dryly, “Since your party failed to take any prisoners that could be interrogated by this council, but instead killed most, let some escape, and even freed one such man, you force us to take *your* word, not theirs. Did the prisoner mention the name of the merchant?”

Aurora felt her confidence wavering. She glanced nervously at Tyrius, and he returned an unblinking, serious stare. Aurora hesitated another moment, and then admitted, “The smuggler called him ‘Master Merchant Murphey.’”

Immediately the council erupted into a frenzied uproar. One merchant, a heavy fellow with quivering jowls, rose from his chair and moved to speak privately with Secun. The heated words of their exchange could not be overheard above the general din. Secun soon sent him back to his seat. A host of eyes followed the heavy man. Aurora took careful note of the man’s face. She did not remember his name from the introductions.

When the council was done asking questions, Tyrius presented them with the bolt of silk, the head of the gnoll, and the knight’s shield. The three of them left the room while the council deliberated. A servant brought refreshments. Eventually they were called back to the council chamber.

“The council thanks you for bringing this matter to our attention,” Secun said. “But we cannot take any definitive action without better evidence. We will dispatch a force of constables under the command of a customs officer to verify these things in the house itself.”

The high constable interjected, apparently repeating a previous petition, to be allowed town funds as a hazard bonus for his men,

since “everyone knows that the house is cursed.” At a frown from Secun, he amended this to “because the common men believe the house is cursed,” but he maintained his petition until a quick vote was held which denied him the funds.

The council further resolved that a force of constables be sent to the various locations frequented by Murphey—his shop, his townhouse, his warehouse—and that he be brought in for questioning. Secun expressly warned the party not to interfere in that due process, as the council did not want to prejudice the witness before he had a chance to testify for himself under oath. Aurora agreed and they took their leave, but not before Secun further warned her, as a “simple scholar,” to stop trying to buy magic components in the town, since she was frightening the marketfolk.

“News travels fast in the small town, apparently,” Aurora observed as they made their way back to *The Mermaid*. “I just overheard that cooper say that the council is investigating Master Murphey about his involvement in the smuggling.”

“I heard the name among those goodwives,” Barnabas said with a nod toward a cluster of woman. “And all this before we are half-way back to the inn.”

Tyrius looked distressed. He turned to his companions and asked, “How will justice be served if the constables do not apprehend Murphey before he can catch word and escape? Should we not at least find the man, to ensure he does not flee?”

“You heard what the councilman said to me!” Aurora said. “You can do what you want. But I dare not further raise my own profile in this fish-scented town. I’m not for disobeying the direct orders of the town council.” She headed off toward the inn, not waiting to see whether or not the rest followed her.

“But you two are with me?” Tyrius asked hopefully. Barnabas shrugged his consent, and Thokk hefted his axe with a smile. “We need only find the shop of Master Murphey.”

The shop of Master Murphey turned out to be a general store. A crowd had already gathered around it, but the shop was closed, itself an oddity, and Murphey was nowhere to be seen. Tyrius pounded on the door and demanded entrance, but received no

response. Thokk, not exactly knowing why they were there but excited by Tyrius' calls, slammed his shoulder into the door and broke the simple latch. The trio searched the store, and even the stock rooms in the back, but found no trace of anyone. "He does not seem to be here," Tyrius announced to the crowd. "But he will be found. Until then, see to it that not a single button is missing from this store, or you will have us to answer to for it." After issuing the stern warning, he continued to busy himself with the search.

Watching from the crowd, in a simple brown threadbare peasant's robe with a hood, Nadine saw the trio enter the store of her employer. She then slipped off around to the stable on the side, quickly saddled and bridled a riding horse, put a cart horse on a lead, then took both horses into the alley behind the shop. She returned to the stable, emptied a half-lantern's worth of oil onto a manure pile, and used flint and steel to set it ablaze before returning to the alley.

"Fire!" called someone in the crowd when the flame became visible through the open stable door. The crowd took up the cry immediately; even those who did not see the flames. Precious few buildings in Saltmarsh were of stone. A fire could easily sweep through the town and in a few hours render dozens dead and hundreds homeless. The alarm spread and the constables dispatched to apprehend Murphey arrived on the scene just in time to forget their charge and join those running to wells with buckets.

Tyrius heard the commotion, exited the shop, and saw what was happening. He called Barnabas and Thokk to join him, and he took charge of the bucket brigade, organizing people into lines rather than each one haphazardly dashing about. Thokk returned to the store only long enough to grab a bushel basket of oranges before dumping out the fruits and heading off for a well with the basket. Barnabus contributed to the effort by setting pace for the crowd with a fast rhythmic sea shanty. His clear voice called out the cadence, and he accompanied himself on the lute. Sure enough, the people began to move the buckets back and forth in an efficient and tight choreography.

With everyone thus occupied, Murphey emerged from the secret attic of the store, exited through a back door, and met Nadine in the alley. He carried with him saddlebags full of food, gold coins,

and even a few gems. He passed a small gem to Nadine while she held the riding horse for him to mount, and then he rode through the streets of Saltmarsh and out to the coast road, receiving only a few cries of “Isn’t that...” and “Hey, stop!” after him before he was away. Nadine walked the cart horse slowly to the other end of town before leaving. Murphey had a long head start on her and a saddle, but his horse was laden both with his baggage and his considerable bulk. She had no doubt she would be able to catch up with him before their arrival in Seaton.

An hour later, with the fire long extinguished and no one hurt, Tyrius and his two companions made their way to a warehouse said to be owned or rented by Murphey. A small party of local militia men intercepted them, and the leader of the group said, “Ye’re to return to *The Merry Mermaid* and stay there ‘til ye be summoned by the council.”

That evening, Tyrius, Barnabus and Aurora appeared before the council for a second time, and this time the council numbered thirteen, with the only missing member being the Lord of Saltmarsh himself. Secun was not the only councilman wroth with the party for expressly violating the mandate to leave Murphey alone. The high constable reported to the other members of the council, “Had it not been for the interference of these meddling strangers, my men would have taken Murphey alive!”

Tyrius apologized profusely. More than by his contrition, however, many on the council appeared mollified by the situation itself. With Murphey fled, the merchant could be declared guilty by admission in absentia, saving a prolonged and uncertain trial that would pit his word against that of the strangers. Even better, since Murphey had left no known heirs, the council was free to seize his considerable assets in the name of the town. More than one of them looked to profit either personally or professionally from his downfall, and it appeared to be only the officials of the viscount that were left out of the windfall and legitimately angry with the party.

Secun admitted that the constables and customs officers that had been dispatched to the “haunted” house had returned and reported that everything was exactly as the party claimed, further strengthening the case against Murphey and legitimizing the party’s story of having broken up a smuggling ring. While the viscount’s officials might not be getting a share of Murphey’s

estate, they would likely receive a commendation or reward from the viscount or even the king for having ended this crime against the crown. Lastly, those on the council representing the temples of Saltmarsh thanked the party for helping to end the idea of the alchemist's house as cursed and as a blight on the name of the town. The town council decided to award the party the impressive sum of 300 gold lions for their efforts to date in breaking up the smuggling ring, to be divided among the party members as they saw fit.

The high constable declared the slain gnoll a "monster" and all the slain smugglers to be "outlaws" so that the party would face no legal repercussions from their kin (charges of manslaughter, or claims of weregild) for their deaths. Moreover, the party was awarded the "Right of Pillage" on all goods recovered from the haunted house and sanctioned to take immediate possession of them. However, the council specifically and clearly stated that since the crown tax had not been paid on the silk and brandy, the party would have to pay the twenty-five percent duty on them to the custom house in order to take legal possession.

The council also offered to pay two nights' food and lodging (from the time the party left the haunted house yesterday followed by the crowd, to tomorrow morning after tonight's meeting with the council) at *The Merry Mermaid* from council funds. While the council did not grant title to the haunted house or its land as some in the party had been hoping for, they gave the party "squatter's rights" to allow them to camp there free of any fee for the time being and without being charged with vagrancy.

Aurora asked, "Why would we want to camp there?"

Secun cleared his throat and told the high constable check the doors and windows to make sure there were no eavesdroppers hanging about before continuing, "Assuming the smuggler's tale of supply by ship is true, it is very likely that the sea-based smugglers have no idea of your actions against their land-based crew, as there is no easy communication between the two groups. We therefore propose that a trap be laid, such that the next time the smuggler's ship appears (which we estimate to be between two weeks and a month hence), you will row out to the ship, pretending to be the smugglers, and then seize the ship and take prisoner its crew. We are prepared to promise you fifty gold lions each to any of you who survive, as well as right of pillage for

anything you manage to capture from the ship. If you agree to this generous arrangement, we ask that no more than half of your company be absent from Saltmarsh (or the house) at any point in time until the smuggler's ship reappears and the matter is resolved. The customs house will send out patrols, day and night, of excise men to remain on the lookout for the ship and will notify you as soon as it is spotted."

"We are grateful for the reward and find it more than generous," Tyrius said on behalf of the party. "And I think I speak for all of us when I say that we are interested in your offer of future employment."

"But we will need to discuss the offer with the rest of our companions," Aurora added, with an eye toward negotiating a higher reward in the future.

That evening, Aurora gathered her five teammates at a single table at *The Merry Mermaid* and bade them drink as much ale as they would, for the council was buying. Even before the meeting was officially convened, everyone pledged to help in the upcoming battle against the sea-going smugglers. Once everyone had put down a first round, Aurora began talking of the future.

"First of all, everyone, congratulations on a wonderful and successful adventure! Despite a few missteps along the way, we've handled ourselves admirably and saved Saltmarsh from looming criminal activity right on its back doorstep. Cheers!"

The companions cheered. Thokk quickly quaffed another drink. Aurora noticed the other guests in *The Mermaid* trying to listen in on the conversation. Ruth stood in the door of the kitchen. Aurora lowered her voice before continuing. "However, I worry that we have stepped on quite a few toes in the doing. By now, my friends, you know me as a capable ..." she leaned in and mouthed the words, "spell caster" before continuing, "in search of adventure, but a good friend of mine once wisely advised me to keep a low profile in this area of the world. This town harbors deep-seated prejudice against the magical arts, and so I present myself to others as a writer and common scholar. I believe it would be a wise course of action for me to burnish that side of my reputation. We've also irritated some members of the council (including the rather important Master Secun himself) in the way our efforts were concluded, so I think a little massaging of the

egos of the local community is also in order. I think that I can help kill two birds with one stone and offer to publish an extremely flattering account of our latest activities as a broadside. How does this sound to everyone..."

Aurora wrote with an imaginary quill in the air as she recited loudly, "...A lowly group of ragtag mercenaries are hired in secret by the Saltmarsh town council to investigate a local building of suspicion. Disbelieving the legends of ghosts and necromancers, the wise high constable, chief customs officer, and lord of Saltmarsh encouraged the mercenaries to infiltrate the house and learn the truth of the situation, fearing that the house may present a threat to the town or the king's authority in the region. Proving their suspicions correct, the mercenary band uncovers an extensive smuggling operation and learns of a local contact in Saltmarsh working with the smugglers to defraud the king of justly-earned tariffs! On instruction from chief customs officer Secun, the mercenaries were then sent to reconnoiter merchant warehouses believed to be the most likely sources of the urban contact. Once again validating Master Secun's outstanding deductive skills, the fence of the goods was quickly revealed as a local merchant. Sadly, though, the deceitful merchant set fire to a stable and threatened to burn down not only the stables and the general store (containing much of the evidence against him), but half of Saltmarsh itself! Good Master Secun and the council courageously ordered the mercenaries to divert all their efforts to fighting the raging fire, saving the town in the process, but granting the criminal flight. The council has now set its goal toward ending the smuggling operation for good and restoring the king's authority to the region in their charge."

The rest of the group chuckled over their drinks as Aurora slid into old habits of storytelling, but they agreed that it couldn't hurt to try to mend a few bridges with their current employers.

"That is all fine and well," mused Barnabus, "but not many of the folk hereabouts can read. Mayhap you should write your account for the parlors of the elite, while I compose a ballad for the public houses frequented by the commoners..."

"Indeed," agreed Aurora. "Also," she continued, "I suggest that we offer to keep ourselves somewhat secluded in the 'haunted house' to help avoid any further unpleasantness from occurring in this provincial little town. We could even fund a few structural

repairs to the home and suggest that, with our help, the haunted house could be turned into a minor attraction along the coast road after we've dealt with the smugglers— 'come relive the terrifying tale of the haunted house of Saltmarsh!' Of course," Aurora rolled her eyes, "the council's wisdom and loyalty to the king will be a central part of the information presented on tours, and proceeds from the house can benefit Saltmarsh at their discretion for years to come. We can use all this as a perfect excuse for making a few trips to Seaton. I, for example, 'need to pick up supplies' for writing the account of the council's heroics."

Chuckles erupted from the party members. "Actually," she whispered, "I am anxious to meet with someone who might teach me a few new tricks, and I could use some additional reagents for spells I think we all might find handy. We'll need some basic lumber and building supplies for stabilizing and improving house, too. Tyrius, you mentioned you're wanting to visit a temple as well."

"Just so," replied the noble paladin. "I am told there is a temple to Sol in Seaton. Many of my faith consider Sol and Pelor to be two faces of the same god. I doubt I will find a temple to Pelor here in the south, so I would wish to be shriven by a priest of Sol in recognition of the divine providence we received in routing the smugglers."

"While we're there," continued Aurora, "we might as well sell off the treasure we collected at top coin. Surely we can find multiple goldsmiths, curio shops, and gem shops in such a big city. Collecting bids and bartering up the price will likely get us a far better deal than we could in turning over our spoils to the merchants of Saltmarsh. Seaton is likely to have a few trading houses where we can stash something for a rainy day, as well."

Barnabus suggested that if they were selling things in Seaton, he was sure he could move the silks and brandy without paying the king's tariff, but Tyrius informed him that that was not going to happen. After the drinks and celebration, the party stayed the night in *The Merry Mermaid*. Barnabus was already at work on his ballad as the rest of the party drifted off to bed.

Chapter Eight

Sanballet's Refrain



8 Goodmonth, 570

Tyrius, Larry, Aurora, and Babshapka were already awake when the smell of Ruth's cooking came drifting up the stairs from below. Others, having indulged in too much ale the previous night, needed to be roused from their beds when the food was finally laid out on the table. Eventually the whole of the party found their way downstairs, some eagerly and some reluctantly.

A tall, broad-shouldered, dusky woman strode in through the door. Her features betrayed a predominantly Flan heritage, though not purely so. She had copper-brown skin and black tresses. Whether her mixed ancestry included Oerid, or Suel, or both was not obvious. Ruth nodded in recognition and offered a half-curtsy in respect. The newcomer was dressed in an old but well-maintained tabard bearing a device on the left sleeve, a loose linen blouse underneath, tight leather breeches, and high boots. The hilt of a longsword projected above her shoulder (she wore it on a back-harness under her tabar) and a dagger sat comfortably on her hip.

The woman grinned, more in satisfaction than friendliness. "No mistakin' ther lot o' ye fer Moorfolk, be t'ere?" she asked

rhetorically. Thokk, looking up from his plate of fried fish, smiled in reply, spiky tusks protruding from his broad mouth.

“Excuse me?” asked Aurora. She understood Keoish well enough, but she was taken aback by the woman’s thick lower-class Salinmoor accent. The woman tried again in Common, but her accent was just as heavy. “I be sayin’, ther lot o’ ye be ther strangers wot met wit’ ther council.”

“Oh, yes, quite!” Aurora agreed.

The woman introduced herself as Corporal Wilhelmina Stoutley, chief excise office of the Saltmarsh Customs House. Under the direction of Secun, she had been tasked with both conveying the party back to the alchemist’s house and retrieving any goods that they wished to turn in for reward under their right of pillage. She said she had a wagon ready outside.

“Thank you for bringing the wagon,” Aurora said respectfully, “That was quite thoughtful. But as yet we are only part-way through breakfast, and after that we will need time to pack and load our gear.”

Wilhelmina scowled and gestured at the window, “We be burn’n daylight ‘n’ ‘aven’t time fer layabouts,” she muttered. Nevertheless, she took a chair on the other side of the room, glowering at them as they ate.

Ruth brought her a plate of fried herring, which she refused at first, then reluctantly accepted. Ruth said something to her too softly for the party to hear, but her response was clear enough, “Tom stays wit’ ther wagon!”

A little later, those sitting across from the window saw Ruth bringing out a fried egg sandwich to a man sitting in the passenger side of a wagon drawn by a single draft horse. Ruth even had a handful of raw oats for the horse, and she and the man talked amiably for a while.

When the party was finally finished with their breakfast, they loaded their gear into the back of the wagon, and then themselves. There was only room on the seat for two, with Wilhelmina driving and the other excise officer sitting beside her. The lad introduced himself as “Private Tom Stoutley, at yer

service!” They quickly noticed that he addressed the woman as “Willa,” not “Corporal.” There was a strong facial resemblance between them, but the youth was much lighter in skin tone and a good ten years younger.

The wagon bumped and jostled the passengers about, and Thokk soon elected to walk alongside them rather than riding. His long strides easily kept pace with the draft horse. There was no way little Barnabus, or Tyrius in his heavy armor, could keep up, though, so the rest of the party remained in the wagon and arrived at the house before midday.

Willa drove the horse right through the gate, without a hint of superstitious hesitation, and up to the front entrance of the house, on the seaside.

“Unlike the townsfolk, your horse doesn’t shy away from the wall or the gate,” Aurora observed.

“Ther ‘orse ‘as got more sense than most people does,” Willa remarked. She spat into the long grass, perhaps to emphasize her point.

The party showed the excise officers the trapdoor into the secret basement, and pointed out the cask of brandy they wanted taken back to the town. The whole of it already reeked of death, and at first, Aurora had to fight the impulse to gag. They collected a few odds and ends, like gold earrings removed from the dead smugglers, that they still planned on personally selling in Seaton. While Willa and Tom rolled the cask up the stairs, Aurora conferred briefly with Tyrius. When the officers returned, Aurora showed them the secret door, and then walked them through the sea caves, counting casks and bolts, and ending at the lowest cave, which was half filled with seawater.

“Ye dinnae mention aught o’ t’is t’ ther council” Willa said hotly.

Before Aurora could offer an explanation, Tyrius apologized, “We did not want to inform the council of the full extent of the smuggling ring until we were sure that the smuggler did not have allies on the council. Now that Murphey has been run out of town, we are confident that the council will be able to do the right thing with all of this contraband.”

“And by do the right thing, Tyrius means pay us the full value of all the goods,” Barnabus said sharply.

“After the excise tax,” added Tyrius.

“It nae be me place ta make decisions fer ther council,” said Willa, “but we can bring all yon casks an’ bolts back. ‘Twill take more’n one trip, tho.”

Meanwhile, Tom was looking out into the Azure Sea through the cave. “I musta been by t’is cliff a hunnerd times an’ never seen t’is cave.” he wondered aloud.

“Nae, yon rocks be concealin’ it,” answered Willa, and pointed out a rocky promontory that would shield the cave from view from the open water. “Ye’d need t’ be in tight t’ ther cliff face t’ see it - perfect fer smugglin’, all right.”

Willa, Tom, Thokk, and Tyrius packed the wagon full of casks and filled the empty spaces with bolts of silk, and then the two excise officers set off back to town, leaving the party in the basement of the house.

“Before we settle in,” Aurora suggested, “And now that we are alone, we should finish searching the secret cellar, as we did not have time to do that properly on our previous visit.”

Their first stop was the room of the leader. Even as he stepped inside, Babshapka knew that something was amiss. “The bed has been moved, and look at this,” Babshapka observed. The floor that was previously under the bed had a flagstone removed to reveal a large hollow underneath. As the ranger approached, a voice boomed out, seemingly coming from the hole itself but filling the room. It sounded suspiciously similar to the voice that greeted them upon their first entry to the house.

“Fools! So you have returned. Well, you’re too late! You left behind my spellbooks and my treasure, and I have them now, so there is naught more here for you. Me and the merchant and the captain had a nice little smuggling operation set up, and we would have gotten away with it, if it hadn’t been for you meddling adventurers! Well, don’t you worry. Sanballet doesn’t forget. Enjoy your success for now, but heed my words—I am out there, and I will have my revenge. And next time, I won’t be stopped by

a room full of skeletons! I will have my revenge! AH-AH-HAAAAHAHA!"

"It's an audible spell with a trigger," Aurora sniffed. "Tacky, cheap trick."

"Well it scared the poop out of me," Larenthal admitted.

Sobered and a bit nervous, the party carefully searched the room but found that nothing of any value had been left behind. They then moved to the "danger" room from whence the skeletons came. Rapping on the walls, Aurora quickly discovered a secret door, but not how to open it. After several minutes watching her try, Thokk grew bored and left, but soon lumbered back, carrying the wrought iron stove that had been in the hearth.

"Thokk, what are you...?" began Aurora, but she did not have a chance to finish.

Thokk shouted, "Thokk open door!" and he hurled the heavy stove at the wall. It crashed into the wall and then to the floor, but broke through the dust-covered lathe to a thin layer of wood beneath. Thokk retrieved the stove and hurled it again, this time cracking the wood and revealing an open space on the other side. After several more blows, the stove was a smashed and rent ruin, but the doorway was open and large enough for them all to step through.

The room beyond contained the remains of a laboratory and, apparently, the famed alchemist. The party recovered several items of gold from the table in front of his long-dead corpse, coins from his rotting belt pouch, and Aurora even found a water-damaged spellbook in a secret drawer of the table, plus a specialized text on alchemy. Thokk discovered a glowing stone clutched in the skeletal fist of the alchemist.

"What is it? What do you have there?" Tyrius asked. Tyrius had been appointed to carry the small valuables recovered by the party (gems, jewelry, coins and such) as the only one whom everyone trusts. Thokk bared his teeth menacingly, clutching the stone, but he backed down under Tyrius' unflinching gaze. Reluctantly, the half-blood handed the stone over to Tyrius.

Next the party searched the cellar itself, and this time they managed to find the secret door to the wine cellar. Tyrius took the plate armor they had removed from the dead man on their previous visit. He was eager to try it on, but the memory of the corpse worms made him cautious. He decided to requisition a single cask of brandy, break open the top, and soak the armor in it, reasoning that the potent alcohol would kill any remaining pests. Thokk remarked, "Don't dump it out. I'll still drink that."

Barnabas announced, "I can see things are in good hands here. As for me, I have now finished composing the Ballad of Barnabus and the Smugglers of the Haunted House of Saltmarsh, and I intend on returning to town to debut it tonight. I think it would be best if Aurora accompanied me, and the rest of you stayed here to guard these goods and watch the house."

"No my diminutive little suitor," Aurora laughed. "Babshapka and I travel on with Tyrius along the coast road to Seaton. We leave Larry and Thokk here to guard the house."

Several hours later, when Willa and Tom return with the wagon, the party informed them of their plans. Willa reminded them, "Didn' ther council charge ye t'ave 'alf yer number 'ere in ther 'ouse 'case ther smugglers return?"

"As I recall," Aurora objected, "The council specifically said that half our number need remain in the house or the town. Barnabus will be in the town, and Larry and Thokk will be here in the house. That's half our number, and it does meet the requirement."

Willa sighed, opened a small chest in the wagon, and took out a wax-sealed sheet of parchment. "If ye be goin' to Seaton," she explained, "ther council 'as writ up a letter to ther Viscount for ye." Aurora reached out to take the letter, but Willa pulled it away from her and handed it to Tyrius, who carefully folded it and tucked it away. Aurora scowled at the woman. Then they got to work loading the wagon a second time and managed to fit all the remaining casks and bolts aboard—including the cask, now resealed, in which Tyrius had soaked his armor.

Willa and Tom headed back to Saltmarsh with Barnabus riding in the wagon and trying out his new ballad on the captive audience. Between the three inns and the tavern in Saltmarsh, Barnabus planned on working out an arrangement of performing local

songs, plus his featured ballad, in one establishment each night in exchange for food and lodging. The stanzas of the song featured all the action of the search of the house and the climactic battle with the smugglers. It mentioned each of the party members by name, but the chorus, curiously, referred only to himself:

Oh, the blades did flash, the blood did flow,

There was danger by the fistful,

But through it all there shone the smile,

Of Barnabus the minstrel!

Aurora, Babshapka, and Tyrius begin walking down the coast road to Seaton as Barnabus' voice faded behind them. Larry and Thokk stood by the gate, watching the others leave. Then, with with Larry's help, Thokk carried the bodies of the nine smugglers and the gnoll out of the house and tossed them in the bushes on the other side of the road. "Maybe they will attract wolves. Or even a bear! I would like to fight a bear!" Thokk said as he dragged the last corpse out of the house.

"I used to know a bear," Larry said. "I can speak bear." He said a few phrases in the bear language to demonstrate. Thokk ignored him.

Neither of them understood the function of the stove and they didn't miss it. They cooked a hearty supper over the open hearth and discussed sleeping arrangements,

"The magician's bed is too small for the both of us to sleep in it together," Larry said. "And what if that creepy alchemist comes looking for the things we took from him today!"

"Thokk fears nothing," Thokk said, but his voice lacked conviction. Darkness was falling and speaking of the mage left them both feeling a little spooked.

"Maybe we could watch the house better if we slept outside, in the woods across the way. Besides, I'm not used to sleeping indoors," Larry said.

Thokk nodded, "If the mage comes back, he won't find us in the woods." They packed a few things and left the cellar, setting up camp in the woods. Before lying down, Thokk took out his flute and played some plaintive melodies. He thought wistfully of all the glorious blood that had been shed recently. He remembered fondly the looks of admiration the townsfolk gave him after his return to the Merry Mermaid the day before. *Perhaps living among humans is not so bad after all*, he thought. At second moonrise, Thokk was snoring heavily, but Larry could not find sleep. He left his slumbering companion to walk even deeper into the woods where he could commune with nature the way his master had taught him.

Chapter Nine

The Stoutly Salter

8 Goodmonth, 570

Barnabas reclined against the contraband in the back of the wagon, paying no attention to the excise officers driving him. Tom held the reins, and his sister sat up front beside him. As the ill-mannered halfling bard crooned about his heroics, Willa and Tom shared a secret smile and a roll of the eyes.

Willa still wore her heavy suit of chain armor. Though it was second-hand and ill-fitting when she acquired it, it was a prized possession—a present from Secun from when she made corporal. She had worn it on the coast road and the Bale road numerous times, and it even saved her from a blade once. She also carried her preferred weapons, a longsword and dagger. The dagger was for close-quarter fights when the craft was so small that a step could unbalance it, but she preferred the sword any time the deck was stable. If there was space, she preferred to use the sword two-handed for maximum effect, though she had been known to switch to one-handed so as to throw her dagger left-handed, a move seldom suspected. She did not carry a shield. Lots of the excise officers did carry them, but she found them completely impractical at sea.

“I’d like to lay hand on a greatsword,” she thought to herself, “And mayhaps I will if I can make any claim to fair share of wha’e’r becomes this booty.”

Wilhelmina ‘Willa’ Stoutly was a lifelong “Salter,” born in Saltmarsh as the first child of a poor fishing family. Her father owned a small rowboat but mostly worked on the larger trawlers of more prosperous men. Her early life had been happy enough, with a kind and industrious mother and a hard-working and indulgent father. Her father didn’t begrudge her being a girl and indeed raised her to know the fishing craft as well as he did. Neighbors often said he simply never noticed that Willa was a girl, which was fine with her, as she was strong, swift, and adventurous.

She had lived so long as an only child, until the advanced age of eight, that she simply assumed she would always be one, and perhaps her parents did as well. Everyone seemed surprised when her mother was again with child. Still, Willa was a big girl (nearly a maiden!), confident in her parents' love, and did not worry overly much about the new arrival.

Willa and her father were off fishing, more from pleasure than necessity, when her new brother Tom was born. The boy entered the world with an unexpectedly difficult birth and her mother passed soon after. The death of his wife devastated Willa's father. He went through the motions of providing for the family, but the joy had gone out of his life. The sympathy and charity of neighbors kept the babe in milk for a year or so, but after that it increasingly fell to Willa to look after the family. The more she grew, the more responsibilities she could assume as her father retreated into idle depression and drink. Yes, she resented the sibling that had cost her both her parents, but she was also the only one keeping Tom alive, and as he grew, he did show her all the affection and appreciation that a child would its parent. He was never as serious as she, never as responsible, but then he never had to be.

Willa was twelve or thirteen (she hadn't yet bled) when the militia officers began to hassle her father for not showing up for the monthly drills, or, when he did show up, for being drunk. After numerous warnings, he spent a weekend in the stocks. The next time muster was called, Willa went in his stead. The pimply-faced sergeant told her she couldn't represent her family as long as there was an able adult male, and she told him she would go home if he could beat her two falls of three in wrestling. When she pinned his arm behind his back and made him cry yield on the first bout, he didn't ask for a second fall.

Willa found she actually enjoyed the militia, especially the weapons training. When she acquitted herself well in a skirmish with marsh goblins, she was hooked. She put in for auxiliary patrol duty, up and down the road to Fort Bale. The patrol work was occasional, but it was a guaranteed wage, and better than fishing all day and coming home with empty nets.

The real breakthrough came when a position as an excise officer opened up. Sure, her sex was held against her, but the Saltmarsh Customs House had no one else at the ready who could both

competently swing a sword and navigate a boat. Her corporal told her that she would be replaced as soon as they did find someone, but she managed to distinguish herself in an encounter with pirates and get promoted before they dismissed her, and after that she became a fixture. Excise work was still part time, but it was regular and any one day spent checking tariffs and cargos earned her as much as three to five days fishing on her own.

Now, at twenty-five and already an “old maid,” she had attained the rank of corporal. The Customs Master, Secun, trusted her implicitly. He said more than once, “I’d name ye capt’n o’ ther excise off’cers in an ’artbeat if I thought the ‘pointment be ‘proved by the Viscount.” More often than not, Willa found herself to be the ranking officer on missions, so she commanded in fact if not in title. Now that her brother Tom had reached the age of 15, she was able to bully and cajole him into starting as an excise officer too. He preferred the freedom of private fishing, but how he intended to ever make enough money to take a wife he had never been able to articulate. He protested, “I’ve no plan to marry,” but then again, as far as Willa could see, he had no plans for anything, and considering the number of maids he frequented, it could not be long before one was found to be carrying. Tom actually did a decent job at officering, so long as Willa was not in his group.

Several days earlier, Willa heard the commotion about the strangers who arrived in town and claimed to have explored the haunted house. They supposedly discovered a smuggler’s nest, though their claims sounded long on conjecture and short on evidence. Willa never doubted that there were smugglers involved, and now she had all the evidence she needed loaded in the wagon, but the real motives of the strangers, with not a one of them a crown subject, remained suspect to her. *Could they have been working with the smugglers all along? Could they be attempting to gain some sort of local notoriety to hatch an even bigger crime?* They had driven merchant Murphey out of town without a trial and upset the town council to no end. Her patron Secun, in particular, had some choice words for them that almost brought a blush to her cheeks, and she reckoned she could sling invectives with the saltiest sailor. The council wanted them to seize the smuggler’s supply ship when next it makes port. Secun told Willa that she was to go with them.

“So far as they know,” Secun said, “You will be there to navigate and assist, but your real job will be to find out more about them, especially whether they are who they are presenting themselves as and whether they are representing their actions accurately to the council.” Secun let her choose one private to take with her, and she picked Tom. Ordinarily she would take anyone else, as he always found a way to subvert her authority on missions, but in this case he was the only one she could trust not to mouth off in town about their real mission.

“Thank you for conveyance,” Barnabas said as he clambered off the back of the wagon outside a tavern in Saltmarsh. “This lucky establishment will enjoy the official debut of my epic new ballad tonight, and I will enjoy a night of generous tips, food and drink, and, unless things go in some unexpected direction, a companion to warm my bed tonight.” Gathering his things, Barnabas offered a quick bow to Willa and Tom before striding into the tavern, whistling the tune from the refrain, “Of Barnabus the minstrel!

“Ye gonna go ta ‘ear ‘im tonight?” Tom asked with a knowing smile.

“I’d as soon take ‘im out, toss ‘im into ther Azure an see if an ‘obniz can swim.”

Chapter Ten

Taking Care of Business

9-12 Goodmonth, 570

For Babshapka of the Silverwood, the village of Saltmarsh had been an unwelcome chaos of noise and foul smells. Seaton, he was certain, could only be larger and more repugnant. Though sworn to guard Aurora, he resolved to entrust her safety to Tyrius and the viscount while she was in Seaton itself. By nightfall they had passed several outlying thorps, but they were not yet within sight of the lights of the town proper. They pitched a camp alongside the road and divided up the watch. The next day, several miles before they reached the city itself, the wood elf set his eyes on the last true stand of forest near the city, made arrangements for a rendezvous a few days hence, and bade his companions farewell. Tyrius and Aurora took a final inventory of the gems, trinkets, and coins recovered from the house, and went on their way. The wood elf watched them until they disappeared from sight around a bend in the road.

When Tyrius and Aurora reached Seaton, they went directly to the palace of the viscount. The staff there seemed to have been prepared for their arrival, or at least to have been briefed on recent events in Saltmarsh, for their letter of introduction from the Saltmarsh Town Council was accepted without any questions and they were shown to a waiting room in the palace and offered refreshment while the letter was being read by someone unseen. Tyrius also turned over the shield of the knight he had originally showed to the Town Council; the armor remained still in Saltmarsh and he retained the emerald for the time being.

After some time, they were told that a meeting with the viscount himself wouldn't "be necessary." Tyrius received directions, and the offer of a page for a guide if he desired, to the city's Temple of Sol. Aurora took a small but comfortable guest room in the palace (of a kind that might be afforded to the retinue of someone important rather than an important person herself). At her request, she was granted access to the library of the viscount's court wizard, supervised by one of his apprentices, and possibly a meeting with the Wizard himself, at his convenience.

Aurora took full advantage of the opportunity and quickly found herself so engrossed with her studies, with the Court Wizard visiting with her more than once and her even permitted to attend the lectures he gave his apprentices, that she had no time to visit the markets and sell the smuggler's treasures individually for the best price each as she had planned. On the tenth of Goodmonth she visited Tyrius at the temple and gave the valuables over to him, asking him to take care of them. The paladin was in the midst of devotions, fasting and praying, and he considered such worldly affairs a distraction, so he immediately met with a merchant of the Saltmarsh Town Council, in Seaton on business, turned everything over to him, asking only a fair price for the goods.

A day later, Aurora again visited Tyrius briefly.

"I asked you to take care of business, not to entrust our things to a Salter," Aurora objected in exasperation when she discovered how Tyrius had disposed of the party's goods. But she could not really argue further as she did not have time to do the haggling herself. Besides, the purse seemed heavy enough with gold.

"Now we need to consider how to best invest this money for the good of the whole party," Aurora said. "We will need a number of magical supplies. After all, nothing is available in Saltmarsh. I will need some of this coin just to identify the properties of that stone we took up from the dead alchemist. We know it's magical in some way, but we don't know who should have it or how to use it until we identify it, and for that I have to buy a pearl worth 100 gold lions! I will also need 25 gold lions to buy the materials to write the spell 'Message' into my spellbook, which may come in handy if I ever need to speak to one of you in combat, or secretly, or through a door or something. And, if I can spend another nine gold lions on incense, I can cast an involved spell allowing me to call a creature to me as my familiar. I was thinking that a hawk would be a good idea—we can use it to scout the ship once it comes in, as I will be able to see and hear through the hawk."

"You really are a spellcaster," Tyrius said, obviously impressed. "All this time I took you for merely a dabbler in the arcane."

Aurora sniffed, "A dabbler?"

“How much do you need for all of that?” he asked. After some discussion, Tyrius agreed that she could use party money of 200 gold lions to purchase two “Identify” pearls, 27 gold lions for a brass brazier and incense for three future “Find familiar” castings, and 25 gold lions for her to inscribe the spell “Message” into her spellbook. They had also talked about purchasing building materials to improve the haunted house, but when Tyrius did the math for splitting what remained of the party treasure six ways, he decided the others should explicitly approve of that purchase first. They planned on meeting early on the morrow to make these purchases in the markets of Seaton and then returning to Saltmarsh.

By evening’s end, Aurora finished her “historical accounts” of the events in Saltmarsh—three copies on different sheets of parchment—and she presented one to a secretary of the viscount. She had also copied some spells (both ones taught by the court wizard and some from the alchemist’s book) into her own spell book and made a complete backup spellbook in the event that something should happen to her own. She considered specializing as a diviner (like her master and patron), but ultimately decided that if she was to continue the adventuring lifestyle rather than that of a sedate researcher, the field of enchantments would serve her better. The wizard made sure she had the training she needed to enact her decision, and he gave her a list of enchantment-based spells appropriate for her learning and experience.

“Is there anything else?” he asked her. With or without use of any magic, the attractive young half-elf had clearly caught the older man in a web of enchantments.

“You don’t have a spell that would allow me to detect a man’s thoughts, do you?” she said with a suggestive raise of the eyebrows.

“For that, no spellcraft is necessary,” the wizard conceded flirtatiously. “But in fact, I do not have such a spell in my possession, though I have heard that some do.”

In the morning, Tyrius rose early, and at dawn he received a solemn blessing from a priest of Sol. “By the virtue of this blessing,” the priest told him, “Pelor grants you the ability to

invoke his name for miracles.” The clergy of the temple wished him well as he took his quest back to the world.

There was one more matter that concerned him before he could leave Seaton. He went to the palace to ask after the coat of arms on the shield that had belonged to the dead knight. “We made some inquiries about the insignia,” the viscount’s chief scribe said. “The armor could only have belonged to a landless knight, one Cyrus Stanforth, in the retinue of his Lord Viscount. It seems that this same knight disappeared a month ago while on assignment patrolling the coast road from Seaton to Burle, scouting for highwaymen and monsters. The Lord Viscount will much appreciate the return of the armor to the heirs of Stanforth.” Tyrius grimaced at this news, for the armor did fit him well, and hadn’t he already earned it by defeating those fiends who had slain Sir Stanforth? Nevertheless, he could scarcely act so selfishly after having just received the blessing of Pelor. While the family of the landless knight could offer Tyrius their gratitude, they were in no position to grant him a reward. Tyrius turned over the emerald to the viscount’s scribe with assurances that it would be given to the family as pledged. Tyrius promised to send the full suit of armor as soon as he had the chance. He was also given a sealed letter from the viscount to deliver to the Saltmarsh Town Council.

Then it was off to find Aurora, and when he did, they visited the marketplace and quickly acquired the brazier, incense, and pearls Aurora wanted. The inks and materials she needed, she had already purchased from the court wizard and used for spell copying.

“I don’t think we have enough money left to worry about putting it into a merchant bank,” Aurora said. “But I did manage to find one which promises confidentiality for holding the alchemist’s spell book in a deposit vault. I’ve already copied the spells from it that interested me, and I’ve made a backup copy of my own spellbook for safekeeping as well.”

Their business in Seaton concluded, the pair set out on the coast road. They had not been walking an hour before Babshapka appeared silently from the brush and joined them. They were traveling lighter than when they came, and had had an earlier start, and they managed to arrive at the haunted house by dusk. Checking the basement, they could see that Thokk and Larry had been using the food stores, but they did not find them on the

premises. Even calling for them and searching the house revealed nothing.

Babshapka circled about the house until he found obvious tracks on the other side of the road which led him to hunter's nest in the woods where the half-orc and dwarf had created a concealed campsite from which they could observe any comings and goings at the house. Babshapka found both of them so engaged in their conversation that they had forgotten to watch the house.

"We left you with a job to do. What are you doing out here?" Aurora demanded.

"I'm not an indoors type of dwarf," Larry said apologetically.

"I know, I know. Sky and stars and wind and leaves and all that," Aurora sighed with exasperation. "I was always told dwarves preferred tunnels and holes, but you are as fairy-headed as Babshapka here. Really I don't know what we will do with you! And what is your excuse, Thokk? Did the ghosts and skeletons frighten you away?"

Wounded by the remark, Thokk snarled and pointed to a new string of wolf's teeth he wore on a cord around his neck. Then he held up his arm, displaying a nasty-looking inflamed wound on his forearm. "Does Thokk fear anything?" he growled. "I went hunting. Wolf tried to take my kill! Bigger than any wolf ever seen. I battled it, axe and claw, tooth to tooth, and I spilled his blood not but a few paces from here. His bite was deep, but I sealed the wounds with the tip of my own knife, heated in the flame, and I strung his teeth into this amulet. Does Thokk fear ghosts and bones?"

Aurora could see that she had gone too far, so she made peace as quickly as she could. "It's a very handsome necklace, Thokk. You have a real skill. It looks exactly like the power totem that an orcish chief might wear."

The half-blood's demeanor changed, and now he beamed with pride.

"But you will return now to the house and spend the night in the basement," Tyrius ordered. "We will be with you the whole

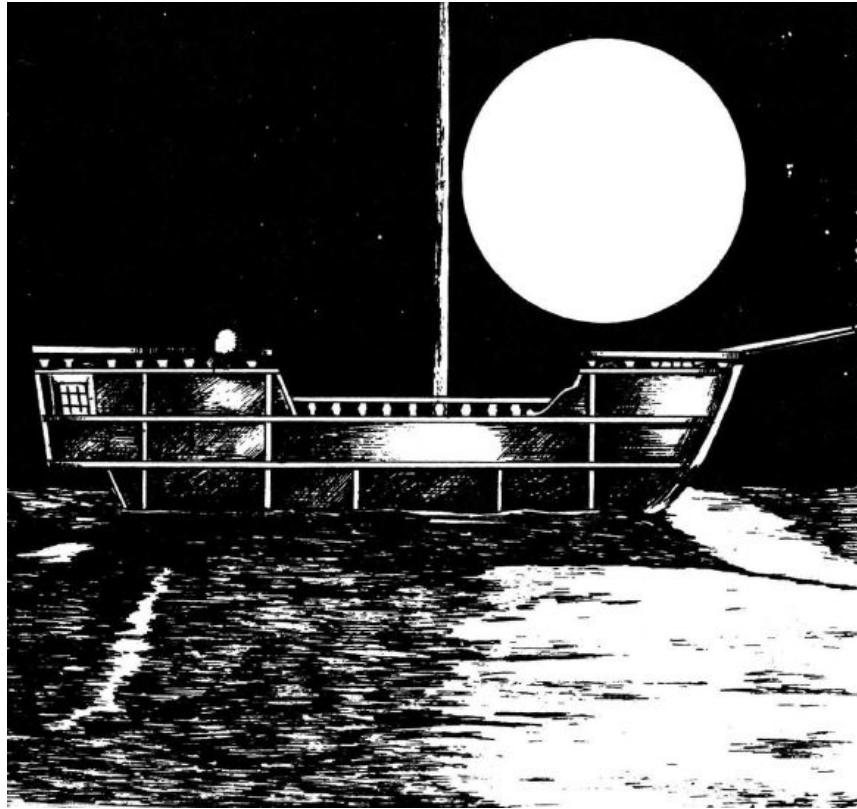
night,” he added by way of assurance, not unlike a parent calming the fears of frightened children.

The party made dinner from the goods that remained in the basement, and they indulged themselves in some of the brandy they had retained. After dinner, Aurora addressed the group, explaining to them how she had spent both the party booty as well as some of their collective reward money. No one seemed too concerned. Babshapka showed little interest in treasure, Larry valued acorns and herbs above wealth, and Thokk was better satisfied with the wolf-tooth necklace he had created than he had been with the whole storehouse of contraband. Nevertheless, Aurora assured them, “We should have enough to keep us well-fed and housed for the next three to five weeks, at least until the smuggler’s ship comes in. And we’re bound to find lots more treasure on the ship. I realize that my use of party funds for seemingly selfish ends might appear to be asking a lot, and I’m sure I’ll be asking again in the future, but most of us are going to need help beyond our individual means at some point, and my magics will benefit us all.”

Everyone nodded disinterestedly, but she continued, “Tyrius, I know your donations to your god and the cost of votives will be expensive for you. Babshapka, Larenthal, and Thokk, you will likely need to ... um ... pay for companionship occasionally since ... well ... your social graces are ... I mean to say ...” It quickly became clear to her that no one other than Tyrius had any notion of what she was talking about and none of them seemed particularly concerned about the money anyway. Larry and Thokk had little use for it, and Babshapka was honor-bound to guard her, not as a paid mercenary. The hard sell, she realized, would be with Barnabus—who was still in Saltmarsh. She was still considering the best approach to pacify his inevitable objections as they drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Swimming Lessons



13-22 Goodmonth, 570

By midmorning, the party had returned to Saltmarsh. Acting with alacrity, Tyrius went straightaway to the Customs House where he found Secun already at a table working through a pile of papers. The townsman rose to greet the young paladin, and Tyrius returned the gesture with a polite bow before handing him the still-sealed letter from the Viscount.

Secun broke the seal and read the letter on the spot, nodding as he went. When he finished, he returned to his chair behind the table, tucked the parchment away, and motioned for Tyrius to take a seat in an open chair. Tyrius shook his head, "Thank you my lord; I will remain standing for now, until I have heard your words."

"Well, the Viscount has approved the operation and we are now officially sanctioned to proceed. Saltmarsh is prepared to offer

your party the following, in addition to our previous considerations: The merchants on the council will purchase any captured goods your party wishes to sell or turn into cash, whether left over from the house or what you may acquire in the future from the smuggler's ship. The price will be a fair one. If your party prefers to take possession of the goods and contraband and sell them yourselves in Seaton, you are free to do so.

"Moreover, should your party require any gear for your assault on the smuggler's ship, and it is not available here in Saltmarsh, the merchants on the council have agreed to import such goods for the market price in Seaton, with no markup or charge for the transportation.

"Finally, the clergy on the council will agree to make available to your party healing or other divine assistance and services for the rates generally applied to favored non-worshippers."

Tyrius bowed again and thanked Secun, "With the favor of the divine light and the consent of all the gods of right and law, we will not fail the Council, nor the Viscount, nor the King."

Tyrius returned to meet the rest of the party at *The Mermaid*. Babshapka successfully located Barnabus and had some limited success rousing him despite his objections about the early hour (it being already midday). Once they had assembled in the common room downstairs, Aurora took charge of proceedings. "Our first order of business is to use my new pearl to identify the magic stone that Tyrius obtained from alchemist's remains."

Tyrius reached into the pouch at his side, but an expression of dismay came over his face as he felt around inside for the stone. He quickly searched his bag and his pockets, emptying contents onto the table and double-checking his things. "Alas, what sin have I committed to suffer such misfortune of chance?" he protested.

All the while Thokk scowled darkly, his eyes darting about to each face. "This glowy-stone?" he asked, drawing the magical gem forth from his own pouch.

"How did you get that?" Tyrius exclaimed, more in surprise than reproach.

"Found it after you leave!" Thokk said defensively. "Tyrius plays a trick and hides it in Thokk's pouch to test him?" He bared his teeth, and added sarcastically, "Very nice friend!"

"I swear on my honor, I did no such deceit," Tyrius protested with a vigorous shake of the head.

"I don't like the sound of this," Aurora said quietly and warily. "Thokk, please give it me, and I will get to the bottom of this trickery." She glanced over to the innkeeper who sat at a table across the common room, busying herself peeling onions and trying to appear as if she was not listening in on the conversation. "Ruth," Aurora said. "I'm exhausted from the morning's hike, and I would like water and a room upstairs to lie down in before lunch."

Once her privacy was secured, Aurora arranged the supplies needed to create a magical potion which should give her the ability to identify the properties of a charmed object. She injected the concoction along with the pearl, waited a moment for the magic to take effect, and then turned her attention to the glowing stone. "A luckstone," she heard herself say. "No," she corrected herself, "A *cursed* luckstone." In the gleaming facets of the gem, she seemed to momentarily see the features of Thokk's face. "So you've chosen yourself a victim," she said to the evil stone. "He was the first to take you from the alchemist, wasn't he? And I suppose you are also responsible for the death of the alchemist."

The stone glowed softly with an evil light. Aurora carefully wrapped it up in a kerchief, dropped it into a leather pouch, pulled the drawstring, and tied it up tight. In just the time it took her to walk downstairs to report her findings to the party, however, the stone had disappeared from her pouch and reappeared in Thokk's pouch. Eyes now wide with fear, Thokk pulled it forth. "Throw it in the sea!" he said, but even as he said the words, his fingers closed around it possessively.

Aurora shook her head, "If only it were that simple."

"Well done, half-blood," Barnabas said sarcastically. "Leave it to you to pick up a bad luckstone. I suppose it's going to turn you queer in the head and we'll have to kill you."

"What if we buried it or crushed it?" Larry suggested.

"The magic is too powerful," Aurora explained. "Besides, even if we actually could destroy it, it is now linked to Thokk and we might do him harm in the process."

"If it's a cursed item," Tyrius said, "perhaps a blessing can reverse it."

Aurora, Tyrius, and Thokk set off for the temple of Phaulkon to beseech the aid of the priest. To their great relief, Aeravis said, "I will be able to remove the curse, but it will cost you more than a copper sparrow."

"We have received the assurance of the council that the priests of Saltmarsh will provide us whatever divinities or sanctities we require at the same fair price that might be applied to favored non-worshippers," Tyrius stated.

"Favored non-worshipper?" Aeravis said quizzically, his eyes locking with Aurora's. "I wonder how this girl divined the nature of your cursed gem."

Aurora returned his gaze without flinching, but her face betrayed her discomfort. "I'm a scholar," she replied weakly. "I have read of such things before."

"Well, girl," the priest said, "I'll favor you, though you be a stranger and a non-believer. I'll even favor this outlaw half-blood if the council tells me so." Aeravis said. "For 65 gold lions my blessing will remove the curse."

Aurora's heart sank, but there was nothing for it except to agree to the terms and let the priest do his work. He took the gem and inspected it before turning his attention to Thokk. The half-orc trembled, visibly disturbed. The entire ritual took only a few moments. Some incense, an invocation, a brief prayer, and the priest laid his hands upon the half-orc's head. Then he closed the stone in an engraved wooden box.

"It's done," he said.

"How do we know?" Aurora demanded. "What if it didn't work?"

"Forgive her impertinence," Tyrius apologized. "She does not mean to blaspheme."

Having now spent most of the party's reward money, they returned to *The Mermaid* where Ruth's soup had grown cold. Organizing her thoughts in her head as she ate, Aurora decided to explain their financial situation as the result of "identifying and removing the curse." She omitted mentioning to Barnabus that she spent far more on purchasing another pearl and copying spells. Sighing heavily, she added, "Well, there's nothing for it. Our grand plans to disband and retire to a life of luxury after capturing this smuggling ship are going to have to be set aside for a while. I foresee us traveling and working together for quite some time into the future if you're all up for it. As things stand now, we can scarcely afford to rooms for the night, so I propose we return to our post at the alchemist's house."

"Suit yourself," Barnabas said sourly. "I have a show tonight and a comfortable bed awaiting me after. I'll join you on the morrow, but from now on, no one spends a copper of the common purse without common consent!"

That comment put the party into an argument over who was the leader and who had the authority to spend the proceeds of their adventures for the common benefit of all. It quickly became apparent that both Aurora and Tyrius considered themselves to be the one in charge, but neither one wanted to take the responsibility for having spent down the purse. As the argument continued, a bleary-eyed Wilhelmina Stoutley appeared at the front door of *The Mermaid*. She scolded the party, "In yer absence, me an' Tom's been patrollin' ther coast at night, e'en though none o' ther council be think'n the ship'll come in so soon." As if there might be spies everywhere, she dismissed Ruth (who said she needed to go to market in any case), closed the shutters (over everyone's objections with the room already overly hot) and posted Tom outside. Then she asked, "Now tell me, 'ow far has yer plannin' and prep'ration come?"

"We plan to wait until one of the excise officers sees the ship," Aurora said with a note of defensiveness in her voice. "They will alert us by rowing to the hidden sea cave, and then we will row out in the captured jollyboat to meet the smugglers."

"And then?" Willa demanded.

“Well we ... I mean to say, then, well at that point,” Aurora stammered before admitting, “Actually, we haven’t discussed the details further than that.”

Willa was not impressed. She peppered them with questions and seemed dubious about their abilities. “Can any of ye swim? Can ye row? Can ye row quietly? What ‘bout ther signalin’ system? ‘ave any of ye learnt thar lantern code? Will ye be wearin’ armor? What happens if one o’ ye falls into the sea while wearin’ armor? ‘ave you thought t’ pr’pare a charm ar twain?” A three-hour strategy session followed, with much back and forth. Only when Ruth reappeared in the late afternoon, saying she absolutely must start on supper, did Willa relent and let the party go.

“Except for Barnabas, we are all returning to the alchemist’s house,” they told her, “And we’ll prepare our own meal there.”

“That’ll do jus’ fine,” Willa said. “But on the morrow at firs’ light, we begin trainin’ with swimmin’ and rowin’.”

Willa told Tom that he would be taking the nightly patrol by himself that night, as she intended to accompany the party to the house. The excise cutter was to be docked in Saltmarsh at the end of each of its patrols so as not to draw attention to the house. When they reached alchemist’s house, the party immediately began preparing an evening meal while Willa inspected the smugglers’ jollyboat. She was pleased to find that there was sackcloth for muffling the oarlocks, and two grappling hooks, but she was dumbfounded to learn that the party had not even looked in it yet! She shook her head in disbelief at the party’s incompetence.

The next day, Willa had the party in the jollyboat as soon as it was light enough to see in the sea cave without a torch. As a small mercy, she said they would train on the rowing while the morning air remained cool and then move to swimming in the heat of the day. She arranged the party’s seating in the jollyboat, explaining to them the importance of balancing their weight especially port and starboard but also fore and aft. She rowed them out of the cave itself, and even the most casual of them was immediately impressed by the skill and strength she needed to get them beyond the surf zone of water crashing on the huge rocks that concealed the entrance of the cave. Once they were out in calmer, open water, she allowed them turns on the oars. First

Thokk and Tyrius tried rowing, each alone, with two oars, and then she put them together in teams, such that each of them handled a single oar but the two sides of the boat were rowed in tandem. After much practice, and after all were hot and sweaty, she took them away from the house and along the rocky coast until she spied a small spit with a protected tide pool behind, only perturbed by the largest of waves. Beaching the jollyboat, she had them strip down to small clothes, wade into the water, and practice floating. Babshapka and Thokk needed no swimming lessons. While the others made short ventures out to the open water and back by doggy-paddle, Thokk whooped and hollered as he splashed about. He also ended up drinking far more salt water than he should have, being used to rivers mountain streams. Willa told him he would pay for that later. When they were all cold, shivering, and cramping, she allowed them back in the boat and told them that they could warm themselves by rowing back to the cave.

Barnabus joined the party at the house while they were at lunch. Despite protesting, "I was born on a ship ... nearly," Willa insisted he join the rest in the afternoon's swimming and rowing lessons. That evening every member of the party nursed tired muscles, aching bones, and blistered hands. Even the indefatigable Babshapka seemed spent.

"Now wouldn't it be a fine dereliction of our duty if we didn't set a watch o'er the sea by night," Willa said knowingly. Over their objections, she drew up a watch schedule. She sent the first watcher up to the second floor to take a shift at the window. More than one of them ended up spending their "watch time" asleep leaning against the wall of the room upstairs.

The swimming and rowing lessons continued for the next several days. Rather than losing the opportunities for spellcasting, Aurora used her daily allotment of magical potential to place an enchantment of magical armor over herself, Babshapka, and Tyrius before they slept each night. "It's better than wasting the spells," she explained, "And it makes me stay in practice."

With Thokk and Tyrius now potentially capable of rowing the jollyboat each by himself alone, and the others capable so long as they worked with a partner, some of the party put forth that it might be best to have the smuggler's jollyboat act as a decoy, rowing slowly out to the ship, while the excise cutter snuck

around from the seaward side with the real boarding party. To accomplish this, they decided that they would need more grapnels, so they requested that Willa purchase those in town, along with a set of dark cloaks for all of them to hide their features. Further, they debated among themselves about what to do with anyone on the ship who might surrender to them. The disposition of prisoners proved to be a major point of contention after the fight with the smugglers before, and they did not wish to make that mistake again, especially in a time-sensitive situation. After much circular discussion, Tyrius finally suggested that they request instruction from the council, as that could obviate the need for debate. Willa said that she would venture into Saltmarsh to report to the council the next morning, provided that the group promised to practice without her supervision.

Willa returned in the afternoon with the grapnels and with clear instruction: the party must not under any circumstances let any of the officers go, nor were any deals to be struck with them. They must be captured if possible and turned over to the council; if they could not be captured, the officers must be killed. However, any common smugglers could be dealt with at the discretion of the party. Willa had further news of interest. After considerable debate, the council had granted the party's "right of pillage" to extend to the smuggler's ship itself! The party had not thought to ask about this, but were very pleased to learn it. "Ye can thank me fer that bit too," Willa said with a grin. In fact, Willa had put the question to the council herself, since after several nightly strategy sessions, she had become increasingly concerned by Aurora's repeated requests for her to purchase acid in town, and even more concerned about Larry's declaration, "First we thunderwave to clear the deck! Then we set the ship on fire! Burn it down and let it sink!" Willa had decided it would be better for all concerned to give the party a reason to capture the ship intact.

A few days later, Willa gave the party a "holiday in town." It was good for everyone to let loose a bit after having lived in close quarters in the cellar for nearly a week. Willa arranged for a tour of a trading cog captained by a friend of hers (Captain Saul) who was in port for the day. They studied it from the docks, then went above and below decks, getting a feel for the size and space, approaches, how to manage the ladders between decks, and so forth.

Rather than walking back out to the house in the afternoon, Willa and Tom sailed them back in the excise cutter. The party was now set on their strategy involving both the jollyboat and the cutter, so Willa had persuaded Secun that the cutter needed to be based in the sea cave rather than the town. Tom joined them in the cellar.

That evening, a new strategy session was launched. They all agreed on the dual approach to the smuggler's ship, but they decided that most of the party would need to be in the smuggler's jollyboat so as not to arouse suspicions from the ship. Thokk and Barnabus, the huge half-orc and diminutive halfling, were the least likely to be mistaken for smugglers, so they would be in the excise cutter and try a stealthy approach, passing beneath the prow of the smuggler's ship and attempting an unseen boarding on the far side. Barnabus could then attempt to eliminate opposition without being seen, while Thokk created a distraction on deck that might allow those in the jollyboat to board. Starting the next day, Thokk practiced rowing the cutter by himself.

Although Luna was nearing full, summer storm clouds were building at sea and the nights were growing darker. Willa believed the smugglers might try to use the weather to get near shore without being seen, and she felt such an attempt was imminent. That night, at the strategy session, she said, "I'll be contactin' ther council on ther morrow."

In the morning, Willa returned to Saltmarsh to give another report to the council, and the party practiced on their own. Tom seemed content to sleep all day after patrolling all night in the cutter. When Willa appeared in the evening, she brought strange news and a stranger person with her. The news was that, by order of the council, Tom would not be going with them in the boarding attempt, rather, the stranger would. Over their objections, Willa reminded them that someone would need to remain at the house to signal the ship even after they launched, "Altho' o' course ye hae not considered t'at afore now."

The strange woman with Willa was slight of build, almost frail in appearance, although she moved with a fluid grace. She wore simple traveler's robes and carried a staff, with no obvious weapons or armor about her. But it was her skin that was the most striking. It was of a golden hue such as none of them had ever seen before. She had green eyes. Her eyebrows indicated that she should have dark black hair, but her head was smoothly

shaven. She spoke an oddly accented Common, and with a little questioning, Aurora determined that the newcomer was of the Baklun people, from far to the north and west, in a place she called the “Plains of the Paynims.” How she was to assist the party in taking the ship or why the council insisted on her presence was not explained.

The new woman, who called herself “Shefak Ishu,” remained silent during the nightly deliberations and strategy sessions, but she participated in the rowing and swimming, and she even took her turn at the nightly watch. Aurora pressed her for details and fished for information.

Shefak Ishu was born to a wandering tribe of horse nomads in the Plains of the Paynims. Although physically weak, she was considered wise beyond her years by the holy women of the tribe. When she was a girl, her tribe’s travels took them near a temple to Xan Yae, “The Lady of Perfection,” the Bakluni goddess of Mental and Physical Mastery. She enrolled as an acolyte, with her family hoping that she would become a priestess. After years of training, she found that she excelled more at physical combat than prayer and spell-casting, so the rashaw moved her from the divinity studies to the halls of the devout—a marital order of disciples not unlike the monks of other temples.

“In the halls of the devout, I learned the story of Zuoken, the most perfect disciple of Xan Yae,” the newcomer confided in Aurora. “Three score years ago, Zuoken was imprisoned, but no one knows where. It is the goal of every devotee of Xan Yae to find and release Zuoken.”

“And you think you will find him on a smuggler’s ship?”

The girl smiled and shook her head. “When I completed my training, I asked for permission to travel and look for clues as to where Zuoken might be imprisoned. I followed the rising sun to the east and the rivers to the south. After months of travel I came to this kingdom. The people of these lands all stare at me. I suppose they have never seen a Bakluni woman.”

“But why here? Why Keoland and Saltmarsh?” Aurora asked.

“There is an ancient forest called the Dreadwood, which is supposed to be home to many evil secrets. Rumors led me to

believe I should begin my quest for Zuoken under those trees. I travelled to the city of Seaton, trying to find people who could guide me to the Dreadwood, but the local constables harassed me and accused me of witchcraft. They do not appreciate the presence of a Bakluni woman in their heathen town. But I did nothing illegal, nor did I put any hex on anyone, so they have been unable to arrest or deport me.

“One week ago, a representative of the Viscount of Salinmor (who is also the Lord of Seaton) summoned me to appear before him. He told me about all of you and your mission, and he suggested that, if I join you on your mission, you might assist me on mine.”

Aurora smiled inwardly. Her ultimate goal of assembling a team of adventurers to explore the Dreadwood was one step closer to completion.

Two days after Shefak’s arrival, thick storm clouds obscured the sky, and a light fog was on the water. Far off at sea, heat lightning flashed on the horizon, but no sound of thunder reached the shore. Most of the party were asleep when Tom burst into the cellar from the secret door to the sea cave, shouting that he had spotted a ship. Without pausing to answer questions, he grabbed a lantern and headed up the stairs to the house, ready to return the smuggler's signals.

*Oh, the blades did flash, the blood did flow,
Thokk’s anger it did kindle,
but through it all there shone the smile,
of Barnabus the minstrel!*

Chapter Twelve

Battle for the Sea Ghost



22 Goodmonth, 570

In his haste to alert the party, Tom sailed the excise cutter into the sea cave with the mast down, but he did not take the time to remove it from the ship. Willa took charge and ordered the party to remove it for the operation. She saw Thokk and Barnabus loaded and launched before she placed the rest of the party in their positions within the jollyboat.

Thokk strained against the oars and pulled his craft out into the black, rolling sea. His half-blood eyes allowed him to see through the darkness well enough to avoid the rocks around the cave mouth. Barnabas had to endure several terrifying minutes of blackness and crashing waves, tossed about the cutter and drenched with spray while Thokk heaved and fretted. Once they pulled out beyond the surf zone and into the open sea the waves calmed and Thokk concentrated on rowing silently with a steady pace. Every so often the half orc looked over his shoulder, trying to detect the dark ship against the dark sky so that he had somewhere to make for more precise than “away from land.”

Willa checked everything twice in the jollyboat before shoving off. She was in no hurry; she wanted Thokk to have as long a lead as possible. Her kept her hauberk of chain neatly folded under her aft seat. She directed the beam of her lantern through the fog and

across the rocks as she called orders. Tyrius and Babshapka took the oars at the outset, though she would spell them out if needed.

Back in the alchemist's house, Tom made his way to the bedroom window overlooking the ocean with his lantern lit but hooded. He scanned the dark waters, trying to find the ship he had seen at sea. After several minutes of straining his eyes, he still could not discern a shape on the water, but at length he did see a flash of light. It was a long flash, followed by three short flashes. He quickly reviewed the parchment given him by the party and reasoned that it was the first line of the code, but how was he to respond? They had not told him! The same signal—a long flash followed by three short ones—repeated twice more with a pause between each sequence. Tom shrugged and took the safest bet, repeating the sequence he had seen by uncovering one wall of the lantern and holding it toward the sea. He waited anxiously for a response. He cared little for the strangers, but he was acutely aware that his sister, his only living family, was on board the jollyboat with them, even now rowing out to meet a ship full of cutthroats.

"Thokk!" hissed Barnabus, seeing flashes of light over the shoulder of the barbarian. He directed his companion to turn their cutter the direction of the light, estimating that they were half the distance out to it, perhaps even closer. In the jollyboat behind, Willa saw the signal as well. She whispered to Babshapka, "Pull harder," so as to turn them to the portside.

On board the *Sea Ghost*, Captain Sigurd "Snake Eyes," Punketah the Mage and two crewmen stared up at the decrepit mansion. "Ol' Sanballet's gone barmy," muttered Punketah. "That ain't ther response signal, no how. That be our own signal back again."

"Ye be nay wrong," replied Sigurd. "Too much brandy, or watchin' t'em coloured lights too long? Wait a fair bit an' hail 'im agin," he ordered.

Ten minutes later, Sigurd had the crewman on the lantern flash another signal at the house. The smugglers waited impatiently for the reply, watching from the rail of the *Ghost*. When it finally came, they saw the same signal as before: a long flash followed by three short ones. "T'at be wrong, alright," said a crewman, shaking his head.



"Might be..." said Punketah, drawing his words out, "that Sanballet's got summit ter say to us and is coming out hisself—and one o' those land lummoxes he uses fer muscle don't know ther signal from his arse."

"'Tmight be," said Sigurd, unconvinced. "Or 'tmight be Sanballet got hisself pinched, an' yon light's made by no friend o' ours."

"Kingsmen?" spat Punketah. "Nahh, it be past ther bedtime. Kingsmen don't sail o' ther night."

Nevertheless, Sigurd called up to the man in the crow's nest, "Luke! Eye's up! All directions, laddie!"

Sigurd waited a few minutes more, just to give whomever was in the house the chance to right the signal, but it did not come. "We be cuttin' bait," he decided, and then shouted to the man at the fore, "Weigh anchor, lad!"

The man aloft called down, "Cap'n, jolly t' starboard!"

"Belay t'at!" shouted Sigurd to the man at the capstan. He had the crewman with the lantern shine it low across the water. The light only dimly illuminated the approaching jollyboat. The craft held fully six figures, though their identities could not be discerned

through the misty darkness. "Bjorn, make ready t' receive 'em," Sigurd called out to his mate on the lower deck.

"Do ye want our jolly launched?" Bjorn called back.

"Nay jes' yet."

"Mayhap ye be right," Sigurd murmured to Punketah, "a full boat could mean Sanballet's comin' out fer a parlay—or 'tmight be me in ther right, an' t'ese nay be friends. When t'ey gets close enou' t' see, be ye castin' yer web t' keep 'em in ther boat, t'en sleep, t'en we be guttin' any left standin'."

"Aye, Cap'n," agreed Punketah darkly, and his hand opened a belt pouch and drew forth a pinch of cobweb.



With all eyes except the lookout on the approaching jollyboat, Thokk and Barnabus slipped the cutter in front of the prow of the still-anchored *Sea Ghost*. Thokk's oar strokes yielded no more noise than the sea lapping gently against the hull of the great ship, and they passed unseen to the seaward port side of the *Ghost*. Barnabus took out a grapnel, its hooks muffled by sackcloth, and tossed it neatly up to catch on the rail above.

Bloody Bjorn and a crewman stood by at the starboard rail, the crewman with a rope ladder in hand. On the stern deck, the man with the lantern kept it shining on the approaching jollyboat. Several of the figures aboard could be seen to lean in and whisper to one another.

When the prow of the jollyboat was some twenty yards from the hull of the *Ghost*, the mist parted enough to reveal the strangers.

The stout frame of a dwarf was the first giveaway, but none of those below looked familiar to anyone on deck. Bjorn drew his broadsword, and the man next to him dropped the ladder to the deck. "Now!" bellowed Sigurd, and Punketah began the words of an incantation.

Those in the boat proved quicker. Babshapka dropped his oar, stood and turned, pulling forth a bow, already strung, from beneath his dark cloak. In one smooth motion, he nocked and loosed an arrow. A single shot struck Bjorn square in the chest. The arrow shaft erupted into a tangle of vines that wrapped around the mate and forced him down to the deck. A firebolt leapt from Aurora's hands and scorched Bjorn's companion.

Willa lunged across the seats to take up Babshapka's oar. Together with Tyrius, she steered the jollyboat and then pulled in the oar as they ground to a stop against the hull of the *Sea Ghost*, the two ships broadside to one another.

Larry had been mumbling under his breath for several seconds, perhaps even before Punketah had begun his spellcraft. Abruptly, a thick fog bank rose from the water and covered the whole jollyboat and the main deck besides, obscuring all. A second later Punketah completed his web, but in the fog he could see no targets for the spell. The web splashed harmlessly into the water. Its fringes adhered the jolly to the larger ship, but the sticky strands did not catch his intended victims. Punketah uttered a foul oath. Sigurd yelled for the anchor to be raised and drew his own sword.

Under the shroud of Larry's fog cloud, those in the jollyboat threw up grapnels and ascended to the main deck of the *Ghost*, even as Barnabus and Thokk climbed aboard on the other side. "Sleep! Damn you Punketah!" cursed Sigurd.

The mage pulled forth a pinch of sand, but he objected, "Cain't bespell that what me eyes cain't see!" Though he stood beside the man, he could scarcely make out Sigurd's shape in the darkness and fog, much less the boarding party from the jolly.

The wounded crewman at the main deck rail slashed at a shape coming up out of the fog, but a blow from an unseen opponent struck him down as those in the jollyboat clambered aboard. The aft crewman's lantern beam danced through the encompassing

fog but revealed nothing. From the main deck came a terrifying battle cry that froze the blood of the smugglers. An orcish voice raged, "Thokk bathe ship in blood!"

Blown astern by the east wind, the fog advanced across the main deck, and the boarders used it for cover as they moved aft. Barnabus ascended the port ladder to the poop deck ahead of the fog but immediately darted into the shadows. With a clatter of heavy booted feet, Thokk, Tyrius, and Willa ascended the starboard ladder and engaged the smugglers in melee. Shefak ran across the fog-covered deck but ignored the ladder. Rather, she used her staff to vault over the railing to the poop deck, rolling as she landed.



Before the first blow was struck, Punketah completed his sleep spell, centering it on the attackers surging up the ladder but carelessly forgetting about his own shipmates in the same area. Shefak was the first to collapse, but then the crewman at the tiller and the one holding the lantern also went down. The lantern clattered to the deck but continued to cast a dim light through the fog. Barnabus was creeping up behind the man on the tiller just

before the spell struck. As a wave of drowsiness swept through him, his eyes closed, and he succumbed to the magical sleep before he could deliver his blow. Aurora and Babshapka, still below on the main deck but approaching the ladder, felt the wave of drowsiness pass through them, but their fey heritage asserted itself against the lull of the spell.

With his companions asleep or still below, Thokk singlehandedly confronted both Sigurd and Punketah on the poop deck. None of the other smugglers were conscious. Willa and Tyrius scrambled up behind the half orc. "Drop your sword and surrender your ship," Tyrius demanded as he maneuvered himself into the fight.

Sigurd roared defiance and slashed at Thokk. His sword moved faster than Tyrius' eyes could follow. The half orc suffered three devastating cuts. Thokk fell to his knees and his blood slicked the deck. He was still struggling to rise when Sigurd ran him through with a fourth and final stab. The massive half-orc collapsed with a groan.

Babshapka ascended the ladder to the poop deck next and just behind him came Aurora. The ranger sprinted into the melee while the enchantress spun about to try to make sense of the chaos around her. The fog muffled the sound of the battle. She could not be sure, but it seemed as if Thokk had already fallen. Looking for the others, she nearly tripped over Shefak's sleeping form. At first she thought the Bakluni woman had been slain, but upon inspection, she discovered the monk slept peacefully. Aurora slapped her twice and commanded, "Wake up or we're all dead!"

Leaving Shefak to rouse herself, she hurried over to where Barnabas dozed comfortably beside the sleeping tillerman, his intended victim. Aurora shook the halfling and slapped him to consciousness. Just then an arrow from the man in the crow's nest stuck her hard, lodging its head between her ribs. She cried out in the surprise and pain and tore the shaft from the wound. Recovering herself quickly, she replied to the insult by hurling a firebolt at the man above.

Baranabas sat up, rubbing his eyes lazily, then suddenly he remembered where he was. He leapt to his feet and looked around. He quickly assessed the situation and took note of the sleeping smugglers at his feet. With Tyrius busy trading blows

with Sigurd and unlikely to notice anything else, Barnabus took the opportunity to kill, not capture, the sleeping crewmen.

Unable to offer another spell and equally unable to escape, Punketah fell quickly beneath the blows of the boarders, but Sigurd fought on with considerable skill. Both Tyrius and Willa tasted the metal of his blade before Babshapka moved to a flanking position. Then the concerted effort of their attacks forced the smuggler down to the deck. The sounds and cries of battle which had been strangely muffled in the fog fell completely silent. The fog curled away from the main deck revealing a single dead smuggler by the rail. The formerly entangled mate was gone, as was the man who had been at the capstan. The anchor was still down.

"Is he dead?" Willa asked of Babshapka who knelt over the bleeding half-orc.

The elf shook his head.

"Let me help!" Larenthal pushed aside the ranger. He and Tyrius employed their healing spells to revive the half blood and close his wounds. Tyrius breathed a prayer of gratitude for the miracle. Thokk snarled and bared his teeth in a grin.

"Feels better, doesn't it?" Larry said, patting his friend gently.

Punketah and Sigurd were also still alive. Both were unconscious and badly wounded. Tyrius bound their wounds along with their hands and feet.

"Quickly!" Willa urged. "We hain't done yet, and thar be more ta come!"

Thokk rose to his feet and hefted his axe and his shield. The party pulled together and began to cross the deck. As if on cue, a cabin door was flung open and three lizardfolk charged out at them. Unfazed by his recent brush with death, Thokk threw himself forward to meet them, blocking their javelins with his large hide shield. A small flying creature launched out with the lizard men and swooped over their shoulders. It sunk its tail barb into the half-orc as combat was joined again. Seeing the beast, Aurora observed, "Isn't that a dragonne..." but that was as far as she got before Thokk sliced it in half with his axe.

The lizardmen quickly realized they were outmatched, but before they could withdraw, the fighters in the party were on them. They slew the lizardfolk and dumped their reeking carcasses overboard. Again the deck was clear and calm restored.

“Pelor shines his goodly light upon us!” Tyrius exclaimed.

“We are good, aren’t we!” Aurora added with a note of pride, even as she clutched at the painful arrow wound in her ribs.

Willia ignored their self-congratulatory remarks. She busied herself retrieving her chainmail hauberk from the jollyboat and donned it. “If ye ’ad taken ther time ta dress yerself afore, ye wouldnae ’ave them bleedin’ wounds, now would ye?” she scolded herself as she observed the bloodstains soaking through her clothes.

“Are we ready for this?” Tyrius asked, looking around at his companions. Everyone gave their assent. The party charged in through the door the lizard men had come out. A blur of chaos erupted. The subsequent battle below decks was desperate and hard-fought on both sides. It involved fighting on rope ladders, climbing on and over brandy casks and even attempts to roll them down upon others. Daggers were thrown in the dark, and the party’s spellcasters exhausted all their remaining spells. In the end, every member of the party suffered serious wounds. Five common smugglers were dead, three surrendered, and all of the ship’s officers (the Captain, the Mate, the Bosun, and Punketah) had been knocked unconscious, captured alive, and bound to the mast in the hold.

Despite their wounds, the party was eager to search the ship for a pirate’s treasure. Besides the items recovered from officers themselves (jewelry, armor and weapons, and possibly magical gear) and the obviously valuable cargo of silk and brandy that filled the holds, the party’s search uncovered a cache of odd coins in the cabin of the lizardfolk, strange papers and four potion vials in the captain’s cabin, a spellbook and a wand in Punketah’s cabin, a secret room filled with weapons, and a secret prison cell with a manacled sea elf (who was soon after released).

As Babshapka and Larenthal dressed wounds and applied bandages to the injured, Aurora mused over the plot. “The smuggler’s role in supplying Sanballet and Master Murphey with

brandy and silk is obvious," she said. "But there's clearly something more afoot here."

"I've learned a thing or two from the prisoners," Tyrius agreed, "And then there's the contents of this letter from the captain's cabin."

"Don't ferget 'bout ther lizardfolk," Willa added. "We need t' gather all ther clues t'gether w' ther facts."

"Well there's the weapons the ship is carrying, far more than the smugglers themselves could have used," Barnabas said. "I'd wager my share they were smuggling arms. Maybe that's the real racket."

"That might explain the hundred coins the lizardmen had," Aurora said thoughtfully. "Perhaps they were dealing in arms, as you say, and supplying weapons to lizardfolk."

"Seems like as enough, though I like ther soun' nae one bit," Willa concurred. "If I be readin' this map aright, ther lair be at the mouth o' ther Dun River, not but a few hours west o' Saltmarsh by sail."

"We should further interrogate the prisoners and ascertain from where these arms are coming and for what purpose the lizardfolk are purchasing them," Tyrius declared.

Their efforts to learn information from the prisoners availed little. The three crewman claimed not to know, and Sigurd had already told the others, "I'll nae be sayin' naught, an' ye'll do ther same, if ye hae any wits about ye." The crewmen did admit that the silks and brandy were loaded in the port of Jetsam in the nation of the Sea Princes, but they all claimed that none of them had ever seen the arms come aboard.

The party decided to interrogate each of the four leaders separately. Aurora clumsily tried to get Tyrius to watch the remaining prisoners so that he would not be present during the questioning, but he quickly saw through that and ordered Thokk to guard those remaining. "We don't torture prisoners," he said sternly. Willa, Tyrius, and Aurora spent some time alone with each of the prisoners in a below-decks cabin before returning them to the group bound to the mast. The common smugglers had their

hands and feet bound, but they sat on the deck not tied to anything for the moment.

Captain Sigurd “Snake Eyes” remained calm, collected, and quiet during his interrogation. He told them his name, inquired after theirs, and agreed that he was captain of the *Sea Ghost*. Other than that, he steadfastly refused to provide them with any information.

The first mate “Bloody Bjorn” struggled a bit and cursed them as they took him away from the others, but he quickly settled down once they were alone with him. Bjorn wasted no time before asking for a deal. Once he learned (from Tyrius) that his freedom was non-negotiable, and that regardless of what he told them they would be compelled to turn him over to the Saltmarsh Town Council, he fell thoughtfully quiet. Eventually he told them that Sigurd had a contact in Jetsam for the weapons. When asked for the arms dealer’s name, he said, “Mayhaps I could recognize th’ man and point him out in a crowd, but I do nae know his name or where be his business. Silk and brandy we brought aboard as legal goods ‘n cargo in Jetsam, w’ a bill o’sale, but the weapons—they be another thing altogether. They be handled only by th’ officers ‘n with th’ port officials ‘n th’ crew none the wiser.”

“We know about the lizardfolk. How long have you been running arms to them?” Tyrius pressed.

“Since th’ sprin’, but I dunno why,” Bjorn admitted. He also explained that they captured the sea elf sneaking on board their ship while docked in Jetsam, but that no one had been able to speak with him. Sigurd was considering selling him to slavers. In return for this information, Bjorn asked them not to say anything to his shipmates about what he had revealed, and he asked Tyrius to tell the Town Council that he had been cooperative. Tyrius agreed to both conditions.

The bosun “Foul” Frithoff was sullen when they pulled him from the mast, but once they had him alone in the cabin he let fly with a string of invectives the likes of which even Willa had never heard. He cursed them and their families, past and future, and went into lurid detail about what he would be doing to each of them once he was free. His interrogation was effectively over after a minute, but they kept him in the cabin as long as the others so as to sow doubt among his colleagues. When they

finally dragged him out, his voice was hoarse and their ears were red.

Lastly they separated Punketah. Tyrius began, "The Saltmarsh town council has ordered us to turn over the officers, but the council has empowered us to make our own decisions about the common crew."

Punketah replied, "I be nae officer nor underlin' t' one. I be a professional fer hire. I report only t' ther cap'n' but nobody reports to me."

"You may be a hired professional casting spells for pay, but that will not save you if you go to trial. You are party to a very serious crime, personally involved in smuggling and providing assistance to the king's enemies," Tyrius warned.

"And the local law takes a dim view of magic users," Aurora added.

"I ne'er put my hand to any such crime," Punketah emphatically protested. "I be merely hired, no differn' than a sellsword, ta' defen' the ship."

"In that case," Aurora reasoned aloud, "We should be free to deal with you as we see fit." Tyrius raised no objection, so she continued with that tactic. "What are you willing to trade for your skin, Punketah?"

Punketah claimed to know even less about the weapons deal than Bjorn did. He did not know where they were from or how they get on board. He did confirm that the weapons were ultimately sold to the lizardfolk, and that they had a large lair at the mouth of the Dun. He also agreed that the brandy and silks were purchased legally in Jetsam, and that the sea elf was captured in that port. Negotiating for his life and his freedom, he offered his magic items in return.

"That's generous of you Punketah," Aurora said with exaggerated sarcasm. "The council has already granted us the right of pillage. Your spellbook, your wand, and the ring from your finger are already forfeit and in my possession. Unless you have some magical items we have not found, you still have nothing to bargain with."

Punketah replied, "Ye 'ave me wand, but can ye wield it? Do ye know the secret word that makes it work? Do ye know the dw'omer of me ring? I'll tell ye if ye swear on the gods that ye will release me."

While they considered that, Punketah sweetened the deal with further information. "Them lizards be prep'rin' themselves ta' sack yer village a'right," he said. "Them salters all be in danger. But if ye grant me ta keep me spellbook and toys, I'll join ye to defend the town or attack the lair or whate'er ye say, just so long as I go free with what's mine once the lizardfolk be dead."

"It's a worthy offer," Aurora admitted. "We will discuss it and consider the possibilities, but we must do so amongst ourselves."

With all four captives back at the mast, the party left Larry and Thokk to guard the prisoners. The rest went above decks to talk. They took the surrendered crew with them, releasing their leg restraints but leaving their hands bound. Out of earshot of the prisoners, Willa, Aurora, and Tyrius conveyed to Barnabus, Babshapka, and Shefak what Punketah and the officers said. Together they sorted through the various statements the smugglers had made, trying to discern common elements and truths.

"Wha' trouble me mos'," Willa sighed thoughtfully, "be ther Sea Princes havin' some hand in ther pot."

Barnabas nodded his assent, but the expressions on the faces of the others betrayed their lack of comprehension. Barnabas explained, "The Sea Princes are ancient rivals of Keoland, and the two nations have fought many naval wars in the past. If the Princes are indeed involved in arming lizardfolk to assault Saltmarsh, it could be part of a larger plan to invade all of Salinmoor!"

Chapter Thirteen

The Ghost at Saltmarsh

22-23 Goodmonth, 570

While the captured pirate ship gently pitched with the waves, tugging at its anchor chain, the party gathered the loot into a single pile. They more-or-less agreed that all the monetary treasure would be equally split, with Willa (but not Tom) receiving a full share. Aurora conducted a magical ritual to detect magic, and she separated out those things that radiated an enchantment.

“My ritual will let us know what items *are* magical, but not what they do. I am happy to follow-up by casting an *identify* to note their properties, to be sure they are not cursed,” Aurora said. No one had not forgotten the fiasco with Thokk’s *cursed luckstone*. “But I would appreciate it if the party could split the cost of the expensive pearl required for each use of that spell.”

Barnabas balked at that prospect, but Shefak scolded him, “Greed and attachment to material things bar one from true spiritual progress.”

Barnabas replied curtly, “I don’t know who you are monk, and I don’t know how you came to join this party or to claim an equal share in our pillage. But I think your foreign god would be most grateful if you took upon yourself a vow of silence. I know the rest of us would.”

Thokk grunted with laughter, but Shefak coolly ignored the remark. She conducted herself as if the halfling did not ruffle her at all.

Aurora began to sort through the magical items, stating, “The gear should go to whomever can best use it for the benefit of the party.” Her spell identified the captain’s longsword as an enchanted blade. It was a large sword that could be used one or two-handed. This she gave to Willa, and the salter was well-pleased with the acquisition. Not the great sword she hoped to obtain, but that could yet be purchased with her share of the plunder.

The mate's broadsword, an enchanted, single-edged large cutlass, seemed most fitting for Thokk, but he declined, stating his preference for his axe. Aurora suspected that Thokk was fearful of taking up another cursed item.

"This blade is similar enough to Bakluni falchions that Shefak could wield it," Tyrius suggested.

The monk shook her head and said, "One who relies upon magic as a crutch will never learn to truly focus the body and mind."

"Oh! The wisdom of the west!" Barnabas interjected sarcastically. "Focus on this body!" he said, offering her a crude gesture toward his crotch.

Babshapka spoke up, "I am pleased to take the enchanted sword, provided that it proves more potent than the weapons I now wield." He hefted it and observed, "This blade is light enough for me to still use my shortsword in the other hand."

Punketah's ring and wand remained unidentified. Aurora kept those items herself, along with his spellbook, until they decided what to do with the mage. She also kept the four phials from the captain's quarters labeled as healing, healing, cure disease, and neutralize poison. She was most curious about the spellbook and what it might contain, but until she had time to study it, she would not know. If they were useful spells, she would suggest pooling money to pay for their inscription into her own spellbook. After that, she would deposit this book in the same bank in Seaton where she put the previous one recovered from the long-dead Alchemist.

As for the ring of protection, Aurora suggested, "I think Thokk could make good use of this ring, given how often he is in the forefront of attacks."

Thokk regarded the ring suspiciously, but Aurora assured him, "I am confident that it will do you no harm Thokk. If it were cursed, Punketah would hardly have kept it on his finger, would he?"

Thokk examined it by the light of a deck lamp – his concern giving way to covetousness. "It will complement my scars!" he laughed. "I will wear it when we slay the stinking lizardmen."

Not magical, but possibly important, was an unopened scroll tube that was found with Punketah's spellbook. Babshapka and Dirty Larry found that of the three chain shirts worn by the officers, two fit them well enough to use. They were rusty and missing links in places, to be sure, but they still offered an improvement over their own leathers.

Tyrius untied the hands of the three remaining common sailors so that they could give sea burials to their dead companions, and after observing them during this act, he declared that they should not be bound again so long as they stayed above decks. The three smuggler officers, and Punketah the mage, however, remained tied to the mast in the hold and under the guard of Thokk and Larry. With the grapnels and some hard work, the party and the sailors pulled both the smuggler's jollyboat and the excise cutter aboard and lashed them to the deck. By then the twilight before dawn was chasing back the darkness.

As Willa directed the smugglers to raise anchor, she could see the ship itself, painted on the prow, bore the name the *Sea Ghost*, an appropriate moniker for a smuggling vessel if ever there was one. She took the tiller while the three sailors raised the sail and worked the ropes.

"Is a crew of four hands sufficient to handle the ship and bring us into the harbor in Saltmarsh?" Aurora asked. "It would be a delay, but we could send the jolly back for Tom."

Willa pointed off the port side to where storm clouds blackened the southern horizon. "Wit' ther fair east wind we hae right now, an' calm seas, we be arrivin' soon eno', tho' we willnae be settin' any speed records. I nae be wantin' t' be out on ther open sea wit' only four sailors on deck if summit blows up, tho'. That thar storm out t' sea durn't look t' be gettin' any closer, but we hae better be safe in harbor afore she hits." Willa hoped that by them waiting until it was light enough for him to see that they were sailing to Saltmarsh, Tom would deduce that the ship had been successfully taken.

Willa took the tiller so that she (rather than the sailors) could control the ship's direction, but it also allowed her to stand easily and speak with the rest of the party, who remained on the poop deck discussing what course of action to take next. She agreed with Tyrius when he said, "The captain, mate, and bosun we'll

turn over to the council, and I'll brook no contrary argument – they surrendered or were captured, and we agreed to those terms before we set out.”

“What about the others?” Barnabas put in. “The council explicitly said we could use our own discretion. I say we should we make them pay us a ransom for their release. That’s my discretion.”

“I think not,” Tyrius said. “We will release them if it seems fit to do so. For now, the sailors know the ship and are valuable as crew. But I do not know if they can be trusted.”

“As far as the three sailors,” Aurora voted, “Why not hire them on as deckhands for the vessel? We could test their loyalty.”

Thokk interrupted, “Easier just to kill the entire crew, including those who surrendered. I’ve got the stomach for it, and I’ll be happy to kill the fish-elf too. I’ll slaughter them all like pigs, and I’ll test the enchanted weapons on their throats.”

“Thanks for the offer, but that’s not necessary,” Tyrius said with undisguised disgust and exasperation. Clearly the orcish bloodlust inspired by the battle was still coursing hotly through Thokk’s veins.

“I will not allow you or anyone else to harm the sea-elf,” Babshapka stated with firm resolve and a glaring expression.

“Thokk’s not wrong about the sailors,” Barnabas reasoned. “Willa has already said these men will not be sufficient to crew the ship should we want to use it to sail to the mouth of the Dun, and more sailors will need to be hired. That being the case, why not just crew the ship entirely with Saltmarsh sailors of more certain loyalty?”

Tyrius thought out loud, “I am even less certain about the mage than the sailors. Should Punketah be turned over to the council or not? He said he would help us in return for his life and his gear. He claims that we will need him to safely approach the lizardfolk lair, and he warns of dangerous shoals and lizardfolk traps.”

“Why should we trust him at all?” Barnabas asked. “I, for one, do not.”

“When do we start killing the stinking lizards?” Thokk asked eagerly.

Ignoring Thokk’s impetuosity, Tyrius continued ruminating on the captured mage, “I do not say that we should trust him; I say that we might need him. Then again, I’m not sure if we should take the ship to the lizardfolk lair. Even Punketah has said that he can only help us navigate if we approach during the day, but in a daylight approach, the ship will be seen from miles off. Should we instead sail one of the jollyboats or the cutter, or even approach from the land?”

“If we aren’t going to turn him over to the council, it might be better not to mention him at all,” Aurora added. “But I think it would be best to hand over all the officers to the authorities, including the wizard, despite his offer to help us. I believe we should be very clear to the council that the smugglers were involved in an attempt to foment a revolution against the mainland, and so they should use all means at their disposal to wrest information from the prisoners, especially the captain, Snake-eyes, who was uncooperative when we questioned him. With luck, they might garner a little information along the way to help us against the lizard folk.”

“I will not endorse any course of action that implies torturing prisoners,” Tyrius objected, “Saltmarsh may be a remote backwater (and here Willa had to bite her tongue) but it is still under the King’s justice, and those council members should know it.”

Aurora shrugged. “I am willing to accept the decision of the party with regard to the sailors, mage, and officers—they all chose their path and must walk it to its conclusion.”

Willa liked the idea of hiring more crew in Saltmarsh for the ship. She, of course, would follow the orders of the council and the chief customs master, Secun, in any matter they decided upon.

After further deliberations, the party decided that Punketah would be turned over to the council along with the three officers, but with the caveat that he might be useful to the party later. They would stress that regardless of his crimes, a swift execution was not in anyone’s interest. The three sailors would not be turned over.

“What of the fate of the sea elf, Oceanus?” Babashapka asked. “I have related our tale to him, all that transpired at the haunted house, and our obligations to the council. Should we not bid him leave the ship before we reach Saltmarsh? If he stays onboard, he might be summoned before the council or possibly even seized or interrogated by them.”

“Ask Oceanus what he would most like us to do with him and, assuming he wishes to be released back to his people, perhaps he might enlist his people’s help in the fight against the lizard folk,” Aurora suggested.

Babashapka spoke with the sea elf and later reported, “He would like to stay with us to determine whether the lizardfolk pose a threat to his people. If so, he will return to his home and ask his people to help us in our venture against them. But if he finds that the lizardfolk pose a threat only to the humans of Saltmarsh, his people will not necessarily cast their lot in with us.”

By mid-morning, the *Sea Ghost* was docked in Saltmarsh harbor. She had been observed coming in for hours. Customs officials and a dozen guardsmen waited on the docks, while the length of the harbor was lined with small folk. Chief Secun approached once the ship was tied off and a gang plank lowered. He called to speak with Willa, and when she answered, he asked her for permission to come aboard. Willa stood a bit taller and paused a just a moment before granting him leave. Once aboard, he asked her to order that no one else come aboard or leave, and then the two headed for the captain’s cabin to engage in a private conversation.

Willa related to him all that had happened the night before and everything they had learned from the prisoners. Secun remained thoughtful for half a glass of brandy, weighing the implications of it all. Then he drew a deep breath and began to sort his way through the various concerns. “So long as the common sailors stay on the ship, they are outside the jurisdiction of Saltmarsh, but should they step on shore, they will be arrested for smuggling.”

“Fair eno’,” Willa agreed.

“I’m far more concerned with this hearsay about lizardfolk. Take care you don’t start a panic. While your party may speak freely about the smugglers, you are on no account to speak of the

lizardfolk, so as to avoid scaring the townspeople. The council will need to debate the meaning of all this before making a public announcement.”

“Wha’ says ye ‘bout ther sea fairy?”

“He should stay aboard. In fact, it would have been better had the sea elf remained below decks, but half of Saltmarsh has seen him now, so that ship has already sailed,” Secun said. “The town constables are waiting to receive the ship’s officers and the witch. They will be taken first to the blacksmith, to be fitted for hand-manacles and leg irons, and then walked to the town gaol. On second thought, I don’t want the witch stored with the others. The butcher’s ice-cellar will do for that one.”

The party took the officers off the boat one at a time. The captain went quietly, without concern, with hands tied and feet hobbled. He was marched slowly up the harbor road toward the blacksmith’s shop.

Foul Frithoff was next. He was halfway down the gangplank when he hopped neatly into the air and plummeted straight down into the water. Thokk and Barnabus jumped in after him from the gangplank, and Oceanus followed with a graceful dive from the deck of the ship. The would-be fugitive used the sharp barnacles and mussel shells of a dock piling to cut the ropes that bound his hands, but before he could hope to swim away, Frithoff had been sliced by Barnabus, stabbed and pulled to the surface by Oceanus, and shot through with an arrow from the crow’s nest by Babshapka. Thokk dragged the dead body out of the water and laid it along the shore for the people to gawk at. His blood slowly stained the gravel around him.

After that dramatic failed escape, the party reasoned that the remaining two prisoners were unlikely to make an attempt, but Thokk insisted on knocking them unconscious before he hauled them off the boat to be sure. The captain and Bloody Bjorn, the first mate, shared the single cell of the town’s gaol; the wizard Punketah, after being manacled, was kept separately in the butcher’s basement.

The party surrendered most of the cargo items of value found on the *Sea Ghost*, but they retained the magical items, the armor of the officers, and the weapons (both used and stored) of the

unmentioned lizardfolk. After selling what they could to the merchants of the council and paying excise taxes on the cargo, an eight-way split was 171 gold lions for each of them (including Willa but not Tom). Each party member (except for Willa) was also rewarded with an additional 50 lions from council funds as a reward for capturing the smugglers.

For the remainder of the day, most of the party elected to stay on the ship rather than suffer the curiosity of the Salters. They used the galley to fix meals. Aurora copied several spells from Punketah's book into her own. She used their single remaining pearl to identify the wand she had acquired as a wand of magic detection. "That will prove useful!" she said to herself happily.

Willa went ashore and bought a greatsword, just as she had promised herself. She set aside the entire remainder of her share of the booty for a fishing cottage, boat, and nets for her younger brother Tom, so that he would be provided for with an inheritance and means of supporting a family, should he marry. While she was out, she also cruised the bars and taverns searching for available deckhands. She found none, but learned that a merchant ship was due in to port which meant several men might be available soon.

An hour before sunset, Tyrius and Aurora went ashore to attend the council meeting to which Secun had summoned them. Babshapka obtained admittance as Aurora's bodyguard, and Willa also attended as an aide to Secun. The meeting began on a serious note. Secun, the high constable, and the militia captain presented the party's findings to the rest of the council. "We have come to agree," Secun said evenly, "That the lizardfolk present a real menace and danger to all of us."

A murmur of consternation among the councilmen rose in pitch until it erupted into a clamor of raised voices expressing fear at the threat itself and anger that the information had been withheld from them until the meeting itself. Still others insisted that the viscount should be informed at once.

The militia captain hushed them and reported, "M'ssngers been a'ready d'spatched to Bale Keep n' Seaton. We've nae 'eard back from Seaton, but ther commander at Bale Keep 'as got 'is men on ther alert, ready fer trouble if we holler." The captain explained that Bale Keep conducted patrols into the Hool Marshes, but the

patrols only penetrated deeply into the marshes during the winter when the ground was firmer under foot and there were less mosquitoes and poisonous snakes about. During the summer, they patrolled at the edges of the marsh only and made sure nothing threatening emerged. Thus, they could say with certainty only that, if a “flicker” lair existed at the mouth of the Dun River, it had not been there the last winter. The captain’s report led to more outbursts from the council, this time from those objecting to alarmism and demanding better evidence.

Secun called for order before proceeding, “We cannot present a proper request to the viscount unless we have certain proof of the threat. But since these adventurers and strangers to our village have thus far met with such laudable success, let us resolve to retain their services to assess the threat posed and to grant a reward of five hundred gold lions for obtaining reliable evidence. I so move!”

Aurora interrupted impolitically, “If the threat is real, the council ought to recompense us ten times that ...” Her bid was not well received, especially considering that the council had just granted an entire merchant ship and its cargo as plunder for the party.

Aurora spoke up again. “We have already presented sufficient evidence of a connection between the lizardfolk, smugglers, and the Sea Princes. The Princes are behind this plot, and they are obviously using the lizardmen as sellswords.”

Most of the council dismissed her idea at first; they did not feel that the “flickers” could be part of a sophisticated plan or that the Princes would be interested in a land war. The previous animosity between the Sea Princes and Keoland had largely been confined to naval battles. Aurora pressed her point, persistently, persuasively, and articulately. When she hit on the fact that the electrum coins used by the lizardfolk to pay for the weapons were of Sea Prince mint, several members of the council started to look concerned, even alarmed. Willa intervened, moving to Aurora’s side and in hushed tones privately scolding her for frightening everyone. She told her to stop speaking along those lines lest the council itself panic. As Willa whispered in Aurora’s ear, Secun worked to steer the council back to the business at hand.

Captain Sigurd was brought in, still in irons, and thoroughly questioned. The salty pirate calmly confessed to his part in

smuggling and arms running, although he offered no oaths. He explained that an assistant to one of the Sea Princes told him of the opportunity to run arms to the lizardfolk after he was already smuggling silks and brandy, and that the two operations were not connected. He did not know, and had never asked, from whence the lizardfolk got their coins, nor why they were of Sea Prince mint. He named his contact for buying arms in the Sea Princes.

“From this admitted pirate we have learned that it is more urgent than ever for us to send this party of adventurers to the Dun where they may assess the situation with the lizardfolk,” Secun declared to the council. Turning to Tyrius and Aurora, he said, “We are prepared to offer a reward of 500 lions, no more, for your party to divide as you choose, plus the right of pillage to anything you retrieve from the lizardfolk in your adventures.”

“I don’t understand why you are tasking us with the mission if it pays so poorly?” Aurora said stubbornly. “Would it not be easier to assign some expendables of Saltmarsh to scout the lair from sea under guise of a fishing expedition?”

Secun replied with cold ice in his words, “None of the citizens of Saltmarsh are expendable. The council is willing to pay your party this small fortune of half a thousand gold lions only because we assumed that you are competent to face such dangers without shielding yourself behind the good folk of our town. But in a word, it is you and your party of misfits and strangers who are the expendables here.”

Willa’s eyes dropped to the floor; Aurora’s face flushed with anger. Tyrius had remained silent through most of the meeting. Now he spoke up, before Aurora’s had time to reply and make things even worse. “We accept the offer. The *Sea Ghost* will set out as soon as we have a full crew.”

It was well-past dark before the council adjourned and Tyrius, Aurora, and Babshapka found their way through the sparsely lit streets and back toward quay where the *Sea Ghost* floated at harbor. A heavy fog had cloaked Saltmarsh in curling mists through which the light of the city lamps shone dimly.

“I know you are eager to see your mission complete so that you can return to the Silverwood,” Aurora apologized to Babshapka as

they walked, "But it seems that we have another adventure ahead of us first."

The stoic elf offered no reply.

"These things are in the hands of the gods," Tyrius agreed. "May Pelor protect us. So long as we stay together, he will guide us."

"I think we'll stick together," Aurora speculated. "Larenthal and Thokk will go wherever their noble paladin goes. Willa is to captain the *Ghost*, and Shefak has more-or-less vowed herself to us. That just leaves the ever-unpredictable Barnabas. But the promise of five-hundred gold lions will encourage his loyalties, I'm certain. Surely, more adventures lie ahead for us!"

They passed by *The Inn of the Merry Mermaid*. A lantern illuminated the sign over the door. The painted mermaid smiled suggestively in the night. Light streamed from the windows and from the open door of the establishment. A round of applause erupted from the handful of patrons inside, and the unmistakable voice of a certain halfling began:

*All 'round about this netting town,
Tongues tell the tale, all that befell,
Of pirates, ghosts, and all my boasts...
...and Barnabus the minstrel!*

Adapted for Greyhawkstories.com from the original article posted to Canonfire!

<http://www.canonfire.com/cf/modules.php?name=Forums&file=viewtopic&t=8700&start=0&posts=0&postorder=asc&highlight=>

Follow the further adventures of Aurora, Tyrius, Barnabas, and the whole gang as they face Danger at Dunwater, The Final Enemy, and a series of continuing adventures in Kirt Wackford's ongoing campaign journal on Canonfire!