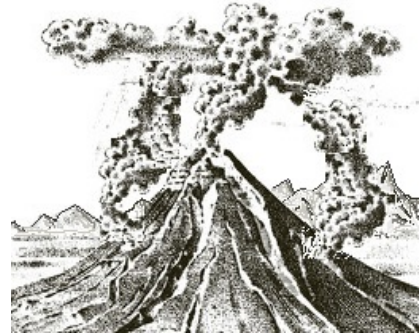


**Journal of Grangarn – Clan of Kaeel
February 2793**

Today we say our fairwells to Godin, Orbin, and Kaeel, along with all the sires of our clans, and begin on our journey. These, our brethren, remain behind, as do all dwarves under the mountains. Preparations for war are at hand. Moria will be retaken in the autumn, and its era of orcs finally brought to an end.

Currently forges glow, smoke billows, and molten slag pours from all sides of our mountain as weapons of battle are forged. I glance at our distance already traveled, and from here I see our entire mountain, bared naked from the clearing of most trees. With all the forges and slag issuing out, it now mimics a volcano in the throws of eruption.



We grieve to be unable to join our brethren in their tasks, and perhaps the battle, but the venture at hand is far too important. “Lies of dragons”, some protest. “Myths and legends”, say others. But if even the slightest chance or truth exists, then ours is a quest that must prevail.

And so, today we have begun the first of what shall be a countless number of steps, and hope that all future ones shall tread around perils. We shall path though the wooded cliffs of middlers peaks on to Esgaroth, and there gather additional supplies. We plan to camp along the tree lines, where there is ample disguise and protection, though these peaks are mostly considered safe passage these days.

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Today is the 3rd day of our travels. Spring is here and winter not quite over. Last night was not quite cold enough for a fire, but enough to see the fog in our breath. As I write on this early morning hour before breaking camp, a thin layer of frost has enveloped upon the freshly sprouted spring grass of the clearing. Tiny white flowers bloom on the tops of some blades, and it is a blossom of which I am not familiar. I collect some samples for Edwirn back home.

Some members of our group have already awoken and currently preparing to break camp. Brumdren is teasing Thalduhr again. Being somewhat of a jokester, Brumdren lately passes the time with odd Brumdrens; annoying everyone at times and none is off limits. There are eight of us in total, and yet upon daybreak we discovered nine silhouettes on the frosty ground.

Such is the topic of discussion at this moment. Brumdren had obviously gotten up early to make a somewhat large outline of an additional dwarf in the frost, and then returned back to his spot to pretend he was sleeping. He is now accusing Thalduhr of moving from place to place in his sleep, and leaving the additional large outline on the ground.

Thalduhr is used to such pokes at his stature, him being a good arms length taller than most of we dwarves. His bushy eyebrows appear like long-haired caterpillars. His sunken in eyes and the peculiar lattice weave of his long red beard also add to his overall awkward appearance. His axe alone is taller than most of us, and Brumdren seems very amused to poke fun that his mother must have had a fair eye for humans to account for his stature. Thalduhr responds with a punch, which Brumdren still thinks worth it.

I find it amusing that Balgruim and Dalgruim are yet again arguing over which of them will carry the chest, and which the sack. Lots were tossed the previous night, but their results had some doubts as to a proper casting. It seems that one of Balgruim's tossed chips landed against Dalgruim's boot, which he claimed was then tipped unfairly.

But if not for this quarrel, it would be another. Sibling rivalry I say, and for as long as I have known them both, I can't recall of a day when these two brothers totally agreed on anything. Twins are not uncommon among the Orbin clan, but I have never seen a pair so dead set on trying to be different from the other, while being just alike.

Both brothers had the dark curly hair of their mother, and both with curly beards to match, though Balgruim kept his beard short, while Dalgruim grew his long and clasped in a ring. Both of them would tug on these hairs of their chin when annoyed without realizing it, and when both of them did this at the same time, it meant that a fight between them was about to ensue.

Balgruim kept his hair in a braid that wend down some length from under the silver back plate of his helm, and just to be opposite, Dalgruim wore no helmet at all and held his hear back with a band. Dalgruim smoked a pipe too. Not that he particularly enjoyed tobacco, but he smoked I think just because Balgruim did not.

At times, when there was nothing else to argue about, the two of them would fight over which was the oldest, as their mother had never told them which. Perhaps she just refused to admit that she mixed them up at birth somehow, and did not actually know herself. Balgruim was oft prone to complain about most anything, and being this way meant his brother tried his best to do opposite.

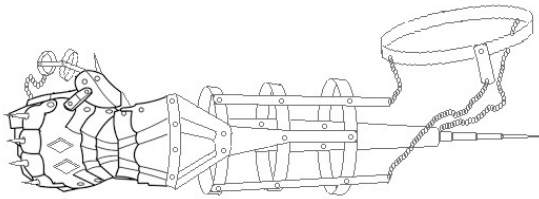
Apparently this particular argument got settled, as Balgruim now has the sack, but I can still hear Dalgruim teasing him for stumbling when picking it up. “We will never move forward unless you set both eyes down on your fat feet.” And not taking any flack, Balgruim responds, “we will never move forward unless I shift my eyes to the left and the right to make sure you are still pulling your weight.”

Grilrun was already up before me, and for the majority of the morning seemed content to occupy his time leaning against a tree, grinding away at the metal knuckles of the gauntlet on his left hand. This Grilrun perpetually did anytime we stopped to rest. His gauntlet was a most unusual piece, gifted by his uncle especially for this trip, and forged from a very peculiar ore.

His uncle Gorbren, was 3rd generation of the clan of Godin, and would not let anyone forget it. His lineage was long renown for their ability to smith the finest of blades, and Grilrun knew his way around a forge quite well himself. Though this was not an axe, as their clan was best known for, the refinement of his gauntlet was quite impressive, and differed in feel and design from anything one might consider dwarven.

Brumdren, at times would make fun of it, pointing out that it was far too large for him, and thought it quite funny that his uncle had only made him just the one, as most gauntlets come in a pair. “It’s not a gauntlet,” Grilrun would reply each time. “It’s called a claw, and you only need one.”

Indeed, it was quite unlike any other gauntlet, and for lack of a better name, I suppose that ‘claw’ somehow fit. It gloved around Grilrun’s fingers on hinged joints at each knuckle, but from there continues eloquently all the way down his forearm, with a short blade extending at his elbow bend. The blade would rest against his upper forearm when his arm was extended, and poke out as a spike when bent. It also had short spikes coming out from the knuckles and curved hooks that bent between each finger to aid in gripping firm whatever he held. It also had a very thin chain that webbed between the first finger and thumb, for catching swords in battle.



Gorbren insists it is perfect for battle, as Grilrun would proclaim. Indeed, unlike the rest of us who awkwardly hauled our shields everywhere we went, Grilrun carried none.

The rib down his forearm was perfect for glancing off blows of both axe and sword, and with the chain webbing could even grab a blade as it swung at him. One would think that such a thin chain would snap under the force of a sword, but impressively it could stop even a strong blow from Thalduhr’s axe when they sparred. I have seen it.

The “claw”, however was, as Brumdren pointed out, a bit oversized for Grilrun, which is why Brumdren made fun, but also why Grilrun was perpetually grinding it down. Though impressive, this was a bit of armor perhaps better suited for someone of Thalduhr’s large stature.

Then there is Vonmus, third cousin to king Nain. Vonmus is a somewhat quirky fellow of whom I don’t know that well. He seems prone to superstitions, and thinks himself in charge of our party somehow, perhaps because he was the one who first presented our quest to the king, and also secured our royal travel papers. Such papers, by the way, may hold some bit of sway in the lands of Esgaroth, but probably not much beyond its waters.

Vonmus is familiar with history, myths, legends, and lore, and long served as a servant to the master at the royal archives of Iron Hills. He is probably of better service there, for he seems to know little of travel or battle, or survival in the wilds, but for some reason he insisted his inclusion on this journey before the king himself. He becomes easily startled by birds, and has an irrational abhorrence of spiders.

Previously, he squished one running across one of his tomes while letting out a girlish squeal, upon which Brumdren was quick to ridicule him for both his squeal, and his use of unnecessary violence against a poor helpless arachnid. But Vonmus's response was that "spiders are always up to no good, and behind every one there is something going on. It is always best to just squish them". Brumdren's reply was that, "those who go around squishing spiders will find themselves eventually being squished by them."

Indeed, Vonmus is not properly suited for travels or quests; skittish and easily startled, he lacks any stealth, clomping his way through the woods like a troll. And though he only carries with him a light satchel of books, he is always the one slowing us down and straggling behind. One useful talent he proclaims is that he can somehow smell gold from a distance, which I have never seen him do and think quite absurd.

As I finish these notes for the day and prepare to break camp, I can't help but notice that Khardal is nowhere to be found. He too must be included in the posterity of this journal, for together we make a crew, and a crew of eight is indeed a lucky number.

Khardal is the smallest of us, and most agile on his feet. It is impressive how fast he can shimmy up a tree or cliff in full gear, leap between boulders at a sprint, and disappear from sight in a blink. His beard is short and brown, with a gray stripe down the middle. His speech has a faint whistle to it whenever he talks. If I had to surmise, he has already broke camp and is already out scouting the path ahead of us.

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Upon arriving in Esgaroth, I sent Balgruim and Dalgruim off to secure rations of shoreberries, some dried mutton, and oiled flay fish. The mutton and fish travels well, but shoreberries are a seasonal rarity I spied in water barrels at a vender upon entering town. Actually, I smelled the shoreberries first, as it has quite a pungent fragrance. Even through the smoke of the local meat pit, and dung of the gated swine fenced in along the alley, I could make out that these barrels had fruit in them that was ripe.

It did not take both brothers to run this errand, but we had all grown weary of hearing them bicker, and I figured we could all use a

break. Also, my knee had begun bothering me again on the last section of trip, so I had them keep an eye out for elle skin as well.



It had been perhaps twelve years since last I ventured to Esgaroth, and I only passed though it on my way to Dale back then. But little has changed in such time. Stone stacked houses still lined the street on each side, most with various wares for sale on their

wooden slab porches. Each home here was also a business, which no one really attended. Wares purchased from them were mostly obtained by simply placing payment in round wooden coffer, which is unsettling to us dwarves who do enjoy a good barter, and one can't barter if no one is around. Humans differ from dwarves, in that they seem a bit too trusting and naïve, or perhaps us dwarves are just overly suspicious.

It is somewhat rare for dwarves to visit Esgaroth, but not unheard of. There are items of trade between realms of humans and dwarves, but our passage through its streets was still met with pauses and stares from its human population.

I sent Khardal ahead of us to secure passage for the next segment of our journey, while the rest of us retired our worn feet, and met our limit of drink, at the Tavern of the Willow on south lake peer. It is here that I scribe in my journal.

Those here at the tavern are apparently not used to seeing such a large crew of us dwarves together. Moreover, they seem uncomfortable with the songs of the mountain that dwarves generally sing when gathered around drink. The barkeep has attempted on multiple occasions to quiet us down, but so far to little avail. It has been a journey of twelve days to arrive here, a longer one remains ahead, and this is our only opportunity to relax and drink between the two.

The barkeep was also none amused that, upon tally of what would likely become a substantial debt, instead of coin, Vonmus only offered the parchment given to us by our king as payment. Not accustomed to taking promissory notes, he promptly summoned the magistrate, in whom he had already flagged down to be of the ready shortly after our arrival.

But, after close inspection of the note and seal, the magistrate nodded to the barkeep, re-enforcing that indeed our bill would be paid from the city coffers. After this, the demeanor of the barkeep changed. Undoubtedly, he recalled reading the clause about being paid double in value for all we required. We all hollered and slapped Vonmus on the back spilling ale all down his beard. Amazingly, his simple piece of parchment had secured both food and ale for the group. I wonder how Balgruim and Dalgruim are fairing, as I just sent them out with coin.

Grilrun does not take part in song, and instead seems content to ignore the ale on his table and focus once again on grinding away at his gauntlet. The abrasive stone he uses as a rasp does not appear really rough enough to file metal, and yet over



these last few days I can see progress. Oddly, his scraping also does not make the sounds one might associate with a rasp on metal. Actually, it makes no sound at all, and also leaves no shavings on the table.

I asked Grilrun about this once, and was informed about another oddity of this unusual “claw”. The metal it is fashioned from has yet to have a name, and this gauntlet its first application. I suppose he is field testing it out. It comes from some rare ore discovered by his uncle from deep within the mountain. Though dullish gray in sheen, it has nearly the strength of mithril once cast, thus the ability of such a thin chain in stopping Thalduhr’s axe blade. But strangely, it can only be filed away using the same raw ore of which it was made.

Interesting, but I worry about his obsession with it lately. It is un-dwarf-like to ignore a full cup of ale. Khardal has already returned from securing transit, and informed me that he met up with Balgruim and Dalgruim, and they are currently loading supplies into our boat. Seeing Grilrun’s full glass on the table, Khardal quickly consumes it and orders two more. Grilrun did not even notice.

As I glance up, I also notice that Balgruim and Dalgruim have just sauntered in. “I hate shopping for supplies”, Balgruim hollered as we made eye contact. I am waving him and his brother over to get in

their share of ales. I note that, like Grilrun, my cup of ale is also barely touched. I suppose this book is no different than Grilrun's claw, and anything to occupy one's mind as we travel so far from home, but I still should get caught up with the group on drink before the time comes to go.

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From the tavern we made our way, stumbling with song, down the pier to the boat that Khardal commissioned for us. Though mid-day, the lingering affects of the ale now have most of our brood passed out on its deck. The boat is smaller than expected, but seems to accommodate us well enough. Its limited space requires us to sleep above deck, which will suffice for the moment, but I hope for fair weather.



It is a two-mast river ship named Eel, painted red and green, the colors of Dale. Balgruim and Dalgruim had loaded all of our supplies into its hull, with the exception of the shoreberries, which was kept in a sack, tied by a rope in the waters behind the boat.

Shoreberries sours fast upon drying, and also why it is such a rare treat. Such delicate fruits can only be consumed by the waters of the river whenever visiting Dale or Esgaroth.

It is a favorite of the lobtoads too, and a few have already gathered around the sack, following it behind the boat, and attempting to get their greedy little paws inside. This would also a good way to catch lobtoads, though they make a most horrible meal.

“I hate lobtoads”, says Balgruim as he watches them attempt to steal our meal. Brumdren partially wakes up from his stupor, and opens one eye. “Hey everyone,” he blurts with a bit of a slur, “What does Balgruim hate today?” In chorus, the rest of the group murmurs, “Balgruim hates lobtoads”.



“Balgruim hates everything,” added Thalduhr as he rolled over. His larger stature has him curled up in a nest of anchor rope that does not fully contain his legs, but at least provides him some form of a pillow.

This seems to be Brumdren's new jest. Balgruim really does hate everything, and he is not shy about letting everyone know. It is an aspect about him that, as of late, has become increasingly annoying. Personally, I don't know how anyone could hate lobtoads, as they are so adorable that I would cuddle one if I could catch it.

Brumdren has also grown annoying with his relentless poking fun at everyone. In the past, he would point out how slow I move when my knee acts up, and also about the size of my ears. I suppose they are large, but not compared to my nose, which he refers to as my baby spud. But that is just Brumdren, and I take his antics like the rest of them.

The captain of our boat is named Aarmon. Aarmon is thin, clean shaven, and has a dark skin that is heavily wrinkled. His thin white hair makes me think he is quite along in years, though I do have a difficult time telling age when it comes to humans. His voice is gruff and gargled, and often I have to hear him twice to know what is said. Aarmon is more familiar than most in regards to dwarves, as his normal route consists of transporting goods back and forth along the Celduin and Carnin, all the way to the Iron Hills where he trades with dwarves on the southern side.

While he is favorable towards us dwarves, and even speaks a bit of Khusdul, he has been quite blunt in his aversion to transporting us upstream on the Forest River, a route that he avoids when able. He lacks fondness for elves, who he thinks quite pretentious to start collecting river tolls. Unfortunate for him, our journey demands we go west, following this river to the Halls of the Elvenking. It is there that we have our business.

Aarmon's only crew is a somewhat younger human, I think. Harper is his name, and compared to Cam is somewhat shorter and quite spry. His beard, if one can call it that, is sparse and straggly, and Harper squints with one eye. But for a human he is polite, and quite nimble, perhaps as much as Khardal. When not tending elements of the boat, Harper resides in a sail fold up in the middle mast, and can shoot up there as if he had done so a thousand times, which he probably had. Harper is a bit more inquisitive and friendly than I prefer, as dwarves do like to keep to themselves.

As I continue writing, the sun is beginning to lower. The tall rocky banks of the river now cast shadows on the boat. There is a chill in

the air, but it comes with a faint smell of flowers. The winds, carving through the cliffs further add some chill.

“I hate the wind,” says Balgruim. Brumdren lifts his head up, as if to make fun of him again, but it is a gag that has run its course. I nod my head showing that I am no longer amused, and he laid back down.

“The wind will be less once we get past these cliffs,” inserted Harper from his pocket in the mast sail. “They tend to funnel along this stretch because of the cliffs. But less wind also means slower travels.” He then startled me a bit by jumping from the mast, sliding down the sail and landing with a thud on the deck. “It’s also time to oil up the lanterns,” he continued, “as it will be dark soon”.

With darkness falling, it also means it is time for me to retire for the night. The boat lamps do not appear bright enough to write more. Dwarves do see well in the dark, but I also have yet to take rest since my tavern drinks.

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The high-cliffed landscape outside of Esgaroth has given way to steep sloping hills. The early rays of the sun revealed land on both sides that were covered with a thickness of trees. No longer was there the distinct boggy smell that one associates with Esgaroth. The banks of the river also changed from rock into sand, and then into muddy earth.

The fragrance of the landscape was now woodsy with hints of flowers. I can also make out the additional smells of ripening bluefruit. We have yet to begin consuming the supplies we purchased in Esgarogh, but here the bluefruit grows wild. It simply drops into the river on overhanging tree limbs when ripe. As I watch totally free shoreberries drifting past us, I can’t help but think that our coin was ill spent on them.

This segment of river has also changed in weather. The blustering winds that had fueled most of our journey from behind now lost their strength. The lobtoads disappeared from trailing behind us too; partially because of the abundance of fruit elsewhere, but also due to an increasing activity of water snakes in these parts.

“You got to watch out for the striped ones”, warns Harper, as he points to a rather long one sunning on the banks. Harper is still at the helm after steering the boat through the night. I inquire with him if they are poisonous, and he replies, “no, but they stink and are fairly aggressive.”

“Snakes,” blurted out Balgruim, who was also inspecting our new environment. “I hate snakes”, to which everyone, myself included, in one accord murmured, “Balgruim hates snakes.”

“What’s going on over there,” pointed out Thalduhr, who had also been gazing at the snakes catching early rays of sun on the riverbanks. I turn to look with the others but can’t see anything in that direction.

“What is it,” inquires Khardal while squinting into the sun. “I don’t know,” continues Thalduhr, “but there is something over there. Do you see that area against those trees where all the green leaves look drab?”

“Yes” replies Khardal, “what of it?”

“Well I saw it move”, continues Thalduhr while shifting in his nest of ropes.

“Like the wind blowing though the trees kind of moving?” inquired Khardal. All of us are looking in the direction Thalduhr is pointing now.

“No”, Thalduhr asserts, “that drab color. It is doing nothing now, but it has been jumping along the bank and following along side the ship for a while now”.

At this, even Harper paused to look more intently at the particular spot. “It is probably just the reflection of the sun off the sails, glinting off the water. Water has a mage’s bag of illusions. Fish also appear to be in one place in the water, when really they are in another.”

“What’s that about fish?” Khardal now asks, obviously no longer interested in the trees. Khardal is such a twitchy dwarf, with an attention span that matches.

“Well, any angler will tell you that a fish is never where you see it, so you have to stab where the fish isn’t, it is all based upon its relation to you and the sun. It is another sun and water trick.”

Khardal points to yet another snake in the river. “So is that snake where I see it now?”

Harper shakes his head. “It only works on things under the water, and this water is too murky to even see fish.” As he spoke, Harper secured the helm wheel and started unlatching a series of long spatula looking staffs from the ships sidewalls. “But enough of snakes, fish, and illusions in the trees, now we shall see what Dwarves are really made of.”

What are these for?” inquired Brumdren.

Harper smiles. “We have lost our wind, and will lose it even more as the trees get more dense.” I now notice along the banks of the river that, while there was already a good density of trees, clusters of them were starting to get more dense, and taller, now with branches hanging far over the waters.

“From here we shall have to make our own way up the river, using oars”, continues Harper.

Turning to Skamper, Brumdren inquires, “Was that in our agreement? I don’t know anything about rowing a boat”.

“Well then you shall learn”, continues Harper, “as this boat is not going to move itself against the flow of the river”.

“And how would you get up the river then if we were not here?” inquires Brumdren.

Stepping up from below deck, captain Aarmon interrupts, “ If you were not here, then my boat would be headed in another direction, to the harbor at Ragspoint to trade bogetree sap for copper. It is just fortunate for you that you pay better. But once you get used to rowing, you might like it. It is as easy as rowing a boat.”

“It is rowing a boat,” replies Thalduhr.

**“Indeed it is,” Aarmon smiles.
So I suppose then that we all shall now learn how to row.**

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It is almost evening now. The banks of the river have narrowed and waters deepened. The flow of the waters has also quickened, which became noticeable by all. Aarmon instructed us in the proper use of oars, and the hook sockets they fit into. It took us a while to get used to it, but now it is a struggle to make much progress. We keep close to the banks where the flow is somewhat slower, and switch off taking turns, as apparently rowing uses muscles that I did not know I had. Thalduhr, Brumdren, and myself are all taking our break currently.

The trees also became taller as we moved further upriver, to the point that at times they almost touch the branches on the other side. Some of the lower limbs have come close to clipping the ship's mast, due to us staying so close to the bank.

The sun is beginning to set, and the trees cast eerie shadows on the waters. The air feels thick and smells boggy. Harper has already lit lanterns on both ends of the boat, as well as an additional one especially for me on the mast. It gives me enough light to get caught up on my journal.

The sails have long since been rolled up and moved out of the way. Snakes are not only in the water now, but can be seen dangling from branches overhead, some of them slithering away from the lamplight, and others freezing in place.

“Let us anchor here for the night,” Aarmon is telling us, and Harper nods in agreement. Instead of unlatching the anchor, which also happens to be Thalduhr's bed, Harper just grabbed a second shorter rope and scampered up the mast with one end in toe.

“Stop all rowing”, he now says, and those still rowing promptly stop without complaint. We all have been rowing for hours on folding benches that were obviously designed for humans. Only Thalduhr seemed comfortable on them.

The boat had been steered more evenly between banks, and as it slows to a halt, it begins to veer left as the current carries us back. Harper waited for a rather large overhanging branch, one we had already past just moments ago, and then jumping from the mast,

tossed the rope over while grabbing the other end. Impressive, I thought, and he then ties it off quickly.

The boat continues to drift backwards, until the rope pulls taught against the branch, bringing our bow straight again. Satisfied with his anchoring, Harper bounces back onto the deck with a thud.

“Well, that should keep us for the night. We will be much safer out here in the waters than anchoring close to the shore.”

“Safe from what”, inquires Dalgruim, still rubbing his sore forearms?

“Oh, nothing in particular, but why take chances. Also less snakes.”

Though Harper has provided enough light for me to add more to my journal, this day of rowing has worn on me. I shall retire for the night with the others.

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It is morning again, and all of us were woken up by Aarmon. The river was still dark, though a few rays of morning light did manage though the canopy. There is a fog in the air, and a dampness and chill on everything.

“I wish we had a fire”, says Balgruim. “I hate the cold”.

Brumdren, is just now waking up. “Balgruim hates the cold,” he yawns. Thalduhr is wringing out the damp from his beard. Grilrun was already up, even before the captain woke us, and again I find him grinding away on his gauntlet.

“No fires on the boat”, hollers Harper, who was up in the masts untying the boat. “And when I untie this thing, we are going to loose distance unless you dwarves get to rowing”.

“How long until we get there?” I inquire.

“Not long,” he replies. “I suppose it depends on how fast you row, but I would say perhaps an hour or so”.

“An hour! If we were so close, then why anchor here for the night?”

Harper plops from the mast to the deck. “Well, I hear it best to not surprise elves, especially at night.”

I understood what Harper meant by not surprising elves a short time later. As we continued to row hard against the current, the thick of the surrounding forest trees started thinning and the river widened. Light from the early morning sun could now be seen unfiltered upon the boat, finally drying us out. The sun feels good on my skin. In the distance along a bank to the right, I made out a port of nicely polished gold-speckled white stone. The gold speckles could be seen glimmering from even our distance away.

But not long after reaching this clearing, the sound of an arrow buzzing past me could be heard. Brumdren had the woven hat he was wearing now attached to the mast by it, with his head still inside. I dropped my oar and jumped up for my shield. Besides Harper and myself, the rest seemed oblivious. Even Brumdren thought that his hat had just snagged on something and was still processing what happened.

“Reveal your business”, came a voice from above and behind us. Looking up we could see that a fort of sorts had been fashioned in the trees, currently with several elven archers poised with their bows pulled back. They wore blood red cloaks, all trimmed with gold on the hood and sleeves.

This startled the group, which quickly dropped their oars and turned to look. This also startled Aarmon who, though he had traveled these waters before, was not aware of this new offensive structure in the tree line, nor expecting such aggressiveness over river tolls. The elves who patrolled these parts of the river against hazards expected payment for such services. He locked the ship wheel and turned formally towards the sound of the voice. Not knowing which of the elves spoke he addressed them all.

“Greetings,” he said. “The Eel hailes from Dale by way of Esgaroth, we bring dwarven travelers, sent by king Nain of Iron Hills who request audience with king Thranduil.”

One of the cloaked elves stepped a bit forward and removed his hood. His face was typical of elves, with fair skin, blue eyes, and long glistening blonde hair that looped out from behind his woven mesh

helm. “This port no longer harbor humans or dwarves, and nobody gains audience with the king unless expected or requested by him, you and your boat”

The elf was cut off as our boat, which was no longer being oared, had started drifting under his catwalk platform. He paused for a bit, tilted his head to one side, and waited for us to drift past to the opposite side of the catwalk. Instead of finishing whatever he was going to say, the elf continued now in a less formal tone. “It is best to drift back from where you came, or pay the river toll if your desire is to pass through, but we only dock elven boats here.”

Vonmus stood up and motioned for the other to resume their oaring in order to keep the boat in place. “I beseech you to permit docking by request of Lord Nain, son of Durin, king of the Iron Mountains and beyond. I possess parchments with his royal seal, as well as gifts for your king. We have been sent here on a mission of both necessity and favor to present before Thranduil.” Vonmus held up a leather satchel when he said “gifts”, a small sack which I had, until now, not known about or seen.

“Show me the parchments,” insisted the elf, to which Vonmus returned the satchel to his pocket and retrieved the king’s royal draft. The guard peered at it from a distance that I would guess is too far to be read, then turned to mention something to the elf next to him. That elf promptly scurried down the catwalk, through the branches, and disappeared into the tree line.

“You shall harbor,” he continued, “but at the very first dock, and all shall remain in your boat until summoned. A guard there shall be allowed passage onto your boat to further inspect your king’s script and seal, and also check for weapons. Mind you, if he is not impressed, you will indeed come before the king, but in chains.”

“In disclosure,” I replied, “we all brandish weapons, but only for protections as we travel, and they are the tools of our mandated quest.” With that I held up the axe I had picked up when startled.

The guard smirked at the sight of my axe. “I mean real weapons,” he replied. “Anything found with enchantment is obviously of elven crafting and will be confiscated. And if of darker enchantment then both you and them would be destroyed. You had just best be certain that your letters are authentic. It has been some times since we had new additions to the bars of Cerin Dorn.”

He then looked at Brumdren, who was just now retrieving his hat from the arrow on the mast. “And by the way, I will be wanting my arrow back too.”

We docked as instructed, our manuscript inspected and taken, and different from what the catwalk guard said, all weapons aboard were confiscated. Of special concern was Grilrun’s gauntlet, which by now had a majority of the excess bulk rasped off of the finger joints and excess decorations as well. The elven guards could not decide if this was a weapon, or for defense, or a prosthetic for an injured arm. It did have that spike extruding from the elbow. It was also constructed of an alloy of which they had never seen.

It mattered little, as the gauntlet was so firmly attached to Grilrun’s hand and arm that it would not come off, probably due to Grilrun’s arms being swollen from so much rowing. With a look of some suspicion, the main guard allowed him to keep it. We were then made to wait, and still we are waiting. The sun has reached its crest, and all I can do is sit here and catch up on these notes.

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Apparently, the letters from king Nain were approved, and both myself and Vonmus were allowed to leave the ship. The others were to remain behind on the boat, now tethered to the dock with a chain. “Bring that other one too,” the head guard stated while pointing at Grilrun. A little bewildered, Grilrun stood up and exited the boat along with us.



We were escorted up a seemingly endless series of gold-flecked white-polished stairs leading up from the pier to the main fortress wall. The keep was protected by two large thick wooden doors, mounted between tall marble arches. Through these, was a near endless trek of highly vaulted arches, though these were of pure white marble. And still the stairs, so many stairs.

Eventually the stairs, then a hall led us to a large ornate room, with red and gold

tapestry on both the ceiling and walls. The room ended with a red cushioned throne having gold gilded arms and feet. The throne seat was empty. “Introducing lords Vonmus, Grangarn, and Grilrun from the court of king Nain of Iron Hills”, the guard formally hailed.

“Greetings, I am Legolas”, stated an elf stepping out from behind a table on the east side of the room. He was of somewhat taller than normal stature. He wore no armor, but garbed in white flowing tunic with just hints of gold. As he spoke, he seemed to focus his gaze on Grilrun’s left arm. “To what purpose does your party hail, and to what request might Nain bring you to this stronghold?”

“You are Legolas? Inquired Vonmus. “I mean no offence, but we were instructed to petition the king.”

Logolas looked up from Grilrun’s arm. “My father yes, he is currently disposed of with important matters. I fear that I will have to suffice. What is the nature of your visit?”

Vonmus stepped forward and bowed. “My lord, there is a particular treasure, a necklace that resides within the vaults here. Actually, it was gifted to your king, though succession of Thingol, by us dwarves long before the war. Pardon our rudeness, but it is the request of our king that we be permitted now to borrow this necklace for a short space of time.” Vonmus pulled his satchel out and opened it. Inside was an impressive assortment of gems, obviously sent along with him by Nain. “And as a surety for it, we would like to offer. . . . “ “And which of the many ornate necklaces from the king’s treasury might you refer to,” interrupted Legolas, obviously not impressed with Vonmus’s bag? “And exactly what is your king’s interest in it?”

Vonmus paused for a moment, “it is called Nauglamir in our ancient tongue, but you might know it as the Nauglamir.”

Legolas’ deep blue eyes widened, and his brow raised in a perplexing gesture. He paused for a bit longer than I felt comfortable. “The Nauglamir! Now that is indeed an odd request.” Legolas paused again, this time as if calculating the information.

He raised a finger and gesturing the guard with a nod. The guard promptly nodded in return and departed. He then looked over at Grilrun. “You there, which one are you, and explain that contraption on your arm.” He gestured Grilrun over as he spoke.

Grilrun approached Legolas and lifted his arm. “My name is Grilrun. And I call my ‘contraption’ a claw. It is a gift from my uncle to aid in our journeys.”

At that moment King Thranduil entered the room, hastily approaching us. “You have found it,” he blurted. “You have found my missing jewel. Which one is it, the one from the abyss, the one in the sea. Either way matters not, they do not belong to you, they rightfully belong to the Eldar, and to myself, first of the descendents of the House of Feanor. You will return to me what is mine.”

We were somewhat shaken by the king's brash demeanor and took a few steps back. “Your lordship,” replied Vonmus in defense. “No jewel has yet been found, but should it be, I promise that we have no intent in keeping it. We just desire to borrow the necklace, and only then for a short space of time.”

“Then why the necklace, if not for the gem,” interrupted Legolas. “Indeed, Nauglamir is of stunning dwarven craftsmanship, though as I recall, it was not a gift, but rather a commission. But it is also a piece with a most specific and precise purpose.”

“Yes”, admitted Vonmus, “It once contained a very special jewel; a jewel residing beyond any ability to obtain, and in such context the necklace indeed no longer serves a purpose. And without its jewel, it is not even as use as a necklace. As such, it was our assumption that borrowing of it would be of little consequence.”

“Yes, but for what purpose?” Legolas continued.

Vonmus sighed. “As I speak, all forces under the Iron Hills prepare for battle. Before the first leaf falls this year, they head for Moria and venture to free our lost kingdom from the orc. In this matter, we assume to prevail, but there is another matter there, that of the balrog.”

“The balrog, or balrog, as we call it in our ancient tongue, is nested deep below the mines of Moria,. Defeating such a beast will require much more than axe and spear. It requires something far more substantial, and as you have surmised, that something is silmarils.”

“According to lore, no mortal can hold it, and no evil can endure it. It is the only thing that can defeat the balrog. But in order to wield

it, we do require the necklace. Our forefathers fashioned the necklace specifically to house the brilliance of this gem, and also to shield it from his holder.”

“Impossible,” blurt Thranduil, “Of them, one was taken to the heavens, one lost to the sea, and the last one tossed into the abyss. None can be retrieved, especially by a small party of impetuous dwarves.”

“Agreed,” replied Vonmus, “yet according to our lore, one of them has already been retrieved for us. Our legend tells story of a dragon named Catterwuld, captured by our forefathers long ago. The beast tells tale of Scath the worm, who upon discovering the glint of this gem deep in the molten abyss of Withered Heath, retrieved it for her own, only to become tormented later by its brilliance.

According to these tales, it now resides in the ruins of Scorn on the northeast ridge of Ered Mithrin, alongside Withered Hearth, at the burnt black breeding place of dragons. The gem was covered by Scatha deep within the castle’s well, which is why it was not discovered with the rest of her treasures. ”

King Thranduil paused for a long moment, then gestured to the guard, who promptly disappeared again. Then leaning over Legolas whispered something into the king’s ear. The two then stepped aside, out of range of hearing and continued their discussion privately in elven tongue. Finally Thranduil returned.

“Your tale is beyond any belief or reason. How absurd to base a quest off of myth and legend. It is insanely preposterous!!!” He paused. “Yet still, I must concur with your king Nain, in that even the whimsical chance of your tales bearing true warrants this quest. Your request to borrow the necklace is granted, but with conditions. Take heed to full realize that the silmarils duly belongs to me. It is my birthright as heir to the House of Feanor.”

“And if the tales of your lore prove true, and the jewel is truly recovered, then I have no desire to lose it yet again; not to dwarves who’s loyalties and intents change at the first glint of gold, nor to the depths of Moria, should the balrog prevail against you. And so, along with the necklace I shall send my own envoy Eldrin, for proper oversight and protector of this royal treasure. He shall accompany you in your journey and remain with the necklace at all times, and also with the silmaril, should it be recovered.”

“To these conditions we agree, along with our gratitude for your faith and generosity,” replied Vonmus, “yet I must affirm once again that, in exchange for its retrieval, we first be granted use of the silmaril, as it is necessary in our disposal of the balrog from Moria. It should be understood that only then shall the gem be relinquished to its rightful place in the house of Feanor.

“Agreed,” continued Thranduil. Looking up he noticed that the guard he had sent off had just now returned. Thranduil waved him over and received a small box from his hand. “Eldrin is currently being informed of his mission, and the Nauglamir is being retrieved. Eldrin will meet you with it at the dock, and then embark along with you.”

Thranduil then opened the small box he held to reveal its contents. “It is said that the ruins of Scorn are cursed. It is between peaks of razor rock and moats of molten slag. It is a lair of both vile beasts and dragons.” Thranduil pulled out an aged looking map. “Though long before my time, the royal archives retain this runic of its walls and underbelly, from a time long ago in which it was still in its prime.”

“No doubt it is mostly rubble by now. But this map reveals a hidden entrance to its dungeon which, if still intact, would provide access without need of venturing far into the ruins itself.” He pointed to a location on the map. “If correct, then the well that you speak of can be accessed here, from deep under the castle, by breaking through this wall. If the silmaril truly resides here, it might save time and lives by approaching it this way, as opposed to burrowing down from above, where likely foul creatures fester. If it is there, it is my hope to increase your chances of retrieval.”

Thranduil then held up a three-sided crystal. “And this treasure is known as Manwe’s Window. Within the ruins of Scorn is the Pool of the Valar. If the room has not yet collapsed, it is said that when this is placed upon the waters of this pool, the crystal floats, and through it can be seen visions of near future events. Use it also in your quest, to reduce perils and increase your chances of retrieving the silmaril. A foul future known is also a future that can be altered. It is a tool, not a gift, and I do expect its return.”

He then closed the box with its contents and handed them to Vonmus. “There is still yet one more issue of importance that can

not be discussed here, and for that you must follow Legolas. I bid you success in your venture and hope to receive you again with good tidings.”

With that, Legolas motioned us to follow him, leading us from Thranduil and the throne room down stairs and many corridors. We were going deep below the castle, all pondering the reason for our descent, with Legolas ignoring all queries. As we traveled, the air grew humid, and the distant sounds of flowing water heard. The sides of the walls became moist and stairs slippery with pooling water.

The sounds of splashing water grew in volume until we at last entered a large carved out dome shaped room, with water flowing from a swirl on the ceiling down all sides. It pooled at the base of the walls before flowing out through grates in the floor. The room, much like the stairwell down to it, was lighted by florescent star-shaped creatures, which inched slowly along the walls and floors. We had to be mindful not to step on them. Here Legolas gestured us to stop.



“Allow me to see that gauntlet again,” he began while turning to Grilrun.

Grilrun lifted his left arm. “I call it a claw”.

“It is a very interesting piece,” said Legolas, “and what are these?” he continued while fingering the two identical depressions displayed on the back of its hand plate, one of them Grilrun had partially etched away.

“Oh those . . . they were just some decorations that my uncle was fond of. They came to him in a dream, but unnecessary in function so I attempt to remove them.”

“And the metal it is forged from?” inquired Legolas.

“It does not have a name,” replied Grilrun. Its ore is rare and also discovered by my uncle in the deepest parts of the Iron Hills. He says that the ore sings to him to tell him where it is. It is unique in that it stronger than Moria silver, and once cast becomes indestructible, with exception of the same ore from which it is cast.”

He revealed his small black rock. “I have been using this to file the finger joints, arm guard, and decorations.” Legolas took the stone from him to examine better.

“I see,” replied Legolas, “ Could I have a sample of the ore and some of the filings rasped off for experimentation?”

Grilrun shook his head. “Such is an odd matter too, you can break off a piece of the ore if you like, but as far as the finished metal, I can grind bits of it away, but it produces no dust or fragments. Somehow, it either gets absorbed back into the ore, or just evaporates away. It is a very strange metal.”

“Well, I shall be blunt”, began Legolas while handing back the stone, “This is indeed an unusual metal, unlike any I have seen before. However, its construction and design are familiar to me, a style of armor I have seen long ago, from a relic age long before even my father’s time.”

“I find it peculiar that your uncle composed a piece with such similar relic design features, and one that also maintains such odd metal properties. And then there are these decorative depressions on the hand guard. . . . Let me ask, you have come here for the Nauglamir, but have any of you actually seen sketches or drawings of it before?

Vonmus nodded his head. “I have some ancient sketches of it from production in one book that I carry.”



“Well, these impressions here in your ‘claw’ are of the exact shape and size as the empty setting for a silmaril on the Nauglamir, and here there are two sockets side by side. It is all very curious, and a curiosity I fear somehow beyond coincidence. I will need you to meet with Alatar the Blue to confirm my suspicions, and also consider any potential course of action. He resides upriver in the direction you are already headed, with just a few days journey out of your way.”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “we are on a short schedule. If the silmaril is where we believe, it will still take us many weeks to arrive there, and there is still no telling what hindrances we will encounter along the way, or how long it might take to unearth. The campaign to

regain Moria begins before the last leaf falls. Each day matters, and we can't be diverted just to satisfy your curiosities."

"The subject is not for you to negotiate," replied Legolas. "Dark forces are at play here, and a darkness of more concern than your defeat of a balrog. Do you not understand why I brought you down to this room, or that you and your party are being followed."

"Followed?" I replied. "I would think I would know if we were being followed."

Legolas peered at me, "and would you perceive a barrow wight if you saw one. Indeed, they can't be seen, but only felt. And if you do see one, it is only as a reflection of the sun, or at night as a darkness that one perceives as moving among shadows that remain still. They are extremely territorial, and it is quite odd to encounter one any distance away from their haunt; quite odd indeed. It must have some significant purpose in following you that I can't surmise, but I can sense its presence all around you and your gauntlet."

I felt a deep twinge in my gut as I recalled several instances from our trip. Thalduhr was certain that he had seen something following us along the banks of the river, and yet when we looked, nothing was there. In town, I recalled the leaves near a bush doing the same thing when there was no breeze, and most disturbing was at the beginning of our trip, when we discovered nine distinct outlines upon the frost of the ground, one of them larger than the rest.

I was aghast, and exchanging glances with Grilrun and Vonmus, I could see that they came to the same sudden realization. "What do we do?" blurted out Grilrun. He started tugging on his gauntlet. "If this thing is haunting my claw, I don't want it anymore."

"No," replied Legolas. "This is why I brought you three down here. Wights are extremely dangerous. They cannot be killed for they are already dead. However, they do have a most difficult time hearing, seeing, or navigating over running waters. Here we can speak freely, and I don't sense its presence now. The important thing is not to give indication that you realize its presence, so keep your gauntlet on for now."

"We need to understand what it wants, why it is following you, and what the gauntlet or silmaril might have to do with it all. I perceive that it has not been following you as much as leading your group."

Your uncle found the ore because it called to him, and he designed the details of your gauntlet in a dream. Your quest is based upon a story revealed to you by a dragon, which obviously allowed for its own capture. It is my thought that whatever the intent of this wight, it has been preparing for this for quite a long time to get all of the pieces in place.”

“For some reason, it is leading you to the ruins of Scorn, to bring this gauntlet there. If it perceives that you realize this, I do not know what action it might take. Your group is likely of no importance, other than a current means of transport. The wight could quickly kill your entire group and simply use others to get it there. We need to get you to Alatar, but do so in such a way that appears you are oblivious to the creatures plans. Alatar will know better than I what all this entails, and what you must do.”

“It could kill us all,” exclaimed Vonmus who was already squeamish on the superstitious side.

“Yes,” continued Legolas, “and most quickly I would say. But I do use ‘kill’ for lack of a better word. Wights do not seek to kill, but rather are tormented and seek for themselves to no longer exist. You exist in life, and they in death, and their attacks are simply a means of mutual annihilation. Most creatures attack the body, but wights consume the soul. They dissolve parts of themselves along with their victims, seeking primarily their own destruction, though the behavior of this one is quite unlike any I have ever encountered. Alatar will know more.”

“We leave here now,” continued Legolas, “as we have already spent a suspicious amount of time beneath these flow of waters. Once we leave, you will not speak of this to the others of your group, nor among yourselves. Eldrin, who will be waiting at your boat, has already been informed. From all appearance, your group continues upriver on route to Scorn at withered heath, but Eldrin will lead you on a short detour at some point along the way. Perhaps if all goes well, your quest to Withered Heath continues after that, as it is still our hope that the silmaril be recovered, but these particular questions must be answered first.”

With that, we left the cascading room and castle to board our boat. To the rest of the party, we now do our best to present ourselves not so shaken, but also can’t help but twinge as we glance along the banks of the river for a glimpse of a creature that cannot be seen. I

write all this now in the corner of the boat with some reluctance. This event in our quest must be documented, and I do not think that a burrow wight would be reading over my shoulder with flowing water to my back. Writing in my journal at this time is also what most would consider my normal behavior, but my quill quivers in my hand.

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The current was strong against us on our first day out from Elven Halls. Eldrin is aboard as with the Nauglamir as promised. It is in a small bag tied to his belt, though I have myself not yet seen it. He is quiet and keeps to himself. Currently he stands on the bow with his long white hair freely blowing around the strong narrow lines of his face. Unlike the guards encountered at the castle, he wears no armor, and carries only a dagger by his side. He also has an elven bow and quiver stashed along with gear.

“Why doesn’t he help row,” says Brumdren, loud enough, and on purpose for Eldrin to hear.

“Elves do not row” was Eldrin’s reply to overhearing. “My mandate is for only the protection of the necklace.” To this Brumdren curled his nose and muttered something rude about how elves don’t have the stamina for it, but this did not provoke Eldrin to pick up an oar and help. Brumdren’s grumpiness is not without merit, as the strength of the current continues to make distance more challenging, and I myself take only a short break from it at times such as this.

There are noticeably fewer snakes in this stretch of the river, but perhaps that is because I can’t see them. Since leaving Elven Halls, the river water has grown increasingly black. I inquired about this with Aarmon, and he stated that we have almost reached the fork at Enchanted River, and the strength of its added current is what we fight now. The waters running from it are anything but enchanted; black as tar, foul to the smell, and it is said that those who drink of it will fall into an endless sleep, though I could hardly imagine anyone drinking such filthy waters willingly. The name of this forest is Mirkwood, and the name of this tributary should have been Mirkriver, as that seems far more fitting. I still catch myself glancing at times along the river’s bank, and between the shadows of the trees, for any sign of our unwanted traveler.

Grilrun takes a break from rowing along with me. He rests against the ship's mast. Normally he would be grinding away at his gauntlet, as such was his habit in his free time, but his demeanor towards it has changed, and he now just stares off into the tree line. Like me he is probably looking for any unwanted evidence of the wight.

This following day requires less effort to row, and more progress is being made. We finally passed the Enchanted River tributary, and good riddance. It is now a joy to row upstream by comparison to before. The days are still dark, with little light feeding in through the thick canopy above. We still kept lanterns going at the front and back of the boat. Along with Eldrin also came renewed rations provided by the king. This included new lamp oils from a native elven tree. Not only does it burn so clean that we no longer have to keep wiping the lantern glass, but also has a slight fragrance of flowers in bloom. The crew is feeling very content, as they know nothing about our meeting at the castle, but I can't seem to shake a deep feeling of foreboding.

Today, my anxieties from the meeting at elven castle were replaced with much more grievous concerns. Indeed, I feel lucky to be alive, and still all of our lives are in great peril. Last evening, the boat suddenly slowed to a halt. Aarmon peered over the side, expecting to find us caught up on some branches or fallen vines, which has happened before. He grabbed a lantern off its hook for a better look. There was nothing to be seen, at least not above the surface.

"Hey Harper," he called out. "We are snagging on something". Harper jumped down from the sail masts and snatched up the boat's back lantern. If anything was snagging the boat, it would likely be caught on the rudder, but he too was unable to find anything.

The boat then slowly but noticeably began steering itself towards the left bank. The captain grabbed the wheel to redirect us, but to no avail. "We are not snagged," he hollered, "we are being pulled".

Eldrin, aware of the situation, leapt from his seat against the mast, pulled out his dagger from its sheath, and dangled himself over the side.

“What is it”, inquired the captain?

Eldrin lifted his head back over the side, but just long enough to yell out “Spiders”. With some confusion, all of us began looking around the deck to see what he was talking about. Eldrin remained hung over the side, moving his arms up and down with a sawing motion. “It is spiders, and we are caught in a trigger line.”

Just as I was approaching Eldrin to see what he was referring to, the web line was severed, and I felt the boat drift free. “Row!” yelled out Eldrin in a forceful tone, and to our amazement he reached down himself to grab hold of an oar.

But no sooner had he said this than another tug was felt on the boat, this time from the rear. Looking over the side, from the glint of Harper’s lantern, I could make out a thin glimmering line that adhered itself to the side. “Don’t just stare at it,” hollered Eldrin, “cut it.”

I pulled out my axe and bent over the side, but the web was close to the water line, and just out of reach. Harper yanked me up, handed me the lantern, and took my axe in one fluid motion. He bent over the side and began scraping the axe against the ship. It took multiple whacks, but eventually this line was severed as well.

This was immediately followed by a wispy slurch sound as another web line attached to the ship. This time it stuck to the mast about half way up. Now the boat was being pulled and listing to one side as well. Two additional lines then attached to the deck as Thalduhr chopped the one on the mast with his man-sized axe, which only required one whack.

I peered through the darkness towards the riverbank to see where all these webs were coming from. Dwarves can see well in the dark, a gift bestowed by all those generations in the mines. At a distance of about 2 stones throw away, I could make out the bulbous shiny back end of a large multi-legged creature. It would rear its back end, launch a long spindle line of web towards the ship, then tear it off with its back legs to stick to the trunks of neighboring trees. The ship was being pulled towards the bank as these sticky lines of webbing began drying and constricting on their own.

The boat leveled out after Thalduhr chopped through the mast web, but we were still being pulled by these other lines. “Go for the

spider”, hollered Eldrin as he loaded an arrow into his bow. We dwarves just looked around, as we did not have bows, and the distance was further than an axe blade could be thrown. Aarmon picked up an angler’s spear from the deck, but also realized it was too far to throw and quickly dropped it. He went back to hacking at the web attached next to him.

Eldrin sent his first shot directly at the spider, but just before making contact it was knocked out of the sky with a short burst of red flame. He shot off another, and the same thing happened. “There’s a witch too,” shouted Eldrin, “everyone find the witch!”

I was confused by Eldrin’s command, as I had never seen a witch and did not know exactly what to look for. Scanning the tree line and bank, I could see nothing but the spider and trees.

“Try burning them”, exclaimed Harper, who had found some measure of success by wrapping his shirt around an oar, and setting it on fire with oil from the lantern. The web lines that were difficult to cut with blades melted rather quickly under the heat of a flame.

The boat now had multiple web lines attached at various locations, and even using his makeshift torch, it became difficult to detach them faster than new ones arrived. Eldrin fired a few more shots at the spider, which again were swatted out of the air by the same red light burst. He paused again to look intently for the witch.

“There she is,” I proclaimed as I finally spotted her. I did not know exactly what I was looking for, but there saddled on the back of the spider was a small bumpy creature in a cloak matching the black of the night and the spider. She could be seen only when moving, and only moved when diverting the arrows that Eldrin launched. She would lift up a short cane as the arrows came in, followed promptly by the red burst. “She is on the spider”.

Spotting the hag, Eldrin let loose another arrow directly at her, which was again swatted from the sky. By now the boat was more than half way to the shore, and the witch and spider close enough to throw axes at. I lifted up my axe and let it fly.

This caught the witch, or more specifically the spider off guard. The witch, being occupied with Eldrin and his arrows, did not notice me tossing the axe, and it hit the spider in its



bulbous back end. The spider jumped and quickly scurried further back into the tree line, with the witch holding onto a belt on its back.

“I got it”, I hollered, but that did not slow down its attack. Now from between trees, just a bit further back and again out of the reach of tossed axes, the spider continued to send line after line at the boat. Its accuracy was not as good while launching from between the trees, and several of its web lines missed. But the ends of those that did hit their mark were promptly attached to trees now deeper in the woods.

“Forget the web lines,” hollered Eldrin, “and prepare to battle”.

Eldrin was right. There was no stopping the onslaught of webs anymore, and the ship was certainly going to be pulled to the bank. Whatever was in store for us there, it was best to prepare for it now. In the field, we dwarves would form a defensive formation, but that was not practical aboard a boat. We lined up as best we could along the side, with axes and shields in hand.

The boat not only pulled against the bank, but it was further dragged over onto its side, and then onto shore. We jumped from the boat as it listed against the rocky gravel. But the boat did not stop here and continued to be pulled up the bank, until it crunched against the first line of trees.

I glanced along the bank where the spider had been, looking for the axe I had previously thrown, but did not see it. This left me with only my dagger. I peered between the trees and thickets for the hag and spider. The lanterns on the ship had gone out, and the only real light was the torch that Harper still held, but he was some distance away.

There was no sight of our attackers, but I heard Balgruim yelp as the shield he had salvaged from the ship was smacked with a splotch of webbing, and this from above. He was struggling to hold it as it was pulling him upward and almost off the ground. He finally let go. This onslaught from above was followed by him losing his axe, and Eldrin’s bow was pulled up by webbing too. In the canopy, there were sounds of spider scurry, branches bending, and random twigs snapping and breaking off to the ground.

“Back to the boat”, hollered Harper. “Get back from the trees.” Well there was no way to do that. Large branches extended over the boat, which by now had been pulled up the bank and under them.

With all of us being too helpless to see, attack, or defend in any way, it was in short order that dwarf after dwarf was relieved of their weapons, then one by one being pulled up into the canopy on web lines striking hand, shoulder, or boot.

When Vonmus got pulled up, there was a scuffle, and then a loud shriek. Perhaps he managed to conceal his axe, and landed a good whack against the spider. It was hard to tell in the dark. As that scuffle resumed, Vonmus dropped from the tree, landing hard on the ground. He was promptly followed down by the spider, which then plopped down upon him, stabbed him a few times with its mandibles and retreated back up the tree.

As I headed back to the boat, I too was grabbed by my boot, which pulled me back into the woods before lifting me upside down into the air about the height of boat's mast.

"That's all of them, Fam" came a gurgling voice from the thickets. Out of the darkness wobbled the short-statured hag. She was about the height of us dwarves. She had a head resembling an owl, though all covered with tangled wire-like thick hair. Bony thin fingers protruded from the sleeves of her oversized dark cloak. The spider, which had managed to remain mostly well hidden in the canopy now descended from above on a string of web to the ground.

"The bubbles will be elated," stated the spider in its high shrill voice. Its hairy front mandibles quivered as it spoke. The spider itself was much larger than the hag, with smooth slender legs and bulbous back end. Its abdomen was red with gold speckles. Around it was a silver belt, embedded with faintly glowing red gems. Its head was covered with little eye orbs that glowed dimly green in the reddish light cast by a garnet on the top of the hag's contorted wooden staff.

Harper's torch had been extinguished. He did not fair well in the battle, and now the only light came from the faint glow of this witch's staff. A few strokes of moonlight also managed through the leaves. But from this scant amount of light, I could make out that Aarmon, Harper, and Vonmus all remained lifeless on the ground, with the rest of us all dangling from the trees.

"Lets us go," exclaimed Thalduhr, "or we will. . . ."

"Ahh. . . it speaks," interrupted the hag with a cackle, who not only had an owlish face, but a short pointy beak to match. "Always do

they say, let me go. Always do they say please don't eat me. They all beg for their lives." She motioned to the spider. "Fam, take them back to the cage, and I will see what offerings they have brought for us."

"Yes, yes", replied the spider with excitement. "Back to the cage, back for the bubbles." The spider climbed back up into the canopy, and began clipping the web lines that held us. It attached them to its underbelly with a bit more sticky stuff from its back end, tethered up any slack, and began dragging us between branches as it made its way deeper into the forest.

We slammed into trees, bumped into each other, and occasionally got caught up in branches on the way, only to be pulled free with brutal tugs on the lines that held us. Grilrun grabbed hold of a branch with his claw, but the bark simply peeled off. My line was not quite as taught, which left me at times being pulled through branches, and at others being dragged over shrubs on the ground. I attempted to grab at whatever branch or shrub I could hold onto, but the web was strong, and the spider stronger. It would yank on our individual lines with its back legs when one of us got caught up, and then scold us for struggling.

After a most unpleasant bash through the thickets we came to a large clearing of trees. It was illuminated by the dull red glow of a large stone in the center. Off against the furthest tree line was what remained of another unfortunate boat, somehow hauled from the river and through the woods, and now turned on its side, and fashioned into a house of sorts. On the opposite side was a large wicker-like structure made of thick branches and webbing. Lifting us above it, the spider opened the top of a woven mesh lid and dropped us in.

Thalduhr was the only one who, after the bashing ride through the forest, retained enough fortitude to attempt to grab the cage side, but was promptly flicked on in with one of the spider's back legs. The top was placed back on and secured with a fresh wad of webbing.

"What are you going to do with us," demanded Eldrin, while attempting to peel some of the sticky web off his arm and shoulder.

The spider appeared worn out from dragging all of us back, and now slumped down on a hastily fashioned bed made from still more webbing. "You are for the bubbles," replied the spider in its high-

pitched voice, then lifting up one of its legs, pointed to the tree next to our wicker cage.

Along with the others, I turned to look. The trunk and upper branches were all covered with a dark gooey slime that was writhing with a multitude of jiggling baubles. “They will be hungry”, continued the spider as it appeared to doze off.



“I hate bubbles”, said Balgruim in a meager attempt to bring some levity to our situation.

It is here, tired, beaten up, and still in a state of bewildered shock that I write down the details of this evening on some torn parchment I found in my pocket. I write using twigs and a mixture of mostly my own blood and mud, and will have to add it to the journal later, if there is a later. I don’t know if I shall be alive or dead on the morrow, and writing at a time like this seems like insanity. But continuing to document the events that transpired our group is perhaps the only sane thing I can do at this moment.

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I woke up some time later, still exhausted by the experience. It was still evening. Khardal and Brumdren were lamenting the loss of Vonmus. He was at times pompous, and often slowed the group down, but he had become one of us. “At least he managed in a good whack,” said Khardal. To which Brumdren replied, “indeed, but I warned him a spider would squish him if he did not watch out.”

I look over at the spider, which I assume is still sleeping. I notice the wound on its side that Thalduhr is referring to. Its gash is just visible in the faint light of the camp’s glowing red stone. Perhaps Vonmus did land that blow, but more likely than not it was where my own tossed axe hit. It matters little at this time.

I hear the others speaking in whispers, and Thalduhr was attempting to lift Dalgruim up high enough to inspect the trapdoor above. It could potentially be reached by climbing up the inner lattice structure, but the web binding is so sticky.

“What’s going on”, I inquire, but was quickly hushed. “Don’t wake the spider,” said Balgruim.

I glance again at the spider. Some of its green eyes are black from facing away from the light, but the majority of them appear open and facing our direction. I cannot tell if the spider is sleeping or not, but it is not moving. What is still moving is that mass of slime on the trunk of the tree. There is even more wiggling and jiggling on the tree to our other side, and also behind.

“I’m pretty sure that those are spider eggs ready to hatch,” whispers Grilrun. “We have to get out of here.”

“There is no getting out of here”, came the gurgley voice of the owl-faced hag as she entered the clearing from the tree line. She had just now managed the same trip back through the forest, and in tow behind her was a makeshift sled of sorts, pulled by branches attached on each side. Stacked on it were various items recognizable from our boat.

The hag pulled the sled up next to the spider and dropped its two pull branches. “We and us don’t get many of your sort riding the waters. You and yours must elms far from the places you dwell. . . ahh, but wander with items of mention; of mention, but of little-no use to Crazule an mine familiar. Perhaps some pieces for trade.” She stroked the side of the sleeping spider with her slender fingers as she said 'familiar'. "You seem to have extinguished good Fam from the tussle."

“Tell us what ‘items-of-mention’ you desire,” inserted Grilrun, “and perhaps we can obtain them for you, if you let us go.”

“There is no getting out of here,” she said while shaking her head. "No letting go. Elves cannot know of this place. You would tell. There is no to us moving again, we and us are tethered here, tethered to the litchaura. Very rare, good spot.”

With that the hag picked back up the two poles of her sled and continued to drag it past the spider to the opposite side of the clearing, where the tilted boat was. She then disappeared from sight as she pulled the sled in.



“What is a litchaura”, pondered Thalduhr out loud.

Eldrin pointed to the reddish glow seen coming from one side of the still sleeping spider. “That over there is a litchaura. These are large crystals growing out of the ground in areas where underground rivers flow close to the surface. This entire area is a meshwork of underground currents. The crystals become charged and glow as the waters pass by them from below. Broken off pieces of litchaura remain linked to their parent crystal. They glow and share its power, but only over a limited distance.”

“Pieces like that gem on the witches staff?” replied Thalduhr.



Eldrin nodded his head. “It enhances the hag’s ability to conjure hexes, an her staff and spells are more powerful here close to this location. But that does not address our problem at hand.” Eldrin gestured with his hands towards the still bubbling tree.

I pointed to the ground and whispered, “can we dig our way out?”

Brumdren shrugged and pointed to the empty loop on his belt where his axe once was held. All of us had been thoroughly robbed of anything from which to dig. With a bit of effort I snapped off a moderate sized branch from the side of our cage and motioned that everyone should do the same.

It was a decent enough plan, but the crack of the branch promptly woke up the spider. “I am here guarding and watching,” it blurted out, as if it was not just asleep. “And whenever I am not watching, then my pet will be. The bubbles will have to be fed. The bubbles are mine,” it continued in a matter of fact tone, as if proud of them.

“Your pet?” inquired Eldrin.

“Yes, my pet, her name is Crazule. “She will be doing my watching for me when time to tend my other tasks.”

“Your pet,” replied Balgruim with confusion. “I thought it was the other way around. I thought you were the pet? Are you not Crazule’s familiar?”

At this the spider leapt up, and its mandibles quivered. “I am not the pet,” it blurt out with some distain. “You are a stupid halfling,

unable to see apparent things? Perceive my great size and strength,” continued the spider as it stood up to display its full height.

But then, glancing towards the boat dwelling, and realizing the full volume of its voice, the spider continued now a bit more quietly. “Was it not myself that pulled your boat to the shore, disarmed and captured the lot of you. My pet Crazule is but small and fragile. She handles all of my fetching of plunders. Stupid halfling thinks I am the pet!” The spider started to lay back down.

Picking up on this, Eldrin intervened. “I also thought of you as the pet. Crazule calls you Fam, does she not? Is that

not short for ‘familiar’? And what is that belt around your waist, is that not a pet’s collar?”

At this the spider lunged forward and slammed the cage with a front leg. “You devise wrongly.” The spider lifted up its underbelly to show off its silver belt with pride. The belt was studded with pieces of the same glowing crystal that resided in the center of camp. “This is a gift, a special gift that I had made for myself. I tell Crazule to make it, and she makes it for me. I descend from the royal line of Shelob, if you don't know. I am a pet to none.”

“What turmoil is this,” garbled Crazule, stepping out from the boat. “Be settle and quiet, or I shall find need to involve myself”, after which she promptly returned back inside.

“See,” said the spider, now with even more of a whisper. “See how she defends me, defends me against silly misconceptions.

“I humbly apologize,” replied Eldrin with a slight bow. “I am obviously mistaken and forgive my ignorance.”

This seemed to calm the spider, and it again laid back down and was quiet, but we were uncertain if it had returned to its slumber.

“What we need to do,” whispered Eldrin to the group, “is to somehow get that belt off of the spider. The witch is obviously using that to control it. With the belt removed, the spider might realize that it is being controlled, and possibly turn on the witch.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “but how?”

“There is a clasp I noticed, on its right side,” inserted Grilrun. “Perhaps I am being foolish, but this spider seems easily provoked. I can attempt to enrage it enough for it to lunge at me through the cage. If it gets close enough, then one of you can perhaps reach through the sides and unhinge it. Maybe it even knocks over the cage.”

“That sounds like a plan that could go horribly wrong,” commented Balgruim.

“Agreed,” continued Eldrin, “but can you think of another? He then pointed to the nearest tree. “These things look just about ready to pop, and I don’t think any want to be here when that happens. So whatever we do, we should do it soon.”

There was a moment of pause, where I assume everyone pondered over any other possible solution, but there was none. “Very well,” replied Thalduhr. “I suppose we all

enrage a very large and horribly aggressive spider to attack then.”

But before we could even decide on who best to do the antagonizing, Crazule the witch exited the boat structure. In one bony hand was her staff, and the other held the crystal that king Thrandui had given us, the Window of Manwe. She passed by the large glowing stone as she wobbled her way towards our cage.

“Us and we are Crazule, and Crazule wants to know of this stone,” she began. “We sense of it much magic; a very ancients of much magic that Crazule perhaps knows something of. To which of you also knows of this stone?” Her beak would snap shut with a firm click at each pause between statements.

We all fell silent, partially because we could barely understand her speech, and partially because none of us knew what to say.

“Speak of it to us,” she insisted again, with a firm beak-click.

“We will tell you,” replied Eldrin, “but only in exchange for letting us go, all of us.”

The hag paused for a bit, as if perhaps considering the proposal, but was shortly interrupted by Fam's overhearing. "None of you can go," proclaimed the spider while standing up again. "The bubbles will be hungry".

"Quiet!" blurt Crazule. She tapped her staff as she spoke, making the gems in Fam's belt slightly glow. She turned again towards Eldrin. "Perhaps you just tells us one answer then. Does it perhaps goes along with this, as we thinks that it does?" Her bony hand reached into a pocket and pulled out three small golden spheres.

The expression on Eldrin's face was that of shock, as if he knew what these were, but he gave no reply.

"Yes yes," continued Crazule. "We can see that you thinks that it does. But by what chance of events would bring such together, after such lengths of years; both the keyhole and the keys?"

She then began muttering to herself, as if attempting to recall something. "Ahh. . . yes yes, we remembers it now. From so long ago, when Crazule was little, back before us were we. And now how does it go?"

Three golden pearls, placed where they go,
Latches are set where the window will show.
Under the pool, below every stair,
Deep in the mountain, the heart is kept there.
Closed is the doorway that keeps all inside
For there in the darkness the shadows reside."
When mirror is broken, reflections bite back
And that which is nothing will fit through the crack.
Something from nothing, to nothing returns,
And time fades away as the neolgrim churns.

"Crazule remembers, Crazule remembers all the true visions of Mandos" the hag blurt, out with a prideful click of her beak. She then paused. "But the legends, they tells about the how but not the where. Where is the where?" She muttered as she shook her owl head. "We and us does not know where is the where."

She looked up at Eldrin, "but you know, do you not? You can tell Crazule where is the where? Tell us now so we know."

"Give us our freedom first," replied Eldrin.

“No,” asserted the spider, “the bubbles will be hungry. You are for the bubbles.”

“Quiet”, she scolded again. “Not for spiders to decide. Some matters are more important than your bubbles Fam. Crazule is not sure what we and us do with such broods of scampers anyway,” she mumbled.

“But the bubbles are mine,” sulked the spider. “And they will be hungry”.

“We and us says quiet” responded Crazule now with more force, and she tapped her staff three times. The gems on the spider’s belt grew brighter with each tap, and Fam cringed with each one, as if in pain. “Fam will does as told”.

“Fam will does not” replied the spider. “Fam is not the pet!” With that, Fam lunged towards Crazule.

Crazule tapped multiple times on her staff, until the spider's belt was glowing red, and Fam writhed on the ground in pain. Yet then, with a small burst of resolve, Fam lunged once again, this time lobbing off the hags owl head with a single quick mandible snip of fluid motion. Crazule’s body fell over, and the spider collapsed. “My bubbles”, it murmured, while resting on the ground.

“Well that was an unexpected”, said Grilrun, “but not sure how that helps our situation. Crazule now lay in a puddle of her own blood, still clutching the crystal and pearls in one hand, and her staff in the other. Her head had rolled up against one of the bubble trees and stuck to it. The bubbles now more than ever looked ready to burst.

“Perhaps it is back to digging our way out again,” I said, “and perhaps now with some bit of haste”.

With that Fam seemed to revive a bit. She seemed strained, but stood upright, and with a bit of effort pried against her abdomen with one of her back legs until her silver belt came free. “I am still watching you,” she stated, “and my bubbles will be still be hungry.”

“Well, I am digging my way out,” replied Grilrun, as he started scraping away at the ground around the cage with the spike on the elbow of his gauntlet. “If we all start digging in different places

around the cage, Fam can't stop us all. Without my axe, I am not sure what to do after that, but I personally intend to go down fighting."

"No, you can't go," replied Fam, and pushed Grilrun back through the lattice with her front leg.

"Yes, come on," supported Thalduhr, breaking off one section of branch with only a little webbing. "Grilrun is right. It is only one spider, and it can't guard all sides at the same time."

But Fam, being undaunted, started circling the parameter of the cage, pushing back each of us one at a time. She then jumped on top of the dome to push us back with various legs from all sides. The cage bent and creaked as if going to shatter under her weight. She also scraped legs against trunks of the neighboring trees, facilitating bubbles that were just about ready to go ahead and burst. An onslaught of black shiny spiders, about the size of our fists had begun.

It was not long though before discovering a primary flaw to Fam's master plan. Obviously and for some reason, she desired live food for her spawn, but this was possibly her first brood, and not all her details fully thought through. For as her babies started filtering through the lattice, it was not difficult for us to begin squashing and stomping them. They would attempt to jump out of the way, but as hatchlings they were not particularly agile. I could see, however, that the sheer numbers of them would eventually overtake us.

"Stop stomping", shrieked Fam as we squished most of the first wave. But we continued smushing ever spider that made its way through. "I am going to tear you apart, just like Crazue," blurt Fam, and she then started ripping away at the lid of the cage to get in to us.

Thalduhr lifted up Eldrin, and then Khardal, who grabbed hold of the underside of the lid to hold it down, but knocking them off, she pulled the lid free. Poking her head in, her hairy mandibles quivered, "Tear you apart just like Crazule".

But then, and for no apparent reason, Fam abruptly stopped. With a horrifying shriek, her body reared back. I thought she was preparing to lunge in, but instead she just fell backwards off the cage to the ground. On her back, her legs curled inward as she shrieked.

The smooth outline of her torso also wrinkled inward until finally all sound from her stopped and she lay dead.

An eerie shadow weaved between and around the trees in the faint light of the red stone. This felt to me like some unseen sharp slicing cold fog, or perhaps an acidic mist, glanced by and around us, and as it did, all of the wiggling bubbles on the trees stopped wiggling. The slime dried up and began curling off the trunks. And then, just as suddenly as this all happened, it was gone.

We all just stared at each other in shock. “What was that!” exclaimed Thalduhr. The spider and all of her spawn lay dead and crispy, and the shredded lid now hinged down into the cage by the last of its webbing.

“I don’t know,” replied Brumdren, “but I’m getting my raw dumpling out of this cooking pot.” He began using the lid as a ladder to climb out.

I looked over at Grilrun and Eldrin, the only two in the group with any inkling as to what had just happened. Everyone was bewildered, but we were aghast. The once shiny black spider was now all wrinkled, grayish, and with an appearance that her carcass had been dead for over 100 years. Had the wight just killed her to save us, and just for the purpose of allowing us to continue our quest, its quest!

“Grab those gold pearls and crystal out of the witches hand,” said Eldrin as he and Brumdren exited the cage. “And the rest of you check the hag’s dwelling for our stolen supplies, weapons, or things we might need. There is little time to rest. We shall leave this place at dawn.”

“Who made you boss?” replied Balgruim, as he jumped from the cage to the ground.

“Eldrin knows these woods,” I stated. “Our boat is crushed, and I think him best suited to find our way out of this mess.”

“Astute,” continued Eldrin, “but even I could use some assistance.” He unfolded a small map from his pocket and spread it over the closest flat rock. The map had small circles upon which he arranged the feet of a small gold compass. He aligned it to point north, then paused, waiting until the north-pointing compass suddenly changed direction.

“I am pretty sure that your compass is broken,” said Balgruim as he looked over Eldrin’s shoulder. “Withered Heath should be north-east through the forest from here.”

“This compass,” responded Eldrin without looking up, “can be trusted and has been pre-set to reveal the next step of our journey. Gather what things you are able, and try to get some rest as daybreak comes sooner than you will wish.”

With that, Balgruim proceeded towards the hag’s dwelling with the others, leaving Grilrun and myself alone with Eldrin. “You know where we are headed, and why?” continued Eldrin. We both nodded. “Good, these woods are riddled with underground streams, making navigation difficult to that which pursues us, yet I fear that our intent will shortly be realized. Once we start, keep the party moving. Let us be prudent and not share a spider’s fate.”

Resting against the litchaura for its light, I recount these events on this parchment. We are beaten, broken, and missing one of our own. We have survived a night full of perils. We have cleaned our plates of a bitter dish. Such a cluster of reckless dwarves we are, as apparently we will demand second helpings on the morrow.

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We started our journey at the first break of day, if there is such a thing as daylight under such a thick forest canopy. The light from the litchaura became quickly obscured behind branches and leaves, leaving us in the dark. Eventually even the hag’s staff, which Thalduhr carried with us for light, continued to wane the further we traveled, until he finally just tossed it aside.

A small bit of light managed in through the trees, casting eerie shadows on every side. As a youngling, I was told, ‘do not fear the shadows’, but on this day I do. I am, however, somewhat consoled that I do not currently sense the presence of the barrow wight. After feeling it brush against my back in the cage, I fully understand what Legolas meant by sensing the creature. It is a sensation that one is oblivious to, until it is experienced. After that, it is a presence so easily recognizable that even the faintest residue of a wight on an object can be felt.

The woods grew so dark and thick at times that we could scarcely see, even with adjusted eyes. We got in the habit of numbering off every so often, just to make sure all of us were still here. And always, Grilrun and I pushed the group forward at times when they wanted rest, just hoping that any unseen currents deep below provided some measure of obstacle for it.

Eventually, the path widened and the thick forest canopy gave way to a clearing of sorts. Trees could still be seen across the landscape, but they appeared somewhat spaced and arranged. The leafy cushion of the forest floor was broken up by the roots of trees, all covered in bark, and emerging and intertwining along the surface.

It soon became easier to walk on the roots of this new terrain as opposed to just stepping over them. They became larger and larger, eventually requiring that we almost leap from one to the next at times. In time, this tangle of roots gave way to formal stone steps, which were also intertwined with roots, but with a spacing that appeared intentional.

The density of trees continued to diminish, and the steps formed into a legible path. Following this led us to an elegant white stone building, with its sides disappearing into the side of a low rocky cliff. An arrangement of shallow pools decorated the area in front of this building, and a sweet smelling breeze could be felt for the first time, replacing the musty feel of the forest before, though no flowers could be seen.

“Alatar”, called out Eldrin as we approached the structure. Along the way, I noticed that the branches of some trees were perched out over these pools in such a way that the descending dew, collecting on their leaves, was directed from one leaf to the next, making miniature streams near the base that fed their waters.

A tall slender man emerged from an archway and gazed upon us with a bewildered look. He had blue eyes, a short white beard, and was clothed in a thin wispy blue robe. He wore no shoes upon his feet. “This man looks like he has never seen a dwarf before,” muttered Dalgruim under his breath.



“Alatar is not here,” replied the man, “and not expected back for some time either, in fact not until after spring. For what purpose might you seek him?”

Eldrin led us closer to the man. “Might I assume then that you are Pallando? I am Eldrin on envoy of King Thranduil, sent to inquire of Alatar’s wisdom in a matter of some bit of urgency. I have come in search of a wizard, and apparently I have found one, might we step inside to converse with you more privately, for even the trees have ears?”

Pallando seemed willing but sighed, as if having better things to do. “Indeed these trees do have ears, follow me, I suppose. Perhaps I can settle your king’s matters and get you back on your way.” The building had no door, but rather a series of staggered stone archways that led back into darkness.

He stopped abruptly and looked around. “My staff, does anyone here see my staff laying around?” We all glanced around. “Eim, . . .” said Pallando while extending his arm, “give me my staff!” Suddenly, the tree closest to him quivered and bent over. The tree had the semblance of a face, and it glared at us with two dark inset eyes, but in a friendly sort of way. One of its branches reached down, handing a long slender staff to the man.

“Your staff,” replied the ent, after which, it stood back up and resumed its original position. This was quite startling to all of us except for Eldrin. None of us dwarves had ever seen a tree move on its own accord, and we certainly never heard one speak.

Pallando smiled, “see, the trees do have ears. And these dwarves look like they have never seen an onodrim before.”

As Pallando led us back through archways, the end of his staff began glowing, casting his elongated shadow against the wall. As he passed each separate archway, orbs attached to them on both sides also began to glow. The inside of the building was mostly a maze of open spaces and arches going off in different directions, and it was much larger than it appeared from the outside. I recall thinking that I would get lost here if not for being led the way.

We continued on into a somewhat formal room with actual walls, having benches along the side long enough to accommodate the group. Here, Pallando stopped and turned towards Eldrin.

“So what is the king’s request?” he inquired with the demeanor of still having something better to do.

Eldrin paused for a bit. “Actually, this is a matter perhaps best suited for smoke and mist, for barrow wights have ears too.”

This seemed so sober up Pallando’s demeanor, and a more serious look came to his face. He tapped against his staff with a finger, and from its base issued a dark grayish smoke, spanning out in all directions. The smoke coiled as it issued past our group, then rose up along the walls and across the ceiling to create a swirling cage to surround us.

“Wights you say,” began Pallando. “they are territorial, what would one be doing here. I have not heard of any such venturing beyond the rims of withered hearth.”

“Perhaps not barrow wight exactly, but I refer to it as such for lack of another name,” continued Eldrin. “Legolas sensed its presence at Elvenking Hall, and it was a presence that he first encountered at Amon Lanc, long ago as the fortress was being taken by orcs. He does not know its purpose in tracking this party of dwarves, but suspects it has to do with the Silmaril, and also with this.” Eldrin stepped back, took Grilrun’s hand and lifted it up for the wizard to see.

“The group’s quest”, continued Eldrin, “is for a silmaril, and they have requested the Nauglamir with which to mount it. Yet more intriguing, this particular gauntlet displays two ornamental sockets of the exact size and shape for a silmaril. When Legolas first noticed this, he was suspicious of their motives, but then as he sensed the presence of what I will call a barrow wight, he in his wisdom realized that more sinister motives were at play. The darkness of it all eludes him, and so he sent us here.”

Pallando gazed at the gauntlet. “Stand up and bring it here,” he said as he gestured to Grilrun. The wizard then looked at it more intently. “This is of a metal I have never seen, and yet its architecture has a familiar feel. Where did you come by it?”

“It was a gift,” replied Grilrun, “from my uncle.” It was fashioned from a rare ore he discovered as small flakes in the heart of the Iron Hills. If it matters, the architecture for it came to him in a dream. Once refined and cast, the metal is quite indestructible, with exception of this ore from which it was cast.” Grilrun pulled out the course hunk of ore from his pocket. “For half of our journey, I have been slowly grinding away at the finger and wrist joints, as my uncle has cast it too large for my hand. I also thought the decoration on the back a bit off-centered, so I have rasped most of the left one away smooth.”

This was the first that most of our group had heard of any of this, and they sat on the benches in a stuporous state. “Why were we not told any of this,” inquired Dalgruim. “All this time we have been following you through the woods, we were being followed by a barrow wight, and you did not think to concern yourself with informing us?”

“I’m sorry my friend,” I replied. “Grilrun and I could not chance letting anyone else know. You saw what it did to the spider. Legolas suspected that the moment it perceived that we knew of its presence, it would turn on us too. We had to pretend that we did not know it was even there.”

“What they have also neglected to mention,” inserted Eldrin, “is that their mission takes them to the ruins of Scorn, being led there by tales of a dragon.

“And you believed a dragon?” inquired Pallando.

“Well no, not exactly,” corrected Khardal. “See it was actually more of a cautionary tale meant to warn the exact opposite. But we figured there is some truth to most every lie, and. . . .”

“Never mind,” interrupted Pallando. “It is of no importance now. Here, follow me,” he said while turning to exit the room. Myself, and the others promptly followed behind as he led us to a different chamber a few arches away. As we did so, the whirling smoke from Pallando’s staff followed along with us, swirling and contouring against the walls.

Finally the wizard stopped in front of what appeared to be a large half shell of an oyster on a pedestal. It was filled with water. A white mesh of thin threads hung down from the ceiling just above it, some

dipping into the oyster dish while others draped fully to the floor. Water dripping from the ceiling flowed down the mesh, which I assumed to roots from the trees above. Pallando waved his staff and the fibers retracted like curtains out of the way.

“Hold your arm over the water,” Pallando instructed. The pedestal was actually too tall for Grilrun to reach, so a chest was moved over to use as a stool. Climbing upon it, he held out his arm as instructed.”

Pallando examined it closely again. “Do you see?”, he inquired.

Grilrun looked at his gauntlet, “see what”?

“This is the pool of truth, wisdom and knowledge, a byproduct from the formation of the seas. Once there were two, . . . well two halves, and through them could be seen the entirety of all past and future. That proved too powerful and one was destroyed. Only this half remains, and as such is limited to only the present, but look down into the reflection.”

Along with the others, I stood on my toes to see, but still was too short. Grilrun looking down however, could see. “It’s all still there,” he blurted in amazement. “In the reflection, it is all still there, all those parts that I thought I had filed away.”

“Yes,” continued Pallando. “Your glove is crafted from a very strange metal indeed. All of this time, you have not been grinding it away, but rather ebbing portions of it from this realm into. . . “ Pallando paused and suddenly looked concerned. “. . . Into the twyst.” We gazed at him with expressions that demanded more.

“It is quite a feat to conjure something from nothing. It is the most ancient of magic, not repeated to my knowledge since the first making of all things.” He paused, as if attempting to figure some way to explain.

“When something is conjured from nothing, the process produces a leftover ‘un-something’. This un-something is referred to as twyst, and basically means ‘other side of a coin’. The something and the un-something get separated apart, and are kept separated, for in whatever places they ever should touch again, they will revert to back to nothing; a nothing so deep that it is as if they both never were. This is ‘weaving of the fabric of universe’ form of magic.”

“Such is the realm of a barrow wight,” continued Pallando. “They don’t feed upon life. It is more as if the life force they consume is made to feed upon them, feeds upon their death. In their bitter anguish, they seek to revert little by little back into the nothingness from which all things came, as a means of escaping their cursed state.”

“And yet,” continued Pallando with a pause, “it would take a most dark and powerful magic to merge together ‘two sides of the same coin’, in such a manner where they don’t revert back to the nothingness from which they were originally conjured. It is a dark magic indeed, one beyond my understanding to know, but one apparently accomplished here in your gauntlet.”

“To weave a hole between the very realms of creation, and then merge and maintain them, that would require an energy beyond what I know to exist. So your gauntlet exists both here and there at the same time. It is a link between realms, but for what purpose? Of that I am unsure, nor for what reason it now entices your tracker.”

At this Eldrin interrupted. “If it helps, I overheard the hag Crazule refer to a particular item called a neolgrim in a poetic prophecy she recited. What is a neolgrim?”

The face of the wizard turned pale as part of the puzzle now registered. “The neolgrim is ancient lore, to even the ancients. It is not a what, but a who! Banished to the void at the creation of all things. He must have found some way to press his influence upon middle earth, to somehow manipulate his bidding through a wight.”

Pallando grabbed the gauntlet and stuck his fingers into the empty sockets on the back of Grilrun’s hand. “If there is a silmaril left here in middle earth, then there also exists an un-silmaril in the shadow realm. If both of these were to be placed together within this gauntlet. . . .”

“This is Neolgrim’s gauntlet,” stated Pallando as the realization came to him. “It was fashioned for him, not you. With the insertion of both the silmaril and the un-silmaril held in these settings, he would have an arm here in middle earth. His dominion would be exerted over both realms, and I can think of no magic or weapon yet fashioned that would be able to stop him. This gauntlet is indestructible, the silmaril wields the very powers of creation, and

with this arm Neolgrim would have the ability to revert any opposition back into nothing. This situation is dire beyond anything we have perceived.”

At this Pallando seemed to revert to his thoughts, with the rest of us being oblivious to him. “If only Alatar was here, he would know what to do. This was never to be my task, I did not agree to it. I only followed Alatar here as a favor to him, to keep him company. We agreed, that I tend the garden and he handles the rest. But he is far away, so very far away at Rhun, or was it Belfalas.”

“Snap out of it” said Eldrin. “This is beyond what any of us bargained for, and yet here we are. The wight – or Neolgrim if it has a name, is on its way behind us, it will only be shortly delayed. He likely realizes by now that we are privy to his plans. We have to destroy it.”

Pallando came out of his daze. “Destroy it, what do you mean, the gauntlet or the wight?”

“Either, both, it does not matter. We need to do something”

Pallando looked around, “I’m missing my shoes. Has anyone seen my shoes”?

“I think we broke him,” said Brumdren.

Eldrin sighed and turned towards Grilrun, “can you get it off? Try getting it off”.

A look of horror was on Grilrun’s face. “I have tried,” he replied with tears, “when none of you were looking I have tried. It just won’t come off. It is latched on firm somehow.”

Suddenly, came the deep thundering bellows as tube horns were heard outside. Once again, Pallando came out of his daze. “The ents are under attack.” He rushed to the entrance, the rest of us following quickly behind.

There some distance away, we were aghast to see, rambling down the hillside at full speed, an assortment of spiders, some trolls, and a small army of fully armored orcs descending fast. What we had not realized upon our arrival was that the tangle of large roots we passed over before actually belonged to onodrim, and all of these ents were

now defending the valley as best they could, grabbing and smashing spiders while defending against an onslaught of orcs. The orcs hacked at them with axes and shot flaming arrows.

We looked amongst ourselves. Perhaps Pallando's wisps of staff smoke could provide some little defense against a wight, but would do little against an opposition like this. Only a few of our weapons had been recovered from the hag's residence, and just those she felt worthy of collecting for trade. This too would provide little defense.

Turning around I could see that we were surrounded from all sides, with what must be every foul creature in all of Mirkwood gathered and called to this battle, and here it seemed that Pallando had checked out again, with his biggest concern apparently pondering the location of his misplaced shoes.

**Last remaining chapter is to be read
after discovery of the
Heart of the Mountain compartment!**

Eldrin shook Pallando's arm. "Come out if it, there is no longer time for shoes, nor to destroy the gauntlet. Do you have any weapons here?"

"Weapons no, not here" replied Pallando. The wisps from his staff had started to dissipate, and he thud it on the ground causing them to again come out to swirl around our group with more force. "My poor garden. They are all thrashing it. So many years of work."

"He is no good to us", inserted Balgruim. "We should look around for something to defend ourselves with".

"Or we could just leave", replied Pallando, still in a daze. "Perhaps we should just do that instead".

"Leave, but how?" I inquired. "They are coming from all sides."

"We should take the river", responded Pallando as he turned to walk back inside.

"Aye, we have totally lost him", said Brumdren. His hand was pounding his axe against his palm as he did when mentally preparing for battle.

"No wait," I said. "Perhaps he knows something."

"But a river. . . . here. . . we are two days journey away from the nearest river," said Brumdren. But still I convinced him and the others to follow Pallando. Besides, he was taking his swirling staff smoke with him as he left.

We followed Pallando back into the structure, this time quite a ways back, past the two previous rooms. This led us somewhat downward, stopping in front of a large underground pool, flush with the floor. It too had wet roots dangling from the ceiling.

"This is not a river," said Brumdren, "and now we are all trapped down here."

Pallando shook his head. "The river is far below. This is just the pool leading down to it. Underground rivers go through here in many directions. It is why Alatar chose this location to reside. He can travel quickly to many places in middle earth, and uses the pool

of knowledge to know where and when he is needed. . . . Oh, the pool of truth and knowledge, we should bring that along too, and my shoes, where are they?”

“We don’t have time for that,” said Eldrin. “What do we do, jump in and swim?”

“Oh no, you would certainly drown,” said Pallando, “I can form a bubble around us, but first we should gather a few things. One of you should fetch the pool of truth. Just dump out the water but be careful not to break it. There is also a bag in that back room. Use it to fill up with whatever books and items you can find down that hall and meet back here.”

Pallando seemed firm that he had no intent in leaving until certain items were gathered, so we all spread out, mostly to just grab whatever seemed of importance and pile it on the floor next to the pool. Myself, I returned to the original room with the benches, for it was there that we had left my chest and journal. It was there, tucked under one of the benches that I also noticed a single pair of shoes, which I grabbed.

By the sound of it, the battle outside did not seem to be going well. By that, I mean that the loud smashing of timbers and shrill battle cries of the orcs had subsided. The ents were apparently defeated, and the sounds of orc armor could be heard banging against the archways as they entered the dwelling in search of us.

We all numbered off, as we did in the forest, just to ensure we all had returned from gathering, and Eldrin nodded to Pallando. Pallando lifted his staff, and the wisps of smoke from it dissipated. The group and items we gathered became surrounded instead by a greenish aura that enveloped from his staff. Pallando seemed exceptionally happy that I managed to locate his shoes, which more than anything seemed to be the one thing he was waiting for.

“Now which way to go,” pondered Pallando. The sound of orcs was fast approaching, and could be heard clamoring a short distance away. “Where did Alatar say he was going?”

“I don’t think it matters,” replied Brumdren, “let us just go”.

“Indeed,” agreed Pallando, “let us just go”. The aura rolled over the pool of water, pushing all of us along with it. A poorly aimed spear

from the first orc arriving crashed against the wall next to Dalgruim as our bubble descended down the water shaft, with all us in tow.

The bubble descended beneath the pool straight down until slowing to a stop with a feel like we were being tugged to my left. We were caught for a moment in the current of an underground stream before tugging yet again even lower and to one side, descending down, down, down, until a firm sensation of flow revealed we were being carried along by an even stronger current. The bubble bounced a lot, and travel was not comfortable, with all of the items we had collected bashing around together and against us.

“How long?” blurted out Brumdren.

“I don’t know”, replied Pallando, “and not really sure where we are going or will end up. Alatar usually takes care of the travel part.”

We continued bumping around in the bubble for many hours, perhaps even a day. It was difficult to tell how fast we were traveling, but at times could feel that we slowed down, only to drop or lift up and start moving fast again. Likely, there was some method of navigation, but such was lost on Pallando.

During our hours of bouncing, Grilrun’s claw managed to loosen, or perhaps like a fragment of litchaura stone, just waned in its power to grip onto him, being so far from its source of wight strength. He pried the thing off, and tossed it outside the bubble as we traveled. Eldrin thought that unwise, as it should be destroyed, but the deed was done. There is no telling where it might end up, but my hope is to be some underground cavern from which it can never return.

Eventually, we slowed once again, and it felt like we could either get snatched up by yet another current, or start lifting up again. We started lifting, and continued going up until we surfaced. Our final location was either a lake or an ocean, and I knew not which. We were some distance from the closest shore, and Pallando’s bubble pulled us towards it.

I could tell that he was exhausted, as were the rest of us, but the trip required him to maintain his aura spell over the entire group for quite a long time. I do not know if the size or duration of such a spell

has any affect on fortitude, but must assume that it requires some bit of concentration to maintain.

Upon reaching the shore, the bubble vanished and Pallando sat down. All of us found the nearest rock to lean up against, and just left our possessions where they lay in a pile. The landscape was rocky, with endless water on one side and rolling hills up the other. There was no evidence of any other beings here, but just expanses of grasslands dotted with trees. A stream weaved through it all and exited into the large waters, and it was clear water with many fish, and multicolored pebbles that sparkled like gems. Snow white kine graze peacefully on the grasses.

Eldrin pulled out the map and compass he carried to chart our position. We had traveled southeast, very far southeast, and his thoughts are that we have traveled all the way to the sea of Rhun. That would be quite a distance indeed and many weeks of travel on our way back to our home at Iron Hills. Eldrin says we could perhaps catch a merchant ship, and gain passage for most of the way up the Carnen, but the thoughts of more travel, adventure, or quests no longer appeal to me.

I record the events of the last day in my journal as I rest next to this rock. The breeze blows through my beard, tickling its hairs with the fragrance of. . . yes it is shoreberries in season, so a bit upstream must be some shoreberries trees. And here on the shore there are brushberries. They fall off in the hand as one brushes them, deep purple and tasty.

Yes, I believe I have quite had my fill of adventures, at least for a while. While the group has plans to begin their journey north, along with Pallando on the morrow, I believe I shall stay here for a while. Grilrun is also of the same mind, with plans to stay behind with me. Returning would just get us caught up in the war to regain Moria. Apparently they will have to find some other way to challenge its balrog now.

I assume that Eldrin will eventually return the Window of Manwe and necklace back to Elven Halls, and perhaps dispose of the gold pearls somewhere along



the way, as such items should probably not be kept together. My chest and journal I send back to Iron Hills with Balgruim and Dalgruim, along with my condolences to our king over the loss of his nephew Vonmus. With them I send warning of the dangers of mining particular ores. Yes, I believe I have quite had my fill of adventures for a while, and here take my peace.