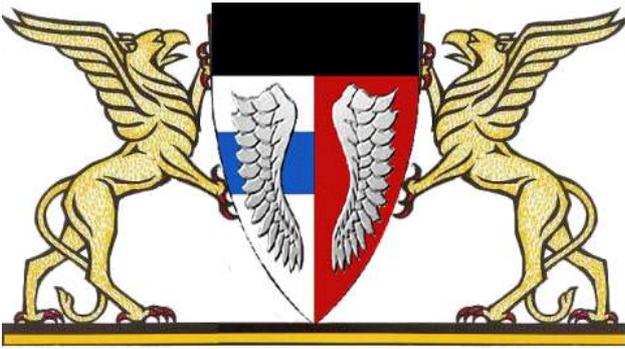


CLOCKWISE 2021_B - WOLF VON WITTING
THE GATES OF HIGHDUNGEON
A TALE OF DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS





The DUCHY of GOTHANY

Chapter 13 – More of Marl	page 3
Chapter 14 – Pegastoke	page 6
Chapter 15 – Return to Highdungeon	page 9
Chapter 16 – Umberwich	page 12
Chapter 17 – Dryadoak	page 14
Chapter 18 – Dragonbar	page 16
Chapter 19 – The Red Deer	page 19
Chapter 20 – Carrackham	page 21
Chapter 21 – Barleyhaven	page 24
Chapter 22 – Marl & Highdungeon Again	page 26
Chapter 23 – Centaur Keep	page 29
Chapter 24 – Deerwick	page 32
Chapter 25 – Orchampton	page 34
Chapter 26 – Elfminster Ministry	page 36
Other locations	page 40

The story so far:

Grendeline and Nariel, a human and an elf who age forward and backward in an endless cycle of 120 years connected to the elliptical orbit of a celestial object named Alcetyn, travel to Marl, the capital of Gothany and uncover another great mystery along the way. They bring with them a magic morningstar, which connected to an altar in the Temple of the First begins to speak. It calls itself Branwell and it knows many things. Just not many things we understand...

- Wolf von Witting -

The duchy of Gothany became independent after the first Wyvern War 193 years ago. A *Council of Twelve Cities* appoint succession of sovereign by vote. The Earl of Marl was succeeded by the Lord Commander of Centaur Keep.

Song of the Reign

*It ruled the Duke of Elfminster and Dragonbar
In peace and wisdom for sixty years
His House was blessed from near and far
And for his end each one shed tears*

*It ruled Grandmaster Wizard of Wyvernall
The years in number forty-eight
In righteous justice for one and all
And words which carried sense and weight*

*Then it ruled the Lord of Ettingrave
To his joyful fifty-seventh year
His wish for us to well behave
Is code of honour everywhere*

*Then it ruled the Earl of Marl
With iron hand and hardened soul
Twentyseven years of Brioncarl
We might as well have had a troll*

[- The Unknown Bard of Marl -]

PROLOGUE:

Grendeline, Narielle and Dielle learned many useless things from Branwell. Proth did not comment and Gwyness had a hard time to follow, while Jethro understood as much as if you had offered him the word *railway station*.

They learned that stars are distant suns, that there are inhabited worlds around some of them and that some of these worlds were *designer planets*, as their own. What a designer planet was, redefined Branwell for their convenience as *magic* worlds. The frequency with which Branwell started to use the word *magic* was disappointing.

His use of the word *science* resonated even less with them. To them it signified *to know* and it was in their mind impossible to know something one only has been told. Believing a story was faith and the label of *science* did not change this.

The High Priestess was equally disappointed and began to suspect the gods were not entirely in their right mind when they created these worlds.

Yet she was determined to make sense of the confusing information she got. Her mind was unable to process it. To clarify, she asked if it would be accurate to call the expanse between worlds an endless ocean. And Branwell willing to accommodate her answered that it was a poetically accurate interpretation. She envisioned the sky as a dome of water above their heads. And it still didn't make any sense at all where the colonists were supposed to have anchored after their long voyage. Their ship would have made landfall high up on dry land and the High Priestess knew there were only hills and forests in the area.

On the question if the ship of the colonists had come crashing down, Branwell answered with a negative. She therefore concluded the colonists had not fallen from the sky.

Grendeline didn't tell her about the great chamber of Highdungeon they had found underground.

Neither did she mention the metal dome. Mainly because only *they* knew. What they didn't know, was if common awareness of Highdungeon was a healthy knowledge to spread among races and tribes who not yet had stopped waging war on each other. There had not been any major conflict in a long time, but revealing this strategical advantage to only one side, could quickly ignite a devastating struggle for power. This secret has been wisely kept by the Council of Twelve Cities.

Branwell soon got nicknamed *the crazy oracle*, because little he said made any sense. While he himself appeared convinced of these stories, they all seemed far-fetched and didn't offer a shred of proof. No instrument existed to verify his claims.

- Electrons, my rump! Was all Jethro had to say.



CITY OF MARL

CHAPTER 13

*Erelong folk see what they can see
Regardless of the other kind
In the harmony they chose to be
Not right, nor what is left behind*

[- *The Minstrel of Dwarvendell* -]

Some folk would have to change their skin not to be identified as to what trade they had chosen. The grim faced bearded man who walked into Marl in the morning was such a person. While he was dressed like a commoner, merely by looking at him you could tell he was a wizard.

Then there are some who always fail to notice the very obvious. Such as the merchant who insisted the grim bearded man needed a new hat. He didn't take no for an answer. And as the bearded man said nothing more, he believed the hat was as good as sold. As the merchant's wife came to the market stand, her husband was nowhere to be seen. Instead there was only a cute little puppy guarding the merchandise, barking desperately at her. She never saw her man again and assumed he had run away. She didn't bother to report him missing, because she was happier without him and much preferred the company of the dog.

As a curious detail, she noticed the dog had the same eye-colour as her absent spouse and thus named the dog a diminutive after the husband. The dog responded well to the name Towy.

But this is not their story. Our attention must stay with the incognito wizard, as ordinary as he tried to appear. He carried a small box full of airholes with him. Nobody noticed him as he mingled with the crowd in the market square next to the Earl's Palace. The Earl himself didn't spend much time in it. He was a natural performer and felt his place was among people. Occasionally he spent time with the necessary politics, but he kept his serious edicts brief and generally avoided to interfere in

folk's lives. For this he was very popular. On this day he had a serious announcement to make;

- The Council of Twelve Cities have made their decision, declared Thordanal Andertan, new Earl of Marl. The next ruler of Gothany will be the Lord Commander of Centaur Keep. Since this is not a city or a town, Marl remains the capital of Gothany for the duration of his reign. The Lord Commander will honour us with a visit this month.

Folk cheered and applauded as they did for almost everything he said.

The wizard did not applaud, but this was only because he would have had to put down the box he carried.

The Lord Commander of Centaur Keep was a well known and respected soldier who had defended Gothany against many incursions from Angria. His fortress was on the border where both countries met with Northangerland. The decision to allow Marl to remain the capital, could be a sign that Thordanal was under consideration to succeed the Lord Commander, should he fall in battle.

It could also be a sign that the Lord Commander himself felt Marl was a better place for it, and that the centaur in the city's coat of arms felt closely related to his keep. The motive was not revealed.

The wizard rattled his box and peeked inside through one of the holes.

- Just wait, he said. I'll find your friend.

Proth Rokoser and Jethro Retekin were admiring the goods in Baltram Gauth's new shop. Baltram himself hammered away on something new and Ragnal Teikena was minding the shop.

It said *Arms of Gauth & Teikena* above the door, but it was the ingenuity of Gauth, which brought in the most faithful customers. Gauth on the other hand, knew he would not be able to keep his business running, had he not a reliable partner who also was skilled in book-keeping.

Jethro found a new shortbow, which felt exactly right in his hands. His aim would improve with a bow made to his preferences and Gauth knew his preferences. The deal was sealed and gold coins changed hands.

As they came back into the street, they nearly collided with the wizard. For once it was Proth who first found the appropriate words to use;

- Please excuse us, Sir.

Their gazes met. The wizard and Proth held their eyes steady on each others eyes for a half a minute, which for Jethro appeared like far too long.

- Don't bother the good man, he said and tugged in Proth's sleeve. They walked away in opposite directions, but after four or five steps Proth turned and looked back. It was just in time to see the grim bearded man doing exactly the same.

- That was a wizard, he said to Jethro.

- Oh, my!! replied Jethro, you are talkative today! Proth pointed in the direction of the man he had identified as a wizard and Jethro objected;

- Do not point a naked finger at a dressed man.

Proth tenderly slapped his forehead and insisted on Jethro looking into that direction. He did.

Now Jethro saw the four women coming towards them. His sister, Gren, Nariel and Dielle. As women often do when there are no men around, they kept chatting with each other like a flock of magpies. As the women passed the wizard Nariel fell silent. Gren, Dielle and Gwyness didn't notice. After a few steps Nariel turned and looked after the man, as Proth had done. She joined the others a moment later, when Jethro was showing off his new shortbow.

- I just saw a ghost, she said.

- Oh, goodness. You do look like someone walked over your grave, if you ever will have one.

- No, really. I'm serious, Gren.

- Who was it?

- I have seen that face before, I am sure.

- Proth believes it is a wizard, said Jethro

- Of course! Nariel suddenly ran off, trying to catch up with the man. She lost him in the crowd for a moment, but then spotted him crossing the street. He didn't know he was being followed. As Nariel had come within earshot, she shouted;

- Atatkyo!!!

The bearded man froze in his step. He turned. As he saw Nariel, his eyes widened in infinite surprise. He slowly walked towards her.

- Shshshsh!! He held an index finger to his mouth.

- Don't call me that. I don't go by that name.

They embraced.

- It was literally ages ago, Nariel.

- Yes, it was. Look, Nex, I have to introduce you to my friends. What name do you use now?

- Hm... It is time to change again, Nariel. Make something up.

- I can't make something up, Nex. I have no imagination.

- Fine, say *Nexter Grigolin*. That way you can still call me Nex.

They returned to Nariel's friends and the elf introduced her friend. As he shook hands with Grendeline, she remarked; I've heard a lot about you, Nex! I heard you were killed 84 years ago.

Atatkyo glanced briefly at the elf and turned his attention back to Grendeline.

- We have met, he quietly answered. I am sorry, I did not recognize you at once.

- Yes, we have indeed met. I look forward to hear about your escapades since then.

- Oh, I'm afraid that will be a very long story.

Dielle looked from Grendeline to Nariel, to Nex

and back to Grendeline.

- How can you be acquainted?
- It's a small world, Dielle. It's a small world.
- What's in the box? Jethro was curious.
- Mice, said Atakyo. Two blind mice.
- Blind? Why are they blind, Nexter?
- Oh, they didn't appreciate daylight. Never did.

* * *

In the afternoon Grendeline, Nariel and Nexter withdrew to the women's room in the Inn next to the Elvensong Taverna.

- I heard the Grandmaster Wizard of Wyvernall was murdered, said Grendeline.

- He was! Confirmed Atakyo. I killed him myself.

Before Grendeline or Nariel could ask how it was possible he continued; the plan to assassinate me failed. By chance their trap was sprung before I walked into it. I would have, because I didn't see it coming. But they killed my apprentice. The body could not be identified, so I feigned my own death. I was tired of ruling Gothany anyway.

- Do you know who was behind the attempt?

- Yes, I do. And I have caught two of the three. I have them with me in the box. Two former drow.

- The mice!!!?

- Indeed.

- Do these mice have an exceptionally long life span or did you catch them recently?

- Both, answered Atakyo. But they were not deprived of their amulets until fairly recently. And drow, like all elvenkind live longer than humans.

- They were immortals? Nariel was baffled.

- Yes, there appears to be something of a dog eat dog competition among immortals. They all want to be leaders of a group of six immortals. For this they kill.

- What did you do with the amulets of these drow or ...mice?

- I carry them with me. Who can I trust? He emphasized the pronoun. Neither Grendeline, nor Nariel answered the question. Grendeline took a deep breath.

- Since you are telling us, you have them, I can assume that you have at least some trust in us.

- You didn't try to kill me before. I find it unlikely that you should have changed your character.

- You said you caught two of three?

- Yes, Nariel. Only one remains to track down. The one who has eluded me is not drow, but human.

- Who is he?

- His real name is Brion Griodain, but I believe you have heard of him as Brioncarl, the first.

The two women were shocked.

- We put him outside the city gates three days ago.

- Then he can not have gone too far.

- Since you have been showing us a measure of trust, we can return the gesture by telling you, Grendeline paused, we have found Highdungeon. It is unclear how she expected Atakyo to react, but he didn't react at all how she expected.

- I have already been there. I tried all possible spells on the portal to the dome, but I was unable to open it. Now I no longer have access, since I *resigned* as Grandmaster Wizard.

- But you have not heard of Branwell, have you? Said Nariel.

- And... said Grendeline, we know how to access Highdungeon. Through the ruins of Brodweigh.

- Yes, that makes sense. Oroladian would have had an entry. But no I have not heard of Branwell. Who is he?

* * *

The Temple of the First was closing for the night as they came, but the Monk who had met them before could not very well deny them entrance, having brought the precious relic to its rightful place. Atakyo was as fascinated as they had been the first time they saw the glowing morningstar. The Monk left them alone for a while, tired of listening to the crazy oracle.

- Fantastic! And this is Branwell?

- I am Branwell, the Spirit of the Morningstar.

Atakyo's lips protruded, as if he was going to kiss it. He had no such intention. But he looked around to reassure himself only Grendeline and Nariel were listening.

Branwell addressed Atakyo instead.

- Do you have a question for me?

- Yes, Branwell. I wonder, have you ever heard of the sixty amulets?

- The Alcetyrn amulets, yes I know of them.

- Do you know how they function, Branwell?

- Yes I know.

- How?

- Magic!

Atakyo laughed out loud. Do you know where they are?

- There are five in this room, answered the bright morningstar. Atakyo backed away from the altar.

- How do you know?

- I have all of their positions.

- Apart from these five, where is the closest?

- There is one on the road between Rhûnark and Pegastoke.

- Going in which direction?

- Towards the east, to Pegastoke.

- Velocity?

- The amulet appears to be on a pedestrian.

- It means he is walking. Pegastoke is southeast

of Gnollwood. Branwell, can you estimate when he will arrive in Pegastoke?

- Late in the day tomorrow.

- Branwell, you are a treasure! Thank you! Can you also identify the person who is wearing the amulet?

- No.

- Wait!! Are there other amulets nearby?

- Define nearby.

- I rephrase. Where are the next closest amulets?

- There are two in Ettingrave and one in Firk. The one in Firk is moving out towards Wyvernall.

Atatkyo looked at Nariel and Grendeline.

- Could either of these be Brion, if he left on foot? They shook their heads.

- One final question, Branwell. Atatkyo heard the steps of the Monk in the corridor outside.

- Is there any cluster greater than five in Gothany?

- There are twelve at Oracle.

- Twelve!!! Both Grendeline and Nariel shouted in surprise, just as the Monk came into the room.

- They have been stationary since I became operational, said Branwell. They are clustered on a surface equal to my socket.

The Monk who didn't understand what the dialogue was about asked impatiently if they were finished.

- Yes, we're done. Thank you, for your patience.

Outside the Temple of the First, Nariel who didn't say much inside had an outburst;

- How is it possible, that you got all these very useful answers out of him, while we got nothing but gobbledegook?

- You said he was crazy. I asked crazy questions.

- They were not crazy at all, objected Nariel. Now we know exactly where to find the Earl... I mean the former Earl, Brion. Do you have a dimension door spell, so we can sit and wait for him in a Pegastoke tavern?

- Unfortunately, no. But how many of us are going to Pegastoke?

- That would be Nariel, you and me, Dielle, Proth, Jethro and Gwyness. We are seven.

- Then we could fly. And we would be there before he arrives.

- You can give us all wings?

- No, I am a transmuter wizard, but giving us all wings is an exhausting task. Fourteen spells to cast, if we want to return back to our human shape. I would prefer to only use two spells.

- And how do you propose to do that?

- Oh, that's simple. I turn one of you into a dragon.

Grendeline felt an inexplicable jolt of intense fear at the suggestion. Atatkyo noticed it.

- I would prefer if one volunteers.

Grendeline calmed down.



PEGASTOKE

CHAPTER 14

*The spirit unbroken of dreams in our prime
Can all come to pass when biding our time
To ne'er surrender is hard to do
But onto yourself you have to be true*

*Fly high like a bird in the sky
And may all your dreams never die*³*

[- Minstrel Lawrence of Pegastoke -]

The four women and three men left Marl at dawn to find a secluded spot where Atatkyo's magic wouldn't attract too much attention. Only Nariel and Grendeline knew what the wizard proposed to do. Atatkyo placed his box with airholes on the ground and laid out the plan to them. Surprisingly, for Grendeline, none of the four who heard the idea for the first time, were scared of the prospect of spending the day as a dragon. Dielle and Jethro were eager to do it.

- A red or a green dragon? Why not both of us?

- Because, explained the wizard, frequent and long transmutations can be harmful for the human body. We are not likely to stay for long in Pegastoke. When we are done, we may want to fly to the castle ruins of Brodweigh. Then it can be the turn of the other. After that, when need arises we can alternate between the two of you. This is healthy for both. One dragon can carry six people. Jethro suggested they flip a coin. Heads for Jethro as a green dragon and tails for Dielle as a red dragon. The coin rotated rapidly in the air before it was caught in the palm of Jethro's hand. To prevent it from bouncing and fall to the ground he covered it with the other hand. Then he stretched out both hands to let Gwyness read out the result.

- - -

*³ Last two lines borrowed from Lawrence Dean's (UK) song *First Flight*

- Tails, we ride a red dragon today. Jethro was unable to conceal his disappointment. Atatkyo pulled Dielle close to him.

- Dielle, my dear. You have nothing to fear. But before we climb up on your back, you should try your wings and fly around this field. Don't go high up, because we don't want all of Marl to see you and come running. Dielle nodded in response.

- Now... Atatkyo concentrated on the spell. As the transmutation began to take effect Dielle gave out a shout of surprise. In a few seconds the small human woman had grown to a huge red dragon.

- Off you go; urged Atatkyo her. She took a few steps with her paws to gain momentum and spread her wings. The flapping was irregular at first, Dielle not being used to have wings, but she quickly adjusted to having them.

- That's the advantage of having a volunteer, said Atatkyo. Someone who is eager to explore a new form, has an inherent ability to act like one. Don't we all say that imagination has wings?

The red dragon made a wide circle around her friends and returned to them gliding the distance before landing.

- Wohooo!!! she cheered and sneezed, projecting a sudden burst of fire towards her friends who very nearly got scorched. Jethro saved himself barely by dropping to the ground.

- Easy, Dielle!!!

- Sorry, but it is such an awesome feeling! I am a dragon!

- You believe you can carry the six of us without dropping anyone? Nariel laughed. Please, no loop, I'd get terribly nauseous.

- No loop, no roll. Besides, I would need to practice before I attempt advanced aerobatics. Grendeline was riding closest to the dragon's head and the wizard, clutching his box of mice, placed himself last on its back. Before long, the party was on their way to Pegastoke, riding the airwaves. Dielle resisted the temptation to try maneuvers. She had no good excuse to do them. The air was her domain, and her domain alone on this day.

* * *

Gnollwood stretched towards the horizon with the river Odikon separating a third of it to the west and two thirds in the east.

Pegastoke on the south-east edge of Gnollwood was visible from far. Between Pegastoke and Sevenmarl, they could also make out the small town of Rhûnark. In the west they could see as far as Merrybath by the sea. For this they had to turn their heads and twist their bodies, which they all

gave up except Jethro whose view, in front of the wizard, was best for twisting and turning. It was another dream coming true for Jethro, to soar into the sky like a bird, pegasus or a dragon.

Folk, horses and carts moving on roads and in settlements shrunk to ants from their view. It was impossible to identify individuals from the back of a dragon. Try to tell the faces of two ants apart from an upright stance if this isn't understandable for you. As they approached Pegastoke, Dielle was advised to descend to an altitude barely above the treeline. This would obstruct their line of sight with the ground, but Atatkyo reminded the cleric that it was a mutual impediment. Not many would see their approach.

Their feet made contact with the ground in a pasture generously spread with cow manure.

Because of her size and number of feet to mind, Dielle was the first to step into muck. This did not change as the wizard morphed her back to human shape, except the dirty paw had become a hand.

- Eeuw!!! But flying was fun. I would have preferred to remain dragon for a while longer.

- I know, commented the wizard. That's part of the danger with it. Trust me, it is better to change you back to human as quickly as possible. It is not only nominal power which corrupts, but real physical power as well. If you could crush a coconut with your bare hands, you wouldn't need sensible reasoning to open it. I believe we are all fond of the Dielle we have been acquainted with.

Let's not hastily embrace unavoidable seasoning. We cannot avoid changes. They come as surely as the sun rises in the morning. But when we seek shortcuts to wisdom, we are bound to tumble flat on our noses. Now we are a short walk from Pegastoke and our game does not arrive until late. Have you lot been to Pegastoke before?

* * *

Proth Rokoser, Gwyness and Jethro Retekin went for a walk into the street after dinner. Proth kept glancing towards the gates of Pegastoke.

The walls were decidedly higher than Immerhûk's and Golembard's, but not nearly as tall as the great city walls of Wyvernall.

- Why do you keep looking to the gates? Asked Gwyness. The Earl is not coming yet. We can't expect him for another two hours.

- I know, said Proth.

- His mind is working something out. I can tell. Jethro knew his friend better than anyone.

- If you were the Earl, said Proth. And by chance had spotted the dragon flying low towards the city you are heading for. What would go through your mind?

Gwyness and Jethro pondered upon the question for some time.

- I have a feeling you would feel more comfortable if we walked towards the gate, was Jethro's first comment. We do not expect anyone to eavesdrop on our conversation, but which ever conclusions we make, my gut tells me we should be outside the city.

They steered their leisurely walk towards the gate.

- He did conspire with drows to assassinate a Grandmaster Wizard who also happened to be an accomplished transmuter.

- One of the few in existence, added Jethro to Gwyness' initial thoughts.

- Yes, there was no wizard school of transmuters in Immerhük. But all the other schools.

- How do you know this, Gwyness?

- I paid attention, dear brother.

- Can we assume the Earl is a coward, but not an idiot, added Proth.

- Like everyone, he too can have gut feelings. But he must have thought the assassination of the wizard was successful. His stretch as one of the immortals began eightyfour years ago. Only in the past six years his actions have drawn significant attention to him.

- Real red dragons are known to be evil. One would not fly to Pegastoke without wreaking havoc, reasoned Jethro.

- Which means, if the folk of Pegastoke appear unaware of a red dragon having come down near the town, then it must have been a transformed being in the shape of a dragon.

The three of them hastened their pace as they passed the gates.

- How close to Pegastoke does one need to go before realizing that no dragon has demolished anything? Now Jethro got a bad feeling too.

- Nor set fire to anything, said Proth.

- Not very close.

- What would he do? He would still be miles away from any other town. Hungry. Tired. Exhausted.

- He would approach very carefully and find a way to enter as inconspicuously as possible.

- Let's hide, keep an eye on the road and who is coming and who is approaching with stealth.

- He could have sought shelter at a nearby farm. Perhaps he is not coming at all.

Proth looked up at the city wall. From up there one would have a good view of the road.

- On my way, said Gwyness and left in a hurry.

Proth and Jethro waited among the bushes until Gwyness was on the wall. She signalled for a group of four individuals approaching.

One of the four approaching men was dressed as a hooded monk and from his length and shape he could very well be the Earl. The other three were

mercenaries. One of them almost as huge as their friend Toronar. A bodyguard type.

- Why would a monk travel in the company of three mercenaries? Jethro readied his bow.

The hood was a convenient and easy disguise. He did not have to show his face.

They passed Proth and Jethro but halted between ten and twenty paces from the gate. The monk instructed two mercenaries to have a look inside the gates of town. The big guy was staying at the monk's side. Jethro assumed the wizard, Nariel, Grendeline and Dielle would be waiting inside by the wall. Possibly wondering where the three of them had disappeared to. The two mercenaries at the gate stopped in the opening and looked around.

- It's him! Said Proth. He was sure.

Jethro emerged from the hiding place and walked out into the middle of the road, shortbow pointed at the monk and his bodyguard. The two men at the gate were interested in someone standing by the gate wall, inside Pegastoke. One of them disappeared out of sight. The other shouted a suggestion to his comrade and suddenly changed his posture to prepare for a fast escape. He turned, but only made one step before he fell to the ground with a throwing knife in his thigh.

Grendeline's signature, thought Jethro. Proth was right. The monk was the Earl in disguise. He gave another instruction to his bodyguard who slowly approached the gate while he himself turned to run away. Jethro and the former Earl of Marl were face to face. Brion quickly regained his composure and called on his bodyguard to remove Jethro from his path.

Jethro fired the bow, hitting the big mercenary in his chest. It didn't stop him. The only effect was to slow him down long enough for Jethro to fire a second arrow. The second arrow was the width of a hand below the first.

The mercenary kept charging Jethro, who still had time to place a third arrow on his bow. A magic missile from the city gate hit the mercenary before Jethro could fire a third time. Nariel had just demonstrated the usefulness of the third spell she had acquired. Grendeline, Nariel and Atatkyo were standing in the Pegastoke gate.

Brion attempted to escape sideways into the bushes, but abruptly stopped when he found Proth Rokoser blocking his path.

- Please, he said. Don't hurt me!

He was back into his begging mode and gave the same pitiful impression he had made in the throne room of the Marl Palace.

Proth didn't hurt him. Jethro didn't shoot him.

The wizard approached from the gate with Nariel and Grendeline behind him and a box under his

arm. Gwyness and Dielle were standing at the Pegastoke gate.

Brion turned to face the approaching wizard.

- YOU!!! he screamed. It is not possible! We killed you! How can you be alive? I have your amulet.

- No, you don't, answered Nexus Atatkyo calmly.

- You have the amulet of my apprentice. But she was not only my apprentice. She was my best friend and companion for more than 300 years.

Atatkyo put down the box with the airholes in front of Brion Griodain and uncovered the mice. Brion looked bewildered at them. Atatkyo murmured a spell and one of the mice began transforming. Before the transformation was completed, he cast the second spell and both of Brions drow accomplices reverted back to their drow form.

Having spent a long time as mice, they still behaved like mice. One sniffed the buttocks of the other who disapproved with a squealing sound. It sounded more like a pig than a mouse.

Brion gaped at the wizard in fear. The wizard indistinctly cast a third spell and Brion felt his body transmutating. He shrieked in agony as he shrunk but there was nothing he could do to prevent his transformation into a rat. His monk costume covered him and only the splattering blood revealed that Atatkyo's boot had caught him under his heel.

He kicked aside the cloth and revealed the broken body of a rat. Its intestines were broken and exposed and its contents were flowing mixed with blood out over the gravel of the road. Then the wizard picked up the cloth and shook it. The amulet fell out. He picked it up and wiped it with the cloth. He added it to his satchel with the other.

Grendeline looked down at the writhing drow.

- What about them?

- Oh, said Atatkyo. There is not enough brain in a mouse to sustain for long the spiritual essence of a man or an elf for that matter. They gradually lost their wits. Look at them! They are no more aware than beasts. Size and memory are connected. It is the same with their stomach. I didn't feed them much and now they have no more in their belly than what they had as mice. My guess is the one who succeeds in eating more of the other could survive until tomorrow. Promptly one of the dark elves shrieked out in agony as the other started gnawing on his arm.

Grendeline turned away in disgust.

- I'm not sure I could wish for such a cruel fate for my worst enemies.

- Have you ever lost someone who you cared about more than you cared about your own life?

- No. But I wouldn't know. I'm damned to forget.

- Ah, that can be convenient.



HIGHDUNGEON

*Carelessly fly, like birds in the sky
They say is to be, happy and free
While birds on the ground
Where they also are found
Are exempt from this claim
Though they are the same*

[- The Blackhove Bard -]

CHAPTER 15

They talked about flying to the ruins of Brodweigh, Oroladian's fortress at Toweridge, when Gwyness happened to mention the long red-ochre corridor. She dreaded walking the long distance down the seemingly endless corridor.

Nexus Atatkyo was confused.

- What do you mean, endless corridor?

- We walked along that corridor for several hours, clarified Grendeline.

- Several hours!!!? So it is broken.

- Broken?

- Yeah, the Highdungeon corridors are spatially distorted. You walk at a rate of a mile per minute underground. Except in the Gallery of Heroes. The burial site has the same ratio as movement above ground.

- Are you saying one can go from Carrackham to Xanthingen in fifteen minutes? It's a two weeks journey!

- More like four hours, forty minutes. If the town of Xanthingen is connected to Highdungeon. I'm not sure it is, Gren. There is no corridor that long.

- But that's faster than flying, remarked Dielle.

- I thought you already knew this.

- No, said Nariel. Of 31 corridors to choose from, we picked a broken one. That is our usual luck.

- No, it's not, objected Grendeline.

- Still, there must have been some residual force in effect. Maybe the corridor is only functional at one end. Perhaps we can repair it, speculated the

wizard. Or we could find the Pegastoke entrance. This town ought to be connected.

- Sounds like fun. Let's do that! Suggested Nariel.

* * *

Pegastoke was not ruled by a single supreme master, but by the Bardic Circle. Among them was Minstrel Lawrence, who informed the party of Grendeline, Nariel and Atakyo, that the town had no dungeons, but catacombs which could only be accessed through the Temple of Raahl.

These catacombs were rarely visited for any other purpose than burial. The most distant tombs from the entrance were already filled and in these days there was no need to explore the catacombs to their widest extent.

- The temple is devoted to the Sungod, said Gwyness to her brother who knew little about who was who in the pantheon of gods. The only gods he was interested in were the patrons of trees, the forest and a few other divinities whose main concern was the preservation of nature.

- I knew that, said Jethro, who also was aware that there would be no nature without the sun.

- Listen, Lawrence, said Grendeline. Have you ever heard of, or seen, a heavy wooden door below in the catacombs?

The minstrel had not heard of such a door, but he knew who, if anyone, would have.

- Brother Gogoshar of the temple. He is caretaker of the tombs. He spends much time down below.

The Temple of Raahl was near the western wall of Pegastoke, not far from the gate and the road where the wizard had stepped on the former Earl of Marl. They were shown to the stairway leading down to the catacombs and told brother Gogoshar was most likely to be found underground. They lit torches from a crate of supply at the stairway, because only Nariel had natural darkvision.

The caretaker of the tombs was nowhere to be seen or heard. They hollered into the corridors and Nariel heard a distant reply.

- He's coming, she said.

Brother Gogoshar lit a torch for their benefit as he approached them. The caretaker was an old and short hunchbacked man with no hair on his head but a few strands of grey hair hanging down from the sides. He was wearing a dusty plain brown robe.

- The wooden gate? Gogoshar peered at them peevishly. It's locked! It's been locked for ages. No one knows where the key is. We tried picking it, we tried magic spells. Nothing can open the gate. But I sure would like to know what's behind it.

- Can you show us in the direction nonetheless?

- That way! Brother Gogoshar pointed westwards.

- I thought so, said the wizard.

- Do you have a key?

- No! Grendeline was surprised by the question.

- Why would we...

- Be so kind and show yourself out, when you're done, interrupted the caretaker. He trodded off, back into the corridor he had come from.

- Strange man, commented Dielle.

They went down the corridor to the west, passing a pile of skulls deposited in a niche of the northern wall. The burial chambers had no doors but low gaping holes. In one burial chamber of the south wall a few candles were burning low.

The gate to Highdungeon, a heavy wooden door was five to ten paces down the corridor in the west wall after the corridor turned south. They gathered in front of it. It was the same kind of gate Grendeline and Nariel had seen at Immerhük.

- The door is warded against spells, said Atakyo, but here... He examined an area in the middle of the door in front of him, slightly higher up than his eyes and half of his hand disappeared inside the wood. From a compartment with an illusionary cover, he brought forth a metal item.

- Here is the key! He held it triumphantly up.

- Easily accessible from both sides, he added.

Then he unlocked the door and opened it. The door swung creakingly open. The wizard made an inviting gesture.

- You are not going to need the torches anymore.

Before the wizard could impress them with his knowledge about Highdungeon any further, Nariel had already stepped up to one of the torches mounted to the wall of the corridor and rotated it in its socket. An ochre coloured corridor lit up as far as they could see into it.

- Follow me, said the wizard and took a few steps into the corridor. He suddenly disappeared out of sight. Grendeline, Nariel, Dielle, Proth, Jethro and Gwyness were staying closer together. As they followed Atakyo in his step, the wizard appeared in front of them as suddenly as he had vanished.

- If we stay in a group, we don't lose sight of each other, he explained.

They were prepared, but no less surprised when they found themselves back in the great chamber of Highdungeon in less than one hour.

- It worked!!! shouted Gwyness.

The only one who wasn't the least impressed was Nexus Atakyo. He travelled down the corridors many times.

* * *

Atatkyo cried out in disappointment.

- Oh, no! You tried to pick up the book!
- Yes, said Grendeline. It crumbled in my hands.
The wizard sighed.

- Well, to be honest, I made the same mistake. There was another book. *The Country of the Blind* crumbled in my hands. I was trying to find a spell which could prevent this from happening.

- You didn't find one, did you, Nex? It was only Nariel who called him Nex.

- No, not yet. But it should have been possible.

Grendeline put her hand inside the grove next to the octagonal portal on the metal dome. She pulled and pushed at the horizontal metal bar with the same result as before. It didn't budge. Then she attempted to rotate it. This movement was possible, but without any immediate result. She rotated it a full turn and the door gave off a soft rubbing sound.

- It's working, screamed the wizard excited.

Grendeline rotated the bar clockwise half a turn until it ran into resistance. Then she started rotating it counterclockwise in which direction it turned without obstruction. The two sides of the door slowly separated and disappeared into the side of the dome.

- Go on! Urged the wizard. Don't stop.

Grendeline had to rest her arm in between. The portal was half open but barely wide enough for them to squeeze through. She rotated it until the door had completely retracted into the walls.

Inside the portal was a short metallic corridor, it was octagonal like the portal itself. At the end of the short corridor was another door.

Grendeline, Nariel and Atatkyo climbed inside.

- There is no keyhole, observed the wizard.

- Here is a panel with buttons, said Nariel pointing to the wall next to the door.

There were six large buttons on the panel. Two yellow and two orange buttons with symbols, one red and one green.

- Press a button, see what happens!?! The wizard suggested, keeping his hands by his sides.

Grendeline pressed the left of the two yellow buttons on top. Nothing happened. Then she pressed the other yellow button and a female voice said something none of them understood.

- It sounded like a warning, Gren.

Neither the green button appeared to result in any visible reaction. The red button caused the female voice to repeat the *warning*.

The left orange button caused the outer doors to emerge from the walls. It began closing. Jethro quickly stepped in between. He, Proth and the clerics had been watching them from outside.

- Let's not get separated, he said and heard the female voice making another statement, different

from the first two warnings. The doors appeared to react to Jethro's interference and retracted back into the sides of the dome. The last orange button appeared to have no function.

- Perhaps you have to press the buttons in a certain order? Atatkyo was puzzled.

- Or perhaps you have to press some buttons at the same time, speculated Nariel.

Grendeline tried combinations, but which ever she tried resulted in either the *warning* message to be read or the outer door trying to close. Every time their friends at the outer door prevented it from shutting them inside.

But the inner door didn't open.

- We have to ask Branwell what it means.

Grendeline had now heard the warning message often enough to repeat it, even if she didn't understand a single word of it.

- Very well, said Atatkyo disappointed. We have to come back here.

Grendeline banged at the door with her fist. She too, was disappointed. Her banging was a loud hollow thump. But the door didn't open.

- Where do we go from here? The elf, the wizard and the old lady came back out.

- We have almost 30 exits to explore, said Dielle.

- Is there one to Hibernau?

- No, said the wizard immediately.

- Back to Marl, to consult the crazy oracle?

Jethro was as eager as Gren and Nexus to solve the riddle of the inner door.

- Elfminster? Asked Dielle who wanted to go back home.

- Hm... I think so. It should be in the north wall. But let me take you to Umberwich first.

- Umberwich!?! Why Umberwich?

- Because it is where I have my house. I would like to pick up a fresh spellbook for Nariel, a wand and a special quarterstaff. And... he glanced at Nariel, some scrolls of first level spells which could come in very handy for her. I believe she is ready to expand her range.

Nariel nearly jumped for joy at hearing this.

- Yes, let's go to Umberwich, Gren.

Dielle Uryens sighed.

- I have had enough adventure for a while. I would like to go home. Her friends looked at her in surprise.

- Anyone else, who would prefer going back home to Hibernau? Grendeline looked at Proth and the siblings.

- You can go, if you want to, Dielle. You know how to find the key to the gate. You have coins enough to buy a horse and the road from Elfminster to Hibernau is quite safe.

- Just do not include Highdungeon in your tale of adventures, warned Atatkyo.



UMBERWICH

*Home, where my thoughts escapin'
Home, where our music's playin'
Home, where my cat lies waitin'
Silently for me...*

*Tonight I'll sing our songs again
I'll see you all, but don't know when
And all the words come back to me
In shades of mediocrity
Like emptiness in harmony
I need some beer to comfort me*

[- Minstrel Simon of Pegastoke -]

CHAPTER 16

They accompanied Dielle to the Elfminster exit and said their goodbyes. Grendeline and Dielle embraced in a long hug.

- We will see each other again, this I know, Dielle.
- Yes, Gren. Gothany unexpectedly got smaller. Come and see me between adventures. I will be in the temple.

- Where we first met, long time ago.

- Or I may be pulling weed in your garden, Gren.

The torches in the corridor lit up, revealing another ochre coloured passage. The Elfminster gate was out of sight and so was Dielle as she stepped into the corridor a few paces.

Grendeline never knew she turned to look back.

Then Dielle continued determined forward.

- Well, said Nexus Atakyo, this resolves one of my quandaries. I am glad no one had to die for it to be solved.

- What? Grendeline had no idea what he was talking about. Neither had any of the other.

- We can debate it in my house, Gren. This way, my friends.

Grendeline noted that the wizard for the first time included all of them when he used the word.

The Umberwich exit was in the east wall. The town was, as Grendeline was aware, towards the border of Zamorna.

Umberwich was a dark city. Most of direct daylight was blocked by the mountains in the east and by its narrow streets. Many houses were dark brown with black wooden beams. It was a city of gloomy folk. Their melancholy was contagious and even Jethro, who was trying to always wear the hint of a smile on his face appeared morose.

- Why do you choose to live in such a dreary place, Nex? Nariel didn't understand it.

- Because, said the wizard as he opened the front door to his house, it is a good hiding place. And indoors, you don't feel the difference. At all.

Jethro's face lit up instantly as he entered. The wizard had decorated his home in bright colours and with interesting items everywhere. Copper and brass items, a few beautiful paintings of the land and beautiful white porcelain figurines. It was already cozy before Atakyo lit the fireplace.

He appeared in contrast to outdoors more jovial and friendly than they ever had seen him.

- First things first, he said and opened a chest of various content. Here is the spellbook for Nariel. He handed it over to the elf.

- And here are some scrolls of first level spells you can add to your new book, *sleep, charm, identify, chromatic orb* and... ah, what is this? I have no use for this rubbish... He tossed a scroll aside.

- This one, *find familiar*. Oh, perhaps you can have use of this one also; *shield*. Nariel suddenly more than doubled her hold of spells.

- You are the one who taught her *featherfall*?

- Indeed, answered the wizard. Who is hungry, I have a magic storage facility. He opened a hatch in the floor and went downstairs.

They heard him hum and rummage below.

- It is always cool down here. All around the year! He shouted upstairs.

- That's not magic, that is in the nature of basements, since daylight doesn't reach it and cool air is heavier than hot air, said Jethro.

- Is it? The wizard's head appeared in the hatch.

Perhaps you're right. He held up the hind leg of a boar. It was deep frozen.

- How do you explain this, my friend?

- Oh, magic, answered Jethro. Wand of frost or something similar.

- Fact is, said the wizard. If we heat it, it will be as fresh as the day we caught it.

- That is useful magic, commented Grendeline.

The wizard prepared them a meal. He did enjoy cooking as much as any innkeeper. Showing Proth where plates, glasses and cutlery were to be found, he expected his guests to prepare the table. And so they did.

After dinner he leaned back in his chair and lit a pipe.

- My friends, he said. I have been thinking. Grendeline was thinking about his more frequent use of the word *friend* and wondered if he meant it or if it merely was meant to make them feel more comfortable.

- Proth, I think you should improve your skillsets with useful knowledge the *Rouge's Guild* best can teach you.

- Such as... ?

- Lockpicking, pick pockets...

- I am not a thief, interrupted Proth.

- I know, answered the wizard. All the same. And he continued his list of useful skills he felt Proth could acquire; setting and detecting traps...

- Yes, I agree to that.

- And Jethro... do you believe the *Ranger's Guild* has anything they can teach you?

- I don't know. This remains to be seen. Jethro was still chewing on a slice of the boar.

- This is what you wanted to talk about, Nex? Nariel felt something more was coming.

- No, I had something else in mind.

- And what would that be? Grendeline felt Nexus was about to reveal it.

- I have been alone for a long time, the wizard explained. Now I have completed my revenge. It was irritating me the three of you were nowhere in sight in Pegastoke. He was referring to Jethro, Proth and Gwyness.

- Then I was delighted to find you had taken the initiative to go outside town. We had Brion surrounded on all sides. Now I have three amulets in my satchel. Gren, Nariel and I are already wearing one. As there were four of you, I didn't know which three I should give the amulets. But if you want immortality, or more correctly, die young in a violent death somewhere in the foggy distance of the future, then I would offer them to you. The room fell silent.

- We are already young, said Gwyness. What would it do to us, if we wore such amulets?

- That's a very good question, said Atakyo. Not much, to be honest. Because Alcetyn is moving towards us, you wouldn't notice not much at all.

- Are you sure about this? Asked Grendeline.

- Absolutely sure, said the wizard. We tried this with my apprentice, who also was my friend and companion for 300 years. You will not begin to age before Alcetyn is moving away again.

- Nearly fifty years from now?

- Yes, but meanwhile you will need less sleep. If you want to sleep, you can. It doesn't prevent you from resting. But if wounded you will regenerate faster, you will need less food and should you lose a bodypart, an arm or a leg, it would grow back

over a few years. Just try to stay attached to your heads.

- So we are not turning into toddlers? Gwyness had no other worries.

- No. That is not going to happen. You will also be immune to spells like *charm*, *sleep*, *confusion* and *dire charm*.

- What do you ask in return? Proth leaned back in his chair, expecting the wizard to reveal another great secret.

- I will ask nothing in return. I only wish the five of you will join me at Oracle, some fifty years from now. This is naturally an impossible promise to make. But I hope by then we will be even better friends and that you will have the same questions Nariel, Gren and I have.

Jethro laughed.

- I don't believe this! We are being offered... He hesitated to use the word... *immortality*, and you expect nothing from us in return?

- When you have come to my age, said Atakyo, you will understand. It is easy to accumulate wealth. Look around you. My house is full. What more can I wish for? It is much more difficult to rid oneself of things. Property is a burden. You have to be afraid it can be stolen. These porcelain figurines are the only items I have left reminding me of my companion, he gestured towards the white figurines. I have ruled Gothany. I have lived more than 500 years... What can I expect you to do, if I give you the amulets? Will you stab me in the back?

- No, said Jethro.

- No, said Proth. If I stab you, you see my eyes.

- Not likely, said Gwyness. I don't use knives for stabbing. I smash heads with my mace.

- The offer is on the table. Or more precisely, in my satchel. No need to answer now. Think it over.

- No need to think it over, said Jethro. I'm in.

- So am I, said Gwyness.

It was quiet for a minute, because Proth nodded in response. He was as convinced as his friends.

Atakyo tossed the satchel on the table between Gwyness, Jethro and Proth who sat opposite to them. Slowly they each pulled an amulet out of the satchel and held it in their hands. It was the symbol of a star surrounded by ancient glyphs in a wheel. Jethro was the first to hang one around his neck. Then Gwyness and last Proth who let it slide inside his gown.

- You should never wear it on the outside, warned Nariel. Few know what it is, but those who do, may not hesitate to chop off your heads. With it, comes also the problem of not aging. You would have to explain that to your family.

- Our parents are dead, answered Jethro. We were living with our grandmother until we left the

village. He nodded to Proth. So did he. We have cousins in Hibernau, but they are not as close as the three of us always have been.

- Now it is the six of us, said Grendeline. And other than the six of us will be difficult to trust with this knowledge. We are not likely to betray each other. At least I hope so. If Nex had other plans, he wouldn't give those amulets to you.

The wizard puffed on his pipe again.

- We go and see Branwell tomorrow? Gren, do you still remember the words in the small corridor of the metal dome? Grendeline repeated them.

- We could go today, she added.

- I have many rooms in this house. Nariel and I have a few things to talk about. I need to show her some wizardry things.

- I wonder how Celtine is doing, murmured Gwyn.

- She is probably still sweeping floors in the archmage's tower and hasn't learned a spell yet, said her brother. And Proth nodded.

- Rowald will be surprised to see us so soon again, said Gren. Doesn't it arouse suspicion to appear in a town with intervals too near to each other in time? He wouldn't believe that we have been in Pegastoke and Umberwich. He would barely expect us to have reached Rhûnark, had we not been carried on the wings of a dragon.

- Yes, you can't tell him, assured the wizard. That would be unwise.

- The same goes for all of our friends in Marl, said Nariel. We can't tell anyone of them. Not that we have anything to fear, but they would be confused and could ask the wrong person for answers. We could tell them not to do that, but they would still be confused, because we can't explain to them how we travel so fast.

- Up in the north we have plenty of horses, but even at horse speed, we could not explain it. A horse can only make between 25 and 35 miles in a day, said the cleric.

- We make 25 miles in 25 minutes, said Jethro.

- If you have the patience, then I have it, said the wizard with a smile. Tomorrow should be *under the oak-celebration* in Dryadoak. We could go to Dragonbar in the morning and fly from Dragonbar to Dryadoak by green dragon. It would give Jethro an opportunity to try his wings. With an amulet he is less likely to become voraciously hungry upon landing. It should be safe. And the celebrations are a wonder to behold. I have been there before and I was delighted.

- Yesss!!! Jethro was enthusiastic about the idea. So enthusiastic that no one wanted to spoil his fun.

- I guess, said Grendeline, we can delay our trip back to Marl for a while. She watched Jethro jump up and perform a short jig-of-joy.



DRYADOAK

*If men were meant to travel these ways
We come to see you one of these days
Long distance we have been
Across all of the land*

*We're born of dust and flame
No men can tell our name
But if you ask we say
We are the children of the stars*

[- Bard Staphân Mosnor of Dragonbar -]

CHAPTER 17

When Nexus Atatkyo transformed Jethro back to his human form, the young *ranger* (as he proudly considered himself), was overflowing with emotion and words. He described flying as a most superb experience and recommended it to his friends, who were not convinced by his enthusiasm, but at least were giving it some thought.

- Black dragon next? Jethro punched his friend in the side. Proth just smiled.

- Or a yellow dragon, Gwyn? He tried to encourage his sister to share the experience.

- Yellow dragons are extremely rare, said Atatkyo. We should be careful with that.

Jethro stopped and looked down at his clothing.

- Why do we transform into dragons with our clothing on and then back to human form, while Brion and the drow slipped out of their clothes?

- Good question, Jethro. Gren was impressed.

- Because, said the wizard, this is not the same spell. I am happy you asked. Transforming a man with all his gear requires a higher level of spell casting, which most transmuters never achieve.

- I sense a certain pride, Nex.

Nariel had learned her new spells on the previous evening, while her friends were playing dice.

- It is so! Atatkyo tried to brush it away to make it a mere statement of facts.

- We know you are the greatest transmuter of all time, Nex. I am just glad we have you on our side.

- So am I, agreed Grendeline.

The celebration *under the oak* was an annual occurrence in Dryadoak. The village honoured the oak and the dryad, from which it lent its name.

Folk came from Dragonbar and from as far away as Elfminster to attend. They set up tents around the mighty oak and plucked their musical instruments. It was a festival of song, dance and comical as well as dramatical performances.

Aspiring sorcerers were showing off amusing cantrips, jugglers impressed with their dexterity and local merchants were displaying their goods. Commerce could not stay far away from a well visited event such as this.

Atatkyo advised his friends to only speak of him as Nexter Grigolin. He shook some hands and joked with familiar faces in a very unwizardlike fashion. He was wearing the same face, but it was not the same serious face they were used to. Only Nariel had seen him relaxing like this before.

- Only for this it was worth coming here, said the elf and bit into an apple.

- Yes, agreed Grendeline.

- I was not speaking of the apple, Gren.

- Neither did I.

The bard Staphân Mosnor was there with his lute. He plucked it softly and performed a song he had written in honour of the celebration. It was a little bit sad, but also a reminder of the joy of this time and with hopes it could last for ever.

- Nothing lasts forever, sighed Gwyness.

- *We ate and we drank, like pigs from a trough,* sang the bard. *Regardless where we came from, we sang anyhow...*

- Beautiful song! Commented Grendeline.

- Oh, my goodness, exclaimed Jethro. He spotted the dryad, or if it was a maid from Dragonbar in the honorary role of a dryad. She was beautiful!

- The most beautiful girl I've ever seen, he said.

- Her beauty will fade, but you will stay the same, warned Atatkyo with a low voice. Don't fall in love!

- If it is the real dryad, she will stay the same for many years, said Gwyn. It is difficult to say if she is the nymph of the tree or not.

From the crowd a man with a shadow over his face approached the wizard. It was not a real shadow, but something Grendeline perceived as a darkening of his features. It could be worry, she thought.

- Sir Grigolin, he called out to the wizard. May I have a word? Atatkyo agreed convivially. Nothing seemed able to ruin his good mood on this day.

- I don't know who to turn to. Forgive me for approaching you with my trouble.

- Think nothing of it, said the wizard and invited the man to go on. What is your trouble?

- My daughter should be here, but she has

disappeared. She was with her friends...

- Are you sure? Perhaps she is playing a game of hide and seek?

- Show me! Where did she disappear? asked Jethro resolutely, ready to investigate.

- The man willingly led them to the friends of his daughter, two girls. They were distinctly upset.

- She went into the bushes, one explained. Out of sight from the crowd.

- We heard a... sound...as if she was crying out for help and her mouth was being covered. We ran as fast as we could to find her father.

- Where exactly did she disappear into the bushes, asked Jethro. They showed him. Jethro examined the ground. He took a few steps into the undergrowth and disappeared out of sight.

- Two men, wearing boots dragged her away, he said. Nariel, if you would be so kind and follow me. The rest of you, why don't you continue to enjoy the celebration?

Grendeline laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

- They will find her and bring her back fast, she reassured him. Jethro and Nariel had already disappeared among the bushes and trees. Why did you think of asking Sir Grigolin?

- He comes here every year. I know him, he likes to help when he can. And you, I don't recognize you, but you look fearsome. There is no city militia near, who else could I ask?

- You were right to come to us, Atatkyo said.

They were waiting less than half an hour before Jethro and Nariel returned, with the girl in tow. Her clothing was torn and her hair was in a disarray, but she was unharmed. When she saw her father she fell into his arms and sobbed quietly.

- What happened?

- Two soldiers in the uniform of Zamorna.

- From Zamorna? They are far into Gothany.

- Not anymore, said Nariel. Now they are raptor-food.

- Raptors! Here? What kind of raptor?

- My guess is, it was a mimeoraptor, because we didn't see it until it jumped the men who were trying to run away.

- From the raptor?

- No, from us.

- Shouldn't we hunt down and kill the beast?

Gwyn had a concerned look on her face.

- I don't think we need to do that, said Nariel.

Apart from it being extremely dangerous. But now it has food for days and it is likely to move on.

But the soldiers.. What were they doing here?

- Could it have been deserteurs?

- Yes, possibly. Or scouts.

- In that case they will not be doing any reporting.

- No Gren, but it is very peculiar.

- We should warn folk, that a mimeoraptor has

been seen in the area.

- Tomorrow, said the wizard. Let's not spoil their fun today. The predator will eat the soldiers and it would not come out in the open while we're here. Mimeoraptors are solitary hunters. They migrate fast and far across the land. It could be in Zamorna by tomorrow. There shouldn't be a thing to worry about. But, he paused. Perhaps we should advise those who need to relieve their bladder or more to use the bushes downwind. Most already have the wisdom to do that.

- Can you see to it, good man? They gave the mission to the man whose daughter they just had saved. He was happy to oblige.

Nariel suddenly laughed out loud.

- What is funny?

- No nothing, really. It just occurred to me that one of the soldiers died with his trousers unbuttoned up front and his willy hanging out.

- Well, said the wizard, tilting his head. We often have coming what we deserve.

- Friends, said Grendeline. Do you know what I would like to do tomorrow?

- How could we, if you don't tell us, Gren?

- Tomorrow I would like to visit the tavern in Dragonbar. The whole town got its name after it.

- Yes, that is correct, confirmed the wizard. In the beginning there was only that tavern in the area. Now there is an entire city around it.

- You know, Nex... I knew that. I don't know how, but I knew it. I've been there, but I have no picture in my head of what it looks like.

- It could be a good opportunity to sit and listen to what gossip is being spread now. Perhaps we may even get a clue as to why those soldiers were in the vicinity, said Nariel.

- But today, said Nexus Atatkyo, let's just enjoy this celebration. Drinks for all of you. On me, he brought out his purse and wiggled it. Hear the lovely sound of loose silver coins.

Proth put a hand on his purse but Grendeline stopped him. Don't ruin the fun for him, Proth. If he wants to buy, let him buy. Save your gold for later. Proth only nodded very slightly.

As most of the time, he didn't say a word.

- Sometimes I get the impression our man in black can't speak, said the wizard.

- I can, answered Proth.

- Aaaah...! And what about our lady in black, can she sing?

Grendeline felt uncomfortable with this question.

- That depends on what you understand as being able to sing. I can repeat the words of a song and in my ears it sounds like singing, but in your ears it could sound like advanced torture, because I have often been told I can't hold a note.

The wizard in reply burst into laughter and song.



DRAGONBAR

*Let memory not become too vague
How Wyverns once spread like the plague
And raiding village, farm and land
'Till they were vanquished by our hand*

*The sky was dark and slain our king
The sun was blocked by Wyvern wing
We gathered all from near and far
To make a stand at Dragonbar*

*The battle raged in days of old
And thousands died, we have been told
Ferociously we fought the beast
Remaining few fled to the East*

*We can not let them multiply
I tell you this, I'll tell you why
They may return, we don't know when
But we may have to fight again*

[- The Mad Bard of Barleyhaven -]

CHAPTER 18

The Dragonbar Inn was at the heart of the city. It had everything. Over time, several workshops were attached to the original structure. Butcher, tanner, brewery, pottery, bakery and more. Behind the Inn were enclosures of venison, boar and beehives. The fisherman brought his catch every morning and the fresh fish was salted or smoked. Onion, cucumber, tomatoes, dill and parsley were grown in local gardens. Egg and dairy products were traded by surrounding farmers. Trade within Dragonbar was done traditionally in food and work as much as in coin. Only traders from distant places with exotic fruits and spices, asked for silver and gold coin in return. The city was prospering and food was a pride of folk to have in variety and abundance. Naturally, the Inn was the most famous and reputable in Gothany.

The Innkeeper, Haribald Rifkin was a jolly big man with an impressive belly and a good sense of humour. Rifkin's beer was the best to be found in all of Gothany. *Only the best*, was his motto. This referred to the produce he was willing to serve in his tavern, as well as what he offered and with fair price obtained in return. In the evening he was enjoying to serve his own beer in his own tavern. He had a huge family of three sons and seven daughters. The youngest, a girl of twelve, was already learning to wait on tables, taking orders and carrying light trays. His eldest son, Harl, was responsible for the adjacent butcher and tanner. The eldest daughter, Marla, was making sure the fourteen guest rooms upstairs were to complete satisfaction for travellers.

Upon arrival, Proth made sure they would have two rooms with three beds for the night. Marla led Proth, Jethro and Gwyn upstairs to present the accommodations, while Grendeline, Nariel and Nexus Atatkyo remained at the bar, tasting the Innkeeper's famous beer.

- Sometimes my customers stand around packed like herrings in a barrel, explained Haribald Rifkin. His business was flourishing. It was afternoon, but the tavern was already crowded. By the evening it would be full.

- We should spread out, later, and hear the tales travellers bring from far, suggested the wizard.

- Of particular interest will be what is happening in Zamorna. Perhaps we can better guess what two of their soldiers were doing here.

Grendeline didn't appear to be listening.

- Gren? The lady in black was snapped out of her thoughts.

- We can guess what their soldiers were doing here, yes. I heard that. Then she added;

- If I'm right, we can ask their captain. That officer over there, she pointed, looks to me like a military captain of Zamorna. He was in the company of three of his men.

- Perhaps, before we ask them about their men, I could eavesdrop on the conversation. We might get answers to questions we would not have thought of asking. No ears were better suited for eavesdropping than the ears of an elf. Nariel didn't have to stand close to them to listen in on what they discussed. She could hear them over a distance they most likely were unable to imagine. Not every elf had the same delicate hearing, but Nariel could also focus on sound at a particular pitch, range and their distribution by air currents. She positioned herself in a corner where the conversation of the soldiers bounced off the wall. One of the soldiers was worried about wyverns near his home town. He hoped they could return to Zamorna shortly.

- As soon as we have caught our two deserters, the captain assured him. We can't have our troops running off in these troubled times. The wyverns have taken all the land in and around Spiderwood.

- Why don't we ask Gothany for help? One of the soldiers inquired. They defeated wyverns once, they can do it again.

- It has been on the table. But that was a long time ago and no one living today remembers it.

- But if the wyverns expand to the west of the forest, they also come back into Gothany. It will become their bother one more time.

- In that case, we would be lucky. But we haven't exactly had the best relationship in the past.

Nariel listened a while longer, but none of their dialogue shed any more light on their intentions.

She returned to Gren and Nex to give them the gist of what she had heard.

Proth, Jethro and Gwyn came downstairs and joined the bustle.

- Well then, we don't need to ask them anything, but it would be helpful to them, if we gave them a crude map of where to find the remains of their deserters. I believe the mimeoraptor would not have eaten their swords and chainmail.

With this issue resolved they felt it was in place to simply enjoy the evening. Only Grendeline was concerned how bad it could get if the wyverns were to return west of Spiderwood.

Proth and Jethro watched four guests playing a game of dice at one table. They had not seen this particular game before. They used *six dice*.

Every time a *one* or a *five* came up in a roll, it counted one hundred or fifty points. If *three of the same number* came up in one roll, it counted one hundred times the dots on the die, except for *three times one*, which counted as 1000.

At every roll a minimum of one die needed to be set aside and in every roll points needed to be scored. If a roll ended without points, then all the set aside points were forfeited.

If all six dice yielded points, lets say three fours, two fives and a one, makes 600 points, then the player was allowed to continue with all the dice. But it was crucial to know when to stop rolling. It was unlikely, but possible, to score nothing, even with six dice. But the written down scores, when a player stopped in time, were kept.

Who first reached 5000 points won the game.

- Simple, said Proth.

- We can play this on the road, when we rest, said Jethro who was missing their game-creator Nevis. Kodari knew lots of games with cards, dice and easy to create on-the-ground-boards. This game was easy enough, quick to learn and fairly entertaining.

- And Gwyn is tired of playing Jazzie all the time.

Nexus Atakyo noticed his friend Grendeline was worried. He put down his mug of Haribald's beer and looked at her.

- You know what I would do? If I had any say...

Grendeline looked at him.

- What?

- I would send the Archmage of Immerhûk with some of his mages to Spiderwood on a day the wind is blowing towards the east.

- And then?

- I would let them send a number of fireball spells into the forest and burn it all down. That should take care of all the wyvern eggs in the area.

- I've been thinking about that, she answered. It could also happen on a day the wind blows east. But we wouldn't be starting the fire.

- If they have any common sense, their wizards should do it when the wind blows south...

- At any rate, it will unleash the wrath of all the fully grown wyverns.

- If I understood correctly what Nariel overheard, Zamorna already experiences their wrath.

- As we did once, added Grendeline.

- As we did once, echoed the wizard and gulped the last of his beer. Then he shoved the mug over to Haribald's side and pointed at it.

The barkeeper was already filling another mug.

- Tomorrow we will be back in Marl, talking with the Crazy Oracle, the Spirit of the Morningstar.

- Sometimes Branwell almost makes sense, Nex. You certainly found good use of what he knew.

- A cluster of twelve stationary amulets at Oracley, remembered Atakyo. Should we try to find them?

- What happens if an old person receives an amulet when the star is on its journey away from us?

- It should be the same as with everyone else, speculated the wizard. The process of aging is halted until it is *in tune* with Alcety. No one who has worn one has ever died of old age.

- I was close enough to dying, said Grendeline.

- But you didn't die. Obviously.

* * *

Dragonbar's gate to Highdungeon was located under an inconspicuous shrine devoted to the deity of dragons. The faith had no more devoted followers in the city and the shrine had been abandoned for decades. Yet, for being abandoned it was still in a remarkably good condition. No one was guarding it and no one had seen the party exiting it. No one was interested who entered it or why. No one noticed the six travellers who went inside the following morning and disappeared.

No one noticed the travellers who later in the day

appeared in the dungeon under Marl City Palace. Not immediately anyway. But the guards who were posted at the entrance to the dungeon were immeasurably surprised to hear footsteps from below. One of them was Toronar Ryotakin. He was happy to see his friends again, but tied to regulations which demanded him to bring the six travellers to their captain. They followed him willingly while chatting lively with Toronar. Rowald Isankino was equally happy to see them again. It was only a surprise to see them so soon again.

- Barely a week has gone by, he remarked.

- Yes, we didn't get much further than Rhûnark when we realized we had to return, explained Grendeline.

- Oh, why is that? Asked Rowald.

- We forgot to ask the Spirit of the Morningstar in the Temple of the First something very important.

- It may be crucial to our next mission, said Nariel.

- And what, if I may ask, is that question?

Grendeline noticed that Rowald asked questions in a casual, friendly manner, but decidedly was prying into their undertakings. She felt compelled to answer, simply not to arouse suspicions of anything going on, which Rowald should not know or should know about.

- We heard a phrase and were wondering if the Crazy Oracle could tell us what it means.

- Perhaps I can help?

Grendeline repeated the phrase she had heard from the female voice inside the metal dome.

Isankino shook his head. No, I have no idea what it means. One of the words remind me of a word I read in a book about the ancient language. I think it means *outside*... Please, when you do find out, let me know. I am as curious as you are about the language of the ancients.

- Will do, promised Grendeline and imagined two of her fingers crossed.

- I have news for you too, said the captain.

- Oh, and what news do you have for us?

- The new ruler of Gothany, the Lord Commander of Centaur Keep is in Marl. I believe he is in a meeting with Thordanal in this very moment.

- That is interesting, lied Atakyo.

- Would you like to meet him?

- We'd be delighted to. Nariel poked the wizard and quickly prompted him to assure that he would be delighted as well. Nariel had distinguished the vague vibration of disinterest in his voice.

- Indeed, said Grendeline. We would love to meet the new regent.

- Then I will make sure you meet him before he continues to Carrackham. From the faces of his visitors, Isankino could ascertain that his words concerned them. Everyone knew Carrackham was along the coast to the west. As closely as it was possible to come to Spiderwood.

THE RED DEER

*Oh what a night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the longest night of the year
Grey is my hair, too late for cheers or whining
Gone are my friends, many I once held dear
But I'm still here, unable to surrender
Tomorrow brings another glorious day*

*Rise from your knees
Don't fear the coming storm
For all men must die
When their road has come to end
So please, don't cry
For all men must die*

[- The Mad Bard of Barleyhaven -]

CHAPTER 19

Atatkyo sighed.

- What is it, my friend? Grendeline was now also getting into the habit of using the word *friend* more often. She realized the more one uses it about one and the same individual, the more it becomes true. The more time they spent together, the more she felt they were developing a close friendship.

- I don't know, Gren. But I have the feeling what we learned in Dragonbar is connected to the Lord Commander's journey to Carrackham. He is a good man and if I were responsible, I would go.

- This bothers you, Nex?

- It bothers me only in the sense that I feel we should go with him to make sure he doesn't end his reign prematurely.

- So, you believe there is imminent danger?

- The fact that he is going confirms there could be a threat. Remember he has kept our west border to Angria safe for a long time. He is a devoted man to do what is best for folk.

- I see. Well... I haven't met him before, so I have no preconception. They were in a large room with a herald and a guard at the door. They knew the guard. It was Neryman Nebyed. But after a brief greeting he dutifully posted himself at the door where he was expected to be when the new Earl and the Lord Commander entered the room.

They didn't need to wait long. The door opened and the captain of the Marl City Guard, Rowald Isankino entered. He positioned himself next to Neryman and nodded to the herald who held a long, heavy staff. He tapped it three times on the floor and loudly declared; his Supreme Excellence Lord Commander, Galbaric Akarso of Centaur

Keep, Benevolent Ruler of Gothany.

A man of very ordinary stature entered and halted near the door, next to Rowald Isankino.

The herald tapped his heavy staff three more times and announced the next dignitary to enter the room; his Excellence and Lordship, the Earl of Marl, Thordanal Andertan.

Andertan entered the room and walked up next to the Lord Commander. Then he turned and waved his hand, dismissing the herald and indicating to Neryman Nebyed to stand guard on the outside of the door. As soon as the door closed both the Earl and the Lord Commander relaxed.

- Formalities satisfied, said Thordanal. He too was pleased to see Grendeline and her friends again.

Akarso was a handsome scarred soldier without a gram of unnecessary fat on his body. The scars on his visible bodyparts, his arms and face, were more than anyone cared to count. Grendeline noticed that none of the scars made him less attractive.

He emanated authority and an immediate sense of trust towards him. His eyebrows raised slightly when he recognized the wizard. With three decisive steps he was in front of Atatkyo and shook his hand.

- Good to see you again, my friend.

- Oh, another one... said Nariel quietly. Akarso did not linger with the wizard, but stepped sideways to shake hands with Jethro, then with Gwyn and Proth and finally with Nariel and Grendeline. His eyes rested on Grendeline for longer than what was entirely comfortable for her.

- Have we met? Akarso looked at the wizard to ascertain if the wizard could give him a hint.

Atatkyo did not reveal his thoughts.

- I don't know, answered Grendeline. Honestly, I can not safely say if we have, or if we have not.

- You are telling the truth, noted Akarso. Rowald has already told me about you. He didn't mention you travelled with the wizard.

- Sir Grigolin joined us recently, said Jethro.

- His name is Atatkyo, corrected Akarso.

- Oh, I didn't know if you knew, explained Jethro.

- I know my friend likes to travel incognito. But I assume you all know his real name.

- We do, confirmed Grendeline.

- Allow me to quickly explain why I immediately felt it necessary to see you, said Akarso. As I said, Rowald has talked about you and given me his... assessment of your abilities. I agree with him. There is a lot more than what meets the eye. Now as I see the wizard with you, I am delighted and convinced you can help us and all of Gothany.

- Here it comes, foresaw Atatkyo. Galbaric Akarso gave him a quick sideways glance and smiled.

- You know me too well, my friend. And for a long

time. We have received word from Zamorna. They have a new problem with a massive invasion of wyverns from Spiderwood. It would be best to put an end to the threat before it grows. Our future depends on it. Wyverns have no regard for human lives, or elvenlives, or any other lives. They only breed and spread their evil. You can't reason with them, you can't negotiate or beseech them. They kill and eat their victims. It's all they do. And they lay a massive amounts of egg.

- Aye, there's the rub, said Grendeline, who never favoured the deliberate extinction of any species. If only we could convince them to lay fewer eggs.

- I ask you to come with me to Carrackham. All six of you. I'd be very disappointed if you declined.

- How could we decline? The wizard shrugged.

- The wind will be in our favour early tomorrow. We set sail by dawn. My ship, the *Red Deer* is at pier seven. You may find it small for being the ship of the regent, but Gothany has no proud fleet and there has not been time to build a flagship. The previous Earl of Marl and ruler of Gothany didn't care much about a flagship either. Let Angria be in command of the sea.

- So much for pleasantries... commented Nariel.

- What do you believe we can do, my Lord?

- I am good at getting seasick, said Gwyness.

- We sail along the coast. There will be no high ocean waves, explained Akarso.

- There is something we need to seek ere we... Grendeline hesitated to complete the sentence.

Thordanal Andertan cleared his throat.

- I have prepared a banquet for this evening. You are all cordially invited, including your friends on the Marl City Guard.

- Or we can seek the wisdom of Branwell upon our return, changed Grendeline their plans for the evening.

* * *

The Red Deer was indeed a small ship for a regent, even for such a small country as Gothany. It had no mermaid, but the figurehead of a huge red deer at its bow. It was an attribute of Akarso's home village Deerwick, near Centaur Keep.

Grendeline spotted the Archmage Lord Elkin and twenty other mages on board. Unlike Atakyo the mages from Immerhük all gave the appearance of unequivocal importance. Jethro predicted one of them would trip over the cordage, because they wore their noses so high and it didn't take long before it happened.

The mages were too important to mingle with the other passengers. When Nariel inquired with Lord Elkin as for the well-being of Celtine Dryel, he

assured her that his apprentice was safely at home undusting the shelves in his library.

- I have never seen a wyvern, admitted Gwyn.

- They are often mistaken for dragons, but they are smaller and have only two legs, while a dragon has four. Wyverns don't breathe fire, but they have a poisonous sting in their tail. The most use we have for wyverns are their hide which is an excellent material for bookbinding.

Atakyo leaned on the railing of the forecastle deck, gazing towards land. Nariel came up the ladder from the main deck.

- Celtine is not with us, she said. Lord Elkin's apprentice had some important dusting to do.

Look at those jester's, she was referring to the highbrow mages from Immerhük.

- They have never seen battle, replied Atakyo.

- Are we going to see one?

- It is possible.

Proth and Jethro were below deck, teaching their friends from the Marl City Guard to play a dice game they picked up in Dragonbar. Neryman, Toronar and Sagitta were on the Red Deer. Rowald Isankino did not join them.

They were making 4 knots eastwards. Grendeline calculated the journey to Carrackham would take eight hours. By evening, they approached the harbour of the furthest south-east city of Gothany.

The Lord Commander Galbaric Akarso was met by a delegation of high ranking officers and upon his arrival briefed on the most recent events. Troops had been positioned near Spiderwood on the Gothany side all along the Zamorna border. A number of units had been sent in support from Zamorna. Young and inexperienced soldiers. One hundred and forty centaur archers were in the second line of defence. Their reach was longer than regular military archers.

Some wyverns had been spotted flying up from the forest and towards the northeast and in the afternoon eight giant spiders and a swordspider had come out of the forest trying to breach the blockade of troops. The swordspider had wreaked considerable havoc among the units it engaged before it was vanquished.

There was no dragon on Gothany's side of the border. How the circumstances were in Zamorna, no one knew. Not even their own soldiers. From Carrackham to Spiderwood was a short walk.

- We can expect more spiders coming out of the forest at night, said Galbaric Akarso. Light the fires at sunset. Keep them going until morning and have guards ready to sound the alarm at all time! Then he asked Grendeline, Nariel and Atakyo to take a good look at their set-up.

- No need to second guess yourself, assured him the wizard. You have all the necessary experience to keep our side of the border clear.

- Yes, it looks like well prepared and solid troops, agreed Nariel. What did you expect us to say?

- It is perhaps in the nature of a good commander never to be entirely sure of victory, said Gren. It does look good to me. But the wizards ought to spread out more in the second line of defence. I assume they are well armed with chromatic orbs, magic missiles and fireballs.

- Yes, they are. Or should be...

- Just don't waste any arrows on spiders. It is a too common mistake among archers, to aim at the whole spider, while only arrows who hit their body cause serious wounds.

- Noted. I remember where I saw you before. You were in the battle at Dragonbar. Grendeline wanted to protest, but no words came over her lips. Nariel helped out.

- You could not have been there, she said.

- I wasn't. But my great grandfather was. And I have a painting by Rudyard Duryoda, one of the greatest artists Gothany ever had. It is a scene from the battle. In it, you are standing right next to my great grandfather. In the background two silver dragons are fighting on our side and next to you a man and a woman I haven't been able to identify. But I am sure now, you are her. You are in the painting. And it is almost two hundred years old.

- Yes, I was there... and my parents...

Nariel jumped when Akarso mentioned Duryoda, but didn't comment on it. And they all took it for granted the man and the woman next to her in the painting, were Grendeline's parents. Everyone except Nariel, who had another thought.

- We will have little to do on our side of the forest, other than waiting. Atakyo changed the subject of debate.

- Waiting and intercepting naughty spiders, who try to run away, added Nariel.

- I have great idea, Jethro suddenly lit up. They all directed their attention to him. We go into town, find a tavern and drink a couple of beers. The Lord Commander wasn't amused.

- No intoxication for me on the evening of what could become the second worst battle in the history of Gothany. But you are not under my command and can do as you see fit.

- No beer today for me either, said the wizard. But there is no telling how many days we have to wait here, so... You have my blessing, go ahead and enjoy yourselves. I believe we can spare those of your friends from the Marl City Guard who want to go with you. Then he looked again to the East.

- I wish we could find out somehow what is going on over there...



CARRACKHAM

*Sailor, sailor, where you go
Tell us tales, we'd like to know
Where you sailed and where you've been
All the lands we ne'er have seen*

*Sailor, sailor, in our heart
You remain when far apart
If we could we would go too
Sail beyond the horizon with you*

*Sailor, sailor, touch the sky
In our dreams we learn to fly
With high sails so far we see
And one day we learn to be free*

[- The Blackhove Bard -]

CHAPTER 20

The harbour of Carrackham stretched wide along the coast. It was the busiest port in Gothany with more in and outgoing ships than Marl. There were a multitude of inns, bars, taverns and brothels. The fishmarket was bustling from early morning until dawn. Unlike Dragonbar, trade was almost exclusively conducted with coin. The origin of a coin and how it was obtained was of no interest. Only its weight in copper, silver or gold. Precious gems could easily receive an appraisal at any street corner and be converted into coins. Well, the gem dealer didn't always have his shop exactly at the corner of a street, but it was a manner of speech in Carrackham. It meant the same as everywhere, anywhere and somewhere. This was also said about taverns and inns. They were everywhere, anywhere and somewhere to be found, if folk were looking for it. Proth, Jethro, Gwyn and Sagitta Gauth found a marvellous foodplace at the *Skipper's Guild*. It had huge oaktables cut from mighty oaks into single large pieces. From the markings on their surface, they already had to be over a hundred years old, deducted Jethro. In the ceiling hung

impressively sized model sailing vessels of all kind. They were constructed with all the care and skill as their full sized sisterships. Had there been little people, the length of fingers, then they could have sailed away with those models.

To their surprise, the Skipper's Guild had Rifkin's beer on their menu. Sagitta had not yet tasted it.

- When were you in Dragonbar? Sagitta asked casually. Gwyn thought quickly of what to say.

- We didn't say we had been to Dragonbar. We said his beer was the best and that Haribald Rifkin is the Innkeeper in Dragonbar.

- The wizard told us, explained Proth.

- We drank this beer in Rhûnark, added Jethro.

Sagitta sensed there was something odd in their answer, but she decided not to pry.

* * *

Galbaric Akarso and Atakyo retired into a tent where they quietly talked about what happened to them in the years they had not seen each other.

Without mentioning Highdungeon, Atakyo told his friend about the revenge on his assassins. It was easy, since he didn't use the magic underground corridors to find them.

Akarso accounted for a few border incursions from Angria. It was always unclear if they were intentional provocations or independent forces.

Grendeline and Nariel remained with the soldiers keeping an eye on the Spiderwood treeline. Now and then, Nariel spotted a wyvern among the trees, appraising the strength of the blockade.

Twice before midnight, groups of spiders emerged from the forest and attacked the blockade. They used no strategy and were showing no sign of organisation.

- But what is causing them to leave their protected hiding among the trees? Could it be, the Zamorna fighters are unsettling them?

- I have no idea, Gren.

- Galbaric has managed to mobilise an impressive force here. He clearly has support all around Gothany.

In the early morning hours three swordspiders emerged from the forest. They rapidly approached the soldiers in the blockade.

- Swordspiders, shouted Nariel. And Grendeline stood up and screamed;

- Magic missiles and chromatic orbs, target the nearest spiders! Nariel released her magic missile immediately, but it felt like an eternity before eight more came from various directions.

Nariel had already fired a chromatic orb after the missile. One of the swordspiders went belly up with a crackling sound and what sounded like a

whistling exhale.

- You only have one of each?

- Come on, you should be glad I have any at all.

The two other swordspiders had reached the soldiers and started slashing them. Guts were spilled and fearful screams were heard. Another shower of seven magic missiles and two orbs finished a second swordspider. It too went belly up with a crackling sound, which barely could be heard in the noise from fighting and dying men.

The third swordspider was barely injured. Nariel ran towards it, lighting up the morning with her flaming sword.

A third round of magic projectiles hit the spider, whose ferocity didn't diminish.

- Be careful, Nariel! Grendeline knew the elf was too far away to hear her. The elf moved faster than any human was capable of. The spider had finished off all the men in its vicinity. It bit off the head of a mutilated soldier who kept screaming on the ground. He had already lost half a leg and an arm. Nariel charged sideways into the beast.

Her sword cut through the arachnoid and splattered its liquidous innards across the grass and her own face. The spider crackled and seized all movement. Nariel wiped her face and kept spitting repeatedly while she slowly walked back to Grendeline. She must have received a taste of yellow-ish swordspider blood and it was not a taste she cared to keep in her mouth.

Grendeline handed her an apple.

- Not bad!

The commotion stirred the resting troops and both Galbaric Akarso and Nexus Atakyo came out of their tent.

- We have to fill the hole in the blockade, said Galbaric.

- Perhaps our refreshed friends can assist you here, said Grendeline who saw Jethro and his three friends returning from Carrackham. And I think Nebyed and Ryotakin will also be delighted to take a place in the front line.

- Yeah, I can join you, said Nexus Atakyo. I just don't enjoy standing in the midst of minced meat and blood.

The Lord Commander smiled.

- I have a solution for that. And at the top of his voice he commanded his troops to step ten paces backwards.

Nariel pointed to the horizon.

- There's a fire...

- It's not the sunrise? Galbaric turned into the direction she had indicated.

- No, that is not a sunrise, he then said grimly.

* * *

The one fire they had spotted appeared to multiply across the horizon. By sunrise it was clear that the Zamorna forces had started a forest fire. Spiderwood was burning.

- It is a desperate measure. It means their fight has not been going well, said Galbaric.

- I believe the losses were huge on both sides, speculated the wizard.

- We don't have a choice now, we have to light it up from our side as well. Or else we could be overrun by both wyverns and spiders, feared the Lord Commander. Fortunately we have almost no wind at all for the moment.

- Mages! He screamed. Fireballs into the forest! Keep throwing them until you run out of spells.

Burn down this side of Spiderwood!

The mages released their spells and the fire had barely caught in the trees on the Gothany-side of the border before a host of spiders and ettercaps came charging out of the forest. At first only a few all along the line of the blockade, but more and more came running.

Grendeline grabbed the nearest spear and plunged it into the body of a giant spider. Nariel's sword was flashing near her.

Two wyverns came flapping at low altitude from the forest. One of them unexpectedly turned into a pigeon. The wizard had used a spell. The second wyvern had reached the blockade and stung a soldier with its tail. It shrieked eerily. A shower of arrows buried itself in its chest, paws and wings.

It couldn't maintain its altitude and sank to the ground. The soldiers finished it. One of them, was Neryman Nebyed. He severed its head.

Immediately he needed to turn his attention to an ettercap who charged him.

Three more wyverns came diving from a high altitude. The closest one of them shrunk into a bat and fluttered surprised away from the battlefield.

Another wyvern was struck by a *hold monster* spell from the Archmage Elkin.

It crashed helplessly to the ground.

The third wyvern reached the ground and started to toss around soldiers. It too was suddenly hit by countless centaur arrows.

Grendeline gazed north and saw the battle was not going as well everywhere. Mages with less experience cast lightning bolts, cones of cold and other spells which not only killed their enemies, but some of the fighting soldiers as well. A number of woodland beings had been summoned and helped the clerics in healing the wounded.

Summoned skeletons were fighting alongside the soldiers. Clerics were controlling them from the second line of defence.

More spiders charged them from the forest.

- Move north!!! Galbaric sent the centaurs to

enforce the blockade line where it had been weakened.

Another wyvern emerged from the forest, flying so low, they didn't see it coming. Its claws cut into Galbaric Akarso's arm.

Grendeline plunged her spear into the creature. It shrieked and swung its tail after her. She jumped over it and threw a knife at its eyes. The projectile buried itself in its target. The one-eyed wyvern lost sight of Akarso and focused on Grendeline. It tried to slash her with its claws, but a flaming sword cut through it.

Grendeline helped the Lord Commander up on his feet saying; You just had to get yourself another scar, didn't you? You collect keepsake's from all your battles? Galbaric laughed, then he grinned and covered the wound with one hand. It was bleeding badly. Grendeline beckoned Gwyness to take care of him. Then she sent several knives in rapid sequence towards a charging ettercap. As it reached her it was cut in two halves by Nariel's flaming sword.

The battle raged on for an hour before they took notice of no more beasts coming from the forest.

The fire had caught on all sides of Spiderwood, except towards the sea and the flames were now so high that ships in Carrackham had to be moved to the other side of the harbour, not to catch fire. Folk in town carried water buckets and extinguished small fires which enflamed on the nearest rooftops of the city.

To the north was a stream flowing towards the Epicon. Soldiers carried water from it to prevent the fire from spreading far into the fields. From Carrackham came folk with buckets of seawater to do the same. The remaining troops of the blockade had to move another fifty paces away from the treeline. The heat was too intense.

Grendeline looked around to see if her friends still were alive. The wizard was untouched.

Proth, Jethro and Gwyness were exhausted, but unhurt. Nariel was standing next to her, breathing heavily. It seemed she could easily have gone on fighting for another hour.

Neryman Nebyed was wounded in a leg and cared for by a cleric. Sagitta Gauth was engaged in conversation with a centaur, who allowed her to try out his longbow.

- Where is Toronar?

- The big guy!? Nariel looked around.

- Over there! She had spotted Ryotakin carrying two heavy buckets of water and emptying them on small fires. The Battle of Spiderwood was over and they had won. Zamorna lost a large part of their standing army, but was out of danger for a long time. A few wyverns were seen escaping seawards.



BARLEYHAVEN

*But I take delight
In the juice of the barley
And courtin' pretty ladies
In the morning so early*

*Musha-rigum-dodum-da
Whack fol the mummy-O
Whack fol the mummy-O
There's Cookies in the Jar*

[- From a Traditional Angrian Folk song -]

CHAPTER 21

Archmage Lord Elkin and eleven of his mages were returning to Immerhûk on the Red Deer. The mages were no longer carrying their noses high. None of them tripped over cordage, because most of the time they were staring at the deck. Grendeline and Nariel almost felt sorry for them.

Halfway to Marl a loud crashing was heard on the starboard bow. Sailors ran to investigate.

- We're taking in water, they screamed.

They were near Barleyhaven and the captain gave order to change course and steer towards the nearest port.

- All hands below deck, the captain bellowed.

- Start passing buckets before we sink! And with a glance at the mages he added;

- All hands, means *everyone!!!* On your feet and get down below deck, or jump overboard. In either case we stay afloat longer.

Grendeline, Nariel and Nexus Atatkyo were already grabbing buckets and passing them in the line. As Lord Elkin joined them, Nariel who had seen something odd asked him to take her place in the line. Then she waded through the flushing water towards the breach. She took a deep breath and disappeared under the water. She came up once and shook her head forcefully. Then she returned to investigate the object which had punched a hole into the Red Deer.

As she surfaced again she screamed somebody to throw her a rope. Somebody did. It was a short piece of rope. She threw it away angrily.

- I said a rope, not a blazing belt-cord to tighten my corset with!!! A sailor tossed her a longer rope.

- Oh, thanks! Nariel vanished under water again.

Grendeline started worrying when Nariel didn't surface after a few minutes.

- How long can an elf hold her breath, she asked Lord Elkin who was passing a bucket next to her.

- An elf? Oh, I would have to guess, but five to ten minutes, or so...

A mage offered to take Grendeline's place, taking her for a frail old lady and she didn't enlighten him of the error in his assumption. Instead she hurried to wade towards the spot where Nariel had dived. Grendeline was just about to dive under water herself when Nariel came up, gasping for air.

- Oh, good! Come, you have to see this!! She dragged Grendeline under the cold water. First she couldn't see a thing, but the water was clear and her eyes adapted quickly. Nariel had tied a rope to a statue which had breached the hull of the Red Deer with a sturdy trident. When they surfaced again, Grendeline asked Nariel;

- What, or who was it? It looked like a statue.

- It is! It was standing on the highest column of Taïri, Posildon, the God of the Ocean. We just caught it by sheer luck, Gren! It's fantastic! It was about to break loose. I tied it up for us to salvage the piece.

- You call this luck? Our ship is sinking and you call it luck? Then she saw Nariel smiling happily and laughed.

- I wonder what needs to happen for you to think of us as unlucky.

They heard shouting from above. The Deer had reached the harbour and the harbourmaster was instructing the captain to try to reach the nearby ramp of the wharf.

- Sounds like we may not sink after all, Gren.

A few minutes later the ship made contact with the ramp. Ropes were tossed from the ship to land and vice versa. Harbourworkers were coming to assist from all directions. Barleyhaven was well organised. It was also the oldest port in Gothany, older than Marl, Carrackham and Swordhaven.

- And heave!!! The ship slowly moved up the ramp and the captain told all hands to jump ashore and help pulling the ship up the ramp.

- And heave!!! More and more men were pulling the four thick ropes, fastened at the bow. Slowly the Red Deer moved out of the water and up the ramp.

- Heave!!! And heave!!!

Nariel and Grendeline jumped ashore to salvage the likeness of the Ocean God, Posildon.

* * *

The skipper, harbourmaster, Lord Elkin and the Lord Commander came to inspect the hull breach. Nariel and Grendeline had to step away from their discovery. The only ones who were amazed by the statue which had lodged itself in the opening, were Galbaric Akarso and the harbourmaster.

- Who tied it? The skipper tugged at the rope.

- I did, said Nariel.

- Good initiative. It prevented the statue from tearing a larger hole and more water from flowing in.

- We could also have lost the statue, added the Lord Commander, who was less concerned with the damage to his ship, than to its cause.

The harbourmaster stuck his head inside the hull to survey the damage on the inside. He made a few interjections to mark the gravity of his observations and instant conclusions. Then he stepped back from the ship and declared;

- It's not so bad, we can have this repaired in a few days.

- A few days!!!? Both Lord Elkin and Akarso were unhappy with the long involuntary interruption to their journey.

- How about, until tomorrow? Asked Akarso. Lord Elkin was not at all happy with having to wait.

- We leave today, he said. By the road. He was referring to himself and the eleven mages who had survived the battle at Spiderwood.

- By tomorrow is impossible, the harbourmaster explained. We would have to pull all workers from almost all other ongoing jobs and work through the night to have it done by tomorrow.

- Then do it! Said the Lord Commander.

- Such effort would come at a considerable price, now the harbourmaster went into haggling mode.

- What is your price to have it done by tomorrow?

Galbaric Akarso noticed the harbourmaster had his eyes on the statue. It appeared to be made of pure orichalcum, shining red and gold. Inside it had to be hollow, or its weight would have been impossible to carry along with the hull breach.

- Oh, the statue. You want it?

Nariel wanted to yell it was hers, but considering where it was lodged, she realized it may not be a very good idea to claim it.

- Fine. Galbaric Akarso sighed. Take the statue. But have the ship ready by tomorrow morning.

- By morning is still impossible. We are not magicians. There is no *remove hull breach* spell, or *restore damage*, though I feel it would be a brilliant spell to come up with. Why do you guys only come up with combat spells? He glanced sideways at Lord Elkin.

- We don't... began the Archmage, but then decided not to pursue the argument.

- Yeah, said Nariel, why not come up with a few useful spells like *create good beer*, or *shelves undust yourselves*?

- *Broom wipe floor, refresh food, unsour the milk*, Grendeline added.

Nexus Atatkyo had joined them.

- Did you say *refresh food*? I have invented that spell. I can do that. Both Nariel and Grendeline looked with a mix of surprise and awe at him.

- It works with the milk too, he explained.

- There's one mighty useful wizard, said Nariel.

- Very well, Galbaric Akarso interrupted, take the statue and have the ship repaired as quickly as you can.

- Aye, my Lord, said the harbourmaster and patted his acquisition.

Grendeline noticed some markings on its base. She ran its fingers over it.

- It says *Poseidon*, she read. Not Posildon.

- Nobody has ever been close enough to read it, said Nariel. Are you sure?

- Yes, definitely. It reads Poseidon.

* * *

The Archmage and his eleven mages parted only a few hours later. The harbourmaster was quick to dislodge the statue and have it transported to a position near the harbourmaster's office. It would in the future be standing on a column watching the harbour of Barleyhaven.

Nariel sighed.

- At least, now I know where to find Tairi. We fled in a hurry and Barleyhaven did not exist yet. One day, perhaps... We will have the magic to visit the world under the surface of the sea.

- Or the sea will back off and reveal the sunken city again, speculated Grendeline. However, I do not know what could cause this to happen.

- We have to pray to Posildon... Poseidon... that he shall give it back.

- But then he would render the ports of Marl, Carrackham, Barleyhaven and Swordhaven useless. And all other harbours in the world.

- A small price to pay, felt Nariel.

- I wasn't sure if i should believe you, that you were from a city which had sunken beneath the waves of the ocean ages ago. But it is true.

- It is really not so long ago, said Nariel. Tairi sank between 800 and 850 years ago.

- Remind me to congratulate you on your 1000th birthday.

- Only some 100 years to go, said Nariel. But I've lost count. I can't say when it will be.

- If we are still alive in 100 years, we'll celebrate.

- If nothing else, we can celebrate 100 years of friendship. That alone will be a worthy reason. Atakyo joined them again.

- You know, since Barleyhaven is the oldest port in Gothany, it should be connected to Highdungeon. There should be a gate under town. Or nearby.

- Yes, but we can't appear in Marl Palace today, if the Lord Commander had not returned yet, Nex.

- We would promptly have to explain to Rowald.

- And Miri would be curious as well.

- Miri... said Grendeline. Miri Akarso and Galbaric, could they be related?

- There are a lot of Akarso in Gothany, said Atakyo. And Retekin, Teikena, Datka, Sankuma, Lalanka, Duryoda, Rifkin, Sakursa... He named some of the most common names. They don't have to be related at all.

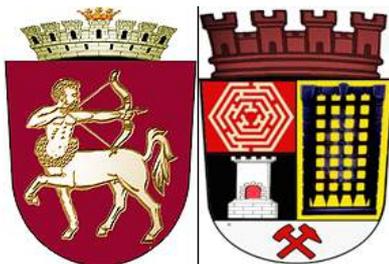
- Unless we go back to the 2056 first...

- Have you never heard of the second, Gren?

- What?

- Yes, there was a second ship, following the first.

- The first ship were called *the designers*. It was not the actual colonist ship. The colonist ship carried more passengers than the first.



MARL & HIGHDUNGEON

*We knew dawn would be months away
We stood out on the porch
Then tumbled head on through the dark
Without a map or torch*

*Time, my dear, the fire is,
In which we burn and aim
It seemed, however, life meanwhile
Was growing up in flame*

[- The Mad Bard of Barleyhaven -]

CHAPTER 22

The Red Deer anchored in Marl in the morning on the day following its departure from Barleyhaven. Grendeline, Nariel, Proth Rokoser and Nexus Atakyo went straight to the Temple of the First.

Branwell said he had adapted many useful words and understanding from his dialogues with the High Priestess and was hopeful his answers now could make more sense. Grendeline repeated the words she had heard in the short corridor of the metal dome. Branwell translated it as; *outer portal is open. Unable to comply.*

- You have to close the outer door, before you can open the inner door, Branwell clarified.

- Why?

- It's an airlock. A security and protective function of any vessel which travels in more than one element. For example, if it is located under water. You have air inside and open the inner door. You still have air inside the short corridor. Then you let water into the corridor. When it is full, you can open the outer door and swim to the surface, if that is what you wish to do.

- Aha...

- You do the reverse when you enter. If you come back in, you have to close the outer door, to remove the water from the corridor.

- That makes perfect sense, said Grendeline. So, the Francis Drake was a ship which could travel under water?

- It could also travel under water, Branwell said.

- Six buttons, two yellow, one green, one red and two orange next to the inner door, said Nariel.

- That would be open and close inner door. Add or remove air inside the corridor and open or close outer door. Be careful not to press the red button if the outer door is closed, advised Branwell.

- What would happen?

- The air would be sucked out of the corridor. You would suffocate.

- Why would it do that? It makes no sense. Why not pump in water?

- The Spirit of the Dome would expect you to wear magic garments and helmets providing you with air to breathe.

- Thank you, Branwell. You have been helpful and we are not going to think of you as a Crazy Oracle anymore. Today you made perfect sense.

- I am delighted to serve, said the Spirit of the Morningstar.

* * *

Jethro and Gwyn joined them on their way to the Marl Palace.

- We say I am experimenting on *dimension door* spells, said Atakyo. And that we need to be at the lowest possible altitude in Marl. This explains why we need to access the dungeon and why we then disappear from it. We do it a bit hush-hush and make them feel they are part of a secret.

- That should encourage them, said Grendeline.

- Why didn't we use this excuse before, Nex?
- Because I don't know the dimension door spell. Nor do I know how to teleport. It is an experiment, I don't want Galbaric to ask me to transport him here and there. I don't know how to do it.

They were back at the metal dome. The outer portal of the *airlock* was still open. The six of them huddled together into the short corridor inside and Nariel pressed the orange button to the right. The outer door closed. Nariel pressed the left button and it opened again.

- Magic doors! She commented. Then she closed the outer door again and pressed the yellow button on the left. The inner door opened.

The air inside was stale and what ever was in front of them was wrapped in pitch black.

- Did anyone bring a torch?
- We didn't expect needing one.
- Nariel, do you see anything?

Nariel stuck her head inside the darkness and looked around.

- It is another corridor, she said. It continues straight ahead. Nariel climbed through the open door. When she set foot inside the longer corridor, a few magic lights lit it up. They were hidden behind smooth white panels in the ceiling of the longer corridor. Now they all could see. It was still dark, but more of a lumination equal to the twilight of dawn and dusk. The walls were part metal and part of a smooth material they were unable to identify. The metal was coloured white. The smooth material was a bright shade of ochre.

- It is beautiful, said Gwyness.

They continued down the long corridor and found several doorways along the way. It ended in front of a great white-ochre gate. It had four buttons in a panel. One of them caused the gate to retract into the walls without making any sound. Inside was a great hall. It too, was pitch black until Grendeline stepped over the threshold.

Several magic lights lit up the hall. It was brighter than in the corridors.

Proth felt uncomfortable in the environment.

- No shadows to hide in, he observed.

In the center of the hall was a slightly elevated podium and in the middle of the part nearest the entrance, were three peculiar chairs, the middle of which was slightly elevated compared to the other two. It appeared to be the throne of a commander. The chair were of a soft material on the outside, none which they ever had seen before.

In front of the three chairs were six smaller chairs in front of workdesks of unknown function. They were all very comfortable to sit in and could rotate, tilt slightly, and be moved forwards and backwards in groves underneath.

The workdesks had smooth panels and few small levers and buttons. Along the walls were more smooth panels and some with buttons.

Nariel didn't hesitate to try some of them. Nothing happened, except the same gentle voice they had heard before in the airlock, which kept repeating a short message over and over again. This was a different message, but they could not understand the words of it.

They closed the entrance gate, but it didn't change anything. The voice kept repeating the same message.

- Back to Branwell, said Grendeline. There was not much else they could do.

As the last of them had left the hall, the magic lights turned off and it was again dark inside.

They entered the small corridor and as Atakyo as last of them left the longer corridor its lights also turned off. They closed the inner door and opened the outer magic door.

- This was disappointing, said Nariel.

- Yes, indeed, agreed the wizard. I had hoped for something more spectacular.

- I think it was spectacular, said Gwyness. It was so beautiful. It must have been advanced folk who constructed it.

- I think it was a bit eerie, said Jethro, and Proth didn't disagree with this notion.

- It was like walking into a tomb of the gods, said the wizard.

- You have seen something similar before, Nex?

- No, but I have dreamed something similar. Back to Marl?

- What else can we do?

They walked back to the Marl exit and walked down its dark ochre corridor.

- These magic torches, said Gwyness, they're a bit like the magic lights inside the dome. They have no smell, they always burn with the same brightness, even if they flicker to simulate real fire, and they go on and off magically when we enter or leave the corridors.

- The corridors have probably been constructed by the same folk who constructed the dome.

- It is the same magic, agreed Nariel.

- Imagine the potency of their spells if they used their magic in the same way we do, said Nexus.

- They probably would have had fireballs which could wipe out entire cities, speculated Nariel.

- Lightning bolts which bounce around endlessly.

- It is probably why they are all dead now, said Grendeline. If you *have* a fireball so powerful, can you resist using it?

The wizard went pale.

- What do we tell Rowald? Experiment successful, or not? Better not. If we can avoid telling him anything, we better make it so.

* * *

The captain of the Marl City Guard was not interested in asking them any questions on this day. He and Thordanal Andertan, the Earl, were listening to Galbaric Akarso's thrilling account of the Battle at Spiderwood. Anertan decided to write an epic song about it.

It was late in the day, but the Temple of the First was still open. The monk they had met several times greeted them.

Grendeline spoke the words the voice in the dome had kept repeating. Then she asked;

- What does it mean?

- It means, the Spirit of Everything is sleeping.

- How does one awake the Spirit of Everything?

- You will need to find its heart.

- What does it look like, the Heart of Everything?

- It would be in a room below the great hall you entered. Probably several decks below.

- We didn't see any stairs or stairway.

Branwell appeared to think it over.

- How would they move up and down between decks? Grendeline phrased it as a question.

- There would be a small magic chamber, no bigger than a toilet stall. It would have buttons to press. But if all is sleeping it may not function.

- Then how do we move up and down?

There would be smooth panels in the wall, near the magic chamber, one of which should have a shaft with horizontal metal bars attached to the wall at evenly spaced distances. This should allow you to climb up and down.

- You mean, like a ladder?

- That is precisely what I mean, confirmed the Spirit of the Morningstar.

- What would the panel we seek look like?

- I do not have this information. I may be magic, but I am not a divinator.

- I know how magic can have its limits, said the wizard.

- Branwell, said Grendeline. These panels are smooth. They do not have a keyhole and they do not have a handle. How does one open them?

- You slide in your fingernails under the top, or the sides, or the bottom of the panel, depending on where it is mounted and you try to gently press the whole panel towards you. If it releases, then you have found the right side to remove it.

- Sounds simple enough...

- There is another type of panel which you have to press before you can open it. If you press it, it should sink into the wall slightly and slide back in place when you release. If you press it only on one side, the panel should release itself.

Grendeline was out of questions and believed Branwell had finished. But he had not.

- There is a third kind of panels. The third kind of panels require a key.

- We didn't see any keyholes.

- They would be covered by a small locking lid or a small panel within the panel.

- Where can we find such a key?

- You would have to ask a member of the crew.

- If we want to move up and down between decks, and if we can't ask a member of the crew, which kind of panel would the shafts we are looking for have? What is the most likely type?

- It would absolutely have the kind of panels which require a key.

- Aaaaarrh... groaned Grendeline, why didn't you start with telling us about those panels?

- Because the other kind of panels were more commonly used.

- Can't we simply cut a hole in the floor and climb down to a lower deck? Nariel thought she had a brilliant idea.

- The floor should have a thickness the length of your elbows. Apart from the metal beams you do not have the tools to cut, the floor should be filled with cables and ducts which I strongly advise you not to sever. Worst case, a lightning bolt could be released and kill you all.

- Fine! Said Grendeline, let's not touch the floor!

They heard the footsteps of the monk in the corridor who had come to close.

- Last question. What would such a key look like?

The kind of key we are looking for?

The humming in the altar increased slightly in intensity and a beam of light emerged from the morningstar. In the beam appeared a set of six keys in different size and shape. They were all unlike any key they ever had seen before. Five of them had an irregular jagged edge.

- Oh, thank you! Said Grendeline and tried to take one of the keys out of the beam. Her hand went through the key. It wasn't there.

- It is a magic projection, said Branwell. These keys are not here. I only have their image. Even if I had them, there is a very low chance any of them would fit the lock you seek.

- It is like... a picture? Nariel examined the keys from all angles.

- Yes, answered Branwell. The light went off and the keys vanished. The monk entered the room.

- Done here?

- Yes, we finished, answered Grendeline.

Back in the street, they stood for a while outside the Temple of the First.

- That was... fascinating, said Proth Rokoser.

The day didn't cease to amaze. The shadowrunner had spoken. Three words in a day!



CENTAUR KEEP

*I'd love to go to the gathering place
Where the songs are many
And we're face to face
Oh, bardic bliss will be with us again
I don't know when
Now this you hear and it means that I'm here
Just remember to treasure the moment*

[- The Blackhove Bard -]

CHAPTER 23

Proth Rokoser was enrolled without difficulty into the *Rogue's Guild*. Jethro Retekin joined the *Ranger's Guild*, but he was more used for teaching than for learning. His sister Gwyness was staying to serve for a while in the Temple of the First. This way, they could all consult the Spirit of the Morningstar when ever a question came to mind. Grendeline, Nariel and Nexus Atakyo were invited by by the Regent and Lord Commander Galbaric Akarso, to join him for a visit to Centaur Keep. The wizard knew this was out of reach for the gates of Highdungeon. Orchampton would be the nearest town with a dungeon gate for their return. The Red Deer was in need of additional repairs, which gave them a few more days in Marl. They would sail to Swordhaven and ride to Centaur Keep from the harbour in the West on the back of centaurs.

Dielle Uryens had arrived safely in Hibernau and sent a letter by raven to her friends. She was hoping to see them all again.

Jethro had ordered a crate of Rifkin's beer and spent the last of his coins from the slavers camp.

Grendeline and Nariel visited Branwell every day and had questions about the First. Branwell also knew about the Second, but didn't know where their ship made landfall. It may not have been in Gothany at all, but was more likely to have been in Angria. Both Angria and Northangerland were more populated than Gothany. Branwell did not

have all information, but from the known numbers and spread of folk, he speculated that there may well have been a third ship, making its landfall in Zamorna. He also believed that both the second and the possible third ship would have returned to this... Earth, which had been mentioned. He more than believed. He was convinced. It was Nariel and Grendeline who believed Branwell was telling the truth.

Sailors arriving to Marl reported they had seen an island far south of Gothany and Zamorna, which now was populated by wyverns. The island had previously never been explored and was rarely mentioned. Now it quickly became a topic for discussion as *Wyvern Island*.

- Let's hope they never return, wished Atakyo.

On the day before the Red Deer was to set sail a peculiar dwarf arrived in Marl. He had passed through Immerhûk and brought salutations from Celtine Dryel. The Archmage and his friends had not yet returned to their town. Dhûrin Faramoarte, as the dwarf called himself saw the Archmage and his party on the road before entering Golembard.

When he heard the Red Deer was to set sail for Swordhaven, he immediately tried to negotiate for passage on the vessel. When Nariel saw him, she whispered to Grendeline; *He is one!*

Grendeline could not figure out how Nariel immediately could see this. Neither the wizard or herself were able to instantaneously determine it. But she trusted her friend and didn't hesitate to assess the claim for herself.

She approached the dwarf to shake hands with him. Faramoarte assured her, that it was a great pleasure to make her acquaintance. On her questions as to why he was travelling alone, he answered with unclear explanations and tried to change the subject. This was very odd, because dwarves were rarely solitary.

He said his hometown was Dwarvendell, but he left it a long, long time ago. When he said it, and how he said it, confirmed Nariel's observation.

- We should grant him passage said Grendeline to Atakyo.

- It is not ours to grant or deny, Gren, but I will pass on our sentiment about it to Galbaric.

- This way, we can get to know him better, Nex.

- He is so cheerful, said the wizard, he must be carrying a heavy secret.

- Oh, it is my impression he carries more than one secret, answered the old lady in black.

* * *

On the day the Red Deer was to set sail, the winds were unfavourable for travels westward. The captain said it would be useless trying to set sail. Galbaric was restless and grumpy, but the weather was not under anyone's control.

On the following day the wind turned. It wasn't strong, but they made at least 3 knots. Sometimes they were slowing down to half the speed, but it picked up again. Galbaric was happy they at least were on their way.

Dhûrin Faramoarte was standing aft, watching the splashing waves in its wake. Grendeline sat down next to him.

- Where to, from Swordhaven, if I may ask?

The dwarf didn't look sideways at her.

- I intend to return to Angria.

- Angria? You know, the name Faramoarte sounds to me more like a name one could expect to the East, in Zamorna.

- Yes, I have been there too.

- And you have been in Angria before?

- Yes.

- And in Northangerland?

- Yes.

- It takes a lot of time, travelling around.

The dwarf laughed quietly.

- Time, he said, I've got in abundance.

- How was Dwarvendell?

- It was nothing as I remembered it.

- Family and old friends?

- Everything always changes, Dhûrin said.

- Are you really from Dwarvendell?

- Yes, I am really from Dwarvendell.

- And then, after that?

He laughed again.

- You could say that I'm in part from everywhere.

- One learns many things from travelling.

Now the dwarf turned towards Grendeline.

- What I have learned is that there is many a fate far worse than death and all of them involve living. Grendeline looked out across the waves. The wind changed again and the Red Deer picked up speed.

- Do we only go to where the wind blows?

The dwarf was surprised by Grendeline's answer.

- No, but in the end, nature always gets its way.

The winds are gentle and kind. Going with them is not a sin.

- Perhaps being able to forget is a blessing, she said and looked out over the sea again.

- Indeed, being able to forget must be a blessing. But I am not blessed. On the contrary.

- Do you believe you are the only one who is cursed?

- No, perhaps not. But I am the only one who lives my life. I've seen the magic lights dancing in the winter sky over Northangerland, I've seen the fire

mountains in Dragonland, I've watched the leaves tumble in the mighty forest of Gnollwood before it was infested with Orch, Goblin and Koboldkind...

And once, every decade or so, there is a moment when I feel it was worth waiting for. To endure this one life we are given, for the sake of every magic moment we are granted.

- Sounds fair.

- But I am between these magic moments for a long time now.

- Have you been to Blackhove? Or Pegastoke?

The wizard joined them, greeted the dwarf politely and turned to Grendeline.

- Supper is being served in the Skipper's cabin.

- I was in Blackhoven a long time ago. Why?

The wizard turned to the dwarf and said;

- It hasn't been called Blackhoven for a hundred years.

- I said Blackhove, corrected the dwarf himself.

- No, you said Blackhoven.

- An insignificant mistake to make, said Dhûrin.

Atakyo looked probingly at the short, sturdy man.

- How old are you, exactly?

- Go and eat, Dhûrin said. Supper's ready!

* * *

- He is immortal, said the wizard to Grendeline on their way to the captain's cabin.

- Yes, I know, Nariel already told me.

- What was that about Blackhove and Pegastoke?

- No, I just felt a bardic circle could cheer him up.

Nariel and Galbaric were already at the table.

The captain introduced himself as Cleod Hiboria and his first mate as Poarl Jacani.

- Please, be seated! He gestured towards the steaming pots on the table, and help yourselves!

- Has anyone of you ever been riding on a centaur before? Galbaric who was the only one who has had the privilege explained;

- The ladies will only be allowed on the back of female centaurs, the wizard and I only on a male. They are stronger and faster than horses. You only need to hold on to the saddle. We will be at the Keep in no time.

- Why is it important what gender someone has?

The Lord Commander made a gesture which could mean anything.

- It's their decision. We have to respect it.

- What about someone who has been transmuted from male to female, or the other way around?

- It is who and what someone is, which counts. Not what they have been.

- A rat is a rat, commented the wizard.

Grendeline gave him a quick glance, while Nariel put a hand over her mouth. She remembered what the wizard did to the rat at Pegastoke.

- Please, Nex. We're eating...
- I hope it is all to your satisfaction, said Hiboria.
- It is very good, confirmed Grendeline.
- I thought the dwarf was one of you, said Jacani.
- Yes, said Nariel. In a way he is...
- But we have not been travelling together, added the wizard.
- We'll bring him some food later, said the first mate. If he would like to have some.

* * *

The centaurs were waiting in Swordhaven to carry them on their backs. Before they parted from the dwarf in the harbour, Grendeline thoughtfully wished him well and hoped she could show him the pleasant round of a bardic circle the next time they met. In a place like Blackhove or Pegastoke. Dhûrin doubted they would meet again

- Oh, it can be a small world. The chance we meet again may be bigger than you think. I have made the experience that nothing is quite as random as it appears.
- Time will tell, said Dhûrin.
- Time will tell, echoed Grendeline.

Galbaric was not exaggerating about centaurs. They were a lot stronger, bigger and faster than horses. Grendeline estimated they moved faster or possibly with the same speed as in the magic corridors of Highdungeon. She had seen the distance between Swordhaven and Centaur Keep on a map. The centaurs did it in half the time she had expected. They didn't slow down before the keep was in sight. It had higher walls than Marl and a moat around it.

- Welcome to Centaur Keep, said Galbaric as they crossed the drawbridge to his fortress. His second in command paraded the troops in the yard as they road in.
- All halt! He yelled. Then he turned and saluted his commander. Welcome back, your Excellence! They climbed off the backs of their centaurs and the centaurs walked over to the fountain.
- This is my second in command at Centaur Keep, Lyodras Gordally. Gordally bowed towards the elf, the wizard and the lady in black. They responded with the same gesture of courtesy, as they did Galbaric said their names.
- Where are my manners, Galbaric said and pointed to one of the centaurs that had carried them. He approached them.
- Here comes the commander of the centaur forces, Takvorian.
- They bowed also to the centaur commander.
- Lyodras, I have not come to relieve you of command. You stay in charge here. I will give my

guests the tour of the fortress and then we ride on to Deerwick.

- My Lord? Lyodras Gordally was surprised.
- You are as of now the new Lord Commander of Centaur Keep. I find it more expedient to relocate to a town, where it will be easier for me to be where in Gothany I am best needed. Somewhere geographically more towards the heart of the country. Like... he looked at Atakyo. Let's say Elfminster. The duke of Elfminster and Dragonbar is at an unknown location and council members rules in his stead. I am not convinced they enjoy being in this role.

He turned to the Centaur Commander.

- You have been an invaluable help over the years and I am going to miss you. I would request that you kindly delegate a group of centaurs to the city of Elfminster. I can not demand this, but I would be grateful if you did. You do not have to decide this now. Think about it and send the delegates, if you decide for it. You know that you always have my gratitude and my help regardless of your decision. Takvorian bowed.

- And you, he turned to Grendeline, Nariel and Nexus Atakyo, let me show you around the Keep and if you have not grown weary, accompany me to Deerwick and I will show you my home village.

- I get the feeling, said the wizard, that you have something more in mind and that this *more* you have in mind, involves us and the choices we have to make in the near future.

- You are very perceptive.
- Why don't you just tell us, instead of trying to sell us the idea before you suggest it?
- I may be worried that you will decline, my friend. It is not only you who knows me, but I know also you. I have not yet found an argument to convince you.

- You want us to remain in your service, said the wizard. That's it, isn't it?

Galbaric twisted and turned.

- You make it sound so... I don't know... Up and down a hierarchy. That's not how I want it. You will not have to pretend. You will be no less free to do as you see fit. But I would love to have the three of you in a role as advisors. You understand I need folk around me who I can trust?

- Yes, that I can understand.

Galbaric looked at Grendeline for help. She gave it some thought, glancing at Nariel who didn't reveal with any facial expression what was on her mind.

- I assume, we don't have to give you any answer right away either? You're a man of patience, isn't it so? Galbaric confirmed it, nodding.

- Then I will say we will think about it.

- It's all I am asking for in this moment.



DEERWICK

*At the end of a road is a way
And you stroll down the way to a trail
And if you don't falter or stray
You come to the end of the tale*

[- The Minstrel of Merrybath -]

CHAPTER 24

I would prefer, if we walked from the keep to my village, said Galbaric. It will take us little more than an hour, but it is a beautiful road and a path in some places. We have to walk along the river "Victory" which for much of its stretch is the border between Gothany and Angria, but here it flows south after Deerwick and into the bay. It is the only river in Gothany, aside from the Odikon, which doesn't flow into the Odikon. They agreed to walk.

It was, as Galbaric had promised them, a lovely and peaceful stretch to walk, along fields of waving corn and with an occasional glimpse of the river Victory.

Along the road they passed a number of farms and Galbaric told them their names and who lived in those farms. It was clear to Grendeline that he was passionate about his home village and surroundings.

- All I ever wanted was not to let their peace be disturbed, he explained. Over there, he pointed to a house, is Gruelsiven. My best friend lived there when we were kids. Galbaric's scarred face was soft when he talked about his memories.

- This could well be the last time I walk this road, he said.

- We can hope it is not, said Grendeline.

- We never know the future. Every day can be our last day. I never worried about that. In battle, this is not something to linger on. Every battle ends, but so does every life.

- Yes, even the gods must die, she answered.

- We are close to Deerwick now, said Galbaric.

- Only one more bridge to cross. Galbaric was becoming notably nervous.

They saw the village. It was between three hills with gentle slopes on all sides. On their side of the river, before they crossed the bridge, was another fortress visible on a hill. This fortress appeared to be an abandoned ruin.

- Blankenhill, said Galbaric. Has been falling apart for the last 200 years, since Centaur Keep was built. They crossed the last bridge to Deerwick and walked up the main road into the village.

There were no defensive structures. This was a village of farmers.

- And there is our house! The fork in the road led up to their doorstep. In the other direction, the road continued through the village.

Galbaric knocked on the door. Nariel smiled.

- If it is your house, then why are you knocking on the door? Nothing appeared to move inside the house and Galbaric was just about to knock again as the door slowly opened.

It was a young woman who opened. When she saw Galbaric she embraced him sobbing.

- What's the matter? To Grendeline he explained, this is my niece.

Between heavy sighs and tears she proclaimed irregular breathing that her grandfather, Galbaric's father had died and the funeral had been only the day before. The Regent of Gothany didn't show his feelings.

- I'm sorry...

- Come inside, Galbaric's niece bid them.

- We are sorry to hear this, said Atatkyo. Your father was a good man, Galbaric. And to his niece he said; Thank you, for receiving us.

In the kitchen sat an old woman who looked much older than Grendeline.

- This is my aunt, said Galbaric. If you talk to her, you have to yell, because she doesn't hear very well.

- Tanila, he said to his niece. I give you this house. I can't live in it myself, I have only come to get a few things. We won't stay long.

- But mum...

- I will see my sister before we leave, but this is now your house, girl. You can keep it, sell it. Do as you wish.

- But...

- Tanila, my dear, I am appointed Regent of Gothany. I will live in houses much bigger than this one. I will only take the painting from the study and a few small objects for keepsake.

- Come here, he gestured for Grendeline, Nariel and the wizard to follow him. They came into a room filled with bookshelves and on one of the walls a large painting was hanging. It was signed by the great master Rudyard Duryoda himself and it depicted a scene from the Battle at Dragonbar

Both Grendeline and Nariel gasped. They both recognized Grendeline in the painting.

Grendeline had several memories flashing in her head from looking at the painting. It was truly a masterful representation. The man next to herself had some similarity to Galbaric. She recognized also the other man and the woman next to her.

That, she said, is the Duke of Elfminster and Dragonbar and his wife.

- He is dressed like an ordinary soldier, said the wizard.

- It's because he fought alongside his men. It would have been unwise to wear costumes which only would have made him a better target.

- Of course! Galbaric slapped his forehead. I should have guessed it!

Grendeline stepped closer to the painting to study the details in it. One of the silver dragons in the background fought two wyverns. One of them was being trampled under his front paws and the other had its claws ripping through its back and its tail was swinging towards stinging the dragon.

- He died, Grendeline murmured to herself. Only one of them, she survived...

Galbaric was opening drawers and cupboards. He was looking for something and as it often happens when you look for one thing, you find another.

- Perhaps you know what this is. He had opened a small decorated box and removed a metallic object from it. It had a round part like a coin, but with a hole in it and an extension with a jagged edge, like small dragonteeth.

- Oh, gods!!! Both Grendeline and Nariel were shocked and Galbaric couldn't help but noticing they had a better idea of what it was than he.

- What is it?

It didn't look like any of the keys Branwell had shown them, but it had similarities to all of them. There was no question in Grendeline's mind this key would open something important in the metal dome of Highdungeon.

- It is... a key, identified Atakyo calmly the object.

- All three of you know what this object is and you wonder why I'd like to have you as advisors? Not only do you seem to know what key it is, but also where it goes.

- That, my dear friend, said the wizard, we do not know. We have seen something similar, but on my honour I swear to you, we don't know where this key goes.

- I believe you, said Galbaric and put the key in Grendeline's hand. Keep it, it's yours.

- Perhaps we should tell him, Grendeline turned to Atakyo. Nariel didn't say anything, but clearly she didn't disapprove. And Atakyo sighed.

- Yes, you're right. We should.

- Tell me what? Galbaric had no idea.

They told him everything. About Highdungeon, the magic corridors, about the metal dome at the heart of Highdungeon, about the amulets and about their age. The latter didn't surprise Galbaric at all.

They also told him the dwarf they met, was one.

- Elfminster, Marl and Orchampton are connected. He summarized.

- They are.

- And we could be in Elfminster this evening.

- We could.

- And this... key... is from the metal dome.

- We think so.

- And there are 12 unused amulets at Oracle.

- It appears to be so. Do you want one?

Galbaric was not sure. While many may jump at the prospect of immortality, one whose life had not always been comfortable could easily see Dhûrin Faramoarte's point of view. Immortality could be a curse as much as a blessing. It was no guarantee of immortality. There were so many ways of dying horribly and if old age didn't end a life, then sooner or later a sword or the teeth of a savage beast could. Evil folk were capable of excruciating torture, which could go on longer than we care to find out. Galbaric was used to weigh every argument for and against before making a decision. In this matter, there was no need to make an immediate decision. He promised them he would give it further thought. Altogether these were astounding news to digest.

- Tanila, he said to his niece as she entered the room. Send a messenger to Centaur Keep that we won't be returning today and instead continue to Orchampton in the morning. I regret the change of plans, but we will be in Elfminster shortly. How shortly they could be arriving in the city north of Gnollwood, he didn't reveal. Tanila was delighted to hear her uncle would stay in their home for the day.

- Tell me, Galbaric, this key... Grendeline held the unusual key in her palm. Who gave it to you?

- The Duke of Elfminster and Dragonbar gave it to my great grandfather, saying he had to keep it safe. It has been passed on. We didn't know what it was. We were under the impression it was an item which in the wrong hands could unleash a devastating force. I have no children of my own to pass it on to. But you, Grendeline, you were there and now you are here. If anything, I'm convinced you wouldn't let it fall into the hands of evil. When unravelling mystery, caution is advised. What we find could be unimagined horrors, instead of treasure. I will send my things with a merchant trek to Elfminster. It should arrive in a few weeks. Tomorrow we depart for Orchampton and I look forward to see a Gate of Highdungeon.



ORCHAMPTON

*A dream in sleep has different shape
Than dreams awake for our escape
One reveals our deepest fear
The other what we're holding dear
One is not our conscious choice
The other is a written voice
Once it caught you on its hook
You have to finish all the book.*

[- The Blackhove Bard -]

CHAPTER 25

It was impossible to convince Galbaric of the beauty and benefits of spending an hour or two as a dragon. Between Grendeline and Nariel, the most positive answer the wizard got was from the elf, she said;

- No, no, no, no, no and no!

Three centaurs came riding from the keep, to inquire if all was well or if their support was required. Centaur Ovarol joined them in the study.

- It is completely safe, assured the wizard. I have done this a thousand times. Well, perhaps not that many times but a hundred times. Or less.

- Why don't you transmute yourself? Nariel believed she had found the best solution.

Tanila's little brother, who was eavesdropping at the door, suddenly came rushing.

- You are a real wizard!? You do real magic?

Atatkyo tried to ignore the boy, but eleven year old Tobarac demanded answers, tugging the wizard's plain robe.

- I can't transmute myself, he tried to make it sound as if his objection was obvious. I have to make sure the dragon returns to human form.

Grendeline knew most dragons could speak the common tongue and were able to perform the same delicate movements as human hands. They may appear ferocious, but were highly intelligent. She said nothing.

- Can you turn me into a dragon? Asked Tobarac. It sounded like a plea. Nobody paid attention.

- You just have to find someone else, said Akarso.

- Only one hour! Atatkyo was hoping Grendeline and Nariel would confirm. It is safe!

- I want to be a dragon, shouted Tobarac!

- Go outside and play, said Nexus Atatkyo.

- What about the boy? Said Grendeline. He wants to be a dragon.

- Out of the question, said Galbaric. His mum would kill me and then I would have to kill you. Nobody objected to the flaw in his argument.

- How would he come back? He can't fly back, because you have to make him human and he can't walk back on his own, he is only a boy.

- We could race the dragon, said Ovarol, the centaur. And bring him back. Without weight on our back, we are faster.

- You are supposed to be on my side, Ovarol.

- I want to fly, uncle, assured Tobarac.

- You are eleven years old, young man, tried Galbaric to dissuade the eager child.

- Twelve next month. Tobarac quickly realized he had another ace up his sleeve. And I will ask you nothing else for my birthday, he said.

Galbaric sighed.

Atatkyo felt it best not to press the issue. Young Tobarac did it so well without his help.

* * *

Tobarac, the dragon, behaved remarkably adult for his age. He kept his promise to the wizard to do exactly as he was told and nothing else.

The centaurs did well in keeping up with Tobarac for half the distance, but Gothany's topography offered unexpected challenges. Uphill they lost speed and followed the dragon over an increasing distance. Outside Orcheston the wizard turned Tobarac back to the boy and they waited together twenty minutes for the centaurs to arrive.

Tobarac was on fire.

- That was awesome! He screamed. Let's do it again. Maybe for my next birthday! He hoped the wizard would agree to this, but Atatkyo fueled little of his hope with a hesitant; *maybe*.

Galbaric was trying to calm down. He didn't wish to try this ever again. Over the treetops he came to realize, he was afraid of heights. On the high battlements of Centaur Keep he had always been looking into the distance. It was looking down which didn't become him.

Tobarac was lifted up on Ovarol's back. The boy had a field day, first flying as a dragon and then riding on a centaur.

- Now, do *not* go bragging to all of your friends

about today, please. Remember what I told you! With this final piece of advice, Galbaric let the centaurs return to Deerwick with the boy.

Orchampton was regardless of its name never populated by a single Orch. The main theory of how the city obtained its name was related to the cultivation of fruit and nut trees around it. Another theory states the name was chosen to balance town names not to reflect racial bias. Even if Orchs never would build a city, and rather eat a human, than listen to them. Reading and writing was another activity cultivated in Orchardampton. The presence of the largest library in Gothany was a guarantee no Orch would set foot in town. At least, that's another theory popular among folk in Orchardampton. Until they have been eaten.

The Lord of Orchardampton was delighted to receive the new regent of Gothany in his palace. He talked incessantly. It conveyed the impression he didn't wish for his guests to ask uncomfortable questions concerning his allegiance to the former Earl of Marl. It wouldn't have crossed their mind, had he not talked without interruption.

- You must take a tour of our beautiful orchards, and taste our delicious apricots. You know, we have also a variety of orchids and an orchestra of string instruments lulling them to peaceful bloom every morning and a number of precious books have gone missing from the library, we have no idea how they could have disappeared and I can't imagine how exhausted you must be after your journey...

At this point he had to take a breath to be able to continue the avalanche of words and Atakyo took the opportunity to ask where the entrance to the dungeons or catacombs below Orchardampton could be found. The Lord was stunned his visitors took no interest in the matters he avoided and since they neither appeared interested in the lapses of their librarian, their apricots, orchids or orchestra, he relaxed slightly.

- Our dungeons!?! His intonation of surprise and particular articulation of the word *dungeon* caused Grendeline to smile. There was a feminine quality to his demeanor. And he was stalling.

- What in the name of all the gods do you hope to find in the dungeon?

- Since you ask, we can say our particular interest is in a heavy wooden dungeon door, a gate. One that you have been unable to open.

Their host was now convinced his possible past shortcomings were of no relevance to the visit.

- A heavy wooden dungeon door, you say? He had no idea what they were talking about.

- No matter, he said and picked up a small bell, rattled it and waited for his servant to enter. An

elegant slim man, in contrast to his master, opened the door to the reception hall and waited for the Lord of Orchardampton to signal him the permission to approach.

- Vasicas, do we have a dungeon door; a heavy wooden door in the dungeon, we've been unable to open?

- I am unaware of such door, my Lord.

- And who, Vasicas, if anyone in Orchardampton, can we trust would be aware of such door, if it existed beneath us?

Vasicas lips first protruded slowly and were then sucked into his mouth. He scratched the back of his head.

- Captain Kinoi, of the Orchardampton's Guard would be the one who most frequently has errands to the down below, feeding prisoners and granting them opportunity to volunteer information.

- Bring him to us, please, Vasicas!

- As you wish, my Lord.

- Oh, and Vasicas...

- Yes, my Lord.

- While we wait, send up a girl with a tray of various fruits from our best garden for our guests.

- At once, my Lord.

- Very well! He waved his hand dismissively and Vasicas went backwards to the door before he turned.

Grendeline and Nariel exchanged looks. Non of them were used to, or keen on formal display of respect and reverence. Not so much disapproval as something they were unaccustomed to.

Promptly a girl carrying a tray of fruit knocked on the door and waited for permission to approach.

As she was given the sign, she placed the tray on the desk below the Lord's elevated seat and waited for permission to leave. The Lord of Orchardampton examined superficially the selection and indicated to the girl she could go.

Atakyo picked up a peach and cut it in two halves with a knife he seemed to conjured up from nowhere. The half without the nut he handed to Grendeline. Galbaric Akarso chose a pear.

Nariel abstained.

- I am curious, said their host. Do you believe you can open a door which to the best of our knowledge never has been opened? And if you can, what do you hope to find behind the door?

- A corridor, answered Galbaric without thinking.

- A corridor...and this corridor leads to a room? A room who no one has entered for ages?

- We don't know, interrupted Grendeline. We may not find anything. We may not be able to open the door.

- In which case I rapidly will dimension door us to the next town, said Atakyo.

- And you can not simply dimension door yourself

to the other side of this dungeon door?

- The door is warded against spells, explained the wizard. This is why no one has been able to open it. No one has been able to pick the locks and no one has found a key.
- Mysterious dungeon doors, wizard. Has it been tried to axe ones way in? Or force the door with a battering ram? Burn it? Acid?
- These doors have proven impervious to all manner of assault. It looks like wood, but it appears powerful magic protects them.
- Powerful magic protect powerful secrets.

Grendeline found herself impressed by the sharp mind of the Orchampton nobleman.

Before more difficult questions could be posed Galbaric Akarso decided it was best to stifle the curiosity of their host.

- We will inform you of any findings we make, which are relevant to the folk of Orchampton. We are grateful for your assistance and hospitality and will not let it remain unrewarded. However, we require you to allow us access, possibly on more than one occasion, to your dungeon. Let us pass in or out at our convenience and refrain from interference in our investigation. Is this clear? Akarso looked sternly at the nobleman.
- Crystal clear, he answered feigning aloofness.

The next knock on the door was Captain Kinoi of the Orchampton Guard.

* * *

As they walked down the corridor towards Highdungeon Grendeline ventilated her tensions;

- I thought the Lord of Orchampton was going to trick us into revealing more than we were willing to share with him.
- And I actually forgot for a while that I am regent of Gothany and his superior, said Galbaric.
- Fortunately it occurred to me. How long is this corridor?
- It looks worse than it is. The exit to the chamber of 32 doors can appear suddenly, explained the wizard. It gives the impression of being endless, but it is not.

Galbaric dropped the stem. He ate everything else of the pear, peel, flesh, seed and core. When he turned to see where it had fallen, it was gone.

- I see what you mean...

The exit to the chamber of 32 doors was in front of them.

- It should be 32 doorways, Galbaric commented, since there is no actual door in the opening. There is only a door at the far end. The one only we know how to open.



ELFMINSTER MINISTRY

*A carved oak table tells a tale
Of times when kings and queens
Sipped wine from goblets gold
And the brave would lead their ladies
From out the room to arbours cool*

*A time of valour and legends born
A time when honour
Meant much more to a man than life
And the days knew only strife
To tell right from wrong
Through lance and sword*

[- The Six Madrigal Bards of Inception -]

CHAPTER 26

The third visit to Highdungeon yielded no more secrets than their second visit. They found the magic chamber which were to transport them to a deck below. It was indeed no bigger than a toilet stall. It had buttons, but they activated only the voice telling them again the Spirit of the Dome was sleeping. Grendeline translated it for Galbaric who was more interested in where the female voice originated from.

- I would like to meet this woman, he said. Where might she be hiding?

They found a panel near the chamber with a concealed keyhole, but the key didn't fit. There were however glyphs at the keyhole which were the same glyphs as on the key.

They found a storage room with curious items. None of their functions were discernable. It was a collection diverse shapes with smooth surfaces and few buttons, none of which caused the items to display activity. There was a box of mysterious vials, containing an odourless liquid, small bottles of potions and crates of large bottles containing a potent alcoholic beverage, burning lips and throat even from the smallest sip. Galbaric spit it out. There didn't appear to be anything useful.

- This can take years to figure out, sighed Nariel.

The light in the storage room was almost as weak as it was in the corridor.

About the hall in the center of the dome Galbaric had one spontaneous comment;

- This looks like a command room.

- Could be, agreed the wizard.

Nothing brought them closer to solving the mystery.

It only brought one of them closer to home.

* * *

Grendeline was happy to be back in Elfminster. Upon arrival she wrote and dispatched a letter to Hibernau. She would come visit soon.

The Lord Regent Galbaric Akarso assumed formally office in Elfminster Palace.

The councilmember who temporarily performed the duties of city ruler was delighted to surrender the responsibility. He remained as advisor.

Galbaric's friends, who cared little for rank, title and privileges were nonetheless bestowed with them. Lady Grendeline of Hibernau was named military advisor, Atakyo was noted in the protocols as Grandmaster Wizard Grigolin of Umberwich and the elf, Lady Nariel of Taïri appointed main advisor for foreign affairs.

Soon after the news were officially announced by town criers all around Gothany, Miri Akarso and Toronar Ryotakin requested and received transfer from Marl to the Elfminster City guard.

A delegation of twentyfour centaurs led by Ovarol arrived to support the ministry of Elfminster. The troop of centaurs not only improved defensive and attacking forces, but made also a most welcome picturesque addition to the city. Centaur droppings were considered a more precious fertilizer than their horse equivalent, even though no one could safely say there was a difference. Perhaps having it delivered in barrels, gave it a nobler mark.

As one of his first administrative acts, Galbaric let construct a proper road through Gnollwood, which would turn southeast towards Manticross and avoid the cathedral ruins and kobold territory. Strong regular patrols were dispatched to curb orch activity along the road. No contact with orch were reported and it was assumed they had fallen back to the Eastside of the Odikon's flow through the forest.

Nexus Atakyo designed a Folk Coolinghouse, which required no magic of any kind to keep cold storage. It was largely underground and allowed

no daylight inside. The Coolinghouse kept a near freezing temperature. It was swiftly implemented and became a fashionable commodity and so popular, the idea spread all over the country.

Inspired by the wizard's initiative, Nariel proposed the construction of a Folk Washinghouse, which was built next to the Coolinghouse. In it, folk could wash themselves and their garments and it became at least in Elfminster a popular place for social interaction. Some felt more gossip was to be heard in the Washinghouse than in the Tavern.

Near the end of summer Proth Rokoser felt he had picked up all useful skills the *Rogues Guild* in Marl had to teach him. Jethro Retekin was offered the position of principal at the *Ranger's Academy* in Elfminster. Proth, Jethro and Gwyn arrived in the city north of Gnollwood on the first day of Fallmonth. The news they brought with them was Neryman Nebyed's recent appointment as Rowald Isankino's second in command.

For his part in the victory over the wyverns at Spiderwood, the King of Zamorna named Galbaric Akarso in his first year as regent, *First Archduke of Gothany*. The appointment was confirmed by the Queen of Angria and the Archduke of North-angerland. No particular ceremony was held.

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Proth Rokoser, Gwyn and Jethro Retekin were frequently in the metal dome of Highdungeon, trying to unravel its mystery. It was also a welcome retreat for them from the bustle of Elfminster. Grendeline had trusted Proth with the strange key because he stubbornly refused to give up, but neither the three of them had any success finding a lock it fitted into.

One day Jethro was slumped in the high chair of what Galbaric had called the command central. Gwyn attempted to decipher the glyphs below the buttons and levers at one of the working desks.

Proth, who felt uncomfortable in what they called the main hall, was going along the walls, annoyed by the lack of shadows. His left hand slid over the smooth panels at the wall.

He stopped. There was a small, hardly noticeable circle within a rectangular panel. He pressed it gently and it reclined slightly. As he let go of it, the circle bounced forward and rotated downwards on a concealed hinge revealing a keyhole. Surprised Proth searched his pockets for Grendeline's key.

Jethro noticed his friend had found something and was at his side in the blink of an eye.

- You found the keyhole! You found it!!
 - Don't know. Yet.
 Proth was as stingy with words as always. He found the key and held it up.
 Gwyness now also joined them.
 - Try it! She urged him on.
 - Go on, try it already! Said Jethro.
 Proth let the key slide into the keyhole. It fitted. He turned the key and the compartment unlocked with an audible snap. He opened the panel, which had revealed itself as a door. Inside were two neat rows of rods with a handle. At closer examination the rods turned out to be hollow pipes, closed at one end. There was a lever in the handle, which could easily be reached by the index finger if the rod, or the pipe, was held in its handle.
 Proth pressed the lever and something with close resemblance to a lightning bolt emerged from the open end of the pipe. It flashed past Jethro's face, singed the fringe of his hair and burned a dark spot into the ceiling. Shocked by the energy blast, Proth dropped the rod on the floor.
 Gwyn screamed. They looked frightened at her.
 - Were you hurt?
 - No I was scared, brother!
 - What is it? Jethro kneeled and picked up the rod.
 - Don't point it at me, warned his sister.
 - A weapon! Proth peered into the cabinet. And there are seventeen more of them.
 - With this, one can stop an army! Said Jethro.
 - If it doesn't run out of magic charges, warned Gwyn.
 - You're right, we should not make use of it lightly. Gwyn pointed at the bottom of the cabinet.
 - And there is another key!
 Jethro picked up the second key. It was different from the first key only where Grendeline's key resembled a coin with a hole in it. This one was shaped like a portal. It also had a hole in it.

Jethro carefully placed the rod back into its place in the cabinet and picked up the portal key. They all three went out into the corridor, where they had seen a keyhole in a panel near the small chamber they started calling the *transport chamber*. The key fit into the lock and the panel opened. It revealed a metal shaft with horizontal bars in its walls for climbing down. It was dark in the shaft. Jethro dropped a copper coin into it and they waited for the impact. When they heard the coin drop to the bottom of the shaft, they knew it was best not to let go of the horizontal bars. It had to be the height of the Pegastoke walls.
 - Who goes first?
 Proth Rokoser climbed into the shaft and made his descent. A light as dim as the light in the corridor lit up the shaft. Jethro followed him.

- Guys, I wait up here, said Gwyness.
 She waited for half an hour until she heard her brother banging on the panel of the deck below her. She could hear a muffled scream.
 - Help! Gwyn, open up!
 First she didn't know what to do. Then she removed her plate mail and dropped it to the floor. She took a deep breath and climbed into the shaft. Her brother was still banging on the panel to the shaft. He was screaming louder. It frightened her.
 - Help!!!
 Gwyn arrived at the level where her brothers banging and yelling was the loudest. She pressed on the panel and it swung open, but was beaten back by Jethro's fist into locking position.
 - Will you stop making such a racket!!? she yelled.
 Jethro stopped banging.
 Gwyn opened the panel again.
 Her brothers face had gone red. Behind him she saw Proth leaning against a wall, smiling down on both of them.
 - We better go back up! Jethro said. Gwyness started slowly her ascent. Jethro followed when the shaft ahead of him was clear. Proth was the last to return.
 - You found anything, guys?
 Jethro shook his head. The deck below is similar to this one. And we have to be more careful. The panel can only be opened from the inside without a key.
 - You mean, YOU have to be more careful, replied Gwyn and began strap back her plate armour. I feel we have had enough excitement for one day.
 - Yes, I agree, Gwyn. Let's report our findings to Grendeline. She will be delighted to hear we finally made progress.

* * *

Grendeline would have been delighted, had she been in town, but unfortunately she was at home in Hibernau. But Galbaric, Nariel and the wizard were excited about the discoveries.
 - Rods of lightning bolt? A whole cabinet full of them? Atatkyo glanced at the Archduke, now I understand why you were told to keep the key safe.
 - If memory serves, we have to climb two decks down to awaken the *Spirit of the Metal Dome*. Nariel sounded uncertain about it.
 - We wait until Grendeline returns before we make the next expedition to the dome, decided Galbaric and reached for a pitcher of water.
 - We have waited this long, solving the mystery, we can hold out two more days.
 - There is no guarantee we solve it now, Atatkyo

commented. Every time we have opened a door, we found another closed door behind it.

- True! Nariel laughed.
- Life is more interesting, said the wizard, as long as we have unsolved mysteries ahead of us. We need discoveries to look forward to. It is better we create more mysteries.
- How, asked Proth Rokoser.
- In taking interest in the world around us. Not all mysteries have to be as intriguing as the metal dome in Highdungeon. Who was that dwarf, who travelled with us on the Red Deer? He paused. Did the Zamorna captain find the remains of his deserters? And did the four of them return in time for the battle at Spiderwood? I think not. Why did books vanish from the library in Orchampton? Why is Grendeline in the painting of the Battle of Dragonbar?
- Because she was there, said Nariel.
- My point is, if we don't take interest in the things we don't know, then there will of course be no mystery to solve.
- And when we know it all, we can die in peace. It was Gwyness Retekin who concluded so.
- Gwyn, I am more than 500 years old and I do not know it all. How many times have we not closed a book after reading the last page and wish'd the story could go on, and on and on...?
- If it was a good book, I felt good at the end, said Gwyness.
- Oftentimes I wish'd it could go on and on, admitted Jethro.
- Life is like that. It goes on and on.
- Until it doesn't, said Proth.
- Ah, and when it doesn't – do we feel cheated?
- We don't feel anything, because we are dead.
- Exactly! The wizard emphasized it. And the only way to feel alive is to dig as deep as we can.
- Figuratively, commented Galbaric.

- I haven't mentioned this before, said Nariel, but I know I have to be 900 years old, but I seem to have a gap of 400 to 450 years in my memory. Atakyo's head briskly turned to the elf.
- There, another mystery to solve! How can one forget more than 400 years of ones life?
- Grendeline forgot everything, argued Jethro.
- Grendeline is a mystery, said Nariel.
- Who created these amulets? Jethro's hand slipped into his gown.
- How and why? Gwyn contemplated it.
- My friends, said the wizard, keep looking for the questions. Keep looking beyond what you see and ask yourself what is missing in the picture. Galbaric glanced at Rudyard Duryoda's painting.
- Do you mean this literally or figuratively?
- Both! I see you are looking at the painting. What do you see?

- I see my great grandfather with Grendeline and the Duke of Elfminster and Dragonbar. And his wife...
- And...?
- I see the soldiers and two silver dragons fighting wyverns...
- And what is not in the picture?
- Well... Galbaric tried to imagine what else could be in the painting. I see no centaurs... no elves...
- Go on!
- I see no dwarves, no goblins, no griffins...
- Yes, go on...
Galbaric frowned. Dragonbar is over here... he pointed. And this is... where's the Dragonhill?
- It's not there, is it?
- No, but.... It should be right here. Galbaric pointed to the left side.
- Towards Dryadoak, yes. Atakyo nodded.
- Could Duryoda have made a mistake?
- Perfect representations of folk who can't stand still, but mistakes in the landscape?
- By the gods!!!
- See, there we have another mystery. It is not the answers which make life worth living. It's the questions, my friends. The day we stop asking, we can close the lid to the coffin ourselves.
- But why should we seek challenge, if it does not bother us?
- How shallow our sleep, if not exhausted? How insipid the food, when not hungry? How stale, the satisfaction, had we not struggled to arrive? What pride in being, if it didn't cost us to become?
- Enough already! It is obvious we always seek the opposite of what is good for us. Let's not rush headless towards tomorrow. It will come to us.
- Everything always changes... said Gwyness.
- Somebody wise said, we have to learn how to control the changes, or else changes will control us.
- I think it was Grendeline who said that, Jethro.
- Yes, Nariel, I heard her saying it.
- She will be back soon, the Archduke calmly reassured them.
- You promise? Gwyn smiled.
- The future is always veiled in mist. But as long as our hearts are beating, we do what we have to do. Life goes on, he glanced at Proth Rokoser and added; until it doesn't.

Perchance a beginning...

Possible sequels to be written:

- THE SECRET OF THE SILVER DRAGON -
- IMMORTALITY TIMES TWELVE -
- IN THE TWILIGHT OF ZAMORNA -
- THE SLIPPERMEN OF TROGLODERRY -
- AROUND THE UNICORNER -
- THE METAL DOME QUEST -



Wandmere



Killark



Flindmar



Xanthingen



Narnebourg



Cloakley



Oracley



Trollbridge



Firk



Ogrebane



Swordhaven



Drowgale