

RAPPAN A'THUK

Player's Guide



NECROMANCER
GAMES



FROG GOD
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Player's Guide

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Player's Guide

A Guide to the Player's Guide

What is this book exactly? This book is not a book of hints, tips, and tricks for playing in Rappan Athuk. Things like, "Be sure to search for the secret door in room 4 on the level of the minotaurs' maze" – you won't find it here. (I don't believe there is such a thing as the above, so don't feel you've gotten something extra there.) This book immerses a player in the world of Rappan Athuk, to let you *feel* what it's like to live in that world every day. It takes the town of Zelkor's Ferry from being a number on a map and a list of names and game stats to being a place populated with people. The good folks of Zelkor's Ferry have personalities, and the occasional foible, and are available for interaction with your characters. Now when your player characters ride into town, *they* won't know anybody there, but *you* will.

Beware – another thing this book is not is a straitjacket. You can't use the things written here to *force* your GM into (or out of) a particular behavior. "But the book says..." won't hold any weight around here, because we are big believers in Rule 0: "The GM is always right." It may just so happen that in the *slightly* altered universe in which your characters find themselves, things are a little different than they are in Zelkor's Ferry Prime and they just need to deal with it. In that case, though, it is to be hoped that your GM gives you sufficient information to accommodate his or her changes and feel comfortable in the village nonetheless. (GMs – Hint, hint!)

To be sure, there are specific tips included; grizzled, legless veterans (and some that are merely maimed, not grizzled at all) tell their stories and give their opinions on the crucial things to know about Rappan Athuk and its environs. This information will be useful for folks who have never tackled a dungeon with a population higher than many cities, or those whose alter egos spend so much time in the city or in the great outdoors, that both player and character have forgotten the best way to handle a dungeon. The most important thing to remember about all this advice, though, is that none of it tells everything. Adventurers telling stories of Rappan Athuk are in the same situation as the classic blind men with the elephant: that "each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!" We invite you to add *your* stories to the annals of the Dungeon of Graves!

Bristleback Inn

"Welcome to Zelkor's Ferry. I hope the captain didn't question you too hard at the gate. You may be a person bent on finding an adventure, but you don't look like a troublemaker to me." The woman's blue eyes seem to twinkle as she smiles at you. Her light brown hair is beginning to show some grey, but her arms look strong where she has pushed up the sleeves of her brown dress. "If it's adventure you want, let me tell you, you've come to the right place. Although we hold our own here, this area can by no means be considered safe and there's plenty for a brave soul to find and do.

"I'm Amelia, and my husband and I are the proprietors of Bristleback Inn. It's been in my husband's family for several generations." She leads you into the building's common room and continues. "A room with your board is one gold piece a night... Thank you very much. The stable is just next door and stabling for a horse or mule is one silver piece. Anything more exotic than that and you'll have to ask Bristleback; we own the stable, too. The two fellows out there, Vort and Igor, are both decent folk and will take good care of any of your animals."

Amelia turns to survey the room, and you take a look around also. The

inn's low-ceilinged common room is really nothing special, but out here so far from civilization it seems to have all the comforts of home. The tables are well-worn, but also well-scrubbed. In fact, a teen-aged girl with hair the color of honey is engaged in scrubbing one right now. "Don't forget the sides, Ysbel," Amelia says to her. The slender girl looks up at the comment, flashes a shy smile when she sees you looking at her, and then goes back to her work.

The shutters are open to let in some fresh air, and at the far end of the room a small fire burns in the fireplace as an old man snoozes in a chair nearby. Lamps are set into brackets high on the walls, to provide the most light in the evenings and also keep them out of the way of clumsy patrons. The bar is on the other side of you, before the stairs; it is supplied with a couple of kegs, and a row of pottery mugs hung on pegs on the wall. The treads on the stairs are worn in the centers, and you can see that anyone of much height will need to duck on the way up to avoid an inconvenient beam.

A door opens between the bar and the stairs, and another woman enters carrying two sealed bottles. The woman has skin the golden-brown color of good ale; her eyes are deeper brown, and she wears her black hair pulled up into a loose knot at the back of her head. "Amelia, the cook brought these up from the cellar and told me we'll be needin' them in here."

Amelia nods. "I heard Bristleback tell Gumbel last night to get some more bottles up here today. Just put them in the rack under the counter, Tallie." The woman does as instructed, then straightens to look at you. Amelia introduces her. "This is Tallie, one of our serving women. She and Ysbel stay plenty busy around here, but feel free to ask them if you need something and I'm not around."

Suddenly from behind the door you hear a man's voice, rather muffled, calling "Tallie!"

"That Gumbel!" she exclaims, and rolls her eyes. "I'm coming! Keep yer britches on," she calls, then disappears again behind the door.

Amelia gives one last satisfied look at the room, then turns to you. "I need to get out back and weed the vegetables or pretty soon we aren't going to be able to find the food for the weeds. The privies are around back to the left; the kitchen garden is to the right. If you end up around that way by mistake, watch your step because I don't want anyone trampling on my garden. You ought to take a look around and chat with some of the people here; I'm sure several of them have things to tell you about their own experiences in this area, things that might help keep you alive when you head out looking for your destiny." With that parting remark, Amelia also disappears through the door to the kitchen and leaves you alone.

You're not quite alone, though, as you realize when a soft voice interrupts your thoughts. "Pardon me." It's the young maid; Ysbel, that was her name. She's now working on a table nearer you, and lays down her small scrubbing brush when you turn.

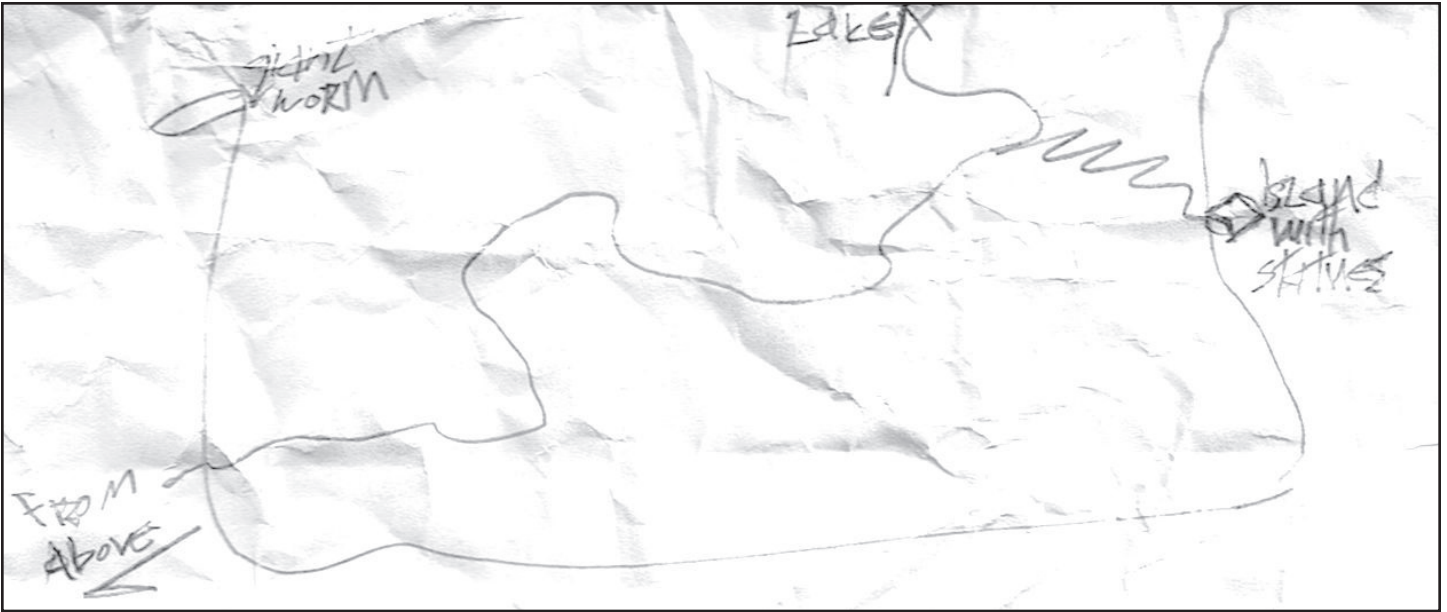
"I couldn't help but hear what Amelia said about people having things to tell you. I know someone who tells amazing stories! Some of them may even be true." She gestures to the old man sitting in the corner by the fireplace and continues. "That's old Russ. He's Amelia's grandpappy, and to hear him tell it, he may have tamed this whole area single-handedly when he was young. There's no doubt his stories are interesting, though they might not be helpful to you. Let me just get his attention."

Pappy's Story

Ysbel steps to the fireplace and touches the old man on the shoulder, then raises her voice a little. "Pappy! Here's someone who wants to hear all about how you cleared out that dungeon when you were young."

The old man starts out of his snooze and looks up at the girl, then squints at you. He uses his arms to straighten himself in his seat and squirms back and forth a little bit to get more comfortable. When you step closer, you see a pair of crutches lying next to him and note that he has a peg on his

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right leg. At a second glance, though, you realize that his other leg isn't folded underneath him; it's missing completely, cut off at mid-thigh. A small lute lies along the left side of his chair, and one of the pottery mugs stands close by on his right, placed on the broad hearth surrounding the fireplace.

"So yer interested in an adventure, eh?" Pappy begins. "I can tell ye about some adventures. I'm a bit dry though; bring me a beer, if ye'd be so kind, girlie." He passes his mug to Ysbel, who shakes her head at him, smiling.

"Pappy, it's way too early in the day for you to start on the beer. I'll get you a mug of water from the rainbarrel, though; it'll be cool." Ysbel starts off on her errand and Pappy smacks his mouth a few times experimentally, then turns to you.

"Did ye know that we've a dungeon practically in sight of our watchtowers? The Mouth of Doom, they call it, out in the middle of the forest to the south of us. Oh, my friends and I found it right enough, nigh onto fifty years ago now. I suppose it was a nice enough little dungeon, and it gave us a thrill or two, but it was nothing compared to the granddaddy of all dungeons!"

Pappy's voice is raised, and he shakes his fist in the air. "Rappan Athuk – now *that* was a dungeon! My friends and I were well known at one time, though not the stuff of bards' tales. We were powerful, and we made our presence felt. We fought malicious specters down there, and nasty creatures with big mouths that lived in heaps of trash. We battled an undead king to a standstill, though there were no winners that day and both sides crept away to lick our wounds. In fact, we got further below that dungeon than anyone else I've ever known. You wouldn't know it to look at me now but I was a powerful wizard once, back before I lost my legs – and half my mind."

Ysbel returns just then with the mug of water. Pappy takes a small sip, then downs a larger swallow with a grimace and sets the mug carefully on the hearth. Ysbel takes up her scrubbing again at the other end of the room but appears to be listening in to Pappy's story as well.

"We weren't about to just waltz in the front door, so we found ourselves a different entrance. It wasn't easy going, but we got right down into the thick of things without those fiends being aware. Once down we had some trouble finding our way around; there was a confusion of low tunnels, and the darkness was so thick our lights barely allowed us to see. We followed a winding river through several caverns; one was filled with spiders, undead creatures, and nasty trolls, which was where we lost Sister Gabriola. Another cavern had a purple worm the size of a small village. To this day I think we could have just walked away quietly from the creature, but ye might know that our rogue Renfrew couldn't leave well enough alone! He was the first one poisoned, and by the time we could pull away and tend to him, he was already dead," Pappy says as he shakes his head.

"The levels of the dungeon proper may be made of worked stone, but down deep, where we were, it was all natural caverns. There was one

especially huge one, where the ceiling was lost high above us and our lights made little bubbles of brightness in the great dark. In that situation, ye know there are always beings watching you, usually to yer hurt.

"While we were there we fought the most vile creature I have ever seen." Pappy's eyes narrow, as if envisioning his opponent of years past. "Out of the darkness floated this giant mass, as large as I was tall and covered in eyeballs and mouths. It turned out those eyes shot out beams of magic like those from wands! We fought like demons ourselves, I can tell ye. Our knight got up close to try to stab it with his greatsword, and discovered all those mouths were full of sharp teeth. I tried several of my specialties on it, only to realize it was more than a match for me; ye may imagine my shock when it took some of my own spells from me! We had to get cunning, especially when it tried to run away after we injured it. We finally defeated it, though, and found the treasures it had taken from other hapless victims. I recall the battle fondly now, as one of the last times I was able to use my most powerful spells and keen intelligence before something in that vile place diminished them forever.

"Many of us were injured at that point and ye can be certain it was hard to find a safe place to rest and heal. We thought we had found a place, isolated at one side of the cavern, but we were wrong. That quiet corner turned out to be guarded by huge metal statues of bulls which came alive when we got close. They put out a gas that turned my companions to stone, some temporarily but some permanently. I myself was affected for a time. The stone effect wore off but before I could recover myself one of the bulls trampled me, breaking both my legs. Sir Marlett and the elf Daresiel had both been turned to stone and the bulls trampled them also, breaking up their bodies so we had no hope of recovering them." Pappy shakes his head again. "My remaining two companions got meself and our badly wounded dwarf out of there, and patched me up well enough that I could use my emergency scroll to take us out of that foul pit completely. We ended up back at our camp in the forest, though, and without our two healers the others managed to save my life, but not my legs. At that I suppose I'm better off than Gulim, who died of his wounds.

"One thing we never did locate was the evil temple everyone claims is there. I think somehow we passed it by and went straight to the caverns that lie below it. I don't remember everything that happened to us beneath that twisted temple, though parts of it still give me nightmares. The worst was that even after we left, the reek of its evil continued to work on my mind and body and gradually stole my strength, my health, and most of all my intellect. I eventually learned to mend shoes, and other things I could do without need of my legs, but these days I just play a few tunes on my little lute and dream about striding through the forest in days gone by, wishing I had never heard of that accursed place."

Pappy stops to stretch out his leg, and begins to absently rub his left thigh. "If ye be wanting to explore that foul dungeon, allow me to offer ye some pieces of advice. There's no doubt that the most important part of any adventuring party wanting to take on Rappan Athuk is the wizard. Ye

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need one who is powerful, with plenty of offensive ability. He also needs good magic items; it's worth a bit of sacrifice by the fighters or the rogues to see a magic-wielder well equipped. A good selection of fire spells would be helpful; they're always good against the undead and there's a powerful lot of those waiting there in the dark.

"Now, any group wanting to explore the depths of Rappan Athuk is going to need rope, and lots of it. Ye don't find easy stairs leading from one area to another; no, it's down sheer drops and over rocky cliffs – and then of course it's all to do again in reverse if ye ever want to get out. I know what yer thinking," Pappy's voice changes, becoming higher and slightly whiny. "What about that wizard? Can't he just fly us all down?" He clears his throat and resumes his normal tone. "Well, to be sure he *can*, if ye want him to use up all his spells and have nothing left to use in a fight when ye get to the bottom. It's better to use mundane means wherever possible and save the magicks for when ye need them most. We used our rope skills several times in difficult situations. Once we had to climb down a cliff as rats were trying to gnaw our lines!

"Another thing ye need of course is lots of light sources. Torches won't make it, either, though it might be okay to have a few if yer in a pinch. No, ye need some source that lets ye keep both hands free! It's no good trying to climb down that rope I mentioned a bit ago with a torch in hand – that's a good way to take a long fall. 'Twon't do to just carry it in yer teeth, either, as the rogue Renfrew once tried. He thought he was so clever, and so much more nimble than the rest of us – until he caught his hair on fire." Pappy's speech slows slightly as he reminisces. "We called him Renfrew the Red after that; I don't think his hair would ever have grown back, even if he had lived."

Pappy reaches for his mug and takes another drink, then sets it back down. "I'm afraid I'm worn out with all this talkin'. Though it's nice to have an audience, I don't usually talk this much in a week. Thank ye for listening to my adventures, but I'm in need of a little rest now." The old man settles himself in his chair, then leans his head on one hand and his eyes drift closed. You start to turn away when you hear him mumble softly, "And whatever ye do, don't go down the well." You raise your eyebrows at this one last piece of advice and then walk out into the fresh air.

The Stable

Next to the inn stands a stable, as you had been told. A fenced paddock beyond it holds three horses. The stable's big double doors are open to the light and you can hear men's voices from inside. When your eyes adjust to the shadow, you see two husky men, likely the stablehands Amelia mentioned earlier, talking with a slender woman. Both men look like they are probably from this area, but the woman's deeply tanned skin and thick dark brown hair suggest she may once have come from the southern desert. She is dressed in a simple shirt with a leather vest and pants while a scarf is held around her neck by a sliding fastener and a sword hangs at her right side. She gestures animatedly as she talks, and you realize that she is missing her right hand. It also occurs to you that you cannot hear her speaking, even though you can see her mouth moving. Both the men look at you as you approach, and the woman also turns your way. One of the men steps forward.

"I'm Vort. Can I help you with something? We offer stabling for horses and mules for just one silver piece per night." Vort is tall and broad shouldered, with hair the color of ripe wheat. He wears sturdy pants and a snug sleeveless brown tunic whose laces are open at the collar. The other stablehand, in contrast, is stocky and not as tall. He sports a distinctly bulbous nose and hair that is, frankly, the color of a rather vile mud. His clothes fit him loosely and make him look somewhat unkempt.

The shorter man steps forward and peers at you earnestly. "Did you bring lots of horses with you? I hope so, because we don't have very many here right now and it's getting kind of lonely. When Fenice leaves we'll only have two left! This is Fenice; she brings us horses sometimes so I like her. Horses like her, too, because she whispers to them. I try whispering to them, but they don't pay much attention to me."

The slender woman – evidently Fenice – smiles at the man. "Thank you, Igor," she whispers. "I'm sorry the horses don't listen to your whispering." The woman then turns to you. "Fenice Melior," she continues very softly, "occasional trader in horses."

"Fenice whispers to horses because she doesn't have any voice," Igor interjects. "She whispers to everybody else, too. I tried whispering to everybody one time, but it made my throat sore."

"Fenice lost her voice when she was part of an expedition to Rappan Athuk," Vort puts in. "Amelia stopped by and told us that you're interested in hearing stories about the area. We thought maybe Fenice here could tell you some of her adventures. You have to listen closely, though, because she can't speak up."

"Sharing information is always good," Fenice adds softly, "So you won't make the same mistakes!"

Fenice moves to sit on a low stool. A wooden box of tools nearby suggests this is a spot where the men often groom the feet of the animals under their care. The stable as a whole is relatively neat and smells of fresh straw. Above is a large loft with an open area down the middle, with a ladder on the wall leading up from the ground. At the far end some space is closed off with walls and set with a door on each side. That might be storage, or perhaps personal space for the stablehands. Sun shines in through two windows, illuminating the slow fall of dust in the air.

Igor throws himself down in a pile of straw near Fenice and wiggles back and forth a few times to get comfortable, while Vort leans against one of the stalls. Fenice takes a drink from her waterskin and begins to speak, so softly that you have to lean in close to hear.

Fenice's Story

"I and several other people joined a group of three adventurers who had been into the great dungeon before, several months previously. It was led by Lord Pirulen of Avenir and the sorceress Candara. There was a sneak-thief in the group – I really can't call him anything else – and he opened the entry door with a key. I don't know where he stole the key or what he did with it after, but it wasn't on him when we checked over his dead body a few days later.

"We fought a lot of wights, and there were some wraiths, but that was later on in a hall full of pillars," Fenice's soft voice continues. "For a couple days we wandered through a huge maze, and I swear the walls moved when we weren't looking. I think it was more luck than anything else that we managed to get out of that one. We encountered some goblins there, little realizing what was to come. Lord Pirulen, Candara, and their sneaky pal Cerigo had explored the area some before and been stymied at a spot that required traveling underwater. This time they had come prepared, and our whole group was supplied with items or spells necessary to breath and travel underwater. It turns out there are huge areas of that labyrinth that can be accessed only by some of those water-filled passageways.

"One thing we had not expected was to come out of the water only to encounter a fire-breathing three-headed dog. In the heat of the battle I lost my favorite sword to it – and my hand. Lord Pirulen even laid his hands on my arm and healed the wound in the middle of the fight, but that didn't replace my hand. We finally managed to trick it and block it behind a magic wall for a few seconds, and then run for our lives."

Igor suddenly jumps to his feet, making the rest of you jump also, so intent were you on that soft voice and its narration. "This is too scary! I don't want to listen to this anymore. I'm going out to talk to the horses." He hurries out into the sunlight, and you hear him call to the horses.

Vort shrugs and looks at Fenice. "You know he doesn't mean to be rude. I don't think he'd heard you talk about that part before."

"I know," Fenice replies in her whispery voice. "Believe me, it was certainly scary at the time! We ran, with Brother Arno just happening to end up in front. He yanked open the first door we came to in that broad hallway and we piled through. Lord Pirulen and I were last, and we watched each comrade simply blink out of sight as he or she ran through the door, moving too fast to stop. We looked at each other and then the paladin just shrugged. He took my arm with his left hand and we stepped through together. Happily, it was just a teleporter and everyone had arrived in the same place – that time – so we were able to carry on. Any chance of knowing where we were had been lost, of course!

"Eventually we found another waterway, and passed through it to a cavern full of long, pointed rock formations on both floor and ceiling. Some of them must have been enchanted guardians, because they came to life and attacked us with long tentacles. It was not much later that Gamira Darkwood, an elven ranger with us, located a secret door that led to a

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gate which none of us could find a way to open." Fenice's voice, though still very soft, becomes more intense with excitement. "Candara used her magic to get us to the other side, and we found ourselves on the doorstep of a goblin kingdom!

"There is an entire goblin kingdom hidden in the depths under that dungeon, and of course we managed to stumble on it." The whisper falls back into its previous cadence, and you lean closer again, so as not to miss anything. "We saw only a small part of their main city, but that was more than enough for me! At first things went fairly well. We let Candara do the talking, and she convinced the goblins we met that we had come from the Underdark and were looking to replenish our supplies.

"I think our time there would have gone better had we not had a paladin with us. The rest of us – even Brother Arno – could have turned a blind eye to the slavery; it was only some kobolds, and who cares if one type of menace decides to enslave another? But Lord Pirulen was already upset by it when he discovered that there were other humans in the city: prisoners who were to be used as sacrifices. That was beyond what he could stand, and he insisted that we immediately attack to free them." Fenice's whisper becomes intense again, and she leans forward on her stool, gesturing for emphasis. "We were more than ready to leave by that time, but didn't all share his passion for this crusade. When some of us were insufficiently zealous, he removed the decision by freeing three prisoners and then joining the group with the news that two patrols of goblins were behind him and we needed to hurry!" Now she stands, and begins to pace back and forth as her whispered story continues.

"We had already decided to go back the way we came and were able make it back to where Candara had used her magic on the wall. The goblins stopped their pursuit as we got toward the end of the corridor, which we didn't understand at all. They definitely seemed afraid of something having to do with the great gate. We found we could open the gate from the goblin side, though it took several of us to do it, and then of course we could not secure it from the other side. Candara put some type of magic on it, but she was exhausted by that time and had few spells left.

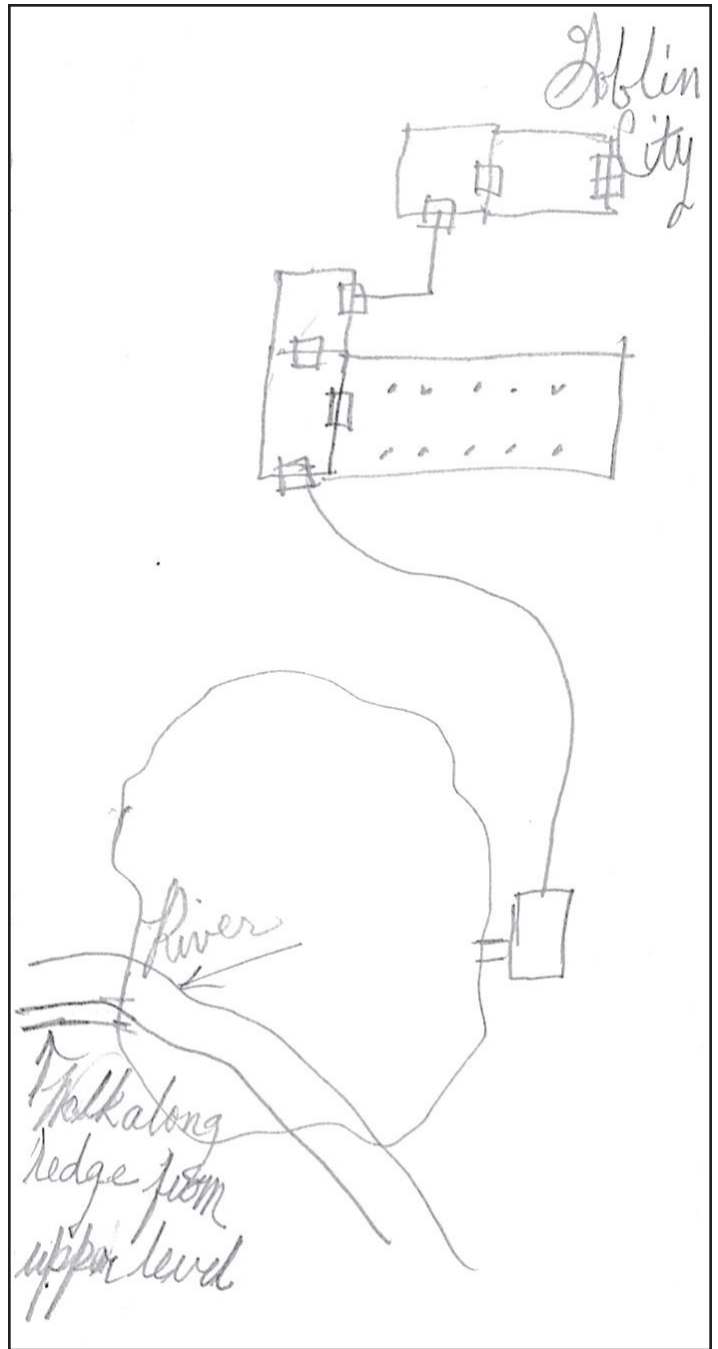
"It was definitely time to rest, so we picked the best place we could and set out guards. I'm afraid we were overconfident, though, and we definitely underestimated the goblins. Somehow a small group managed to surprise our guards on the city side, and get to where most of us were sleeping without raising an alarm. In that city they have a saying, 'A running goblin can slit a thousand throats in a single night.' Happily for me that running goblin was in too much of a hurry and didn't stop to check his work." Fenice loosens the slide holding her neckscarf and folds it away, revealing an ugly red scar across the front of her neck. "Candara and I survived, though just barely. Gamira was on watch with Turbayne (one of the former prisoners) in the direction of the dungeon rather than the city, and when she finally heard something they came in the nick of time."

Sliding the fastener back up, Fenice settles the scarf around her neck again and her voice becomes grave. "We lost both Brother Arno of Larchmont and Lord Pirulen to those little scum, as well as two of the prisoners we had rescued, and Rosson Gildersleeve, a gnome who had valiantly acted as our scout through some tight spots. Gamira used up the last of our healing potions on Candara. She tried reading a spell from a scroll to heal me, but botched it somehow and it didn't help. I wasn't actually dying by that time – Gamira was surprisingly useful with linen bandages and unguents – but I would really have preferred not to be reminded of that episode for the rest of my life.

"With only three of us left of the eight who started out together, even with the addition of Turbayne all we could do was move ahead with great caution and hope blindly that we could find a way out of the dungeon before we were all killed. We made it back to the area with the randomly teleporting rooms and stumbled across something that saved us all – a place that teleported us right out of the dungeon."

Finally Fenice pauses in her agitated pacing. "Come on!" she says in a harsh whisper. "I need to get outside into the sun, too. Let's see how Igor's doing with those horses."

Outside, Igor seems to be enjoying himself with the animals. He speaks quietly to a tall gray horse while he brushes its coat, and a glossy brown seems to have already gotten the same treatment. The remaining horse, a smaller one with a white star on its black face, stays somewhat aloof from the other group. Fenice gives a sprightly whistle – the loudest sound you



have heard her make – and the black horse trots over to the fence. The slender woman absently pets it while she continues her quiet speech.

"The most important thing when going into Rappan Athuk is for each member of the group to have as many magic items as possible. There are so many different areas down there, so many different side branches, that you never know what you're going to come up against next. It's impossible to plan. The best idea is just to have magic items that will cover as many contingencies as possible, and then you'll always have something you can use.

"Of course there's your basic armor and weapons; considering how dangerous the inhabitants are, and how difficult many of them are to defeat, there should not even be a question about needing those. It's the specialized items, though, that can really make or break a group. For instance, you should have items that provide light – not just enough light for humans to see, but ones that use light as a weapon. Those are the most effective against many different types of undead creatures, which is mostly what is in that evil place. It's also good to have something that produces fire; the more 'normal' creatures down there are used to dark damp places and are frightened of fire. A nice fireball, or wall of fire, or even spurting fire from your fingertips left and right, will earn their respect and convince them to leave you alone."

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You notice that Fenice has started to rub the stump of her right arm, and you suspect she is unaware of her action. "Fire resistance is also critical. This is the lair of demons, and they have more than one location that opens into the depths of Hell itself. Of course, standard fire resistance barely helps against hellfire; you need something a bit stronger and you need it to be ongoing, not something that's going to wear off every few minutes. Another thing that's very useful is an item that allows you to fly. There are some deep cracks that are difficult to cross, high places to climb, and so on. We also made good use of water-breathing magic, but that was because of the specific places Candara, Cerigo, and Lord Pirulen wanted to explore."

The black horse butts Fenice's shoulder, and she reaches up to smooth its nose as she continues. "Something else you might not expect is that you need to be able to crawl. Not every denizen of the great dungeon is as tall as you or I; though some are considerably larger, there are also smaller ones. It can be a great advantage to be able to move through the tunnels you find; it can lead to some goodly treasure, and it is also an outstanding way to get away from some of those larger creatures. Magical bags and backpacks gave us places to stow away armor or other bulky things when we needed to crawl, or swim; I can't imagine going some of the places we went with our fighters having to drag their armor along behind them." She looks away from you to the stablehand. "Vort, could you get my saddle and bags, please?"

"The last thing you need to remember, of course, is that no matter how prepared you are, you are still not prepared enough." Fenice climbs the rail of the fence and jumps down next to the horse. Vort appears with her gear, which she takes with a nod and then saddles her mount. You notice that even without a hand, she is able to use her right arm to hold or brace things, while her left hand of course does the finer tasks. Finally Vort passes Fenice a set of filled saddlebags. She looks directly at you, her face serious and her whispery voice harsh. "Whatever you think you will be able to do in Rappan Athuk, something is going to be there to deny you complete success. You'll end up with amazing stories to tell, but only at the expense of friends left behind in the making of those tales. Maybe before you go, you should ask yourself if a venture into that dungeon of graves is worth the rest of your life."

She puts her left foot into the stirrup, braces herself with her right elbow, and smoothly swings her leg over while Vort opens the gate of the paddock for her. She gives another whistle and Igor looks up. "Good-bye, Fenice!" he calls, waving to her vigorously. Her left hand busy with the reins, Fenice lifts her right arm in acknowledgement and then turns her horse away, through the gate of the settlement and out. Vort drops his own hand and closes the gate, then gives you a brief nod and walks back into the stable.

Rasmus Pye's Trading Post

Walking on through the settlement, you come next to a two-story wooden building. Above the door is fastened a rectangular sign bearing the words "Trading Post." The first floor has no windows, but the second floor has three, with the shutters open. You hear a snatch of song in a woman's voice before it fades again, and then you push open the door.

You are greeting by a ringing sound as a bell chimes above the door. The room is full of so many things that it's hard at first to pick out any individual items. Then the odor of the place hits your nostrils: a combination of musty furs, drying herbs, oiled weapons, and other more exotic scents. A ruddy, red-haired man looks up from where he is working at a long wooden counter.

"Greetings! Welcome to Rasmus Pye's Trading Post!" He puts down an oiled rag he was using to wipe a sword and rubs his hands with a cleaner cloth. Coming around the counter, he extends his hand to you for a friendly clasp. "Rasmus Pye I am, purveyor of the common and the fine. Whatever you're heart's desire, I know where to get it for you – within reason, of course," he adds hastily.

As you look around, you are able to take in more of what fills Pye's establishment. Two bundles of furs are stacked near the door. Wooden barrels line the floor along the wall, some with their tops open showing things like smoked fish and jerked meat. Shelves are lined with pottery jars whose contents are not immediately obvious; wooden boxes holding

herbs and spices in sealed packets; large pieces of soft leather waiting to be crafted into clothing or other items; and one or two of any number of other things, most already used to some degree. Herbs hang from the high ceiling as do several lanterns; the fellow can't need this many to light his shop, so they must be for sale as well.

To the left of the door in the back wall stands a tall rack with a variety of weapons, held upright by bits of cord tied to nails in the wooden wall behind them. In the back right corner is the beginning of a narrow stair, going up toward the front of the building. Glancing up where the stair passes through the floor, you can see a door that would close the opening from above and you think you hear a voice singing softly. Pye moves back to his place at the counter and finishes wiping down the sword, talking the whole time. "So you've just come in, eh? No doubt in the area seeking for adventure. Well, when you need some supplies, you just be coming to Rasmus Pye and I'll provide them to you at a fair price, yes indeed. Folks wonder how I can get so many things away out here, and it's because I believe in doing right by people, and so they in turn do right by me.

"Take those furs, for example. The pelt of a bear or a wolf is useful out here, and not too hard to come by. In a great city, though, those pelts are few and far between and will fetch a goodly price. On the other hand, things quite common in the city are rare this close to the wilderness. I've traveled up and down and know people hither and yon, and we do business together so that we all benefit." Pye gives the sword one last swipe before placing it in the weapons rack, looping a cord around the hilt and guard, and tying it to its own nail. It occurs to you that, besides holding the weapons for display, the ties would severely hamper anyone inclined to suddenly snatch up a weapon and threaten the proprietor. Evidently Rasmus Pye is shrewd as well as affable.

"Nor is it just great traders who benefit – no indeed," Pye continues, gesturing to his stock. "You see before you the collections of dozens of travelers who somewhere acquired extra gear or unusual items and sold them to me rather than carry them any further. They got a bit of coin for the purse and you, perchance, will be able to find just the right thing for your needs when you venture out yourself. If I'm not here – because sometimes I do travel out, to do what traders do – you can always deal with my excellent assistant."

Pye moves to the stairs and calls up. "My merry love, could I interrupt you for just a moment?" The reply is indistinguishable where you are, but Pye is evidently satisfied for he moves back to his counter and begins the polishing process on a dagger that matches the previous sword. A few moments later you hear footsteps upstairs and someone wearing a green skirt starts down the steps.

"I'm that sorry, my dearest Pye, but I had my mouth full of pins. I started right in to work on my newest order of shirts while the light is good. I heard the bell; have we customers?" The woman who descends wears a white blouse with her skirt, and has golden-brown, curly hair pulled back with a light green kerchief.

"This is my esteemed wife, Meregan," Rasmus Pye says, introducing her with a flourishing gesture. "Not only does she know where everything is in this wonder of a shop, and put my own poor self to rights, she is outstanding with a needle and makes clothing to special order for many of our customers."

Meregan looks amused as Pye's flowery description and gives you a bit of a mocking curtsy, then says, "If you won't be needing me right now, Pye, I ought to get back to my shirts. You know that I like the light to be just right when I'm sewing so much black, and putting on all those extra pockets takes longer than usual." Turning to you, she continues, "I suppose you're taking in the whole village. Do be sure to step around to see Kalgor; he can be a bit of a grump but just ignore that, because it's the good work he does that's most important. I hope you'll be safe in your journeys, so that we'll see you again many a time!" Meregan gathers her skirts and heads back up the stairs, and you catch Pye admiring his wife's neat ankles when you turn your attention back to him.

The trader gives you a wink, and says, "She's quite right, you know; you truly ought to be meeting Kalgor while you're here. Just go right around the building and his place is at the back. Ulman Dark, also; he has the house off by itself on the other side of the commons and could be supplying you with a bit of healing or two, should you be in need. You'd best be taking care, now, as we'd like to see you back often."

Kalgor the Gemcutter

Following Rasmus Pye's instructions, you round the trading post and come upon a rougher, shorter building set up against its back wall. In fact the other building is so close that the upper floor of the trading post actually sits atop part of it, where the second level has apparently been extended. Over the door of the small shop hangs a faded painted sign showing what appears to be a grey rock, superimposed with a red gem. The front has windows but they are shuttered.

You have to stoop a little as you enter the door and it takes your eyes a moment to adjust to the dim interior. Everything seems just a little lower than normal – the counter, the windows, and the door in the far wall. When you see the proprietor you understand the reason, for he is a dwarf. His beard is reddish brown and full, caught together in three places with bands of brass to keep it from falling into his work.

He is seated at a stool on the other side of a high counter, peering closely at something that must be on a shelf in front of him because you cannot see it from where you stand. Two clear glass lamps hang just behind the counter, putting the dwarf in the center of a circle of light and shadowing the rest of the interior. You move closer, and see that he has two rough golden-brown stones laid out on a black cloth. Your motion startles him, as if he was not previously aware of your presence. One big hand claps down over the stones and he stands, not becoming appreciably taller in the process.

"What's this? Who let ye in here? Oh, yes, the door's unlocked.... Interested in my wares, eh? Well, well, what d'ye know." He sweeps the two stones into a small box and tucks it away into some niche under the counter. Now that he is looking at you, you see the dwarf wears glass lenses over both eyes, set in a slender metal frame and held by thin pieces that hook over his ears. "Kalgor's the name, specialist in gems and other underground treasures. Not that I go digging for 'em, ye understand. Not this dwarf!" He shakes his head emphatically. "But others bring 'em and I take my tools to 'em – a little tap here, and a little tap there, to bring out the rare beauty found in each one. Nor don't I do it for free! A fellow's got a right to make a bit of coin for his skill.

"If ye bring me a gem that ye've found somewhere, I can tell ye its value. It'll cost ye ten percent, but I'm accurate and I'm honest, which is more than ye'll find with most folk around these parts. Then, if ye want me to try to improve it, I can do that too. That'll cost ye another ten percent up front, and it's at yer own risk." Kalgor puts his fists on his hips as glares at you as if you had contradicted him.

"I make no guarantees, d'ye understand? Though my eye's good, and my hand's as steady as ever. I'm as likely as not to improve your pretties so ye can sell 'em off in some big city for a goodly amount of coin. But there's no guarantees, no guarantees. Nothing in life is certain.

"I see ye looking askance at my spectacles, but don't be concerned. All the better to see the fine details. Not one cut do I make before I've seen my way to the heart of a stone, and heard what it has to tell me about itself." Kalgor seats himself on his stool again, and pulls out another small box from below the counter.

"Now, unless ye've business for me today, I need to get back to work. Be off with ye, and come back when ye've brought me something pretty." At that the dwarf begins to fiddle with his tools, glancing up at you over the top of his spectacles until he sees you're truly leaving. Closing the door on the dimness, you squint as you step out again into the bright sun.

The Ferry

Coming out of Kalgor's establishment, you find yourself facing a small house of stone, the only one you've seen here in Zelkor's Ferry. A pair of wooden chairs and a small table sit in front of it and the door stands open, as do the bright blue wooden shutters. To your left is the way back to the settlement; to your right are the river and a long wooden dock, where a tanned sailor in a wide-brimmed hat is preparing to cast off a boat. On the dock itself, a husky dark-haired man is arranging crates and barrels. You hear a door open across from you and notice a small shack just past the left end of the house. A tall woman walks out, her pants and shirt covered with a big canvas apron. She removes a cloth she had tied over her hair and the

blonde braids wound around her head glint in the sun.

"Ho!" she calls out to you in a hearty voice. "Are you looking for the ferry? I can ring the chime for Gutmark, and catch him before he leaves. He's just taking the boat out fishing, but running the ferry is more important." She relaxes when you assure her you have no need of the ferry at the moment, and introduces herself. "I am Adebrin. Gutmark brings in the fish, when he's not needed for the ferry, and I take care of them from there. I smoke them, and other meats, too, when we have them." As she draws closer you smell the faint scent of woodsmoke on her; that shack must be the smokehouse.

Adebrin removes her big apron and hangs it on a peg inside the open door of the house. A glimpse through the opening shows that the interior is tidy but crowded. "So have you just arrived here? Yes, and I suppose you are looking for excitement nearby." She shakes her head. "So many people come with such high hopes, and so many of them leave here disappointed or worse. No doubt at some point you will have need of the ferry; it is the straightest way to leave here if you travel to the Coast Road. If you wish to go by water, which may be slower but more sure, you can be a passenger on one of the keelboats that plies the river. The Yellow Oak is fast, but not very large. The Lucky Oak is not quite so fast but is a little bigger. Then there is the Brawler. It is a big, slow ship, captained appropriately by one they nickname "the Whale." There are a few others that come and go from time to time, but you are mostly likely to see one of those three.

"I noticed you earlier wandering around the village," Adebrin says, "But I think you have not yet met our residents on the north side? The soldiers in the barracks are like soldiers everywhere. The smith is a good man, but tight with his words. His wife does not care to be friends with any of the women in the village, though," her voice turns mocking. "I can tell by her expression that she thinks she's better than someone who has to deal with smelly fish. And the trader's wife thinks she's better yet, doing nothing but sitting in her house all day sewing fine clothes of linen. Would she be so smug if she knew what that Pye does on those 'trading' trips of his? I saw him once or twice elsewhere, before I married Gutmark. She'd best keep an eye on his sharp dealings, or one day she'll find he's traded her away!" Adebrin emphasizes her point with a firm nod, and continues.

"Did Pye give you his best friendly approach? He tried that on me when Gutmark brought me here last year." She leans forward, and drops her voice confidentially. "He wasn't smiling so much, though, when I showed him I knew the true value of a barrel of smoked bear meat – a great delicacy in the city. And why did he send his own son away, to be apprenticed to the smith? It's because he couldn't handle the boy, young as he is. Big Morgan, now, that's a real man and he knows how to handle a feisty lad.

"Enough of me talking gossip!" Adebrin says, throwing up her hands. "I know adventuresome folk like you aren't interested in the doings of our little community. Instead of listening to me natter on, you'd do better to go have speech with Garamond, who is working out on the dock. He's been in the dungeon of graves, so they say, and lived to tell the tale!" She motions you away with her hands, then goes into the stone house and closes the door.

The Dock

You stroll over to the dock, which like the rest of the settlement seems weathered but still serviceable. It has space for only one boat on each side; if the captains were very careful it might be possible to moor a third right out at the end, but the river current makes that seem chancy. About halfway along the wooden surface stands a row of barrels and a stack of crates, now much more efficiently organized than when you first saw them a few minutes ago.

The figure you saw from a distance turns out to be a burly, bronzed fellow who has obviously spent most of his life out of doors. He hoists the last out-of-place barrel onto his shoulder, and the bunching muscles in his arms remind you of knots in a branch of wood as they flex under his tanned skin. He starts to make his way around from behind the remaining kegs and you notice that he seems to limp; when his legs come into view, you can see that his right leg is missing from the knee down and has been replaced by a wooden stump. He sets the barrel neatly in its place and gives you just a glance before making his slow way up to the trading post,

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returning with one of the large bundles of fur you saw at the building earlier. After placing it carefully atop some crates, he rests on a nearby barrel and strikes up a conversation with you.

"You're new here, eh? Just passing through?" His voice is deep and somewhat rough, as if his throat is sore. "You can call me Garamond. I'm passing through also, but I've been here many a time. 'Twas right here in Zelkor's Ferry that Ulman Dark himself brought me back to life after an unfortunate incident in a great underground dungeon not too far from here." The man needs only a little encouragement to get him to keep talking; he brushes his thick dark hair out of his eyes and continues.

Garamond's story

"My companions and I set out from Zelkor's Ferry and traveled to the cesspit of evil they call the Mouth of Doom," Garamond begins. "The entrance is designed to be frightening, and it is successful; several in our group had to nerve themselves a few moments before they could bear to step in. Once inside, our exploration progressed well. We were not as careful as we could have been – if you go there, watch your step; you can't afford to assume things are as they seem.

"We found access down to the second level, which turned out to be more confusing. Several rooms were similar and we made errors in scribing our map. It was a maze of doors, with one room leading directly into another and then sudden dead ends. We eventually found our way out and to the third level down, but that was even more confusing." Garamond shakes his head, and brushes his hair out of his eyes again. "I swear there was some type of magic interfering with our ability to keep track of where we were.

"We went down, and down again, and there at the bottom of the dungeon we found a pathway to Rappan Athuk, the great dungeon. It was wide enough to drive a wagon in it, or march an army through. There were a few foul creatures of the dark traveling it; we managed to avoid some and kill the others quietly.

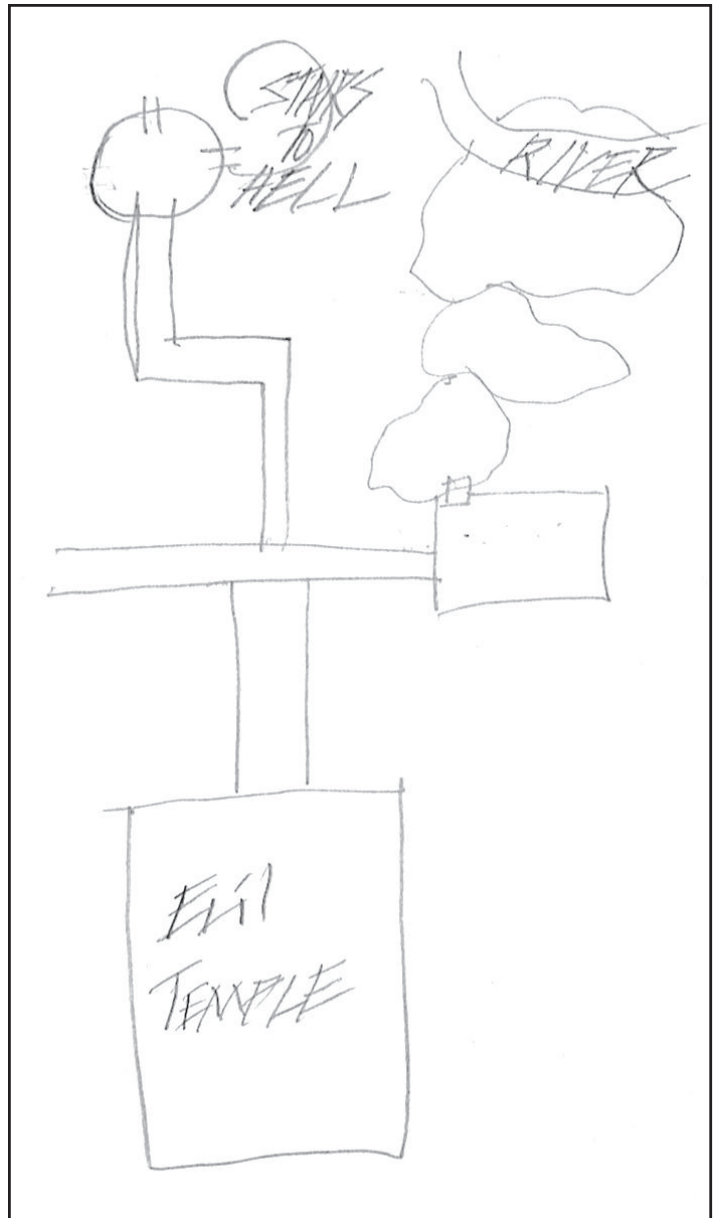
"Following the path was straightforward, but not easy." Garamond rocks back and forth a little as he speaks, and his eyes seem to be looking at something far away. "We traveled for days in the dark, until the echoes of our own movements nearly drove us crazy. Once Bregenz (the bard in our group) tried a brave song to stir us on but the walls threw back dissonance, distorting his voice so that it sounded as if a horde was shouting, rushing down the tunnel toward us. We hushed him after only a few lines but I swear it took an hour for the echoes to fade.

"Our eyes played tricks on us, seeing things at the corners of our vision. Janda, an elf, lost a score of arrows, loosing them at things he thought he saw, so that we refused to let him fill his quiver again. Huge caverns threatened to make us lose our way until the others were frantic at the thought we might never find a way out. When we finally reached the cursed dungeon itself, where the foes were deadly but things we could face with weapon or spell, battle-hardened men nearly wept for joy." The man stares into the distance for another moment, then coughs and turns his gaze back to you.

"We had a few good fights after we were finally into the great dungeon. One incredible battle was when the ten of us fought a gigantic armored worm the color of a ripe plum. It actually swallowed Sir Albertus De Vinne whole, but thanks to the protection from his magic armor, and that incredible magical sword of his, he was able to cut his way out from the inside as we finished it off from the outside. There were also the usual giant rats and skeletons, but they were just an annoyance.

"We discovered a river running through the dungeon and were very curious to see where it led." Garamond gives a half-smile. "The wizardess Euphemia of Rieven had a magical boat in her equipment but it would not hold everyone so we decided against that. When we came across the river again later, though, and found a boat someone had hidden nearby, we agreed we would try it. On the river the current was fast, the ceiling low, and we had a difficult time keeping the boats from crashing into the walls and into each other. It seemed that it was going to go on forever, but at last we came to a shore. Euphemia (who is a gnome) and Dark Nakki, a dwarf, agreed that we were deep beneath the surface, much deeper than we had been previously.

"We fought some powerful creatures in the cavern where we beached our boats, but after that it seemed the foes we discovered offered little



challenge. Several of our people grew uneasy, and Sir Albertus was almost ill from his intense feeling of foreboding evil. It was not long before we discovered the source of that evil: we crept down a long, wide hallway and discovered the high temple of the degenerate being whose worshippers built the complex in the first place.

"Somehow the priests had discerned that we were approaching, and they were ready." The man's husky voice is tense. "They hurled magic at us, and summoned demons to attack. We had not been searching for a temple and so we were wretchedly unprepared. Before we could disengage, many of us were wounded by spell or by claw. Rather than a gradual retreat, we simply turned and ran. The gnomes couldn't keep up with the taller ones, so Father Baris carried Euphemia, and I myself picked up the other cleric, Vianta of Briem. Both the gallant ladies were able to shoot magic over our shoulders, forcing the pursuing demons to fall back a bit.

Garamond shakes his head, and pushes his hair out of his eyes again. "Some of the rest of this I learned later; at the time there was only confusion. Janda of High Tower was our scout and he was in front as we ran. He came to a room of doors and the first one he opened contained a narrow staircase spiraling down. Thinking the demons might not be able to fit in the stairway he started down, the others right behind him. Sir Albertus stayed at the door until the last of us arrived, then he and I held it as the others hurried down. Cerin D'Avola also backed us up with her twin crossbows; small bows had seemed useless to me but they were excellent in such close quarters. Finally the demons ceased their attack. The three of us took the opportunity to flee, and their mocking laughter followed us

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down the narrow stair.

"As we reached the bottom we could feel the heat, and by the time we joined the others Sir Albertus and I were sweating in our armor. Janda was scouting ahead, as was Decanus Ovalico who could move very quietly for someone who appeared so clumsy. Decanus reported back a room with burned bones – the remains of unholy sacrifices, no doubt. Janda gave us the choice of going back up the stairs or trying one or another long corridor. Not wishing to return the way we had just come, we opted to search for another exit. We moved as quickly as we could, for the metal of our armor was quickly becoming hot to the touch.

"After a few twists and turns, we discovered why the demons had been laughing at us: in our flight from the evil temple, we had run to a rift that opened up to Hell itself." Garamond shudders. "Ahead of us demonic lizardmen frolicked in a lake of liquid hellfire, as if in clear water. The heat was incredible and I could hardly breathe; my lungs felt as if they were on fire. I saw Euphemia faint, and Dark Nakki swore as his beard began to smoke. The demons attacked immediately, with flaming spears and their own fiery hands. Somehow I was closest to the lake of fire, and one grabbed me and tried to drag me in. He nearly made it; my right foot slipped in and began to burn and the pain was incredible, worse than anything I had ever experienced before. Sir Albertus grabbed me at that exact moment or I would have been gone. As it was I could not help myself; I heard later than he hoisted me over his shoulder and carried me as we fled again.

"They told me that the next passage they tried came to a dead end and the group was about to despair when Janda discovered a hidden room that was magically cold – a protection against the fire and demons of that awful place. By that time, though, I was dead from the hellfire, as was Euphemia and the beautiful Cerin D'Avola. My understanding is that one of those remaining – Decanus, or perhaps Bregenz the bard – found a scroll in Euphemia's things and was able to puzzle out a spell or two to get the group out of the dungeon.

"Ulman Dark was able to restore my life, to a degree." The man's shoulders slump. "Sometimes I've wished my companions hadn't been quite so loyal after all; they got me out, but of course couldn't help my leg. I was such a bad case that when he got done, both Ulman Dark and I were laid up for a month and I've never really gotten my strength back. Some days it even hurts to breathe.

"If you're truly thinking of heading down into that detestable tomb, let me give you a few words of advice.

"One piece of equipment lots of groups neglect is a boat; it was only by chance that we had one. There is a river in that dungeon that winds back and forth from one area to another and could take you to many places you might want to go – but also some that you don't. A magic boat would be best of course, to make it easier to transport, but I suppose there must be ways to get normal ones down there. Do be certain there's room for everyone, though; sending only one part of a group off in a boat would be a good way to get both parts killed.

"Iron spikes are very important. They're key to being able to retreat from any dungeon, but especially Rappan Athuk. You can spike a door open, particularly if you had trouble finding it the first time and you need to know for certain that it will be open still when you're ready to leave. You can also spike a door shut – very useful when you're trying to leave and someone's getting close, trying to prevent you. Of course, even iron spikes aren't the solution to everything," he adds sternly. "For one thing, spiking a door is noisy – very noisy. Tends to attract attention. For another thing, you can't ever forget that everything that lives in that dungeon knows its way around better than you do. While you're busy spiking doors over in one direction, something that wants to eat you is circling around another way and you're going to get a nasty surprise.

"Don't forget your distance weapons, either. Most folks think of a dungeon as being small rooms and a few corridors. The great dungeon has many large rooms and huge caverns, and sometimes you really need to be able to attack something without needing to get too close!

"It's incredibly important to have a scout or two, make use of them to gather information, and then act on it instead of just blundering ahead. More scouting, and not getting cocky about our abilities, would both have made things better for us. There are two thoughts that really haunt me," Garamond continues. "In my nightmares about that flaming lake I also see a great golden bridge, gleaming in the flickering light of the fires of hell. I

don't know if it is only part of my dream, or if it was something real that at the time I barely saw. The other is the thought of that long underground passageway. Since the time I traveled it, I've wondered when an army of the dark will use it to come marching out of the Dungeon of Graves.

"Well, I need to get one more bale of furs from Pye and have it ready before the boat arrives. The captain likes to make only a brief stop, and I need to be sure all these goods get aboard. A pack animal is about all I'm good for anymore." The bronze-skinned man stretches slightly as he straightens, then moves off again in his lumbering gait.

Ulman Dark

You wander back past the ferryman's house and look north across the small peninsula which holds the settlement. From here you can see the remains of a stone wall along the far side of the spit of land, giving some small amount of protection to any attack that might come from the river on the north. It is at least head high in most places, and taller and in better shape where it meets the guard tower at the gate. The wall is only a few tumbled stones along the east side of the peninsula, though, and nothing is left of it in the area of the dock.

Built almost up against the wall on the north side, as far away from the rest of the settlement as it is possible to get, is a large wooden house: the home of Ulman Dark. It seems a bit odd that it stands so far from the other buildings, when some of the ones to the south are built literally on top of one another. You head north across the common space and realize it is grassy on this end, though it is mostly dirt near the inn and stables. The house ahead must be at least two stories tall; it is as tall as any other building in the village. There is a stone stoop, and two stone steps up to the front door. The main floor has no windows but the upper level has some, or at least you see two at the front.

Just as you near the house the door opens and a woman pauses in the doorway. She is dressed in dark leather and holding a black crossbow, with long auburn hair held out of her face by a woven band. A quiver hangs at her side, its strap around her neck and lying between her breasts. Her brown eyes survey you coolly, and then she smiles.

"So, have you come to see the necromancer in his lair? Come to hire the services of the great Ulman Dark?" Her voice seems slightly mocking, but that may be your own misperception. "You don't look injured yet, so perhaps this is just a preventive measure? Always a wise choice, acquiring a healing draught before you need it. Just don't use very many at a time – not even Ulman is always quite sure what's in them, and too much of a good thing could kill you." The woman turns gracefully, poised on the doorstep, and calls back into the house. "Ulman! Someone here to see you." She leans her shoulder against the door frame for a few moments, the crossbow negligently dangling from her left hand.

A man dressed in black appears in the doorway behind her and speaks in a deep voice. "Kandra? I thought you had gone out to shoot that nasty crossbow of yours."

"How many times do I have to tell you? It isn't the weapon that's nasty; it's the woman who wields it." The woman – Kandra – gives the necromancer a smile and a significant glance, then steps lightly down the stairs and walks around the west side of the house. By moving that way slightly yourself, you can see a large barrel sitting against the north wall, a target painted on it. The outer white and middle yellow rings are nearly untouched; you see some marks in the inner red ring but if there are any hits in the center black circle, they are not visible from where you are.

"Welcome to the abode of Ulman Dark." intones the man now alone in the doorway, and you give your attention back to him. He is tall and slender with pale skin, as if he spends very little time out of doors. His black hair brushes his shoulder and falls into his eyes and his dark eyes are shadowed, as if he never gets enough sleep. "Please, step inside and let me tell you about my services." He ushers you in, and then closes the door behind you.

It seems very dark inside, and your eyes try to adjust. Suddenly the room is flooded with more light; two hooded lanterns on the wall which were mostly closed have been opened to their fullest. You squint briefly against the bright light and see Ulman Dark seat himself on a tall, high-backed chair in front of the lanterns. His face is in shadow as he begins to speak in his smooth voice.

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"I have studied extensively in many cities, and in the wilderness where few others have ever set foot. The knowledge of the stars is mine, and the animals of the night, and the plants that bloom in darkness, and things that grow in dark places. I have studied the persons of humans, elves, dwarves, and many other races; I know what makes them live, and I know what makes them die. I understand what herbs and substances are necessary for a body to heal itself, and I combine these rare ingredients painstakingly into a healthful draught than can help alleviate an injury or wound. In addition, there is more I can do!" Dark's voice increases in volume slightly with his excitement. You also become aware of a rhythmic thumping outside, every several seconds, which seems to underscore what Dark is saying.

"My great knowledge of the body allows me to recognize many diseases both terrible and common. Through the use of such practices as leeching, and purging, and the application of plasters and the imbibing of nostrums, it is possible that I may help the afflicted to cheat death, and live, though the most deadly disease try to say me nay."

He grips the arms of his chair and leans forward. "Yet more amazing is the possibility of removing deadly poisons from the body. I have studied poisons extensively indeed and know that few have a certain cure. But many *may* have a cure! The procedure is complicated and difficult, requiring precision and concentration, and the application of certain very rare ingredients. It can only be effective at all if begun within hours, lest the poison have too tight of a grip to shake.

"Any of these services is available to anyone, for a most reasonable fee. There is no need to appease a particular deity, or appeal to the good nature of someone who may disapprove of you. I ask only for payment in advance, for my best effort will be expended and my stores depleted, whether or not I am able to battle back the ravages that may come upon a body. I am able to make no guarantees, for I am not a god nor aspire to be one, that I should promise to cure all the ills of men. I can but do my best, but my best is very fine indeed." His voice softens and becomes intense. As he leans forward his face is somewhat illuminated, and his eyes look very dark. His deep voice continues, persuading you of his abilities.

"The most amazing of my services, though, I have yet to mention. My studies, which some deplore as 'black magic,' have granted me a measure of power over life and death. The temples of the gods keep their secrets well hidden, but I have found that it is possible even to restore life to a body, after life has fled." The sounds outside have stopped and it is suddenly very quiet here, as if everything is holding its breath in the face of this incredible claim. Dark continues in a hushed voice. "I cannot go into more details, for this procedure is my own secret, one thing that only I know, one gift that only I can give the world. However, it is costly, and horrendously difficult, to the point that I myself may be physically devastated by the procedure. Here again I can make no guarantees, but many an unfortunate adventurer has been brought to my door lifeless and cold, only to be restored to his or her comrades with joy after my own humble efforts." He has drawn your attention with his recitation, made you feel the tension and triumph he describes, and so you are startled with Dark suddenly rises to his feet, silhouetted against the lamps.

"Now go!" he says, gesturing toward the door. He turns and with a gesture closes the lanterns, plunging the room into darkness. You hear his steps and then he flings open the door, giving enough light for you to make your way out. As you are stepping out, he urges you again. "Go on into your adventures and come back when you must, and from my knowledge and skills I will endeavor to provide you with what you need."

Just then Kannra Dark comes around the corner of the house, her crossbow held carelessly over her shoulder and her quiver empty. She is panting slightly, and sweating from her exertion. Her graceful movements make every step look as if she is dancing. "The bolts are stuck again, Ulman, but the guards say they will get them out for me." She stands close to him and looks up at him with a smile. "Have you concluded your conversation? Do you then have some time for me, before I have to go?"

Dark gives you another intent look, then turns his gaze back to his wife. "Come, my dear, let us make the best use of our short time before you leave," and turning his back on you he firmly closes the door.

Raised voices around the corner catch your attention, and you walk around the house to find three men arguing over a clutch of crossbow bolts stuck into the target barrel. All three are dressed in leather pants, plain shirts, and brown tunics with short sleeves, on one of which is

embroidered a simple pattern of a river and a boat.

"One thing I don't want is Kannra Dark unhappy with me again," the first one says with a shudder. "That tongue of hers could flay a bear alive and make him beg her to just stab him rather than haranguing him more."

"Let's see if we can get the bolts out without breaking them," the second one suggests more calmly. "She wasn't very happy with our results yesterday."

"I am *never* doing anything to get a price on my head," the third man says, digging at the bolts with his dagger, "if there's a chance in hell that Kannra Dark might be the one to come after me. I heard, before I came here, that she poisons her crossbow bolts with something exotic. That way not only is her target injured, he's confused, or weak, or forced to cooperate, depending on who's telling you. I didn't credit it at the time, but now seeing who her husband is, I can believe it."

"It's true she's a mite sharp-spoken," the second man begins, and the first one snorts at the understatement, "but watching her fire that crossbow is a thing of grace and beauty. I'd be happy to watch all day, but we'd need to get her more than one target so she doesn't feel a need to put all the bolts into one bull's-eye."

The two who are not engaged in digging bolts out of the target notice you watching, and motion you over. "Come take a look at this target!" one calls. "It's some amazing shooting." You stroll over and see that what you thought was the dark center of the bull's-eye is instead the fletched ends of closely packed crossbow bolts. Evidently the shooter had put the bolts through the center of the target, directly next to each other. Up close you can also see differences among the three men. The one who spoke to you has light brown hair, closely cropped, and is a bit more heavy-set than the others. The second man is a bit younger and taller than the others, with dark blond hair, while the fellow attempting to remove the crossbow bolts has brown hair liberally sprinkled with gray and is slender but appears strong.

"That Kannra Dark," the younger man says. "The first day she was here, she had us set up a target for her. After a few shots she got us to weight it with a log. Her bolts really tore up the barrel that day since she kept hitting in the center or close to it. Yesterday she shot the center right out, but wasn't this precise?"

"Yes," agrees the brown-haired man, "And asked us to get her bolts out, and then gave us a tongue-lashing when we broke half a dozen of them."

"Today I think she hit more than just the exact center," continues the blond, "but it's hard to tell with the middle of the target completely gone. I'm Tancred Malgun, by the way, one of the guards of Zekkor's Ferry. You just arrived this morning, didn't you? I saw Captain Skorma talking to you earlier. This fellow here is Corbel Grambien, and our friend who is so handy with a dagger is Bernhard Caxton." Bernhard gives a nod over his shoulder and keeps working.

"Kannra Dark always causes a bit of a stir when she's here," Corbel remarks. "She's married to Ulman Dark right enough, but she's a bounty hunter and so she's away a good portion of the time. She's here for a few days every couple of months, maybe, though I understand she's been gone as long as six months at once when she had to chase some fellow right out into the desert down south."

"I've heard she's cruel," Tancred says in a hushed voice, looking over his shoulder at the house behind him. "When a person gives her a lot of trouble she tortures him before she turns him in, or kills him slowly if the reward is for him dead. I dearly admire that red hair of hers and she moves like a dancer when she has a sword in her hands, but a poisonous snake is graceful too and probably a lot less dangerous."

Bernhard straightens slowly, a dozen bolts in his hand, and motions for Corbel to take over the task. "You two wouldn't remember this," he says quietly, "because it was before Bristleback hired you, but one time we all saw what Kannra Dark can do." He glances at you, to be sure you are listening as well. "You know Ulman does healings for people, though he uses his own strange methods. Well, one time a healing went awry and it laid him out so that he was terribly weak. The folks he was trying the healing for weren't happy with the results; not only did they refuse to pay him for his effort, they stole a goodly amount of money from him and some other stuff. They just rode out of town, and the rest of us didn't know what had happened until the next day. Then we found Ulman and took care of him but there was nothing we could do about the theft – until Kannra arrived that night."

"When she heard what had happened, she became like a scorching flame. Just her look would have started straw on fire! You think her tongue was rough yesterday? That was nothing compared to what she had to say about those thieves. She looked everywhere in and around the house. She questioned Igor and Vort, and searched the stables, then rode out of here like a streak of dark lightning.

"Evidently that group hadn't gotten far enough away. Of course, there had not been anyone to warn them that Kanndra would be coming after them." Bernhard narrows his eyes and gives you a thin smile. "Not that a warning would have done them any good. By the time Ulman Dark was back on his feet Kanndra returned with not only his missing things, and some other useful magical items, but also a present: six nicely-tanned human skins. Someone told me later that he used them to bind a set of new books for his notes. He just wasn't able to make the books very large because he had to work around holes in the skins in several places."

Corbel and Tancred just stare at Bernhard, their eyes a bit wide at this announcement. Corbel clears his throat.

"Here are the rest of the bolts; why don't you," and he passes them to Bernhard, "leave them on her doorstep? I'm sure she'll find them there. I'll be sitting on the *other* side of the barracks." He turns to you. "You're welcome to come, too. It just seems safer over there all of a sudden."

The Barracks

The barracks for the guards in a good-sized wooden building, just a single story with probably some storage space up under the roof. It faces southwest to best fit in with the shore of the river just behind it. The shutters are open on the windows all around. A glance in as you pass by shows you that one side of the front seems to be private quarters with a sitting area and fireplace; very likely those of the captain. The other side is what appears to be a common room. The quarters for the regular guards must be across the back. Tancred and Corbel find their favorite seats amid the stonies strewn along the base of the crumbling river wall, and Bernhard joins you all a few moments later.

"I expect you're here because you're looking for adventures in these parts," he begins. "While we're not as spectacular as Kanndra Dark, the three of us could probably tell you a few things. You interested?" Reassured on that point, Bernhard continues.

"My family was from this part of the country but moved to a larger town when I was about 12," he says. "Rather than apprenticing me, my father let me train for the town guard. After a few years as a guard I starting taking jobs with adventuring companies, and eventually I had the chance to come back to this area, with an expedition that was searching for the Mouth of Doom."

"I suggested Zeklor's Ferry as a starting point. We found that dungeon with no problem, but the group I was with wasn't prepared for what they found." Bernhard shakes his head disgustedly. "At first a few were afraid even to step into the maw. Inside there was an altar that burned with green fire, as well as some type of deadly river and all sorts of other weird things. For some reason they had expected nothing but combat, and we saw plenty of that, but the strangeness was more than they could bear. They headed back for more civilized parts but I stayed out here around Zeklor's Ferry."

"I did some work with caravans for a while; going up and down the Old Path toward the coast is dangerous business. We fought off gnolls or bugbears on a regular basis, but there are also trolls along there, and sometimes roving bands of goblins. That's not to mention the various bands of brigands that camp in the forest, or make their headquarters in obscure caves. There's a definite need for guards, and I kept busy."

"Did you ever travel on the north side of the river?" Corbel asks. "The swamp there is where the trolls come from, I'm sure; I've heard they have a giant underground complex where dozens of them live. And have you seen the size of frogs they have there? I have, a time or two; big enough to swallow a horse in one gulp. Those giant frogs would probably take over the swamp, if the dragon didn't keep their numbers down."

"No, pack trains I was with always kept to the south bank, no doubt for some of the reasons you mention," Bernhard replies. "We did see a dragon once or twice, circling high in the air above the Coast Road. I never heard of it attacking any caravans, though."

"Speaking of the swamp," says Tancred. "I heard from someone that the giant frogs there are actually intelligent. They have some type of deity of their own, and made a temple to it."

"A warty, slimy frog god? I find that hard to believe," Corbel declares skeptically. "I don't think giant frogs are intelligent enough for that. What would they sacrifice to it? Giant flies?"

"I'd say probably slow, unobservant travelers," remarks Bernhard pointedly and Tancred grins and elbows Corbel slightly.

"Back to what I was saying, though," Bernhard continues, "Eventually I was hired by a group which was searching for a different way to get into the dungeon. They had heard there was a 'back door' that led to an easier route than going in the main way. Through searching the forest we found another evil temple in the foothills north of the river, and Saltare (the wizard leading the group) thought that likely hid the back way. We easily located a ramp that went right down underground but as soon as we started to explore we were attacked by a whirling mass of bones, some of which were as sharp as blades. Even Saltare was not able to identify later what magic that was, but it was cutting our people apart and so we retreated." Bernhard shakes his head. "We spent more days continuing to search for an entrance, but after fighting trolls and wraiths and smothering swamp creatures, and getting stung by giant bees and poisoned by giant spiders, we gave it up and went in the main entrance."

"You know," Corbel interrupts, "I may know where there is a back entrance to that dungeon. I was part of a ship's crew for a year and took note of a cave that opened up where the side of the cliff collapsed. From what I've heard, it must be just about due east of that dungeon. The sea there is slightly protected by an island that runs parallel to the coast so it should be possible to approach the beach. I've also heard there's some sort of sea dragon that moves up and down the coastline in that area, but Bernhard, you just said that you've seen a dragon flying along the Coast Road. It seems unlikely that a second dragon would live so close, so that probably untrue."

"Interesting," Bernhard says. "I wish I'd know that five years ago! Any other things you saw from the sea that we might like to know about?"

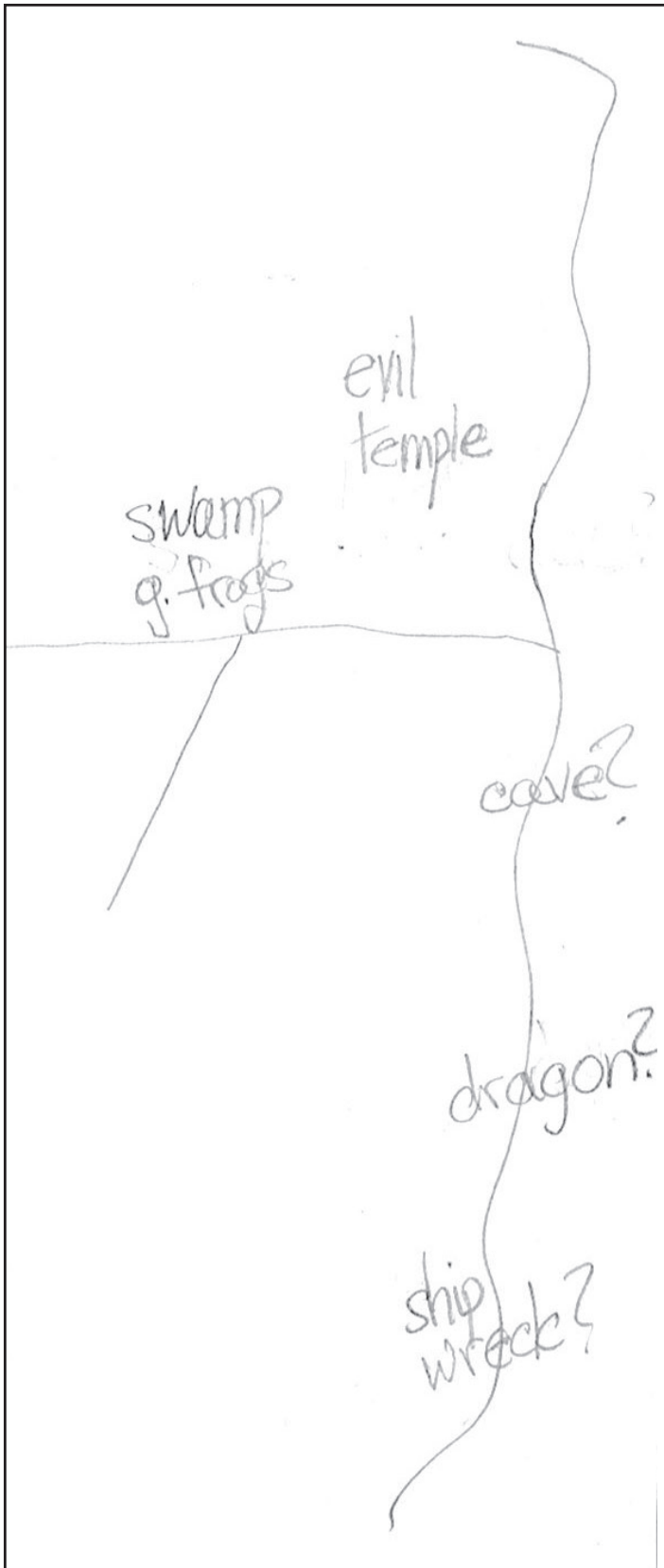
Corbel smiles. "Well, there are the pirates, but I don't think that's what you mean. A ruined ship lies along the coast south; rumor is it belonged to a band of pirates that ran aground in a storm. They were carrying so much gold and other plunder that the ship sank like a stone. The current is so treacherous there, though, that even small boats can't approach it from the sea so I don't think anyone has ever explored it. Really, the coast is an amazing place. If you can find a quiet cove, you can pull your dinner straight out of the sea, add in some fruit from the short, and live like a king with almost no effort. Until the next storm comes, of course! Listen, I have the next duty shift. We need to hurry this up so I don't miss anything when I have to leave!"

"Right." Bernhard turns back to you. "I know one thing I think is important: If you're going to explore that dungeon, you really need to take along an elf." He shakes his finger to emphasize his point. "The whole place is riddled with secret doors; some even I could find, but others were hidden so well it was just impossible. There were places where we were completely at a dead end and we *knew* there had to be a door there but we could not find it! I've always been told that elves somehow have this way to just 'know' when a secret door is nearby, and it would have been really useful to have had one to hand at those spots."

"Elves aren't so important!" breaks in Tancred. "The race you really need with you is a dwarf, preferably two or three. Dwarves know all about stone construction, which is what everything is in that dungeon anyway. Not only could a dwarf have found your hidden doors, he could locate moving walls, or traps in the floor. We lost one guy, Barlos, who had been another guard in two or three different caravans that I worked. He stepped on a particular place on the floor that just fell away under him and dropped him into a deep pit. We couldn't see the bottom at first, but when we lowered a light down it was obvious by the spikes sticking through his chest and neck that he was dead. To make it worse, Alsina, who is an elf, had crossed that very stretch of floor just a few seconds ahead of him and noticed nothing strange at all. If we had had a dwarf with us, he would have detected the trap right away and Barlos wouldn't have died."

"Not only that," adds Corbel, "Dwarves can see in the dark. Elves have better vision than humans, but dwarves somehow can see without needing any light at all. They can go ahead of the rest of the group and scout things

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out quietly. Then, when they've seen what's ahead, the rest of you have a better chance of surprising whatever it is and killing it more easily."

"Ha!" Bernhard snorts. "I've yet to see the dwarf who can move quietly enough for that. In fact, most humans are bumbling oafs compared to the denizens of such a dangerous place. Remember, even if you're truly moving quietly, you're still not as sneaky as you think. There were times when we would have sworn we were absolutely silent, and yet the creatures who lived in those areas obviously knew we were coming and were ready for us." Tancred and Corbel both nod their heads glumly at that.

"Something else," Bernhard continues, "is that you need to have a plan for how to keep track of where you've been. There are places where it gets very confusing, such as tunnels that go over or under another part of the dungeon or irregular sections where it's hard to keep track of how far you're moving."

"There are also moving walls," puts in Tancred, "and places where corridors get cut off when you're not looking so you can't make your way back the way you came."

"Not to mention magical traps," adds Corbel. "There are places that teleport away someone who steps there, or touches something. Sometimes they will take everyone in a room, sometimes only one person. Once in a while there's a way to get right back, but usually there's not."

Bernhard nods. "Having a decent map is the best way to be able to make a retreat, or discover possible alternate routes to explore if your way back is blocked."

"It still doesn't help much," Corbel says bitterly. "My brother Cantzley talked me into leaving the ship and hiring on with a group that was going into that awful place. The pay was good, and they offered a fair split of the treasure. I had heard a few rumors about it but Tepeno, the warrior who was leading our group, was confident he had the information he needed to find our way through it. Little did he know the whole place is one giant maze! We did pretty well avoiding things like pit traps and moving walls, but weren't prepared for the magical traps. We came across one room where everyone who stepped in was teleported to an identical room somewhere else. That was unnerving, but at least the whole group ended up together."

"The bad time was when our group was moving into a new room; half of us were watching out in the previous room while the other half searched the next room, which didn't appear to have any doors. Someone touched some carving on the wall, and all of a sudden everyone in the room was gone. We had the door open and saw what happened, but when we got the rest of us into the room and tried to do the same thing, we couldn't make it happen again. I don't know how long the five of us worked, pressing and poking the walls, trying desperately to replicate what they had done." Corbel's shoulders slump. "We finally had to give up on that and just look for them physically. We knew it was very likely impossible, but we tried anyway. My brother was one of those who had disappeared, as were Lady Onyx and the wizard Moltors, Tepeno's two closest companions."

"The five of us searched until we ran out of food, then we started taking it from ogres and goblins and kept looking. We persuaded one of the goblins to give us some information before we killed it, and the thing told us about an 'oracle,' which knew everything about the dungeon. We finally found that on one of the upper levels. In exchange for some gold, of which we had plenty by then, it told us that the rest of our party was dead in something called 'The Bloodways.' Grisly name," Corbel remarks, and shudders.

"At that point we decided to leave," he continues in a monotone. "Even if the oracle was mistaken, or lying, we were all unlikely to survive long enough to join up again. Tepeno returned to the city to try to take up what remained of his life, and our other companions (who hadn't had close friends disappear) no doubt went on to other adventures. I managed to get hired on here by Bristleback, so that I can be relatively close to the dungeon. I really don't have any hope, but I want to be nearby if by chance my brother ever does come wandering out of the dungeon of graves."

Corbel looks away then coughs a little and clears his throat. Rising, he says, "I have to go get ready for my watch. I'll be on in a few minutes." He goes on into the barracks and disappears from sight.

Bernhard and Tancred look at it each other. "I guess we'd better go, too," Bernhard remarks, standing. "We're not on watch quite yet, but we will be later and we'd better not put off our chores."

"That's right," Tancred says, also rising. "Need to get busy. You be careful, if you go." He steps to the door, allows Bernhard to proceed him, then enters and closes it behind them.

The Smithy

It's easy to tell that the next building is the smithy; the clangor of metal on metal told you even before you could see the forge through the open double door. The smith is a tall man, with the impressive arms and

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shoulders one would expect of a man in his profession. His sleeveless tunic and pants are leather; his head is shaved clean and glistens with sweat, making his skin look like polished mahogany. The heavy hammer in his hand falls in a ringing rhythm on a bar of iron, forming it into a horseshoe. As quickly as he finishes one and cools it in a bucket of water, his tongs take up another glowing bar and he starts work on the next shoe.

Behind him you finally notice a young boy pumping away at the bellows. He seems rather slight, but you realize the smith's stature probably makes him look small in comparison. Taking that into consideration, you estimate the youth is probably 12 or 13 years of age. Just then the smith dips a final shoe into the water with a flourish and growls, "Take a rest, boy, and be sure to drink water. We'll be back at it in a few minutes."

The smith leads the way to the water barrel near the door where he pours a dipper of water over his bald pate before drinking, and then wipes his sweating face and head with a handy cloth rag. The boy drinks first, splashes a little water on his own face and steps out into the sun. He is dressed similarly to the smith, but has golden brown hair pulled back in a stubby braid. The lad stretches thoroughly, then slumps against the building in a shady spot.

The smith notices you standing there and approaches. "Hello!" he rumbles. "Need a horse shod? Not right now? Just getting to know us, eh? I'm Big Morgan." The hand he offers you seems about the size of a dinner plate but his grip is moderate. "If you need plain smithing, I'm your man: shoe a horse, fix up the little metal bits on their gear, repair a wagon, mend the iron rims on its wheels. Even tools I can do. I'm no good at the fancy stuff, swords or things. But Verestin here may be, when he grows; isn't that right, boy?"

The boy looks up at that, and steps up by the smith. "This is Verestin Pye," Morgan says. "His folks live at the trading post but he doesn't much take after his dad and so he's apprenticed over here, to myself and also to the guards. Keeps him out of trouble, eh?"

"Yes, sir," the boy replies, then addresses you. "I'm learning smithing from Big Morgan. I practice weapons with the guards morning and evening and do some of their chores in exchange for living in their attic. The house here is too small for me to live also, but Deslena Potter does give me all my meals. I'm already a lot stronger than when I started with Big Morgan, and when I'm grown I'll be able to be a warrior if I choose, or learn to smith weapons and know how to use them. If nothing else I'll always be able to do a useful trades there is. At any rate it's more useful than just traveling back and forth and taking people's money from them for a lot of stuff they don't need."

"That's disrespectful, boy; don't be talking that way. Get in there and sweep up any scraps, then stir up the coals. You know Deslena in baking today and wants us to keep the heat nice and even for those pots of hers."

"That she does," interjects a new voice, "And I'm glad to see that fact hasn't been sweated straight out of your mind, Morgan!" The speaker rounds the corner of the smithy and you see a tall woman with skin the color of a nice brown ale. (That thought makes you realize you may be getting thirsty yourself.) Her hair is covered by a kerchief woven in a colorful pattern, and the sleeves and hem of her tunic and skirt have matching trim. Most of her clothing is covered by a large plain apron smudged with clay. "I still haven't forgot how you ruined an entire batch of drinking mugs by going off and letting the forge cool," she goes on, looking at him with accusing eyes.

"That was before I had an apprentice," the smith replies in his deep voice, "and that's the only time such a thing has happened in three years."

"Well, it'll be at least that many before I let you forget it!" the woman says vigorously, then glances curiously at you.

The smith takes the chance to change the subject, introducing you to his wife, Deslena Potter. "Pleased to meet you!" she says. "I make the dishes and mugs we all use hereabouts. You also may have seen some of my things at the trading post: jars for oil, little bottles for ink and other exotic contents. Why, Ulman Dark himself has bought several of my bottles and jugs to store whatever he keeps in that house of his."

Deslena laughs and goes on. "I always glaze my pottery; it makes it more useful, especially for holding liquids, and it makes it more attractive. Right now I'm looking for ingredients that will give me a beautiful dark blue color, but I can't seem to find what I need. If you hear of something that gives blue dye, or makes a blue color when cooked, dissolved in alcohol, or whatever, that information would be valuable. Just remember!"

She pats Big Morgan's cheek, then says, "I just wanted to check on the fire." She raises her voice slightly. "I need to get back to what I'm cooking; now that I have this bottomless pit to feed every day, it takes a lot of work." An inarticulate mumble comes from inside the smithy, but Deslena raises an eyebrow and calls back, "I heard that!" She gives you a little wave, then goes back to their quarters on the other side of the smithy as Big Morgan returns to his forge.

The Gate

About that same time you see Corbel Grambien, the guard, heading for his post at the gate. He's added a helmet and leather armor to his uniform, has strapped on his sword, and carries a bow and quiver. Watching him walk to his post, you get a good look at the inside of the gate. It is wide, with two great doors covering the entire neck of the peninsula. At the two points where the gates would meet the walls, wooden watchtowers stand. They are tall enough that the guards manning them have an excellent view of the entire countryside and parts of both the rivers bordering Zelkor's Ferry. From the south tower the old wall extends less than twenty feet before dwindling down to nothing. On the north the wall stays higher farther, though it too diminishes toward the east as you noticed earlier.

From here you can't see the line of kobold skulls that got your attention as you first approached the gate. However, you can see the broad, heavy beams used to secure the gate and the ones almost as large closing the postern gate through which you entered. Corbel climbs into the south tower and you recognize the iron gray hair of Captain Skorma in the north tower. The captain evidently takes shifts along with his men, which fits the impression you had of him from your earlier meeting. He seems to take the security of Zelkor's Ferry quite seriously, which is all to the good now that you're on the inside of the gates!

The two guards going off duty pass by you as they leave their duty station. "Hey there," one calls. "We're going to the inn to get something to drink. Corbel thought you might want to talk to us; join us if you like." Having a drink does sound good, as does the idea of hearing another helpful story or two, so you follow along.

The Guards' Story

You have to blink a few times when you enter the inn; it seems a little dim after the bright sun. You see Pappy snoring in his corner and a woman sitting by herself on the other side of the room, while Tallie is behind the bar serving the off-duty guards. You get something to drink as well and join the men at a long table near the windows.

"Harlemen Jesco," the first man begins, "and over there is Serlio Mazam." Mazam has the bronzed, weathered skin of a person who comes from the south, in or near the great desert. Jesco appears to be from somewhere around here, with the brown hair and brown eyes common in these parts. "We're both former caravan guards, traveled around the area, and now working here where it's relatively safe and the ale is good."

"Mazam and I both hired on as part of an expedition that was planning to explore Rappan Athuk. We had known each other a bit from the caravans along the Coast Road, but had never worked together. Our employers looked down on us and gave us all the worst jobs around the camp, but that was what we had expected. They were paying us enough to make it worth our while, including a good part of the money up front. Also they had supplied us with some magical items that we never would have been able to get otherwise. I was given a magical ring and a longsword."

Mazam speaks up at that point. "I got a magic helmet and a longsword. I knew what that meant, though: I'd be expected to be up in front with the long weapon when fighting some of the larger beasts or monsters we would no doubt meet. It's the sort of gift that comes with a dangerous obligation."

"We did well enough in the wilderness," Jesco continues. "The group we were with was experienced and worked well as a team. We fought one group of trolls, and were attacked by some gargoyles guarding the entrance when we arrived at the great dungeon. That took magical healing for everyone to recover."

"The entire complex is built in a sunken area, or sank after it was constructed, so it has no long view of the surrounding area. Mazam and I

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were on watch at different points on the edge of the bowl while the others checked out the various buildings. The forest around there was eerie – very quiet. Our group called us in when they were ready to open the main doors.

“The doors were locked, so the wizard used a spell to open them. As they slowly swung in, a gust of air came pouring out reeking of death. We had expected some stale or smelly air inside the dungeon, but this was rank enough it had us all gagging. When the doors opened far enough to let some light inside we could see why the stink: on the floor just inside were eight slimy spots that had once been bodies. A couple were quite near the door and I got a good look. It seemed like the bodies had been dissolved or liquefied, and when that happened the armor just crumpled in on itself.”

“That right there was enough for me!” Mazam exclaims.

“That’s right,” agrees Jesco. “The folks in there looked experienced, or at least well-equipped. I saw suits of full plate armor on two of those bodies, but the suction of the bodies liquefying had crumpled them in just like paper. I also know they had at least some magical items, because next to one long robe drenched with slime was lying a slender wooden staff, cracked all the way down its length, with a shattered blue gem at the top. Whatever magic overcame that group was powerful.”

“I said, ‘That’s it, I’m not going in there!’ The people who hired us weren’t happy about it at all,” says Mazam. “I told them they weren’t paying me enough to go in a place where bunches of people die in the very first room.”

“We gave them back their magical weapons and things,” Jesco explains, “rather abruptly, in fact. I figured I’d done enough work on the trek out from the city to earn the advance I’d been given, but I didn’t want to be

accused of stealing the magical items. Maybe someone else would need them later. Then we just left. The two of us headed back for the Coast Road. It wasn’t long before we were able to both hire on with a caravan; none of the masters seemed to hold it against us that we hadn’t wanted to head down into that evil place. A couple even seemed to think we showed wise judgment to avoid it altogether.”

“I’d rather face brigands any day – or every day,” Mazam adds, “than set foot into that cursed dungeon. Even the vicious ogres and the immense spiders don’t frighten me as much as just peering into the stinking darkness that day. Being hired by Bristleback here has given us a comfortable base. We don’t travel much, and fight only once in a while. If Bristleback would drop his obsession about finding some ‘red bear,’ life would be easy.”

“We keep hearing people say, ‘Don’t go down the well’ when they talk about that dungeon,” Jesco says. “Mazam and I don’t know what well they mean, but we think it might be preferable to getting killed just inside the front door.”

At that moment a boy appears at the door of the inn. “Sirs, the Captain is looking for you,” he calls.

“Never a dull moment,” Jesco remarks wryly. He and Mazam drain their mugs before they rise, give you a nod, and stride away.

Ebrima’s story

Deprived of the guards’ company, you take another look around the room. The woman sitting on the other side of the room appears to be a half-elf; the profile you can see shows the tip of a slightly pointed ear peeking out from her dark, shoulder-length hair. She takes a drink from her goblet and then sits staring into the distance, her chin on her right hand and her arms resting on the table. Absently she reaches her right hand under her hair, rubbing her left cheek, or perhaps her ear, and then moves to take up her goblet again. After emptying it she turns your direction and stands, and your glance is immediately drawn to the black patch over her left eye.

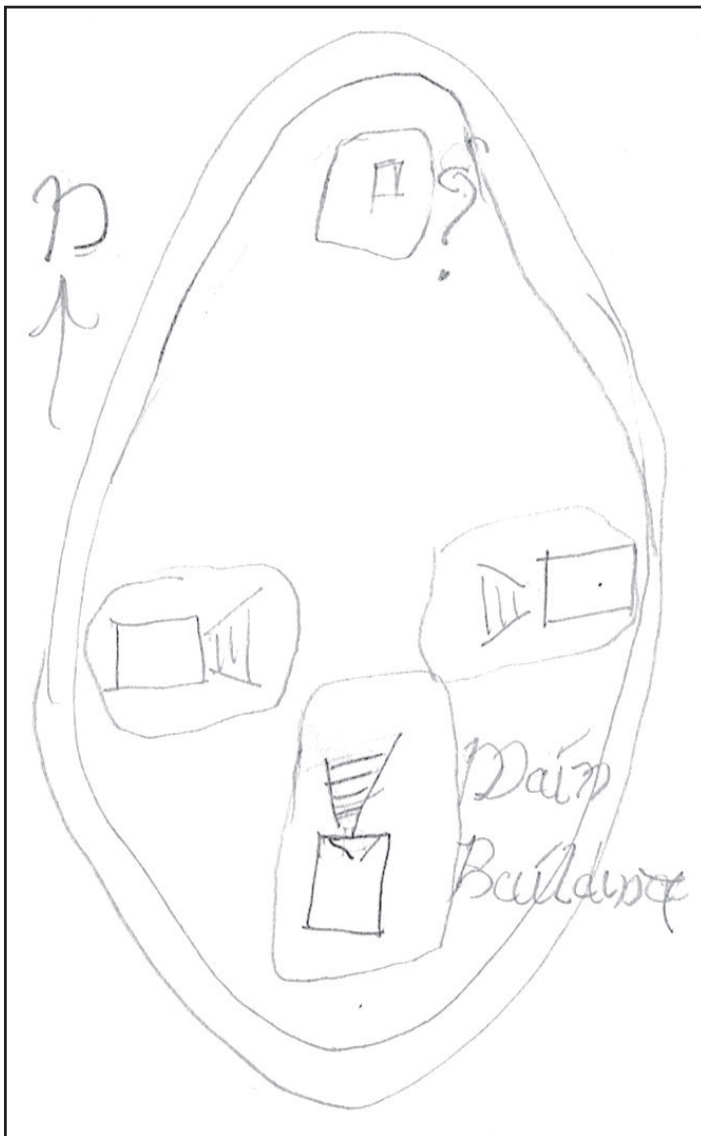
As the half-elf passes you on her way to the bar you catch a glimpse of a scar that runs from her left eye back under her hair on that side, but the hair hangs straight down, covering everything else. She also holds her left arm stiffly, with the elbow bent and out a little bit from her side instead of hanging naturally, and she wears a soft leather glove on that hand. Tallie speaks with the woman as she refills her cup and the server gestures in your direction. The half-elf nods and returns to her seat, and Tallie comes around the bar, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Amelia says you’re interested in some of the underground areas hereabouts,” the young woman begins. “I’ve heard that lady over there has done some exploring around here in the past. I thought she might be able to tell you a thing or two, and she said she would be willing if you would buy her somewhat to eat and drink. Her time is short, though, because she’s leaving when the riverboat comes in.” A few coins change hands, then Tallie takes you to the half-elf’s table. “I’d like to make known Ebrima Perigord. I hope she’s helpful to you.” She gives you a nod and heads back to her chores.

Ebrima is drinking white wine, and Tallie shortly arrives with a plate of fresh bread, cheeses, and sliced meat, which the woman nibbles at as she talks, pausing for bites between sentences. The half-elf seems quite willing to relate her experiences.

“I’ve been adventuring in this area for some time, so I can definitely tell you a lot of what you need to know. Only thirty miles from here, or maybe only about twenty, is a large dungeon, several levels deep, that they call the ‘Mouth of Doom.’ A year ago I was part of a group that did some rather extensive exploration of it. We were the, uh, League of Danger; you may have heard of us. We had several members, but those of us who set out in search of the Mouth of Doom were Nyala the Bold, Vani Kinslayer (a valiant dwarven fighter), Sir Bulmer the, uh, Magnificent, Lotha Quicksilver, the gnome priest Dobkin the Wise, and myself, Ebrima the Silent.”

“In our search for the dungeon entrance, we accidentally encountered an evil, uh, cleric who lives in the forest to the south of here. She hates all humanoids and kills them on sight! When she heard where we were headed she attacked us, assisted by packs of wolves and worgs. Battle was not our purpose so we tried to move on out of her area, but she summoned dozens of gargantuan spiders to try to trap us before we could get away.



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"Be wary in that area of forest; her spiders are big enough to carry off a full-grown man. Their poison subdues prey, but it doesn't usually kill the victims. You'll just lie there helpless as the spiders wrap you in their webbing, turning you over and over until the web covers first your body and then your face. Next they hoist you up into their trees and hang you head down – still alive but only barely, to contemplate how it feels to be fresh meat and pray to your gods that you die peacefully from lack of air before the spiders decide to make you their next meal. If you find yourself in a spider wood, look carefully at the bundles of web hanging there; some of them might be people you once knew."

She takes another drink of wine and goes on, gesturing emphatically. "Despite the efforts of the, uh, depraved cleric, we discovered the entrance to the Mouth of Doom and moved in on it like a bolt of lightning. In short order we routed out a band of bugbears from the first level. We sneered at the spiked pits and poisoned-arrow traps. We lived to speak about the green fire, and fought the demons in the, uh, room of many gods.

"Then, we found a chamber with a statue of that evil cleric's ancient deity. A black skeleton accompanied by worgs guarded the stair to a deeper level. Of course, in such a place there will be undead, and we fought those. The priest, ah, Holy Dobkin was able to do much against them, but the battle was fearsome." The half-elf lowers her voice and leans toward you. "We traveled even further and found a place where it seemed the very air was poisoned. Despite the noxious stench we managed to rid the world of the, uh, twisted creature living in the lake at the center of the trouble. It was there my eye was wounded by the poisoned claw of the being, and my ear as well." At this Ebrima pulls back the hair covering the left side of her head and you see that the top of her left ear is missing. The cut that took it off must have been rather deep, because a puckered line of scar tissue runs from her eyepatch to the ear and across the top of it. She smooths the hair back down and continues.

"Despite our wounds, we continued our explorations. Once we found ourselves trapped in a room with no doors, and it was only my, uh, quick thinking that enabled us to foil that magic that would have entombed us there forever. Finally we returned to the stair that would eventually let us out of the dungeon, but our retreat was prevented by a, ah, pack of large dogs, the biggest I had ever seen, and their growls were ferocious. Not only were their teeth razor sharp but we discovered they were hellspawn and could breathe fire!" Ebrima's voice grows excited and she gestures animatedly.

"We fought relentlessly but were bitten, burned, and generally mauled. I, uh, tried to prevent one of the helldogs from breathing fire on me by thrusting my forearm across its jaws." At this the half-elf draws off the leather glove on her left hand, and gently pushes up her sleeve. Her arm is a mass of scars, with criss-crossing white lines and odd indentations where some flesh seems to be missing. The hand itself is misshapen by scar tissue and the fingers appear stiff and are bent oddly. "At least having my arm in his mouth brought him close enough that I could use my sword to good effect." Ebrima adjusts her sleeve and slides her glove back on, but before she can say any more Tallie returns.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Ebrima, but you asked me to let you know when the riverboat arrived. I knew you'd need to be leaving right away, so I wrapped up the rest of the bread and cheese for you." She holds a small bundle packaged in a piece of worn cloth.

Standing, the half-elf pulls a pack from underneath the back corner of the table and hefts it on her good shoulder. Tallie slips the packet of food into the top of it then moves away. "This place kills people early, and it's no place for someone with an imagination. I'm leaving this area forever, before I miss my chance to get out of here alive – and so should you." Ebrima toasts you with the last swallow of her wine, then sweeps out the door.

