

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

To Shevala, Pathfinder Venture-Captain
Grand Lodge, Absalom

Hail from Magnimar, where the shadow of the Irespan drowns out the sun. You were absolutely correct that the City of Monuments has much to offer our organization, and it seems that our fellows here at the fledgling chapter house are uncovering new mysteries around every corner. Unfortunately, the surplus of projects has left little enough manpower to assist me in my own research. Although my initial investigation of Magnimar's esoteric shops has turned up few leads, one merchant of antiquities—a corpulent man named Belsir Trullos—informed me that he'd seen an ioun stone resembling the one we seek during his most recent visit to Kaer Maga. After I plied him with more than a few coins, he suggested that I speak with a man named Dakar in regard to the relic. No telling if the stone in question is authentic or one of the arcane reproductions that occasionally pop up, but there's only one way to find out. All that I have heard about Kaer Maga leads me to believe it a den of inequity, rife with criminals, outcasts, vice merchants, and worse. So, nothing I haven't seen before. I've chartered a boat and will leave on the morrow, and as always I shall send you updates as often as I am able. If there's truly an ioun stone for my wayfinder in Kaer Maga, I shall find it.

By my wit,
HENRY JONAS
Pathfinder

10 Gozran, 4707 AR

Riverboats are the only way to travel. After spending the morning lounging on deck and enjoying the gentle rocking of the boat, I can hardly bear the thought of the long ride ahead. I wish I could have left Redmare behind entirely, but as the captain has only agreed to take us as far as Wartle, she's currently corralled near the stern, where she whickers uneasily at each shift in the current. Poor girl.

I've never been aboard a halfling vessel before and am continually impressed by its efficient (if cramped) design. Captain Othlo is of a helpful disposition—as he ought to be, considering the exorbitant price he extracted for my passage—and has been happy to put up with my constant questions. Having spent most of his life traversing the Yondabakari, he's an excellent source of information on the peoples and dangers I might face on my journey farther up the river. His crewmen, for their part, are decidedly less sociable, spending much of their time tending to the craft and speaking with each other in the halfling tongue. Due to their occasional laughs and side-cast glances at me, I am sure they find my awkwardness aboard their tiny boat comical.

The river here is lazy, meandering in bends that stretch for miles on its long journey from the Mindspin Mountains down to Magnimar and the Varisian Gulf. In places it's sharply defined, cutting furrows through the rolling hills of the lowlands, while in others it almost blends completely with the boggy Mushfens to the south, merely a ripple of current through the endless patches of low trees and swamp lilies that threaten to swallow the incautious traveler. To our north, the Dry Way follows the river bends closely, allowing carts and horse-messengers access

to settlements farther east. It's this that I'll eventually take to Kaer Maga, but for now, at least, I'm content to doze and let the miles slip quietly beneath me.

12 Gozran, 4707 AR

This morning, the wind kicked up and forced us ashore, the boat making little progress against the combined force of both air and current. Despite my rising impatience to be on my way, part of me secretly welcomed the chance to get off the boat and stretch my legs.

Othlo is a fine captain, though the halfling's boat is a bit cramped.



WAYFINDERS

Aura Faint evocation; CL 5th

Slot —; **Price** 500 gp

DESCRIPTION

This small magical device is patterned off ancient relics of the Azlanti, the first humans. *Wayfinders* are typically made from silver with gold accents, and function as compasses. Each bears four simple glyphs on its face, one for each of the cardinal directions, along with a spinning pointer that always points north, granting its user a +2 circumstance bonus on Survival checks to avoid becoming lost in the wilderness. In addition, all *wayfinders* include a small indentation designed to hold an *ioun stone*. While still granting the bearer their normal benefits, stones slotted in this manner frequently reveal entirely new powers due to the magic of the *wayfinder* itself. When no stone is in place, a *wayfinder* can be commanded to emit light as a standard action, as per the spell.

CONSTRUCTION

Requirements Craft Wondrous Item, light; Cost 250 gp, 20 XP

RISE OF THE RUNELORDS

The longer we're on the water, the smaller Othlo's little cockleshell seems. The sparse woods near the river here are cluttered with game trails, so with an afternoon to kill, I saddled Redmare and set off for a quick hunt in the forest.

Not an hour into my journey, I heard a commotion up ahead, a strange cacophony studded with growls, whinnies, and hoots, as if a bear, a horse, and a monstrously huge owl were all engaged in a fearsome melee. Dismounting, I ground-hitched Redmare and drew my blade, creeping forward cautiously. On the other side of a large stone, a majestic stallion was facing off against a terrible beast combining the features of a bear and an owl. Seeing me, the creature let out a horrific growl-hoot, clicking its serrated

beak shut with bone-shaking force. While impressive, the display proved to be its undoing, as the horse reared in terror and dropped its mighty hooves right into the beast's chest. The creature staggered, took a last swipe with its talons that opened the horse from withers to haunch, and went down, dragging the noble steed with it. For a long moment, nothing moved, the forest silent save for the frantic, blood-choked whinny of the horse. Speaking in a soothing tone, my sword before me, I approached.

On the far side of the clearing was the horse's rider, or what little was left of him. The monstrous owlbear obviously struck from ambush, pulled the rider from his saddle, and ripped him asunder. The horse, an Uplands stallion that would have brought top dollar at the markets of Korvosa, must have remained to defend its master. A damn fine job it did of it, too—the last blow crushed the owlbear's ribcage, probably puncturing a lung. After making a quick sketch of the creature, I spent some time sifting through the mystery rider's trampled and ruined gear. He was an elf, and his raiment seemed of high quality, but beyond that there was little to identify him. From the road filth on his tack, he had been traveling for some time. Nestled at the bottom of his pack, carefully wrapped in a spare shirt, was a strange metal box with a puzzle for a lock. A simple incantation showed it to be magical in nature, but so far I've been unable to solve the locking mechanism. In truth, I'm not sure I want to—many of the designs on the box are unknown to me, but the engraved outlines of human skulls are disconcerting. Perhaps I'll hold onto it and let someone with more experience in such matters take a crack at it in the next chapter house I reach.

Those talons are capable of opening a man like a ripe melon.



16 Gozran, 4707 AR

A simple meal, a hot bath, and a pleasant stroll around Wartle have made this one of the best days in recent memory.

We reached Wartle early yesterday morning, and Captain Othlo quickly set his crew to work unloading their Magnimarian goods and taking bids on cargo bound for the big city. Though I once again offered him a fair price to take me on to Whistledown, he would have none of it—apparently a business deal gone sour with the town's gnome residents left him unwelcome and prejudiced against the other little folk.

Despite a long history, the town of Wartle remains something of a frontier settlement, populated primarily by swampers and trappers. Aside from a few highly successful brothels, most of the buildings and boardwalks that rise on stilts above the murky swamp water are filled with dirty, bearded men who scratch out a living exporting peat, fungus, and furs to the "city folk" downstream. Still, they're a boisterous and fun-loving lot, easy to get along with so long as you don't put on airs. Most of last

DANGERS OF THE MUSHFENS

Numerous hazards and predators lurk in the Mushfens. What follow are just a few of the dangers travelers might expect to encounter when passing through the notorious bogs and fens.

Boggards: These savage frogmen are a deadly threat to any who wander the swamps (see page 84 for more information).

Faceless Stalkers: The ugothol, a race of degenerate shape-shifters, linger in the depths of the swamp, sparking tales of body snatchers (see page 88 for more information).

Fang Flies: Oversized flies sporting long proboscises breed by the millions in the swamps, latching onto larger animals and drinking their blood. Attempting to remove them with force generally results in the proboscis breaking off in the victim's flesh and possibly becoming infected. Instead, applying a small flame or hot object causes the flies to detach without harm. (These creatures have no stats, being little more dangerous than mosquitoes.)

Dragonwasp: Beautiful but dangerous, these small insects come in a variety of iridescent colors and hunt in swarms, attempting to sting and lay their eggs in any suitable hosts. (Use the same stats as Small monstrous centipedes with fly speeds of 40 feet and perfect maneuverability.)

Marsh Giants: These hulking, misshapen brutes dwell deep in the Mushfens, adhering to a sinister animistic faith.

Moss Pigs: Similar to their forest counterparts, the flanks of these boars bear long strands of moss and fungus from rubbing on the sickly trees. (Use the same stats as a boar.)

night was spent in a precariously tilting dive known as the Lean-To, sampling the local liquor called Bog Grog. It's actually not so bad, once you get used to straining out the grit with your teeth, but it's generally a good idea to avoid drinking the dregs of the communal bottle. Needless to say, I got a late start today.

17 Gozran, 4707 AR

I left Wartle this morning astride Redmare after saying a surprisingly reluctant goodbye to the rowdy swamper. I miss the ease of the boat, but I won't deny that it feels good to be back on solid ground again. As I passed from the northernmost boardwalk onto the dirt of the road I encountered a small stone fountain marking the town's edge. Standing at the center of the fountain was a stone statue of a turtle, covered in a thick green moss, with water pouring from its shell. Perched on its nose was a single blue butterfly, and although I'm hardly a superstitious man, a momentary fancy took me and I tossed a copper coin into the water as I passed. You never know when Desna might be watching.

The Dry Way passes along the edge of the Sanos Forest, the Yondabakari drawing a surprisingly sharp border between the trees and the fens. Unfortunately, the swarms of tiny midges from across the water recognize no such demarcation, and more than once I had to stop to burn swaths of blood-bloated fang

flies from Redmare's flanks. With such local fauna, few folk are willing to call these lands home, and on two separate occasions I approached a trapper's shack in hope of company, only to find a rotting ruin ready to collapse at the slightest breath.

As evening approached, the clear sky began to twinkle with a brightness rarely seen by city-dwellers. As the oppressive heat subsided, I decided to push on a bit into the twilight and was duly rewarded. In the distance, a faint spark came into view. Wary of will-o'-wisps and other hazards of the swamp, I dismounted and approached the site carefully, only to be greeted by the melodious plucking of a lute. No sooner had I heard it than a voice from the direction of the fire called out, "No point sneaking up on a minstrel, friend—I could hear your stomping a mile away. Come sit by the fire and warm your bones."

The rest of the evening flew by in a blur as Finnigar—a traveling storyteller of some skill—and I spent time sitting around the crackling fire, exchanging yarns and swigs of potent emerald liquor from his hip flask. One tale of note is recorded below—I would scribe more, but my quill grows heavy and the comfort of my bedroll beckons.

The Legend of the Whispering Tyrant

Long after the rise of Aroden, the Last Man, but early in the expansion of his empire, a band of his missionaries bound for points north encountered a tall, lonely tower on the banks of Lake Aletheia. In a single window near the tower's peak, a feeble light flickered. For days, the faithful had wandered through the barren lands, and the sight of habitation brought them much joy. Upon entering, however, they found only empty cobwebs and brittle bones slowly turning to dust. Climbing the dusty stairs to the tower's highest chamber, they discovered a single candle in front of the window, so freshly lit that the wax had barely begun to drip. Night fell as the missionaries waited uneasily for whom ever resided in the barren tower to return, and as the darkness grew, so did their fear. Quietly at first, then slowly increasing in volume, sinister whispers rose, a low susurrus that tugged at the edge of their hearing, murmuring of wicked deeds and even darker delights. With prayers to Aroden for protection, they sought to flee the tower, but quickly found that the door they had entered through had disappeared, leaving a blank stone wall. As the hours passed, the whispers grew, and their urgings became commands. Minds cracked and broke under the strain of the vile suggestions, and those missionaries who resisted were set upon by those who had been claimed by the madness. In the darkness of the tower there was a carnival of unspeakable acts, the ruined monks cavorting in the blood of their fallen comrades, draping themselves with viscera and wallowing in perversion and depravity. Their shrieks echoed through the sinister tower, but only one of the former brothers was left alive to hear them, a missionary who had barricaded himself at the top of the stairs. Only by

throwing himself from the candlelit window did he survive, but in doing so he left behind more than just his brethren. For the Tyrant of the Tower had demanded payment for his escape, and on quiet nights the pathetic mute can still hear a vague buzzing in his ears and feel a flutter in his throat as, far off in a forgotten tower, his voice is added to the tyrant's choir.

18 Gozran, 4707 AR

I awoke this morning to find Finnigar gone, along with the pair of coins I had left in my pouch. Removing the rest of my gold from my boot, I brushed down Redmare and continued on my way, peeved but unsurprised. Filthy bards.

20 Gozran, 4707 AR

Today's journey was swift and uneventful, and I passed only a single traveler making his way hastily toward Magnimar. The Dry Way remains close to the Yondabakari here, and the bugs are thick. Hopefully my campfire will keep the pests at bay long enough for me to get some rest. It is quiet here, and a warm fog has rolled in off the fens, bringing with it the strange calls of swamp life.

23 Gozran, 4707 AR

Perhaps that coin in the fountain bought more than I know, for surely it is only by Desna's blessing that I'm able to write this. Redmare is worse than dead, and I'm afraid it will take a dozen scalding baths to wash the stench of the Mushfens from my skin.

The trouble began three days ago, when I was awakened by the sound of Redmare whinnying in fright. No sooner had I sat up, grasping for my sword, than a sharp blow to the back of my head sent me back into darkness. When my senses returned, I found myself bound by tight reeds to a long pole carried by a pair of enormous frogmen. The creatures, known as boggards, are a serious threat to travelers in the fens, but are rarely sighted north of the river. It seems that my fire made me too tempting a target.

We traveled for what felt like hours, me slung underneath the pole, my back and neck raked by the tall thornweeds that infest the swamp. Another pair of boggards led Redmare along behind us, her nostrils foaming and eyes wide with fear. Despite my attempts to communicate, my captors seemed either unable or unwilling to speak to me. Instead, one of them actually stopped to pinch my side at one point, as if sizing up a succulent pig.

Soon after, we stopped at an immense mound made from mud, rotting wood, and swamp reeds, sculpted to resemble a gigantic

...I do not know what day it is, or even what time of day. I can't be sure, but the night carries strange sounds and I believe the creatures are giving chase. If anyone finds this journal, please send it to Venture-Captain Shevala at the Grand Lodge in Absalom.



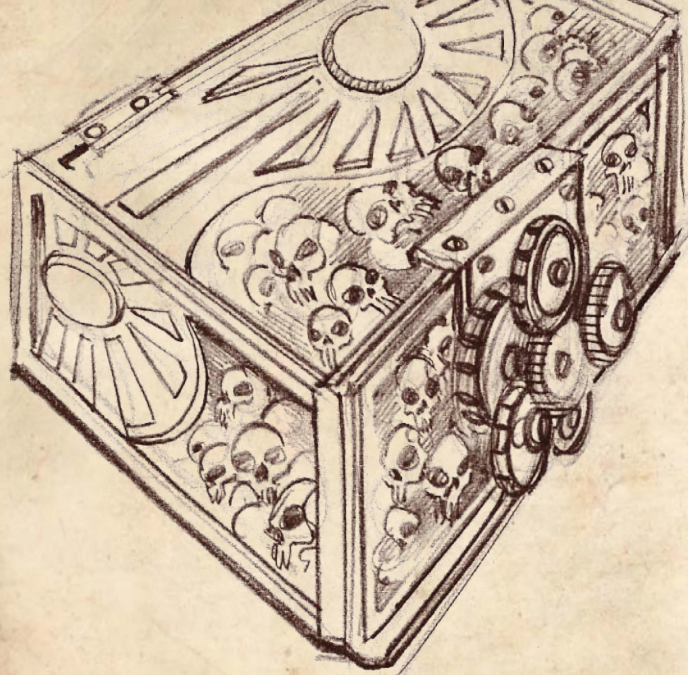
frog with its maw open wide. There, sitting on a throne of alligator bones, was a monstrously fat boggard wearing the mud-stained regalia of a king. Upon his head was a crown of reeds bedecked with small stone fetishes, and about his neck hung a necklace of shells supporting a thick piece of amber above his breast. These, plus the obvious deference accorded to him by my captors, singled him out as their chieftain.

My pole was set upright, the bottom end jammed deep into the peat so that I might face their leader. After sizing me up for a moment, the king belched out a command and Redmare was brought before him. At the sight of my horse, his eyes glazed over with delight. The frogman then muttered a few croaks that sounded suspiciously like an invocation, and a host of gigantic dragonwasps the size of bucklers emerged from the swamp and made straight for Redmare, stinging her multiple times as she cried out in pain and terror. One of the boggards was nearly pulled from his feet trying to restrain her, but as the stings continued, her protests grew weaker. Every muscle in my body ached to break free and attack the boggards, but my bonds held firm, and I dared not reveal any of my other skills while so many of them stood ready to finish me off. Instead, I watched with burning eyes as my dear companion screamed, twitched, and gradually grew still, the red dragonwasps dancing about her prostate form.

Eventually the boggard chief gave a signal, and I was carried a short distance away, where my captors divested me of my gear, cut the bonds on my sore limbs, and dumped me into a shallow fen. The boggards then placed a lattice of stiff swamp reeds over the pit and secured it with heavy rocks, turning it into a soggy prison. No amount of ink can describe the stench that invaded my nostrils as I carefully treaded water, attempting to keep my face above the surface. Presently, the priest-king himself paid me a visit, pouring a bucket of foul-smelling oils into my pit while his long, sticky tongue darted about, probing the muck. Rumors hold that boggards prefer to marinate their food before dining, but I never imagined I would experience it firsthand.

In the gloom of the Mushfens, it's difficult to keep track of time, but it soon began to lighten and I was able to peer over the pit's edge and take stock of my surroundings. Most of my gear was only ten feet away, piled in a heap near where a single guard lazily devoured the carcass of a large dragonwasp like those that attacked Redmare. The drone of the ever-present fang flies was only overpowered by the cracking and slurping noises of my captor consuming his meal.

Fortunately, the wilderness is full of opportunity for those who know how to spot it. After an hour of patiently waiting, I was able to trap a cricket that had come to investigate my prison. From there, it was a simple enough incantation to put the boggard guard to sleep. With a low croak, the frogman tumbled to the ground and began to emit wet, snuffling snores. Using another minor spell, I



The box is fascinating, but I'd rather not be the one who tries to open it.

was able to pull my dagger from its sheath across the way and into to my waiting hand, where I quickly put it to work cutting the reeds that made up the bars of my prison.

Within seconds I was free and dashing through the swamp with my most essential possessions, this journal among them. I caught only a glimpse of poor Redmare, now tied to the ground with a number of terrible bulges squirming in her belly, but that was enough. I shudder to think of the fate that befell her, but an attempted rescue would likely have had me back in the stewing pen, preparing to share her fate.

I covered a lot of ground in that first panicked stumble, and quickly became lost in the twisting meres and mangroves of the Mushfens, but here my wayfinder saved me, for even without its ioun stone, a compass is a handy thing. Two days later, feverish and weak from exposure, I stumbled out onto the banks of the Yondabakari, with the twinkling lights of Whistledown in the distance. I must have been a sight, staggering bloody and mud-coated between the quaint whitewashed houses, but the locals took pity on me and ushered me into the Azure Cup, a human-sized inn where I was barely able to rent a room before collapsing.

Outside my window, the tiny wooden chimes that swing from every eave catch the faint wind and create the subtle harmonies that give the town its name. Tomorrow I will undoubtedly begin re-provisioning for the next leg of my journey, but at the moment I haven't the heart. A soft bed and oblivion will have to suffice.

I am sorry, Redmare.



HAND OF THE HANDLESS

2 Desnus, 4707 AR

Standing at the foot of the Storval Rise is like looking into the face of a god—sometimes literally, as in places the rocks have been hewn into massive representations of kings and demagogues whose identities are long lost to memory. The point where Kaer Maga breaks the relentless trudge of the plateau is no exception. Even as I write this, the city leers down at me from its perch, a thousand feet of vertical cliff face separating us. Waterfalls from the city's underground aquifers cascade down among graven images and portals into the fabled dungeons honeycombing the rock beneath the city, joined by long streaks of a less pleasant nature—I suppose when your window overlooks a chasm, the motivation to walk elsewhere to empty your chamber pot grows less and less.

While most trade caravans follow the Yondabakari all the way to the pass a few miles southeast, taking the easier ascent and following the ridgeline to the city, I decided to take what I find the more romantic approach: the Twisted Door. While most of the dungeons beneath Kaer Maga remain unexplored and viewed—correctly—as dangerous by the locals, there is one notable exception. From a set of huge bronze double-doors at the base of the cliff, the Halfflight Path rises up through the rock, occasionally emerging to wind in treacherous goat paths along the exposed cliff face before plunging back into the stone. Vital to the city's trade efforts, this particular path is kept clear by the Duskwardens, a devoted group of almost monastic guardians who see through merchants and other travelers and keep horrors from the rest of the catacombs from invading the passage. All for a modest fee, of course.

Tomorrow morning I'll make my ascent and begin looking for Dakar, but for now, the sunset over the lowlands demands my full attention.

3 Desnus, 4707 AR

Sweet Desna, that was a lot of stairs. I need a drink.

3 Desnus, 4707 AR Evening

Please excuse the wax drippings on this page—the owner of the Sorry Excuse charges extra for lighted rooms, and I'm already paying an arm and a leg for the use of this hacked-up desk. I shudder to think what the bargain rooms must be like, though judging from the commotion in the common room below, most of the patrons will be in little condition to pass judgment. But I digress.

I awoke at dawn this morning and joined the already growing line of merchants and travelers forming in front of the Twisted Door. Up close, the gates are even more impressive—the gleaming bronze is covered in embossed runes. Moreover, the doors themselves, which appear straight from a distance, are actually subtly warped, their edges seeming to rotate at strange angles, yet still fitting together without a gap. Running your eyes along any particular line, it's perfectly straight, yet when you reach its end you find that your vision has somehow curved, like the toymaker's twisted rings that have only one side. Truly curious.

Shortly after my arrival, the doors swung open and disgorged a dozen armed men garbed in dusty browns and grays, each bearing a badge on his right breast depicting a gold arch against a midnight blue background. These, then, were the Duskwardens. With an efficiency born of repetition, the bored-looking men levied their fee—a not-insignificant sum—from each trader and wanderer before organizing those assembled into small groups, which they then led into the gaping tunnel at intervals, each headed by one of the wiry, stern-faced men. The warden assigned to my group was named Darien, and when queried, he explained that the gaps between groups were intended to help the Duskwardens keep order, give them room to fight if necessary, and keep the travelers from proving too tempting a target for the dark things that hunt beneath Kaer Maga.

After a short wait we set off into the tunnel, the wardens loaning small glowing pendants to those in need of light. The path began to rise almost immediately, and though the way curved and doubled back enough to remain feasible for the merchants' horses and carts, before long the muscles in my legs burned like hot wires. Our guide, for his part, moved nimbly before us and between us, not quite dancing circles around us, but constantly ensuring that the darkness beyond our meager illumination held no surprises. Though the wardens sweep the tunnels constantly for danger, the threat was not so distant that we could afford to be careless. At

GOING DEEPER

While most of its residents are content to live in the city's soaring towers and hollow walls, Kaer Maga's surface structures are just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the bustling markets, an intricate network of dungeons, tunnels, and complexes extends down through the Storval Ridge, and perhaps even farther. Although the top few levels have been frequently inhabited and remodeled by various daring organizations, incursions by the dangerous creatures that inhabit the lower reaches led the city to establish the Duskwardens, charged with seeking out and sealing all entrances to the greater catacombs. Even so, the depths of Kaer Maga remain uncharted and hold a powerful allure for foolhardy adventurers.

GameMastery Module D2: *Seven Swords of Sin* offers additional background on Kaer Maga, sending PCs into a well-defended arcane stronghold beneath the city in order to stop a powerful sorceress from awakening relics dating back to the time of the Runelords themselves.

several points we passed side-tunnels that had been bricked up, and in these places Darien instructed us to move as quietly as possible lest we attract the attention of creatures that might view the bricks as mere inconveniences. At one such wall I paused, and from beyond it I heard the faint sounds of roaring, a deep bellow that made the rock buzz, combined with a high squealing that cut off sharply. From that point on, the merchants and I found renewed strength to quicken our pace.

The path itself is an architectural hodgepodge. At its base it's hewn primarily from the raw stone, following natural seams and tunnels, but at several points it changes drastically, at one point becoming a tube so smooth that only the sand spread on the floor keeps the foot from slipping, while at another suddenly displaying ornate masonry and elaborate frescoes. Once, we seemed to actually be walking down a hallway in some grand subterranean city, the doors flanking us barred with locks and chains. The most harrowing portions of the journey, however, were those in which the tunnel emerged onto the cliff-face, becoming a ledge just wide enough for a cart, before plunging back into the rock. The view was magnificent, but one look over the edge at the sheer drop below us was enough for me, and I spent the rest of these spans hugging the wall.

Finally, however, the tunnel disgorged us into a small stone-walled corral on the plateau's surface, just a stone's throw from the walls of the city. Darien collected our pendants, thanked us brusquely, and loped back into the tunnel's mouth, scarcely winded.

Over half a mile in diameter, Kaer Maga's hexagonal ring of eighty-foot-high walls looms stark and imposing. The numerous doors and windows the residents have chiseled out at every height hold anchors for ropes and baskets, wooden ladders, or vast nets like the rigging on a ship. Up these precarious routes men and women climb without hesitation, the children scampering fearlessly from landing to landing, to pass through the haphazard portals into homes or thoroughfares. For where any other city might have a curtain wall,

RISE OF THE RUNELORDS

Then it stood, drew a knife from a hidden fold in its garment, and before I could move, thrust it into its own belly.

Kaer Maga is its walls—a solid ring hundreds of feet thick, hosting chambers large enough to house entire districts, many of them stacked one on top of the other.

For the outsider, though, the most common road into the city is through the Warren, and it was there that I found myself. Just as no one knows Kaer Maga's original purpose before generations of squatters turned its mysterious chambers into a bustling city, no one today knows what cataclysm might have breached these walls, though several theories reflect the fact that citizens born in the Warren seem subtly twisted, their women more likely to miscarry. Where the huge stones of the Ring end, blasted away to reveal the layered chambers inside, a new structure rises up to bridge the gap: a precarious shantytown of scrap lumber and broken stone. Here, in the Warren, a maze of scaffolding as high as the surrounding walls hides the city's poorest citizens, a vertical slum where bare planks create a maze that threatens to swallow the unwary. Through this the main road passes with no gates or guards—simply seven stories of staring eyes and grasping hands. The latter I managed to bat away, staring

down the would-be guides that descended like flies as I moved through their muddy streets and into the open-air city center that locals call the Core.

For most travelers, the journey into Kaer Maga stops at the Core. The only places in the city to receive regular sunlight, the three districts of the Core are considered neutral ground by the loose alliance of gangs and guilds that rule the city in an anarchic, mercenary, and utterly tribal fashion. To the north, Widdershins provides relatively posh housing for those with means, and to the south Downmarket and Hospice milk gold from locals and transients alike through trade and lodging. In the middle rests the unnamed lake that fills the troughs of fresh water that riddle the city.

It was here, in the close-packed stalls of Downmarket, that I got my first real taste of Kaer Maga's storied population. In the centuries since the first squatters stumbled across the vast edifice, Kaer Maga has become a city of outcasts and heretics, a home for those who no longer fit into the societies of their birth. Into this anarchist haven pour the dregs of a score of nations—mostly human, but as different from each other as night and day. Sweettalkers from the far east haggle in their sighs and whistles with hairless Osirion shopkeepers, the lips of the former sewn shut to keep them from uttering anything less than the truename of their god. Veiled men of the Iridian Fold follow close behind their partners, chains and lacquered armor creaking, while farther down a cleric of Abadar ignores the propositions of a Nexian whore-priest. Where so many cultures intersect, tolerance is a virtue, and there are few items or services too taboo to be sold in the claustrophobic markets of Kaer Maga.

It was while I was watching one such transaction that I felt the tug on my belt pouch. Feigning obliviousness, I yawned, then in one movement dropped low and swung my leg around in a heavy arc, sweeping the thief's feet out from under him as I grabbed his arm.

Behind me, a child tumbled to the muddy ground. Dressed in the threadbare rags of a street urchin, he looked perhaps twelve. To my surprise, he grinned up at me shamelessly, hand still firmly in my purse.

"Ha! Good on you, Lord! Got a bit too greedy for my own health now, neh?"

Scrambling nimbly to his feet, the boy gripped the hand that held his wrist and shook it like we had just made a deal.

"Here, now, Sire, I can see how you might be down on my securing of a bit of advance pay without prior notice, but I assure you, I'm worth every copper. The name's Gav, and it's a pleasure to serve. So where to?"

I finally found my voice. "What are you on about?"

"Simple logic, Sire—judging by the way you're eyeing the goods, this is your first time in Kaer Maga,

Gav knows his way around the city, I'll grant him that.



and everyone knows that I'm the best guide these streets have ever seen. So either you can chase me hopelessly through the city I was born in trying to recover this handful of tin in my purse, or you can take me on as your personal guide. Which'll it be?"

His rapid-fire chatter made my head spin, but I couldn't argue the point. Matching the child's professional courtesy, I nodded solemnly and dropped his hand. "I'm looking for a man," I said. "A merchant, I think. Named Dakar."

The boy's demeanor immediately became serious, and he glanced around furtively before pulling me down into a hunker in a narrow alley between stalls.

"You don't start small, do ya, Gov? What do you want to have a run-in with him for?"

"He's got something I need," I said.

"Right, well, see, Dakar isn't someone you just walk in and see. Don't know that any folks have ever seen him. He's what you might call the leader of a merchants' guild up in Ankar-Te." The emphasis he put on "merchant" told me that the man in question was anything but. "You're sure about this?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Alright then." And without another word he stood and moved out into the crowd, darting through cracks between bodies with the ease of a seal in surf, but always staying within sight. After a few moments, he stopped and beckoned. "The Augurs are the straightest shot to the grapevine," he whispered.

"What—" I managed, then stopped short. Before me rose a wall of green flesh covered in bloodstained rags, two piggish eyes staring down at me across a long, thin nose. One hand went to my sword as with the other I sought to push Gav behind me, but the boy was having none of it.

"Greetings, wise Augur," he proclaimed, with a small bow. "This man seeks your insight before an important transaction. Will you part the curtain of days and tell us of what is and may yet be?"

The troll looked me up and down, and I quickly moved my hand away from my sword. Finally it nodded and led us over to a small table near the wall of a smithy. Seating itself across from us, the troll finally spoke, its voice the rumble of a timpani. "What would you ask of tomorrow?" it growled.

Gav held out his hand toward me and snapped his fingers impatiently. I placed a few coins in them, and he deposited several on the table before blatantly pocketing the rest. "This man seeks a business deal with the merchant Dakar, but knows not where to find him. What will result of his search?"

At the mention of the name, the troll's eyes narrowed, and it gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod. Then it stood, drew a knife from a hidden fold in its garment, and before I could move, thrust it into its own belly.

With a sick fascination I watched as the creature pulled the knife across its stomach, spilling its intestines onto the table before us. The child, for his part, watched without blinking as the troll swirled its own bowels with the knife point, studying the blood that leaked in hot rivulets across the wood.

"What is sought will be found," the troll intoned at last, "but there will be a price. The blood will flow and will not flow, and the seeker

WHO'S WHO

With so many conflicting cultures and outcasts from conventional society, Kaer Maga can be a confusing place. Presented below are definitions of some of the city's more notable groups, guilds, and organizations.

Ardoc Family: The extensive ruling family of Bis, golemcrafters who wear their chisels as badges of office.

Augurs: Troll soothsayers who use their own innards to prophesize with questionable accuracy.

Bloatmages: Grotesque arcanists who seek power through increased production of blood and lymph.

Brothers of the Seal: An ancient sect of militant monks charged with guarding a magical portal somewhere beneath Kaer Maga. Currently broken into two increasingly violent rival factions: those who wish to open the seal, and those who believe it should remain closed.

Council of Truth: A respected group of scholars devoted to unlocking the secrets of the universe. Disappeared suddenly a generation ago under mysterious conditions, leaving their facilities abandoned.

Duskwardens: A group of urban rangers and warriors devoted to keeping the dark things beneath Kaer Maga from interfering with the city itself. In charge of operating the Halfflight Path.

Freemen: An egalitarian gang of escaped slaves that controls the Bottoms.

Sweettalkers: Religious zealots from the far east who, unworthy of speaking their god's true name, choose to sew their own lips shut rather than utter an impure word.

Tallow Boys: The common name for a loose-knit organization of young male prostitutes, many of whom also peddle information collected from their clients.

will be the hand of the handless." Then it scooped up its entrails, thrust them roughly into its gaping belly, and staggered drunkenly away with the coins, one hand holding its already regenerating insides inside.

There was a long pause, and then Gav turned his smug gaze on me again. "There you go, then!" he said.

"What in the Hells was *that*?" I asked, aghast.

"An Augur," he replied. "Troll fortune-tellers. Don't worry, they heal up quick—he'll be fine in a few minutes. And more importantly, Gov, everyone knows they speak the truth—which means they know *everybody*. And he knows we want the word out. We've run up the flag, now we just wait and see who rallies."

He grinned again.

"So, Sire, where are we staying?"

6 Desnus, 4707 AR

Waiting is not my strong suit. A man could explore Kaer Maga for ages and never grow bored, yet returning to the inn each night

THE RING DISTRICTS

The following districts comprise the region of Kaer Maga known as the Ring.

Ankar-Te: This district attracts the most immigrants from the distant south and east. In its narrow streets, child-goddesses locked in ornate metal palanquins mingle with zombie servants and hairless Tallow Boys as they race about doing their masters' bidding.

Bis: Bis's fabled Balconies, a vast swath of residences on the ring's inner walls, are ruled by the golem-crafting Ardor family, their laws fair but enforced by an army of constructs.

The Bottoms: Escaped slaves and runaways of all sorts are welcomed into the ranks of the Freeman here, their emancipation protected by their well-armed "brothers." They hope someday to grow strong enough to abolish slavery in the other wards.

Cavalcade: Here a number of the streams from the city's unnamed central lake merge before tumbling down the cliff, giving rise to a network of bridges and water-powered workshops.

Highside Stacks: These towers house Kaer Maga's wealthiest citizens, some of whom have never been seen in the city proper, preferring to conduct their business via magic and proxies.

Oriat: Residents of Oriat tend to be cautious and jumpy due to regular outbreaks of guerilla warfare between Brothers of the Seal, which sometimes spill out into public and result in civilian casualties.

Tarheel Promenade: More established than the transient stalls of Downmarket, the bazaars of Tarheel Promenade are particularly known for their concentration of arcane services and temples.

The Warren: This towering shantytown, perched on rickety scaffolding bridging a vast gap in the Ring, houses the city's poorest inhabitants.

having come no closer to my goal is disheartening. At least the kid's impressed—ever since he realized I was a Pathfinder, he's been an endless high-pitched stream of questions about how he can join. I refused to let him in the room the first night, fearing theft, and ever since he's quietly made his exit each night when I retire for the evening. This morning, however, I rose early and found him sleeping in the hallway in front of my door, curled into a ball.

8 Desnus, 4707 AR

My skin reeks of blood.

For several days Gav and I wandered the city, spreading the word of my search through his seemingly limitless stream of contacts and seeing some of the city's more appealing sights: the towers of Highside Stacks that house Kaer Maga's wealthiest residents, and the Balconies in western Bis, where the buildings climb the inner walls of the Ring like cliff-dwellings, a waterfall of humanity that pours out across the stone beneath a ceiling barely visible in the permanent twilight. At first he tried to take

me to the assorted brothels and pleasure-houses of Hospice, but while I was impressed by the variety of delights being offered, some of the more extreme services the painted boys and girls whispered in my ear turned my stomach. Instead we drank in the Bottoms with the escaped slaves that call themselves the Freeman, gambled what we could afford to lose in the exotic gaming halls of Ankar-Te, and saved coin by bathing covertly beneath the bridges of Cavalcade—all accompanied by a running commentary from my surprisingly informed young guide on the city's recent history. The amount of history and petty secrets I amassed in such a short time was astounding, yet everywhere I went, my incomplete task hung over my head like a storm on the horizon, and my purse grew ever lighter.

When contact was made, it was sudden and jarring. While casually browsing a bookseller's stall, I was suddenly yanked backward as my arms were pinioned behind me. Out of a corner of my eye I saw Gav writhing in the clutches of a brawny street tough, and then everything went black as a second pair of hands pulled a bag over my head. I kicked out, catching one of my assailants in the knee with a wet pop, and with the back of my head slammed backward, crushing what felt like a nose. Then something struck me hard in the temple, buckling my legs.

"No more of that, if you want to meet the master," a voice whispered in my ear.

Suspecting I knew who he referred to, I obligingly went limp and felt myself bound and loaded into the back of a cart, which rumbled over cobblestones for some time before finally stopping somewhere far from the bustle of the marketplace. Rough hands pulled me upright and led me through echoing halls of stone or tile before finally stopping and removing my hood, leaving my hands bound.

I was in a stone chamber lit by hanging braziers, the walls draped thickly with silk curtains and tapestries. Along the room's edges sat row upon row of cushions and duvets, accompanied by low wooden tables. At the far end, the room was almost completely obscured by a large paper screen, backlit by a soft yellow light that cast strange shadows. Next to me, two of the thugs removed the bag from a similarly bound Gav before stepping back a respectful distance to watch and listen.

"So," spoke a voice from behind the curtain, "who is this who shouts my name so incautiously about the city?"

I cleared my throat. "My name is Eando Kline, Pathfinder," I replied. "This boy is my guide. I was told by the Magnimarian merchant Belsir Trullos that the man known as Dakar could provide me with something I seek—a gem of some importance to my society; it's known as an ioun stone. I come prepared to bargain."

"And what do you have to offer?" the voice asked.

"My organization is ill-disposed toward secrets," I responded, attempting to regain control of the situation and put us on equal footing. "Why not dispense with the cheap theatrics? I like to know what sort of man I'm dealing with."

The guards stiffened, but the voice gave a soft, hissing laugh. With a rustle and the sound of something heavy being dragged, Dakar emerged from behind the curtain.

He was huge. His face was long and narrow, with a prominent chin and hooked nose, the hairless skin stretched tight over his skull. Sweeping back from his bald forehead, an elaborate headdress of overlapping, bejeweled plates clinked and rattled. Beneath that, however, any resemblance to humanity ceased. From the neck down, his body was that of an enormous serpent, dark gray and wrapped in places with ornate golden bangles. He slithered to a stop in front of us and laughed again at our expressions, forked tongue flickering between his teeth.

"Wormfolk!" Gav breathed.

"We prefer the term 'naga,' child," Dakar admonished. "It would serve you well to remember that. Now, Kline, I have freely granted your request, though to do so is not often in my nature. What do you have to offer me?"

"Gold," I replied, finding my voice once again. "Gold and information. Access to the knowledge of the Pathfinders, as vetted by myself."

The naga made a nest of his coils and reclined upon them, eyes locked unsettlingly on my own.

"Do you really think I need either, Eando Kline?" he asked. "I have eyes and ears in every corner of Kaer Maga—if I wish to know something, I know it. And your wealth is but a drop in the sea as compared to mine. No, Pathfinder, I deal in neither, but rather in service and favors. And I have one prepared for you."

I stood silent, neither accepting nor rejecting anything.

He nodded. "Good. As you have no doubt gleaned from your adolescent companion, I operate a number of enterprises in this district, and help maintain peace in the city through strategic arrangements with professionals in similar trades. Recently, however, an upstart has been attempting to circumvent these gentlemen's agreements and move in on my territory. Neshiel is a hemotheurge—a bloatmage, as some might call them." He glanced pointedly at Gav, who blushed but stood tall under the gaze. "The wizard recently had the audacity to steal a valuable spellbook from one of the hex crafters under my protection, and I want you to get it back... and deliver a message in the process."

"Why can't you send one of your men?" I asked.

The snake-man tossed his head in what I interpreted as a shrug. "It's complicated," he replied, his forked tongue darting out to taste the air. "A matter of guild agreements and powerful persons who must be appeased. Suffice to say that the known free agents can't be trusted and I'm not interested in risking my own boys. Still, it should be a simple enough matter, if you have the stomach for it. I'll even let you borrow something to make the task a little easier."

From behind the curtain, a tiny object floated up and over to me as if of its own accord: an amulet on a worn leather thong, carved from black volcanic glass into the coiled shape of a leech.

"While you wear that amulet, the magic of the bloatmage will be unable to touch you," Dakar said.

I stared at it uncertainly. "I'm no assassin," I said.

"Certainly not," Dakar soothed. "But unless I miss my guess, you know how to handle yourself in a fight. And besides, Neshiel's impertinence endangers the exceedingly fragile web of alliances that keeps this city from tearing itself apart. By putting some fear into him, you'll save countless lives. Think on that." There was an expectant pause.

"Alright," I said at last, slipping the amulet over my head. "When do you need this task completed?"

The naga smiled.

"No time like the present," he said.

Thus I found myself, only a few hours later, standing outside a prosperous shop in Tarheel Promenade, while Gav peered into the

Dakar isn't quite the man I had expected.



BLOATMAGES

Hemotheurges, more commonly known as bloatmages, are spellcasters who use blood as a key component in their magic. As common lore holds that sorcerous ability is inherited naturally through bloodlines, bloatmages overload their own circulatory systems, producing more blood than they require in order to amplify their natural ability, frequently using the excess as a component in arcane rituals. As a result, bloatmages' skins distend grossly as vessels burst and blood pools in rolls of bruised, engorged fat.

With their bodies so delicately balanced at their bursting point, bloatmages must be careful to regularly let their own blood in precise amounts, usually through the strategic placement of dozens of leeches. Without such measures, the increased pressure on a bloatmage's brain causes him to lose most of his higher cognitive functions and fly into an insane rage, lashing out both physically and magically. If the hemorrhaging bloatmage is not immediately bled in this situation, organs buckle under the strain and he quickly lapses into seizures and dies.

Although evil bloatmages have been known to collect the blood of others or form symbiotic relationships with vampires, most bloatmages are scholarly ascetics concerned primarily with unlocking greater power through the blending of sorcery and wizardry than either is capable of alone.

him there. His hands darted in quick gestures as he mumbled half-heard words, a glow of blue fire springing from his fingers and forming a net around me, only to evaporate the second it touched my skin. Against my chest, the amulet glowed red with warmth. He saw it, and his eyes widened with fear.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Dakar sends his regards," I replied. "Where's the book?"

He launched into a stream of curses, cut off only when my hand constricted his windpipe. I looked up from where I crouched over his bulk on the floor and saw Gav watching the exchange with open-mouthed excitement.

"Wait outside and keep a lookout," I told him.

"But—" he began.

"Gav, outside."

He stomped out of the room and I looked down at Neshiel, his face twisted with anger and fear. "Well?" I asked.

He glared and clenched his jaw. Inspecting the bulbous flesh, I selected a particularly large leech and pulled, ripping it from his skin and dropping it wriggling to the floor.

He gasped at the pain, but only a few drops of blood welled from the puckered wound where the parasite had attached itself. I gave him a pointed look.

He spat, hitting me on the chin. I reached down and pulled another leech. And another.

He glared and clenched his jaw. Inspecting the bulbous flesh, I selected a particularly large leech and pulled, ripping it from his skin and dropping it wriggling to the floor.

half-light for anyone who looked suspicious. He gave the all-clear, and together we moved into the building.

The shop itself was a vast collection of magical oddities: disembodied hands and floating orbs that flickered through every color of the spectrum. Gav's eyes immediately lit up with greed, but I shook my head slightly and he caught the motion. We were here on a mission—we were not thieves.

Sitting behind the shop's counter, Neshiel was exactly how Dakar had described him. Obviously once human, his skin was now expanded outward as if inflated, the rolls of bloated flesh crisscrossed everywhere with varicose veins. Beneath the surface, fluid oozed and eddied, his skin one vast blister. And across this gluttonous expanse stretched dozens of fat black leeches. He looked up and smiled as we walked in, revealing a set of perfect white teeth that somehow made the whole package that much more horrible.

"Welcome, Lords!" he called in a deep, jovial voice. "What wonders of the arcane can Neshiel provide?"

I wasted no time. Without saying a word, I strode quickly across the room. Neshiel's smile flickered and faltered, and then my outstretched hand met his doughy neck and knocked him completely off his stool, slamming him to the floor and pinning

As I plucked the things from the hemotheurge's skin, a curious change began to take place. None of the wounds bled more than a few drops, and indeed they seemed to heal remarkably quickly, but by the time half of the leeches lay crushed in a pile by my feet, his face was flushed and his breathing labored. Beneath me his flesh seemed to expand and grow taught, the vessels in his eyes distending until the whites were solid red. I ripped off two more leeches, and trickles of blood began to flow from his nose and ears. Beneath me his skin was swollen and purple, a balloon ready to pop. Finally he screamed, and I ceased my stomach-churning ministrations.

"There!" he gasped, pointing to a drawer in the counter. "Book... there... take...." He seemed to be having trouble finding the words, and with a shock I suddenly wondered if the swelling in his flesh had extended to his brain. Standing and yanking open the drawer, I found a thick leather book with gold piping that matched Dakar's specifications. I picked it up and walked around the counter. Behind me, Neshiel moaned and pressed wounded leeches to his face, sobbing with relief.

As I neared the exit, I caught a glimpse of movement through a cracked door that I'd walked heedlessly past in the excitement. Flinging it open with my hand on my sword, I found myself confronted with a child. Eyes wide, the toddler couldn't have been more than

THE CORE DISTRICTS

The central part of Kaer Maga consists of these three districts.

Downmarket: Common lore holds that you can find anything you want in this crowded market of wagons and stalls, no matter how rare or taboo—as long as you can pay the often steep prices.

Hospice: Catering to visitors and residents alike, the inns and bordellos of Hospice specialize in a wide variety of cultural comforts and fetishes, earning a reputation as the most lavish (and morally decrepit) red light district in Varisia.

Widdershins: Merchants and middle-class citizens without ties to any of the ruling factions tend to settle in this relatively peaceful residential neighborhood, maintaining a well-paid constabulary to keep it that way.

two or three. On his flesh, corpulent with baby fat, sat two small leeches. He looked up at me in concern, then back to the sniveling mass of Neshiel. Both bore the same sparse brown mop of hair.

I pushed past him and out the door. Gav greeted me with enthusiasm. "What happened?" he asked, trying to look around me into the shop. "Did you get it?"

I felt sick.

"Let's go," I said.

Back at the Sorry Excuse, I sat at a splintered table and twirled Dakar's gem lightly over my fingers, making it appear and disappear. Even while dormant, the stone still sent faint vibrations down my arm, as if the limb were reawakening after falling asleep. Three empty pints and a hyperactive Gav kept me company, the latter still high from our second exchange with a real-life crime boss.

"...and that's how I would have taken him if you got in trouble," he finished, finally pausing for breath. "So where to next?"

I stopped flipping the tiny green crystal and replaced it inside my shirt, where it rested by my wayfinder in a pouch next to my chest.

"Well, out of this accursed city, for starters," I replied. "Hopefully before this whole thing comes back to bite me. Then find someone headed back to Korvosa and post some letters, maybe even stop in there myself."

"Sounds great," he said, flashing me that winning smile. "When do we leave?"

I stopped short and looked down into his open, trusting face. This kid had nothing to tie him here, I realized. No family, no support network, just the living he scratched out on the streets through his wits. Not that different from me, really. And now here I was, a chance for him to be a part of something larger, to transcend the day-to-day. I knew the feeling all too well, and confronted with those hopeful eyes, I couldn't tell him no.

"Alright," I said at last, taking some coins from my pouch and scratching a quick list on a slip of paper. "First order of business, as junior member of this expedition, you go pick up these supplies while I stay here and have another drink. You got it handled?" I raised my hand to order another mug from the barkeep.

"No problem, sir! Back in a blink!" And then he was out the door, sprinting with heedless abandon through the mass of shoppers.

I sat there for a full minute, watching the crowd beyond the doors. Then I stood and hoisted my bag, the drink untouched. Walking out the door, I looked one last time in the direction Gav had gone, then turned and strode quickly the other way.

The kid was sharp, there was no doubt about that. He'd make a good Pathfinder someday.

But I work alone.

*Only constant leeching
keeps bloatmages from
hemorrhaging.*





FOOL'S GOLD

13 Desnus, 4707 AR

They say the heart's natural state is one of yearning, and nowhere is this truer than in regard to the open road. Put me too long in any given city, and my legs will itch for the feel of a horse beneath them, my toes for the sand of distant shores. Yet just two days out of Kaer Maga, the rains hit, drenching me so thoroughly that I dared not unwrap my journal from its oilskin, and I began to remember why it is that man builds cities in the first place.

Thus it was with a glad heart that I came to the crumbling walls of Sirathu, poorest of Korvosa's holdings. Everything I'd heard of it in the past had painted it as a backwater suited solely for sharecroppers and herdsmen (and the occasional disgraced noble), but as I arrived its muddy streets were abuzz with activity, even given the rain that fell in obscuring sheets from the tiled roofs. Taking the opportunity to dry out and rent a room at the Royal Hare, I spent a bit of time in the common room, and was well rewarded. It seems that since the town's inception, a font known as the White Prince's Fountain has stood dry in the market square. When it was originally constructed, the leaders of Korvosa promised it would be enchanted to provide limitless amounts of pure, clean water,

so that the town might never need bother with wells. Before it could be finished, however, the collapse of the Chelaxian Empire drew the city's attention elsewhere, and the fountain has stood dry ever since, a symbol of the nobility's low opinion of the common man. A few months ago, however, a young local girl was found unconscious next to the fountain, which now poured forth water so pure that it rejected even the dust of the air. And the girl, too, seemed changed, speaking sometimes as a child and sometimes in a stranger's voice, warning those who would listen that they must rise up and break with Korvosa entirely before it's too late. While not all of the locals have gathered arms and rushed to the child's standard, the strange events leave little doubt among these practical people that, one way or another, change is coming.

As is fitting with my role and nature, I of course attempted to arrange an audience with the child, but the locals are understandably suspicious of outsiders and reluctant to endanger their supposed oracle. Perhaps if I remain for a few days and gain their trust, they'll change their minds. If not, well—between the disturbing puzzle box I took off the dead elf in the swamps and the ioun stone that still needs to be examined by someone more experienced in such matters, I have more than enough mysteries on my plate.

3 Erastus, 4707 AR

Three weeks! Three weeks I chased those gods-damned thieves across southeastern Varisia, and only now, hiding in the dark crotch of a bridge like a beggar, am I finally able to begin thinking clearly again.

It was my own fault, of course. The wine at the Royal Hare is less watered-down than most, and as the night of my arrival wore on the patrons proved too eager an audience for tales of my wanderings. Unable to resist, I expounded until my voice was hoarse, plied by the steady stream of drinks from my new friends, locals and travelers alike. While recounting my journey upriver on this latest mission, I came to my encounter with the owlbear, and as a grand finale pulled out the skull-embossed puzzle-box I acquired there. It had the desired effect, provoking gasps and signs against evil, but my pride proved my undoing.

Later that night, after I had staggered back to my room and readied myself for bed, there came a knock at the door. Made foolish by wine, I presumed it to be yet another admirer, perhaps a comely local lass looking for a tumble with the mysterious stranger. Cracking the door and peering out, I discovered three figures I recognized from the common room: a burly half-orc, a Varisian woman, and an effete elf. Before I could react, the half-orc slammed the door forward and into my nose, which broke with a crunch. My eyes clouded with pain, I stumbled backward, fumbling for my dagger, as the three moved quickly into the room. The elf and the woman ignored me completely as they rifled through my possessions, chattering urgently in some language or cant I couldn't understand. I, for my part, had little attention to spare them either, as my blurred vision filled with the looming dark mass of the half-orc. I jabbed tentatively at his shape with my dagger, but he caught my arm and squeezed until the bones groaned in protest and I dropped the weapon, lest he break my wrist. Grabbing my throat with his other massive paw, he lifted me free of the floor and thrust me against the wall, keeping me out of the way of the searchers.

At that moment the elf let out a triumphant cry. In the tongue of his people, he blurted out something about "the box." In response the woman hissed angrily at him in their mystery language, and the half-orc turned his head to mumble something back over his shoulder. That was all the chance I needed. Pulling my legs up tight, I withdrew a hidden dagger from my boot and swung it hard and underhand into the orc's side, sliding it flat between his ribs. He grunted as my blade slid forward to the quillons and I torqued left with all my might. Warm blood and worse drenched my arm and chest, and the half-orc and I dropped to the floor in a tangled mess.

Thrusting the twitching corpse aside, I stood just in time to see the window shutters swing free and hear the quiet thuds of bodies hitting mud. Singing a quick psalm of healing to mend my nose and purge the unbidden tears that blurred my sight, I ran to

the window and found the elf and woman mounting a pair of waiting horses, a third steed standing unladen and obviously intended for the half-orc. I turned to gather my gear and give chase, only to discover my pack missing, along with this precious journal and the wayfinder that, in more cautious moments, I keep around my neck to prevent such things. Taking up my sword, I vaulted after them to the street below. Yet before I could cut them down, the thieves put spurs to flanks and raced south along the town's main road, followed by my screams of impotent rage.

The next seven days are a blur of motion. Pounding on the door of the local horse trader, I purchased a swift-looking mare at an outrageous price and was on the road within hours, using all of my meager tracking skills to follow the bandits' trail. Had they even for a day crossed into the woods or attempted to double back and ambush me, all would assuredly have been lost, but the bastards flaunted their confidence by staying to the road, always just a half-day's ride ahead of me. At night, sometimes, I would see their

The strange fountain offers pure water and ill omens.



RISE OF THE RUNELORDS

campfire in the distance, but though I rode until my horse blew bloody foam and I swayed unconscious in the saddle, the trail led ever onward, until at last I topped a rise and found myself staring out over the vast expanse of Korvosa, the grandest metropolis in Varisia. In the burgeoning light of dawn it glittered like spun gold, every roof and steeple reflecting the honeyed glow. Yet only a fool takes Korvosa at face value.

At the bottom of the hill the wide trail suddenly became a paved road, straight and level. For the last mile into town I rode on massive slate slabs surrounded by shards of gray flint. It was the only time I had seen such a road in Varisia, and I wondered as I went if similar thoroughfares crisscross all of Cheliah.

This road took me through a tent city filled with the sights and smells normally associated with native Varisians and Shoanti, which the locals derogatorily call Thief Camp. To the south, Thief Camp gives way to an area of roughly built wooden houses and shops catering to visitors from elsewhere in the region. Residents of the city use this unnamed area as a buffer between themselves and, as they put it, "those thieves and savages outside." After making a few subtle inquiries with the merchants and traders in Thief Camp, I at last followed the road to a massive stone bridge ending in a black-marble gatehouse in the Wall of Erodred.

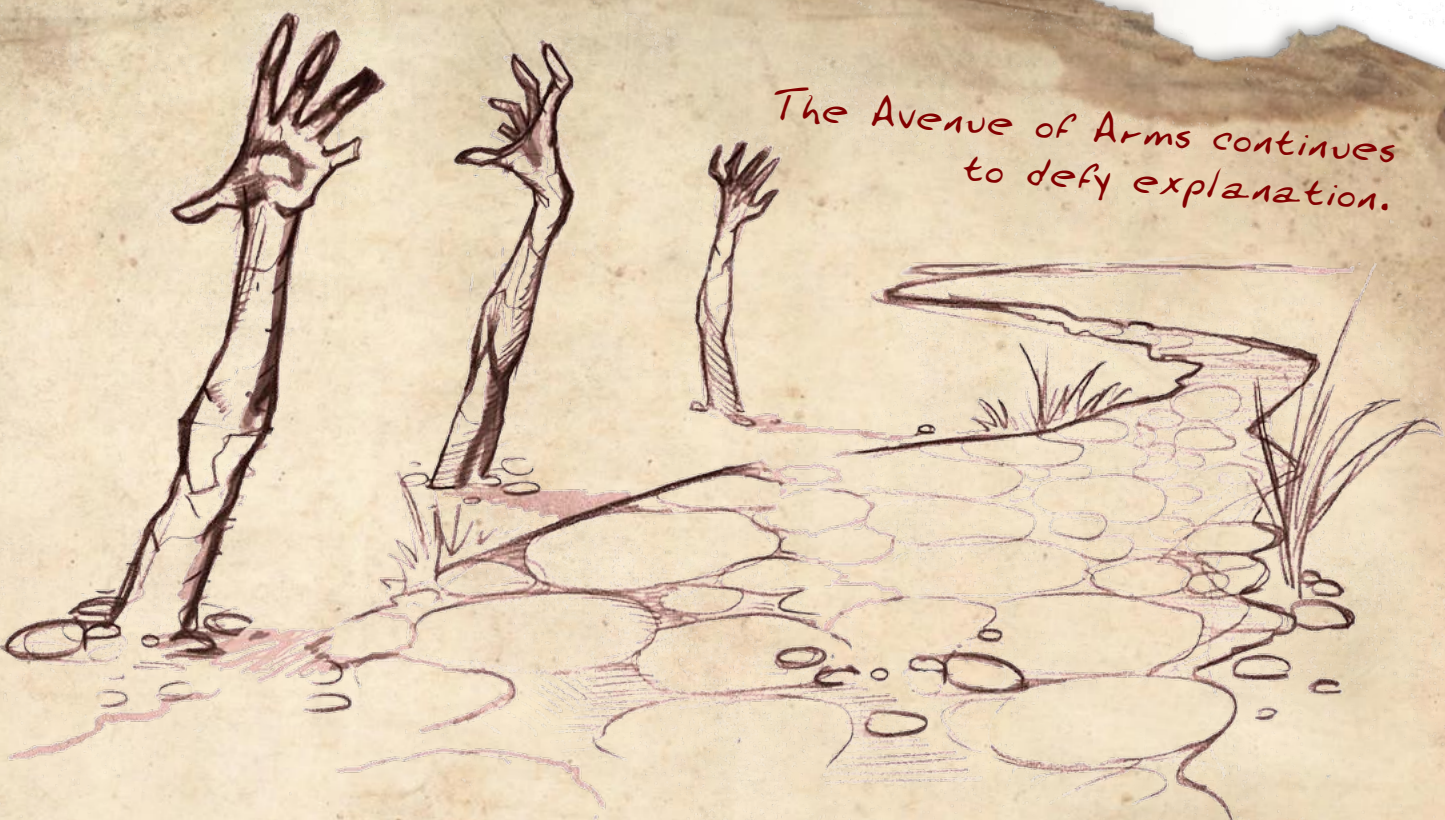
That twenty-foot-high wall, made of black marble, bears along its top a row of black, downward-pointing metal spikes, broken only by the occasional leering bust of some fiend or another. From what I understand, this reflects modern Chelaxian architectural sensibilities, and was yet another failed attempt by a monarch of Korvosa—in this case the recently deceased king, Erodred the Second—to lure Cheliah into reabsorbing the city.

At the gate, I stopped and attempted to press one of the guards for information on the two thieves who had passed before me, but though I offered healthy bribes, the guardsman shoved away my palmed coins with bored disdain. Of all the times to run across an honest guard... Fortunately for me, my questions were overheard by a nearby beggar who was happy to point me in the right direction, and there began a long stretch of skulking and information gathering that bled my purse almost dry.

Despite nearly a dozen bridges, Korvosa is a divided city, carved apart by the Jeggare River and the Strait of Saint Alika. Seven districts, divided further into one to five wards apiece, split the city into relatively distinct administrative, cultural, and economic sections. While no single wall surrounds the entire city, several wards are physically defined by walls of varying ages and styles.

I spent six days in the North Point District, canvassing the inns and taverns in search of my quarry. Comprised of four large, sparsely populated wards, North Point houses many of the city's oldest non-noble families. The Infernal Wall opens onto Northgate, home of the city hall, the gloomy Arbiter's Hall, and the Bank of Abadar. The remnants of the city's first mainland walls define the northern edge of the ward, dividing the influential Gaters (as they're called by the rest of the city) from the truly old money in Mainshore.

Coming up empty and growing increasingly nervous, I crossed into the inviting but bustling Midland District. When people think of Korvosa, they generally think of the cosmopolitan crowds of Midland. Regardless of the bustle, I knew almost immediately that I wouldn't find who I sought there—the district contains the Korvosan Guard's headquarters, as well as both a department of the beloved Sable Knights and the hard-hearted Order of the Nail. As such, it's not exactly welcoming toward the lawless,



nor to vigilantes bent on their own form of justice. I circled northwest and climbed into the Heights District, passing by the University of Korvosa on my way.

It was here that I finally struck gold. Leaving the Posh and Turtle just below Korvosan Tower, I found myself waylaid by one of several beggars I had contracted to keep watch for my quarry. Surprisingly nimble in his stinking rags, the panhandler led me north along the waterfront via the Avenue of Arms. As I reached its north end, I came upon an intersection with a wide, tree-lined boulevard, and there, leaning against one of the trees' slender trunks, slouched the foppish elf who had eluded me for so long.

Circling wide around the square, I approached from behind and at an angle, keeping the bole of the tree between us. When I grew close enough to brush up against its smooth bark, I turned and drew my dagger, wrapping my arms around both tree and elf and pinning him there, dagger pricking the skin beneath his chin. Placing my cheek next to his, I whispered in his ear.

"Hello, friend."

To his credit, he didn't flinch. Instead he turned his head slowly, careful not to impale himself on my blade, until he could look me in the face. At that, his eyes widened the tiniest bit, and I smiled with all of my teeth.

Faster than I could blink, he straightened his legs and leapt into the air, bringing his throat clear of my blade. Before I could react, he slammed an elbow down on my still-sore wrist, smashing it between bone and the tree trunk. I howled and lost my grip, and then he was off, dodging through the busy streets. Obviously more experienced with the territory, he nearly lost me in the crowds of that lane as we raced across a narrow bridge, over the Strait of Saint Alik, and into the least desirable section of the city: Old Korvosa.

Completely covering Endrin Isle, Old Korvosa is, as the name implies, the oldest section of the city. And the dirtiest. And the most dangerous. The cramped tenements of Bridgefront make the claustrophobic apartments of Old Dock appear roomy and expansive, seeming more akin to the towering shanties of Kaer Maga's Warren district. Coming to the end of the bridge, I found myself suddenly in an entirely new environment. I had heard tales of Old Korvosa, of course, but the stories never really conveyed the sights and stomach-churning smells of the place. Here, maimed veterans of the Goblinblood Wars sat begging along the streets. There, dealers in pesh and qat peddled their wares in plain sight. All of this I took in at a glance, but spared no attention for.

The elf veritably danced through the crowded, stinking throngs. Even as I fell behind in our slow-moving chase, I watched with begrudging respect the way he spun full around to dodge through a group of thick-handed copper beaters, or grabbed a stirrup to slip under a slow-moving horse. Elves and halflings always make the best cutpurses, and this one was no exception.

At last we broke through the first two blocks of the district, past the walls of ramshackle tenements and squeezed townhouses. With Bridgefront behind me, I found myself in Garrison Hill. Still

EXPLORING KORVOSA

Established during the expansion of the Chelaxian Empire as the primary settlement in Varisia, Korvosa remains closely tied to its roots in devil-worshipping Chelax and continues to be the unofficial capital of the region in the eyes of most foreigners, rivaled only by Magnimar. Korvosa is the setting of the Pathfinder Curse of the Crimson Throne Adventure Path, and further information on its web of political intrigue and infernal pacts can be found in *Pathfinder* volumes 7–12 and in the forthcoming *Guide to Korvosa*.

crowded, this oldest part of the city (outside of Fort Korvosa itself) at least provides wider avenues and boulevards, especially as you near the cliffs of the island, where the high walls of the rebuilt fort still stand, proud and erect.

The elf leapt through a merchant's cart, stomping on a display of wrinkling Ravenmoor grapes, then vaulted over the bewildered Varisian tending the makeshift stall and tumbled along the alley floor behind. Not trusting the slick fruit, I instead leapt to the side of the cart, planted one foot on the wall of the nearby building, and spun through the air behind the merchant.

I landed awkwardly in a puddle of something, and my feet slipped out from under me, gravity slamming me hard into the pavement. The foul liquid, redolent of urine and fish, splashed up around me, soaking my clothing and coating me in a slick of filth. The elf reached the end of the alley and turned, passing from view. Struggling to my feet, I followed.

And stopped short. The narrow waterfront lane I found myself in held a dozen or so people, but not one of them an elf. Painfully aware of the stares of the fishermen around me, I breathed hard, attempting to ignore the burning in my chest. That's when I heard a soft wooden bang to my right. Turning, I noted a small greasy window almost level with the street, with scuff marks scarring the sill. Without a second thought, I dashed at the window and dropped, trusting the slimy filth covering me to grease my slide. With my right foot leading I smashed through the glass and struck something soft and yielding on the other side.

The elf and I landed hard on the rough-hewn floor of a cellar, with me on top. For a moment we lay there head-to-toe with each other, gasping to regain our wind, then simultaneously launched into a flurry of kicks that bloodied each other's faces but lacked the leverage to do any real damage. That tactic proving ineffective, I rolled off the elf and came to my feet. At that moment, the extent of my injuries became apparent. Long slivers of glass stuck out of my legs, chest, and arms, and wide patches of blood coated my body, seeping through my already befouled clothing. Darkness framed my vision and my knees buckled with exhaustion, but I managed to grab the edge of the window frame and catch myself. Through the haze of a raging headache I noticed the elf moving even slower, and took the opportunity to hum an aria borrowed from the priests of Desna, feeling the magic inherent in the music close the worst of my

RISE OF THE RUNELORDS

wounds and fill my veins with new life. Bits of glass fell from my flesh as I stepped forward, still shaky, and drew my sword.

Rising slowly, one arm held close against his chest to immobilize it, the elf began to weave his fingers in strange movements, mouth moving but eyes still set in that same expressionless mask. A spell? Really? With my sword drawn? Fast as he was, not even an elf could concentrate on a spell and still expect to dodge me. Before he could finish his incantation, I lunged forward and ran my sword clear through his stomach, carrying him to the ground with me, where I lay panting on his corpse, his blood flowing out between us and warming my hands.

For a short time I stayed there, surveying my surroundings from the floor. On first blush, it looked like a water-damaged empty basement. In fact, it looked like a basement on second and third blushes as well. Sighing, I sat up on the dead elf's chest, causing a spurt of blood to blast a streak of crimson on my arm. Absently, I backhanded his face. Why did he run down into an abandoned basement? Maybe he lived in the building above. Maybe he knew

someone who did. Still, his strength was in his speed, and he had sacrificed it. Why? Glancing down at the body, I noticed for the first time a thin chain around his neck, at the end of which hung a softly glowing key.

Maybe he had a way out after all.

Snatching up the key, I walked up the wooden stairs leading out of the dusty basement and tried the key in the door. No luck. Over the next several minutes I tried putting the key into anything resembling a hole I could find in that dust-filled, gods-forsaken basement. At last my frustration got the best of me, and I fell to kicking the elf's corpse, punctuating each strike with a curse or unanswered question. Then with one final kick, his body shifted, and I discovered what I had been missing: beneath where the elf had fallen, his wide puddle of blood seemed to drain, ever so slowly, into a previously unseen crack beneath the body.



Gods, the smell.

As I moved the key near the crack it began to glow more brightly. Encouraged, I stuck it in and twisted. With an audible, grinding crunch, a rectangular outline of cracks suddenly formed in the floor, with a dozen parallel cracks running across it. The parallel sections recessed in a series of mechanical chunks, forming a steep, crudely cut set of stairs, dripping now with blood. A terrible draft of corruption washed into the basement.

Ah, how wonderful. Sewers. A section of the famed Vaults of Korvosa.

With a quick search of the elf's body, I found little to identify him, but plucked an unused handkerchief from of his pouches and put it to my nose. As I had hoped, it was perfumed. Elves. I tied it around my head to cover my mouth and nose.

Holding my sword out before me, I descended into the yawning sewer, searching for any indication of recent passage. At the foot of the stairs, a low-ceilinged tunnel flowed sluggishly with a morass of salt-water sludge a foot deep, stretching out into the darkness. Holding up the elf's key, which continued to glow with a pale blue light, I continued cautiously down the tunnel. After a time, the passage curved and I caught a glimmer of dim radiance, accompanied by the shuffling and snorting of something huge. Then the tunnel opened up, and I found myself staring down upon one of the island's many cesspits... and its inhabitants.

Massive three-legged monstrosities with mouths that filled their bulbous bodies waddled around in the filth and refuse collected below the city. If they saw me they did not react, for they continued their disgusting work, shoveling huge piles of garbage into their gaping maws. Careful to make as little noise as possible, I edged around the circular chamber on a narrow, man-sized walkway. Three other similarly sized pipes opened into the cesspit, and as with the stairs, the key grew brightest near the far tunnel. Fair enough. Not wanting to remain near the massive, dangerous, and nauseating creatures any longer than I already had, I moved quickly down the passage. Almost immediately the air changed, the odor lessening until it felt almost fresh.

Taking heart, I continued on, finally coming to a raised dais made of wood and covered in a thick and muddy layer of pine needles and dirty hay. A wooden trap door waited in the roof above. In front of me, horizontal lines cut directly into the stone wall created a makeshift ladder. Climbing it, I slid a dagger's blade into the slight gap between door and roof and pried. The thin blade provided little in the way of a view, but after several finger- and toe-cramping minutes I guessed the room beyond to be empty.

Taking a deep breath, I threw open the door, scampering up the ladder and through the hatch as quick as I could. I was alone, but I felt certain someone had heard my entry. Silently I took in the boot-filled mudroom in which I found myself before moving into a well-appointed entry hall. Kicking off my slime-coated boots so as to not leave a trail, I began my exploration in earnest. Voices drifted throughout the seemingly endless building, forcing me more than once to duck into a side room and press my ear to the door.

It was in one of these rooms that my luck finally turned and I found myself surrounded by piles of bags, weapons, works of art,

KORVOSA'S OFFAL SECRET

Built where the land meets the water and straddling a major river that dumps into the most prosperous clam field in Varisia, the lower sections of Korvosa face a huge, stinking problem: their own waste. Many of the sewers beneath Korvosa drain into massive cesspits to the south, but the isolated wards on Endrin Isle trust to an alternative means of disposal: otyughs. The otyughs of Korvosa have more than tripled in number (and can still only barely keep up with the city's offal) since Lord Magistrate Dess Leroung imported them from Cheliah almost two centuries ago. Large steel plugs in the streets, opened by equally massive crank-driven winches, separate the city's population from its surly waste disposers. These otyughs occasionally break out of the sewers and rampage through Old Korvosa, where they're subsequently corralled and incarcerated again by guardsmen wielding longspear coated in tranquilizing poisons.

and other seemingly random but valuable items, each tagged with a tiny note listing a date and location. Throwing myself into the mounds of goods, I burrowed frantically, and was soon rewarded by my own pack, its tag noting the circumstances of its theft. Tearing it open, I discovered everything as I had left it, with the notable exception of the missing puzzle box. Such losses bothered me little, however, and with a lightened heart I slipped the thong of the wayfinder over my head and clutched the journal to my chest, vowing to never let either pass from my sight again. With one longing look at the piles of loot—who knows what other secrets might rest within such a trove?—I made haste for the door, only to run headlong into a bewildered youth wearing all red, approaching from the direction of the sewers.

We stared at one another for a few surprised seconds, then I kicked him hard in the knee and sprinted the other way. Behind me, his cries of alarm as he went down were answered by other voices, and the clank of weapons sounded from several directions.

A staircase loomed up suddenly in front of me, and without thinking, I took it, taking the steps two or three at a time. Ahead of me, sunlight slanted through a windowed landing, broken only by the brace of red-garbed guards who came charging down the stairs, swords drawn. I was out of options. Summoning up the last of my strength, I put my head down and charged, backpack held in front of me like a shield. The surprised guards' blades whistled over my head, and then I was crashing through the glass, pack protecting my newly healed skin from the jagged shards as I plunged in free-fall to the cobblestones that appeared below, tucking and rolling to spread the impact over my whole body. Above me, the guards looked on in astonishment as I tumbled to my feet, the broken glass raining down around me.

Seeing their expressions, I was unable to resist and swept my arm out in a low, mocking bow. Then I turned and raced laughing into the streets of Old Korvosa, the fresh breeze cool on my face and stones smooth beneath my bare feet.



BELLY OF THE BEAST

12 Erastus, 4707 AR

Curiosity is Man's greatest blessing, that which most distinguishes him from the beasts of the field. The drive to discover, to question convention and unveil secrets, has lifted us up from the dirt, birthed science and culture, brought us both the arcane and the divine. It has made us masters of heaven and earth, and taught us to know the minds of the very gods themselves. In the Pathfinder, this need for truth has been honed to a needle point, an obsession, and one might well argue that in this purity of purpose, we most embody Man's reason for existence on this world.

But gods, sometimes it makes us stupid.

For the first few days after my escape, my braggadocio ran high, and it was enough merely to have recovered my journal and wayfinder. As, in truth, it ought to be—I've no need for further trouble, and I'm no closer to identifying my ioun stone than when I left Kaer Maga a month ago. Yet as the hours roll on, I find myself more and more reluctant to saddle my horse and show this festering hellhole my back. Instead of fulfilling my mission, all I can think about is that puzzle box, and how the thieves seemed to know it on sight, finding it worthwhile

enough to jump an armed (if admittedly foolish and inebriated) man and ride halfway across Varisia to turn it over to—whom? What have I stumbled into? And what role does my box play in it? Try as I might, I just can't bring myself to turn my back on such questions. I've got to go back in, got to take back what's mine and find someone who can tell me more. That might be easier said than done, though—something tells me that, whoever these people are, they aren't going to be caught unawares a second time. If I'm going to do this, I'll need help.

So I'll bring in a specialist.

12 Erastus, 4707 AR

Evening

Adventurers and mercenaries never really retire. They die, sometimes gloriously in a bard's song, sometimes coughing up their own organs in a muddy battlefield, rarely in bed. Or they live, ruling a nation or on the run, constantly looking over their shoulder.

And some of them—perhaps the luckiest—simply fade away.

Given the nature of what I had to suggest, I figured it prudent to wait until nightfall, nursing a glass of bad whisky at a dive bar just north of the Icon of Man Ascendant in Northgate. The bartender, while the surly balding sort, didn't seem to find it worth his time to evict me from my place at one of the outside tables, so I sat there long after the whisky was gone, watching the stretching shadows and the children playing on the statue, clambering over its sides and running between its marble limbs. I wonder, in this land of monuments, is this how the ancients would see us today? Children running beneath the feet of giants. Finally, the sun set completely and parents called their broods home. I pulled my cloak tight around me and joined the crowd, weaving my way through the streets to Mainshore.

I walked slowly, and the shop was dark when I finally approached. Though lamps along the street cast a warm orange glow across the cobbles, in the shadow of the stoop I was no more than a whisper of movement as I removed the lockpicks from my pocket and went to work. While not one of my prouder childhood skills, there are some things you never forget, and this lock was easier than I had expected. Before long I felt the satisfying metallic pop as the bolt slid back and the handle turned. Scanning the street to make sure I wasn't seen, I cracked the door and slithered inside, closing it ever so softly behind me.

The storefront was empty, the long counter packed with racks of strange weapons and adornments displayed neatly on thick swaths of exotic fabrics. On the walls, tapestries depicted landscapes the likes of which few in this city will ever see—sailing vessels skirting the Eye of Abendigo, the crowded markets of Vudra, and the golden pagoda temples of distant Qin. Freestanding silver torch-sconces like eight-foot-tall candlesticks, their stems rippled and twisted so the light seemed to extend all the way down their mirror-bright surfaces, stood between them. And from the ceiling hung stranger trophies yet—the head of one of the great jungle beasts they call river gluttons, or a lacquered suit of wooden armor with four arms. All of this I took in at a glance and, relaxing, stood up.

Pain lanced suddenly through my shoulder, and I froze in mid-crouch.

"That's far enough, dirtbag. Keep your hands where I can see them, and move slowly if you hope to use that arm again."

Careful to remain as still as possible, I slowly turned my head. To my right, the slender blade of a short sword extended straight down into the hollow behind my collarbone, pricking my skin and staining my filthy cloak even darker with blood. Following the blade up, I found myself staring into a woman's inverted face, her dark hair falling down around her cheeks and framing a jaw set in quiet determination.

"Sascha. Still agile as ever, I see."

Her eyes twitched slightly in surprise.

CASTLE KORVOSA

Built atop a massive flat-topped pyramid, the citadel of Castle Korvosa rises to almost twice the pyramid's height to make it by far the tallest structure in Korvosa.

The pyramid once served as a vital strategic and religious site for the native Shoanti. When the Chelish settlers moved onto the mainland from Endrin Isle (the island on which Old Korvosa stands), it took them nearly fifteen years to finally and decisively expel the Shoanti from the pyramid. After that time, the people of Korvosa built the first citadel walls atop the pyramid and gained control of Korvosa Peninsula in the process.

Over time, many different leaders have added to the citadel, building up from the top of the pyramid in a variety of styles and for an assortment of reasons. The castle's South Tower, the most recently completed and tallest addition, looms over the rest of the citadel and the city. Its claw-like tip scrapes the sky at nearly 600 feet above the base of the pyramid.



SPEAKING KORVOSAN

The people of Korvosa universally speak Chelaxian but have, over time, created their own slang and terminology unique to the city. These are some of the terms one might hear while passing through the city.

Arbiter: Korvosan judge. Arbiters wield a great deal of judicial power in the city.

Chel: While in most of the world this word is considered a mildly inappropriate term for someone of Chelish descent, in Korvosa it has evolved into a vicious ethnic slur.

Copper Pinch: Korvosan copper piece. Usually referred to simply as a “pinch” (plural and singular). Among children, calling multiple copper coins “pinches” often elicits playful tweaks on the arm or backside.

Gate: Someone who lives in Northgate.

Gold Sail: Korvosan gold piece. Always called by its full name to differentiate it from the similar term “sail” (see below).

Moth: A full-blooded Varisian.

Pincher: A very poor person who scrapes by on only a few copper pieces a month.

Platinum Crown: Korvosan platinum piece. Often referred to as simply a “crown.”

Sail: A ship.

Shingles: The rooftop highways and temporary residences above the city.

Silver Shield: Korvosan silver piece. Frequently called by its full name to differentiate it from the shields used for protection.

Vaults: Any underground opening beneath Korvosa.

“Eando?”

“The one and only.”

Faster than the pain could register, she slid the sword from my shoulder and somersaulted over me, dropping from where she had clung to the lintel like a spider. Landing on her feet, she jammed the sword point between two floorboards and stood looking down at me, balled hands on hips.

“Well, get up, then. Sorry about the shoulder, but you’re lucky I didn’t have the alarms armed, or you’d be complaining of a lot worse. What’re you doing in Korvosa, anyway? And why in the name of the gods are you breaking into my house in the middle of the night?”

I rose and found myself staring up into her eyes. Even now, the years hadn’t shortened her any. To those who didn’t know better, she might have been a comical sight—a bulky, middle-aged woman swaddled in a thick woolen dressing gown, black hair shot with gray and every inch the scolding matron, save for the well-oiled blade at her side. They might have written her off, and that would have been their mistake—and possibly their last. For even through the robe, I could see that the fat of years overlaid rosy muscle, and her eyes still moved restlessly from place to place with the urgency of a hunter.

“Nice bathrobe,” I said.

“Hmph. Can’t say you look much better. Come on and sit, I’ll get us some drinks and see to that scratch.”

I let her lead me through a beaded curtain and back into a cozy apartment even more packed with oddities than her shop. Sitting me down at a battered wooden table, she produced an unlabeled bottle of what smelled like sour rotgut and took a long pull before pouring a liberal amount into my wound, where it stung like a thousand ants. As she carefully stitched my shoulder back together, I told her the story of my escape from the strange gang lair. I finished right as she did, and at my description of the guards I’d narrowly avoided, she suddenly gripped my wounded shoulder hard, making me wince.

“Ow—what?”

She moved around me to seat herself in the only other chair, facing me across the unvarnished surface of the table, and I was surprised to see her expression grim.

“What color did you say they were they wearing?” she asked.

“Crimson... all the same shade, head to foot. Even the hilts of their swords. Seemed kind of foppish, really. Why?”

She reached for the bottle and took another long pull.

“You poor, poor fool,” she said. “You really have no idea how lucky you are, do you?”

I said nothing, so she continued.

“You didn’t just drop into any old thieves’ guild, Eando. There’s only one group in Korvosa that would dare wear robes like that, or need a safe house of the size you’ve described, for that matter. Surely somewhere in your chronicles you’ve heard of the Red Mantis?”

The name set off a warning bell somewhere in the back of my skull, but she was warming to her topic and kept going.

“Kline, these guys are bad news. The Mantis has its claws in a dozen countries at least, and probably owns politicians in a dozen more. They aren’t just thieves—they’re assassins, and the best in the business. Totally ruthless. These guys don’t care who gets in their way as long as they take out their target, and they *always* take out their target. You’re a fine Pathfinder, but you mess with the Mantis and that diary of yours is going to be awful short.”

“Well then,” I said, “looks like I’ll be needing some help getting back in, doesn’t it?”

She stared at me in stunned silence for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“Are you kidding? I haven’t run a job in years! I’m retired. I’ve got my shop, and a nice little nest egg tucked away besides. I won’t deny we had some good times—and gods know, I owe you almost as many favors as you owe me—but my adventuring days are done. And to tell you the truth, I don’t miss them at all. I’m happy to help you fence whatever relics you come across in your ramblings, but I’m out. Give me a nice warm bed and a pouch full of gold over a dirty bedroll and a pinched breakfast, I say.”

“Sure you do,” I replied with a sneer. “You never get bored being a merchant, never miss the rush of night air on your skin or the whistle of your knife in the dark. That’s why your sword’s still

polished bright, why you can still hang from the ceiling with ease. I'm sure those skills come in useful when negotiating with the dreamy nobles who buy these knick-knacks won by someone else's blood. You never lie awake at night, listening to the footsteps in the dark and imagining one last run. Not you."

She glared at me. "What you're suggesting is suicide," she said. I smiled.

"Then they'll never expect it, will they?"

14 Erastus, 4707 AR

Our planning went late into the night, and the next day was spent in bed, waiting and resting as best we could, not knowing when we'd next get the chance. As night fell, I made my preparations, being sure to tie my journal, wayfinder, and ioun stone directly to my body beneath my armor with strips of linen. They'd probably be safe in Sascha's shop, but I wasn't about to take any chances this soon after recovering them. I was debating how much rope to take when I heard a rustle and turned to see Sascha come through the curtain.

The change was absolute. Instead of the gown, she wore a studded leather jerkin over a long-sleeve leather shirt, both of them bearing scars from repeated patching. Straps held thick leather bracers to her arms, with a dagger strapped under the left one, and similar tie-downs held gold-inlaid steel greaves to her shins. An elaborately decorated Losen half-skirt wrapped around her waist beneath a jewel-encrusted belt to complete the ensemble. The sword from last night was back in her hand, but now it glowed with a pale blue fire that she quenched with a flick of her wrist. Only the smattering of gray in her hair and a slight strain on the straps of her armor paid homage to time's passing.

"Good to see you can still fit into the old thing," I said.

"Go to hell, Eando," she responded with a smile.

We left by the back door and moved west, crossing into Ridgefield and then to the northern end of the Avenue of Arms and the intersection where I had cornered the elf previously. We were crossing the square when a scream rang out from behind me, savage and bestial, and I whirled around in a half-crouch, hand on my sword. Sascha's outflung arm hit me across the chest, holding me in place.

"Easy, Eando. It's just the Company. Look."

She pointed upward, and my eyes rose to where a hippogriff perched atop the peak of the Great Tower. From a saddle on its back, a black-clad rider watched the city below, dark cloak fluttering in the breeze. Then the great beast cried again, its eagle-head voicing a fearsome hunting call, and the pair leapt into the air, winging swiftly over the rooftops and out of sight.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

"The Sable Company," she replied, turning me back in the direction we had been traveling. "The

city guard in Korvosa is one of the most honest I've encountered, upholding the law out of love for Abadar as much as for the king, but no power in Korvosa goes unchecked for long. The Sable Company men are the best of the best, and while the guard reports to the king, the Company takes orders only from the Seneschal of Castle Korvosa. Both are used primarily to police the city, but the unspoken understanding is that if either the king or the seneschal ever went bad, the other would still have the means to take him down and cut the head off the snake. You've got to love a military order whose entrance oaths include the promise of regicide, but that's Korvosa for you. Here, even the good guys keep tabs on one another."

"Sounds like your kind of place."

"Oh, it is. It is."

We continued on, and before long we were crossing the bridge into the cesspool that is Old Korvosa. Retracing my steps from a few days before, we moved through Bridgefront and into

Don't these things ever die?



RISE OF THE RUNELORDS

Garrison Hill, where we turned and followed the hill's curve around to the northeast, ending along the same waterfront lane full of fishermen. We made our way to the little window I had slid through before, and much to my surprise, it was still shattered. Sascha sighed a little, and I knew her thoughts, for they were also mine: if they didn't bother fixing the window, it meant they had abandoned the safe house. Or is that just what they wanted us to think? I had to know for sure. Searching carefully for traps, I knelt down and peeked inside.

*It seems the
Red Mantis
has earned its
reputation.*



Empty. Not even a smear of blood to mark the desperate struggle of a few days ago. Slipping a small crowbar from my belt, I quickly and quietly cleared the rest of the glass shards from around the frame. With Sascha standing guard, I slipped through the window and set down softly on the floor. Behind me, Sascha leapt lightly to the ground.

The key I had recovered from the elf opened the same door in the floor, and we crept quietly down into the sewers, swords drawn and more certain than ever that we were walking into a trap. Why else would the Mantis have left their back door wide open? We made our way to the large open pit, but this time there were no massive otyughs slopping around in the muck. It didn't make me feel any better.

As I slipped around the edge of the arch onto the ledge encircling the cesspit, Sascha suddenly grabbed my arm and pulled me back. Pressing us flat against the wall, she twitched a hand to point past me toward our destination, to where a dark, hulking creature slouched in the shadows of the exit passage: a troll, and armed.

I held my breath, but it was too late—the troll had already seen us. He loped toward us with remarkable speed and, even as we backed farther into the corridor, he roared and swung his massive spiked club with all his might. The swing went wide, but the masonry corner next to my head exploded in a cloud of shrapnel that stung my face. Before the dust settled or the troll could draw back his club for another attempt, Sascha slid in under the troll's grasp and plunged her blade low into its abdomen in a smooth, perfect thrust that squelched out his back between his shoulder blades. But instead of the expected gout of blood, the thing merely shuddered once and straightened, his hands grasping for the blade as he gave a rumbling, imbecilic chuckle.

"Oh, right," Sascha said, and twisted the sword's hilt.

Blue flames lit up the blade, still sheathed in the troll's flesh, and he roared in pain as he threw himself backward off of the burning sword, foul smoke rising from the seared edges of the wound. Taking his club in both hands, he swung with renewed vigor, just barely missing my shoulder. Despite my lack of flaming blade, I hacked hard at the beast, hoping to at least distract him. To my surprise, my sword cut deep into his hip, and the troll's step faltered, bringing him stumbling into me. Wrenching the sword from my hand, he pulled the blade free and flung it down the hall with a clatter, his flesh knitting together before my eyes. Bringing his sharp-nosed face directly in line with mine, he drew back his lips and bared a row of pointed fangs, his fetid breath hot on my face. Weaponless, I did the only thing I could think of: I smiled back, and patted his warty, filthy cheek.

It was all the distraction Sascha needed. Slipping around behind it, she plunged her sword directly into the point where skull met spine, driving it in almost to the hilt. I have no idea if the creature even felt it—one second he was ready to gnaw off my face, and the next he coughed once and collapsed, bearing me to the ground in an avalanche of stinking flesh. Trying hard not to retch, I eventually managed to kick my way free of the beast. Casually wiping her blade on the troll's corpse, Sascha held out my own sword.

"Try and hold on to this next time," she said, and I snatched it without response.

We waited a few minutes to listen for reinforcements, but at last the stench got to us and we passed down the corridor the troll had guarded until we reached the spot where I had climbed up the first time. There we found a few pine needles and dirty hay, but no raised dais. In quick whispers, I explained the situation to Sascha, and she replied by sheathing her blade and deftly scampering up the wall to push open the trap door. A heartbeat later, she slipped into the room and let the panel fall shut quietly behind her.

A tense moment passed in silence, then the trap door reopened and a crimson form slid through, landing with a crunch at my feet. I kicked his body into the narrow channel of filth next to me and accepted Sascha's hand, scrambling up into the mudroom beyond. Together, we slipped through the wide corridors of the safe house, keeping to the shadows and making barely a sound. Despite the sizeable halls, the place seemed strangely empty, and the slightest movement rang like a gong in the heavy quiet.

Partway down the main thoroughfare, we suddenly heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and I pulled Sascha into a thankfully unoccupied storeroom, leaving the door open the tiniest crack. Through it, we watched as three men moved down the hall we had just vacated, two of them laboring to carry a heavy chest between them. All three were dressed in red, but while the two chest-bearers were bareheaded and wore the robes I was familiar with, the third was another story entirely. Instead of robes, his chest and legs were encased in brilliant, blood-red leather armor that looked as supple as skin, with a flowing cloak cast regally over one shoulder. His arms were wrapped in strips of scarlet cloth, from which protruded wicked barbs like knife-blades. Most impressive, however, was his helmet, a strange affair with a closed facemask that made his head look for all the world like that of a massive insect, two smoky crystal lenses protecting his eyes. They passed us by without notice. Exchanging a glance, Sascha and I slid out into the hall behind them, keeping to the shadows. They entered the mudroom, and from outside we could hear the leader call out a name. Once. Twice.

I looked at Sascha. We couldn't risk an alarm. She nodded.

We went in fast and hard. With the silence I remembered so fondly, Sascha moved lightly across the room to one of the men with the chest and grabbed him around the throat from behind, sliding her dagger flat between his ribs. He collapsed, dropping the chest with a loud crash and eliciting a cry from the other man. By then, I was already in the air, leaping over the corpse

and bringing my blade in line with his eye. At the last moment, he ducked, avoiding my sword but bringing his head within range of my knee. I twisted to bring it up with the full force of my momentum, and his face crumpled like a sack full of eggs. With a bloody gurgle, he dropped.

By this time, the leader was on his feet and had drawn his sword, a strangely barbed weapon like a saw-toothed sabre. Sascha closed the door to the mudroom as the leader and I stared at each other.

"You again," the red-clad man murmured, his voice ringing strangely inside his helmet. "You caused quite a fuss on your last visit. So good of you to stop back by and make things right."

"Really," I said, "it was nothing."

The three of us darted from side to side, too cramped in the room to truly circle, until at last the man saw an opening and lunged at me. Sascha caught his blade high on her own and I moved in for the kill, but the man kicked fast and caught me a numbing blow on the shin that nearly swept my feet out from under me. I turned my recovery into a savage upward thrust, but the Mantis danced out of the way, somehow avoiding Sascha's slash to the throat. He flowed between us like water, seemingly everywhere at once, and despite our concerted efforts he nearly had us. Only the fact that, with the two of us working in concert, he could not afford to counterattack saved our lives and allowed us to slowly back him into a corner.

Eventually the minor nicks and scratches we had managed to inflict seemed to take their toll, and the Mantis's movements began to slow. His blade beats became weaker, his ripostes slower, and Sascha and I knew that, tough as he was, even the greatest fighter will drop from exhaustion if tested long enough. It was only a matter of time.

Or so we thought. At last, the Mantis slumped to one knee, his blade held above him in a feeble defense. Sascha moved in for the kill, and in our eagerness we noticed too late the free hand thrust into a concealed pocket. In one deft move, he rolled to the side, tossing down a small clay ball that shattered with a flash of light and a deafening bang. When vision returned, the room was empty, and through the ringing in our ears we could hear shouts of alarm from elsewhere in the building.

"Hell," I said, and looked to the open trap door, but Sascha was already kneeling in front of the chest, handling her lockpicks like an artist with his brushes. With a triumphant click, the lid popped free, and Sascha threw it wide.

When I first saw them carrying the chest, I had hoped against hope to find my puzzle box inside. Instead, I found myself staring down at two rows of them, stacked like bricks within the padded case, each of them carved with a unique arrangement of human skulls and other morbid imagery. I looked at Sascha.

"This good enough?" she asked.

"Yeah," I breathed. "Yeah, I think it is."

Each of us grabbed two of the boxes and tucked them under our arms, leaving our sword arms free for whatever lay ahead. Then, with the sound of running feet approaching from the hall, we dropped into the sewer, and were gone.



OF ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

18 Erastus, 4707 AR

"I still think I could open it."

I snorted. "I'm sure you could. And if what came out was a swarm of flesh-eating locusts or a thousand souls of the hungry dead, what then? Or do you think those screaming skulls embossed all over it are just for decoration?"

"Humph. If it's really that dangerous, I'm not sure how I feel about leaving the others in my shop. Besides, it's probably just somebody's jewelry box." Sascha crossed her arms over her leather jerkin and picked up the pace, her long strides eating up the cobblestone street, but I could tell that she wasn't truly peeved. "Well, it's a moot point now. We're here." She pointed.

Rising up before us, the hall was a work of gothic genius, all tapered spires and leering gargoyles. Even for those satellite buildings set apart from the main campus, the Acadamae was easily recognizable. My hand went instinctively to my sword.

"And you trust this man?" I asked, for the third time that morning.

"As much as I trust any wizard, which is just barely. But Devoren has identified plenty of items for me in the past, and he's always played fair and paid full market for whatever he decides to pick up for himself." Brushing past me, she danced nimbly up the marble steps and rapped hard on the doors. Somewhere inside, a bell chimed.

Without warning, a disembodied voice rang clear in my ear, as if the speaker were standing by my side. "Who seeks entrance?" it croaked. "State your name and purpose."

"Sascha Antif-Arah," Sascha responded easily to the empty air. "Here to see the Sage Devoren, by appointment. This is my comrade, Eando Kline."

There was a momentary silence, and then the doors in front of us cracked and swung open of their own accord. Beyond, a wizened, white-haired man in purple livery stood next to a small writing desk.

"You're expected," the doorman said in the voice from the doorstep. "Please follow me." He turned and strode off down the long, wood-paneled hall, not bothering to look behind him to see

if we followed. Sascha nudged me into motion, and we fell into step a few paces behind him.

The hall was plain and level, the thick burgundy carpet and dark wood paneling seeming to soak up the sound of our passage. Softly glowing ghost lamps floated near the ceiling at regular intervals, lighting our way. We traveled for long minutes, passing closed door after closed door, and soon I became convinced that there was no way the building, large as it was, could possibly contain it all. I began to remark as much to Sascha, but she cut me off with a gesture, and we walked in silence until the stooped doorman finally slowed and knocked at one of the doors, pulling himself up into a semblance of parade rest.

"Enter," said a male voice, and the doorman bowed his head as we passed into the room.

The chamber beyond was sober and elegant. High ceilings were complemented by equally towering bookshelves, and deep green carpet played counterpoint to maroon curtains girding the floor-to-ceiling window which took up most of one wall. More drapes hid what appeared to be the entrance to a well-appointed apartment. In the room's center stood a massive wooden desk, and behind it lounged a man. Shorter than me by a good deal, his eyes were sharp, and his small black beard was trimmed to a meticulous point. His dark robes were modest, yet obviously of high quality. He stood as we entered.

"Sascha! Always a pleasure. What wonders have your thieves and scholars brought us today?"

"Devoren," she replied. "Good to see you as well."

The man moved around the desk to greet us, and as he did I noticed for the first time the view out the window, which confirmed what my gut had told me—without any discernable slope to the hallway, we appeared to have climbed several stories. Wizards.

Devoren clasped hands with both of us, then seated himself on the lip of his desk and gestured for the doorman to leave, which the little man did with a bow, closing the door behind him.

Without hesitation, Sascha pulled out the strange steel puzzle box and handed it to him. Devoren twirled it slowly in his hands several times, peering at it intensely, before setting it carefully down on the desk.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

In answer, Sascha launched into our carefully pruned version of the truth, telling how I'd taken it off the corpse of a courier at the edge of the Mushfens, but neglecting to mention its subsequent theft.

"You didn't open it yet, did you?"

Sascha shook her head.

"Good," Devoren replied. "While I can't tell offhand exactly what charms are warding this piece, there's obviously more here than just an elaborate lock. The design as a whole I don't recognize, but judging by the auras, somebody obviously put a lot of time or coin into this. Probably both. And you see this here?" He pointed at one of the carvings, and Sascha and I leaned in closer. "That's a Taldoran death's head. Not something you see a whole lot anymore, but a clear warning of danger to anyone who recognizes it." He stopped again and peered closer at the tiny, screaming skull. "And to those who don't, I suppose," he conceded. There was a long pause in which he seemed to forget we were there. Finally Sascha cleared her throat loudly, and he started back into the present.

"Well enough," said Sascha. "But I'm more concerned with whatever's inside it. Can you get through the wards?"

"What?" He was staring at the box. "Oh, yes, yes. Give me two days. I should have everything sorted out by then. Usual rates."

"Agreed," said Sascha. She paused a moment, and when no more words were forthcoming, took me by the shoulder and said, "We'll just let ourselves out." We moved back into the hall and closed the door on the wizard, leaving him sitting on his desk and musing over the box, deep in thought.



Hellhounds are everything their name implies.

20 Erastus, 4707 AR

Two days later, we returned at the appointed time and repeated the process, following the little doorman up to Devoren's quarters. This time the room was dark, the curtains drawn across the great window, and the warm study lit by candles. The wizard greeted us with a smile and motioned to two chairs in front of the desk, which we took. The box was not in evidence.

"So what did you find out, Devoren?" Sascha asked. "Where's our box?"

The sage smiled again, this time sheepishly.

"I'm sorry to report that there were... complications," he replied. "I had my strongest countercharms in place, but there was a hidden evocation failsafe I was unable to detect. When I moved to open it, the entire thing burst into flames—if I hadn't placed wards around it, my whole workshop could have gone up! Of course, I'll be happy to pay whatever you think it might reasonably have been worth, but..."

He pressed on, making further excuses, but I slumped back in the chair, defeated. After all my effort, riding halfway across Varisia, nearly getting my throat slit multiple times—nothing. Not even the chance to see what the box contained. I put my hand over my eyes and did my best to control my breathing, lest I throttle the useless wizard. I could tell that beside me, Sascha was having the same reaction.

Suddenly something the wizard said caught my attention.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" I asked.

"I just said that there's an upside to all this," Devoren repeated, eager to regain our favor. "Now that I've figured out the box's wards, there should be no problem opening the others. In fact, I think that—"

I cut him off.

"Devoren," I said quietly, "who said anything about others?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sascha stiffen. My hand on my sword, I stood up slowly.

A single bead of sweat ran down the wizard's cheek.

"Well, I—I mean, I assumed—"

"I did," said a familiar voice, and the curtains to Devoren's apartment parted to admit a tall, well-dressed Chelish man with gray-streaked hair. As he spoke, the curtains behind him and over the window rustled, disgorging four Korvosan Guards with truncheons drawn.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Sascha," pleaded Devoren, who was standing now, his hands clasped in entreaty. "I didn't want to turn you in, but your friend's gone too far this time. Lord Briarus is a very well-respected man, and to steal from his private collection is a serious crime... I have his promise that you'll receive a fair trial, and I'm sure the jury will understand that you knew nothing about—"

"Guards," the nobleman broke in, "these two invaded my residence and stole a number of priceless artifacts. By the laws of this city, I demand that they be taken and brought before the arbiters."

Finally the voice clicked.

"Sascha!" I yelled. "It's him! It's the Mantis who—"

And then they were upon us.

I started to draw my sword, but Sascha's shout stopped me. "These are city guards!" she cried, heaving over the massive desk to block the guards advancing from the apartment. "They're the good guys. Do you *want* us to be executed?" She caught up one of the heavy chairs we had been sitting in and swung it hard and fast in a wide arc, bringing it down on one of the guards' shoulders and driving him to the floor. Following her lead, I stepped in close to his partner and delivered my best uppercut, catching him flush on the chin and snapping his head back in a spray of blood and spit. Then something hard and weighted caught me on the back of my head and buckled my knees. I went down, and from the floor I could see Briarus standing calmly in the corner, apparently confident that the guards could handle us.

A boot came down hard between my shoulder blades, pinning me to the ground, and I was forced to admit that he might be right.

"This is suicide, Kline!" Sascha yelled. She stood with her back to a corner, holding two more guards at bay with a pair of chairs, as if she were a lion tamer. "Get us out of here!" Catching a glancing blow from Sascha's chair, one of the guards dropped his truncheon and drew his sword.

That was it. Drawing my dagger, I reached back and slammed it into the calf of the guard behind me, sending him screaming to the ground. Before he could recover I took two steps and leapt over the table, straight into Devoren. Locking one arm around his chest, I swung him between the guards and me, my dagger pressing hard enough to draw blood from his frantically bobbing larynx.

"Nobody move!" I screamed. "Take one step, and I swear to the gods I will end this bastard here and now!"

To my surprise, they didn't. To a man, the guards took one look at the blood seeping slowly from the mage's throat and put up their swords. Behind them, I could see Briarus looking back and forth from me to the guards, obviously weighing the merits of keeping his identity hidden versus taking me apart.

"Alright, here's what's going to happen," I said, doing my best to keep my voice level. "Devoren, you're going to use your magic to transport Sascha and me out of here safely. In exchange, we let you live. Sound fair?"

He started to nod, then thought better of it and agreed hoarsely.

"Good," I said. "I'm not going to give you a destination and risk these bastards hearing it, so you just pick a place and take us there, but know that if you try anything cute, like popping us into a jail cell or off a cliff, it'll be the last thing you ever do. Now do it."

With the sage mincing on his tiptoes in an effort to avoid my knife-point, the two of us marched awkwardly across the room until we stood next to Sascha. Then, grabbing both our arms, Devoren began to chant, liquid syllables that rolled off his tongue and brushed past our ears without being retained. Around us, the room twisted and blurred, and my grip on my dagger tightened. There was a momentary feeling of weightlessness, and then the world untwisted itself again and we found ourselves on the doorstep of a modest townhouse, just a few blocks from the still-visible front door of the Acadamae building.

"There," Devoren said, sweating with exertion. "I've done as you asked. May I please go?"

"Certainly," I said, removing my dagger from his chin. Then I swung hard and brought the pommel down on the back of his head, sending him crumpling to the pavement.

"Eando!" Sascha yelled, appalled.

"What?" I asked. "He'll live. Come on, let's get out of here."

23 Erastus, 4707 AR

We were fools to think it would be so easy.

For three days we laid low in one of the cheaper inns in Old Dock, leaving only under cover of darkness, and then only to do covert walk-bys of Sascha's shop. I was sitting on the mite-infested bed, counting out my meager supply of coins, when Sascha returned from the last one.

"Well?" I asked.

"The same," she said, removing the heavy cloak that shrouded her form, then hanging it on a hook. "Still no sign of surveillance. No guards, no suspicious characters, no magical auras—nothing. It looks like they've either forgotten about us or decided to leave us be."

"Which is exactly why I don't like it," I said, scooping up the coins and dumping them back into my purse.

"Me either," she agreed. "Neither the Mantis nor the Korvosan Guard are known for their leniency."

"And there's no chance that they might have legitimately overlooked your shop?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Not hardly," she said. "Unless you think Devoren suddenly grew a spine and decided to cover up our names."

I snorted. "So it's a trap."

"Yup."

"And we're going in anyway."

"Yup."

"I'll get my coat."

Outside, the two of us moved quickly and silently through the city's restless darkness, keeping our faces hidden within our cloaks as best we could. When at last we arrived at Sascha's street, it was as she said—quiet, dark, and seemingly unobserved. My skin itched with unseen eyes.

"You're sure this is necessary?" I asked.

"Listen, tomb-robber, you got me into this mess, and I'll be damned if I'm going to hear any whining from you now. I don't know how long it'll be before things cool down, or if any of my property will still be here when it does. I need to pick up some coins and choice items to get me through, and you still want those damn boxes, so buck up or shut up. We're going in. Ready?"

I nodded.

Together, we slipped through the shadows beneath the eaves, passing the door and going straight for the window. With me standing guard, Sascha quickly glued a piece of cloth to the glass, then shattered it silently with a rap of her dagger. With the window unlocked, we slid

into the showroom. Everything was in its place: animal heads and bizarre weapons, knick-knacks and trinkets from the far corners of Golarion. Motioning me toward the counter, she slipped through the beaded curtain into the living chambers.

And screamed.

I was there in two long steps, tearing down beads as I lunged through the curtain, sword half-drawn, and slammed into Sascha's back, stopping short. There, in front of her, was the largest dog I had ever seen. Red eyes glowed above a muzzle of glistening teeth, and bladed spurs of bone punctured skin that looked burnt, and indeed still smoldered in places. From between the dripping fangs, wisps of smoke rose toward the ceiling. Behind the hound, seated incongruously on the rumpled bed, sat a massive figure in armor, his helm and breastplate worked into elaborate demonic devices.

"All prey is the same," boomed a voice from within the helmet.

"The hunter's greatest asset is patience, the ability to remain still. Eventually, the quarry always comes."

The Order of the Nail gladly uses any means necessary to enforce the law.



He stood, and his spiked helm nearly brushed the ceiling. In front of me, Sascha let out a little moan.

"Hellknight," she whispered, eyes still wide.

"Correct," the deep voice intoned, inclining its head in a mocking bow. "Of the Order of the Nail. Both of you will surrender yourselves to me for judgment."

"And who are you to judge us?" I blustered, moving around Sascha. "You're no guardsman, so you have no authority. We haven't broken any of your laws."

"All laws are my laws."

And then several things happened very quickly. With a gesture from the hellknight, the hound sprang, the smoke sucked back into its maw as it inhaled mightily. As I raised my sword in a futile thrust, Sascha grabbed me and threw something past my shoulder, drawing me backward with one hand over my eyes. Suddenly there was a massive flash and a noise like thunder, and then a wave of heat as flames erupted from the spot I had stood a moment before. As we sprinted through the shopfront, we could hear muffled curses

behind us, and a long excited howl. We had barely reached the door when the hound emerged from the back room, fur ablaze. Silently, it leapt for us, but as we passed the final display case, Sascha grabbed a nondescript pouch and flung it. There was a wet popping noise, and then a snort of surprise as the hound found itself glued to the floorboards by a mess of sticky strands. Without looking back, we exploded out into the street.

"What the hell is going on here?" I screamed as we rounded the first corner.

"Shut up and run!" was Sascha's only response.

Behind us, the hound bayed again.

28 Erastus, 4707 AR

Damn it, Sascha. You were supposed to be retired.

With the trap at Sascha's shop sprung unsuccessfully, the powers that be in Korvosa forsook any pretense of subtlety. At guard posts around the city, handbills with our names and likenesses were tacked to walls. At the gates, carts were searched, and anyone near our size and shape detained and questioned. It appeared that Briasus had the ear of someone high up in the Guard, and the reward offered for our capture was more than generous.

I'd have been flattered, if we weren't totally screwed.

When we had finally collapsed after our initial escape from the shop, I lay gasping against the side of a crumbling warehouse and refused to move until Sascha explained things.

"That," she panted, "was a hellknight—one of the Order of the Nail. I trust you've heard of them?"

I had run across mentions of them in the past, but had never paid them any mind, as they were primarily a Chelaxian affair. I nodded, unable to speak.

"They're independents, beholden to no one here, but they occasionally take up bounties and other tasks for the city. They're militant freaks, worship nothing except absolute law, but they're good—very good. Sooner or later, he'll find us."

"And the hound?"

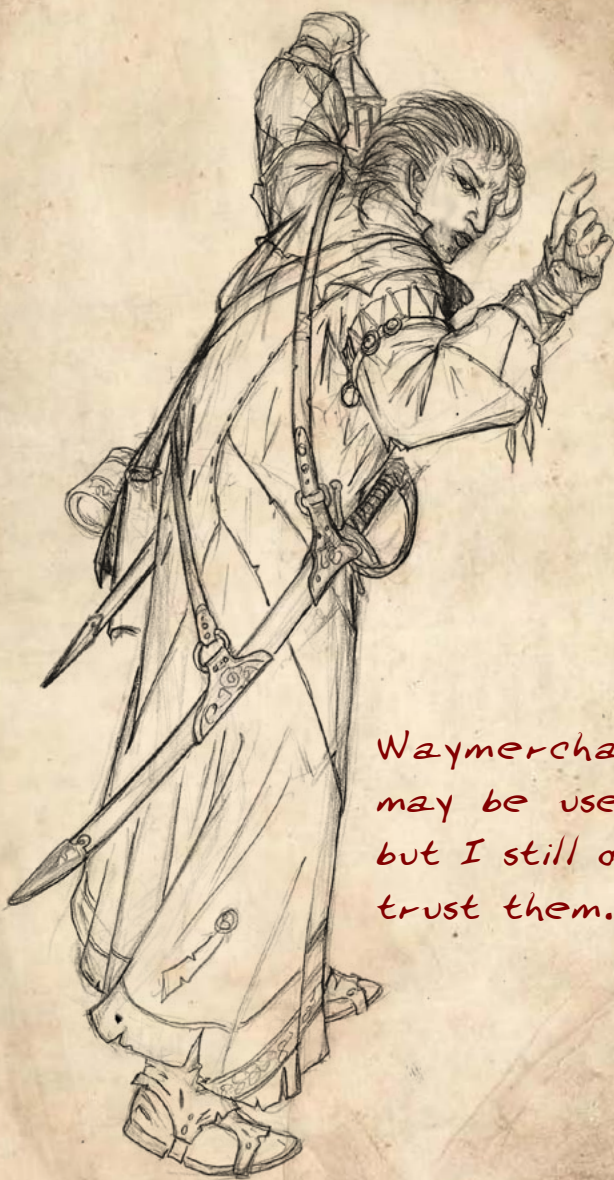
"A fiend in a dog's skin, called up from the Pit itself to track us. Why do you think they call them hellknights?"

For close to a week, we dared not even take a room in a flophouse for fear of recognition, and we slept in stables and beneath carts, once even in the Vaults. Everywhere we went, it seemed the eyes of the crowd followed our movements, and several nights we heard from far off the sound of the terrible hound's baying. Finally, after a particularly despicable evening, Sascha had enough.

"That's it," she said, throwing down the half-cooked rat we had been contemplating for supper. "There's nothing for it. We have to get out of the city."

"Oh?" I asked, scooping up the steaming carcass and wiping it on my pants. "And how do you propose we do that?"

"It's time to call in some favors," she said, standing. Without another word, she strode off into the darkness, and I followed, munching the rat philosophically. Again we



Waymerchants
may be useful,
but I still don't
trust them.

slunk through the streets, furtively in shadows and boldly where anything else would draw attention. Dawn was kissing the rooftops as we stopped at a hovel in the depths of Bridgefront. Sascha pounded three times on the scavenged steel grating that made up the door. From inside came a faint scrabbling, as of tiny feet, which suddenly changed timbre to that of someone stumbling around.

"Whassat?" a man's voice called.

"Open up, Irvine," Sascha whispered. "It's Sascha."

The door cracked open to reveal a beady eye, then was thrown open as a greasy little man with a pinched, rat-like face opened rag-clad arms in welcome, ushering us inside.

"Such a pleasure!" the man crowed, and then slightly softer, "Sought by ev'ry guard in the city, and she visits m'self! Truly, an honor fit for a king."

"Can it, Irvine," Sascha said, shutting the door firmly behind us. "I take it you know why we're here."

"Of course, of course." The weaselly man stank even worse than we did. His hands moved nervously as he talked, picking bits of leaves from his hair, but his voice betrayed no anxiety.

"I'm not sure I do," I said. "Sascha, who is this guy?"

"Irvine's a Rat's Teat Boy," she said. "A second-story man. His gang knows every tunnel in the Vaults, and can get you into any house or shop in the city. Or out of it."

"It's a talent of my people," said Irvine proudly, his nose twitching.

"Wait a second," I pressed. "If he's such a fabulous burglar, why's he living in this hellhole?"

"Poor fiscal responsibility," he grinned.

"Irvine has something of a gambling problem," Sascha drawled. "Not to mention drinking and whoring problems."

"I'm a social animal, I am," Irvine added.

"Fine, whatever," I replied. "What'll it take to get us out of the city undetected?"

"Wells, now, seeing how we're friends and all, I reckon it'll be jus' a shade over the reward they're postin', to be paid no later than a month from now." He brazenly patted Sascha's bottom, and I was astonished to see that he kept his hand. "No worries. I knows yer good for it."

Through gritted teeth, Sascha growled, "Deal. And we leave now."

"As ye wish, m'lady," the little man bowed.

Pausing only to recover a grimy pack and a hooded lantern—"Fer ye 'n the missus," he explained—Irvine led us out of Bridgefront and back onto the mainland, finally stopping near a large drainage pipe at the water's edge, hidden by the wreckage of a burned-out cannery. Heaving aside several concealing boards, he said, "Here's yer out. Once upon a time, taxes was different, and this tunnel was used to sneak fish outta the city without paying. Then laws changed, and it was forgotten. It'll get ye past the wall and then some. Now if ye'll just follow me..."

He turned to enter the tunnel, and perhaps it was a blessing, for he never saw the hound that came flying over a crumbling wall to catch him in the back of the neck, jaws closing sickeningly over bone and sinew. It landed and turned, shaking the little man like a rag doll, and let loose a breath of flame that engulfed them both. As Sascha and I yelled and pawed at our weapons, an armored shape stepped out of the factory's wreckage, a massive sword held easily in one hand.

"So it goes," the hellknight intoned. "The prey that runs blindly might surprise you both, but once it calms enough to plan, its motions become predictable."

I drew my sword and started forward, but Sascha stopped me.

"No, Eando," she said, drawing her own blade. "I've got this one. You get going."

"What?!" I cried. "That's insane. Come on; together we can take him!"

"No," she said again. "You go first. I'm faster than you, and you know it—I'll buy us some time and catch you before you're halfway out. See if I don't."

I dodged to the side, but she moved with me, refusing to let me pass. I punched her back in frustration, but she stood firm. Tears sprang unbidden to my eyes.

"Sascha..." I pleaded.

"Godsdamn it, Eando, go!" She gave me a shove that sent me sprawling into the mud of the tunnel mouth. Outside, the hound moved to stand next to its master, who lifted one hand to Sascha.

"So be it," he said, and raised his sword.

At a flick of her wrist, Sascha's own blade ignited with blue flames, and she looked back at me one last time.

"Run!" she screamed, then turned and charged the hellknight.

I ran. I will not ask forgiveness, for I am owed none. When I meet my end and arrive before the gods for judgment, I will say only this: that when it all came down, I would not let my friend sacrifice herself in vain. For hours, I stumbled through the stinking tunnels, blind, sobbing, scarcely caring which turn I took, but when the end came and a circle of light burned my eyes, I found myself deposited in a grassy field. I lay there for some time, numb, then finally dragged myself up a small hill to look out over the city of Korvosa, its distant walls shot with gold in the morning light.

I don't know how long I stood there, but finally my responsibility to honor Sascha's gift returned, and I found myself faced with a new question: Where to next? I was hungry and alone, left with only my sword, my pack, my journal, and my wayfinder.

The wayfinder. Of course.

Tearing the pouch from around my neck, I shook it out into my hand. With the compass came the tiny green ioun stone from Kaer Maga, the one I should have identified weeks ago, should have analyzed to determine its function and if it was safe to use in a wayfinder. I stared at them both, then looked back once more toward the city.

Screw it.

Taking the compass in one hand and the ioun stone in another, I inhaled deeply and closed my eyes, tensing my muscles for whatever was to come. Carefully, I fitted the stone into the wayfinder's empty slot.

Nothing happened.

After a long moment I opened my eyes. Nothing. No lightning shooting from my fingers, no dragons called down from the sky, no sudden inrush of knowledge or transformation into a dire bear. Nothing at all. I stared down at the compass.

And as I watched, totally still, the needle which had always pointed due north swung slowly to the east.